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WHEN MALICE SURROUNDS YOU

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Constance J. Hampton

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Wellington's Officers Series Book 2

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## Chapter 1: A GRAVE IN ST. GILLES

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

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

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

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

Perfect! It was just perfect!

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

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

"May you burn in hell, William the Fat," she whispered. "May your flesh crinkle like lard in a hot pan and may it

grow back on your evil body and start your agonies all over again, every single day you're doomed to stay there!"

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

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

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

"Ma'am?"

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

The Reverend Simon Desmond, newly appointed vicar of the suffering church of Saint Giles-in-the-Field, stood hesitantly before her. She wondered if he had not immediately recognized her as his stare was directed at her highly indecent neckline, which was decidedly inappropriate for a mourning widow.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alexander. She imagined that his decrepit smell of degeneration was probably in her very nostrils right now.

The Reverend Desmond had initially refused to take her husband in for burial. He had not wanted him inside the church and neither had he wanted him in the cramped graveyard. Everybody in London knew that the church of Saint Giles-in-the-Fields was overflowing with dead bodies; rotten corpses, everywhere.

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

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

Marguerite had to bite her lower lip to keep from smiling at the memory of how her husband's ever-fawning

staff had been disgusted with their employer, whose demise had been so undignified.

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

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

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

At last, the vicar, tired of waiting, had started the service in honour of William's demise without her, exactly as she had intended. In June, one could not delay a burial for too long and it was not right anyway to bury a law-abiding citizen after six o'clock. There were the evening prayers for the parish, and in any case, the body had emanated a smell that sickened the coffin bearers to gasping and heaving and had to be gotten rid of as soon as possible. It was assumed that the widow was having such a bad time parting from her husband that his fat and fast decomposing corpse had remained a few days too many on this earth. She had insisted he should be buried on a Sunday, the Day of the Good Lord, as she had whispered. A bit scandalous; burials were for the weekdays, but after another sum had parted from her black satin reticule, the needy vicar realized that the Bishop lived far away and would anyhow, most

certainly, approve of the extra funds for the poor parish, if not for the vicarage.

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

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

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

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

The next confession had convinced her to try to seduce the man into burying her spouse in the most obnoxious place in London. The girl said he did not “feck”, which meant, within a good translation, that the vicar touched, but did not put his cock inside a woman of his parish. He

obviously had narrowed down the biblical idea of “carnal knowledge” to the act of penetration itself, not to the delights of touch and suck.

Marguerite had felt a pang of desire worming its way down her belly to a very sensitive place between her legs. Ah, God, but touch and suck would suit her very well! There would be too much explaining to do around the birth of a child more than ten months after the death of one’s husband nearly in his dotage anyway. Further information had taught her that the vicar preferred abounding mounds of flesh on a woman’s chest (which Marguerite could amply supply). The girl had giggled profusely, obviously hiding a few more juicy details. She did reveal that he had this thing about women clad in black. It was almost eerie and all too close to the description of a widowed Marguerite, but there it was! As a final insult to her deceased tormentor, she would seduce the vicar who put him in his undignified grave.

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

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

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

“I do feel a bit faint...” she said with a weak gesture of her gloved hands towards her temple. She moved slowly as

if she was on the verge of falling to the floor. At that moment she felt his helpful hands high on her waist, his thumbs closely under her high corseted breasts.

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

His small victories over willing girls were sensibly few within the parish. He did not mix with the abounding Magdalena's of the neighborhood, who represented about

half of the Rookeries population, if not more, except for taking their confessions and tending to their last rites.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Only when she turned around to peer at her husband's grave did he see the vengeful expression on her exquisite

face. Vicar Desmond was well aware of her obvious thoughts of revenge, his widow in Surrey had been full of it as well, and he was not disinclined to be used for the purpose of it. After all, his life had not been a bed of roses either.

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

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From the diary of M. Aurora Ross

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Third of June 1809

Dear Diary,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh Lord, how I hated those invitations. He always took his revenge later by doing those abhorrent things to me as soon as we returned home –back into that prison. He was such a vile man, that Fat One! I will only be consoled by the fact that he never, never...

But today, I had my day of revenge.

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

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

I had seen it in one of those books that the Fat Man kept in his dressing room. I just never guessed it would be such a wonderful thing to experience! To have someone's tongue actually licking your very intimate spot, while he was doing things to that strangely rigid member of his. I call that strangely rigid, but the laundress said that almost all men get to that stage when they are properly 'excited.' I asked her afterwards. She told me all those things for only one sovereign. She sat with me in the carriage. I had Crowley look for her and she was not very far away. The whole

neighborhood had come out to watch the carriage, imagine! I was sitting in it talking to this girl, who knew everything!

