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UNCERTAIN GLORY

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## PROLOGUE: A MEETING IN THE DARK

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A summerhouse close to York, 1808

He jumped up from the bench when he heard the rustling of her skirts.

He had kept the door of the little folly open in order to avoid any unnecessary noise and he heard it close with a click.

Ah, she wanted them to be private then.

“You came!”

His whisper was excited and grateful at the same time.

She stared at him.

Her pristine form only just caught the light from the moon entering its fourth quarter.

“This is madness!” she grated at last. “If he finds out there will be hell to pay.”

He shook his head in bewilderment.

“He’s in London. He will never know. He is not even interested in the marriage of his sister-in-law; otherwise he would have accepted the invitation.”

She sat down slowly on one of the benches.

“Your family won’t be there either!” she scoffed. “They’ll all stay back in Wattles while their son marries a girl of the gentry. The son that put food on their table and money in their empty coffer.”

He sat down on the bench opposite her.

“The adopted son!” he added bitterly. “At least my father’s wife will be there, the countess. Detty would have loved to come as well, but they forbade her to leave the house.”

She shrugged.

“You started to earn your own money and the Countess withdrew her funds. Does she still pay you an allowance?”

He looked down at his hands that seemed bluish in the moonlight.

“Let’s... not talk... about money...” he said haltingly.

Money had been his root of all evil. If money had not been an issue he would be standing next to another bride tomorrow.

She looked guiltily out of a rectangular window.

Yes, it had been money and a title that had forced her into a loveless marriage with an abusive husband.

She closed her eyes when she felt tears welling. One escaped her closed eyelids anyway. She brushed it quickly away with a trembling hand.

Oh, she should not have come! She was sitting in this folly in the middle of the night, dressed in a nightshift and a wrapper, with the only man who had been able to stir feelings she had kept enclosed in an ice-cold heart.

She could never have stayed away from him, tonight. He was marrying her sister tomorrow.

“Amelia?” he asked.

In one step he sat next to her.

She knew she should push him away and run as fast as she could to the big house. Her husband’s house. Her absent husband’s house.

“Oh, God forgive me, Amelia,” he whispered, “and everybody else as well! I need to... I want to...”

She knew that making love to him was dangerous and would probably doom her forever. Still she did not rise from the couch, to berate him for his uncouthness or his disloyalty towards her sister.

She opened her wrapper and lifted her nightshift to his hungry hands and mouth.

Peter. Her secret love and warrior.

She would surely go to hell for it.

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## Devon’s Prologue: AFTERMATH OF THE BATTLE OF TOULOUSE

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*Toulouse, 10th of April 1814*

“David!”

Devon pounced on the figure staring out on the hill.

The battle in the rear had been a short one. Soult was not able to get his reserves up there; he

had used them all up in the heat of the battle for the vanguard.

David turned to his friend.

He was still in a daze. His horse had thrown him when it was struck in the chest with a bullet. He was covered in mud and grime, because he had been forced to crawl into a quagmire to avoid being run over by enemy lancers. Damn, he had been lucky to be on the outside of their last attack!

He suddenly smiled brightly at Devon.

“You made it through it whole, then?”

Devon nodded.

“I was lucky. So were you, I see.”

“Kit wasn’t.” David said darkly, “He’s with the wounded.”

Devon gasped.

“So it’s true? Jenkins was looking for him.

How bad is it?”

David shook a shoulder.

“His leg again, I think, but he was covered in blood and unconscious. It could be anything.”

He smiled thinly.

“I don’t think he will be going home to his new wife any time soon! Let’s clean up, Devon, I’m weary of all this. I think I’m ready to go home now. Even the prospect of seeing old Basil again seems alluring right now. What’s wrong?”

Devon sat down on a white chalky rock.

“I don’t know,” he whispered, “it’s that blinding headache. I need to...”

He turned his head to the side and vomited in the dry grass.

“You need to drink something,” David urged. “I’ll go to that brook and... Damn, isn’t that Cordelia Williams? What’s she doing out here?”

Devon turned his head into the direction of the brook behind them. A woman was kneeling there. She was washing her face.

“Her husband did not make it,” he answered softly, “the poor girl! He was not much of a soldier and I quite disliked him, but still it’s a harsh thing. Come on, let’s go. I want to check on Kit.”

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Devon opened the flap of the tent and almost crouched inside.

Two people were standing next to a camp bed, talking softly. His gaze moved to the other side of the tent. Someone with a heavily bandaged head, which was dark red with crusted blood, was occupying the bed there.

“Mrs. Williams? Jenkins? How’s Lord Brondemeire doing?” Devon whispered.

Cordelia walked up to him and whisked him back outside.

“Major Broadhurst? You are leaving tomorrow, aren’t you? I prepared a letter for Lord

Brondemeire's brother, the Marquis of Andover. Maybe you can bring it to London..."

She pointed with her head into Kit's direction.

"He won't be going anywhere for some time, I'm afraid. He lost an enormous amount of blood and will need all the strength he has left for recovery."

"You mentioned a letter?"

"Yes, I wrote it after Doctor Hales examined him again."

She searched the pocket of her gown. It was gray and neat and seemed to cling to her hips. She was not wearing her nurse's apron for once.

He watched her hands, tapping the pockets. It was a strange, almost intimate gesture. He peered unobtrusively at her face, which was deep in thought.

She really was not unattractive, he thought. Although her long dark hair was braided and pinned in a bun at the back of her head, one could wonder what it would look like when it was loosened and allowed to fall all the way down, on that nicely rounded bottom. Her skin was darker than would be fashionable, but you could not expect an active lady who followed the drum to ever maintain a fashionable pale skin. Almost none of the officers' wives that followed the drum had white skins. The sneaky and often harsh sun in the Peninsula had taken care of that.



He was actually quite accustomed to women with sun-kissed skins. All whores and camp followers seemed to be dark skinned and truth be told he liked the darker skins more than the pale ones. He had never fancied the deathly pallor that was always so fashionable at court and with the ladies of the London Ton. To him dark skins were a sign of strength, like muscles, which was another part of his strange preferences. He had always admired women that did not melt below him for lack of some muscles.

He smiled inwardly: he was certainly fond of a strange sort of females, one could argue. He did not want them to be fashionably petite, he secretly liked sun-kissed skins and he preferred them not to be flabby for lack of exercise and muscle.

Cordelia was indeed quite tall for a woman, but he would not call her 'horsey.' It was more 'coltish' as she had to be somewhere in her early twenties, or no, it was rather in the energetic way she moved.

He peered at her bum again. It was a horse rider's rump. He knew she rode well because he had witnessed her riding, once, in a case of emergency. She had hurried to a place of calamity and she had ridden astride instead of using her sidesaddle.

He had nurtured a raging hard-on for hours after seeing her thus: her skirt was hiked-up on one side and he had seen her white thigh pressed

into the horse's left side. He had thought himself a despicable pervert, but for some reason he had never seen anything so arousing in his life!

“I think I left it in my tent. Follow me please, Major Broadhurst.”

He came out of his reverie with a start. He reddened when he realized he had been staring at her bum.

“Who’s the man in the other bed?”

She smiled sadly.

“It’s Major Armstrong. He has very bad head and leg injuries. It will be a miracle if he survives them. We put the two Lords together. Major Armstrong’s tent houses nine wounded soldiers now.”

“Oh,” he mumbled, “Lionel went down as well? That’s nasty! Is he losing a lot of blood? That head bandage looks soaked!”

“His skull was bashed. Probably a horse’s hoof. It looks a bit worse than it is, though. It seems that the wound did not... It seems that the wound is not very deep. Doctor Hales says that the brain is still intact and hopefully unharmed. He is not sure about the leg though. If the wounds start to fester he will have to amputate.”

Devon cringed at those medical observations. Losing a limb seemed as bad to him as losing one’s life.

“Colonel Lord Loghaire is wounded as well, although not as seriously as those two. He has

already been transported to the hospital in Toulouse,” she added.

“Hengist?” Devon asked unpleasantly surprised, “By Jove, the man should never have insisted on joining us at the last moment!”

He was silent after this outburst. He suddenly remembered the death of her husband.

“How... how are you doing yourself, Mrs. Williams? My condolences on your own loss!”

Damn, why was he stuttering like a boor?

“Thank you, Major,” she said briskly.

She hesitated for a second. She could hardly tell that dashing Major Lord Broadhurst that she and her husband had not exchanged more than ten words in the last week, let alone that they had not slept together since ... Well, she did not even remember when it had been the last time that Rory had found his way to her tent at night.

“My tent is over there!”

She pointed at a tent under one of the few scrawny trees in the landscape. It was quite set apart from the other officers’ tents. Obviously, Mrs. Williams valued her privacy.

She walked in and rummaged through a portable writing desk, her backside wriggling enticingly when she bent to open the different desk drawers.

“Mrs. Williams?”

She turned back with flushed cheeks, the sealed letter in her hand.

“I heard you, Major Broadhurst.”

He did not know how it happened, but suddenly she was in his arms and he was kissing her savagely.

“Oh, Major,” she whispered, “you'd better close that tent flap, sir! I don't want my neighbors to see us.”

He was too astonished by her reaction not to comply.

He grabbed her by her small waist and started to kiss her again.

Was he mad?

Her hands went to his face and she stepped backwards to the bed behind her. He followed as if mesmerized.

She wore little under her dress and he soon found himself groping and grasping fleshy breasts and an enticing belly. Such a wonderful bosom: her breasts were firm and full!

He slid hungry hands along her thighs, too muscled to be fashionable, but they fired his cock at his memory of her sitting astride on that horse. He lowered her bodice and kneaded her breasts eagerly, his thumbs caressing her dark nipples that were already hard and swollen.

There was no room for thought when their passion took them.

God, she really was wonderful and soft. A dead man's wife and he could not care less. Christ, what had his world come to!

She uttered a little moan when he suddenly moved away from her, racked by guilt at making love to a recently widowed woman.

“Please don’t leave,” she pleaded.

She looked deliciously wanton with her lips full and bloated by his eager kisses. Her hair had come loose from the bun and the braid; they now lay in a lascivious halo around her face.

He stared down at her full white legs with the soft curly hairs down at their apex.

“God, Cordelia,” he ground out, “I shouldn’t...”

She bent her knees and more wantonly spread her thighs, giving him a breathless look into the place where he ached to be most.

He licked his lips, swallowed with the intimate sight of her lovely body and tore at the buttons of his fly.

He squeezed his eyes shut as he concentrated on entering her and almost went over the edge when he felt her hold him with her inner muscles.

It was a ride to heaven and back.

She might not have slept with Williams for a long time, but she knew all the motions and to his delight, she also knew how to reserve pleasure for herself.

He sat up, his hands automatically refastening his breeches.

“I am sorry, Cordelia,” he apologized guiltily, “that was uncalled for. I don’t know how that happened.”

She smiled impishly. Her teeth were slightly crooked, but very white.

“I do, Devon. I always wondered what it would be like with you. You have a reputation as a good lover, you know, even if you don’t seem to go after so many women.”

She got up without refastening her bodice and poured two cups from a flask.

“It’s wine from Aquitaine. Maybe I can persuade you to stay a little longer?”

She flashed a seductive smile at him.

He knew then that he was not going anywhere.

“Please don’t feel guilty, Devon,” she urged him, understanding his feelings of remorse. “It had not been a real marriage for some years. There were always others. He preferred the blanket girls to me. He loathed my inexperience. How could I have been otherwise? I was given to him in marriage when I was sixteen. I had no dowry and my parents were happy that I could catch an officer of the celebrated Williams’ family. He was already thirty-seven when we married. His former wife followed the drum with him and he wanted me to do the same. It’s just that I was too young and innocent to give him the comfort he sought. Please don’t look so sad, I was glad he had the camp followers, so that he would not have to resort to raping me.”

Devon looked into the cup. The wine was good, full-bodied and of a fine colour.

“What will you do now that the war will be over?”

She took a sip from her wine and straightened her back.

“My father owns a shipyard in Hull. My parents adore me. They will be happy when I come back home and I will be able to live there with my head up high. I will get a widow’s pension at least.”

“What about his family? Will they not take care of you?”

She shrugged and put her cup on the floor.

She straddled his lap and started to kiss him again, first shyly, then with more insistence when he smiled and let his hands roam over her curves.

“Will you stay the night, just this one night?”

He reached for the buttons at the back of her dress.

“Yes, I’ll happily stay the night,” he whispered in a delicious, small ear. “I owe you a better turn than I just did you. I can’t wait to do it again!”

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Later, on his way back to London, when Devon tried to figure out their wanton need for each other at the aftermath of a grueling battle and Rory Williams’ death, he realized that he now understood the difference between taking his pleasures in a brothel and making love to Cordelia Williams, a widow for less than an afternoon.

She had needed him as much as he had felt this incredible need for her. She had taken pleasure out of him as he had when he had ravished her amazing, lithe body. It was like a two-way street, something he had never experienced before in his life.

Whores accommodated and pretended, but they were careful never to take their own need from a customer.

He wondered if he would ever be able to experience again such a gift as Cordelia had bestowed him.

He almost turned back to France, to her; this widow of his heart, this lover for a night, who never seemed to leave his head in all those days that followed their short, but memorable, love affair.

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## Chapter 1: BACK AT THE TUILERIES

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He looked around the room that had once been his private bedroom. His eyes glistened when he noticed that nothing had been dismantled. The old Bourbon King had not even thought of removing the glory of his predecessor, the usurper who made himself into the Emperor of France.

His lips curled into a sardonic smile.

“Marchand?” he called out.

The valet was immediately behind him.

“Sire, your bath is ready and the doctor is awaiting your summons.”

He nodded and started to open his favourite blue jacket with the red and gold trimmings that he had been wearing for the occasion of his triumphant return. It had come with him all the way from the cursed isle of Elba.

His valet gestured at the waiting footmen to make themselves scarce at once. Marchand did not need them for anything now. The moment the Emperor had entered his beloved Tuileries everybody had run to prepare for his first night at home. That had been more than six hours ago.

The clock in the room started to chime just three strikes and he looked up.

“That late?” he wondered, but then he realized that he had only been in Paris since nine o’clock in the evening. Everything had been a whirl, from then on. He had been too elated to watch his

constitution and now he suddenly found himself in discomfort because of his disregard.

He cursed softly. Health was everything to a conquering emperor and it was the most difficult commodity to obtain as soon as one found himself lacking it.

“Will Corvisart be here?” he asked with hope lacing his voice.

Marchand shook his head with a sad face.

“He is ailing, Sire. He is not even able to get up, nowadays. But Monsieur de Larrey awaits you, if necessary, with the Eau Blanche.”

The valet bent deeply over Napoleon’s boots. He was not certain what exactly ailed the Emperor tonight: his bowels, his stomach or his piles, but the lines in his face betrayed that he was very uncomfortable.

Marchand stared at the Emperor’s boots he was now holding. They were wider than ever. His emperor had become fat if not obese.

He pressed his lips together. He was certain it had started after the cursed mission into Russia: lack of food had been compensated with an abundance of it. That and the Emperor’s eternal digestive problems.

He should not have come back tonight in this way, the valet thought with sudden insight.

He should have rested and then entered Paris heading all the faithful men that had flocked to his banner again. His son’s birthday today, the reason

why he wanted to be inside of the Parisian gates, be damned!

