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CUT ON THE BIAS

by

Susanna Bonaretti



## CHAPTER 1

Autumn, 1905

Lying in Wait

Colonist.

One of the more generous names they called me.

What was I doing here, fifteen thousand miles away from my place of birth, in this forest, in the dead of night, waiting?

Waiting for Wills to give the signal.

Waiting, Wills and I, in this damned forest on a damp, dark and deathly silent night. No fox scrabbling about, no eerie call from an owl, no redwings—it was as though they, too, were lying in wait, anticipating.

Bastard. That, too, was an accurate description of me. My mother was Welsh and my father? Who knows? My mother took that secret to her grave.

Waiting.

The late autumn breeze chilled the night air. My thoughts turned to the next few minutes and how badly it could go for everyone, especially young Wendy, if we got it wrong.

Cradled in my hand was my Webley Mark I revolver. It had served me gallantly for many years and would continue to do so unreservedly. In the other, I gripped an old, dimmed, bullseye lantern as Wills and I hunched behind the straggly wild privet. Kitted out

in our blacks from head to toe and peering through the slots in our balaclavas, we melded into the darkness.

It was not just Wills and me out here, waiting. Wills, our leader, had requested a contingent of sixteen men but was assigned only four. They were supposedly at the ready and in their predetermined positions: two on our right flank and two on our left.

I looked at Wills, his gaze fixed on his pocket watch, his compass and map now safely returned to his pocket. His piercing blue eyes betrayed apprehension and concern, but he was nonetheless steadfast and determined, as I was, as we all were.

Handsome, moustachioed, just a little taller than me, a little stronger—and sometimes smarter—he and I were like brothers, having shared almost half our lives since that incident in Afghanistan nineteen years ago. Wills, then Lieutenant Reginald Williams of the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides, now Major Williams attached to the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police and me, a—

“Get ready,” his voice, barely a whisper but still rich and refined, cut into my reverie.

I shuffled to my haunches. Now was not the time for reminiscing; now was the time for action.

“Go.”

The two of us rose from the earth like demons from hell and moved stealthily through the undergrowth toward our designated objective, the feeble light from my lantern picking the way forward through the hawthorn and gorse. There was no sound or sign of her, or the other four.

We continued through the endless scrub, well beyond the coordinates we’d been given; an uneasiness prevailed.

Where was she?

Where were our other four men? There was no movement to our left or our right. There was no movement other than ours. No one anywhere.

Wills drew his revolver, scanned the depth of the forest and threw me a look that immediately put me on guard.

I swept my light slowly from side to side and stopped on what appeared to be a pile of leaf-covered rags a short distance ahead. Wills reached the mound of freshly disturbed damp forest detritus. I shone the light over the heap as I leaned down and brushed some of the rotting vegetation from the dirty fabric. I could not will myself to lift the cloth. My heart raced. It can't be—

Wills took the cloth from me and pulled it back.

It was. The Honourable Wendy Warburton. Dead. Murdered. Why was she killed? Her father had paid the ransom and we were to secure the girl alive. Why was she dumped so barbarously like unwanted rubbish? And why here, nowhere near the designated place?

These questions demanded answers and I burned with rage to find out why as I brushed the decaying leaves from her young and delicate face. My eyes followed the length of her battered frame. Her clothes and stockings had been savagely torn from her petite body. It was horribly obvious that she had been abused and violated, and then killed. She was cold but rigor mortis had not set in so her end could have been prevented if only...

Wills placed a firm hand on my shoulder and gave me a warning look: the law will take care of justice.

I couldn't help but scoff at the adequacy of the law. Hanging was much too easy for these animals. They deserved more. *I will give them 'justice'*, I silently vowed. The same sort of justice I had meted out so many times before.

Several loud gunshots shattered the icy stillness.

“Goddammit!” Wills snapped, “This way!”

We stumbled toward the reports. More blasts! Racing toward the intermittent fusillade, we encountered the fray in a small clearing.

In the darkness, we could just make out two of our detachment crouched behind the large rotting trunk of a fallen tree. Flashes of light from the gun blasts betrayed the positions of the offending fire emanating from a dense stand of trees a short distance ahead.

Shots rang out incessantly and struck the fallen tree trunk sending splinters of rotting bark flying. The tree was large but its soft decaying wood offered very little in the way of protection.

Our men returned fire and rapidly reloaded but they were pinned down.

Wills looked at me and signalled to move in just as a shot whistled past my ear.

“Lantern!” Wills yelled.

“Damn!” I immediately killed the light and we both rushed to our allies and the cover of the fallen tree.

Reaching the tree, Wills demanded, “Where the hell were you? Where the hell are Perkins and Scott?”

Yabsley, more provocative than his partner, Dolby, yelled back as he reloaded his gun, “Where the fuck were you? And the others?”

“How many are there?”

“I didn’t stop to take a census.” Yabsley turned to shoot wildly into the trees ahead. His arrogance was well-known but this was no time for Wills to put him in his place.

Movement in the scrub to our right caught our attention.

A black-clad figure emerged from the brush, followed by another, both crouching to avoid being seen.

“Hold fire,” Wills commanded, “It’s Perkins and Scott.” He called to them, “Get back. Take cover!” That immediately attracted a few shots in their direction and they withdrew to safety.

“We’ve got to outflank them,” Wills determined with controlled anxiety. That manoeuvre would be dangerous to say the least. Moving to the left was completely without any protection from the onslaught and, not knowing how many we were up against could mean possible suicide.

Wills turned to me, “Volunteer?”

I looked up and scanned the black sky. Turning to Wills, I winked and confirmed, “No shooting star.” I saw the corners of Wills eyes crinkle and I knew he knew what I meant. I moved behind Yabsley and Dolby in readiness for the command.

Wills called to the two on the right, “Prepare to cover,” and repeated the same to Dolby and Yabsley. He looked at me. I nodded. Then he looked at the two to his right, “Fire!!”

Five guns filled the air with smoke, light and hot lead as I broke from the cover of the tree and rushed into the sparse brush to the left, leaving the perpetrators able to only

return a few wild shots. Wills followed me as we pushed through the scrub, as did Perkins and Scott while Yabsley and Dolby continued their now lessened barrage from behind the tree.

Perkins and Scott on the right, and Wills and I on the left, circled around to catch the snipers in crossfire.

The offenders, aware of our ploy, moved back from tree to tree deeper into the forest.

Scott was a good man, just graduated out of Sandhurst and was young, fit and intelligent, and followed orders precisely. Perkins, ex-army like Wills, was older and a recipient of the Victoria Cross for bravery during the Boer Wars but sometimes his actions were more foolhardy than brave. We could just make them out in the dark distance threading their way through the trees toward our moving objective, the shooters.

We were gaining on them, now only twenty yards away when Perkins also caught sight of them and broke into a run charging the stand of trees, firing and shouting, “Halt! Surrender in the name of the King!”

The fool!

Wills and I looked on in horror. It was an ill-fated charge.

Cut down by an onslaught of lead, he fell writhing in agony from a mortal wound to his abdomen. Scott was at his side in an instant and he, too, was felled, shot in the leg.

Gruff voices from the darkness hooted with delight. One taunted, “Come on, boys! Come and get us!” With a few parting shots, they retreated further into the forest.

Wills quickly reassessed the situation and signalled me to go ahead. He called to Yabsley and Dolby, “With me! We need them alive!” and moved off to the left.

I moved as directed, unseen and unheard. I could just make out two figures as they pushed through the trees, firing indiscriminately backward as they fled. One yelled to the other, “That bastard Dickie!”

The other screamed back, “Forget him! Them three yokels with us! Do ’em!” as they dodged between the trees.

I swiftly flanked them and caught a glimpse of the cowards again as they scrambled through the undergrowth. Ducking overhanging branches and weaving through the brambles after them, I counted five but only two appeared to be armed and firing.

I could not get a clear shot at the two who were armed. They were several yards ahead of the other three who appeared to be two older men and a youth. The youth was desperately clutching a small dog to his chest, which was struggling to free itself.

Less agile than the youth, the older unarmed men were struggling to keep up when one of them stumbled and fell. The other stopped to haul him to his feet and caught a glimpse of me and panicked.

“Laurence! Coppers there!” he yelled to the fallen man, “Timmy! Here!”

As I stopped and took aim, a shotgun blast from the trees cut him down, his bloodied body slumping onto the other man.

What the hell! They were shooting their own!

“Leave them!” the second shooter called.

A short way off, Wills called, “This way!” to Yabsley and Dolby, as they chased the retreating shooters deeper into the forest.

I gingerly moved to the two men on the ground, my revolver trained on the man pinned to the ground by his dead comrade.

“Francis!” his anguished voice gasped as he thrashed about to get free, “No! Francis!”

The youth watched on in horror, holding his dog tightly to his chest.

Freeing himself from under the dead body, the older man struggled to his feet and looked about terrified. Seeing the youth, he called, “Timmy!” and took a step toward him. The youth’s only movement was to hunch over the little dog and sway back and forth.

“Halt!” I commanded.

This startled the older man and he turned to me. He had a wild look in his eyes but I could not read his emotions; was it rage, horror, revenge or was he asking forgiveness? Whatever it was, he staggered toward me. I levelled my revolver at his heart and goaded, “Do it! Come at me, bastard!”

What I felt at that moment was hatred and loathing. A split second was all it took for him to lurch one step closer and for me to fire one shot. He stopped in his tracks and slumped to the ground, dead.

“Nooo!” The plaintiff scream came from the youth as he crumpled to his knees.

I turned to the youth, my revolver fixed on him. He was rocking back and forth in shocked disbelief, fearfully clinging to his dog. Even in the darkness, I could see his tears but this only firmed my resolve. These monsters had abducted, raped and killed an innocent girl for a ransom they had received. They had shown no mercy and neither would I.

I advanced on the boy—he must have been sixteen or seventeen, the same age as Wendy. Should I ask him how it felt to degrade her? Did he find pleasure? How did he feel now? Did he have a skerrick of remorse now that his life would end in the next minute?

Images flashed through my mind. Horrible images of rape, murder and reckoning. Images of Mohammedans...of Sarah...my beautiful Sarah...

The rage overwhelmed my senses: *You won't live to do this to anyone else, I silently vowed. This is justice. This is retribution.*

I was barely a yard away from the youth, my Webley pointed at his head. His eyes closed as he sobbed uncontrollably. The dog whimpered. Otherwise, all was quiet.

I pulled the balaclava from my head. “Look at me,” I commanded, “I want you to look at me!”

He looked up to me, pleading, “Please...” He stretched out his arm toward me and opened his trembling fist. In his hand was a golden filigree ring, “Pretty...Sorry...The man said I could...Sorry...” he sobbed.

These were not the words of hardened criminal, not even the words of a young man, these were the words of a young child coming out of the mouth of a youth.

My resolve weakened for a moment but quickly firmed again. This male was complicit in kidnap, rape and murder. I grabbed the ring out of his sweaty palm.

“Please,” he begged, “Not Mikey...” as he held the dog away from him.

“No, not Mikey. Only you.” My finger tightened against the trigger but the instant I fired, my arm was jerked upward and I was pushed away, falling backward.



“I told you we needed them alive!” Wills’ anger was palpable. He was out of breath and pulled off his balaclava, “They got away. Goddammit! There was a cart waiting.” He turned to the boy, “You. Get up.”

The boy sat there, cowed, trembling with fear.

“I said get up!” Wills dragged him up by his coat and punched the dog out of his grip, as I got to my own feet.

The boy was genuinely scared: he had soiled himself and was weeping pathetically as he took in the carnage before him: his two comrades lying dead, blood oozing from their wounds. “Pa...”

