

*** CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON ***

WHEN A LOVE IS SO BLIND

Wellington's Officers Series Book 1

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For my loving husband Jan Herman
who made all those years of writing possible.

Chapter 1: JOHN MONTGOMERY'S PROLOGUE

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"I apologize, Lord John, but the Duke insists that you leave the dogs outside her Grace's apartments."

Lord John Montgomery, the Duke of Rothford's second son and 'spare,' looked inquiringly at the dignified butler and then down at his two hunting spaniels.

"Mother always allows Boris and Bastet in, Tubby!"

Mr. Tubbington sent the young lord an exasperated look.

"Did Mr. Powell not warn you, my lord, that the situation warrants some, ah... decorum, this time? Why don't you wait in the antechamber so that I can call your valet to change your coat and socks, and wash your hands and face?"

"Wash?" John asked with a frown.

One washed in the morning after a night of rest soured one's mouth, and one bathed in the evening when invited to the ducal dinner table. His valet Smithy would dunk him in a bath after a particular fall from a horse into a mess, or when he smelled...

The butler only nodded and opened the door to the small waiting room next to the entrance of the Duchess' apartments.

"Take Lord John's dogs to the kennels, Mordecai," Mr. Tubbington ordered the burly footman who seemed to have been standing watch at his mother's door forever, "I'll send a message to Smithy myself about Lord John's requirements."

He looked back to see the Duke's twelve year old son seating himself hesitantly on one of the straight-backed wooden chairs in the waiting room. He nodded in approval while straightening his face immediately back into a bland sort of severity. Then Tubby flicked two fingers at a young underfootman who had been standing motionless in the hallway, and sent him on his errand after an urgent whispered conversation.

John heaved an impatient sigh. He was not used to being asked to wait, but looking at his dirty hands, he agreed with Tubby that he might need some of his valet's ministrations.

He had been in the stables, taking care of his new hunter, a birthday gift from his elder brother Randolph. His father, Jonathan Montgomery, Duke of Rothford, had always taught him that true warriors in the Middle Ages always took care of their own horseflesh and that was exactly what John had been doing this afternoon.

Somebody shrieked in the room next to the ante-chamber.

John listened intently. He knew that shriek too well. It was doubtlessly his mother, the Duchess.

"You will do as I ask, Jonathan!" her harsh voice threatened.

Ah, yes, threats! His mother had always been a master at threats. John had been on the receiving end of them countless times.

John never understood his mother's urge to always assert herself in that fashion. She did not need to use threats: everybody in the inside and outside of their extensive household always ran to indulge his mother's many wishes, however reasonable or unreasonable they were.

He heard his father mumble something inaudible. That was nothing new either; his mother seemed to possess all the available power over everybody who lived in their London household. Even over his father, despite the fact that his father was an acclaimed war hero from the long gone days when he was the colonel of his own regiment, and despite the fact that now that he was the Duke of Rothford, one of the most powerful men in the Realm.

"A tit for tat!" his mother yelled, "I'll curse you on my deathbed if you ignore my wishes, Jonathan Montgomery!"

His father's answer was muffled, but John could hear it anyway; his mother should not take things so hard, the girl had been just a fling when he was in the North...

John shifted his chair so that he sat closer to the wall behind which his parents quarreled.

A girl? His father had been seeing a girl in the North?

Ah, yes, was mother talking about that very beautiful blond woman John once met when he and his father were taking a ride all the way from the castle in Stirling to a 'strong house' near Bannockburn?

He was only four then and was riding his favorite pony Leslie. It was one of the longest rides he had ever made with his father.

Father was unusually distracted until he'd seen the woman standing in front of that house with a five-year-old boy taking a protective stance next to her. Even at the very young age of four, John had noticed the woman's ethereal beauty.

A different beauty when compared to his mother's. The Duchess was always elaborately dressed and coiffed. She was never seen without her cosmetics, her white mask of rice powder, her painted blushes and her kohl-accentuated eyes.

John was not able to tell the true color of his mother's hair, as he had never seen her real hair; it was always tucked under the huge colorful elaborate wigs she wore. His mother's dresses were more than enormous; they were like battleships enfolding her entire figure, giving her an unreal doll-like appearance.

He did not doubt that she would receive him in the full regalia of her position. She might even wear an enormous hat while she was stretched out on one of her gilded chaises-lounges.

The girl from the North had been wearing a simple grey dress with a squared apron. Instead of dainty high-heeled shoes, she had worn sturdy leather clogs. She had long blond hair in one big braid that fell all the way to her very shapely rear, which was not hidden behind the frame of whalebone or horsehair.

He had watched her with big, round, amazed eyes, looking longingly at the sweet mobile features in the most beautiful face he had ever seen. Her voice sounded animated and musical and her laugh was melodious because of its dark richness, which was so different from the haughty pouts and titters he was accustomed to hearing, coming from the languorous aristocratic ladies that would clog the ducal residences.

Since knowing this woman he had secretly frowned upon the artificiality of court dress, the wooden corsets, the unseemly low décolletages and the harsh make-up that made the women look like puppets on a string and move in a similar wooden manner.

His father and the woman had talked for some time. His father had seemed urgent about something and the woman had shaken her head and pointed at him and the boy, whom he later heard was called Lochiel.

In the end, the woman gave in to his father's urgings and told the boy Lochiel to take care of the little Lord John.

Lochiel admired John's pony and John magnanimously told him he could ride Leslie if he wished. Lochiel had shaken his head. He had his own pony but they surely were not allowed to ride their ponies on their own, so they took John's pony and his father's horse to the stable behind the house instead. They had played there almost until the evening when his father hurried out of the house at last, a bit flushed with his clothes looking as if he had put them on without the help of his valet.

"You must agree that our John must have the same chances to be happily married as we had, my darling," the Duke was pleading.

The Duchess started to say something but she got stuck in a coughing fit. The Duke urged her not to upset herself so much.

Then John heard his father agree.

"If you think this is so terribly important, I'll sign the papers for the betrothal, Elisabeth."

His mother cried between racking coughs, still accusing the Duke of 'damned betrayal.'

Half an hour later, wearing clean clothes and the scent of expensive lemon soap, Lord John Montgomery heard that he was to be betrothed to a girl called Lizzie Campbell, obviously the 'tit for tat' his mother had shouted about before he came to her bedchamber, and that he was sup-posed to marry her when the girl would reach the age of sixteen.

Quick calculations told Lord John that he would be twenty-four by the time the girl was marriageable, so he decided not to worry about this arranged marriage with a little chit nobody knew a thing about, apart from his hysterical mother.

As he had expected, she had been lying fully dressed on a chaise, sporting a three-foot peruke with a large cartwheel hat on top. When she sneezed, she lost a chunk of maquillage from her cheek which fell unnoticed into her high, white powdered, corseted bosom. She wore lace gloves, which he kissed once carefully, after making her an obligatory deep leg.

He remembered acutely how the girl from the North had drawn him against a soft bosom which smelled of woman, lilac soap and, strangely, a bit like his father.

She had kissed him goodbye with gusto and a smile. He imagined sometimes he could still feel those soft lips on both his cheeks and in his dreams as a boy, who was waking up to sensuality; they tended to turn into something very exciting. Since that day he always seemed to remember the smell of her lingering arms and her wondrous blond hair.

He only understood Tubby's remark about 'decorum' in the evening, when his father told him that the Duchess, his mother, had sadly passed away.

Father looked unhappy enough, but Lord John thought he'd noticed something of relief as well, which no doubt was due to the fact that his mother was now free of the ailments from which she had been suffering since Lord John's birth.

John felt regret that his mother had passed from one world into another, which he could not reach, but was not surprised when tears would not fall. He had been closer to his nurses and his nannies, rather than to the doll who had been a duchess and maybe even once a mother because the doll had birthed him more than twelve years into the past.

Without knowing it, he was betrothed at his mother's deathbed at the respectable age of twelve, when he had only been wondering if his mother had ever had blond hair in a braid that touched her rear.

When the date of his arranged marriage came closer, Lord John started to balk.

He was by then more or less in love with the refugee Russian Countess Maria Katrina Oblinsky, whose white-blond hair reached her hips when it was down and who liked to walk around in the clinging dresses of the pre-Regency days which were so fashionable at the court of the upstart self-proclaimed emperor Napoleon Bona-partie in Paris.

His father had sent him twice to a small village near Glasgow to court the little chit he was betrothed to, but in view of his love for Maria Oblinsky he had hated every minute with her, not willing to agree that his future bride was actually exquisitely beautiful and a very proper virginal fiancée. Maria could not lay claim to any of those characteristics; she was about twice Lizzie's age and was experienced in things that had to do with whips, shackles and silk bed sheets.

In the end, the Duke had to promise that Lord John would become the Marques of Lorna and Kintyre, instead of his brother Randolph, upon the Duke's demise.