Marchand felt like crossing himself, something he had not done for a long time. He did it after all, when the Emperor slowly walked to the door of his dressing room to take his late bath, because Marchand had the sinking feeling that Napoleon Bonaparte needed all the help he could get if he was to keep a firm hold of today's reclaimed throne.

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The Duke of Lindley hurried into his library. He mumbled a curse when his robe opened up enough to show a muscled naked thigh.

When the messenger came he had been in his young wife's bed, ready for her embrace and a few more physical treats.

He nodded at the young man, who was dressed like a French civilian. The man was leaning heavily against the back of his chair. No doubt he had a very long and tiring day and night of travelling behind him.

The Duke fell into his opulent chair, signalling the young man to remain seated. No need to stand on protocol in the deep of the night.

"He's back in Paris?" the Duke asked, folding his robe over his legs. It had been only minutes since he had left Attelante's bed and he was still half aroused.

The young man in front of him stiffened, betraying his background as a military man.

“He wanted to be back in Paris on his son’s birthday, which hampered him when he tried to make a triumph of it. He arrived in the thick of a mist at nine o’clock in the evening. Not many knew he was in town already and fewer of the population seemed happy with him. He lost them too many sons, your grace. It were merely the military men at court that were happy with his return. Louis started to earn their scorn because he was favouring the old ones of the ancient regime that had not lost their heads under Madame Guillotine. They detested the upstarts, especially the military ones.”

The Duke nodded.

He had already read reports on the situation in Paris with Louis losing control. The fool had acted as if the years of Napoleon and the Revolution had never happened, reinstating the idiocy of the ancient regime as it was before his brother King Louis XVI lost his head.

Richard looked longingly at his cigars, but decided against smoking one. Attelante hated the smell of them, let alone the taste, and he longed to spend what was left of the night in her sumptuous bed.

“Did you get a health report on him?”

“Yes. He’s not well. His piles are killing him after having been on horseback for weeks. He’s

overweight to the point of obesity and his stomach cramps are disrupting his daily routines. He's as far from the energetic officer of yore as anything. Gone is the always alert man: he needs more sleep than ever. He's morose, which is not characteristic of him. To be honest: we think he is a very ill man."

"How do the French feel about him?"

The officer eyed the duke warily.

"As I said: he lost them too many sons and husbands because of his wars. One may doubt whether they'd truly want him back if it had not been for Louis' stupidities. Orleans should have shown the people some lenience and understanding. Some light at the end of the tunnel instead of a road back to the old hated ways."

"Good!" Lindley exclaimed, "I gather he won't storm our Kingdom in a hurry. I'll have my butler assign you a room here, so that I can have a full report in the morning. Let's say eight thirty. Anything remotely important that I need to know now?"

The man smiled tiredly and shook his head. He was happy that the Duke had ordered him to stay at his residence. It would have been a long way back to the barracks otherwise.

The Duke opened the door to the hallway and signalled a footman to take care of bedding down his most important spy, grinning at a hastily

dressed Poussin who had been awakened when the Duke had left his warm bed.

“The lieutenant needs a bed and gear to write his report tomorrow morning, Poussin,” he said hurriedly.

He had just realized that his wife might not have waited for him to return and gone back to sleep again. She was in the early months of her pregnancy and he had noticed she could easily sleep standing up at whatever she was doing.

Poussin kept a grin from his face when he saw his master hurrying up the stairs to the ducal apartments.

God bless the beautiful new duchess, he mused. She had managed to keep the rakish Duke of Lindley by her side with his full attention, even now that she was breeding. At last now Poussin could run a tight household, with the Duke’s sister, Lady Sophia, in her house in Whitesands and no more whores and hopeful mistresses to kick off the servant’s stairs.

He listened at the door of his duchess’ bedroom and produced a toothy smile. Thank God her grace had waited up for his boss!

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## Chapter 2: BERTHA'S PREDICAMENTS

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“You really should stop crying now, child, you’ll be one mess of tears and Ma’am won’t like that one bit!”

Cook Mulligan replaced her generous behind on the bench, reaching out for the sad girl who had been in tears for more than twenty minutes now.

“I know you’ve got reason enough to cry, love, but please, if Ma’am hears about it there will be hell to pay!”

Cook reached for a cookie jar and offered Bertha one with a hangdog look on her face.

Bertha gazed at it with a tear-stained face, emitting a final hiccup. She pushed the long blond hair out of her face with a last sniff.

Mrs. Mulligan shook her head. No wonder those old geezers had debased the girl... She was incredibly beautiful. The light-blond hair that had never seen the artificial bleach the girls in the house tended to use, the heart-shaped face and the unique almond shaped emerald green eyes... There was nothing not to commend the girl’s figure either, although it probably had lost quite a lot of its so fashionable pudginess since Bertha had to work hard for her daily meals and her place to sleep.

She nodded encouragingly at the girl.

“Th... Thank you, Mrs. Mulligan.” Bertha tried to smile at her consoler, looking for her handkerchief.

Cook grasped it and studied the beautifully composed embroidered initials: RD, surrounded by flowers and an exotic bird.

“If only you could have found work with that embroidering of yours...” Cook sighed regretfully, “You really don’t belong here, Bertha. You’re more a lady than all of us in this house combined.”

That remark at last made Bertha smile. A brothel was hardly a place where one could find any lady.

“He didn’t hurt you badly, did he?”

Cook’s face was full of concern. After twelve years of work in Mrs. Majorica’s House of Pleasure, and despite it being called ‘the Fancy Shoppe’, she thought she had seen it all. Until Bertha appeared one bad day at the kitchen’s doorstep.

Bertha shook her head, trying to contain her new upcoming tears.

“No, I was already... Ma’am’s brother already had...”

“Yes, that beast Pettigrew! He’s abused many a girl, even here... I’m glad he found his way to the gibbet.”

Cook had spoken ferociously and then started to look around cautiously. The Madam still had a



soft spot for the brother who had murdered his own lover after a fight when a gun went off. He had paid for it with a public execution.

Bertha looked down on the sturdy oak work table.

“At least Mrs. G... Mrs. Majorica did not want me for the business. She told me to go and help you out since Kelly wants to work upstairs.”

Cook gazed at the beautiful woman who was sitting so forlornly at her kitchen table. Although her blond hair was starting to come loose from the moorings of a tight bun and her green eyes were red from crying, she still looked stunning.

“I cannot imagine...” she started to say.

Any Madam would like to have a glorious girl like Bertha in her selection.

“She said I was not useful since I’m too big... down there... Men seem to like to have somebody who’s tight.”

She pursed her lips. It was a terrible confession, but if she did not tell Cook now the kind woman would hear it from somebody else anyway.

“Did you have a child, that you have... that problem?” Cook asked shyly, thinking it bad enough that the girl came up with such an intimate confession.

Bertha shook her head.

“No, I don’t have a clue what caused that.”

She suddenly grinned.

“At least it has protected me from being put to work upstairs with the other girls.”

Cook rose to fetch the teapot. The cookie jar was still untouched.

“Let’s have some tea then, Bertha. We’ll have to start on the pies soon enough. Have you ever made pies before?”

When Bertha shook her head again, she continued: “As I said, Bertha, you’re a lady. You should be having tea all day with the gentry and do that lovely embroidery in the evening, waiting for an extraordinary man to claim you as his wife. I hope you will be a quick student; otherwise Ma’am will have you out on the cobbles in no time. Not useful, indeed!”

Bertha frowned and poured the tea for both of them. It had been a reflex: she had done it hundreds of times at Hillview Manor when life was still beautiful and mostly uncomplicated.

Her mother, second wife to the Baron of Dunstead, who was also Bertha’s father, (albeit years before he brought her mother and her into the house, when Bertha was sixteen years old), had never liked to do anything that looked remotely like servant’s work. It had not helped to explain to her that even duchesses would take their place behind a tea-tray if need be.

Anyway, Bertha’s half-sister Robin had done all the work in the house that was not strictly done by the servants as soon as the Baron had

passed away. It had been her mother's petty revenge, to humiliate the girl whenever she could. Bertha had been very sad about that, but she had known there was no way to stop her mother if she had her mind on something.

She heaved a sigh and looked down at her hands.

She was to be twenty-four years old soon enough, but she found herself no longer dwelling in a perfect mansion with a little army of servants, a beautiful but bossy mother and an ever smiling brave little sister who did all the management an estate required.

Bertha's mother, Baron Dunstead's one time lover, who became almost seven years ago his second wife, had ruined everything because of her greediness. Bertha had only been told about them after all the vile deeds had been done towards her sister, and she had not been able to do anything about them. Her mother and her lover Pettigrew, whom Bertha had known back in her childhood days, had concocted a plan to abduct her half-sister Robin and force her to marry a lowly footman in order to give Bertha a chance to inherit the Dunstead possessions the Baron had tried to bequeath in his testament. The Baron had stated that Robin or Bertha could only indirectly inherit the barony if they married a peer of the realm and birthed a male child. Although everybody had assumed that the Barony of

Dunstead had been lost for the line, some very old, unwed nephew had unexpectedly been dug up and inherited, awaiting the birth of a child of one of the Dunstead girls, preferably Robin Dunstead's, as Bertha's rights were a bit shady.

As it turned out, the man Evelyn Dunstead thought a lowly footman had been 'dressed up' for a masquerade ball. In reality he was a baron in his own right and also the heir of the Earl of Wentworth.

The discovery that Robin's new husband-to-be was of the peerage had almost killed her mother: she had swooned in the smithy in Gretna Green and had been diagnosed with a heart-attack.

Pettigrew had brought her to York where his sister Madam Majorica let them a small place until Evelyn could get her hands on her own part of her husband's inheritance: as the Baron's wife she would have inherited some of his not entailed property, but that part of his testament had disappeared.

They had ordered Bertha to get out of Hillview Manor and take a coach to York.

There had been a hidden note that told her to take everything of value out of the manor, but by the time Bertha got the message all kinds of people had already come into the house and ordered the servants to seal and hide everything of worth.

Apart from a valise of clothes and her embroidery basket, Bertha had taken the jewellery her father had gifted to her, which had been hidden in the chest in front of her bed. It had been easy to hide her pretty baubles in rolls of silk thread and small pieces of cloth.

When she had arrived in York she found herself in the middle of very nasty quarrels between Pettigrew and her mother. The quarrels only got worse when she told her mother that she had not been able to take away anything of value or any money. She remained silent about her jewellery which might carry a worth of about a thousand pounds, if not more.

Pettigrew thought he might use whatever money they still had for gambling. He was certain he would win a fortune but of course he ended up with nothing and the last thing Bertha wanted was to use her little nest egg for Pettigrew's redoubtable purposes.

When worse came to worse Pettigrew had the fine idea of offering his sister, the renowned Madam Majorica, Bertha's services.

He decided he had to 'try out' Bertha first, to see if she was 'any good,' conveniently forgetting that she would have made a far better price on that sort of market as a virgin.

When her mother found out about his ghastly rape she took Pettigrew's loaded pistol out of a closet and tried to shoot him. In the uneven fight,

as Pettigrew was muscled and about six stone heavier than his opponent, the pistol went off and immediately killed her mother. Although Pettigrew fled the house he was apprehended within an hour of the shooting. It was his undoing that he had always been a very nasty person who owed half of the York businessmen money. His trial was quick and he was hanged within a month of his crime.

The only one who mourned him was his jaded sister, Madame Majorica, and maybe her equally unsavoury husband.

Bertha had been brought up and educated under the Baron's protection. She had been sent to a little ladies' boarding school since the age of six. The Baron had chosen a school for her where her initial illegitimacy would be 'overlooked.' When the Baron had started his stormy affair with the less ladylike Evelyn he had been a jolly bachelor, soon to be married to a rich girl from the Wharton family. Evelyn had made such a hubbub about her pregnancy that he had reluctantly given Bertha his name.

Bertha had always been a quiet, unassuming, albeit inordinately pretty girl and her teachers had liked her for it.

She had been brought to the Baron's house at the age of sixteen, shortly after his wife had died. It had not taken long thereafter for her mother to

take her place as his legal wife at the other side of their table.

Bertha had been pleased and surprised to find a sister, two years her junior, in the house. Her mother had been less glad of the adorable Robin. She had done everything in her power to make the girl as uncomfortable as possible after the Baron died, only three years after her own elevation to a baroness, until she went too far and got herself into a corner from where there was no escape: abducting a woman of the gentry and forcing her to marry far below her station was a felony.

Bertha had often wondered when justice would find them. Eventually it did, in a horrendous fashion.

Bertha had to hide for months, trying to live on the sale of her embroidery, not daring to sell her hidden baubles as she was certain that Pettigrew's lot were watching her closely.

It was the leering Mr Grimsdale, Madam Majorica's husband, who decided to fasten the thumbscrews on Bertha's existence and raise the rent on Bertha's tiny house.

He reminded her of the promise Pettigrew had made him, to hand her over for business at 'The Fancy Shoppe', and tried her out the moment she walked into the premises, as most pimps were obviously wont to do.

Grimsdale had forced himself upon her person, but had quickly retreated from her after one poke

with his objectionable, dirty male member, declaring that she was ‘as big as an empty jar down there.’

Madam Majorica had listened to him with a stoic face and had declared Bertha unfit (Bertha had smiled at that unwitting pun) for regular business.

As one of the girls in the kitchen had wanted to go into the profession of a girl of pleasure, Bertha had been sent down to the brothel’s large kitchen ‘to replace her, until something else came up.’

Cook patted Bertha’s hand when she saw that Bertha’s tears had dried up without attempting to make reappearance.

“Pies!” she exclaimed. Bertha nodded and rose from her impromptu tea: to learn how to make the brothel’s most valued snack.

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### Chapter 3: TALKING ABOUT A SLIGHT PROBLEM

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“I’ve got to piss.”

David peered into the dark shadows of the room where the candle light did not reach.

“Where’s the bloody chamber pot?”

“Outside the door,” the girl said with a yawn, “the potboy always leaves it there.”

He grunted and opened the door.

There it was. He thankfully emptied his bladder and left the pot in front of the door.

He was only dressed in his shirt, but at least that gave him some protection from the draught in the hallway.

He looked up when he heard grunts and bumping noises.

He returned to the room with a grin and closed the door quietly behind him. He might as well go back to bed; it must be the very deep of the night.

When he clambered back into the smelly bed the girl shifted herself against him.

“Would you like to try for another round?” she asked him without showing a lot of enthusiasm.

“Try?” he mimicked her with a wary voice.

His head pounded and he felt slightly sick, probably due to the bad gin he had imbibed when they had started their long night of debaucheries.

“The madam told me I was to be your last, ah... customer, so I can take my time, can't I?”

He hoped Jeffrey would also stay for the whole night, so they would not have to go back to his rooms in this bloody cold.

“I heard my friend is still at it,” he remarked casually, pinching a big pink nipple.

She nodded, suppressing another yawn.

“Not still, prob'ly only just,” she said, looking sidelong at him.

She wondered if she could go to sleep now or that he would give it another try. The first one had not been very impressive, but it had been plain that he had been drinking a lot.

He was a handsome man, a gentleman, no doubt. She did not get this sort often in her bed in the house off Covent Garden. They mostly went to the more luxurious brothels. He had come with the Big Hunk who had been a regular for the last couple of weeks.

“Why would my friend just have started?” he asked.