“They’re dead, boy, and if we didn’t need you alive, you would be, too.” He roughly manacled the boy. Wills was as unsympathetic as I was but I was driven by revenge. He was driven by justice.

A few yards behind us Dolby attended to the needs of the wounded Scott but Perkins was beyond help. Scott’s injury was not life threatening: the shot had torn through his calf muscle and could mean a significant limp for the rest of his life.

Yabsley inspected the two dead men and, as usual, looked upon me with burning contempt, “You can’t help yourself, can you, Davies? Fucking murderer.”

“That’s enough, Yabsley,” Wills intervened and turned to me, “I take it you had good reason to shoot them.”

“Same reason as always.”

Yabsley’s hatred for me was well-known, deep-rooted and based on his own ineffectiveness, not mine. And it had always been a great pleasure for me to point that out to him. We had come close to blows several times during the past eight years.

The whimpering of the dog diverted my attention. It lay cowering nearby and didn’t give any resistance when I gathered it into my arms.

Wills leaned toward me and confided, “This isn’t going to end well for us, Rebecca.”

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## CHAPTER 2

### The Deconstruction

The room was small and dark, lit only by candles scattered about randomly. Any light from the window was obscured by heavy curtains and the only furniture was a bed, a washstand and basin. Scattered about the room were numerous cushions on a tattered Turkish rug covering the old parquet flooring.

Smoke from the hashish burning in the hookah filled every nook of the room as well as our lungs as we drifted in and out of reality. Was it day, was it night, who knew, who cared?

We had made “love” for hours and I imagined I still had a few more hours left. Nevertheless, Sophie would tell me when time was up. Until then, we enjoyed each other’s bodies.

Sophie was young, compliant and energetic and well experienced in meeting her client’s fantasies. Mine were of domination and subservience and Sophie was very good at subservience. She had become used to my requirements and my scarred face and body no longer repulsed her. The scars on my body I could conceal with clothing but the disfiguring angry scar that traced from my temple to my jaw meant that everyone I met turned away in revulsion or stared and winced at it. Timmy, I noticed, had done neither.

Naked, we lay in each other’s arms on the rug, propped up by the cushions, as we passed the hose and drew deeply from it. We would most likely devour each other one more time before I had to leave. But this intermission was necessary to recoup our energy.

Of course, I knew this was not love but carnal desire; I had not experienced real love since Sarah all those years ago. The only memento of her I still had was her silver locket, which I treasured and wore so that I would never forget her brutal end at the hands of her husband.

I touched my precious locket and tears welled in my eyes as I relived those awful memories and the consequences our actions brought. I must have sobbed as the next feeling I had was Sophie's hand caressing my cheek, "Shh, my love, it's all right." She gently kissed my cheek and mouth. She knew me well.

But those memories were from thirty-one years ago and fifteen thousand miles away. Here and now, after the brutality young Wendy suffered, after the violent deaths of my colleague and those two cowards, I needed to feel a warm body next to mine even if I had to pay for the pleasure.

This response was now a habit; this is how I coped with the violence that had become an everyday part of my miserable life.

I was in a welcomed stupor when the door swung open.

"Miss Sophie," apologised Wills, standing in the doorway, impeccably dressed in his three-piece suit, starched linen collar and silk tie and topped by King Edward's new accoutrement, the Homberg. Beneath his jacket he secreted his Webley and would go nowhere without it.

"Get dressed," he ordered me, "Hawthorne beckons." While Sophie quickly drew the rug over herself as though modesty were ingrained, I could scarcely move; I felt so languid and detached.

"Now!" he roared.

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The London of 1905 was a bustling city of six million souls from every inhabited continent and every class and colour; the largest city in the world and the richest. It was undergoing unprecedented upheaval: women wanting to regain rights lost in the 1832 Reform Act, men wanting fairer wages, Irish wanting home rule, everyone wanting shorter working hours and, on the continent, revolutionists again were stirring up the poor and forgotten. These revolutionists, in particular, were causing problems to the government here with their

socialist and communist ideals, ideals that were being touted to the working class as the great social leveller. Ideals that were being used now to justify rape and murder of the upper classes.

The two-wheeled hansom cab jarred and juddered over the rough road to Whitehall and the New Scotland Yard building. I slouched, hunched and hungover, while Wills sat next to me, stiff and formal. I had climbed back into the blacks of two nights ago, the quick wash barely removing the odour of lovemaking and stale hashish. My gladstone bag, replete with my Webley, holster, ammunition and my other “tools of trade” was cradled in my lap.

His voice broke into the hubbub of the city: “How much did that cost you?”

I could only smirk. Wills was now very married and it had been a very long time since we had enjoyed the company of women like Sophie together.

He continued, “Why does the Home Office provide you with a flat if you don’t use it?”

My silence didn’t help but he persisted, “You missed the debriefing. It was patently obvious the coordinates we were given were incorrect. Each of our three teams had a slightly different set. We were too spread out to be effective. A typographical error.” Wills paused; it was obvious he was reanalysing how that possibly could have happened, then resumed, “He should have given me the twenty men I asked for not four. Then, maybe, we would have intercepted them before they killed the girl.”

Wills slumped into his usual thinking pose, head bent, staring straight ahead, “Something doesn’t smell right.”

I understood exactly what he was saying. The Special Branch’s Department of Special Operations comprised only the best that the Metropolitan Police and the army and navy could offer. Wills was no fool, and as much as it pained me to say it, nor were the four others on this assignment yet we all got it so wrong. Not possible. Something, or someone, was working against us.

Wills interrupted my thoughts, “I had to defend some fairly serious allegations by Yabsley regarding your efficacy in the field. He’s convinced Hawthorne that you’re the weak link in the chain and he is not pleased.”

This aggravated me. Both Yabsley and Hawthorne saw me as an aberration, an irritation and a disgrace and used any excuse to place blame on Wills through me.

“I don’t give a rat’s arse.”

All Wills could do was give me a sideways glance and raise an eyebrow, “You have a special, no, unique position with the Metropolitan Police, Davies. Because of me.”

While I was not officially involved with the Metropolitan Police’s Special Branch or the Home Office, it was Wills’ influence with his former army commander that secured me a position as Wills’ ‘Assisting Clerk’. This position was unique in every sense: not only was it a contrivance devised by Wills to keep me with him at all times but it was a permanent position warranted by the old Queen and given to me, an antipodean colonial woman, something unheard of in a time when an unmarried working female person of my age had the choice of only two occupations: servant or whore. After nineteen years together, Wills and I had developed a unique symbiosis that had proven itself successful time and time again. There was no question of my worth to those that mattered and Yabsley and Hawthorne did not matter; they were undoubted misogynists to say the best of them.

Wills continued, his tone was calmer now that the passion of the fight was over, “You allow your hatred to rule your judgement. That man you shot could have provided valuable information.”

“The boy?” I deflected.

“Practically useless. Cried like a babe. Hewitt and I interviewed him after the debriefing yesterday. The only thing we got out of him was that his dog’s name was Mikey and the two dead men were his father and uncle and his name was Timmy Saddler.” Wills snorted, “He said they were playing a game. Undoubtedly an imbecile. I left him with Hewitt to clean him up and give him a meal. He should be in a better state today.” He paused. “If you hadn’t killed...”

Wills’ gentle reprimand sent a shiver of guilt through me, as he knew it would. Yes, I killed an unarmed man but this man was complicit in an atrocious act upon an innocent. The irony is that, had he lived, he would have been hanged. I was merely facilitating the inevitable.

I countered, “And the other two got away.” It was unfair of me to say this to Wills but I needed to regain self-justification, “And the other one, the first man, Francis, was done in by a blast from a shotgun. Not by me. I trust that was in the report.”

There was really nothing left to say so we fell silent. I closed my eyes and heard Wills ask, “Have you eaten?”

I smiled.

“Food,” he clarified. “Why do you do this to yourself?”

I knew what he was alluding to and where this conversation was heading but chose to avoid replying.

“The hashish, the whisky, the swizzling, the swiving. It’s getting worse, Rebecca.”

A brown funk overcame me. It *was* getting worse. I was drinking more, smoking more and finding comfort in Sophie more often than ever before. I was tired and worn out. Tired of this life, of the lies and deceit, worn out by the constant need to prove myself to men, time and time again, year after year. Maybe now was the time. The time to say finally what I had been considering for a few years now. I took a hesitant breath then uttered, “I want to leave, Wills.”

This caught my steadfast friend completely off guard as I had never before mentioned my desire to quit the service and, consequently, him. After a stunned pause he was able to muster, “Well, that will certainly please Hawthorne and Yabsley.”

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It didn’t take long to reach the Victoria Embankment and Westminster Bridge on the Chelsea Reach of the Thames. New Scotland Yard was only fifteen years old and already inadequate for the ever-expanding Metropolitan Police Force. Buzzing with police, government employees, bureaucrats, agents and lackeys, there were plenty of conspiracies and intrigue to keep all of us on our feet and alert. The priority of the small force commanded by Wills within the Special Branch was the safety and security of the aristocracy especially now that it was becoming evident that two previous abductions and murders, and now Wendy’s, had been carried out by an organised criminal group but for what purpose, we still did not know. Perhaps young Tim could give us vital clues even if he was mentally deficient.

As we strode through to our destination up several flights of stairs, Wills and I were greeted coolly as we passed various sundry employees. Wills was held in high regard by some in the upper echelons but his association with me caused him to be resented and shunned in some lesser circles and especially when I was in his company. He seemed to relish stirring the pot of loathing as much as I did and I admired him for that.

We came to an abrupt halt at a closed door that proclaimed ‘137 – Colonel Sir Giles Hawthorne, Chief Administrator Special Branch DSO’.

The Chief Administrator was respectfully known as Sir Giles but Wills and I called him Hawthorne, and a thorny whore’s son he was, too.

Wills took a deep breath, looked at me with a mixture of admonishment and apprehension and grabbed the door handle. He swung the door open and we pushed in, jolting Hawthorne’s secretary, Fawkner, erect as he sat at his desk.

“Major Williams and Assisting Clerk Davies for Sir Giles,” Wills announced.

Poor young Edward Fawkner was completely flustered by the sudden intrusion of a dapper gentleman and a dishevelled middle-aged woman in black trousers, turtleneck sweater and jacket.

“Er...yes, Major Williams, Sir Giles is expecting you.” He rose from his seat and indicated the sofa, “Please take a seat, Major and...er...Madam, Sir Giles will be with you momentarily.”

Fawkner could not help but stare at me as he returned to his desk. Not only was I dressed in men’s clothing, but my short, white, unkempt hair and the long, ugly scar to my left cheek appeared to shock him. Of course, I revelled in this effect and its cause; my features belied any thought of compassion or weakness to my advantage.

The musical ding from the telephone on Fawkner’s desk indicated that Sir Giles had completed his telephone call. This was furthered by Sir Giles’ harsh, “Fawkner!” squawked through the speaking tube on the wall.

Fawkner jumped to attention as he took up the tube and replied into it, “Yes, Sir Giles.”

“Luncheon meeting with Colonel Humphries at my club. Two p.m.” screeched Sir Giles.

“Today, Sir Giles?”

“Of course today, you fool!”

“Yes, Sir. Ah...Major Williams and Assisting Clerk Davies are here to see you, Sir. Shall I show them in?”

“Just the major.”

“Sir.”

Wills gave me a look that told me he didn't want to do this. I could only offer a sympathetic smile.

Fawkner interrupted, “Major Williams, Sir,” as he opened the door to Sir Giles' office. Wills removed his treasured Homberg and entered the lion's den.

During the eight years I had been with Wills at the Metropolitan Police, I had never seen the inside of the Chief Administrator's office—not that I had ever wanted to—but the décor of his outer office now intrigued me.