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

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

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

Imagine preferring a life in the Rookeries with a specific person, to serving in a great house in Mayfair! I had to make her swear to keep silent forever about our conversation; but she only laughed and said that everybody knew about what she was explaining to me. Imagine; everybody, except for me! Well, I knew about that thing where the Fat Man forced me to take him in my mouth. Good sweet Jesus, he was rank and stale with that terrible pungent odour of his! This must have been because he hardly ever took a bath and that useless old valet of his was not allowed to wash him "there."

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

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

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

The Old Earl was known to be a terrible gambler and a rogue, until he had that accident and slowly lost his marbles and was at last reduced to live like a plant in a hothouse. Anyway, Mother and my Lord McKenna needed the money then, or better the day before that yesterday. After I wed the Fat One, Mr. Baines had explained to me that the Fat Man had bought off all their debts. Those debts would have been able to reduce us all to a life on the streets, or worse yet, in a vile Debtor's Prison, if I had not consented to marry the Fat Man. I married him because Father and Mother kept on pleading with me and I truly could not stand their tears and laments.

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

Rose tried to warn me, but my mother sent her away on some errand. My mother should then have warned me about my marital duties, but she just told me to lie back, open my

legs wide and think of the jewelry I was going to get when I presented my husband with a son and heir.

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

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

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

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

queasy belly, but then, I have never been on a real one except the ferries over the Firth.

Back to happier thoughts. Tomorrow night I will have a rendezvous with Simon. I will take a hackney to St. James Park where he will join me for a ride. God, but I am a wanton woman because I cannot wait to have his... I'd better reign in my wanton thoughts, because I am not certain Mr. Baines will not guess them otherwise.

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## Chapter 2: A MOLLY HANGING

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*London, Newgate, 23 November 1809*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That will teach him for putting his dick in a boy's arse!"

Master Jefferson, seated at Philip's other side, looked very grim. He stared at the three men on the scaffold who were praying with the prison's ordinary, while in the meantime, the hangman was putting a noose around their necks; tugging and pulling at them, unmindful of the fact that the three men were having their last worldly conversation with their Maker.

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

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

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

possible. He had been appalled by his deceased client's request to bring Lord Philip Agnew, Viscount Morvern, to this particular one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The fat man next to Philip only belched and took a bite of the shepherd's pie that no one else had wanted to touch. He stared at the scaffold with a ferocious gleam in his piggish eyes.

Master Jefferson coughed with dismay, roundly cursing his client for exposing him to the barbaric scene of a man struggling for the breath he would never catch again, leered at by grueling lechers that found gratification in his slow struggle with death. Of course the hangman had 'bungled'

the poor man. He had probably been paid to do it by one of the righteous pricks that found it necessary to start another witch-hunt against the men that preferred the company of their own sex to that of a woman.

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

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

Only the idlers, the night-workers and the street urchins could afford to wait for the cutting down of the bodies, in about an hour's time. Whores and pickpockets started to move about, searching the area for customers or victims. The harlots did not bother now with the armed soldiers around the scaffold: they would have to stay until the bodies could be removed, and surely they could snatch a client or two before they went after the willing men of the cordon.

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

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

He disappeared behind the screen where a chamber pot was placed on a knee-high stool. No wonder the room

smelled like a sewer; the pot was almost overflowing. Nobody had emptied that pot since the night before.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jefferson smiled and shook his head.

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

“Inordinately,” Philip drawled. He took one look out of the window where the masses were still teeming. He rose and walked to the fireplace, cursing his dead mother who, of course, had never understood why he could not be ‘normal’ like his damned brother Hengist. He had been removed from her will: she had left all her worldly possessions to his hero-

brother, leaving him without a bloody penny. He wondered how she could have been so disgusted with him. It wasn't fair; he had always adored her for the forceful, handsome countess she had been.

He sighed, wondering what his last night's conquest, Willy Robson, was at right now. No doubt in his cot, sleeping deeply after spending Philip's money on a bottle of cheap gin. Or maybe he was outside, sitting on a roof, or a ledge, still hazy and hung-over, joking with his noisy friends about the sodomite that refused to die, not caring to think that Oakden's fate might be his own, one day.

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

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

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

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Diary of Aurora Ross

London 23rd of November 1809

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

I am even more disgusted with myself for not being able to control the Fat Man's servants. I know they do not care a whit about me; they never did in those years I had to live here, almost like a caged animal. Well, I tell you, this will be the last time I have been treated in such a disrespectful way. I told Mr. Lane that he can go forward and negotiate with whoever wanted to buy the house; that Earl of somewhere behind York, was it Rotherhood? No! I remember now it was of Ham, Rotherham or some such thing. If I remember correctly he has three daughters and wants to bring them out next season, well two of them, the third is still in the schoolroom. He is welcomed to the house. Mr. Lane says it is worth a small fortune because it is built in the heart of Mayfair.