She moved up against him, snuggling against his shoulder. His shirt smelled of starch. Yes, definitely a well taken care of gentleman, this one. Most of her customers normally did not change shirts more than once a month, if ever. She knew of those things; she had washed Gary's shirts, and starched them, for two years. She

closed her eyes. It would not do her any good to think of Gary right now.

“Kate was not available,” she muttered, “she was with someone else, so he had to wait.”

David frowned.

“Why did he not take one of the other girls?”

He pondered that it was a quiet night with that storm outside and it only being a Tuesday.

She suppressed a shudder and plied the thin blanket over her naked shoulder. This year March had been freezing.

“Oh,” she mumbled, “he’s one of her special customers. Only Kate can take him, you see...”

He frowned.

“Why’s that then?”

She sighed resignedly. Talking or otherwise, she was not going to get any sleep yet.

“He’s too big down there.”

She pointed in the region of David’s genitals.

“Hung like a horse, Kate says.”

David laughed mockingly.

“Is he now? I thought women liked that.”

She shook her head with a scant smile.

“Uh-huh. Why do men always think that women like the big ones? A guy like that would tear me apart and it hurts like crazy. Kate can take him because she had some... some mishap after she had her last child.”

David mused about the whore’s words. Wasn’t it every man’s dream to be, well maybe not hung

like a horse but of an impressive size? Obviously women thought differently about the matter.

She seemed to guess his train of thoughts.

“It’s not so much the length as the width,” she explained, “you can’t circle his with one hand. If you have that one inside you it’s like birthing a babe all over again.”

David looked at her hands. They were small but rough. Not a pampered whore’s hands, he thought, but then this brothel was not one of the more expensive ones he normally tended to visit. It had been Jeffrey’s idea to go here in the first place. Now he understood why.

She raised her arms to wipe her hair from her face and to pull it into a knot behind her head. Her armpits were hairy and they exhaled a sweaty but girlish smell. Jeffrey had told him the girls in this house were obliged to wash. Most whores did not bother to get themselves into a tub of hot water now and then.

David had been too long in the army not to be used to the acrid smells that went with those girls’ more intimate parts of their bodies.

He felt himself stirring and grabbed her hand to lead it to his cock.

“Maybe we should go for another round after all,” he mumbled.

She smiled. At least she might get warmer if they did some bed sport and she was wide awake now anyway.

When he was done he fell back in the bed alongside her.

She clung to him merely for the sake of his warmth, not to show any affection. Whores were not paid to show affection.

She was glad when he extinguished their only candle and turned his back on her, at last ready to go to sleep again. She clung to his back for his warmth, her belly against his firm buttocks.

“Don’t do that, love,” he whispered sleepily, “you’ll make me grow again...”

She hastened to scramble away from him.

-

David looked his best friend over with a questioning expression.

“You look like shit, Jeff,” he said amicably, “I gather you did not get a lot of sleep last night?”

Jeffrey played with his coddled eggs. This morning his legendary appetite had escaped him. He sent David a quick look.

“I had to wait till midnight before the girl could have me. By the time I landed in her bed I think I wore her out less than I did myself. Damned, but I needed a good fuck, Dave!”

David watched his friend closely. The man was a giant at over 6 foot 6 inches tall. Anticipating that he wanted to find himself a paid lover he had not worn his elaborate blue-white and red captain’s uniform of the King’s Own Cavalry.

“Still in love with her?” he asked quietly.

They both knew they were not talking about the whore who was now at last sleeping in her cot.

Jeffrey shrugged and pulled a face after he had taken a swallow from his mug filled with coffee.

“Nope. Not really. Not since Bruno Bouchier told me there are chances that she is my sister. She’s now entirely Brondemeire’s, what with that belly full of his growing seed.”

He looked pensively at his plate.

“I’m bloody tired and I have to get my arse all the way to Caversham. What a bad time for Evan to hand me over the stick.”

“You could take Basil’s travelling carriage and sleep all the way,” David suggested, “I don’t think he’s going anywhere with his nuptials so close.”

His voice sounded harsh when he mentioned his older brother’s name. Basil was almost thirty years his senior, but had managed to steal David’s hope for richness and some sort of marital happiness away from him: Lady Aline Fairfax, heiress and daughter to the now deceased Earl of Rotherham. She was to marry his ancient brother in a few weeks’ time.

“I’ll bring your horses to his farm in Richmond, so you don’t have to exhaust them on your trip home. Bloody Napoleon will no doubt wait a while before he starts his great attack on the Allies. Lindley said that they expect him to have his Grande Armée ready in June.”

“Yeah, thanks Dave, I might just do that. No use exhausting my best horses for a trip up North.”

David watched his best friend closely, wondering if he was coming down with some illness or another. It was not like the always energetic and exuberant new Baron of Caversham to be so down.

“Was she any good, that girl?” he asked curiously.

“Kate?” Jeffrey mumbled, “She was okay, I guess. Nothing to your liking, though,” he added carefully.

David suddenly grinned.

“I’m not that well hung, my friend. Glad to hear that you need them with special requirements. Men like you tend to give us, the normal ones, frustrations.”

Jeffrey reddened uncharacteristically.

“I can fuck any woman, nosy, but it’s more fun when she can move around me a bit.”

The first part of his comment was not entirely true. Even in the army some women had flat out refused to give him the bodily service he required. They complained he was ripping them apart. On the other hand, when word got out about his extreme extremity other women tended to seek him out.

“Don’t bite my head off, Jeff!” David complained, “I was only kidding you a bit. I’m

glad you found a woman to your liking. Mine was okay, but when we woke up this morning the bed was wet with her milk. I had another go with her while she was spouting like a whale. I should have waited until she had fed her child.”

It was Jeffrey’s turn to grin.

“You could have had your breakfast with her there and then,” he joked.

David was happy to see his friend in an apparent good mood again

“Tastes like nothing,” he assured his friend.

Jeffrey rose and threw some coins on the table.

“Gottago,” he drawled. “Does Basil keep the coach in Richmond? I’ll bring Meringue and Feet First there myself.”

“Wait up for me, Jeff,” David called after him, “they won’t let you into Basil’s apartment unless I’m there. Some people have done their best to destroy our reputation.”

“Nice!” Jeffrey cried at him, “If it serves my memory right it was you who puked over the whole place last time.”

David barked a laugh, truly glad to see his friend being his own self again.

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## Chapter 4: A GRAVESIDE CONVERSATION

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The woman gasped when Peter touched her arm. She turned around, opening her mouth for a shriek that never emerged.

“You!” she gulped, forgetting all decorum.

“Me.” Peter said quietly.

He was dressed in his major’s dress uniform, wearing the trappings that came with his rank over his Black Watch kilt.

“Why are you here?” she now huffed, pointedly taking a step away from him.

His rugged smile appeared slowly on his handsome face.

“For the same reason as you are here? To pay my respects to my poor dead wife, your adored sister?”

He knew he was not able to withhold the sarcasm from his reply.

“Stay away from me, Peter Wallace!” she warned, taking two more steps backward.

“More steps and you’ll fall into that newly dug grave! What’s ailing you, Amelia? Do I have the pox or another contagious disease?”

His voice sounded more hurt than ironic this time.

She took some seconds to peer at his face.

Damnation, he was still the handsome Peter Wallace of yore, even with the ugly scar marring his left cheek.

“You killed her!”

The vehemence in her voice was suddenly back.

The expression on his face went very sad.

“You too?” he asked, “How could I have killed her when I was still in France when she died? She died of sadness, true, but the sadness was her own, never incurred through me.”

“She died because you did not love her. It ate at her!”

He looked up at the sky. The clouds were dark grey with the water that filled them. They were in for a deluge soon enough.

His brown eyes went back to Amelia’s exquisite face. She was dressed entirely in black as she had been no doubt wont to do for the last year. She looked sophisticated and stern in that colour: she was one of the few women who actually looked great in black, with her straw blond hair and her stark features.

“Whose fault was that? Who forced us into a marriage when I had my eyes on you? Who decided that a poor lieutenant, with a blemish due to his birth, was not going to be good enough for the eldest of the St. Just sisters?”

“You liked her well enough,” Amelia snapped, reddening.

His face contorted and before he could help himself he grabbed her by her shoulders.

“You should know by now that to like someone is not reason enough to share a life as husband and wife!”

He heard himself shouting at her and he cringed, taking his hands from her shoulders.

She did not move; she just stared at him.

He turned away from her, not able to look into that beloved face any more.

Oh, Christina had borne a likeness to her, but that had only made matters worse. It had gnawed at him that he had known Christina had pined for his love, for a gentle gesture, for some sweetness coming from her husband. It had not only been Amelia’s idea to trap him into a marriage with Christina, it had been Christina’s urgings as well, because she knew that Amelia wanted to aim higher than a mere Scottish officer in the King’s army. Christina had foolishly hoped that the fact she loved Peter Wallace, would be enough for the both of them.

Amelia’s eyes suddenly filled with tears.

She had known for several years now that Peter was right: there was more to look for in a husband than his position and his money. She had been a fool to think that a noble title and well filled coffers would solve all her problems.

She shifted from one foot to another, trying to eject the burning sensation that Peter’s hands on

her shoulders had caused. It had been last night's beating that made her cringe. Harmon Aubrey's beating, because she had not reacted instantly to his amorous mood. At least that was what he had accused her of. After seven years of marriage to his lordship though, Amelia knew that he could always find a reason and a stick to hit her with, if he felt like it.

“What will you do from now on, Peter?” she asked, trying to stand entirely still.

Aubrey's stick had not missed her hips and her legs this last time and almost every movement brought her a stab of pain.

Peter had caught her wince and wondered what was wrong with her.

“I need to find a place for Nimmy. There is no one to take care of her in Wattles, now that almost everybody has so conveniently died. I have to be quick about it as I have to report to London in a week's time. I am to ship to Antwerp with my regiment as Wellington expects Napoleon to make a battlefield out of Flanders.”

“What do you mean you have to find a place for Nimmy? She's my little niece, remember? She can come to live with me and Jilly until you've got that new war and your circumstances worked out!”

He stared at her.

“That's very generous of you, Amelia. I don't know what to say...”

“That’s bloo... blooming nonsense, Peter. You know Chrissie would have wanted me to take care of her daughter.”

She looked quickly behind her when she heard a carriage approaching the graveyard and her lips seemed to form an expletive.

“That’s Aubrey.”

She sounded a lot more composed than she felt.

“He’d better not see you here, Peter. He’ll be leaving for London early tomorrow, so please bring Nimmy around after the noon hour.”

“I can’t,” Peter said hurriedly, not entirely understanding why they could not see each other. Harmon Aubrey was his brother-in-law and he did not understand Amelia’s sudden panic.

“She’s still in Wattles. It will take me at least three days to pick her up and bring her to York and then I’m not counting what I have to do since I inherited... Well, no matter. I will get her into York alright.”

“Come tomorrow and we will sort it out. Come at nine, then, if you are so short with time.”

Without another word she turned around and hurried to the graveyard’s gates.

He stared after her, his confusion warring with the fact that he still felt the old way, whenever he saw her: hopelessly, desperately in love.

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## Chapter 5: DESOLATE CAVERSHAM

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Jeffrey leaned against the door of the travelling coach, almost forgetting that he had wanted to light a cheroot the moment the footmen had opened the door for him.

Blast, but the house was a shambles! It had been a neglected place when he had left it more than four years ago, but he had never seen it in such disrepair and so unkempt!

He bent over and lit the cheroot anyway, away from the wind that seemed to howl around his borrowed carriage with the golden Ware crest on its doors.

“Shall I knock, my lord?” the footman with the most initiative asked him.

The fellow seemed entirely out of place with his rich footman’s garb in the shabby surroundings of the dilapidated manor.

Jeffrey squeezed one eye shut against the smoke of the lighted cheroot. He detected movement at the front door and held a staying hand.

“It seems my sister-in-law finally found her way to the door,” he mumbled, watching a woman extracting herself from the opening of the one-hundred-year-old oak door.

When the blond woman noticed him she threw her arms wide and smiled a broad, gap-toothed smile at him.

“Jeffrey!” she yelled, “At last, oh, at last!”

He crinkled his nose when she threw herself full force at him. Damn, but Elma badly needed a wash, and a change of clothes, if he was not mistaken. He quickly held her away from him.

“Oh, Jeffrey!” Elma gushed, taking in his beautiful blue Captain’s uniform with the white snug breeches, his expensive boots and his gold watch dangling on a chain, “You look as spectacular as ever! How I missed you!”

“Hum, you look quite dandy as well,” Jeffrey lied, taking in the shabby black dress with the deep cleavage, her face stained with dirt and pimples. Her hands were dirty and her hair was greasy and unkempt.

He looked quickly at the two Ware footmen next to his transport and at the coach driver who was still sitting on his perch. Maybe he should not be ashamed of his sister-in-law’s appearance, not in front of Basil Ware’s snooty staff, but he felt a twinge of irritation at Elma’s indifference for appearances. She had always been like that. She had always been unsuitable to become the Baroness of Caversham and truth be told, nobody would ever have expected her to acquire that elevated position, if it had not been for the fact that Nigel and his wife had died and Evan had

taken over the position to perish hardly a year later.

“Drive around to the stables,” he ordered the still gaping coach driver curtly.

“Is there somebody to help them out there?” he asked Elma.

She nodded happily.

“We still got Dennis Tanner. He’s been around here forever.”

Jeffrey looked at her with a cocked brow. He did not entirely trust the way she mentioned Dennis Tanner’s name.

“Are you able to receive us?” he asked quietly.

She blushed and rubbed her arms.

“You’ll have to help me out to feed them,” she pointed her chin at the Ware staff that had not yet moved a muscle, “but I’m sure that won’t be a problem for you. There is hay for the horses. Dennis brought it in yesterday after you wrote us you were coming.”

She slid a dirty finger over the gold on his sleeve.

Jeffrey felt like snapping his arm away from her, but controlled himself. He had been an officer in the Peninsula and was used to far worse than an unkempt woman. He glared at the staring Ware men instead.

“Get my luggage inside and off with the coach. Report to me when the horses have been taken care of.”



A footman raised an insolent brow but wisely refrained from uttering any remarks. After all was said and done the captain was a close friend of the Marques of Ware's brother and a new baron to boot. He pulled Jeffrey's one trunk from the roof and waited for the baron to move into his ancestral home.

Jeffrey raised a blond brow. God, but the house looked a dump!

"Jesus Christ, Elma, what has happened here?"

Jeffrey stayed rooted to the floor after entering the drawing room. Apart from a table with four chairs and a couch the room was empty.

"You happened, and the old stupid baron happened and they all died on me..."

Elma seemed close to tears and Jeffrey stepped forward to take her in his arms, as his protective nature won over his disgust of the smell she emanated.

He led her quickly to the couch and had to force her to sit down. She obviously relished a stay in his arms more than a place on the old smelly seat.

Elma rubbed her eyes, managing to stripe her face more with the dirt on her hands.

"It all went wrong after your father married that witch, Anthea Fairfax. He dropped dead and she withdrew all her money. Then Nigel and Sally got ill and died on us. Evan did not know what to do. The income of the farms dwindled to nothing in

the last years and we would all have gone hungry if not...”

She stopped with a mulish expression on her face. She knew that after a letter from Bruno Bouchier, the local doctor, to Anthea Fairfax, small amounts of money had started to come to the house to keep the last inhabitants of the house more or less alive. It had not been enough to provide Elma with a new dress or to buy the food and sweets she always craved. The last shilling they had was spent to buy the hay for Jeffrey’s horses for God’s sakes! At least he was home now and all would be well!