As Fawkner returned to his desk, he kept a sly eye on me. I stood and examined the numerous framed photographs placed systematically on one wall. They were mostly of exotic wild animals, some alive but more of obviously dead trophies, something which appalled me even though I had killed enough of the human animal in my life so far.

One photograph caught my attention. Positioned in the middle of the arrangement, was a large picture of a group of khaki-uniformed soldiers seated in and standing around campaign chairs. Prominent in the centre chair was the ranking officer, a major. I read the title beneath: ‘*After the siege of Ladysmith, March 1900*’ after which was written the names of the subjects: ‘*Tr A Brown, Tr J Smith, Cpr T Johnson, Sgt V Goodall, Sgt D Brown, Tr J Middlemass, Tr F Smith, Mjr G Hawthorne, Lt S Trimble, Lc Cpr W Bell, Cpt G Smith*’.

I pointed to the centre figure and turned to Fawkner, “Major Hawthorne. Sir Giles. He was at Ladysmith?”

Fawkner seemed flustered, “I...I...”

“How long have you been Hawthorne's secretary?”

“Um, two months...Miss...Madam...”



“Do you know anything about these conflicts with the Boers in South Africa?”  
Fawkner’s use of his brain failed him. I tapped on the picture and opted for comedic relief,  
“A lot of Smiths there.”

There was something in that photograph that struck me as odd. Ladysmith was not something to be proud of. Certainly not something to put up with one’s other trophies.

The indiscernible background babble that had been the conversation between Wills and Sir Giles exploded with a tirade from Hawthorne, “I don’t give a damn, Williams! This is a foul up of the highest order!”

I could barely hear Wills’ steady and calm reply. Whatever he said, had no effect. “I read the reports! That was your last chance, Major! I want that...that invert off this case, out of my department and out of my hair! Do you hear me?”

Further murmurings from Wills only garnered, “I don’t care what royal citations she has! She’s a savage just like all damned colonists!”

It was barely a second before the door flew open and Wills, flushed with anger, strode through and thrust his Homberg on his head. “Come on!” he commanded me.

Always ready to needle him, I innocently asked as I collected my bag, “Doesn’t he want to commend me personally?”

“Shut up.”

I could barely keep up with him as we raced through the corridor. “What did old thorny whoreson want?”

“Apart from seeing you burn in hell? He wants the boy interviewed again now. He wants to know every word that boy heard and every word he utters. And by whatever way I can get it out of him.”

“And what about the savage colonist invert he wants out of his hair?”

“He has no authority over you. And he can go to hell.”

“I hear it’s full of roasting inverts and tribades.” That lightened Wills’ mood.

As we entered another corridor I queried, “You said Timmy’s a simpleton. How are you going to get any more out of him?”

Wills slowed his pace.

I had an idea. “Where’s his dog?”

“It’s...ah...in my office.”

We quickly diverted to Wills’ compact office. I noticed Wills had made it quite comfortable for his canine guest: an old cup with fresh water, a sheet of waxed paper that obviously had had food on it and an old piece of sacking on which the dog was now curled asleep.

Wills picked up the dog and sheepishly confessed, “I’m keeping the evidence safe.”

“Marshmallow.”

We once again headed for the lockup down several flights of stairs, to the underground holding cells and interview rooms. This was a part of New Scotland Yard of which the general public knew nothing. Here were kept political terrorists, antiroyalists and revolutionists for interrogation until charges or otherwise were pronounced.

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Entering the area, the whitewashed stone walls glared under the dazzle of the electric lights festooned along the ceiling.

A police guard unlocked the outer gate and we proceeded to a locked door, one of six along the dead-end passage, Timmy’s precious Mikey, nestled in Wills’ arms, began writhing with excitement as we neared the cell.

Wills opened the observation panel and gasped. I peered in to see young Tim, sitting in almost complete darkness and shackled to his chair. He had been beaten and brutalised; his face bruised and bloodied. He had been given a clean pair of trousers but his shirt and jacket were the same dirty ones he wore two days ago except now, they too were splattered with blood and spittle. I was appalled, “And Hawthorne called me a savage. You didn’t do this?”

“No. He was fine when I left him with Hewitt.”

We could only surmise that it was either Yabsley or Dolby, or another of the four officers in the DSO who tortured the boy. They were the only others assigned to this case apart from Hawthorne and Thorny wouldn’t dirty his hands for anything other than to partake of a fat lobster.

The sound of Wills unbolting the door roused Tim from his stupor and immediately began crying, “No. Please...no...”

As soon as Tim saw his little dog struggling in Wills' arms, he broke down. "Mikey! They didn't hurt you!" He reached out to the dog with his unrestrained arm, "Mikey...Mikey..."

It was a pathetic sight that brought a lump even to my throat as I watched Wills having trouble holding on to Mikey until, defeated, he placed the dog in Tim's lap. The unrestrained affection that those two beings showed each other made me turn away lest I succumbed to my emotions.

"Timmy," Wills said gently, "Timmy, listen to me."

Timmy looked up at Wills though his blackened and swollen eyes, a sickly smile forcing itself through the dried blood on his face.

"Timmy, who hit you? Who did this to you?"

"Don't know..." Timmy's eyes welled with tears, "Are you going to hurt me, too?"

"No. We just want to talk to you. Do you want something to eat?"

"No. Mikey..."

"He's eaten. Timmy, do you know why you're here?"

He nodded, "Aye. I stole that pretty lady's ring. The man said I could."

"Ring?" Wills looked at me. I fished the filigree ring from my inside pocket.

"I took it from him in the woods."

Wills obviously was not pleased with me withholding evidence. "Lady Warburton said Wendy had a ring." He turned to Timmy, "Who said you could keep this?"

"The big man. Uncle Francis said I had to do what he said."

"Do you know his name? The big man?"

Timmy smiled, even though his pain, "Croft. My Pa called him Crafty Croft."

"So, there was you, your Pa, your Uncle Francis, Crafty Croft and who else was there with you, Timmy?"

"I don't know who the ugly man was but he was mean to Mikey and me. Wasn't he, boy? He was mean, wasn't he? Pa said that everything would be all right once we done the job and got the money. That the two men would go away and leave me and Mikey alone. We would all be all right after we got the money."

"Did you get the money?"

“They said Pa and Uncle Francis would get some when we went to the woods.”

Tim’s emotion changed from one of elation to seeing his beloved dog to one of horror as he relived the memory of that night. “They hurt her,” he sobbed, “She screamed and screamed and screamed. They wouldn’t stop hurting her.” He stopped and began crying. “Then she stopped screaming.”

Wills and I stood there dumbfounded. We were reliving the horror along with Timmy.

Wills quietly urged, “What happened then?”

Timmy panted uncontrollably, “The big man took the ring off the girl and gave it to me as a mento, he said. I didn’t want it but Uncle Francis said to take it.”

“Where did all this take place, Timmy?”

“There.”

“So, the girl, Wendy, was alive when you went there to the woods?”

“Aye but she didn’t want to go. She was scared. I tried to tell her it was just a joke we were playing on her Ma and Pa.”

“Is that what the big man, Crafty Croft, told you and your Pa and Uncle, that is was all a big joke?”

“Aye.”

Wills was as perplexed by this as I was but we needed to push on. I took up the questioning, “Timmy, do you remember me?”

Timmy looked at me and shrunk back into his chair and gasped, “Aye.”

“I’m not going to hurt you but you’ve got to answer me true. We want to find Crafty Croft and his mean friend so they can pay for what they did to that poor girl. And for being mean to you and Mikey. Do you want to help us do that, Timmy?”

“Aye.”

“Do you remember anything they said about hurting anyone else? Being mean to another girl?”

“No.”

“Are you sure, Timmy?” That came out a little more forcefully than I had intended. Timmy drew back more. “I’m sorry, Timmy. I didn’t mean to shout. They’ve already hurt

two other girls like Wendy. Are you sure they didn't say who were the next Ma and Pa they were going to play a joke on? You want us to catch them, don't you, Timmy? You don't want them to do this again, do you? You can stop them, you know, if you tell us what they said."

"I don't know. They said something but I don't know."

"What did they say? Just say what you can remember."

Timmy was hesitant; struggling to recall the right words, becoming agitated and upset, "Dutch...Abbot...Lady Abbot...Mean man laughed and said she was a grandma." Tim was visibly exhausted. He hugged his dog and began to sob uncontrollably. "I don't know. I'm sorry! I want my Pa. Pa..."

"Timmy...Timmy..."

Wills gently pulled me away. It was obvious to him that we weren't going to get any more from him today. "I'll arrange to get him to hospital today and looked after." He indicated that we should leave.

As we wandered back through the corridors, we tossed back and forth the unanswered questions. I began, "These two, Crafty Croft and Mean Man, are too base to be the masterminds of these abductions and ransom demands."

"I agree. They are puppets but they are not new to abduction and murder, that is certain. We need to find out from Timmy if they mentioned other names."

The incident ran through my mind. "I heard one of them call out as they turned to run, 'Do the yokels.' I'm thinking that those three Saddlers wouldn't have seen the money they were promised or the light of day."

Wills turned to me with renewed interest. "If that is so, and if the Saddlers were used as guides, then it stands to reason that Croft and his partner are not locals."

"And if that's the case, then did they use locals for the previous two abductions?"

We stopped and looked at each other; we had come to the same realisation.

"I'll get someone to make enquiries into any sudden deaths of locals around the same time as the two previous victims," Wills declared.

“There’s one more thing,” I added with guilty reluctance, “I heard one of them call out as they turned to run, ‘That bastard, Dickie.’”

Wills was now doing his best to suppress his anger, “This is why you must attend the debriefings, Rebecca. ‘Dickie’ could be vitally important. One of our team could have added to that information.”

“Yes. And that’s why we need to keep all this to ourselves.”

Wills looked at me with confusion. I continued, “We have an informer, Wills. A spy. We were given the right coordinates. That is, not the correct ones but the wrong ones on purpose. We were not meant to capture those mongrels. They were lucky that they got away by the skin of their teeth. We weren’t supposed to be within cooee of them.”

“If only Timmy’s uncle and father had been captured alive.”

“You’ve said it all before, Wills. It is what it is.”

By now, we had reached the aboveground levels of New Scotland Yard and proceeding up to Wills’ office to arrange a clearance and a hospital ambulance to take care of Timmy. My legs were beginning to protest the lack of solid sleep during the preceding fifty-plus hours.

Entering Wills’ office, it struck me just how small it was compared to Hawthorne’s. My Major Williams was not an untidy man; he was organised, well read and with many interests, but this tiny, windowless room was incapable of holding everything in an easily accessed manner. Hawthorne’s, on the other hand, was voluminous and practically empty. “This,” I thought, “was the perfect analogy of their respective minds.”

A bookshelf filled one entire wall, small as the wall was, and was crammed with books, many of which I had read. Another wall accommodated large filing cabinets crowded with files collected during our eight year tenure at the Metropolitan Police.

Wills hung his cherished Homberg on the coat hook near the door and took up his usual place behind his desk: on a well-worn leather clad swivel chair on rollers squeezed in between the desk and the wall. I, as usual, tossed my gladstone onto the floor and threw myself into the battered sofa, avoiding Mikey’s sackcloth and dinner setting on the floor and making the pile of files at one end of the sofa jump.

I was damned tired. The lack of proper sleep, the hashish and the sexual exertion, added to the stress of the chase the night before, all made it difficult to keep my eyes open.