Randolph did not mind handing over that title 'in advance' to his little brother, because he would become the new Duke of Rothford, which was a more elevated title anyway. The title of Marques of Lorna and Kintyre was only a courtesy title, normally given to the heir. So Lord John, by that time a

spoiled cad with a bad reputation and the worst sexual appetites, prepared to go to Edinburgh to marry the Right Honorable Elisabeth Campbell, a chit without a dowry or any ancestry of note, in exchange for being Marques one day.

John would be happy to be titled at last. His debts were piling sky high and he feared he could not hold out much longer on the credit of being the Duke of Rothford's spare son.

He hated Lizzie Campbell more because she stood between him and the chances of marrying an heiress who could get him out of his self-inflicted dire straits. The only thing Lizzie Campbell would bring him was her body, which generated him nothing but obligations he did not care for.

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***Chapter 2: LOCHIEL'S PROLOGUE ***

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The woman threw off his hands when he tried to grab her by the waist.

"Piss off, Lochiel Cameron," she hissed, "I told you to get lost before!"

She turned and pushed him hard against his chest.

He stumbled backwards on the ancient flagstones of their farm, landing on his butt.

"But Catriona..."

She hovered over him, her hands on her hips.

"Why can't you get it into your stupid head, Lochiel? I don't want you here anymore! I don't need you here anymore! I've got those four sons to take care of and the last thing I want is for you to disturb my rest at night."

He slowly scrambled up from his humble position.

"What do you mean, Cat? They are my children as well!"

She sneered at him, her changing face showing him a glimpse of her true age.

"Sure they are yours, Lochiel," she answered with contempt, "and I don't need another one, nor do I need another child like you in the house. Go back to Edinburgh to play the soldier for that despicable Sassenach that calls himself our Duke!"

She turned and marched into the kitchen.

He put on the coat of his lieutenant's uniform.

"If that's what you truly want..."

He heard despair in his own voice. The wife that was almost ten years his senior really wanted him gone?

She reappeared in the doorway and knocked a hand against her head.

He stared at her in bitter disappointment.

Hard headed? His wife accused him of having a skull too hard to understand what she was saying?

"What about us, Cat?" he almost whispered.

"You knew there was not an ounce of love between the two of us! The only thing you always wanted was to rut! I allowed that. I needed bairns for the Clan, as father told me. Now you can go away. Just send your money for the boys and go fight a war somewhere, Lochiel."

"What about the farm?" he asked, ice sliding down his spine.

The farm had been bought with his mother's money.

"I'll take care of the farm. You go and earn your sons' education. Now go!"

She pointed to the front door.

"My mam's inheritance paid for this farm, Cat! Why would I leave? Everything's mine by right."

Catriona stepped closer to him. He could smell her breath. It had become stale in the five years they had been married.

"Coz you're a lousy farmer, Lochiel, that's why! You're not worth shit here! And don't start whining about your mam. Everybody knows she earned her money on her back, fucking bloody Sassenachs!"

Blood rose high in Lochiel's cheeks.

"My mother married a Scott who protected me and fed me, Cat MacGregor, and don't you forget it!"

"That old Cameron was not your father, you idiot! She married him for his money and then killed him, I swear to God! Now, go away, leave us in peace here! Go back to your whores in that God forsaken town!"

Lochiel looked at her with desperation. He knew they were ill-matched, but just to go away and leave his little boys again?

Cat suddenly seemed to remember something; Lochiel's protective streak that had made him agree to this ridiculous marriage.

"Just go, Lochiel," she said almost pleadingly, "you know there's nothing for you here. I'll take care of our bairns. I am

sure I'm doing this right. Is é Dia amháin a thab-harfaidh breithiúnas orm!"

He looked wide-eyed at her when she pleaded with him in his mother's language. It had been their love-language for God's sake! Only God would judge her here?

"Come back for the boys when you can find the time; on Sundays. Now just go, there is a world waiting for you out there."

Lochiel left, looking back longingly at the small win-dows of the bedrooms where the boys were sleeping in their snug cots.

He was not welcome anymore in his own house.

He shook his head. Catriona MacGregor got him by the balls! She had married him and made him buy the farm the MacDuff's, her nephews, had put up for sale, before leaving for the Americas with the money he had inherited from his mother.

Catriona had birthed four sons in almost as many years, not a small feat at thirty years and up. Now she had sent her husband off to make the extra money she needed for herself, the boys and her bloody clan, with-out the benefits a husband earned for his efforts; a place in her bed when he came home.

He clenched his jaws together.

She was thirty-five against his twenty-five. God, if a man ever could be rewarded for being used, he'd earn the first prize!

He looked back once more at the house that was rightfully his, tears of rage burning in his eyes.

His horse was tethered to a gatepost. Lochiel looked up to the sky. There was no way he would be able to reach Edinburgh today but the weather was probably good enough to sleep under the sky, although there seemed to be frost in the air.

He swung onto his horse that blew a greeting softly through its nose.

He turned back to see if Catriona would be standing in front of a window to wave goodbye, but there was no one to witness his shameful retreat.

Off to Edinburgh, he thought sourly, and if possible, a new life.

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*** Chapter 3: LADY SOPHIA'S HAVEN ***

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He stirred when she entered the bedroom.

She put down the tray and bent to kiss him on his wiry hair. It was grey as the color of the clouds over London.

She smiled when he opened his eyes reaching for her and pulling her into the sumptuous bed. She giggled and kissed his mouth, feeling the bristles of his upcoming beard.

"Hm," he murmured, "where have you been, my love? I missed you when I woke up."

She snuggled her head between the apex of his neck and shoulder, inhaling his beloved scent.

"I don't believe for a moment you were awake earlier," she accused him with amusement in her voice.

He grinned in her hair.

"But I was, my love. Can't you see I raked the fire?"

She leant her head back to watch the big fireplace in the bedroom.

"How sweet of you," she said laughingly, "the house is damn cold, you know. There are just enough servants to see to our needs. How well organized you are, Jon!"

He shifted on his pillow, taking her shoulders with him.

"Whitesands," she whispered, "I love the house. Is it yours?"

"Do I smell coffee?"

He sniffed profusely.

She hastily untangled herself from him.

"Coffee and honeyed scones," she confirmed, grabbing a big porcelain cup by the ear.

"Drink it quickly, before it gets cold. That kitchen is miles away from this room."

She sat up against the headboard. He followed her example and scrambled up from the big pillow, pushing it behind his back before he took the cup from her.

"Is there a scone without honey?" he asked, "That damn tooth is playing up again when I eat sweet stuff."

She nodded and smiled, then dangled a scone without sugary confections before his eyes. He grabbed it and bit into it with vigor.

She closed her eyes and leant against the headboard, sipping the black coffee with relish. She had already eaten a scone, while she was waiting for the cook to finish the tray for her, and had decided that one was enough. She had put on weight these last years and even when Jon told her that he thought her beautiful the way she was, she still felt the need to be a bit trimmer.

He kissed her neck, wafting a scent of coffee and early-morning odors toward her. She bent to kiss his head.

"It's Sophia's."

"What?"

She shook herself out of her reveries on getting slimmer and more beautiful.

"Whitesands!" he nodded, swallowing the last of his scone, "Richard gave it to her after a bit of a nudge."

His nudge, no doubt, she mused.

"Why? Sophia does not need a dowry. She swore never to marry after, well after, you know?"

"Groathill? Yes. That does not mean she does not need a place of her own. Anyway, I had the impression that Celia wanted her out of the house in London, now that she has conceived again. I don't think that Sophia and Celia get along well at all. Richard always adored his sister and that does not sit well with his wife."

She nodded distractedly. After the rape of Sophia Grey, a Duke's daughter, the Duke of Lindley Richard Grey's interest for his sister seemed to have tripled. He had been very protective towards her, setting other evil whispers into motion.

His young spoilt wife did not like Lady Sophia at all.

That she could understand; a young bride always wanted everything concerning her marriage for herself, including her husband. Sophia had definitely stood between Celia Grey's wishes and her Duke. On the other hand, Celia Grey was a wimp. Her father, the Earl of Cornwell, and his atrocious wife had spoiled her rotten.

Audrey had mourned Richard Grey's decision to marry the ninny, but at twenty-six, no young man of the Quality could be considered wise. She had hoped however that Richard would have chosen a girl like his older sister; Sophia was extremely beautiful, intelligent and forceful. She ruled the extensive ducal households since she was a slip of a girl of fourteen. Richard and Sophia's father William Grey, Duke of Lindley, had died of a liver disease when Richard had been less than three years old.

"It is a beautiful place, Jon. Does your stepdaughter know we are borrowing it from her?"

Jonathan Montgomery, Duke of Rothford, shrugged.

"There is not much that slips through the mazes of her net of intelligence. Of course she knows about us, Audrey."

He felt her breath choke and reached out to pat her hand. It felt dry and slightly brittle.

"Don't you ever worry about my stepchildren, dearest! They are on my side, remember. I have been their surrogate father for almost thirty years."

