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WHEN LOVE IS WITHOUT REASON

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Constance J. HAMPTON *

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PROLOGUE: A BAD DAY FOR ELLEN

BURROUGHS

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Port of Rotherham, 1794

“Milord?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Jeffrey?” he asked Ellen.

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

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

“Caversham has beaten you?”

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

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

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

Cyril felt his temperature rise to steaming rage.

“Where is he?”

Ellen shook her shoulders. She was wearing an old fashioned cotton dress that must have seen about all of the nine years of her marriage to Guy Burroughs, Baron of Caversham.

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

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

That produced another shrug of her delectable shoulders.

“Did you eat today?”

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

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

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

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

She was referring to the innkeeper.

“Your pearls?”

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

She bent her head.

“I’m sorry, Cyril.”

She was damned sorry?

He felt the old pain creep into his chest. Damnation, he should have married her all those years ago! Then she would not be in this dreadful situation with a wife-beater, a gambler and a crook.

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

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

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

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PROLOGUE: ELLEN'S FLASHBACK

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Rotherham, 1789

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

“Cyril?”

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

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

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

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

“Well...”

He hesitated.

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

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

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

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

Ellen sat up, purposely showing off her lush assets.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He did not want to hear those spiteful words. God, he hated it when women made a scene or nagged him. He only wanted her expert hand to touch him. It wasn’t like Ellen at all to nag him!

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

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

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

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

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

He looked into her indignant face.

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

Ellen pleased him with short rapid strokes.

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

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

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

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

His hands roamed over her lovely, pendulous breasts.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His hand started to caress her long blond tresses.

Ellen hid her face in his chest.

“I’m bloody breeding again, Cyril.”

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

“Is it mine?”

She let out a slow, resigned sigh.

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

Cyril muttered an oath and pushed her away from him.

“I thought you despised the man!”

She sat up beside him.

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

Cyril got up with an exclamation of disgust.

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

She moved to the edge of the bed.

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

He pulled on his breeches and tugged his boots on.

“Tomorrow!” he promised.

He could never stay away from her. She had always been his very first desire and would probably be his last. He never understood why. The world was full of willing women, but Ellen Fitzhenry had been stuck in his head, and another place, for a long, long time.

He kissed her neck before putting on his shirt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Terrence Fitzhenry had known that Cyril Fairfax would never ask for his daughter’s hand in marriage because he had recognized the opportunistic streak in Cyril Fairfax, something which Ellen always preferred to ignore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She dressed slowly. Tonight she would tell Burroughs that she was breeding again. Maybe he would leave her alone now and go to one of his milkmaids, who did not disapprove of his cruel bed manners, or get himself back to York to his whores. She wanted a long reprieve from her sadistic husband's rough ways.

Outside the hut, she untied her horse.

She looked at the sun.

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

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

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

Good luck to you, Countess, she thought darkly.

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

Cruel world, no?

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KIT BRONDEMEIRE'S PROLOGUE

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London, 1807

“Good lord, Kit! Are you still here?”

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

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

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

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

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

Tony frowned at his tall dark-blond sibling.

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

Kit lifted a lazy shoulder.

“Home to do what, Tony? I understand the few times I was allowed within two feet of her I was only shooting blanks anyway. In any case, the little Lady Brondemeire has been indisposed for weeks on end, if you care to know. If you want an heir for Andover you'd better get your sorry ass back to Pamela.”

Tony sat down next to Kit and frowned. Pamela birthed a girl earlier in the year and claimed not to be ready for any

marital relations. He knew his beautiful little wife was sulking.

He heaved a sigh.

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

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

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

Pamela Broadhurst had brought him nary a pound when she married him in the chapel of the rickety Allington Castle, the home of her father, the Earl of Allington.

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

Before he fell hard for Pamela Broadhurst Tony was too busy courting the King's daughter, hoping that the old

monarch would not object to a future marques of the realm as a son-in-law.

He had been such an idiot!

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

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

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

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

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

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

He frowned.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tony scoffed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The boy could be sixteen at the most, Tony mused, looking at the young ensign dressed in an expensive red

uniform of his Majesty's hussars. It was rich Basil Montague's little half-brother.

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

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

Kit hated lice and every other form of vermin. He would have to ask his batman to inspect his hair the moment he returned to his lodgings; otherwise he might be in for nights of frantic scratching and no sleep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Kit rose unsteadily.