“Look at these,” Wills muttered, rummaging through a series of files and withdrawing a few photographs. I reluctantly got up and edged in beside him behind his desk as he continued, “Lady Cecilia D’Arcy, twelve years of age, daughter of the Earl of Meagher. One thousand pounds. Mrs Charles Richardson, twenty-eight, wife of the industrialist. Two thousand pounds. And, now, The Honourable Wendy Warburton, eighteen, daughter of Viscount Warburton. The two-thousand-pound ransom he paid has virtually bankrupted him. All abducted and...” Wills looked at me. He could not bring himself to utter that word and added, “then brutally murdered. After the ransoms were paid. What sort of animals are we dealing with here?”

“These two bastards must have form somewhere.”

“Yes.” He looked up at me and added, “Hawthorne need not know that we are pursuing this line of investigation.”

I understood his caution; someone was undermining our efforts and the fewer who knew what we were doing the better.

We stared at the photographs of those three young women as though by looking at them we could see what they saw during those terrifying last few hours of their lives.

The empathy I felt for them was one borne from my own pain and from that of Sarah. My hand mechanically went to the silver locket hidden beneath my black turtleneck pullover.

Wills noticed and distracted me with, “They had to be following orders, Crafty Croft and Mean Man. They are thugs. Cutthroats. They wouldn’t have a brain between them.” He rummaged through another file and withdrew a typewritten report, “Some of the bank notes from Richardson turned up at the Russian Embassy. Despite the Tsar being the King’s nephew, the chargé d’affaires is not forthcoming with any assistance to our enquiries.”

I was alarmed that the troubles that were plaguing Tsar Nicholas, as they had his father before him, were being felt in this country, “The Mensheviks?”

“Or the Bolsheviks. The Foreign Office is keeping a close watch on both.”

“Why would any Englishman help these revolutionists?”

“What motivates any of us? Ideals, anger...”

“Corruption, power, money.”

“There’s a growing surge for socialist reform here, Rebecca, you know that. Some trade unions are very aggressive and want what the upper classes have. I don’t believe these two brutes are driven by altruism.”

“More like rapacity.”

“Exactly. They are puppets. Their puppeteer...”

“Socialist?”

“Marxist, anarchist. Anything is possible at this stage.”

I leaned back against the wall, wishing it were a mattress, “So where do we go from here? Dutch lady abbot grandma isn’t much of a lead.”

Wills let out a defeated sigh and looked at his pocket watch. “Lunch.”

I had hoped he would dismiss me so I could go home and sleep but he ignored my irritated exhalation and removed himself to the door, collecting his Homberg, “You should have used that breath to blow out one of the ends of the candle of which you’re burning both ends.”

His convoluted admonition of my indulgences made me smile. I collected my bag and followed him out of the door.

The corridor and stairs were abuzz with the various levels of employees going to or coming from luncheon, or just standing around gossiping on their free time.

As we descended one level, I caught sight of young Fawkner chatting with a young woman at the bottom of the stairs. I recognised the young woman as one who worked as a typiste in the general office. She was quite pretty; I suppose that’s why she caught my eye. They were intently discussing an article in the latest edition of Home Chat, one of the many ladies’ magazines available. Some time ago I had made a mental note that these gossip pages were something I really needed to read, as they gave information about the goings on of the upper classes—mostly misinformation—but it was important to keep abreast of



Society news. Of course, to date, I hadn't done so; the thought of reading about someone's private life and proclivities made me feel uncomfortable, as though I were a Peeping Tom.

Fawkner and the young woman didn't see Wills and me approach. They appeared to be aghast as Fawkner snickered, "What was she wearing?"

Miss Pretty Thing read out loud, "The evening dress was of white mousseline-de-soie, daintily trimmed in treillage fashion with pale green velvet."

Fawkner guffawed, "The Duchess of Bramwell has to be sixty if she's a day!"

"I know," was the only reply discernible amongst the giggles.

"What's the idea of going around all done up like she's about to be presented?"

"Mr Fawkner!" she laughed, "Don't be such a puritan. She can do as she likes at Abbotsford Hall," and they fell about in fits of laughter.

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned to Miss Pretty Thing, "What did you say?"

My abrupt tone and steely gaze, with Wills hovering menacingly behind me, put paid to their mirth and they both visibly turned white. Miss Pretty Thing tried to hide the offending magazine within the folds of her skirt as Fawkner babbled, "Er...nothing, Miss...Ma'am."

"Stop blathering, Fawkner. Who were you talking about?"

"No one, Ma'am."

"Give me that." I reached for the magazine, which was surrendered with a whimper.

I quickly read the article and turned to Wills, "Dutch lady abbot. The Duchess of Bramwell lives in Abbotsford Hall in Hertfordshire." I turned to my now petrified Pretty Thing, "Does she have grandchildren?"

With great effort, the young woman proffered, "Yes...Two, I believe."

I looked at Wills; he looked at me, "Long shot."

"Better than no shot. What time is it?"

Wills retrieved his pocket watch, "Quarter of three."

"Fancy giving the old bugger dyspepsia?"

"Respect, Davies, respect," he glanced at the two bewildered onlookers, "He is your better."

"My arse."

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The exclusive and respectable Marlborough Club in Pall Mall was ‘a convenient and agreeable place of meeting for a Society of Gentlemen’, as they so vehemently touted. It was also Hawthorne’s home-away-from-his-nagging-wife, and it was just about three by the time we reached it.

Getting past the concierge was a matter of Wills demanding to see Sir Giles on a matter of national urgency and that I was...well, important to the case, and leaving him open mouthed in our wake.

We could see the dining room at the end of the long, wood-panelled and plushly carpeted corridor, and that its etched glass doors were closed. However, the now almost deserted dining room was busy with a few waiters clearing tables of the debris of food spattered about by quasi-inebriated old farts who had removed themselves to the reading room to complete the task of intoxication to the point of unconsciousness: ‘Gentlemen’, indeed. “I shouldn’t criticise,” I thought, I was just as bad but, at the very least, I did all that in private.

As Wills and I entered the vast room, we almost gagged on the miasma of pipe and cigar smoke that filled it. Stepping through, we were either ignored by the waiters or, those that did notice, showed their displeasure by looking down their noses at us.

In a secluded booth along the wall some distance away, we caught sight of a balding head and heard Hawthorne’s unmistakable discordant voice speaking to and being answered by, we presumed, Colonel Humphries, the luncheon guest that he had announced to Fawkner earlier that day.

They didn’t see us as they tossed down their ports and sucked on their cigars. They were jovially recounting stories, parts of which we caught.

“...And then, the silly fool,” Hawthorne roared, “disguises himself as a woman and slips out of the farm house with the rest of the women!”

Humphries chortled, adding, “In petticoats, no less! Those damned Boers couldn’t find hide nor hair of him!”

Their raucous laughter filled the room as Hawthorne rejoined, “Captain of the dickies!” and the more he laughed, the louder he became.

Wills and I slowed our pace; something in this conversation piqued our interest.

Hawthorne calmed down and took a long draught of his port. “Do you know what’s become of old Smithy? We lost touch a few years back after he was cashiered.”

“No idea, old man,” replied Humphries, taking a long draw of his cigar.

With careful consideration Hawthorne observed almost offhandedly, “You seem in much better spirits, Neville.”

Humphries paused mid-exhalation, then rejoined, “Yes, the doctor has me on a new regimen.”

“And the wife? How is she coping?”

Humphries hesitated. “Well. Well enough. All is good.” Not wanting to be subjected to any further intrusive questioning, he asked, “How’s the investigation coming along?”

“Hmmm?”

“The abductions. Anything new?”

“No,” Hawthorne scoffed, “Nothing, I’m afraid. The boy’s quite stupid and my men aren’t much smarter.”

“Perhaps you should reinterrogate him. With a little more persuasion, he might remember something.”

Wills and I looked at each other. Why was Hawthorne discussing this with Colonel Humphries? Who was this Colonel Humphries? These questions silently passed between us as we continued to listen.

“Major Williams is attending to that as we speak.”

“Major Williams?” Humphries snorted, “Would it not be better to have those other two reinterrogate him. Dolby and, ah...?”

“Yabsley,” Hawthorne proffered, “Rather grim, I’m afraid. Poor young chap didn’t fare too well under their earlier, er, persuasiveness. Didn’t get much out of him, either. As I said, quite stupid.”

“Hmm, yes. The sooner he’s hanged, the better.”

“I doubt the Crown will put him on trial. He has the mind of a child.”

“Of course.”

Wills elbowed me and whispered, “Follow my lead,” and we strode up to their table, catching both with a look of shock and surprise to see us there.

“What the devil are you doing here, Williams?” demanded Hawthorne.

“I beg your pardon—” Wills forced a genuine-sounding apology only to be cut off.

“And with that...that...”

“Woman, Sir Giles, I’m a woman.”

“You’re a disgrace! This is a gentlemen’s club. You shouldn’t be here!”

“That makes two of us.” I smiled.

Colonel Humphries, clearly embarrassed by the exchange, glanced at his pocket watch and stood abruptly, apologising to Hawthorne, “I must be off. You will keep me apprised? Do reconsider my recommendation regarding the, ah, matter we discussed.”

Hawthorne, momentarily caught off guard, stood and shook his hand, “Of course, old boy, of course. I am most grateful for your guidance, as always.”

As soon as Humphries left, Hawthorne snarled at Wills, “I hope you have a bloody good reason to burst in like this.”

“Sir Giles, again with apologies, I—we—have interviewed young Timmy, er, Timothy Saddler and he cannot tell us anything we don’t already know...”

“*Well, that was a lie,*” I thought. “*What’s Wills up to?*”

He continued, with feigned deference, “I will be arranging for him to be taken to a hospital where he can be treated for the injuries he’s sustained. Ah, are you aware of this? The young boy’s injuries?”

Hawthorne, nonplussed, stammered, “Well...no...I, I haven’t read any report.”

“Well, Sir Giles, I just wanted to let you know that we had reinterviewed the boy and my report will be on your desk tomorrow. Again, please pardon our intrusion.”

With that, Wills gave a slight bow, turned on his heels and marched out the door with me following close behind wondering what scheme Wills was devising.

As we boarded the hansom, Wills instructed the driver, “Louisa Mansions, Borough Road, Newington, cabbie.”

“Thank God,” I thought, “home,” but I was very curious to know why Wills had made a complete about-face in not telling Hawthorne what we had found out.

He read my mind and asked, “Did you find that bizarre, Rebecca, that Hawthorne should confide in this Colonel Humphries?”

“Very. Who is he?”

“When Hawthorne’s had a few, he babbles on about the war with the Boers and that this Colonel fellow was his commanding officer at the time. Humphries, to my knowledge, has nothing to do with the Metropolitan Police or the Home Office but I know who would know if he does or not.”

“The Head of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, Alexander Quinn.”

“Yes.”

It was Alexander Quinn himself who personally appointed Major Reginald Williams and his Assisting Clerk, me, to the position in Hawthorne’s department, much to Hawthorne’s displeasure. It was Alexander Quinn also who had final say over our deployment, also much to Hawthorne’s displeasure. Wills and I had been introduced to Quinn by Wills’ then commanding officer, Major General Stokes, who had highly recommended both Wills and me for the field work we had done in Baluchistan, Afghanistan and the Soudan.

Wills added, “You go home now and rest, old girl. I’ll call on you tomorrow afternoon and let you know what transpired.”

We sat in companionable silence for the rest of the way, rather, Wills sat there quietly while I dozed off.

It took twenty or so minutes for us to reach the small flat the Home Office provided me—courtesy of Alexander Quinn—and the cabbie’s gentle, “Whoa, Bobby,” caused my eyelids to flutter open. “Louisa Mansions, Sir,” he announced.

Wills looked at me and reconfirmed, “Tomorrow afternoon. One o’clock. Rest. I want you refreshed, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.”

“Of course,” I meekly replied as I climbed out of the cab.

“And have something to eat, not drink,” he called after me.