Jeffrey stiffened after she mentioned Anthea’s name. He still could not get used to the fact that she was somebody else’s wife now, or that there might be truth in the rumour that she could be his sister! His sister! Bruno Bouchier had written him that there was evidence that Jeffrey’s mother had an affair with Anthea’s father Cyril Fairfax, the now deceased Earl of Rotherham, at the time that Jeffrey had been conceived. He was born within nine months after that affair and nobody could be the wiser as to who had actually sired him; his father Baron Caversham or Cyril Fairfax.

He clamped his jaws together. At least that accounted for why the Earl had gone through the trouble to get him out of Rotherham and into a prestigious regiment, away from his precious daughter. It also accounted for the allowance

Jeffrey still received; money coming out of Cyril's coffers. Anyone as rich as Cyril would do that for the son he had never truly been able to acknowledge.

Elma stared at him when he remained silent for some time. She reminded herself that Jeffrey had been in love with Anthea Fairfax for about forever. He had been when Evan Burroughs had brought her into the house more than five years ago.

Her eyes started to mist over when she thought about Evan, her deceased husband. Whatever everybody said, she had always been fond of him. Evan had been a dreamer, the ridiculed opposite of his brothers Nigel and Jeffrey. He had loved her to distraction and had married her even if she was not entirely suitable for the second son of a baron: her father had been a schoolmaster and a gentleman and although her mother came from sound village stock, there had not been one drop of blue blood floating in her veins.

Her mother had been dead a long time before Evan came to offer her his hand in marriage. Her father had gone into a decline after her mother died, not caring what happened around him. She had grown wild and ungovernable. It was just as well that the starry-eyed Evan came to take her away from Little Hopeville after he had been stranded there when he was travelling the countryside to seek inspiration for his paintings.

She looked hesitantly down at her clothes, noticing for maybe the first time in weeks that she must look a fright. Oh, well, now that Jeffrey was back everything was certain to be alright soon.

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“What happened at the house, Bruno?”

Jeffrey folded his hands behind his back in a typical officer’s stance and stared out of the window.

Bruno Bouchier watched him from an eared chair.

“We are not certain, Jeff,” he answered quietly, “I think it has something to do with the dirt, the ditches or the rats. It was terribly contagious and everybody that was not afflicted has fled that house, ah... your house.”

Jeffrey turned around to look at the man who was also supposed to be his half-brother. Cyril Fairfax had done his utmost to populate the area of Rotherham with his bastards. They were mostly boys or men, as far as he knew now. Only Cyril’s three legitimate children were daughters.

He studied the local doctor with a discerning eye. Bruno was tall, but his hair was frizzy and brownish, unlike Jeffrey’s straight blond locks. A short hope welled in him that he had not sprouted from Cyril Fairfax’ loins after all, but he soon felt the futility of that thought.

“Elma is still there...”

Bruno's brown eyes sought Jeffrey's face. No doubt the boy was in torment. Things had changed so rapidly at Caversham while he had been away at the wars in the Peninsula and later France.

When the army had returned its officers and men to Britain he had warned Jeffrey away from the house in a short letter. Evan had already been ailing when they had buried Nigel and he had forbidden Jeffrey to come to Caversham, even after so many years of fighting in faraway countries.

Bruno always had a weakness for Ellen Burroughs' brave third son and he had wanted him safe when the disease still raged. He had also told Jeffrey that he might be Cyril Fairfax's son and therefore Anthea's half-brother, to stop Jeffrey from going after her again now that he had come back from the wars in one piece.

"Yes, it sometimes happens that people escape such dire destinies without us knowing why. What do you intend to do about Elma, Jeff? She's still the Baroness of Caversham."

Jeffrey breathed in deeply. Bruno's house smelled of tobacco and wax. It was a lovely house, near the small basin of the port of Rotherham. He knew now that Cyril had bought the house for Bruno's mother after she found herself pregnant. Cyril had married her off to one of his captains as there was no way his father

would approve of his second son and spare to the earldom marrying a girl without money or antecedents. It had been just as well that Cyril's bastard son had only been studious and interested in becoming a physician.

At least Cyril had taken care of all that was his, Jeffrey thought morosely. Bruno Bouchier had gone to study medicine in Edinburgh while Jeffrey had been able to pursue a career in the army.

"What does one do in a case like hers?" he asked Bruno with a puzzled expression on his face.

"The family takes the widow in," Bruno said suavely.

"The problem is that you are her only family now. Her father seems to have drunk himself to death a few years ago and there's no one left."

"You... I hope nobody expects me to actually marry her?" Jeffrey half-asked with a shudder.

Bruno grinned at him.

"Not unless you are Jewish. According to the English law she's your sister."

Jeffrey sat suddenly down on a chair as if a burden had fallen from his shoulders.

"You may have to keep her at Caversham and provide for her until she decides to move on. I gather you earn enough to send money down once in a while? Nothing has been coming in from the property for a long time and you can hardly

expect Lady Brondemeire to continue to support a house she decided to abandon four years ago.”

Jeffrey followed the stem of a crystal goblet with his finger. Bruno had poured him a glass of wine which was of surprisingly good quality. He wondered if it had been Cyril’s blunt paying for it. Rotherham was hardly a place where a country practitioner could grow rich enough to buy such luxuries.

“We have to ascertain first that the little lady is not breeding anyway. It may interfere with you being the new baron.”

“What?”

Bruno almost laughed when he saw Jeffrey’s startled expression.

“The widow’s year, Jeffrey. It has been invented entirely to not get the wrong successor on the throne.”

“My brother died four months ago. Even if he fucked himself to death with her she should know by now!”

Bruno looked down on the pipe he was about to light.

“I doubt your brother was able to bring anything forth but cough and slime for a long time. It’s just that...”

“Yes?” Jeffrey looked with narrowed eyes at him.

“There are rumours that she consoled herself in Dennis Tanner’s bed.”

Jeffrey sprang from his chair with an oath, almost toppling his wine.

“Damnation!” he cried out, “Don’t we have enough to put up with already with all the bastardy in this place? No cuckoo of the Tanners is going to take Caversham away from me!”

“Relax, Jeff!” Bruno soothed him, still not lighting his pipe, “I’ll have my say in that matter if she would be so dumb as to claim a babe as Evan’s. I did have the impression though that Caversham is just a big dump for you... Nobody could want it the way it is now!”

“True,” Jeffrey growled, sitting back on his chair, “but it’s my dump. A bloody dump that I will have to get back into order. However, that will just have to wait. I have to fight in another war first.”

“You shouldn’t,” Bruno said sharply. “You are the last man standing. There are no more heirs. When you die Caversham will revert to the Crown.”

Jeffrey put his chin up.

“There’s no way I can back out of that war and you know it, Bruno. Just assure me you will take whatever money I have and spend it wisely on that dump and the little slut in it. Let’s hope I come back in one piece and we’ll take it from there.”

“Ah, yes,” Bruno nodded, “there’s one more thing. You will have to visit the lawyer’s office of



Spencer and Marrow in York. There was something with... Well, I understand it has something to do with the inheritance. They contacted me when Evan died.”

“They contacted you? What on earth is the matter with those lawyers nowadays? Why did they not write me directly?”

Bruno shrugged, lighting his pipe at last.

“No doubt they’ll tell you that themselves.”

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“You’re leaving again?” She looked at him with desperate eyes, fumbling with her hands in her gown.

Jeffrey looked up from a bowl of porridge that one of the footmen had purchased at the local inn. He wrinkled his nose without realizing it. God, the girl’s smell was even worse today than it had been at his arrival.

“Elma, don’t you ever wash?” he suddenly snapped impatiently at her, shoving his porridge away. The girl’s smell definitely influenced his appetite in a bad way.

She looked wide-eyed at him as if he had suggested she jump in the sea right now to get clean.

“I... There is no warm water, Jeffrey. Cold water does not get me clean. And this frock is the only one I have.”

Jeffrey raised a hand in desperation.

“Listen, I’ll have the footmen heat some water, so you can at least take a bath. I’ll bring you a gown when I return from York. Oh, for Christ’s sakes, Elma, you’re a bloody baroness! You cannot walk around like a stupid smelly tramp!”

She stepped towards him and grabbed him by his sleeve.

“Can’t I come, Jeffrey? I have been here since, since...” she looked wildly about her. Truth to tell she could not remember when she had left the house the last time.

Jeffrey immediately shook his head. No way he was going to drag the smelly creature around in York. And he had plans for York that could not include her presence at all. He was going to get himself laid with a vengeance! Nothing could perk him up better than a hard and fast swive.

Jeffrey rose.

“I’ll send someone to Mrs. Tanner’s cottage to ask her to assist you in washing. I imagine you won’t be able to tackle your hair all by yourself. Maybe she can bring you some shift to wear so that your dress can be cleaned. I don’t suppose you’ll have a reason to go out of doors today. You need a maid to take care of you, but until I can get things sorted we’ll ask Mrs. Tanner to do some work in here. She’s done it before and she is a good sort of woman. I had the footmen fill the larder and there is enough wood now to warm the small drawing room and your bedroom. The

footmen will stay here to help out with the daily routine. Doctor Bouchier will make sure a group of people will come to clean out the house tomorrow. This place is a bloody dump, and I'm damned if I want to come back to this filth."

Elma's eyes widened. She was going to have staff in the house? Food on the table and a warm bath?

Jeffrey hastened his steps towards the door; he was in a hurry to take out Bruno's horse and to ride to York. He hoped to arrive there before the sun set. He preferred Bruno's horse over Basil Ware's luxurious travelling coach. The thing was attracting too much attention as it was and it would definitely not do to park it in front of some brothel or another.

He turned around suddenly when he reached the door.

"One more thing, Elma..." he instructed, "Dennis Tanner is not to enter the house, as you are not allowed within ten paces of him anywhere, understood?"

She only nodded wide-eyed at him. She was going to be the baroness again, what would she need Dennis Tanner for?

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## Chapter 6: YORK

\*

Jeffrey leant back in the big chair in the small private parlour of the King's Golden Fork Inn.

"It seems we both have something to celebrate tonight, Major!" he exclaimed, lifting his tankard.

Peter Wallace obviously felt in a less elated mood than the young captain in front of him.

"My luck in that respect already changed a year ago, Captain," he said more dourly than he felt, "which, I might say, was extraordinary. No one expects three consecutive sons in one family to die so that the adopted brat inherits the title. All due to the long-dead Lady Loghaire, who took almost as good a care of her husband's bastards as of her own sons."

Jeffrey looked inquiringly at the stern man in front of him. He supposed the ladies found the man dashing, even with the broad scar over his face. French sabre cut, no doubt, the way their cavalry fought. Slash the face, blind them, kill the officer. He shivered. At least the Frenchie who had attacked Wallace had not been able to finish the job.

"I've heard of her. Hengist Agnew's mum, as far as my memory goes. A Lady with balls who still reaches out from her grave. I'm curious to hear your story."

Peter took a swallow from his glass of wine, which turned out not to be half-bad.

“There’s nothing particular to tell, Caversham. My mother was Lady Loghaire’s personal maid. It seems she went freely to Loghaire’s bed at the time when Lady Loghaire expected her first child, poor dead Philip. I never knew my mother as she died at twenty-five, when she gave birth to me. Lady Loghaire found a family of the gentry for me. They did not see too much harm in having me as their fourth son as I was naught but an addition to an already big family. They were close to destitute, you know, and the countess paid good money for my keep. Extremely good money, I’d say. Lady Loghaire managed to acquire the barony of Irving for the baronet, who was the father that raised me. She had the good sense to change it into ‘Irving-Wallace,’ Wallace being my mother’s name. She also took care that my sister Detty married an unremarkable man, who later and quite unexpectedly became the Earl of Rotherham. Detty was Lizzy Lorna’s friend, Lorna and Kintyre’s wife, when Lizzy was still living with her parents in Ayre. She was her only friend as far as I know. Lady Loghaire had some sort of ‘tendre’ for Detty and arranged her to marry Cyril Fairfax’ cousin, although knowing the man I would hardly call that union a blessing. The countess could never have surmised I would be the sole male survivor in the Warleigh family,

but knowing her she would have been delighted that I became the baron at long last. That's all."

"Ah, luck through so many deaths. You are right. I'd rather have my brothers Nigel and Evan alive than become the Lord of Caversham."

Jeffrey wiped his lips. He had been indulging in a lot of the inn's good beer.

Peter shook his shoulders.

"I never cared for my so-called brothers. They liked to treat me like dirt when mother Warleigh was not looking. My parents were stiff, unresponsive and very religious. I always wondered how the girls could stand them. I'm certain they married just to be out of the house and not because they cared a whit about their husbands."

The only brother he had liked had been Hengist Agnew, nowadays the Earl of Loghaire. Hengist had served in the same regiments as Peter and when they both were fighting in the Peninsula they had become friends. Hengist had sold his colours after he had married his dead brother Philip's wife.

He placed his glass in front of him, cocking his head at Jeffrey.

"You must know Detty. She's the new Countess of Rotherham and your barony is part of that earldom."

“I happened to meet her in London at the Brondemeire’s party for Aline Fairfax and Ware, who are to be married. I noticed she’s with child.”

“What? Jesus Christ, that’s great for Detty! I did not expect Gilles Blackwood to have it in him! So the earldom may be a fixture for those worthless Blackwoods, eh?”

“Only when it’s a boy,” Jeffrey grinned.

“Anthea is also going to have a small piglet. If Detty’s child is a girl Rotherham will revert to the eventual Brondemeire boy.”

“Talking about Anthea... Is she the reason for your very lucky strike of today?”

Peter looked up when a busty girl brought him a tray laden with food. He winked at Jeffrey who was staring at the servant’s abundant cleavage, while she unnecessarily walked around the table to give him a good view of her tits and generous arse.

“She may want to take you on for tonight, Jeffrey!” Peter laughed when the girl had exited the room with her assets swaying.

Jeffrey pressed his lips together. The girl looked good enough, but he had other plans for the night.

“No, Anthea is not really the reason for my windfall, although she has something to do with it. Cyril Fairfax thought he might have been my father. Just because those presumptions could be true he left me the funds: eight thousand a year

when I marry someone born at least fifty miles out of the range of Rotherham and it's obligatory that she must be gentry or preferably of noble birth. That would have excluded Anthea when she was still unwed. He did not forget to include fifteen-thousand in case I would inherit Caversham, so that's in my pocket. Now I have to find myself a suitable bride to get the rest. Piece of cake, don't you think?"

Peter rose and went to the small window.

"I think not," he said softly.

"Never marry for the wrong reasons, Jeffrey. Marry because you love her and she loves you back and you think your life will end if you cannot be with her. Believe me, I married Christina for all the wrong reasons and all that's left to me are more regrets than I can handle."

He looked down the inn's court, unseeing.

"I loved the sister, but was in a way forced to marry the woman I did not care a whit about. She died of a broken heart and I am left with so much remorse."

"Her sister? You love Lady Aubrey? Oh, bloody hell, she's so shackled to that horrific ass!"

"I knew Amelia when she did not carry his name yet. She was over-ambitious at the time. I was only a lowly base-born bastard lieutenant and had nothing for her to help her advancement in life."