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

He looked up the stairs, listening sharply.

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

He watched the ensign race up the stairs and grinned.

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

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

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

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

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

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ANTHEA FAIRFAX'S PROLOGUE

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Caversham, 1811

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Mulhand showed a toothless smile.

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

Anthea shook her head.

"Where are my father and my sisters?"

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

"I think they went ahead!" Mrs. Mulhand answered brightly.

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

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

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

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

"Let me help you wipe that, Lady Anthea!"

Anthea waved her away.

"No, no!"

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

"I must rejoin the party."

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

"Please, don't bother, Mrs. Mulhand."

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

A hulking man stood on the church path. He was dressed in his 'best clothes:' a purple-tailed coat, a red and

blue embroidered waistcoat over unfashionable purple breeches that must have seen the last century.

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

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

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

Caversham held out a mocking arm to her.

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

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

When they were inside his carriage, he took hold of her sleeve. She looked down at his dirty hand and black nails, trying not to shudder too visibly.

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

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

She was too stunned to move away from him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She shuddered.

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

She gasped when the door to her bedroom slammed open.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Her husband slowly approached the chair.

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

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

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

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

What was that terrible smell?

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

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

Lucy brought her a moist kerchief to wipe her mouth.

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

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

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Chapter 1: MANIPULATIONS

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London, Carlton House, 1814

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

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

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

Two strong hands grabbed her shoulders from behind.

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

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

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

”Oh, it’s you...”

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

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

He heaved a long sigh.

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

She looked at him with wary eyes.

“Who’s with him?”

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

“Molly Sugden.”

Her face burned.

“Not that fat cow!”

He shrugged.

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

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

“I’m not a very good pupil, am I?”

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

“We’ll fix you someone else,” he murmured. “He has all those brothers who will be happy at the chance, now that you’re free.”

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He fingered the letter thoughtfully.

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

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

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

She stamped her foot in anger.

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

He turned to face her.

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

She huffed and turned to the door.

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

He scowled and turned back to the letter. The stupid chit had made him lose his temper, while she meant nothing to

him, nothing! The woman who could crack his armor nowadays was yet to be born!

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

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

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

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

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

He grinned when he reread the missive. The desperate ones were always the easiest to handle, and this one was more than in despair. Well, this one could wait. He had handled the blackmail before and it was not going to let off until the fool started screwing his wife instead of boys.

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

It was a pity about Smythe; he hated to share a commission with anybody. It had been his idea from the start, anyway. Smythe just fell into a feathered bed. Her annulment had been discussed in the House, and he would be able to cash into that at once. On the other hand, he feared that he could not cancel the actual auction without Smythe's interference. If Brondemeire got suspicious and did something stupid or rash, they would have a hell of a

problem. Brondemeire was not to know he had gotten a wife freshly saved from the auction block because his brother wanted him badly to marry this one. There was too much money involved. He could not make another mistake like the contract over the damn Fortescue chit.

He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes.

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

Bloody Julia Fortescue was one of them.

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

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

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

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

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

He grinned sardonically. The new one would probably hit him back if he tried that tack with her. If he had ever known a no-nonsense amazon, it was Anthea Fairfax. She would no doubt teach her new husband a lesson or two, but

at least she would not shun a good swive, which was all that mattered in Kit's case.

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Chapter 2: A LUCKY STROKE FOR THE VISCOUNT

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St. Jean de Luz, France, March 1814

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

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

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

“Hengist!” he had shouted, scooting from his chair, “Hengist Agnew!”

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

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

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

Hengist, recognizing the new Lady Morvern as his childhood sweetheart from Edinburgh from his days as an

ensign, had taken matters, including the Lady, into his own hands.

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

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

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

For days the food situation had been dire in St. Jean de Luz. The army had gathered at the Basque port without victuals of note, but now Hengist had arrived with three of his ships, bringing dried meat, honey, tea, coffee, and the nasty stuff the French called Pinot, which Hengist had taken on board at the isle called Ile d'Oleron.

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

Kit hardly remembered when the women had started to come in. They were eager for a taste of the French cognac-wine and an extra coin on the side. The last thing he remembered was an experienced hand fumbling its way into

his breeches, but he was unable to recall if he had followed up on the woman's sexual admonishments.

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

He cursed inwardly.

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

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

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

Kit squeezed his eyes shut before he attempted to rise.