I walked toward the gates, portmanteau in hand, desperate for sleep, a bath and something to eat as Wills urged the driver, “New Scotland Yard, cabbie.”

I trudged up the front steps and through the doorway to the post boxes and retrieved two letters, which were two more than usual. One was from my wines and spirits merchant—most likely an invoice—and the other brought a warm smile to my face. It was postmarked G.P.O. Sydney, and the sender, printed in raised script on the top left-hand corner, was ‘Patrick Morrison, Esq, MLA, 63, Oxford-street, Paddington, New South Wales, Australia’.

My lethargy left me as I tore the envelope open and read the contents as I mounted the stairs to my third floor flat.

*“My dearest Becky,*

*It was with extreme pleasure I received your letter of the fifth inst., but you really ought to write me more often.*

*You will be as delighted as I was to know that Michael’s Emily was delivered of a fine baby girl—my first grandchild! I convinced them both that Isabella Rebecca Morrison was the perfect name for such a perfect child. I hope that you are pleased that she is named in your honour.*

*When will you return home? I miss you terribly. There isn’t a day I don’t think of you and the rascally things we got up to. Paddington has changed; Sydney has changed. You would not recognise the place now. I doubt you would recognise me! Not the skinny lad you delighted in teasing...”*

A sadness overcame me; I could feel my throat tightening. I had to stop reading.

The stairs had become exhausting and seemed never-ending. Once inside my small residence, I placed my bag on a chair and the letter on the table. Rummaging through the pantry and ice safe, I procured some cheese, salted biscuits and a can of cooked meat but Patrick’s entreaty continued to run through my thoughts. I did want to go home but so much had changed, not with Paddington and not with Patrick but with me. And what I did in Sydney meant I could never go back.

I picked at the cheese and biscuits and couldn’t be bothered finding the can opener. I could hear the absinthe calling me from the sideboard but decided to heed Wills’

remonstration and, instead, headed for the bathroom. My flat may have been small but it was relatively new and had all the modern conveniences: running hot and cold water, a radiator in the bedroom and living room, electric lighting throughout and one electricity outlet for my electric bread toaster, and a separate room for my bathtub and a flushing water closet.

The bathtub filled quickly as I removed my clothing and slid into the warmth that enveloped and comforted me. Sarah's silver locket clung to my skin and I never felt closer to her than when I heard from Patrick and home.

Patrick's letter continued to play on my mind; so many years had flown by since I last saw him, gave him that final reassuring hug and the promise that I would return. So many promises broken, so many lies.

I closed my eyes, touched my locket and began formulating my replying letter...

*“My darling Patrick,*

*It is always with much joy and elation that I receive your letters and this one, bringing news of your first grandchild, has filled me with a longing to be there with you to share your happiness and to finally meet your lovely wife and two sons. You must be so terribly proud.*

*I, too, wonder where the time has gone since I left you to discover my mother's family in Wales. At the very least, my darling Patrick, you have achieved great things. Not only have you two hardworking sons and a wonderful grandchild, but you have risen from being the son of an immigrant hotelier to a member of parliament! I am so proud of you.*

*Have you ever wondered, Patrick, how different our lives would have been had I not left all those years go? Had I been a different person? Had we married? For I did love you, Patrick, and still do.*

*I tire so quickly these days. Life at the manor has become dreary and the hubbub of London is now mere humdrum. I feel my lucky star is on its return orbit and my life is circumscribed. As much as I adore the children in my care, I have made the decision to take my leave and, perhaps, return home once young Daisy returns to school in the spring...”*

I could feel my body's muscles relaxing and my limbs being supported by the warm water. My mind seemed to be a confusion thoughts, images and sounds... I was falling into a deep sleep. The image of a warm summer day and me and my dog, Napoleon, running along the dusty road toward the barracks took me deeper into slumber...

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### CHAPTER 3

1874

Paddington, New South Wales

“Napoleon! Where are you going?” He must have caught sight of a rabbit and veered off into the undergrowth along the Old South Head Road. “Napoleon!” I could see the scrub moving but I couldn’t see my silly dog. We were late as it was; I didn’t have the time to play hide-and-seek, “Napoleon! Come back here at once!”

Following him across the drainage channel and into the waist-high grass, I let out an expletive that, had Mr Morrison heard, would have had me in my room and without my supper, “Damn!”

As though to mock me, a distant pair of laughing jackasses chimed in with their distinctive ridiculing calls; this only made me crankier.

“Napoleon!”

Then, as quickly as my recalcitrant dog loped into the bush, he loped back out, past me and onto the road and stood there grinning at me like the Cheshire Cat, swinging his tail nonchalantly from side to side.

I struggled back out and shook my finger at him, “Bad dog! You’re a bad dog, Napoleon. Don’t stand there with that look on your face. It’s not funny. We’re late.”

I was so intent on chiding my beloved dog that I didn’t see the young woman approach.

“I beg your pardon, young man. Would you be able to direct me, please?”

“Young man?” The impertinence! I swivelled to give this woman a piece of my mind, “How...”

The woman’s gaze darted to my shirt. “Oh, I do beg your pardon! I thought...Your short hair...your trousers...I thought...”

Her words floated about my head but missed my ears. She was beautiful. Not even the apparent horror she felt in mistaking me for a lad marred her exquisite features. Napoleon approved, too, wagging his tail eagerly.

I gathered my wits, yet flustered, “Ah, pardon, you said...?”

She smiled, my heart pounded, “I’m looking for the Morrison Family Hotel. Is it far from here?”

“Morrison...?” the name sounded familiar, “Morrison Family...! Of course! I live there! No, not far. We’re on our way home now, Napoleon and I. That’s Napoleon.”

“Nice to meet you, Napoleon,” and directed her conversation to him, “My name’s Sarah. Sarah Harper.” She turned to me, “Would you like to show me the way?”

“To where?”

Sarah’s smile radiated warmth and love; I was truly dumbfounded for the first time in my life. “To the Morrison Family Hotel.”

“Yes.”

“Is it this way?”

“Yes.”

She took the first steps toward my destination, home. I kept pace with her, as we ambled along, past the toll gate and along the barracks’ great stone wall, the urgency of my return completely forgotten.

“And what’s your name?” Sarah asked.

“Ah...”

“Or should I ask Napoleon?”

“Rebecca. Rebecca Davies.”

“Nice to meet you. May I call you Rebecca? I believe I’m a little older than you.”

“I’m seventeen!”

Sarah laughed with such gentleness I could have swooned then and there. “I must say you hold your age well.”

The next question popped out of my mouth before my brain could stop it, “How old are you?”

“I am twenty years of age and that’s a most impertinent question,” she chided, but in a most agreeable way.

It was only then that I noticed she was carrying a covered basket.

“Are you delivering wares to Morrison’s?”

“I’m delivering lunch to my husband.”

My heart sank, “Husband? You’re married?”

“When one has the former, it’s usually the consequence of the latter.”

“Oh.”

“You seem disappointed.”

“No. It’s just...I thought...um...I thought we could be friends, is all.”

“We can still be friends, surely.”

“Yes. Friends.”

We walked on, Napoleon trotting ahead, scouting for rabbits and rats, garnering a pat from a passerby now and then, me trying to work out what sort of fool I had made of myself and Sarah strolling on, sometimes giving me a sideways glance.

Something glistened around Sarah’s neck and caught my eye; I broke my awkward silence, “That’s a lovely locket you have there, Mrs Harper.”

“A wedding gift from my parents. It has a photograph of my husband on one side and myself on the other. And please call me Sarah, since we’re so close in age.”

Several carts passed us, carrying goods to and from the village of Paddington, now boasting some thirty or forty shops along the Old South Head Road. Morrison’s Family Hotel was one of those, established some twenty years ago to cater to the soldiers stationed at the Victoria Barracks, which we had now just passed as we began the steady incline to the top of the hill and the hotel.

The soldiers there were mostly good natured, at least, those who patronised Mr Morrison’s public house, where I served at the bar in the evenings. And business was good,

good enough for Mr Morrison to buy the adjacent plot and extend the building to cater for more travellers. The new hospital in Darlinghurst and the gaol there also tended to furnish us with guests who could not afford the higher rates in town.

“What does your husband do?” I enquired as honestly as I could, even though I felt quite jealous of him at that moment.

“He’s a carpenter. I believe he’s working on your hotel.”

At that moment, a skinny, redheaded youth appeared some fifty yards ahead and called out, “Rebecca Victoria Davies, you’re in big trouble!” which set off Napoleon with a frenzy of barks as he galloped up toward the youth.

The youth ran down and met Napoleon halfway, stopped to ruffle Napoleon’s ears as Napoleon excitedly jumped about, and then ran down to me with, “Where have you been? Pa’s beside himself.”

“Good. Then there’s two of him to do the work.” I was annoyed that he should interrupt me and Sarah.

“Who’s this?” he said, looking at Sarah and grinning from ear to ear.

“Mrs Sarah Harper may I introduce Patrick, the Bothersome, Morrison, son of the owner of the hotel.”

“How do you do?” was Patrick’s formal and snooty reply as he bowed and held out his hand, much to my irritation. He was barely two years my senior but such a child! Of course, we always had lots of fun together.

“How do you do?” replied Sarah graciously as she took his hand.

“Becky, you’d better get up there. You should have been back an hour ago. The tables need setting and the dishes need washing. And put on a skirt! You know how Pa feels about you dressing like me.”

With extreme reluctance I took my leave of Sarah. As Patrick and I trudged the remaining few yards to the hotel, Sarah called after me, “Perhaps I’ll see you tomorrow?”

I turned back, gave her a smile and a wave. That certainly lifted my spirits and gave me the energy to face the wrath of Mr Morrison.

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The facade of Morrison's Family Hotel was of bricks rendered to look like sandstone blocks. It was an imposing structure, three storeys high and as wide as the block of land it sat on, buttressing up against the lower building on one side. On the other side, the lot Mr Morrison had just purchased, stood a wooden structure—or I should say, lean-to—and it was in the process of being demolished to make way for the extension.

Patrick raced ahead and disappeared into that lot while I, led by my faithful Napoleon, made my way along the narrow passageway between the two brick buildings and into the open courtyard at the back where the stables and coach house were. These were accessible from the back lane as well. The gate there was rarely closed, let alone locked.

My little room—the one I was relegated to when I was deemed to be inappropriate—was on the top floor and overlooked this courtyard and, even though my 'imprisonment' may have been ordained, I was able to easily leave by the stairs that lead down through the back verandas on each floor. This was a feature of which Mr Morrison was particularly proud: an alternative escape route should fire take hold.

On the ground floor, the hotel's kitchen also opened out into the courtyard and that's where I was heading, to my work and possibly, a severe reprimand for taking so long to return home.

And I was right. There, in the kitchen, stood Mr Morrison, his flaming red hair a few shades greyer than his son's, holding a clutch of rolled up papers, in deep discussion with an older man I had seen only twice before. He glanced up at me. I stopped dead in my tracks. He stopped, folded his arms and glared at me.

"Just how long does it take you to return two books to the library?" He demanded in his thick Yorkshire accent. I opened my mouth to offer a lame explanation but he stopped me, "No. None of your excuses. You stopped to look at more books, didn't you? How many books do you need? You have a hundred upstairs if you have one."

"But I've read them all and the library has—"

"No excuses, young lady. This should have been cleared up an hour ago." He was right, of course, the kitchen was a mess with the dishes from that morning piled up.

"But Napoleon ran into the—"

“And Napoleon should not be in the kitchen.” He looked sternly at Napoleon and pointed to the door, “Out!”

Napoleon obeyed and slunk out the door, turned and laid himself down across the threshold with a grunt and the most mournful look.