She could only nod.

It did not bear thinking about the rumors of her liaison with Jon Rothford reaching the ears of her vengeful husband. Even when he was far away on his estates in Scottish Loghaire, she feared his wrath. They had not slept together since she conceived Hengist, their second son, as she could not abide his touch. Her husband had been fast enough to find his release and consolation with an endless string of lovers and mistresses. There were enough Scottish girls who would gladly share his bed for an extra meal and some coin.

Still, he would not take her unfaithfulness lightly. Men like Loghaire would never feel comfortable wearing the horns.

She watched her lover from under her lashes, drinking the last of her coffee.

She wondered if Jonathan even suspected that he had been the hero of her dreams for the best part of thirty years. She had seen him for the first time when she was invited along with her husband to his marriage to the beautiful widowed Elisabeth Belding, then Elisabeth Grey, Duchess of Lindley.

Agnew had almost left her at home because she was huge with their first child and he despised the look of her, but she had insisted she wanted to come to the wedding.

She had never set eyes on Jon before. Agnew hated to entertain "Sassenachs," the Gaelic word of mockery for the English. When she had her come-out in Lon-don, Jonathan was governing his duchy in the North together with his ailing father.

She had hated the new future Duchess of Rothford on sight, understanding very well that it was the green beast of jealousy instigating her dislike; how had such a low-born woman been able to catch a Duke and a future Duke in a row? Elisabeth Grey had been a lowly colonel's daughter, with a doubtful possession in Ireland that would probably make him some sort of a squire at best. Her mother was rumored to have been an actress, but nobody could tell for certain, as she was originally Irish-born with a hoity-toity name, of which one doubted it was truly hers to carry. It had all been quite lowering, although Jonathan Montgomery was elated to have Elisabeth as his wife at last.

Audrey knew he had almost dueled with old Lindley over her in earlier days, but when he left the country for one of the wars against the French, Lindley had seen his chances and secured her for his bed with a wedding ring around one of her grabbing fingers, something Jonathan had not been willing to gift her with at the time.

Jonathan had hardly been able to await her year of mourning before tearing her to the altar after William Lindley's death during her fifth year of marriage.

At twenty-two Elisabeth Belding had been more beautiful than ever. She had borne Lindley two children: Sophia and Richard, who got the most wonderful stepfather in the kingdom, when she married Jonathan Mont-gomery.

How ugly Audrey had thought herself to be at that wedding!

She had never been known for her beauty and Agnew had only married her for her money, bragging to his friends that he would take her from behind, so that he would not have to see her ugly face. To hear that rumor had hurt her deeply, but then she had already been pregnant with their first-born, Philip, and it had taken the future Earl about a year to come back to her bed. He had not bedded her the way he had bragged to his friends that he would. In fact, he was quite amorous, strangely enough, until she ended that by telling him there was a new child on the way. Since then she had locked her door to him. He had tried to approach her a few more times after Hengist was born, but she had denied his rapprochement, suspecting that he did not have any of his disgusted lovers available and therefore turned to her as some last resort.

She had felt such a relief not to have to share his bed anymore!

Audrey was the Duke of Lindley's niece, twice re-moved. Her father was one of the Duke's many cousins; her mother had been a Wharton of the rich branch from that illustrious family, bringing in a lot of money and a good dowry for her ugly-duck daughter.

Loghaire, then only Andrew Agnew, had pounced upon the dowry and as he was mostly in Rothford's Scottish camp instead of Lindley's, her parents had agreed to the marriage: Loghaire was needed for the balance between the two Scottish Dukedoms and when the future Earl of Loghaire had a Lindley in his bed, they figured that the balance would be even.

Jon took her in his arms the moment she finished her coffee.

"Jonathan, we have to leave!"

She squirmed in his still strong arms.

He kissed her on the top of her nose, smiling that dashing smile at her.

"Just one more time, my beauty. I will have to go to Edinburgh for John's wedding and I doubt we will be able to see each other there in this lovely fashion."

My beauty. He had said it again.

"Why do you call me that, Jon?" she whispered.

"Beauty?"

His eyes started to gleam. "Because you are beautiful, Audrey, look at yourself!"

"You know I am not. I could never hold a candle to your wife..."

She felt him stiffen the moment she mentioned his long dead wife.

Then he kissed her firmly on her lips.

"Elisabeth was a passion from the time I was a young foolish buck. True, I married her in haste after Lindley died and if I may believe the stories, it was better than a fairy-tale."

"What do you mean? As far as I know it was the most romantic love tale of the century," she protested.

He pulled a face, holding her close.

"It took me a while to find out that she was a manipulative shrew. Shrew as in shrewd. I don't think she was capable of love. The older she got, the more the beautiful, golden apple turned out to be rotten on the inside. She could play the part of the loving wife and 'grand amour' extremely well, but in the end, I knew her for the self-centered and spoilt woman that she really was. She had no heart, Audrey. Proof of that is that on her deathbed she forced John to marry that little chit, Lizzie Campbell. John was only twelve, for God's sake and Lizzie probably not even four years old. Do you know why?"

Audrey shook her head slowly. Like everybody else in the kingdom, she had always wondered about that strange deathbed-wish.

"The little girl was her father's granddaughter. He had begot-ten a son by some girl of the Scottish gentry, but he was already married to Elisabeth's mother. The Campbells of Ayre adopted the boy; I guess they were the girl's aunt and uncle. Elisabeth would go to all sorts of lengths to improve the lot of her own family. She didn't care that John, as a Duke's son, should marry a high social flyer with money to boot, not some poor nobody from a Scottish village, but I cannot come back on that promise. Not even for John's sake. He hates the chit, of course. He's twenty-four and in love with some terrible Russian countess."

She smiled bashfully.

"I am sorry, Jon," she whispered, "but still that does not make me beautiful..."

"But you are!" he said urgently before kissing her again.

Audrey blushed, pondering that she had not yet cleaned her teeth with mint water.

He only continued after a long lingering kiss.

"You have the most beautiful heart in the world! I always admired your softness and calmness. My God, Audrey do you know how much a man can crave peace and quiet when he lives next to a termagant? Do you know she actually blackmailed me into complying with her so-called deathbed wish?"

"You, Jonathan?" Audrey exclaimed with a shocked voice, "How could she ever... You are the most powerful among the Dukes of the Realm!"

He grinned at her, suddenly finding again the sense of humor that she admired so much in him.

"After she had Randolph she stayed in London. The Queen wanted her as a Lady of her court. That suited her damn well. She needed the admiration of the courtiers, the Queen and the

King more than she needed my company. When I was back in Stirling, I saw Maighread again. There were precious few Scottish girls who could compare with her beauty..."

He quickly kissed Audrey's cheek when he saw her eyes darken.

"I knew of Maighread since she was thirteen years old. She was Stirling's miracle girl. Her old father, a MacDonald sired her when he was in his sixties and her mother had already passed by her fiftieth birthday. Her beauty was absolutely blinding. When I came back to Stirling she was nineteen years old and I managed to seduce her. Our son was born before Elisabeth had John."

Audrey's eyes widened.

"You have a bastard son in Stirling?"

Jon shrugged.

"As far as I know he is in Edinburgh now. I got him a commission with the Black Watch, because that was his heart's desire. He does not know about me, though. When Maighread was pregnant I had to marry her to one of her old cousins who was on the brink of death. I bought her a house outside Bannockburn. Her so-called husband died within the year. Elisabeth never forgave me the faux pas. She brought it up into our relationship whenever she felt like being spiteful. She would only forgive me on her deathbed if I married John to Lizzie Campbell. That's how it all came about. A 'tit for tat' she called it. I could never tell John what was lying underneath this situation of his marriage, though."

"Do John and Randolph know about this half-bro-ther?"

He shook his head.

"Another one of the promises you made to Elisabeth?" she asked incredulously.

"I can only tell them when I lie on my own death-bed."

"Oh, Jon," she exclaimed, "you cannot be serious! What if you die far away from them, or very suddenly? You must tell them or leave them a note in your will!"

His grin suddenly appeared again.

"Now that I told you my story, you owe me a big fat swive, Ma'am!"

She watched him closely, her green eyes turning from tender-ness to lust.

He grabbed her around her waist, reaching for a firm buttock. She had passed her fiftieth birthday some time ago, but for him she was like the sun and the moon together in the sky. He had known willowy beauties in his life, but as he had told Audrey already, he preferred the friendship of a woman he could talk to, whose beauty shone from within, to the quickly fading beauty of spiteful and spoilt women. She had become his haven in a rapidly changing world, Audrey Agnew, Countess of Loghaire.

She sighed when his hand opened her robe, reaching for the apex of her thighs.