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

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

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

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

"How is she?" he rasped.

Hengist leaned back comfortably.

"We had another boy last year."

He frowned.

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

Kit smiled thinly.

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

Hengist's amused bark made Kit wince.

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

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

He frowned.

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

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

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

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

Kit grimaced.

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

Hengist crossed a muscled leg over his bare knee. He was wearing the short battle kilt he usually favored. As a

true Scotsman, he did not mind wearing a kilt, but he hated the longer, restrictive ones.

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

Kit shrugged with apathy.

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

Hengist shook his head.

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

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

Hengist leaned back in his chair again.

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

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

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

Hengist grinned again.

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

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

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

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

Kit’s eyes narrowed slightly when he remembered Bernard’s perverse sexual tastes. Kit had seen him grunting and groaning in a dark spot during a wayside hanging, hiding his obvious fumbling under his greatcoat. Regrettably, hangings had occurred in vast numbers in the last weeks of the campaign in France. Wellington had no patience for looters and robbers and hangings had become an almost everyday event. Poor consolation that Bernard Smythe Johnson was one of the few to enjoy them to the full for his own perverted gratifications.

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

Bernard nodded slowly.

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

Kit interrupted him impatiently.

“What did you come up with?”

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

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

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

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

Kit nibbled his thumb pensively.

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

“Lady Anthea Fairfax, daughter of the Earl of Rotherham, Cyril Fairfax.”

“Cyril Fairfax died recently?”

Bernard looked at Kit with badly hidden surprise.

“You knew Fairfax?”

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

“Of course I knew Fairfax. Everybody knows about Fairfax. He was a genius privateer and later on part of Nelson’s fleet. He must have left the Navy seven years ago, after Denmark. He was married to a French wench, one of

the early French fugitives. She tried to flee to the Americas; Cyril's ship intercepted her. A French countess, they say. She came to England without a penny to her name. They say he married her for looks and love: sort of a love at first sight, whatever that may be. They say he was a damned lucky bastard."

Bernard Smythe peered sarcastically at Kit.

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

Kit clenched his jaws.

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

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

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

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

marriage. I have followed Wellesley to the Peninsula and have been away for three years in a row now..."

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

"So Lady Anthea Fairfax it will be?"

He tried to cover his ramblings hastily.

"Who do I need to ask for her hand?"

Bernard shuffled through a few papers.

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

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

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

"Tell me, Smythe," he said slowly, "how come the little lady is suddenly on the market? As you remarked, her mother died years ago, she must have been out of mourning for ages. Do I smell a rat here? Even if Cyril only died recently, she still must have been a great catch for her dowry alone."

Bernard blushed profusely.

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

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

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

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

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

Kit nodded, deep in thought. If any of this ‘bride-digging’ was his brothers doing (and frankly, it bore his stamp all over it), everything would turn out to be fine.

Tony always knew what he was doing, at least for the last eight years after their father had cocked up his unworthy toes.

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

Bernard scowled. Some damn people had all the luck. Kit was a handsome man at the age of thirty-four. He now possessed the ruggedness that made his face less angelic. Every woman following the drum seemed to be ready to fall uninvited into his bed and he knew it well. Now he stood on the brink of having a well-needed fortune deposited into his lap by marrying a Yorkshire bluestocking, all handed him on a platter by his powerful brother. Although he was the brother of the Marquis of Andover and Viscount of Brondemeire in his own right, his only hope of money would be to marry an heiress. Marrying for money was frowned upon in some circles, but Kit Brondemeire certainly seemed not to be balking at the idea of acquiring blemished gold.

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

Kit shook his head.

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

Bernard suppressed a smile.

"Twenty-six would be my guess. Bit long in the teeth, don't you think?"

Kit shrugged. What did he care? Twenty-six to his thirty-four seemed fine to him. He'd hate to marry another

simpering deb that might turn into a shrewish witch after their wedding-night. The idea of having to bed another Julia Fortescue made his skin crawl.

Bernard shuffled through some papers.

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

Kit’s face split into a smile at last.

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

Bernard looked up in consternation.