“Damn!” Jeffrey swore, “You’re a baron and a major right now. You are every girl’s wet dream, Peter!”

Peter forced a grim smile.

“As are you, Jeffrey. But beware of the title-hunters and the money-grabbers. True love is everything.”

“Aren’t you being contrary? Wasn’t that exactly what Lady Aubrey turned out to be?”

Peter’s smile changed into a grim expression.

“They were as poor as church mice, but they were gentry. Christina was in love with me and Amelia wanted her to have me as well. Aubrey had already proposed to Amelia and she thought to change her destiny by marrying him and his blunt and title.”

Jeffrey stretched his legs. His earlier elation about his sudden richness was quickly evaporating.

“Aren’t you a bit out of the way, here in York? Shouldn’t you be in London taking care of troop movements into Flanders?”

“I’m leaving tomorrow. I had to bring Nimue to Amelia’s house here in York. We rode all the way from Wattles. Amelia is taking care of her as long as I must be away. Should I not ask you the same thing?”

Jeffrey nodded.

“I’m going south as soon as I’m finished here. I promised myself a bit of relaxation at good old Madame Majorica’s.”

He grinned, unconsciously rubbing his hands in glee.

“Wanna come?”

“I’m sorely tempted.”

Peter suppressed his own grin. The fact that he had been unhappily married had given him every excuse to take care of his baser needs now and then with the help of a lush prostitute. His remorse over Christine’s sad and untimely death had never changed that.

“I’ll try my luck with the busty girl here, though. I want to be gone at first light.”

Jeffrey rose from his lazy position.

“I’m off then. I am going to eat at the Shoppe, they always had a splendid cook.”

He hoped Regina would still be at the brothel as well. The last time he had visited was more than four years ago and Reggie had not been young at the time, but she had always been a great fuck, worth the blunt Madame Majorica charged him.

“Don’t get robbed!” Peter called after him when he left the room.

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Jeffrey’s good mood vanished when Madame Majorica told him that Regina had left a few years ago. He looked around him in the parlour where

the brothel's girls were displaying themselves in various stages of dress. Except for Reggie's departure nothing obvious had changed at The Fancy Shoppe, although he could not suppress the impression that the house looked a bit seedy.

Majorica fixed her hands on her hips, thinking fast. The boy she had known as Jeffrey Burroughs was no less than a captain in the King's Cavalry and a baron now. She would hate to lose him to the competition next door. He looked mouth-watering in his expensive captain's clothes and her trained eye told her they were brand-new. No doubt he had gone straight to one of those fancy shops in London where he had ordered new uniforms and boots as soon as he got back from that stupid war in France.

She remembered Jeffrey's slight predicament of course, or more accurately: every girl's predicament who wanted to take her chances with the captain. Damn Reggie for dying of that filthy illness that had given her house such a bad reputation lately. It had not exactly been the illness that had killed her but the man she had given it to, who had slaughtered her like a pig in a fit of rage.

She eyed the young baron again. He was gazing at her girls with that noticeable hungry look.

“Why don't you have a seat in the dining room and have a bite to eat? It will be on the house! We

still have Mrs. Mulligan cooking those pies for us, the ones you always liked so much. There is one new girl who can very well serve your needs, but she is, ah... busy right now.”

She grinned a gap-toothed smile at Jeffrey, who was already half convinced to take her up on her offer.

The moment he was royally seated at an elaborately decked table in a corner of the house that she called her dining room, her smile changed into a worried pout. Damn, but she should have educated Millie’s chit in what to do with a horny young fellow like that giant captain, instead of placing her in that kitchen some months ago. She sighed profusely. Troubles, always troubles! Well, the girl was now on the brink of really earning her keep in the house!

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Bertha trembled all over when the house-girl covered her with a silk sheet on Madame’s opulent bed.

She had been quite happy when Kelly had come down from ‘upstairs’ to tell her she was to have a hot bath. She had it under Cook Mulligan’s supervision. The kind woman had spanned an old sheet in a corner of the kitchen to give her some privacy from all the stares of the staff that came rushing in for food for the customers.

It had been when Madame herself had deigned to come into the kitchen and had thrown her some

flimsy pink negligee that huge warning bells had started to clang in her head.

“You are to earn your keep upstairs for tonight, gel,” Madame had curtly told her, “you’re finished lumbering around here.”

A deep blush of embarrassment had coloured Bertha’s face when she understood she would really have to walk through the house in that flimsy thing Madame had given her and that she was to do the thing most girls in Madame’s house had been doing for years.

“I thought you did not think me fit enough for the work?” she inquired bashfully and with not a bit of hope in her voice.

“Fit?” Madame had cackled, “You’ll fit alright!”

Majorica looked morosely at the girl on the bed wondering if she would turn out to be a good choice for the baron’s night. She remembered her husband had said that the girl had been no good; she had been crying and squirming.

“I know you’ll be new at it and there is no time to teach you how to behave,” the Madam said quietly, “so just think of giving him all the pleasure he wants from you. It’s mostly laying back and opening your legs as wide as possible and telling him he’s great at it. A good whore complies, does not kiss and does not complain. This one does not require anything special except... well, never mind. There will be extra

money in it for you if you can get him to stay for the whole night.”

Madame Majorica grinned after that last remark. She was not going to pay the girl one penny. She had lived on Majorica’s goodwill for months now and a whole night with the big bloke would pay the madam back handsomely. Ah, handsomely indeed! Majorica would have to sleep in Grimsdale’s bed the coming night as there were no other rooms available for Bertha but the madam’s own. Well, with some luck her husband would be as drunk as a Templar tonight and fall asleep in front of Cook’s stove. She’d see to that.

She turned around to the girl when she reached the door.

“Bertha’s no name for a whore. I’ll tell him your name’s Yvette. Remember you want him to stay the night!”

Bertha shifted uneasily against the headboard and nodded while she was swallowing away her tears.

She could not help drawing the sheet under her chin though when she heard heavy footsteps approaching the door. She was almost panicky when she gazed at the porcelain doorknob slowly turning.

Her ‘education’ in Mrs. Grimsdale’s house had been swift: all the girls working upstairs liked to sit at Cook’s table when it was still early in the afternoon and when clients were to be counted on

one hand. They had often giggled or gossiped about their customers, their good or bad habits, their money, and even the seizures of their manhoods, whenever these invoked anything to remark upon. She knew by now that some clients might request different means to reach an orgasm; whether by position in or outside a bed, by means of ‘toys’ as the girls called them, or by means of treatments using faeces, urine or even blood.

Bertha had always listened with awe to whatever the girls had to go through to earn their money. It seemed to Bertha that the girls acquired some sort of specialism amongst them: Carina was what one would call a chief-whip, she whipped men, and sometimes even women, without feeling any involvement with her victims. Marcia had the worst speciality that had to do with the fluids that could emerge from a body. The room she used for that reason would emanate unbelievable smells once in a while. She had built up a rather fixed circle of clients who hardly ever came into the parlour. Bertha always admired the fact that Marcia was so stoical about it all. Marcia was an old hand in the house, she was rumoured to have worked for more than two decades for Madame. She was close-mouthed and known to hoard every penny she earned for ‘later days.’

There were about five girls for the ‘normal’ up and downers and the ‘belows.’ They were a young and noisy group, who would ‘kill’ for a cuppa and

Cook Mulligan's pies. Bertha had really come to like most of them.

They had been quite unbelieving when they heard that Bertha was to be called upstairs to perform in the profession. Bertha had become the whores' special haven; she would make the girls tea or chocolate, now that she had learned to move around in a kitchen, and she was always willing to mend a torn dress or help wash unmentionables.

Everybody knew that Bertha was a lady, with a lady's extensive education, who could even read and speak French. After Bertha had made Cook Mulligan a beautiful embroidered purse, they all had wanted one and had paid Bertha handsomely for it.

The moment the girls had known that Bertha was to take on a client, they had flocked to the kitchen and given her all sorts of advice on the matter.

Bertha had smiled tremulously. Although her bed experience was limited to the loathsome Pettigrew, who really had managed to hurt her, and the equally detestable Mr. Grimsdale, who had only touched her for less than a minute, she had always kept her ears open to the girls' stories. She understood very well what coupling was all about and her bad experiences with the two older men had not been able to suppress her wish to know more about it. Since she had been at



boarding school there were hardly any secrets in that respect: some of the pupils had been a lot more worldly than others and had not refrained from sharing their knowledge with the lesser experienced girls. She had learned to try out things there that had to do with sensuality and self-gratification.

Still, when her first client entered her room she could not help a gasp of terror.

He was huge, terribly huge! He had to bend his head to enter the room. Bertha moved the sheet to her mouth to muffle her bewildered squeak of shock.

Jeffrey had been in a hurry; knowing that he would have a whore that night had made him hard and aching. Madame Majorica had suggested he could stay all night if he so wished; the girl he would get was new and did not have any one else waiting. He had nodded, thinking he might stay the night if the girl was any good, even though he had already paid for a room at the inn.

When he saw Yvette in the faint light of a few candles his eyes opened wide in amazement: the whore was beautiful! Her skin was of a pearly white and unmarred by pimples or diseases. Her long hair was a light-honey shade of blond that could not have come from a pot of dye, her eyes turned out to be the green of moss and her face was a lovely heart shape that reminded him of somebody. He remembered that Madame

Majorica had said that she was new and he already regretted in advance that her profession would soon ruin every beautiful asset she now possessed.

When she gasped the moment he came into the room, he recognized how innocent she still must be. Jeffrey had had many women in his life. Starting out early to take his father's leavings, transporting his experience to his beloved Anthea and using his wiles whenever he pleased on the women who were with the army in the Peninsula and in France. It was true he wanted them experienced and if possible overly flexible to take his too big cock. All his thoughts of preferring experience vanished the moment he set eyes on Yvette, his amour for the night.

She did not get up from the bed so he decided to go and sit next to her.

"My word," he whispered, "you are beautiful, Yvette."

The girl gazed at him with frightened eyes.

Jeffrey almost swore. He did not want her to be afraid of him; he wanted her to be happy to be with him.

His hand tugged at the sheet and it dropped to her lap, revealing a flimsy and quite see-through shift. Jeffrey could not help but stare wide-eyed at her body that was dimly revealed by the frilly, pink negligee.

"Exquisite!" he mumbled again.

He wanted to extend a hand to remove the negligee to see exactly what was underneath, but the bashful look she threw him made him think twice.

“Urm, why don’t I pour you some wine and then I remove my clothes first?” he suggested almost lamely.

It was positively the first time he had not jumped on a whore because she'd thrown him the look of an innocent.

When he handed her a glass of wine she accepted it without a word.

Jeffrey turned around and started to open the buttons on his recently acquired military coat wondering if his new boots would come off without the help of a footman.

When he turned around to her in all his naked glory he noticed she tried to suppress another gasp.

He looked down at his fully hardened and erect cock. It was a big thing, true, but he was a big man at 6 foot 7 and he surmised that the size of his cock was more or less in relation to the size of his body.

Wordlessly, he turned away from her and put on his smalls again. If the girl was new to it he did not want her to be wary of him.

He got himself a glass of wine from the bedside table and sat himself gingerly on the bed again.

“To your beauty, Yvette,” he rumbled.

She nodded and drank.

Jeffrey admired a long white throat swallowing the drink. His gaze continued down to look at the cleavage of her negligee. She had tantalizing round breasts with soft beige nipples that pushed against the cloth of the flimsy see-through thing she was wearing.

His cock strained against the cotton of his smalls and he quickly put his wine back on the bedside-table. He wanted the action he was paying for and he wanted it now.

Bertha looked wide-eyed at him, understanding that the man was to do what he had entered the room for.

Honestly, she had never seen such a beautiful man, if that word was apt for the giant who sat next to her in the bed. He wore his light blond, straight hair over his ears and it reached his shoulders. He had a slight aristocratic and forbidding expression that she remembered from her father when he was frowning at her. His huge body was muscled and toned. She dared to look down his belly to his smalls. My God, but he was as huge there as the rest of him, if she remembered her first naked view of him. Strangely enough she did not feel any bewilderment any more now that he was sitting next to her on the bed. It was almost as if her life had led her to this moment.

“Yvette?” Jeffrey asked, “Will you take off that shift so that I... uh... I mean, I’d rather have you naked!”

Bertha’s hands flew to the bow that kept the negligee in place.

“Yes, of course, my lord,” she managed to say.

Neither Pettigrew nor Grimsdale had been interested in her nakedness, apart from the bit between her legs.

“I’m Jeffrey,” he said slowly.

He was not yet used to being called ‘my lord’ by all and sundry.

He had crept closer to her and smelled orange-blossom scented perfume on her hair.

Most whores wore loud scents, to hide the dirtiness of their hair and body. The only woman he knew who had been rightly and lightly perfumed had been Anthea. He had never bedded Anthea though; during their flirts they had never gone to the very end.

This very enticing woman was going to be bedded right and soundly by him.

She threw the sheet and her negligee aside and Jeffrey groaned with delight.

He lay down on his side, struggling with his smalls and moving his hips to get them off.

By God, he exulted, she had delectable lips! A delectable whore, he mused, and he kissed her hard and deep.

Bertha felt his tongue against her teeth and opened her mouth to gasp. Before she knew it his tongue was inside her mouth, tangling with her own. She widened her eyes. Wasn't this a scandalous French kiss some of her older girlfriends had giggled about at school? And why was he kissing her? Madam had told her whores were not supposed to kiss! But oh, wasn't this heaven? Absolute heaven?

Jeffrey moaned in her mouth.

He had never been a kisser with his paid women, which had mostly been due to their bad smells and worse rotten teeth. This one's mouth tasted so sweet of mint and cleanliness.

His mouth let go of her lips and started to kiss a trail down her long neck to a beautiful breast. He vaguely remembered that Anthea had always had nice fleshy breasts and with Yvette it was no different; she had a pair of beautiful tits that fit perfectly in his big hands.

Bertha sighed and wriggled underneath him. She knew distinctly from the girls in the house that you were not supposed to show real feelings, but this man made it impossible to lay still under his ministrations.

She breathed in the scent of him; shaving-soap and something spicy and male that was probably him. She felt dizzy and elated at the same time. Oh, but he was gorgeous, absolutely gorgeous!

Jeffrey did not know what exactly made him do it, but he spread her beautiful legs wide and attacked that secret place of hers with his mouth.

God, she was even tasty there! His tongue spread the petals of her most feminine spot, lapping the place where he needed to be very soon and then swirling the little nubbin on top of her nether lips. He vaguely heard her scream of delight and hurried to climb on top of her. He stretched his arms while he poked his big organ at her: he was too heavy and it would not do to smother her with his big body.

Bertha had never felt the like before; a man licking her at her most intimate spot. She had an orgasm without being able to silence her cries of rapture.

The girls had warned her that she might eventually have an orgasm, but it was not a done thing to show that to a client. A customer might ask his money back if he noticed that he gave a whore pleasure!

Although she still felt rosy and giddy, she reached out to guide his cock to the entrance between her legs. She hesitated for a split second. He really was a big man, there and everywhere.

Jeffrey felt her opening give and ground his teeth when he noticed her wet desire for him. God's cods, but the girl was delicious! Most women were secretly afraid of him, which could be felt by the fact that they often turned out to be

dry and gravelly. Sometimes they had reached for a pot of lard to moisten themselves to make his passage smoother.