“And you,” Mr Morrison turned to me and pointed to the internal stairs that led to my living quarters, “Upstairs, skirt on, finish your work.”

“Yes, Sir.” Completely deflated, I turned toward the stairs.

“And Rebecca,” his tone changed to his usual, affectionate one, “A parcel came for you this morning.”

I couldn’t help but jump with joy. He stopped me from going any further, “No. The books have to wait until you’ve finished your work. Now away with you!”

I ran upstairs. New books! All the way from England. I could never fathom why Mr Morrison indulged me so. These new tomes arrived like clockwork, once a month, from the same bookshop in London, from ever since I could remember. The subject matter was diverse and always in keeping with my age at the time. History, geography, mathematics, philosophy; the last volumes were by the ancient Roman writers Suetonius and Pliny the Younger but my most favourite writer, so far, apart from Emily Brontë, was Lewis Carroll.

With the thought of new books as a reward, despite wearing a cumbersome skirt and petticoat, I took on the kitchen with vigour. Thank goodness I forsook the bustle and boned bodice; how do these modern women work encumbered so?

My thoughts, unbidden, turned to Sarah.

“Why are you smiling like that?” The disembodied voice was Patrick’s and he sauntered into the kitchen from the dining room with a pile of table cloths.

“Do you know any other way to smile?” I replied not looking up from my task of scrubbing the last of the pans.

Patrick dumped the linen in the basket and approached me, teasing, “You won’t talk to me like that when we’re married, Becky,” and prodded my side with his finger.

Of course, that made me jump and, of course, that started a water fight. Patrick quickly became soaked with dishwater but that didn’t deter him from tickling me mercilessly. How I wish I had worn that boned bodice! We ended up on the floor,

squirming, giggling, wrestling, tickling, struggling to be free until, exhausted by the sheer effort of laughing; we both collapsed and lay there, on our backs, catching our breath.

Patrick turned to me and most seriously asked, “You will marry me one day, won’t you, Becky?”

I thought long and hard, “One day.”

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The summer days wore on; some were very hot, some were pleasantly cooler but all of them so humid. The occasional thunder storm came and went, frightening the horses and Napoleon, and the demolition work next door was complete. The new structure was progressing steadily.

During that time, I learned that the older man who had been with Mr Morrison in the kitchen that day was Mr Brendan Rourke, the builder contracted to erect the new extension. He was Irish, from Belfast, and had built up quite a business in the twelve years since he immigrated, taking on apprentices and young men who had found themselves in trouble either financially or with the police. He was a good Catholic man as was Mr Morrison and, I suppose, that’s why they worked so well together.

During that time also, I saw Sarah more often than not, delivering the midday sustenance to her husband. We usually sat together in the shade of a tree on her way home or, sometimes I would waylay her just as she gave the food to John. She seemed not to want to interrupt John with our chatter and always led me away, saying she had to hurry home.

The conversations we did have in private told me very little about Sarah other than she was born in Parramatta and that her parents had land holdings there. She and John moved to Sydney town to find work which, she said, was difficult to find back home.

Whenever it was available, Sarah took in dressmaking or needlework to supplement John’s income but, other than these details, she really didn’t talk much about herself or her husband. She always seemed to direct the conversation anywhere but there.

I also noted that Sarah wore the same dress every day she came to bring John his lunch. I thought it a little strange, she being a dressmaker, but then it didn’t really matter

because she was always clean and well presented; Sarah would have looked splendid even in sackcloth.

She was always happy to see me, or so it seemed, and I was always elated to see her. I can now admit that I had fallen deeply and completely in love with her.

One sultry day, a thunderstorm caught Sarah as she was about to return home. Dark thunder clouds roiled in from the west, pushing the clear blue skies out to sea. Sarah would never make it back to Darlinghurst in time to avoid the imminent down pour so I suggested she come up to my room to wait it out there. I was on my free time so the three of us, Sarah, Napoleon and I, raced up the back stairs as fat raindrops plopped around us. We made it to my room on the third floor just as the rain fell in sheets and thunder rolled through the heavens.

Shaking off the rain and laughing, Sarah took in my cosy little room, “This is lovely.”

I never thought of it as lovely. It was the attic. But it was cosy and comfortable and had everything I could possibly need or want.

It had two doors: one that came off the internal corridor that also led to the rooms of the other staff; and the other, the one we had just used, that led to the outside fire stairs. This secondary door was exceptionally useful for me to come and go as I pleased and without disturbing the rest of the household or, in fact, being noticed by them.

My room also has a large, north facing window that overlooked most of the buildings and far into the distance to the north shore.

I had lived in this room for all of my life and it contained all of my possessions and my life’s experiences, expectations and dreams. Most of those dreams came from my treasured collection of books, which I had carefully catalogued and cross-checked so I could find what I wanted quickly and easily. I now had five hundred and eighty-three, including those just received, and they ranged from the readers of my school years to a wonderful, new Chambers’s English Dictionary. The bookshelf filled an entire wall.

Sarah went to the window and exclaimed, “What a wonderful view!”

“That’s Port Jackson,” I explained, “And there’s Rushcutters Bay and the gentry of Rushcutter Valley. And from the front rooms you can see Botany Bay.”



Sarah twirled around and took in the room, “You have everything.”

“Everything I need.”

“And so many books! Have you read them all?”

“Yes. Some twice. Do you have books?”

She hesitated, “Yes, of course I have books,” and diverted, “How many do you have?”

“Five hundred and eighty-three.”

She laughed, “You have more than the free public library! How did you acquire so many?”

“Mr Morrison has them sent from London every month for me. But a lot of them were my mother’s.”

Sarah looked at me wistfully, “Your mother? Tell me about your mother.”

I sensed a longing in Sarah’s request; she never spoke of her mother or father and I was reluctant to pry, so I answered her honestly, “My mother was born in Wales, Cardiff, and was a governess. She was employed by the wife of some major stationed there to teach their three children. When he was posted here to the barracks in fifty-four, he brought his family, and my mother, with him.”

“And you?” Sarah stopped, puzzled, “You wouldn’t have been born then.”

“No, I was born in fifty-six.”

“A currency lass, like me.”

Normally, I would have objected to being called a currency lass, or a colonist, or a colonial but, coming from Sarah, it wasn’t an insult. “Yes, I suppose so,” I continued, “Mother said that education was the most important thing to have and from that, everything follows.”

There was sadness in her response, “That’s what they claim...”

I moved on quickly, “I love reading, anyway. That’s what I want to be, a teacher, like my mother. Maybe in China or someplace exotic. I want to see all the places I’ve read about.”

Sarah smiled at my enthusiasm, then asked, “What happened to your mother? Your father?”

“Mother passed away from consumption. Five years ago.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Rebecca.”

“It’s going to happen to us all,” I dismissed with a shrug, “I just hope that I don’t suffer the way she did. What about you, Sarah? Your parents?” I really wanted her to talk about herself and I hoped this would open the way.

She was gentle in her rebuff, “They’re both well. And your father?”

I hesitated; I was a little ashamed and embarrassed but I really couldn’t be blamed for it, “My father? I don’t know who he was,” but I quickly added, “Mother was not an immoral woman, Sarah. She was good and honest and she loved and cared for me and did everything possible for me—”

“Rebecca, I can see that she loved you. I can see, also, that Patrick and Mr Morrison are very fond of you. Do you think Mr Morris—”

“My father? No! Do I have red hair? Do I look even remotely like Patrick, I hope not!”

Sarah laughed—oh, how I loved her laughter, how I loved that I could make her laugh. I continued, “She never told anyone who my father was. Once she said to me that she made him a promise that she would never tell. She said she loved him deeply and he loved her but they could never be together. That saddened her but she said that I was the culmination of their love and that I was very much wanted and adored by my father.” I paused and then added, “Of course, that doesn’t alter the fact that I’m a bastard.”

Sarah almost choked on that last epithet. “Rebecca!”

I continued, “I was born in this very room, you know. In this very bed. The bedclothes have been changed since then, of course.”

Sarah laughed.

“Come, sit.” I led Sarah to the bed and we sat on the edge next to each other. I continued, “Mother said that, at the moment of my birth, a shooting star streaked across the night sky. She saw it through this very window. She said that was my lucky star, a good omen of a long and happy life and that it would protect me. I truly believe that my soul came to me on that shooting star.”

Sarah seemed horrified, “Does that mean that your soul will be taken when it reappears?”

I hesitated, “I never thought of it like that. You may be right, my soul just may be reclaimed upon its return.”

Just at that moment, a bolt of lightning flashed and thunder followed it almost immediately. Napoleon scrambled under the bed and Sarah and I jumped. We sat there momentarily stunned.

Sarah burst into laughter as did I, much relieved. I proffered, “Maybe that was God trying to tell me something.”

“Rebecca! You mustn’t blaspheme.”

I smiled at her religious directness and continued, “Anyway, I think Mother had a lucky star as well.”

“How so? She died young, didn’t she?”

“Yes, but she was cared for. When the major found out she was with child—me—he dismissed her. Couldn’t have that sort of scandal. Mr Morrison took her in. Mrs Morrison had just passed away leaving Mr Morrison alone with a new hotel and a two-year-old son, Patrick. Mother looked after the baby like he was her own and Mr Morrison looked after Mother while waiting for me to arrive. Once I was born, it was like we were a family.”

“But you address him as ‘Mr Morrison’.”

“I can’t call him ‘Pa’ because he’s not but he is as dear to me as a father could be. And as strict! Patrick’s like my big brother.”

“More like your fiancé. He’s very sweet on you.”

“I won’t be marrying Patrick. He’s not the one I’m in love with.” I couldn’t help myself but to look deep into Sarah’s eyes. She gazed into mine but her look was one of apology, of regret.

It wasn’t long before the storm passed through the heads and out to sea.

“I must go,” Sarah said regretfully, “Thank you for showing me your room.”

“You must show me yours,” I said in hope.

Sarah didn't reply but smiled and left. I watched her descend the rain soaked stairs with feelings I had never felt before.

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It was now the end of March and autumn had set in. It may have been the weather or it may have been my imagination but, that day, Sarah appeared quite low in spirit.

I was sweeping the footpath outside the front door of the hotel, Napoleon dozing in the afternoon sun when Sarah emerged from the building site next door and hurried past me.

“Sarah!” I called as she sped by. I took a few bounding steps, followed by Napoleon, and caught up to her, “Didn't you see me?” Her pace didn't falter. I tenderly took hold of her elbow, “Sarah, what's the matter? Sarah?”

She stopped and looked at me and tried to smile. She looked so unhappy. “Oh, Rebecca, please forgive me. I really can't stop to natter today. Forgive me.” She gently prized herself from my grip and with an apologetic look to both me and Napoleon, sped down the hill toward Darlington.

I was totally flummoxed. What had I done? I could think of nothing that would have caused offence. Bewildered and baffled, I turned to resume my sweeping duties when I caught sight of John standing at the edge of the building works looking at me and scowling. What had transpired between him and Sarah? What did she say to him that made him so sullen? I had not expressed to Sarah how I felt about her and I certainly had not enacted what I fantasised, for I desperately wanted to hold, caress and kiss her.

Napoleon noticed him, too, and barked once at him as though he were chiding John.

As we approached the front door, John turned and disappeared into the almost complete building.

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That night, after the public bar closed and after the hotel guests had been fed and watered, the family and staff sat together, as usual, at the supper table. Mr Morrison took prime position at the head, young Patrick on one side of him and I sat opposite Patrick on the other. The other four positions were occupied by the hotel's permanent staff: housekeeper, upstairs maid, groom and cook. The position opposite Mr Morrison was empty; it was the

late Mrs Morrison's, Patrick's mother, who passed away a year before my own mother and only six years gone.