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

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

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

Kit gave him a mocking smile. He guessed what Bernard was thinking. Oh, he was grateful for the trouble Bernard must have gone through to unearth this new bride for him and of course, it would earn Bernard his fee. He had known

of Bernard's lucrative side steps for years now; Bernard was as bloody mercenary as they came.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had no scruples left when it came to bedding a woman. With an army on the way or a battle approaching, you took whatever was offered and closed your eyes if the

woman underneath lacked some teeth, was inordinately ugly or halfway bald. Kit had learned early in his fighting years that the beautiful ones always had pretenses, were arrogant, demanding, and very rarely good bed partners.

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

He could hardly defect from the army to marry.

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

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

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

At Bernard’s sour nod, he grinned victoriously.

“Right, ten it will be,” he declared.

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

Coming into money again would solve a few nasty problems and allow him new freedom. He could buy the gold necklace Juanita had been hankering at; offered to her by a plunderer, and which had probably come from the treasures of Burgos, treasures they had conveniently come upon when the town fell. It would be a good fare-thee-well

present for his Spanish mistress, who was actually boring him to distraction. The girl was always nagging him about taking her back to England with him. Fat chance! He knew that Tony and his bride-to-be would not be amused if he took a blanket-girl home. One could wonder if she really was a Spanish girl. Peninsular women were always kept under lock and key until they married. Although most of the whores in St. Jean de Luz were French, some Spanish 'ladies' had followed the army to find their luck with the officers. Some of them had been able to snatch an officer. Kit's good friend Harry Smith of the 95th. had married an innocent beauty, who had almost been raped by the French in Badajoz. Harry was deliriously happy with her, but then Harry was a bit of a nut without a title and the girl had brought him a nice dowry.

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

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

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

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Chapter 3: A DRINK WITH FRIENDS

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

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

"Come tell us, Major!" shouted David.

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

"Cyril Fairfax's daughter," he announced.

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

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

Devon shook his head.

"Not really. I don't think they ever came out. Fairfax and his countess preferred Yorkshire to London. The girls were all of an age to come out when the countess died a few years ago, so I think that settled the problem for Cyril, what with the obligatory years of mourning."

He studied his friend with a comical expression and asked with laughter in his voice: "I do hope you are

prepared to marry a bluestocking country spinster. At least that's who I seem to remember of the tales..."

Then he laughed aloud.

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

Kit shrugged.

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

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

"Are they ugly?" Kit asked abruptly.

"Beats me..."

Devon laughed again.

"Are you having second thoughts, Kit?"

Kit shrugged.

"Who cares! I can always bed her in the dark, can't I?"

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

"Brondemeire!" he exclaimed.

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

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

Loveall limped into the circle of Kit's friends.

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

Kit introduced David and Devon.

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

Devon smiled. He knew that Lionel Armstrong was the heir to the Wentworth earldom, but that fact had not kept him from taking his place in the army as a Captain in the King's Cavalry three years before. Now a major, doubtlessly, he was due to be promoted soon to the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was one of Wellington's favorites because of his brains, his courage and his title. He was a baron in his own right. Every girl with brains of her own had batted eyes at Lionel Armstrong, but Lionel was reluctant to form any alliances of the romantic kind. He was known to have bedded a woman occasionally but they had mostly been too humble to claim the chance to remain by his side. He had the reputation of being fastidious, the sort of reputation Kit had left behind during the last years of the war and Devon was of late following his best friend rapidly in his deplorable example.

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

He frowned. His mother would not be very proud of her son nowadays if she would ever hear about his debaucheries. His father would probably threaten to

disinherit him, but that would not be a big loss: the Earl of Allington was as poor as a church mouse and the entailed properties he still owned would go to Devon's oldest brother Percy.

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

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

Lionel smiled a white-toothed smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A shadow moved over Lionel's face.

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

"Damn," Kit remarked, "I hope you are right. I am fed-up with the war. It's just that I have a notion that Wellesley

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

Everybody grew silent.

Lionel raised his glass.

"To lives and wives," he proposed.

Devon smiled ruefully.

"What about His Majesty?"

"Ah, yes," Lionel agreed.

"To His Majesty and the pox!"

They erupted into loud laughter.

Lionel studied Kit's face.

"Would I know the bride, Brondemeire?"

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

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

Lionel smiled wide.

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

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

Lionel laughed ruefully.

"Everybody knew about it. No one understood it, though. Caversham was an absolute horror. I still cannot imagine why Rotherham wanted the marriage in the first

place. Caversham must have had three or four children of his own when he married Anthea. One of his sons serves as a lieutenant with me in the Cavalry, nice chap and a good soldier to boot. Anthea escaped the worst when his father dropped dead on their wedding night.”