Not Yvette. Although he went slowly he slid into her with almost practised ease.

Ah, Majorica had been right! This girl was able to take him in!

He withdrew almost breathlessly.

No way, he was going to spill too fast! He wanted to enjoy this to the limit! He only managed about four of five of those actions however when his head seemed to explode at the same time as his cock did.

Bertha was in heaven!

Her earlier two experiences with the despicable men were nothing compared to Jeffrey swiving her. Her body shattered into a thousand sparks when she felt him spend his seed inside of her and she wondered if she was going to die of delight.

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Jeffrey lay down beside Yvette. His head was spinning as if he was drunk. He kissed her upturned nose and smiled at her.

She did not see it. She held her eyes firmly closed.

His hand roamed lazily over her body with the lovely tits and the generous hips. He suddenly thought fleetingly of Peter Wallace, wondering if he would have such a delightful fuck with the



busty girl at the inn. He didn't think so. Nothing could compare with his Yvette!

He felt he was hardening again and looked questioningly at her. When she smiled tremulously at him he pulled her toward him, ready to have another go with her.

It happened the moment when he entered her again.

Their first swive had removed his blatant eagerness for hard sex.

This second time he entered her carefully and noticed that something strange occurred to the left side of his chest.

It was some sort of a pain he felt, mixed with something that felt like a sort of warmth emanating from him. It was also a sensation that seemed to make his lips tremble when he searched for her mouth and for some reason he felt hope and elation burst forth when she hesitantly returned his kiss.

He almost shook his head in wonder when he noticed another feeling struggling to the surface: a feeling of tenderness and the wish to protect her from whatever harm could befall her.

A few days later, after he had been with Yvette almost every minute he'd spent in York, he realized what was wrong with him: he had fallen in love with a whore!

Bertha dried her tears with a small embroidered handkerchief. She could not do it. She just could not do it! It was bad enough that she had to play the whore for Madame after having been abused by Pettigrew and Grimsdale.

Mrs. Mulligan came to sit next to her.

“You are too good to be anybody’s mistress, unless it is the mistress of a house, Bertha,” she said with conviction.

“You are a lady and ladies don’t become mistresses but married wives. If the captain does not see it that way, than I’d wish him to hell.”

Bertha looked tearfully at the kind woman.

“He’ll buy me away from Madame tonight,” she murmured, wiping her eyes again.

They’d had two nights of bliss and three days of excitement together. Jeffrey had taken her shopping yesterday as his sister-in-law needed new clothes and Bertha had turned out to be almost her size.

The modiste had been elated to have the Lord and Lady’s custom and neither Bertha nor Jeffrey had told her differently.

They had chosen two almost ready made black dresses for Elma with some unmentionables to go with it. Jeffrey had wanted Bertha to buy a dress as well and in the end she had accepted a beautiful emerald coloured day dress that matched her eyes. Jeffrey had been indulgent and to everybody around them he had seemed so much

in love with her, that the modiste had exclaimed to Bertha that she was so lucky to have such a smart and fond husband. It had pained Bertha's heart, because all she was to him was an expensive whore.

When he had taken his leave from her and Madame's bed that morning he had told her he wanted to negotiate her release from Madame's house, to bring her home with him as his mistress. Bertha's heart had sunk in her shoes when she heard that. The nights with Jeffrey had been magical, true, and the hours she had spent with him in the daytime had been a wonderful adventure. Alas, it was something altogether different to follow him to his house and maybe even to the war he was wont to go to without being his lawful wife. The months she had spent in York, first with her mother and the terrible Mr. Pettigrew, then on her own and in the brothel, had taught her one important thing: nothing was worse in life than to lose her respectability. Her father had given her all of the respectability that had been in his power: he had acknowledged her so that she had been allowed to become Roberta Dunstead, he had done all he could to give her a lady's education by sending her to a good boarding school in Scotland and, last but not least, he had married her mother when his first wife died.

Her mother had been a fool to throw all that away by hatching that improbable plot to marry Bertha's little half-sister to a footman who had turned out to be a baron. To make the drama complete her mother had followed the desolate Pettigrew to York where she found her ignoble end when he shot her.

Bertha had tried to keep her head high as long as she could by way of her embroidering, until Grimsdale had put an end to it by forcing her to live in his wife's brothel. To become a mistress to a baron, while she was a baron's daughter herself was inconceivable.

"I had wanted to tell you this, Bertha, but Madame came in between by forcing you to work upstairs. My sister who is a cook in the York residence of Lord and Lady Aubrey told me that Lady Aubrey is to follow her husband to Flanders, where they expect the war against Napoleon to continue. Apart from her own daughter she will take care of her deceased sister's daughter, but her governess told her she won't follow Lady Aubrey into Flanders as she is to marry a vicar in one of the villages close-by. Lady Aubrey needed a new governess yesterday and we immediately thought you would be so right for the position. My sister actually told Lady Aubrey she knew of you and I can easily send a boy to ask if it would be convenient if she saw you today. My sister has not yet sent word that the position is taken. This

way you can get out of this house and avoid the humiliation the captain intends to heap on you.”

Bertha looked wide-eyed at Cook Mulligan.

“How am I going to convince the Lady that I will be the right person to educate the girls? I have lived in a brothel for the bigger part of four months!”

Mrs. Mulligan just shrugged.

“As far as I know you lived in your mother’s rented house and had nothing to do with the brothel. Do you think my sister told Lady Aubrey I work in a brothel? She would be chased away without a reference if they knew! No, don’t you worry your pretty head about that. Shall I send a boy now?”

Bertha wiped away the last of her tears. Oh, she would miss Jeffrey. As far as she knew she had been so imprudent as to fall in love with him, but there was nothing to it: if she wanted her respectability back she’d have to go along with Mrs. Mulligan’s plan.

“Yes, thank you so very much Mrs. Mulligan. You’ve shown yourself a very true friend.” She rose from her place. She wanted to pass by the modiste’s shop as she had seen a nice grey and black dress that would be very fitting for a governess in mourning for her mother. Her own clothes would not do at all: they were all from the days she had been a baron’s daughter and neither

was the new dress Jeffrey had given her very suitable for her eventual new position.

She sighed.

Today was another step into another life; how quaint and how satisfying! She'd forget about Jeffrey. He wasn't for her, not after he had found her in Madame's brothel, even if it broke her heart forever.

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## Chapter 7: A SPECIAL ASSIGNMENT

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Devon Broadhurst wiped his fringe out of his face. He had wanted to visit a barber this morning as his valet and former batman Craft was not very talented with scissors that normally cut hair, but the Duke of Lindley's summons to come to the War Office had been more than urgent this morning. He had refrained from the necessity of having his hair cut as early in the morning as eight-thirty.

He yawned behind his hand as he followed the clerk through the long hallways of the building. It had been a long night with a determined Cornelia Marlowe-Grange wanting to use every last minute that was left with her lover. She knew that Devon was due to be shipped to Antwerp to fight an escaped Napoleon, who had broken free from his imprisonment in Elba in the Southern Netherlands.

Cornelia had been passionate and inventive, but instead of being happy with his rich mistress, a widowed lady of the Ton, Devon felt terribly uncomfortable with her nowadays. Cornelia was determined to marry Devon, who was the third son of the Earl of Allington. It might look as if a marriage to Cornelia would be the best thing to do for him: Cornelia was the daughter of Lord Grange, a rich lord from the Grange-Wharton

family, who had married Leticia Wharton-Marsh for her wit and her fortune. The Grange family was one of the richest in the British realm.

Devon knew however that Cornelia was in her forties, she always refused to tell him how old exactly, and even now that one of his brothers had produced male offspring for the Allington line, he knew his father wanted him to sire one or two boys to be certain that the earldom of Allington would stay in the Broadhurst family for a long period of time to come.

Devon also knew by now that he would love to have some children to his own name and for that reason a woman of over forty would be out of the question for him, her rich state notwithstanding.

Last but not least; Cornelia had been part of the little club of ladies who indulged in many a party of the sensual kind, if not outright orgies.

Devon had met Cornelia at one of those parties, instigated by his brother-in-law Anthony, Marques of Andover, and he now started to feel the unworthiness of those festive meetings clearly. How could he marry a woman who had bedded half of London's Ton and keep his head high?

He also thought uneasily about what it would do to his reputation if he married Cornelia and she turned out to be unfaithful. She was not exactly known to have behaved like the Virgin Mary,



within and after her marriage to Viscount Marlowe.

He hardly dared ponder what it would do to him if a child was born, when he had cause to doubt he was indeed its father.

That point was probably moot; Cornelia had been notoriously sexually active without ever conceiving a babe. No, Cornelia Marlowe-Grange would definitely not do if it came to respectfully trying to maintain the Broadhurst-line for the Allington earldom.

When he turned another corner in the large building, his thoughts went back to the woman he did badly want to marry but who was as ineligible for him as Cornelia Marlowe.

Her name actually differed only one letter with the one of his recent mistress.

She was Cordelia Williams, widow of an army captain killed at the battle of Toulouse. He had only slept with her for the duration of one night, but he never seemed able to forget one second of that night of passion and mutual attraction.

The shameful thing was that he had bedded her on the day her husband was laid, not yet cold, in the rows of fallen warriors ready for removal to England. Captain Williams' body would not find a hasty grave in Toulouse, as his family was known to be rich enough to have him embalmed and then transported to a waiting vault in the

graveyard of the Williams family somewhere near Hull.

Cordelia's sensual attraction was still so strong that he regularly paid a whore for a short time of gratification because she resembled the love of his heart. He felt enormous shame about the fact that he would gladly search for that particular whore even after he came back from Cornelia's bed, just like he had done last night.

He had taken the whore against a wall in an alley not far from his own house, whispering Cordelia's name when he came.

God, he was an idiot!

After his sexual gymnastics of last night with Cornelia it was incredible that he had wanted the whore as well and had been able to perform!

She had looked better this early morning than the last time he'd had her: she was not smelly anymore and was wearing a proper dress instead of her usual rags.

Devon chuckled.

At least his passion for Cordelia Williams helped to keep a whore in a better state due to his all too grateful payments.

He looked around him, noticing that they had crossed to another building that was more luxuriously appointed. No doubt he was nearing the offices of the high and mighty in the country.

Devon bit his lip.

He was not certain when he would have to go to Flanders, where the Allied warlords would prefer the big, and hopefully last, battle with Napoleon to take place.

He mused that he would do something special with the whore before he left for the fields of battle and give her good money, so that she would not go into a decline again after he was gone. Nobody knew how long the campaign was going to last, although he doubted it would take more than a few months. Napoleon would hardly wait for all the Allied forces to be assembled in the Southern Netherlands; he was expected to be in a hurry to try to beat the Western European Allies first and then to take his chances against the Prussians, and preferably after that with the Russians.

He hoped the whore was frugal enough not to waste her money on fripperies or gin in a week's time, or on a pimp who would drink away the blunt Devon intended to give her.

He realized a bit shamefully that he never had asked her name, but he understood perfectly well that knowing her name would take the magic of coupling with her away; for him she was his dream-Cordelia in the flesh.

He never had to look for her; she was never far from his house, obviously hoping to earn her day money with her one eager aristocratic customer.

Devon shook his head pensively when he and the clerk halted in front of a big oak door. His life was a mess and he was responsible for every minute of it. The worst was that he did not even care nowadays.

Richard Grey, Duke of Lindley, invited Devon to sit down on one of the chairs in front of a huge fireplace that burned big chunks of wood in order to keep the enormous office warm. Devon smiled knowingly.

The duke was giving him the honour treatment which was just as well. Devon knew the duke better than most people: Richard Grey was the brother-in-law of his best friend Colonel Lord Christopher Andover, viscount Brondemeire. Devon had attended legion parties and dinners either at the Brondemeire's place or the duke's.

"Apologies for the hasty summons, Broadhurst," the duke said suavely when they both sat down.

Richard Grey was a few years into his forties and had recently married the rich Attelante Fairfax, sister of Anthea Fairfax, now viscountess Brondemeire. He was deemed the most powerful duke in the realm, next to the duke of Wellington.

Richard Grey had been a diplomat for the Crown for more than fifteen years and was detached to the War Office and Horse Guards due to his diplomatic astuteness during periods of war.

When a footman came into the room carrying a huge coffee-service and plates with sugared buns Devon grinned at Richard.

“How did you know I had not eaten any breakfast?”

Richard just smiled.

He was not about to tell Devon that his spies had followed him almost the entire way from the opulence of the widowed Lady Marlowe’s bed to the street in which he had fucked a whore standing up against a wall.

He knew exactly what time Devon had come home, so it had not been a secret to him that the Earl of Allington’s son had not yet eaten any breakfast, now that it was not yet after nine o’clock.

“I must confess I did not have breakfast myself as Wellington was in a hurry and had wanted to speak to me before eight o’clock,” he explained truthfully.

He had not bothered to go down to his own breakfast room as his wife Attelante had been ferociously sick in her bedroom that morning due to her very recent pregnancy. He'd always had a problem bearing the smell and sounds of a lady’s indisposition, no use in denying it, and had declined to take breakfast at home.

To his own surprise he could not stay away from his young wife’s bed and he had not yet been awake when she started to make those

distinguishable noises which went with a pregnant woman being sick.

At least he had noticed that he minded those typical female things a lot less since he had been married to Attelante. He wondered why that was and put it on the fact that he was growing older, wiser and probably a lot more stoic about such matters.

Devon accepted a cup of strong black coffee.

“Anthea hinted that your wife is in an interesting condition. My congratulations, Richard, fast work! I gather you will be staying in London when everybody leaves for the battlefields?”

Richard stirred his coffee. Like Devon he took it pitch black.

He wondered why he had a headache. They had only visited a musicale hosted by his sister Lady Sophia at Letitia Grange’s house last evening.

They had all the good reasons to leave early, which had been fine with Sophia.

As Richard had been married for less than four months he had visited his wife’s bed, her early pregnancy notwithstanding, and had fallen asleep very soon after the deed with his wife had been done. He normally slept less than five hours every night and had been shocked that he must have slept eight hours in a row without waking up.

“Why would I stay in London when all the action will be somewhere else?” he asked Devon,

“Attelante insists that I take her with me to Brussels and my agent is looking for a house as we speak. That gets me to the reason why I had to call you to my office today. Wellington will be leaving today to lead his troops. He is rather morose about the quality and the size of the British forces and has to get them in some way organized. He asked me to tell you that he intends you to be an intermediary between himself and the Prince of Orange. The Prince has been appointed general over the British-Hanoverian forces in the Netherlands by a remorseful Prinky because Young Orange has been jilted by Princess Charlotte in an indecent way. It stands to reason that he will also head whatever Dutch forces are available, which as I understand are at least as haphazard and ramshackle as our own. We all know that Slim Billy is sometimes a bit of a stubborn hothead, although he is most of the time unassuming. Wellington wants somebody of influence in Orange’s camp who is not too stuffy and who could be of some influence on his highness. In the end the choice was you.”

“Me? A mere major?” Devon asked incredulously.

“An unmarried colonel, more like,” the Duke answered, “and an Earl’s son. Billy likes the good life, as you may know, and we agreed not to send any of your married colleagues. I hope you won’t mind participating in Billy’s parties. As you know

most things of any worth are said amongst the sheets.”

Devon gaped.