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

Scottish lass, born from a gentle Scottish laird who died before I was old enough to remember him. My mother then remarried to Laird McKenna and we lived either in Kenna or in Edinburgh in my stepfather's town house.

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

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

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

Anyway, I told Mr. Lane that I preferred to go and live at the house off Piccadilly which the Fat One bought for me. He actually bought it so that my family could stay there, whenever they were in London. Mr. Baines said it is not half

as prestigious as the house I live in right now, but I truly couldn't care less. I hate this house at Berkeley Street!

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

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

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

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

Simon and I had gone as far as to, well, I was doing it in the way he liked to do it with me, and that is to say, he

wanted me to rub his interesting part with my mouth instead of my hand. At first I thought it a bit distasteful, but when I knew he'd washed himself before we had our rendezvous in the hackney I even came to like it in a way, although I always needed to keep a handkerchief ready because I found the white stuff that would emerge at the end quite unsavory. Rose does not know of those details of course. She merely asked me if I needed her help if I wanted to prevent unwanted pregnancy. I told her I would not need any help from her there, thank you very much, as we did not indulge in the sort of thing that made prevention necessary. Rose just smiled and said that whenever I needed anything she would ask the Scottish apothecary near Covent Gardens. Sometimes I think she nurtures a 'tendre' toward the man there. I understand he is in his late fifties just like she is. Well, I hope she finds some compassion there; life was hard for Rose until now. Truthfully, so was mine.

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## Chapter 3: A TENT NEAR LISBON

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*Lisbon, January 1810*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hengist jumped, trying to evade her touch, and bumped his big leonine head into the tent’s sail. He cursed. He was so bloody tall, there was no way he could take a step sideways without getting his head tangled in the cloth of his bloody housing. Damn the Peer for putting him in a tent anyway, but with all the new troops arriving there was no

way they could be billeted in a house at the fleshpots of Lisbon. At least the tent proved to be reasonably warm in the Atlantic winter.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He frowned at that thought.

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

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

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

He shifted in the saddle, his dick grinding against the rough wool of his kilt. There had not been time for a wash; he had already been late when Lily had interrupted him. He felt a slight itch, knowing it was caused by the wetness of

her eager mound mixed with his seed. He bit his lip, trying not to scratch his genitals when he was sitting on his horse and touring the encampment with the eyes of more than a few privates and fairly many of the camp followers watching him.

Damnation! He was fed up with one-night stands with the likes of Lily; even if he had just fucked her as if it would be his last time on Earth. He had been driven by his perpetual slumbering lusts, again. What he truly wanted now was peace and quiet and a lovely, loving woman.

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

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

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

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

He steered his horse grumpily away from the laughing men. No acknowledging smiles from him there. The men

seemed to feel his mood and fell silent, gaping with the unexpectedness of it. Major Hengist Agnew was a cherished war-hero and not a sour military man!

Uncharacteristically he shrugged. So let his mood be foul.

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

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

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## Chapter 4: PHILIP'S PREDICAMENT

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*London, January 1810*

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

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

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

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

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

His friend had no such compunctions.

Philip plucked at the cobwebs on his shoulders and collar, muttering in disgust. Lord Morvern was always perfectly clothed. Cobwebs and dirt were just inconceivable. After some futile attempts to remove the undesired spots, he shrugged. Little Stevie Mac would no doubt offer his valet to see to the abject cleaning of Philip’s coat and breeches. The lording was certain to have one, as nobody but an accomplished valet could knot a waterfall tie like the one he wore last night. He had supposed Stevie was not able to

knot it into that creative fashion himself, so he had helped Stevie to make a passable knot after their little bout of intimacy. He had not dared to wake his own valet John Row. John was the only fixture left to him in the house; all his other staff had been made redundant or had left in a huff during the last few months.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He rose elegantly from the couch to help himself to a large whiskey from the sideboard, although it was only

eleven o'clock in the morning. At least the good side of ordeals was that one could indulge in stiff liquor at all hours. He sniffed at the decanter. Not bad. He had not tasted such good stuff for some time now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Last night he had been at one of the most miserable gaming hells in London, and after the losses of his ready money, he had not been able to come up with forty-five pounds. Young Stevie McKenna had been watching him and offered him a loan. The young boy had refused to take an I.O.U. but had been content to have Philip take him to his house at Upper Brook Street later on, after all the clubs had closed or started to serve breakfast.