Jonathan Montgomery had been her lover for the last two years. They had met again at the court of George III. She could not believe her luck when the most handsome Duke of the kingdom started stalking her. When she had given in to his wish to share a bed with her, she had been amazed. Bedding Jonathan had been so very different from her husband's rough attentions. She had never known what lovemaking could mean to a woman, and Jonathan, perceptive to the core, had taught her what it could be like. She now feared that she was addicted to him, hardly believing her luck and her fortune of being chosen as his mistress.

He had asked her to meet him at Sophia Grey's lovely mansion. She understood now that Sophia tried to be at Whitesands whenever she could, but the affairs of the Lindley properties often prevented her from living there.

Poor Sophia, with her self-induced spinsterhood, because a rake had not taken 'no' for an answer at a party in the country, where the Crown Prince was present. Her mother had decided to 'cover the situation up.' The man who had dared to rape her

daughter was too ineligible to become her husband. He had only been one of the Prince's 'low-life cronies.'

Elisabeth Rothford had never liked complications. She had shushed Sophia, saying that nobody would notice the fact that she had lost her maidenhead if nobody knew about it, conveniently forgetting that the case of Sophia's maidenhead had been food for the sniggering court for a month.

Audrey decided to pay Sophia a visit in London the next day to bring her a big bouquet of flowers. Within a few days, she would leave for the North for John Montgomery's wedding as well. Whether she would add her company to Jonathan's was still undecided, but if he would ask her, she knew she would come gladly.

She sighed when he rolled her on her back.

"Jon," she murmured, "at your age you should wobble grandchildren on your knee, instead of attacking honorable women!"

He cracked a laugh.

"Audrey, any man will tell you that they will always prefer a good swive over dandling children. Just start moaning, will you? I love it when you moan!"

"I love it when you make me moan, Jonathan," she mumbled, after which he groused about women always wanting the last word and not knowing when to shut up and enjoy themselves.

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*** Chapter 4: LOCHIELS SLIGHT PREDICAMENT ***

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The sergeant scratched his head when he looked down on the young lieutenant.

Gads, but the man had really superseded himself to-night!

He was stretched out on the flagstones of the small tavern, lying in a pool of blood and vomit. The stench rose to high heaven and he wondered where he could best take hold of the man to drag him away without having to cope with blood and vomit on his hands and uniform.

There was nothing for it. Taking him by the legs would lift the short battle kilt the lieutenant was wearing and give all and sundry the sight that should normally be reserved to wives and lovers. He just could not do that to the lieutenant: Lochiel Cameron was known to be as prudish as a virgin. He might be lying passed out in a tavern of bad repute but he would never touch the women there. As far as Sergeant Burns knew, he was still a fervent believer in his wedding vows even after his wife had liberated him from them by refusing him access to his own farm and marital bed.

"Stupid sod!" the burly sergeant muttered.

Like everybody else in the regiment he had heard about the young man's mishap with his wife and had felt sorry for him, but then he had always deemed the whole situation idiotic.

No young man in his right mind should marry a woman ten years his senior! And just look where it had got him! Passed out in his own vomit and blood, and God only knows what else, on that dirty floor!

"I bet you'd welcome some help," a low voice rum-bled behind him, "we'd better get him to my mother's house, Colin. There's no way we can get him back to the barracks in that state."

Sergeant Colin Burns turned to the big youth standing behind him. He had to duck as the tavern was low and he hardly fit between ceiling and floor.

"Lieutenant Agnew!" Colin said in delighted surprise, "I'm truly glad to see you, sir! I asked Morty to get me some help, but I didn't think there was a hope in hell that you would come to the rescue."

"I'd just arrived from Stirling when your man came racing to the barracks. We'll bring him to the Countess' residence. I have it on good authority that she's in London, so she cannot cluck about him or tell me what bad company I keep nowadays. Right, you lift him under his right arm and I'll take his left. Prepare yourself for a long haul; my mother's house is on the outskirts."

Colin nodded eagerly. Lieutenant Agnew was only twenty-three years old, but like Lochiel Cameron he was already a legend within the Scottish regiment.

Everybody knew that he was the Earl of Loghaire's spare son who had refused to go to some Sassenach city to study and disappear into the life of the London Quality. He had joined the Scottish regiment of the 42nd Black Watch instead, receiving his training in Stirling, away from his father's influence, and became a first lieutenant without paying for his commission.

"You'll be staying in Edinburgh for some time, Lieutenant?" Burns asked the impressive man who had taken Lochiel's left shoulder.

Hengist Agnew turned his face away from Lochiel and swore.

"Damnation, what has he been drinking? He smells like a pile of shit!"

Burns laughed.

"He's out cold with it. Damn, the man is heavy! He must weigh twenty stone, sir."

"We'll take him between us, Sergeant. That will be easier. We'll put him on my horse even if the poor beast will probably balk at his smell. You'll have to come inside the house as well; there is enough staff to clean us all up. I understand my

brother came to the house for the wedding already. My mother insisted and lo and behold, he listened. She has the house entirely staffed now to tend to Philip's specific needs and her own when she's back."

Hengist put his foot against the door to open it, as nobody in the tavern seemed inclined to give them a hand at all.

"The wedding, sir?" the sergeant inquired.

"Lord John Montgomery is to be shackled to a girl of Ayre, a baron's daughter. The problem is that he does not want to be shackled to anyone, let alone to that girl. If ever, he needs to marry an heiress."

"Like this one should have done," Sergeant Burns nodded with his head into Lochiel's direction, "but he's been married for five years now and has four kids, all sons. He's been busy, you know."

Hengist rasped a laugh.

"I know. I've known him for years, since the happy days when he hadn't yet taken it upon himself to provide the MacGregors with a bunch of boys for their clan. I heard she threw him out of the house. His house. Never marry a hag, Sergeant, they get to you and you'll have to turn in whatever you possess, and then you'll find yourself out on the cobbles."

Sergeant Burns peered sharply at the Earl's son. He had heard rumors about the lieutenant stalking the beautiful Marguerite Ross, who was said to be very recently betrothed to one of the richest men in the Realm. She was to marry Fat Alexander within a year.

He had only heard about the girl's beauty, as he had never set eyes on her. Her mother and stepfather, Lord and Lady Mac-Kenna, took care that she only went to church and the lending library, places Sergeant Burns never chose to visit, not even to lay eyes on the most beautiful girl in Scotland.

On the other hand, it had not stopped the lieutenant from flirting with other women. The lieutenant had definitely been

under Meighen Guthrie's skirts. When he had stopped seeing the girl, her wails had been heard all over the Firth.

A boy was holding Lieutenant Agnew's horse on Mona Street. The Black hated Lochiel's smell as Hengist predicted, but the lieutenant just threw the man over the saddle, bottom up, took the horse by the bridle and walked the long way home, an eager Sergeant Burns following him, excited by the prospect of entering the residence of the Earl and Countess of Loghaire.

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Lochiel woke up with a blinding headache.

He brought his hand to his head and touched a cotton cloth bandage. He felt his stomach heave and managed only by sheer iron will not to puke on the laced sheets.

Laced sheets?

He squinted at the fancy bedding through his blistering pain. He was lying in a huge bed with soft feather mattresses. His head was resting on a large pillow.

He groaned, not comprehending why he was not lying on his hard and rough bunk in the rented room he recently shared with his army friend Peter Wallace, in the vicinity of the Edinburgh barracks.

Somebody close to the bed heard him stir and groan, and hurried out the door of the sumptuous room.

Lochiel closed his eyes again, feeling sick with the worst kind of hangover he'd ever experienced in his life.

He heard a man bark a short laugh. He whimpered and slowly opened one eye, which made the man next to his bed laugh even louder.

"I asked my father's valet to prepare you something for that hangover," the man said, coming slowly into Lochiel's focus. "A little hair of the dog won't do you any harm, I'd say."

Lochiel opened both his eyes wide.

"Hengist?"

He noticed his voice was only a croak.

The man pulled a chair close to the bed.

"Don't move, Lochiel. I don't know how you did it, but you managed to almost split your head on the floor of that tavern. Gads, I am afraid I cannot admire your taste for drink-houses nowadays. Thank God I ran into the boy who had been sent by Sergeant Burns to let us know that you were in trouble. I'd never have been able to find you otherwise."

He turned to somebody Lochiel could not see.

"Here, my friend," Hengist said, holding a glass with a straw close to Lochiel's mouth.

"That's Derrick's special cure against hangovers as big as a Bengal tiger. The doctor told me you would need to lie down for a few days. You may have a bad concussion."

Lochiel's eyes squinted after he had drunk the potion Hengist fed him.

"No heaving!" Hengist warned and nodded in approval when he saw Lochiel choking back the impulse to feed the special cure to the rugs.

Lochiel swallowed and then gasped.

"Can't stay," he groaned, "I need to pick up Mont-gomery's chit in Ayre. Nairn told me to get it done as soon as possible."

Hengist's look darkened.

"Is John not going to pick up his own bride?"

Lochiel dared to shake his head.

"He'll be arriving nigh on the night before the nuptials. He won't spend one more hour here than needed."