The conversation was always lively and convivial; Mr Morrison had a very good relationship with his staff, his family and generally most people, a trait that also sat well with Patrick. Tonight, after the strange incident with Sarah and John, I sat quiet and introspective, playing with my dinner.

Patrick noticed. "All right. Who's kidnapped Rebecca? The one sitting here is definitely an imposter!"

Mr Morrison added, "You are awfully quiet, young lady. Has something upset you?"

I wasn't going to say anything but, since it was brought up, I ventured, "Mr Morrison, what do you know about the carpenter, John?"

Mr Morrison raised an eyebrow in surprise, "John? Not much. Why do you ask? Has he done something to you?"

"No."

"He's strange," offered Patrick, "The way he treats his wife. I would never treat you like that, Becky."

I became very concerned, "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. Sarah does everything to please him but he just treats her like... I don't know... Unrespectful."

I was so surprised by this that I couldn't ridicule Patrick for his misuse of the word. I silently resolved to find out more about John.

"What books did you receive yesterday, Becky?"

"Huh?"

Patrick aped, "'Huh?' Most eloquent, Becky. Books. What did you get?"

"Oh. A travel book on China and the Far East, *Old Kensington* by Anne Thackeray Ritchie, *Nancy* by Rhoda Broughton, and Mrs Beaton's *Book of Household Management*."

"Hah! That last one should be a boon to you, Becky. Does it explain how to do women's work in men's clothing?"

Mr Morrison warned, "Patrick..."

“Sorry, Pa,” but he still shot me a sassy grin.

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The next day was a Saturday and always a busy one at the hotel: guests coming in to spend the weekend visiting their loved ones either in hospital or in gaol, end-of-working-week spendthrifts drinking their earnings away at the pub or couples taking an evening meal in the hotel’s renown dining room, thanks to our excellent cook, but I was determined to see Sarah before she arrived with John’s lunch.

After I rushed through my duties, I threw off my apron and headed for the kitchen door and stopped abruptly—an apple! I’ll bring her an apple! Grabbing one from the bowl, I raced out the door, through the passageway, followed closely behind by Napoleon, and down the Old South Head Road hoping to catch Sarah on her way up.

I saw her just before I reached the toll gate, “Sarah!”

Upon seeing my rapid approach, she bowed her head and continued her on her way toward me. Unusually, she was wearing a scarf draped over her head, wrapped about her neck and covering most of her face.

I skidded to a stop, panting, and Napoleon and I joined her on her trek back up the hill. “I brought you an apple,” and placed it in her basket.

Before I could utter another word, Sarah whispered, “I can’t stop and talk to you today. I have too much to do.”

This confounded me. She was earlier than usual and I had raced through my chores so I could talk to her. And she wouldn’t look at me. “Sarah,” I gently enquired, “what’s the matter? What have I done to offend you?”

“Rebecca, please leave. I can’t...I don’t want to speak to you.”

“Stop right there, Mrs Sarah Harper and look me in the eye when you say that!” My anger was fuelled by confusion. I took her by both arms and turned her toward me. “Now tell me!”

She shrugged me off, “Don’t!” and continued on her way defiantly.

I was completely bewildered and just stood there watching her walk away. A moment later, I was by her side, keeping pace with her. She glanced around her scarf at me, “Please don’t, Rebecca. Please go away.”

“Not until you tell me what I’ve done.”

I could see that she was rattled and nervy and that bullying her was not going to calm her any. I reached up and moved her scarf away so I could meet her eye to eye and gasped when I saw that her cheek was swollen and bruised. She immediately recoiled and pulled the scarf back over her face. Without hesitation, she uttered, “I tripped and fell onto the corner of the table. I’m all right. Thank you for your concern. Now please leave me alone,” and she scuttled off leaving me rooted to the spot speechless.

Even though I didn’t believe a word she was saying, I couldn’t believe what I was thinking. How could anyone hurt such a wonderful person? What on earth could she possibly have done to deserve that? She was so gentle and loving. My heart felt heavy; I felt helpless. I needed to find out what was causing her distress but, in my heart of hearts, I knew.

I followed Sarah as she made it to the building works and barely responded to the greetings of the various masons, bricklayers and plumbers as she passed through to where her husband was chiselling out a rebate on a timber floor joist.

I watched and listened, unseen by John or Sarah, as I busied myself pretending to need the bits of discarded timber I was collecting.

Rourke, the builder, greeted Sarah as she passed, with a smile and his musical Irish accent, “Ah, the lovely Mrs Harper. Good day to you.”

Sarah smiled and replied summoning as much cordiality as she could, “Good day to you, Mr Rourke. John’s lunch.”

“Of course, my dear lady, we’re just about to break now.”

John downed his hammer and chisel and met Sarah, “About time. Are you all right?”

Sarah didn’t respond as John peered under the scarf at her bruise. “You should mind yourself. Did you tell him?”

Sarah shook her head, “He wouldn’t listen. He made me promise—”

John grabbed Sarah’s arm, “What? What did you promise?”

With this, Rourke turned and glared at John. John assured him apologetically, “It’s all right, Mr Rourke, it’s all right,” and returned to Sarah quietly but menacingly, “What did you promise McDonald?”

“He would have it by Friday...Five...John, he wouldn’t...you’re hurting me—”

“Then you can go and un-promise him.” He grabbed the contents of the basket, as well as the apple meant for Sarah, and turned his back on her.

She was visibly shaken and it was all I could do to not run to her and console her or to not whack that son of a bitch over the head with his own hammer.

As Sarah left, I saw Rourke approach John and ask, “What happened to the money I advanced you, Johnno?”

I didn’t care for what ‘Johnno’ had done with the money; I cared for what Johnno had done to Sarah.

Sarah had practically run away from John and, instead of turning to go back down the hill, she turned the other way and continued up the road and around the bend. Napoleon and I pursued her and found her in a paddock, sitting on a tree stump, weeping.

We approached tentatively, not wanting to distress her further. “Sarah...”

She looked up at me, her beautiful eyes swollen and red, her tears glistening in the sunlight. “What am I to do?” she sobbed.

My heart broke seeing her so anguished. I went to her and put my arms around her. She didn’t resist, instead leaned into me and rested her head on my shoulder. My embrace tightened and it seemed to comfort her, “I don’t know what to do, Rebecca.”

“Tell me. I will help you.”

Sarah’s reactive snort indicated that nothing I could do would help. I persisted, “Why don’t you leave?”

“We did leave but the troubles simply came with us.”

“I mean leave him. John.”

She looked at me, desperation lined her face, “And go where? Do what? I have no money, my sweet child.”

“I’ll take care of you. You can live with me at the hotel.”

She smiled a piteous smile, “If only...”



“We could leave. Go abroad. China. I have this book—” I was desperate to help her.

“I can’t leave. John needs me. He does love me. It’s just when he...”

“Do you love him?”

Sarah hesitated.

“I love you, Sarah.”

What I thought would have shocked her only made her smile. “And I love you, Rebecca, but it can never be.”

“Why not?”

She looked deeply into my eyes, into my soul. What I saw in hers was pain. She cupped her hand to my cheek and drew near. Without hesitation, our lips met in tender union. A warmth overcame me; my body relaxed and I surrendered to the most glorious sensation I had ever felt.

She drew back and looked at me, “I must go. Everything will work out fine, you’ll see.”

I slowly shook my head; I didn’t believe it could but prayed it would for her sake.

She rose and made her way back to the road.

“Sarah,” I called to her, “I’ll bring you the book on China.”

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## CHAPTER 4

### The Push

That evening was as expected for a Saturday night. The public bar was filled with commercial travellers staying with us in the hotel, off duty soldiers from the Victoria Barracks down the road, gentlemen in their Saturday night finery, and some menial workmen enjoying a few pints before returning home to their respective wives. All were enjoying the company of their grouped compatriots as Patrick, Mr Morrison and I served at the bar and cleared the empties from the tables.

It was Patrick's task to draw the beers while I collected the empties from the tables scattered about the commodious room; sometimes we swapped roles.

Mr Morrison's job was to take care of the 'exclusive clientele' as he called them but they were, in reality, his old cronies from Mother England with whom he loved to chinwag.

As usual, fresh oysters from the fish market at sixpence per dozen were on the scant bill of fare and, with a pint of beer, were always popular and sold out no matter how many were bought in.

My livery for serving in the bar fitted my mood perfectly: black; black skirt and bodice with white cuffs, collar and apron.

After the distressing revelations of that afternoon, I was not in the mood for joviality or the usual raucous banter between me, the soldiers and Patrick. Patrick had noticed and didn't make any comment but I was aware that he kept a close watch on me.

During the course of the afternoon, I had made numerous excuses to go to the building site just to peer at John and to wonder how he could do what he'd done. I didn't like him before then because he was married to Sarah and now I loathed him because of what he had done to her. On one or two occasions, he had seen me staring at him and returned my contemptuous look.

The patrons making the loudest noise tonight—and every night—were the six soldiers from the barracks, led in sheer volume of sound by Corporal Roberts, a ruddy-complexioned monolith of a man from Ulster and, in effect, the only regimental soldier amongst the lot of infantry volunteers that now occupied the barracks. He had been with the 18<sup>th</sup> Royal Irish Regiment but decided to stay when the regiment was ordered back to England now some four years gone.

It had been quite busy and I longed to be with Sarah but, with so many patrons coming and going, my absence would not only be missed but frowned upon by Mr Morrison. So, I carried on with my duties and, empty tray in hand, headed for the Roberts cacophony.

Roberts was well into his cups but still *compos mentis* as he heralded my arrival with a loud and discordant alternative rendition of *Oh! Susanna*: “Oh! Rebecca, don't you cry for me, I've come from old Vic Barracks with a crooked broken knee.”

I wasn't in the mood to join the deafening laughter that followed, instead loaded my tray with the dozen or so empty mugs and asked, “Six more, Corporal?”

“Yes, my sweetest of sweets, and oysters.”

“Sorry. All gone.”

I turned to fill his order from the bar and, in the furthest corner, in semidarkness, slung carelessly into his chair was John, slowly drinking his ale and staring at me. His eyes followed me to the bar. At that moment, I wished I were a man so that I could have beaten him senseless.

“What'll it be? Becky?” Patrick followed my gaze to John. “He's drunk.”

“If he thinks he scares me like he scares Sarah, he's mistaken.”

“Becky, you'd best leave them alone. No good interfering between a man and his wife.”

“He hit her.”

“Maybe she did something to deserve it.”

“Patrick! Since when is it all right for a man to strike a woman?”

“No, I didn’t mean...Becky...”

“Six beers for the Corporal!” I was seething with rage.

Patrick concentrated his efforts to filling the order as I unloaded the tray onto the counter. I didn’t hear or see John’s approach and was startled when he stood over me and slurred threateningly, “You dirty little tom. She’s mine. Go near her again and I’ll kill the both of you.”

His foul breath was hot on my face, “You don’t scare me, you bastard.”

He laughed and almost lost his balance, “Look who’s calling me a bastard!”

That drew both Patrick’s and Corporal Roberts’ attention. Patrick warned from behind the bar, “Watch your mouth, mate!” as the corporal grabbed John’s shoulder and spun him around to face him, “You got a problem with her, boyo, you come see me, right?”

John sneered and pushed the corporal’s hand off. He shot me a menacing look then staggered toward the door.

We hardly had a moment to compose ourselves when the front doors were flung open and six hard faced men pressed their way in. John attempted to push his way through them but he was buffeted from one to the other until he found the door and stumbled through it as they laughed at him contemptuously.

All eyes were now on those six men, strangers to me and most, as they stood inspecting the room and its occupants. All was deathly silent.