He shook his head.

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

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

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

Lionel looked at Kit inquiringly.

“You'd better remember that, Brondemeire.”

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

Lionel shifted in his chair.

“There's something else. After her father died, she suddenly tried to stop the annulment. However, it was already treated in the House of Lords and they had declared her unwed, instead of a widow. Imagine the Burroughs' devastation that they got nothing in the end! I understand there's no money there! It is said that Nigel Burroughs died

of some sudden nasty illness or another or was it his brother Evan? If the marriage had not been annulled, my good Lieutenant Jeffrey Burroughs could have been on the receiving end of her fortune! Just think of how rich he could have been, overnight!”

Kit lifted his glass in a salute.

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

Lionel nodded at him.

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

Kit suddenly coughed.

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

Lionel lifted his mouth in a smile.

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

Kit made a dismissive gesture.

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

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

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

Thank God for St. Jean de Luz, he thought. At least there was food in relative abundance. The local people adored the English as Wellington had insisted that the British army actually paid for the victuals, contrary to what the Grande Armée used to do.

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

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

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

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

They both fell silent for a while.

“Do you miss her?” Lionel asked quietly.

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

He shook his head.

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

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Lionel said slowly, “at least you won't have to go through all that with Anthea. She seems to

be a healthy woman, rides like the very devil and if not flirtatious, she knows how to keep a man's attention. I think you two would suit remarkably well."

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

Kit hung his head.

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

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

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

He would not know how to accomplish that!

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

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

Devon nodded and then shook his head.

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

His eyes crinkled in a smile.

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

David cursed enviously under his breath.

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

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

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

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

David rested his hand beneath his square jaw. He did not care to repeat what was known throughout the entire army;

that he had squandered away his fortune as soon as he could lay his hands on it, on his twenty-first birthday.

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

Basil himself had made huge investments in industrial ventures such as mining and hide factories. He also bred fine premium horses at a farm in the Midlands and in Richmond, a certain thing of value, now that England had been on and off at war with France for more than two decades. Basil's recent wealth was almost legendary now. He was however utterly disgusted with David's lewd and irresponsible way of life, apart from the fact that David was an asset in the British army; he was promoted to the rank of a captain at the young age of twenty-two years, first as a brevetted captain, until the rank had been confirmed by the Horse Guards administration. The last thing Basil wanted however was to surrender without a fight one of his titles, or a part of his fortune to his useless half-brother.

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

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

They had been friends from the moment they attended school at Eton. Kit was always a winner where sportsmanship was concerned: cricket, horse racing, horse jumping, and wrestling, whatever was the offered challenge at school. Kit's striking good looks carried him through every adventure with girls, their mothers, courtesans, and

maids. Whoever he fancied was prone to fall victim to his charms and his much-visited bed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Chapter 4: MUSINGS

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London, March, 1814

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

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

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

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

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

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

He had taken care of that part in the agreement. He had sent for his old conspirator Lady Ross to see to it that number two did not squander her affections elsewhere as long as Grey was touring Europe on his diplomatic missions. Of course, Lindley was not yet conscious of having a new bride coming his way, but he was not apt to refuse. The girl would be too good to be true, even if she

might prove to be too young for his taste. Not that the Duke liked them almost ancient, like Prinny, but Lindley was known to prefer women who were riper, wanton and experienced.

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

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

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

There had been rumors about Lady Sophia quite some years ago, but they stayed unconfirmed. The Prince Regent had fancied her and he would have followed up on that fancy if some debaucher had not gotten to her first, taking her innocence in a situation that could be easily classified as rape. Sophia had sworn she would never marry, more to annoy her domineering mother, at the time the Duchess of Rothford, than to avoid the opposite sex.

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

He opened the Prince Regent's summons, frowning when he read it. Same old story, dammit: how to get rid of

another unwanted courtesan. At least there was always money involved in those problems. He quickly calculated how much he could make for himself on this new assignment and called for Mowbray to bring him his coat, cane and gloves.

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Chapter 5: THE BLESSING OF RELATIVES

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Rotherham, March, 1814

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

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

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

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

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

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

He threw her a disapproving look; she was wearing a green woolen skirt and a sensible white cotton blouse. She had draped her shoulders with a merino wool shawl, not

only for warmth, but obviously also to hide the neckline of her blouse. She wore no jewelry.