"Why you?" Hengist asked.

Lochiel sighed.

"I'm known as a notorious married man, remember? She's considered safe with me, I guess. The whole family over there will join us anyway."

"Well, you can't go today or tomorrow and that wedding is still two weeks away. Let me tell Nairn you are badly hurt. Maybe he'll send someone else."

Lochiel looked almost cross-eyed at his friend.

"No use talking to you now," Hengist grumbled, rising from the chair. "Let me get a message to Nairn and we'll see, alright?"

There was no answer. Lochiel was asleep again. Hengist shrugged and walked out of the room.

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*** Chapter 5: AN ESCORT FOR LIZZIE CAMPBELL**

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"So, he is on his way at last?"

Bernadette Warleigh sat down on a chaise, looking at a distracted Lizzie, who was fumbling with a bow on her dress.

"Do you think it is improper to wear this dress, Detty?" she asked, studying herself in the mirror.

Without waiting for Detty's answer, she scoffed: "Mother says it's quite improper, but what does she know? She's only an Irish squire's daughter. I heard décolletages in London are a lot lower than this one."

Detty looked confused at her friend, who was also supposed to be her cousin thrice removed.

Lizzie was the most beautiful girl in the world, everybody claimed, with her dark curly hair, her eyes the color of cornflowers and her rosebud mouth. Contrary to the dumpling Detty, her figure was dainty and her waist slim, emphasizing the broad hips. Even at sixteen, her white breasts almost overflowed the deep cleavage of her dress.

It was a pity that Lizzie knew all about her lovely assets, though. The fact that she had been betrothed to a Duke's son since she was four years old had not helped her to develop a sweet character. She might have been an adorable child, if her father had not taught her that she was very special, with the best marriage prospects in the whole of Scotland. Inevitably, that had made her arrogant and haughty as a young girl, and almost unbearable for the girls of her age at fifteen. The only one who was able to cope with her was Bernadette Warleigh, daughter of an impoverished squire, because she simply did not care about Lizzie's self-centered nature. She did not listen to Lizzie's babbling and self-importance; she just sat and nodded, dreaming about the heroes from the gothic novels she devoured every day. Bernadette was not truly down-to-earth; she was just floating on some cloud where most people could

not reach her feelings, or her sensitivity for things un-fair or untrue.

Detty was still turning Lizzie's remark in her mind.

Why did Lizzie say that her mother was only a squire's daughter? Lizzie's father, Barry Campbell, had only become a baron since Lizzie's betrothal to Lord John, now twelve years ago. Before that he had been a squire as well and not a wealthy one either.

"There was a messenger saying that your escort is on its way at last, Lizzie. Aren't you happy?"

Lizzie turned around to glare at her friend on the pink embroidered chaise. It was by far the most beautiful piece of furniture in her sumptuous bedroom. Her bed and furniture were made of rosewood, true, and her curtains were of expensive pink satin, but according to her maid Mattie a chaise like that did not exist anywhere else. It had been hand-embroidered in very little stitches. Lizzie did not like to ponder on the fact that it had taken her mother months of needlework to finish the piece of furniture designed especially for her beloved only daughter's room.

Since her father had become Baron of Ayre, more or less a courtesy title because it was newly created, there had been entitlements; the manor itself and monies coming from six sheep farms, and the land that stretched along the wide river.

Lizzie was not able to recall what her former house looked like before they came to live at Sweet Stream Manor. Mother had wanted to take her there one day but she had always refused to see it. She had insisted that Sweet Stream Manor was her house and not some grubby old place.

Her mother had looked at her with sad eyes, but then Lizzie did not remember when her mother had ever seemed happy. She did not understand her mother's attitude at all. It was true that her mother was not able to hold a candle to Lizzie's beauty and of course all the good assets Lizzie possessed had come from Lizzie's father.

At the age of forty-one Barry Campbell was still a big handsome man. Lizzie had inherited his black wavy hair, although his eyes were of a more greyish than blue hue. He had tall muscled limbs because he liked to be at his farms and rode his horse every day for hours.

Lizzie loved her father to distraction, but it was generally known that although her father liked his daughter a lot, he had always mourned the fact that his wife had not been able to birth him a son. There had been other babes after Lizzie was born, but they had died either within a few weeks of their birth or months before they had been due. Barry's relationship with his wife had deteriorated after the local doctor had told Sarah Campbell that a new pregnancy might well cost the Baroness' health or her life, while the chances that she would bring a babe to term were probably non-existent.

The time came that Sarah Campbell heard of her husband's infidelities and the fact that a few lowly maids had been able to bring the birth of his bastard children to a successful completion had sunken her into a deep depression. Although Sarah had hoped to find some consolation in her beautiful daughter, that hope proved futile when Lizzie became an adolescent. By then, Lizzie did not see any reason to become a comfort to her ever-saddened mother; she preferred the company of her father, who only rewarded his daughter's adoration by staying away from the manor for whole days in a row. Barry hated it when women started clinging to him.

It had been Mattie who had warned Lizzie that the Baron preferred to find his delights somewhere else, presumably as far as Glasgow, where the women were willing and less prudish than in the county of Ayre. Lizzie had been hurt. She could not imagine why her father had to go after 'willing' women when he had his beautiful daughter at home.

Now at sixteen she was happy to go away into the world. The marriage to Lord John suddenly looked a lot more appealing than one year ago.

When Lord John had visited her, at the Duke's urgings, he had been arrogant and unfriendly, but everybody around Lizzie had consoled her with the fact that Lord John was rather young to contemplate marriage and could not be expected to be overjoyed about his coming nuptials.

Sarah Campbell had been aghast at his bad manners, but by that time, nobody but Mattie took any notice of the Baroness' feelings. Lord John had even pointed out to the Baroness that he was not remotely interested in his future bride and her Irish-born mother, which carved the insults even deeper into the Baroness' mind. When she had dared to complain to the Baron about the young man who was to become their son-in-law the Baron had been irritated.

Of course the young spare was less than nice; the marriage was an arranged one, wasn't it? The Baron did not doubt however that Lord John would make an about-turn about Lizzie as soon as he had bedded her. She was a beautiful girl and everything would be fine as soon as Lord John had 'broken her in.' The Baroness was aware that her husband used a terminology that was rather apt for horses but not for humans, let alone her daughter, but did not know how she could make her husband see things differently.

Lizzie seemed blessedly unaware of Lord John's bad temper and arrogance: she had fallen in love with his startling handsomeness and thought nothing less of him than that he was to be her knight in shining armor, coming soon to ride her into a golden sunrise. On the contrary, her mother's worries irritated her to no end.

At least it had not helped Lord John at all to be so rude; there had not been a cancellation of the betrothal. In March, the Duke of Rothford wrote a long letter to Lizzie's parents arranging the nuptials for May the 27th, exactly twelve years after his sweet wife's sad demise.

Barry Campbell had only shrugged his shoulders, leaving his wife and daughter in a state of vast excitement over the preparations for the wedding.

Lizzie would marry in Edinburgh in the chapel of the ancient Edinburgh Castle, where Kings and Queens had been wed through the ages.

Lizzie had little experience with men or boys, as everybody had known that she carried the stamp of 'reserved for a Duke's son,' which meant that not one young man in the neighborhood had dared to approach her or tried to court her.

She had some knowledge of what happened between two wedded persons.

She had entered the stables a few times when two horses had been brought together for breeding purposes and Detty had provided her with some naughty books, which always ended with the heroine kissing the hero. Also, she had witnessed the carnal love between a milkmaid and a stable-lad, unwitting at first and afterward with unmitigated interest. Watching with climbing excitement, she had felt pangs of delicious thrills somewhere in her underbelly and had found out that if she rubbed that place somewhere between her legs, she could bring herself to unexpected ecstasy.

She started to stalk the couple on their quests for privacy, amazed at the fact that people could enjoy such crude acts so very much. She started to dream about the couple's fumbling and couplings at night and had found the secret joy of self-induced orgasms. Soon enough Lord John had replaced the stable-lad in her erotic dreams, so now that she was to marry her Duke's son at last, she felt more elation than dread of spending the wedding night with him.

"I think the dress is lovely, although a bit daring..." Detty answered her question at last.

Lizzie pouted when she thought she heard some criticism in Detty's judgment.

"I think Lord John will love it!" she countered, "The last time he was here, mother dressed me as if I were a ten-year-old little chit. He will see the change in me and adore me for it..."

Detty nodded hastily. It would not do to counter her friend and make her angry. She was to marry that very handsome Duke's son after all, and Detty was not going to annoy Lizzie so as to prevent her taking her to Edinburgh as a bride's maid.

The miracle was that Detty had been invited to accompany Lizzie all the way to Edinburgh as her closest friend. Detty's parents had not been so fortunate as to receive an invitation as Squire Warleigh and his wife had not been socially elevated enough to be able to mix with the illustrious wedding company that would await Lizzie in Edinburgh. Lizzie's parents had been forced to pay for Detty's bridesmaid's dress as there was no way that the Warleigh family would be able to afford such a luxurious frock to be worn for one occasion only.