Philip had known Stevie to be following him around like a lovesick puppy, acting nonchalant every time they set eyes upon each other. Philip had not been very happy with the

stalking until the boy seemed capable of bailing him out of a nasty situation.

Stevie shrugged.

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

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

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

Stevie gasped.

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

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

Stevie had always been jealous of his dainty but proportioned stepsister because she had always been closer to the ideal of a woman than he had been to the requisites of the perfect male. He resembled her like two eggs in a

basket, but that made it only worse for Stevie; he wanted to look male and not like the spitting image of his sister.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stevie blushed and nodded. He could hardly tell her that it had been at The Cockpit where he had first seen Philip. The Viscount had been heavily betting on cocks he could hardly distinguish due to his apparent state of drunkenness.

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

He bowed at her with a charming smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He shook his head.

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

Her eyes widened.

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

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

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

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

Marguerite looked at him with something that seemed like longing in her face. Philip almost stepped back from her. He had come to fear that look; it was on most of the Ton’s matchmaking mama’s faces and on as many of their husband-seeking daughters. He had always cursed the plight that would be put on his shoulders one day. He was the heir and although his father of late seemed forced into a grey

world of his own due to his slowly approaching dementia, he could never hope to escape his parents' wish and social obligation that he would marry one day and produce an heir and a spare of his own. The thought was always enough to make him puke.

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

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

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

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

She heaved a deep sigh. It was not easy to be a twenty-five year old widow, albeit a very rich one. Her disgusting deceased husband William Alexander had been dead for eight months now and she still had to wear deep mourning. Society's rules decreed public sorrow for a dead husband was to last two years. Deep mourning would deprive her of all the gaieties of life. She would be allowed to go to sober teas in the daytime, with bossy matrons if she knew any, or if they wanted to know her, but her days stretched ahead every day like gloomy black vaults. She was yearning for the day that her first year of mourning would be over; she might wear grey colours instead of the constant black she was obliged to put on every day and she would be allowed to watch serious dramas and opera at the theatres. She might

even go to musicales, as long as the music was not too worldly. Accompanied by the right people, she was allowed to attend the balls of immaculate reputation, without being able to dance of course, until another year of mourning had passed.

At least she was glad to have gotten rid of her husband's gloomy town house. She had been the stray duck there since the day she had come to marry the rich and fat William Alexander. All the staff, except her own maid, Rose, had been in his pay and confidence, and she had lived to know it. They had been suspicious of her youth and beauty and had done little if anything to make her comfortable as the young innocent bride she was when she was first brought into his unwelcoming house. It was only due to Rose's care that she had not been forgotten when taking her lonely meals in her rooms, when her husband did not deign to bring her on his business-trips or ask her to come to join him for a meal in the dining room.

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

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

Darn, but she had been quite hard to poor Stevie, piling her own widow's frustrations on him. He could not help it that five years ago she'd married the forty years older William just to help her parents out of the claws of debt and maybe even Debtor's prison. Although she herself had been

a frugal and modest girl all her life, it was certain that her mother and stepfather, Lord McKenna, had never heard of the words 'economizing' and 'saving' or, if they had heard of them, they had discarded them as nothing to do with them.

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

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

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

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

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

Marguerite had had a modest coming out at the time. Her parents had felt obliged to have her presented to the Queen, but before her come-out, William Alexander had already been discussing marriage settlements with her stepfather and greedy mother and they had glumly taken William Alexander of Stephens and Alexander's Shipping Company's bid for her hand; they were certain no one else was to offer the ultimate bounty like he did. Thus, Marguerite's honourable bloodlines were sacrificed on the altar of a wealthy, albeit ancient, despicable, fat son-in-law.

Marguerite sniffed. Her mother's motives had been too mercenary to, at the very least, stop and think about what she did to her daughter. Anyone could imagine how

frightening it must have been to be eighteen and to have to marry a man of fifty-six. A very fat, smelly man of fifty-six, because William Alexander indulged in two things only: lots of food and even greater quantities of drink. He had been married before, but his poor first wife had gone to an early grave leaving him without a most needed heir for the Alexander fortune.

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

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

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

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

She dug her head into her cushion.

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

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

Hengist. She knew he had gone back to war. First to Denmark and then he had been shipped to Portugal together with one of the famous Highland Regiments called the Black Guard. She had secretly followed the Black Guard's progress through Portugal, to Spain and back again, always searching for Hengist's name in the newspapers that were brought to William's study every day.

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

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

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

She could always dream, couldn't she?