“A colonel? You mean you just... ”

“Promoted you? Yes, Wellington suggested it. Billy would have nothing to do with someone from the Peer’s camp if he were not at least a colonel. He’s become a bit higher in the instep since his father has crowned himself King of The Netherlands. His former tutor will be with him again. His name is Victor Constant Rebecque. You may remember him from the time that Orange was an aide to Wellington and a lieutenant-colonel. Rebecque never had a real function or rank in the British army. Billy and Rebecque were often at odds, which would colour his decisions now and then. Wellington always spoke well of him, but he knows Billy can have his tiny set-backs once in a while and he wants you there to handle the boy if things are not going right.”

“You mean not going the way Wellington wants them!” Devon grouched.

Everybody knew Arthur Wellington was as stubborn as a mule about how he insisted things should be run. Orange as his aide would have been a lot easier to manage than Orange-the-general and a Crown-Prince.

“Do you have an acquaintance with Orange at all?”



Devon shrugged.

“I saw him the few times I had dinner with the Peer, which were not really situations inductive to get to know Wellington’s aide better. I remember he was rather unassuming and at some times quite brilliant. I’m quoting Wellington’s remarks about him now.”

“As you must know Prinny wanted Princess Charlotte to marry him. The Old mad George was always quite taken with the family when they had to flee the Netherlands at the time of the French Reign of Terror. The Orange family was apt to be grateful with the Hanover’s, as the royals took them to their bosom when they were almost penniless refugees. Now that the Orange family is back in power they are supposed to be one of the richest families on earth. Prinny is especially charmed with them owning the sea-coastline from Calais till Hamburg.

Alas, Charlotte chose differently. Prinny is still furious with her for choosing Saxe-Coburgh, a mere nobody with aspirations to the thrones of Wallonia and Flanders that are now firmly under the butt of Billy’s father. William is very good at earning money it seems. Everybody makes derogatory remarks about that specific talent, but we all secretly wish that Prinny had a tenth of his talents of gaining money instead of spending it.”

Richard fell silent. It was a bit of a dire thing in London’s aristocratic circles to be mercenary, but

he would be the last one to remark on the Dutch king's money-making abilities. He had been working for years to get his own father's gruelling debts out of the way and the only way to achieve that had been to earn blunt. And marry an heiress.

"Ah," Devon smiled, "the gratefulness of that family would probably have paid Prinny out of his debts, am I right?"

"We'll never find out now." Richard answered sourly, "Anyway, what do you think of it?"

Devon suddenly looked grim.

"You understand I'd rather have a regiment than play nurse-maid to Billy, but as you already seem to have decided..."

"Don't take this too hard, Devon. The whole experience may prove to be a lot more interesting than it seems now. It may bring you back whole into the arms of a certain charming widow."

"Which one?" Devon asked Richard without thinking.

Richard raised an eyebrow.

"Is there more than one? You rascal!"

Devon laughed uncertainly.

He had almost betrayed himself there. One would hope the Duke of Lindley would be too busy to find out who the other widow on his mind was if it wasn't Cornelia Marlowe-Grange.

"When am I leaving? It's not as if I will be hampered by having to organize my own regiment now!"

“You’ll get your orders within the week. I’m not certain Wellington won’t give you a lot to do before everything starts. He told me he will need every able veteran. It seems the army won’t be up to snuff for some time. He lost a lot of men and material in Toulouse.”

Richard curled his lip.

Unlike everybody else in the Kingdom he had understood the stupidity of the warlord to go after Napoleon’s most cherished Marshal Soult after Napoleon had already abdicated.

The battle of Toulouse had been a very bloody affair. Wellington had declared the battle a victory, but according to Richard’s reports it had turned out to be a very expensive stand-off that had claimed more than 4500 Anglo-Spanish casualties against Soult’s 3250. Soult had slipped away from the battlefield when he heard about Napoleon’s abdication and knew that the trap he had concocted with another general was not going to work.

He wondered at Wellington’s ability to lead the West Allied forces against Napoleon: Wellington had always fought his battles in the Peninsula and had never participated in the ones that had proven to be part of Napoleon’s downfall in Europe. Wellington had always been a defensive general and Richard hoped that fact might not prove to be in his disadvantage this time: he was the black king on the chessboard against Napoleon’s white.

The problem was that Napoleon had always been a brilliant strategist. It might not need a lot of genius to tell your soldiers to lie down and hide until the other army almost fell on top of you. If it came to a battle of the warlords' minds Richard was not very certain that the British duke would win it.

Furthermore the Prussians were quite cocky about their achievements against Napoleon which was not helping the good relationship between the Prussians and the British. The only thing that might bind the two countries' armies together was the mutual interest of disposing of Napoleon again.

At least Richard's spies had told him that Napoleon could maybe muster an army of 80,000, give or take, in the short term, against about 200,000 of the British-Dutch-Prussian forces. Napoleon was right now running into vast problems in his own 'Douce France' as not everybody was happy about his return. He'd have to post parts of his forces in France just to guard his back against his own people and he'd have to use quite a few of his regiments to guard his frontiers in the East and the South of France against Italian or Spanish attacks.

He watched Devon unobtrusively while he was eating his sugared bun.

Another widow?

Interesting!

He'd have put his money on Cornelia Marlowe-Grange if it came to Allington's third son marrying again, her age notwithstanding. One of his brothers already sired sons, so Devon was normally supposed to marry whomever he pleased.

He wondered why his spies never found out about this other widow. Could it be Ariel Dunstead-Blackwood, Devon's youngest brother's widow?

No, impossible. Devon was not wont to take another man's leavings and Ariel had been notorious for her impudent behaviour with the men of the Ton. He knew for a fact she had been John of Lorna's and Tony Andover's mistress.

Only, if he thought a little longer about it, Cornelia Marlowe had always run with the fast set as well. Truth be told he himself had shared a couch or two with the widow Marlowe-Grange in the wild bachelor years that now lay behind him.

He shook his head. Devon had started to run a bit wild after he came home from Toulouse, but he was a decent man in the end. That was why Wellington had wanted him for the job. The man might like a good fuck once in a while, but he would certainly not be carried away by Slim Billy's lecherous ways. Yes, lecherous, even when the Dutch King and his tutor had thought otherwise. Richard's spies had found out long ago that Billy knew how to evade his tutor's harsh

restrictions imposed on him by a father who was lusting for his son to marry Prinny's only daughter. Even worse; when there had been no way for Billy to smuggle a juicy whore into his bed he was known to conduct sexual experiments with his close friends.

Richard concluded with a grim smile that Devon's secret widow must be a decent woman as well. Hell; that would make it almost impossible to find her!

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## Chapter 8: BERTHA'S NEW EMPLOYEMENT

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Bertha looked down at her big clothes chest standing in the middle of the small governess' bedroom. They would be leaving within three days, she had been told, and she wondered if she should unpack her dresses or just leave them in the trunk.

She stroked the skirt of her new grey and black dress. She had bought it when she had passed the shop that same morning that she had left with her small basket to the tiny house of Cook Mulligan's niece.

Mrs. Mulligan had done her utmost to make her departure from Madame Majorica's house as inconspicuous as possible. She had sent Bertha away on an errand to her sister-in-law's house, telling Bertha to take her basket with her embroidery. Bertha was to spend the night there before she could go to talk to Lady Aubrey, as the boy who had been sent all the way to the mansion near the park had come back with the message that it had not been convenient to speak to her ladyship that same day.

A man had brought her clothes chest at about four o'clock in the afternoon, with a hastily scribbled note from Cook that all was still well at the Shoppe.

Bertha was one big heap of nerves by that time. Jeffrey was only due to go back to the Shoppe at about seven as there were some things he had to arrange in York, so he could not yet know of her defection. Mrs. Grimsdale would not know of her departure till a lot later that day when Jeffrey came to discuss Bertha's release contract. All in all, within a few hours' time Jeffrey and a very angry Mrs. Grimsdale would be looking for her and Bertha hoped that her stay at Miss Mulligan's house had gone unnoticed.

Miss Mulligan lived in a country lane in a small cottage East of York. She was an unassuming woman, a spinster living on a very small jointure. Bertha was happy to give her a shilling for her stay at the cottage and hoped she would keep her mouth shut about her sudden lodger.

After an almost sleepless night a small rented carriage had arrived at the spinsters' cottage to take Bertha to the Aubreys' mansion.

When she arrived at the house she knew something was very wrong. The mansion was big and imposing and two small girls were playing outside, close to the small pond that crowned the front garden. It was just that nobody answered the door when she used the heavy knocker. The two girls only stared at her.



Bertha carefully pushed the front door open. She knew from experience that doors in country mansions were hardly ever locked.

She heard some voices upstairs. If she judged the direction well she surmised the voices were coming from the first floor where the family's bedrooms were situated. As still nobody had come to help her with her luggage, which had now been brought in by the man who had driven her with the hackney, she quickly paid him and crept upstairs.

At the closest bedroom door she found total havoc. A woman, probably the housekeeper and a man, most definitely the butler, were in a heated discussion, while a young woman ran to and fro from the hall into the bedroom and back.

“What on earth is the matter here?” Bertha asked, unconscious of her ‘daughter of a baron’ voice.

The butler and the housekeeper gaped at her, took one look at her rather costly new dress and started to bow and curtsy at her.

“It’s Lady Aubrey, ma’am,” the housekeeper babbled, “she’s in a bad way, but we are forbidden to call a physician.”

Four months in a brothel with many specialized services to often rather depraved clients had taught Bertha a thing or two. She hurried into Lady Aubrey’s bedroom. When she reached the

bed two anxious eyes in a black and blue battered face met her.

“Oh,” Bertha whispered, “you must be in such pain!”

Lady Aubrey tried to mouth an answer but only managed a gurgle. Bertha’s eyes flew to the lady’s throat that was ringed with purple bruises.

“She has bruises everywhere, the poor lamb,” the housekeeper said softly behind Bertha.

“Nothing broken, you think?” Bertha inquired in a whisper.

“I don’t think so. He normally doesn’t...”

“Did she drink some water?”

The housekeeper widened her eyes.

“Why do you ask?”

“We’ll administer some laudanum against her pains and then we can treat her with a salve of the calendula flower, if you have some. She’ll fall asleep after we give her the medication. She must drink something beforehand though.”

The housekeeper nodded.

“We keep some laudanum in the medicine chest and nurse no doubt has the salve. I’ll get it for you.”

It was not easy to give Lady Aubrey the medication as she had to sit a bit upright and everywhere Bertha touched her seemed to hurt. Bertha was reminded of a girl called Tamara who had a client who paid a fortune to beat her up. Since the man’s last stint she still had not

recovered after three weeks of this special treatment. Madame Majorica had scolded that this way it was not worth the money the man brought in, as Tamara had not been able to work for a long time.

Of course they hardly ever brought in a physician. It was Cook Mulligan who tended to the girl and who taught Bertha how to take care of her when Cook had to work in the kitchen. In this way Bertha's nursing skills had astoundingly improved and Tamara had not been the only one to be injured by professional hazards or requiring treatment for female ailments.

Lady Aubrey's chest and buttocks were black and blue. Bertha's discerning eyes saw at once that she had been hit with a stick. Bertha's eyes widened when she saw blood on the lady's inner thighs. Unless the lady had her monthly flow she had probably been raped as well. Raped... The little bit Bertha knew about the law was that rape between husband and wife was not deemed a crime. A husband could do with his wife whatever he pleased.

She sighed.

It was no wonder that the lady did not want a physician to see her: her husband had almost strangled her, beaten her up and raped her.

"She'll probably sleep through the night," Bertha told the housekeeper.

“Now please tell me where I can find my room. I’m Miss Dunn, the girls’ new governess.”

The housekeeper gaped at her before she said: “I thought you were a relative of the mistress.”

Her eyes flew over Bertha’s dress, which looked expensive enough to be made for a noble lady.

“Excuse me, Miss Dunn, I am Mrs. Elliott,” she said at last, “I’ll ask Proper to help you to your room.”

Bertha bent over the clothes chest. She suddenly noticed how willowy she had become since she had left her father’s house. Well, her stay in York and later on in the brothel had not exactly been a bed of roses. No wonder she had lost so much weight.

She heaved a sigh. Oh well, she might as well take her dresses out and hang them on the hook behind the door.

She doubted they would travel to the Continent so soon after Lady Aubrey’s mishaps. The poor woman had woken up after Bertha’s two new charges Nimmy and Jilly had been brought to bed by their nurse.

Bertha had tried to feed the lady some luke-warm chicken broth, which Cook Mulligan’s sister had prepared. Lady Aubrey had problems to open her mouth and Bertha was worried that her jaw was broken. It looked horrible; black and

purple. Her teeth were crusted with blood and she had problems swallowing, but swallow she did.

Bertha gave her more laudanum, but she counted the drops conscientiously. Cook Mulligan had warned her that the medicine could easily kill people if it was administered imprudently.

Bertha eyed a moss-coloured dress that so well matched the colour of her eyes with longing. She had taken as many dresses with her as she could carry in the chest when she had fled Hillview Manor. The dress had always been her favourite, but she doubted she could wear it now that she was in the service of the Aubrey family.

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“I hope... I can count... on your... discretion?”

Lady Aubrey sat gingerly up in her bed. Two days after her ‘accident’ she still had a problem talking.

Bertha looked enquiringly into the lady’s eyes. They were green, almost the colour of her own. With their similar hair colour it was no wonder that the staff had presumed she was the lady’s relative.

“Why, yes of course,” Bertha answered almost unthinkingly, “but I think you should forget about travelling any time too soon. I don’t think you would be able to stand a bouncing carriage for too long.”

Lady Aubrey leant her head against the headboard.

“My name is... Amelia. I’m in desperate need of a friend. I know it may not sound right..., but please call me Amelia. You have the likeness of my... deceased sister Christine.”

“I’m your daughters’ governess!” Bertha objected.

Lady Aubrey tried a prudent smile. The laudanum obviously still worked as she did not feel any pain when she moved her mouth.

“We’ll tell everybody... that you are my cousin, a few times removed. If my eyes and ears don’t deceive me you are of the gentry, so it won’t be hard to pull that off.”

Bertha could only nod. She considered how wonderful it would be to have a friend again. It had been such a long time. Her half-sister Robin had never been her friend because her mother had forbidden her to be nice to the girl.

“My name’s Roberta. My mother died last September. I need to work for my own keep now,” she said quite untruthfully. She thought guiltily of her embroidery basket with at least a thousand guineas worth of jewellery and the money she had earned at the brothel by making bits of embroidery for the girls. They had paid her too much money for it with the indifference of women who made fast money too easily.

“Welcome here, Roberta,” Amelia whispered.

If Harmon Aubrey had not abused her so, she would have missed out on a chance to obtain a

new friend; her only friend. She never dared to make any after she had found out what a monster her husband really was.

Amelia Aubrey nodded. She knew all about being poor. Except that she had decided to marry a rich man to get out of her destitute situation. At the time it had not occurred to her that one had actually something of a choice and could work for money, instead of seeking the bonds of matrimony with a monster.

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Bertha put her cup down and looked inquiringly at Mrs. Elliott.

“I understand that it may be hard for you to talk about your employer, but now that I am to stay, I’d like to know what to expect. First, does he do this often?”

Mrs. Elliott stared at her tiny silver teaspoon.

“I have never known him like this,” she confessed, “I knew he mistreated her once in a while, but this last time... No, I have never seen him so angry after the major came to bring his daughter here.”