Lizzie had chosen the color and design of Detty's dress so that it would enhance her friend's countenance. She had admitted that Detty was far from enticing: the girl had mouse-grey hair, a rather plain face, and she was a bit chubby due to her fondness of sweetmeats. It was not in Lizzie's best interest to haul about an ugly bridesmaid, so for the first time in her life she had tried to make Detty look more beautiful.

Detty was elated to see the peach-collared silk and the matching lace trimmings of her dress. She was to wear fake silken orange-blossoms in her hair and a small mother-of-pearl necklace that would be Lizzie's bridal gift to her, or more exact: the Baroness' choice of gift for the faithful friend.

Lizzie's dress was a cloud of pearly-white silk, embroidered with pearls. The pearls had been Lizzie's choice. She had rejected the crystal bangles that the modiste in Glasgow thought suitable, stating that if one married a Duke's son one should be wearing real jewelry and not fake ones.

Her mother had been shocked by Lizzie's choice. In her book pearls were similar to teardrops and only worn at funerals. Lizzie had not given a jot about her mother's opinion, of course.

"I want to talk to Samantha today," Lizzie suddenly stated.

She rose hastily from her chair in front of the mirror, calling for Mattie.

"Samantha?" Detty asked wide-eyed.

Everybody knew that Samantha was a witch who lived in the woods with all sorts of animals.

"Mattie, Detty and I are going for a ride in the buggy. Get me my shawl just in case. Do you want to come with us? Then we don't have to take a stable boy to drive us there."

Mattie looked askance at her little mistress. She was only twenty-three years old, but had lived with the family since she was thirteen. When Lizzie had turned fourteen the Baroness had thought it wise to ask Mattie to take care of Lizzie's wardrobe and bodily needs; she would need her own ladies' maid anyway when she was to go to Lord John's household.

Mattie had always liked to take the ribbons after one of the grooms had taught her to handle horses and carts. Lizzie had more than once used her skill to drive her to places her parents would not approve of.

Lizzie abhorred driving anything. She had been taught well how to ride a horse, which she did with a firm hand and a straight seat due to her father's lessons. His praise had been more important to her than her initial fright of horses. Still, steering a contraption through a crowd was akin to doing a servant's work, in her opinion, and that of course could not be expected of a young woman who was to marry a Duke's son.

Mattie had balanced her role as a ladies' maid between the Baroness and Lizzie and it had been clear from the start which was the more demanding of the two.

She was very fond of the poor Baroness, who had her own bedroom in the house since the Baron had decided to openly stray from the marriage bed.

Mattie's fondness for the Baroness was reciprocated: when the Baron had been drunk and tried to lay his hands on Mattie while she made Lizzie's bed (Mattie was the epitome of a healthy and busty country girl) she had cracked a bedpan on his head, earning her the Baron's disgust and the Baroness' delight.

Mattie was born on one of the tenant's farms and had always had a healthy outlook on life. There had been a nice man once whom she went steady with, but he had left for the soldier's ranks of the Scottish Stirling regiment and his homecomings had been far and few.

Mattie had given up on him after he had not reappeared for more than a year. Now she hoped she would be able to find somebody in Edinburgh or London; wherever life would take her with her young mistress, as the boys in Ayre were not much to her critical liking.

Mattie was a down-to-earth girl with a good eye for character. She had not liked Lord John one bit for his arrogance and sarcasm. She had watched her little mistress' growing feelings for the cad with a sinking heart, as she did not suppose any good would come from that union. Although she thought Lizzie rather spoiled and naive, there was room enough in her heart to love her. Strangely enough, Lizzie tended to forget her self-indulgences when Mattie was around, un-characteristically treating her like an older sister.

"Do you think you should go there today? What if Lord John arrives and you're not there?"

Lizzie put up her chin.

"Samantha's only a half an hour's ride, I'm certain we will be back in time. I need to consult her on some matters."

Mattie knew exactly on what matters Lizzie wanted to consult Samantha Ferrer.

She decided that it would be wiser to go with her charge. Lizzie might need her after the consultation. Mattie did not have a lot of confidence in what was going to happen to Lizzie's future and if Lizzie wanted Samantha to look into her cards to tell her what the future would be holding for her, she'd better be there to do damage control.

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"Are you certain you want to know what the cards are saying?"

Samantha Ferrer looked at Lizzie with some concern.

Samantha Ferrer was a stunning redhead of nearly twenty-five years who had been widowed since she was twenty-one, when her husband and babe had died in the fire at their farm.

She had preferred to sell the Ferrer property and to live in a small cottage in the woods of the Ayre district. She had some goats, chickens and sheep and nurtured an herbal garden.

People had started to look at her in strange ways when she had started to sell potions and lotions, which earned her the reputation of being a witch. Her red hair did not help that reputation either, nor the fact that some gypsy woman had taught her to tell people's fortunes by reading her playing cards for them. The fortune telling had become her best paying sidekick since the time she lived in her cottage.

Barry Campbell had not hesitated to give her his protection though, bartering his help and protection against the use of her very delectable body.

Mattie had noticed at once that Samantha was breeding, although she hid the fact well under her wide apron.

Mattie had no doubts there was a new illegitimate Campbell on the way and she looked at Samantha with disapproval, although she also sensed some envy. Barry Campbell was too handsome of a man for his own good. She had slapped him more than once when he'd made some obvious advances at her, but she had done that for her poor mistress' sake. The Baroness suffered under Barry's shenanigans with all the

willing girls in Ayre and Mattie was wise enough not to start anything with the Baron under Sarah Campbell's nose.

On the other hand, Barry Campbell was food for any girl's fantasies and if Mattie had lived far away in some cottage in the woods instead of at the Campbell's residence, she wasn't so certain that she would not have succumbed to Barry Campbell's charms. Apart from the fact that Barry Campbell had become Ayre's most notorious stud, he also had a reputation as a great lover. Mattie had indulged with her soldier in some hurried lovemaking and honestly, she would not have minded matching her experience with the good-looking Baron.

"Why else would I be here?" Lizzie asked with a pout.

"Because the cards may not always tell you what you would like to know," Samantha explained patiently.

"I have laid them now on the table and something tells me there are a few things in there that you may not like to hear at all, Miss Lizzie."

Lizzie looked adamant.

"Just start, Samantha. I'm paying you for it, remember?"

Samantha sent a worried look at Mattie who just shrugged.

"Oh, well," Samantha peered down at the cards again, "I see that you will be leaving soon for a town near big water..."

"Everybody knows I'm to leave for Edinburgh!" Lizzie scoffed, "Tell me something I don't know yet!"

Samantha sent Lizzie an exasperated look.

"Fine," she mumbled, "so you will be leaving for a new life. It will not at all turn out the way you expect, though. I see here a Jack of Hearts who will interfere in the life you think you have got all worked out. There is a Jack of Diamonds here who will show himself very shortly in your life and then he will go on a faraway quest. That quest involves a woman, see, the Queen of Spades here."

Lizzie frowned.

"What do you mean with all those Jacks? I don't understand a thing you are saying."

Samantha shook her head.

"Patience, Miss Lizzie, let me explain a few things. Look, the Jack of Diamonds is probably your husband to be, as you are the Queen of Diamonds. Matching court cards are mostly couples. You have a short bonding with this Jack of Diamonds, but he will disappear from your life for a long stretch of time. See, he is on your left which means he is only shortly with you and the card between you and him is the seven of spades which means separation. Left stands for past. You will be sad because you and the Jack of Diamonds are surrounded by clubs. Clubs mean, in this case, tears and sadness. On the other hand, there is this rapidly approaching Jack of Hearts on your right. There are many hearts involved with you and the Jack of Hearts which means, ah, love of the body more than the mind."

"Don't you think the Jack of Hearts is my husband-to-be?"

Lizzie interrupted.

Samantha shook her head.

"Jack of Hearts is almost always the lover. He's known to appear as a lover in any deck."

"What about my marriage?" Lizzie asked, now a little bit panicky.

"You'll marry, alright," Samantha continued, staring at the cards before her, "and there will be children. But I see a lot of secrets here. Sorrow and loneliness, Miss Lizzie. There is also... bodily harm, for yourself and the persons around you, and..."

Samantha suddenly stopped. She stared at the King of Clubs, who was a bit removed from the Queen of Clubs.

"There is this couple," she whispered, "they are estranged and the man, the husband..."

"Well?" Lizzie asked sharply.

"There may be an accident. They... Their..."

"Does it have anything to do with me?"

Lizzie stamped her foot. The reading had not at all gone the way she had expected.

Samantha hesitated. She passed her apron alongside her eyes as if wiping away a tear.

"Ah, by the time things proceed you will be far away from this couple, Miss Lizzie."