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DIARY OF M. AURORA ROSS

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*January 31, 1810*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I like to think Rose is quite naughty there, if I ever conceive a child I am going to keep it tight in my belly and close to my heart. At first I did not want a baby when I was with the Fat One, but strangely enough that changed when I knew he was never going to give me one.

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

dying at any inconvenient time), I may aim for a certain second son of a certain Scottish earl.

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

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

I am sorry that Stevie was not at all happy to see me. He has changed a lot since he came to London in autumn, after turning twenty-one and preferring to live far away from his father's wiles. Well, that I can understand! Lord McKenna is a bully and has a vicious temper.

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

Meg says the man can only do the deed if he is in such a state. I understand only now the Fat One's frustration; he

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

I wonder very often now, how Hengist would be ‘in the state.’ I mean as part of amorous pleasure like I had with Simon. I do remember the first time Simon pushed himself against me when we were fully clothed and it felt a bit peculiar, hard, as if he had put his walking stick between the both of us. Since I became aware of the ‘walking-stick,’ I do remember a sort of similar feeling when Hengist kissed me. Good grief! I was such an innocent girl, then!

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

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

Yesterday Mr. Baines told me that due to an extremely good year and the sale of the Scottish wharves I am eighty thousand pounds the richer. He has found a buyer from Boston who would like to take over the London and Bristol wharves, which will be fine with me. I know Mr. Baines is not doing this without some self-interest, but I am happy enough to see things going fine for him as well, as he receives a percentage. I seem to be one of the richest girls in the country but I would gladly give some of my money if I could have a man with Simon's soft mouth and... Oh well, I have to stay in mourning until the end of April 1811. The chances that I will come upon a nice young man who is able to get himself into the state and knows what to do with his mouth and tongue is almost nil. Maybe I should do something like Lady Elton and install a few very good looking footmen in my house. Or start a fling with the handsome Lord Morvern, or travel to Portugal... but that would not be wise, would it? There's a war going on there.

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## Chapter 5: STEVIE'S RUSE

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

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

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

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

would anyone stay with a heavily indebted employer unless...?

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

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

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

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

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

A smelly thin man held a torch to his face.

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

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

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

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

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

Stevie blanched at the suggestion of a warrant of arrest for his new friend. If somebody had gotten a magistrate to bring out a warrant, all would be lost for Philip. The image of his new lover in the stinking cells of Debtor’s prison horrified him. He knew he had to do something to help his friend out of his predicament. Money, money, Philip needed money and fast. His mind started to whirl. Money; who had enough money? Suddenly the thought struck him.

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

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

One of the men stared at Stevie.

“You’d better tell us the truth,” he said menacingly. He did not add the “or else...”

Stevie could only swallow his upcoming bile and nod.

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“You did what?”

Philip towered over Stevie in his shirtsleeves. He had thrown his stock, jacket, and waistcoat over the only chair in the small bedroom that Stevie had acquired for him in the busy coaching inn.

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

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

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

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

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

Now he looked longingly at the small bed.

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

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

Philip suddenly gave a shout of laughter.

"Do you think she would have me?"

Stevie shrugged.

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

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

Stevie frowned, suddenly doubting his whole scheme.

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

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

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

"I've been brought up in the Ton," Philip drawled, "I know how to behave towards a woman of our class."

Especially when my freedom for the rest of my life is at stake, I might say.”

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

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

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

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

“Later...” he whispered.

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

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

to go through the moves of finding a whore and then to do their business somewhere.

The inn boasted two taprooms, one for the upright travelers, families and gentry and one for the less scrupulous amongst them, the servants, the coachmen, and the locals coming in for a meal or a drink. Philip preferred to stay in the last one, nobody would recognize him there, and after telling the whores there off, he would have nothing to fear. He wondered if they knew his secret preference for his own sex right now, but did not worry about eventual blabbering about it from their part: more than one of the whores preferred the members of their own sex over the men that sought them out for some quick pleasure. He had actually seen that with his own eyes on a quiet evening.

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

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

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

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

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

Philip nodded without seeming interest.

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

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

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

Philip sighed at the pathetic remark.

“Tell me more, little one.”

“I could not find anything of note at first so I took her old maid Rose in my confidence. Rose said the marriage with old William was a disaster and that she really wanted Cherie to be happy blah blah...”

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

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

Philip sat up with a start.

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

Stevie shook his head.

“No, he’s called Henry.”

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

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

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

Stevie hoisted himself against the bed board.

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

“Yeah, quite possibly,” Philip drawled.

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

Philip yawned. He wanted a drink.

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

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

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

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

Stevie leaned his head against the white chalked wall.

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

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

Stevie’s answer was a huge hug.

“You’re absolutely brilliant, my lord.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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