Bertha lifted a brow.

“The major?”

“Nimue is Lady Aubrey’s niece. The major was married to her deceased sister. We don’t know all of it but we understand that Mrs. Christine died of a broken heart. Mrs. Warleigh-Wallace I mean. It is our understanding that the major married Miss

Christine while he was in love with Lady Aubrey. At the time he had nothing to offer her, at least that's what we heard here. He was only the fourth son of Baron Irving-Wallace and adopted as well. Rumour says he was some earl's by-blow. By some strokes of fate his brothers all died, and he became the baron Irving-Wallace instead."

"Lord Aubrey always disliked the major and no doubt he distrusted him whenever he was near Lady Aubrey. No wonder; the major is as handsome as they come, even with that scar on his face. Milord came home unexpectedly. We all thought he had left for London but that turned out not to be true. He was furious to find the little girl here and when he understood her father brought her a few days ago, all hell broke loose. Miss Pierce left the house at once. She declared she did not want to stay in a mad-house and truth be told her wedding is planned this week anyway with the reverend Mr. Booth. Miss Pierce was always frightened of Milord after he... Well, we found her ladyship in the morning just when you arrived and only then understood what Lord Aubrey had meant when he told us there was no physician allowed in the house. He left in high dudgeon that morning, you see, and told us Lady Aubrey was to follow him to London within three days."

"She can't travel tomorrow," Bertha gasped, "she's hardly able to move, let alone sit in a carriage for days."



“Knowing her she’ll go,” Mrs. Elliott declared. “We will all lend a hand to see to her comfort. We will be going with the two travelling coaches and she and you can travel in the biggest one, so that she can lie down. The girls will come with nurse, me and Mr. Propper and the boys will travel on the back and on the roof.”

She nodded pensively.

“Better get your fancy dresses packed, Miss Dunn. Or would you like me to ask Annie to do the packing for you?”

Bertha looked with surprise at the housekeeper, but quickly corrected herself. Of course the housekeeper knew by now that Lady Aubrey had called her a cousin and a friend, instead of appointing a new and ordinary governess. You could never keep a secret from your staff. They always knew everything.

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“You must do me this favour, Roberta!”

Lady Aubrey moved her head restlessly on her pillow.

Four days in London and she hardly felt any better. She craved the drops Roberta used to give her during their travels from York to London, but the damned girl only allowed her a few drops to keep the pain at bay. She claimed that the drops were addictive if they were administered in too large quantities for too long a time. A physician in London had confirmed that those drops could

have such a damaging effect and had prescribed her other ones, while she got less and less drops of the laudanum.

At least during her first days in London Aubrey had hardly shown his face. That was, until a few hours ago.

“I don’t know what he will do if one of us is not going to be at his arm for that dinner. You resemble me so much that no one will notice it’s you. Please, Roberta!”

Bertha sat down next to her new friend. She was truly at a loss as to what to do. Attend a dinner at the Duke of Lindley’s residence here in London? What if Robin would be there, with her husband, the baron? Or even worse: Jeffrey? On the other hand, she understood very well why Harmon Aubrey did not want to show up without his ‘wife’ on his arm. Even in London rumours about his abuse of his spouse had proven to have wings.

She looked momentarily non-plussed at her friend. No, Amelia was in no condition to go to a dinner: her face was still distorted and her bruises had become a purplish-green that no make-up could possibly hide.

Bertha knew that her friend would immediately dismiss the whole plan if she told her of her reserves and her fear of facing both Jeffrey and Robin, but Amelia needed her badly now. There was no telling what Lord Aubrey would do when

he got into a snitch about either having to lift his wife from her sick-bed looking as if she had been run over by a carriage, or show up alone at an important dinner and probably prove all the dire rumours to be true.

She bowed her head not to show Amelia her resentment.

“I’ll do it if you so wish, Amelia,” she agreed.

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Lord Aubrey was an austere man. He had looked at Bertha with arrogance and disdain when she had come down the stairs in Amelia’s evening gown, which fit her almost to perfection. Amelia had told Bertha he was not going to refer to the ‘accident’ his wife had had, as he did not know that Bertha had seen his abuse of her first hand. She said she had explained to Roberta that she had been so badly hurt after a fall from her horse and Aubrey had willingly accepted that lame explanation to the new governess.

His eyes had widened for a split second after his quick scrutiny of Bertha.

After her last look into Amelia’s mirror she had inkling why: she looked the spitting image of his wife in the black and green evening dress. It had taken Amelia’s maid Jenna hours to produce an elaborate hairstyle to change Bertha’s normally sober hairdo into a very fashionable evening coiffure. Strings of emeralds were fastened at different places in the hot-ironed curls that

cascaded from the top of Bertha's head. Bertha knew she had never looked more beautiful in her life.

Without a word Lord Aubrey offered her his arm to lead her to the town-carriage that was waiting outside. Bertha felt that she was trembling and wondered if it was the anxiety of going to a dinner where she might meet people from her 'old' life or the nearness of the man who had so terribly abused her new friend.

As she was supposed to be his wife she would not sit next to Lord Aubrey at the dinner table. That knowledge made her heart pound a little less fast. She waited patiently for someone to tell her what was to come next when the front doors of the sumptuous Mayfair mansion closed behind their backs. After a few moments a buxom, very richly dressed lady appeared before them, followed by a distinguished tall man with greying hair.

"Lord Aubrey!" the man exclaimed, "I am glad you could still squeeze in an evening with us before you leave for the Continent. I am not certain you ever had my sister's acquaintance? I'd like to introduce you to Lady Sophia!"

Bertha's eyes widened. Her behaviour lessons at her expensive boarding school had taught her that one kind of lady should be called by her first name only: the daughter of a duke, or his sister.

Lady Sophia frowned for a split second at Lord Aubrey and Bertha wondered if she might have heard something nasty about him through the servants' grapevine. The Duke took her hand in his and bowed deeply over it.

"Lady Amelia Aubrey, I presume?" Lady Sophia asked looking straight into Bertha's eyes.

Bertha performed the deep curtsy due to Lady Sophia's and the Duke of Lindley's high rank, without affirming that she was Amelia.

When she looked up into Lady Sophia's eyes again she found the lady still staring at her, with a look of disbelief on her face.

Bertha reddened and peered down at her gloved hands, trying not to wriggle them.

"Lady Sophia was kind enough to take the Duchess of Lindley's place today. I am sorry to say that my wife is quite indisposed. She is in an interesting condition and was not feeling very well." the Duke said in an apologetic voice. He nodded at Bertha as if seeking her approval about the fact that his wife was not able to join the diners.

"Aubrey, let me introduce you to some people who will be leaving with you to Brussels!"

The Duke almost hauled Lord Aubrey away from Bertha, "You'll be working with army men now, and I am sure you are burning to know who's who!"

Lady Sophia still stood staring at Bertha.

“Dinner will not be served for some time, so maybe you would like to follow me to the ladies’ parlour?” the Duke’s sister asked her.

Bertha complied with some trepidation. There was definitely something wrong here.

“Would you like a glass of wine, or perhaps Champagne?”

Sophia sat down on a chair in a small parlour where they turned out to be quite alone.

Bertha blushed. She knew by now that Lady Aubrey only drank the non-alcoholic ratafia, but she was so fond of Champagne herself!

“I’ll have some Champagne, Lady Sophia.”

Lady Sophia stared long and hard at her.

“I knew you were not Amelia,” she said calmly, “you look a lot younger than her and she never drinks alcoholic beverages. Tell me, what has that criminal done to her now?”

Bertha almost dropped the high fluted glass a footman had just brought her.

Oh God, what was she going to say to this high and mighty lady?

The Duke’s sister gave her another inquisitive stare with her silvery eyes. She looked magnificent in a silver evening dress that seemed to change colours whenever she moved.

“Amelia is not able to be up and about after his last treatment of her, but he did not wish to lose face by showing up without her. I think he gathered that nobody would remember her

exactly. She seems to have lived in the North for a long time.”

Sophia rose from her chair with a disgusted look on her face.

“He does not know that Amelia and I go a long way back. I knew the St. Just family in Scotland when they had not yet succumbed to their indebted situation. Amelia and I differ about twelve years. I was at her christening. When she told me she was to marry Aubrey I warned her about his bad reputation as a wife-beater. His first wife Constance died after having been married to him for five years. Her death was hushed up and nobody seemed to know what caused her sudden demise. So who are you? Are you in Aubrey’s pay?”

Those last words were said in icy hostility.

Bertha swallowed.

The Duke’s sister was obviously far more astute than met the eye.

“Yes,” she answered, “I guess in a way I am. I am the new governess of the children as their former one has married a vicar.”

Sophia raised an eyebrow.

“Children? I only know of one daughter, Jillian.”

“Her brother-in-law brought his daughter Nimue to York, as he was leaving for the continent and he did not have anyone trustworthy

to take care of her. I know for certain that Lady Aubrey suggested he bring Nimmy to her house.”

“Hm. That must have triggered Aubrey’s ire. He still sees Wallace as his competition, which I don’t think puts him in the wrong there. Amelia cried bitter tears over him the morning before her sister’s wedding, as far as I know.”

She shook her head.

“What’s your name then?”

Bertha blanched. This lady seemed all knowing, so she did not dare give her real name.

“I’m Roberta Dunn, originally from Scarborough,” she whispered, which was not far beyond the truth. The first six years of her life she had lived in a nice cottage near Scarborough with her mother.

Lady Sophia bit her lip, deep in thought.

“Well, Roberta Dunn from Scarborough,” she announced at last, “we’d better participate in this little Aubrey-game. I don’t think it will be any use to expose him and you. But I warn you, my dear; be very, very careful around that man! You probably won’t find anyone at this dinner that has a close acquaintance to Amelia. The only one from that region who could have known her, had to send us his excuses as his ship left this morning to Antwerp. Anyway, just in case, I’ll put you into a group of people at dinner that are merely posted in London and are not of the aristocracy. Most aristocrats know their Debrett’s



by heart and that just won't do. They might ask you tricky questions that need exact answers. I hope you know something about architecture?"

She sat down again.

"Before we go back you must tell me all you know about Amelia."

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Richard drank a cup of coffee in Sophia's parlour.

"I noticed you changed the table seating last night. You put Lady Aubrey next to Nash and David Wentworth?"

Sophia played pensively with her diamond bracelet.

"That wasn't Lady Aubrey. It seems that Aubrey found somebody to double for her. He almost even tricked me with it. It's Jilly's new governess. The other one has wisely married some vicar close to York."

Richard grabbed a chocolate truffle from a silver tray.

"Pity, she was a great spy, but she obviously got cold feet after he tried to rape her. I wonder if I could use the new girl."

Sophia sniffed.

"I'm not certain. She fell out of the blue sky after Victoria Pierce left. According to Amelia's maid she came rushing in after Aubrey had his usual rough ways with Amelia. She said she came from Scarborough so I sent a letter to Gordon to

find out the truth of it. Says her name is Roberta Dunn. I don't know. She has something quite familiar about her."

"Aren't you running away with things?"

Richard smiled, "She's the spitting image of Amelia Aubrey, you said."

Sophia shook her head and picked up her coffee cup.

"She's slender, blond and has green eyes. Anyone who is not looking closely at her would see Amelia with the elaborate hair, the jewels and the clothes. It was a stroke of good fortune for Harmon Aubrey to have her around to impersonate his wife."

"According to the servants Amelia adopted her as a friend?" "Well, good for poor Amelia! Doctor Halden said she must have been badly beaten up. She was still in a bad state after she arrived in town. Are you still thinking of bringing him to Brussels?"

Richard shrugged and then nodded.

"There's no other way if we want to catch him at it. It's just that I fear for your friend. Who knows what he will do to her if we catch him red-handed and he thinks she spied on him."

"Peter Wallace will be close by. It won't be difficult to ask him to keep an eye on her. It may even distract Aubrey from his purposes to have his arch enemy lurking around."

Her brother smiled broadly at her.

“You’re a genius, Sophia! I’ll have to check with the Horse Guards that he gets a regiment close to Brussels. I’ll have him stay at the Rue Royal, as Kit might like to have another high ranking officer around. We’ll offer Aubrey a house in the vicinity. He’s to do the troops’ supplies which will give him all the information he needs about troop movements. It will be almost too good to be true for him. He’ll take his chances alright. I am sure he won’t be able to escape us this time.”

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Bertha looked at her mistress with worried eyes.

“Would you like me to call that nice physician again? I hate to see you in so much pain, but I don’t dare to buy another bottle of the laudanum after he agreed it is so very bad for you!”

Amelia sighed deeply.

“It’s only my ... It’s under there that it hurts. He decided to take his husbandly rights before he left for Brussels. I should have known it would happen again. At least he did not hit me as bad again, as I was already in enough pain and I truly did not have to fake my terror for him...”

“Fake your t...” Bertha repeated wide-eyed.

“He can only ... he can only do the deed when I show fear and pain,” Amelia explained with a blush.

“Ah,” Bertha nodded, “I understand!”

That proved to be a slip of the tongue. Amelia looked flabbergasted at her friend. Roberta was unwed and not supposed to know of those things. The fact that Amelia had confided in the specific matrimonial failures of her husband was bad form enough.

“You understand? How?” she asked Bertha reddening.

“My mother took a lover after my father died,” Bertha invented quickly, “I understood from their quarrels that he had a similar sort of problem. He was very abusive towards my mother, as she was not afraid of him under normal circumstances.”

It was Bertha’s turn to blush. She had never known she could be such a flagrant liar. There were a lot of things one could accuse Pettigrew of, but he had never manhandled her mother, until that one time of course, which had cost them both their lives.

Amelia nodded. She knew by now that there were problems of that nature in the best of families.

“We will be called upon to travel to Brussels as soon as my husband is settled there. The Duke of Lindley will personally see to our safe passage. Talking of him, you never told me how it all went at that dinner!”

“Oh, of course! Ah, I think it all went rather well. I was placed at a table with architects and some rich people I never heard of.”

Amelia looked suspiciously at the governess.

“My husband is a lord of the realm. Why would you be put at such an insignificant table?”

Bertha decided to tell Amelia the truth. At this rate she would find out soon enough, anyway.

“The evening was hosted by Lady Sophia, instead of the Duchess of Lindley. It seems that your acquaintance with the Lady went a long way back. She noticed at once that I was not you.”

Amelia looked with abhorrence at Bertha.

“What did Aubrey say of all this?”

Bertha shrugged.

“Lady Sophia had me brought home in her own town coach when the Duke wanted to have a few words with Milord. I understand Lord Aubrey came home rather late and in a bit of an inebriated state.”

Amelia suddenly smiled.

“Oh, good old Sophia!” she exclaimed, “She did not want to risk your skin by sending you back in one carriage with my husband, for sure! You know he went after our former governess? Poor Victoria had to duck him whenever he was near.”

Her excited smile changed into a frown.

“Oh dear, I forgot about what kind of danger you may be in with him. What a fool I am. He did not...?”

Bertha shook her head. She’d had her measure of Lord Aubrey by now and indeed had managed

to avoid him in the house. One never knew with a man like that. God bless the servants' stairs for that matter!

“Let me pour you a nice cup of tea and then I’ll take the children to the park. The weather is very good for the time of the year,” she announced cheerfully.

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## Chapter 9: THE PRINCE OF ORANGE

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