Lizzie nodded.

"It does not have anything to do with me, then? Anything else I need to know?"

Samantha sniffed, rubbing her belly unconsciously.

"No. Except that you will not want for anything, in a material way, ever."

Lizzie gave Samantha a shilling and sent Mattie a look of disgust.

"We're finished here!"

"I'd like Samantha to read my cards as well," Detty objected.

Lizzie sat down on a simple wooden chair, impatiently tapping her foot.

Samantha was already shuffling the cards for Detty.

"I see this husband for you, Miss Detty," Samantha said, "but he is far away, maybe even as many as seven years, because he is at the brink of the frame. You will marry him and he will obtain a very elevated position in life, although it won't seem so in the beginning of your marriage. You will give your love, however, to somebody else. Somebody you will meet soon and will know for years. He will be the one to give you your heart's desire in some way. Your life will be quite balanced in the beginning. See: the diamonds neutralize the hearts and the spades are neutralizing the clubs. You will only find true love when you... when you go for it."

Detty looked confused and then elated.

"So I'll marry a man in an elevated position and I will find true love?"

Samantha smiled at her.

"That's the gist of it, Miss Detty."

She mused that in the end all the women who wanted her to read the cards wanted to know the same thing: will I find true love and will I marry.

"Can we go now?" Lizzie asked impatiently, rising from the chair, "Lord John may be arriving any minute."

Detty gave Samantha some coins and thanked her profusely. Then she had to race after Mattie and Lizzie who were already getting into the buggy.

"Oh, darn!" Lizzie exclaimed, "I forgot my shawl inside. Will you get it for me Mattie? Just fasten the reigns to the knob on the side!"

Mattie hurried out of the cabriolet, at the same time preventing Detty from entering it.

Something shot from under the brushes, followed by a big hound.

The horse in front of the buggy lifted its legs and screamed.

It balked at the two noisy creatures and started to run with the buggy swinging from left to right behind it.

Lizzie, who had just wanted to sit down, shrieked with terror and fell backwards onto her seat.

Mattie and Detty cried out simultaneously when they saw the buggy catch up speed as the horse jumped into a fast gallop, disappearing into the direction of the road to Ayre.

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Lochiel looked morosely behind him.

When he had left Edinburgh four days ago, he had been in a black mood and for some reason that mood had not lifted.

He looked up at the sky and swore under his breath. This May had been a very wet month and looking up at the sky told him that they had not had the last of the rain yet.

He grimaced at Sergeant Burns who was heading the half-platoon of the Highlanders of the 42nd.

Yesterday they had travelled between Castle Stirling and Glasgow and the rain coming from the North had proven to be unrelenting and cold. Their stay in Glasgow had been short and uncomfortable: the inn where they stayed only had room for them in and above the stables. The badly maintained roof leaked and made their short sleeping time miserable and wet.

Sergeant Burns had laughingly told Lochiel that he had been spoilt during his stay at the barracks in Edinburgh, and Lochiel supposed that he was right. Also the featherbed that he had occupied while in Hengist's mother's house had been too soft and luxurious; making him quickly forget what the life of a soldier was really about. Not that he truly knew of a soldier's life. Being stationed in Edinburgh was hardly a punishment for a man. The barracks were not badly appointed and the room he rented along with his new friend, Lieutenant Peter Wallace, was big and agreeable. They were lucky enough to find a batman whom they both paid for, and who also took care of their 'bodily needs' such as clothing, laundering, feeding and taking care of their horses and weapons.

Lochiel looked down at his horse; a hefty black stallion with a pedigree better than that of an earl. He could not believe it when Colonel Nairn told him that Captain Rutherford, who had died from a bad, festering leg-wound he received when he was on a mission somewhere up North, had given him the horse in his will. He had hardly known Rutherford, although it was true that he had done him a few favors when they were both at Stirling Castle during Lochiel's training.

Stirling. His face soured again.

He had done his utmost to arrive as early as possible with his men in Castle Stirling so that he could ride all the way back to Bannockburn to visit his boys. The ride had been for naught. His wife had left for her father's farm in Dumbarton and had taken the boys with her. The only persons he had

found there taking care of his farm were two of his wife's cousins who were indifferent and close-mouthed.

When he passed by his mother's great-house he had not bothered to visit.

The Camerons who lived in it were virtual strangers to him. Catriona was the one to claim the rent for the house every month and he knew that the new tenants were gruff and unfriendly.

Not that he cared. His mother had been dead for almost twenty years and he had been dragged from one Cameron family to another.

When he was fourteen years old he received the unexpected and merciful news that he was to be trained as an ensign at Stirling.

He gazed up at the sky again, hoping that they would reach Ayre before the rain would start to fall.

When he heard the screaming he looked with confusion at his sergeant, who pointed to some com-motion on a parallel road near the curb.

"What the...!"

"Buggy stampede!" his sergeant cried out.

A horse stormed onto the road, dragging an open carriage.

Lochiel's eyes widened when he saw a female figure holding on for dear life in the dangerously tilting vehicle.

Lochiel touched his horse with his spurs and it sprang immediately into a wide gallop.

"I'll get to the woman, you take that horse, Colin!" he cried to the sergeant.

The sergeant signaled to the half-platoon to continue on the road and spurred his horse as well, heading quickly towards the wildly meandering vehicle.

Lochiel had to pass the run-away carriage on the left in order to be able to reach the screaming girl, who was grabbing the left side of the fast moving buggy.

He stood heavily in his right stirrup to lean over the side of the buggy, which suddenly and mercifully followed a straighter track due to Sergeant Burns having forced the runaway horse into a straight line.

"Try to stand up!" he hollered at the girl.

She looked at him with uncomprehending eyes, her mouth wide open in a shriek.

"I'll catch you!" he shouted at her, "Just stand up so that I can reach for you!"

He kept one eye on Colin Burns who rode next to the frightened horse, trying to slow it down.

"Keep her straight, Colin!" he shouted.

The girl only leant against the left side of the buggy, still grasping at the side.

"Now!"

Lochiel leaned as much sideways as he could on his fast moving horse.

The girl saw his hand coming and rose to an almost standing position.

He grabbed her by the waist, hoping that his horse would continue to run in a straight line, even if he was poking it with his right spur.

"Jump!" he ordered the girl urgently.

She jumped up, enough to give him a firm grip around her waist. She clung onto his right arm while he threw her inelegantly in front of his saddle. She ended there on her stomach, wildly waving her arms, seeking for something to hold. She managed to grab his left upper arm and he swung away from the fast moving vehicle. He heard her cry out and brought his horse to a slow trot.

"Don't be afraid," he reassured her, still gasping with his efforts.

He grasped her around her stomach and slid her in front of him.

God, but the girl was a lightweight! Her long black curly hair had come loose and some of it waved against the side of his face. It smelled clean and feminine.

Something below his kilt started to stir and he bit his lip in exasperation. He could not get horny just because he held some child in his arms! How old was she?

He peered down her long neck and saw two beautiful white globes that were resting in a slightly askew low bodice.

Damn, not a child exactly, but a very young woman!

He felt his groin tighten and shifted her away from him. It was safe enough. Akbar had slowed down to a light trot and would soon start to step.

The girl started to sniff and he leaned a bit forward to hold her tight. He noticed his arm was circling her waist right under her delectable breasts.

"I thank you, sir," she said stiffly, swallowing her tears. She obviously felt embarrassed. Lochiel wanted to let go of his armful of this small woman, but was not certain if she would be able to keep herself upright on his big horse. Not all women were used to the height of a horse.

In the meantime, Colin had taken hold of the bit of the spooked horse. It slowed down in an instant.

"I'll have Rigby take over and drive the buggy, sir!" Colin called to Lochiel.

The soldiers had followed them in a fast trot and were almost upon them.

Corporal Rigby jumped from his horse, throwing the reins to a nearby rider. He walked to the buggy that had come to a standstill now. The spooked horse was breathing heavily and Rigby took her by the nose, softly speaking reassuring words.

"You can go back into the buggy, Miss, if you wish," Lochiel said softly to his armful.

She turned around to him, shoving her firm behind into his kilt with the movement.

Lochiel almost began to pray in despair.

For the journey he had pushed his sporran to his side on its belt and nothing separated him from the little lady except for the wool of his kilt and the flimsy cloth of her enticing dress.

She shook her head, staring at him with the bluest eyes this side of the Realm.

"No, no!" her rosebud mouth pleaded, "I can't go back in that thing!"

"You cannot be very comfortable on my horse's shoulders, ma'am," he drawled.

Christ in heaven, but the little lady was a beauty!

He was not used to sheer beauty. Catriona was in a way handsome enough, but her rough ways and equally rough life had prevented her from becoming even remotely beautiful. There had been only one sheer beauty in his life but she had died eighteen years ago.

"I'll lean against you, sir," she said imperiously, "I'm used to riding, so the height of your horse does not frighten me."

Lochiel opened his mouth to protest the idea. The last thing he wanted was to feel that feminine firm butt in the hollow of his thighs, but she just wriggled her backside between his legs and leaned back against him.

He pressed his lips together. One more movement like that and he would shame himself and stain his kilt!

At least the little lady was not aware of his predicament. She pushed her head under his chin and re-laxed against him.

Lochiel secretly peered at Sergeant Burns who was obviously trying not to laugh uproariously.

Damn! The man had noticed his precarious 'position', and near panic, and deemed it very funny!

"We'll take the buggy to your place, ma'am, wherever that is," Lochiel rasped, "you just sit tight."

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Lochiel woke up with a shout on his lips.

He sat up and looked around the strange room. The small window of the room was opened wide to let in a cool breeze.

The sky was coloring a dusky grey through the slits of the thin curtain that lifted on the light wind.

He swore softly and lay back on his pillow. He turned his nose in the pillow, inhaling the scent of the handkerchief that peeped from its hiding place where he had shoved it close to the headboard. Damnation, to be a married man and to revert to the ways that had only occurred in his boyhood! He could not remember the last time he had to ejaculate into a handkerchief after having been plagued by an unwelcome but persistent hard-on!

The girl he had rescued from the stampeding buggy and horse had turned out to be the same person he had to guide back to Edinburgh; Lord John Montgomery's bride! She had sat against his underbelly, which had simply been on fire all the way, while she had ordered the half-platoon to the small cottage of a devastating beautiful, but pregnant woman. Two more women were waiting there for the buggy's return: a girl with mousy hair but quite a remarkable bosom who was called Detty, and a girl in servant's garb, who turned out to be Miss Lizzie's waiting woman and an acquaintance of a stammering Sergeant Burns.

The whole damned cavalcade had ridden to the manor of Baron Bentham Campbell of Ayre. The two women had sat in the buggy, of which Rigby had stoically taken the reins, while Miss Lizzie sat between Lochiel's legs, obviously innocently leaning against his rock hard dick, which had refused to go down and become limp as it should be.

Before Lochiel jumped down from his horse, he allowed a snickering Sergeant Burns to lift Miss Lizzie from her unknowingly indecent place on the horse, giving him the time to turn his sporran back in front of his belly. The chit had waited for him to clamber down from his horse. Lochiel blessed the fact that he had worn thin, short underwear; he never enjoyed the shifting and shoving of his bare bum and unmentionables on a horse's saddle, thank you very much, so

his genitals had some sort of restraint under his short battle kilt. The sporran had hidden his condition, thank God, but that was about all the blessing he would get that day.

The Baron was at home to receive them, after a stay for a few nights in Glasgow. The servants whispered that he had just ridden in before the cavalcade arrived.

For some reason, the Baron took a liking to Lochiel and remained close to him for the longer part of the day. Lochiel was even invited to take his supper with the family in their sumptuous dining room.

At least the Baroness had given Lochiel a small single bedroom in the house as his sleeping quarters. His twenty men escort, Sergeant Burns, and Corporal Rigby were staying in the servant's quarters and in the rooms near the stables.

Lochiel was glad to have a room all by himself. It took him only a few jerks to relieve the unwelcome erection he had been forced to nurture since he had thrown Miss Lizzie in front of his saddle.

He felt humiliated and ashamed. He was a married man, by God, with four boys to his name and such immature behavior made a dent in his pride. Yet every thought, scent or word from Miss Lizzie sent him reeling back into the unwelcome state of his straining nether regions. He hated himself for it. She was only sixteen years old compared to his almost twenty-five. He was supposed to prefer older women, at least older than himself. Here he was slaving after a girl who would normally not yet be deemed out of the schoolroom and, if she had been destined to be a proper miss, heading for her first curtsy to the Queen at eighteen.

God, if she had not pushed her amazing butt against his crotch he would never have been in this state! Or would he? He wondered if he even liked her. She was impervious, snide and self-absorbed. He had quickly made that assessment after she came home.

He straightened his sheet and blanket over his big body, trying to ignore the fact that he was hardening again. He could have a lie-in for sure: they had arrived at their destination and his men were going to enjoy a day of rest, whatever that would entail in a Baron's household.

After several tries to get back to sleep, he sighed and reached for his handkerchief again.

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"He's very handsome, isn't he?"

Detty put her chin on her knees. She was in Lizzie's bedroom where they shared a tray as Lizzie had refused to go down to the morning room for breakfast.

Lizzie looked mulishly into the mirror. Her mood had not improved since she'd found out that Lord John had not bothered to come to accompany her to their wedding in Edinburgh himself, but had sent all those soldiers instead.

Soldiers! It had been a big blow to her self-esteem. She did not know how to behave after that telling insult Lord John had dealt her. For once, she had the impression that the staff in the house were gloating at her and did not feel a bit of compassion for her. That had been another blow. She had always been convinced that absolutely everybody in the house adored her and wanted the best for her, but that idea had collapsed completely after the arrival of the lieutenant and his soldiers.

"Do you think he's of the gentry?" Detty wondered, "A Cameron, they say. Camerons can be anything, al-though I'm not sure if there is an aristocratic Cameron now..."

"Will you never shut up?" Lizzie growled.

Since Detty had put her eyes on the lieutenant, when the half-platoon had gone to pick her and Mattie up at Samantha Ferrer's cottage, she had not been able to think of anyone or anything else. At least Detty had felt obliged to commiserate with Lizzie, although in her own airy fashion.

Lizzie still blushed profusely when she thought how that lieutenant had thrown her over his horse's shanks. She must have been some sight for all those rough men!

She refused to regret that she had come home sitting in front of the lieutenant's saddle, although her mother had gasped with shock at the indecency of it. Worse, her mother had shrugged when she had complained about Lord John's insult for not coming to escort his own bride.

When Lizzie complained to her father, he just squeezed her against his big chest, saying that in those elevated aristocratic circles one possibly did not concern oneself with the logistics of getting a bride to town. In any event, her parents were to take her there. He assured her that he had never seen anybody with an escort of twenty military men before, especially when they only had to go to Edinburgh. He reassured her by saying that only the Queen would have a force like that catering to her travelling needs.

Lizzie listened to his words and heard, probably for the first time in her life, the telling things that were not being said aloud; Lord John had not cared a jot about how she got to Edinburgh.

She gnashed her teeth. Oh, but that cad was going to pay for the insult! She suddenly knew exactly how!

"According to Mattie the lieutenant is married!" Detty gasped, holding her hand to her heart in a dramatic fashion.

Lizzie frowned.

"How would Mattie know that, Detty?"

"That Sergeant Burns used to live around here as a lad, Lizzie. It seems she's on specific terms with him, but I don't know how specific. Oh well, my father would not take a mere lieutenant as a son-in-law lightly anyway."

Lizzie watched her friend closely and smiled wanly. How Detty could run away with her thoughts!

Did she care that the lieutenant was married? She bit her lip. No, of course not. It was actually great news, for what she had

recently cooked up. She was going to have an affair with the handsome lieutenant! She was not going to 'save' herself for that arrogant cad that was supposed to become her husband! All the better that the lieutenant was married, so she could never be in a position to have to marry him instead, if she was found out.

She put her mouth in a grim line, wondering how difficult it would be to have the lieutenant delightfully compromise her. She suddenly saw the lieutenant in the place of that stable boy and felt a pang of desire race through her body. Ah, but he would be perfect! But how? How?

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He lay back on his pillow with a hand covering his eyes.

“How can you ever forgive me?” he asked with difficulty. “I left you and made you live in penury, having first my father and then my brother paying for your daily needs? Oh, my God I must have inherited my mother’s egotistical character.”

“It was hardly penury,” she protested, “and I cannot believe that your mother’s selfishness can be hereditary.”

She felt a sudden twinge in her belly and gasped.

John bent immediately over her.

“What is it Lizzie, is it the child? Oh, good Christ, we should never have...”

She smiled tremulously at him, amazed about his concern.

“No, this baby can kick me quite hard sometimes. It’s nothing, John!”

“Lizzie, I am not sure we should have...”

He halted meaningfully.

She stuck out her hand to caress the dark curls that were almost falling down to his shoulders. She presumed he had not seen his barber for quite some time.

“Samantha says that at this stage it won’t be harmful to c...couple. As long as the man is not overtly forceful.”

His grin became impish.

“You are actually discussing bedding me with Samantha?”

She bit her lip. She had asked Samantha, although she had known it could not be very harmful. Lochiel had bedded her as late as the seventh month of her pregnancy with the twins. They had been born only a few weeks early.

“You still wanted me to come to your bed? It wasn’t only me?” he asked, insecurity lacing his voice.

“I... How can you think I would not want you in my bed any more, John? Do you think I faked my delight in our trysts together?”

“I know you were forced,” he growled curtly.

She closed her eyes, laying heavily back on the pillow.

“I always thought you did not want me.”