In front was a wiry, scarfaced man of about thirty years and not much taller than me. His malevolent smirk did nothing to endear him nor did the company he was with, all attired in a similar fashion: bell-bottomed pants of varying shades of dirty, no waistcoats, very short black paget jackets, some buttoned up because they actually still had buttons, shirts with no collars and each with a distinctive gaudy neckerchief around his bare neck. High-heeled boots gave each a little added height but certainly no class.

Mr Morrison had become aware of this intrusion and he, too, watched on with concern.

I looked to Corporal Roberts who was eyeing them warily, “Who are they?” I quietly asked.

“The Push,” was his equally quiet reply. The corporal looked to his fellow soldiers who stood up, ready, as Corporal Roberts approached the apparent leader of the group, “Now, lads, this is a respectable place. No trouble.”

The leader, Jeremiah Hickson, smiled broadly, baring his crooked, yellowed teeth, “Tether your horse, Captain, it was him what assaulted us.” His cohorts snorted with derision.

“What are you doing here in Paddington, Hickson? You rats deserting the Suez Canal?”

“That’s unkind, Major, we’re cut real deep, aye, boys?”

“This isn’t the kind of grog shop you’re used to. We won’t put up with any trouble. Hear me?”

“We just want some refreshment is all, Colonel, Sir. Disposing of garbage has made us real thirsty, like.” The private joke brought laughter and snickers from the group standing with him, “Them Forty Thieves is now but twenty.”

I turned to Patrick, “Forty Thieves?”

“A rival larrikin gang in Surry Hills.” He quietly explained.

Corporal Roberts gave each a stern look and addressed Hickson, “No trouble. Got it?”

Hickson stood to attention, clicked his heels and saluted, “Aye, aye, Admiral!”

With a final warning glance, Corporal Roberts returned to his table and the six soldiers resumed their seats, keeping a watch on the Push while Hickson approached the bar. His cluster of reprobates peeled off and took up the table that John Harper had just vacated. I stood there, mesmerised.

Hickson fronted the bar near me – he stunk of sweat and horse manure as most honest carters would at that time of day but it was a certainty that his odour was not earned honestly.

Fishing for coin in his jacket, he looked at Patrick, “Six of your finest whisky, barman.”

Without moving, Patrick responded, “Six shillings.”

“And they call me a thief!” and countered and tossed the coins onto the bar.

“You said the finest,” was Patrick’s retort as he scraped the coins up and moved off to fill the order.

Hickson turned to me, looked me up and down and asked, “You all right, Miss?” All I could do was nod; this man was dead-ugly and his breath matched his body odour. He continued, “You’re a comely lass. We could use someone like you.”

I could see Patrick keeping his eye on Hickson and Patrick had a look on his face I hadn’t seen before, one of steely determination.

Hickson carried on, “What’s your name, lass?”

I suddenly found some gumption, “Rebecca. Rebecca Davies. And yours?”

“Jeremiah Hickson, at your service, Miss Davies.” It was his mocking tone that made my hair stand on end.

Patrick returned with six glasses of Chivas Regal on a small tray, “Six of the best,” and pushed the tray toward Hickson.

The smile Hickson gave Patrick was most disconcerting as it was more of a threat than a thank you. He picked up the tray, looked at me and winked, indicating Patrick, “If ever you want a real man, lass, look me up. Harrington Place. The Rocks,” and joined his minions at the corner table just as Corporal Roberts approached. He had become concerned as he could see that I was shaken.

He cautioned, “You shouldn’t front those larrikins, Rebecca, they’re trouble.”

I turned to him, confused, “He said he could use someone like me. What did he mean?”

“As a lure. To entice drunks and sailors into the Suez Canal and rob them. It’s a bad place, Harrington Place. Keep well clear of it. And them.”

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Eleven o’clock finally chimed as Mr Morrison called, “Last drinks, gentlemen. Closing time. Drink up.”

I was dead-tired and desperately needed some fresh air, silence and solitude so I made my excuses to Mr Morrison and left by the back door. My faithful Napoleon rose

from his nap and greeted me with a wagging tail. I intended to go upstairs and change into my trousers and go and see if Sarah was all right. There would be a price to pay in the morning because of lack of sleep but I was willing to pay it to see no harm had come to her.

Before I could get to the back stairs, I saw two men hunched over a crumpled figure on the ground at the building site. Napoleon's growl was low and stopped as soon as I ordered, "Shh!"

One of the men was Mr Rourke and the other must have been one of his workers; they were attempting to raise the figure on the floor.

"Up you get, lad. Come on, time to go home," Mr Rourke urged as he and his worker pulled up the prostrate man, "Wake up. Johnno, your wife's probably worried sick about you."

He was pulled up to standing position and instead of being thankful, John grumbled and fought to free himself from their assistance, "Get away from me!"

"All right, laddie, we're only trying to help."

"Let go!" With that, Mr Rourke let John go. He stumbled and righted himself then staggered through the almost complete building to the road.

The youngster with Mr Rourke commented, "He's an ungrateful bastard, that one."

"Aye, that may well be but he's fighting many a demon, poor bloke."

"*'Poor bloke' indeed,*" I thought. He'd brought it all upon himself and blamed the world for it. I decided to follow the 'poor bloke' home, uncomfortable as I was in my dress but I kept to the shadows and was unseen by him or passersby, few as they were. Napoleon kept close to me skulking along, his wolf-like instincts for the hunt showing through.

As Harper became steadier on his feet, he became more vocal and aggressive and shouted to anyone and to the world, "Fuck you, you son of a mongrel bitch! Fuck you too, you cunt! Bloody swiving molly! Piss on you all...GOD! WHY HAVE YOU DONE THIS TO ME?"

I almost pitied him but he was showing enough of that for himself that it left no room for mine.

Suddenly, a hand on my shoulder jerked me backward.

"What the hell are you doing, Becky?" Patrick uttered in the loudest of whispers.

“Let me go, Patrick.”

“You want to die? Worse still, you want Sarah to die? I heard what he said to you.”

“He’s drunk and he’s full of rage. God knows what he’ll do.”

“He’ll probably collapse unconscious in bed. Come home now or I’ll tell Pa.”

“Patrick—”

“No. Don’t get involved. She will suffer if you do. We’ll find a way to help her—if she wants our help.”

He was right. That threat from John was real. I didn’t care what happened to me but I didn’t want to be the cause of any more harm coming to Sarah. “All right, Patrick, but you will help me find a way of helping her, right?”

“Yes. Now come home.”

My heart sank. I prayed to God that He would look after her and keep her safe from her abusive drunkard of a husband.

\*\*\*

Unaware that Rebecca had been following him, John lurched from one foot to the other, stumbling and weaving down the dimly lit Old South Head Road toward his home in Palmer Lane, a narrow back street of Darlington, continuing with his barrage of expletives and curses, mostly garbled and unintelligible.

The ‘home’ he and Sarah shared was the upper floor of a ramshackle building that had been a large stable and loft when it was constructed about forty years earlier. The ground floor had been the stable but was now used as a storage house for unused and unwanted furniture by the owner of the property.

The upper floor they occupied, the former loft used to store bales of hay, had been converted to very primitive and basic accommodation and the whole structure was destined for demolition soon. The very low rent reflected this.

This was the only building that fronted the lane. The rest of houses along that narrow laneway were far newer, fronting onto Palmer Street and backing onto the lane.

The rickety flight of wooden stairs that led up to their home was held together by rusty nails and chicken wire, just barely attached to the side of the house. Arriving at the



bottom of the stairs, John braced himself on the balustrade, waiting for the world to stop spinning.

“Highland prick bastard...” he mumbled, hauling himself up one step at a time. Misplacing a foot, he fell onto the rough hardwood treads, “Fuck...Fuck, fuck, FUCK!” he yelled. He righted himself and mounted the stairs on all fours mumbling, “Mine...She’s mine!”

Inside the hovel she called home, Sarah stood peering through the window down at John. Fear and apprehension caused her breathing to become shallow. Wringing her hands, she took up her position at the stove, stirring the thin stew she was able to put together with the meagre provisions she had available.

Their ‘home’ comprised one room. The floorboards were uneven, some rotten in places, some missing, the most dangerous areas were covered with sheets of embossed tin, salvaged from old derelict buildings set for demolition. There was no ceiling; bare rafters and posts held up the corrugated iron roof.

One end of the room was curtained off. This was the bedroom, it being made up of an old double bed with clean but tatty bedclothes and a small chest of three drawers topped with a washbasin.

In the middle of the room stood a small wooden table and two mismatched chairs. A place was set for John. Shelving along one wall served as the pantry.

The cast iron wood stove that Sarah was now standing at was twice her age. She stirred the stew, dreading the moment John would enter.

She tried, she reassured herself, she really had tried hard to convince Mr McDonald. She tried to please John, to be a good wife, to support him...to love him.

The door burst open and swung hard against the wall, startling Sarah. John clumped in barely able to keep his balance and made his way to Sarah. She shrunk back as he reached over her to the shelf and pulled out a half empty bottle of rum, alarming Sarah further, “John, should you be—”

He turned to her and raised his hand, “Don’t tell me what to do!” Sarah recoiled and John reconsidered his response. Instead, he stumbled to the nearest chair, flung himself into it and guzzled from the bottle.

Sarah knew what it was like when John became so drunk; it had happened so many times before. It was best that she kept her own counsel.

She turned to the stove and ladled out a portion of stew for John very aware of his intense scrutiny.

“Did you speak to that Scotch bastard?” John’s words were like a death knell; she knew what was to come.

“I asked you a question. Did you speak to him?”

Barely a whisper escaped Sarah, “He said Friday, five o’clock.” and she waited for the expected.

John flew out of his chair, grabbed Sarah and spun her around to face him. He was enraged and uncontrollable, “WHAT DID I TELL YOU?” He slapped her face hard, “NOT FRIDAY!” and slapped her again and again sending her reeling, hitting her head on the corner of the table. She fell to the floor, clutching the bleeding gash to her brow, crying in pain and in fear.

John staggered to her enraged...confused...dismayed...anguished and dropped to his knees, gathering her in his arms, “Sarah...Sarah...I’m sorry. Sarah...Why do you disobey me? You make me do this...”

\*\*\*

I couldn’t sleep that night worrying over what John may have done to Sarah. Patrick insisted that John probably had been unable even to get up the stairs and probably had slept under them instead.

This hadn’t allayed my fears or concerns and I rose very weary the next morning not savouring the normal Sunday morning’s chores of helping Cook prepare breakfast for our guests and then attending Mass. Mr Morrison, Patrick, all our staff members and I were all Roman Catholics.

I knew that Sarah worshipped at the Sacred Heart in Darlington, where we used to go but, since the newly built St Francis here in Paddington was inaugurated, Mr Morrison insisted we join this congregation to show our support. I was desperate to know that Sarah was well and suggested we attend the Mass at the Sacred Heart, to no avail.

I could see Patrick was unhappy with me and my suggestion but kept his tongue still – until we were on our way to church. He took my arm and slowed his pace. When the group was a few paces ahead of us, he let his tongue loose, “What are you thinking you can do, Becky?” he began, “Didn’t you hear what he said he would do if you kept company with Sarah? What’s the matter with you? I know you have a special friendship with Sarah but it will pass. It’s just a girlish infatuation—”

I pulled my arm out of his grip, “Oh! And you know all about ‘girlish infatuations’, do you?”

He took my arm again and stopped me, “Becky, I don’t want anything to happen to you—”

“And I don’t want anything to happen to Sarah. Let me go!”

“No. Becky—”

“And you said you would help me save her from that brute. I want to go and see that she’s all right!”

Mr Morrison turned to see what the kerfuffle was, “You two arguing on a Sunday?”

“No, Pa, we’re chatting.”

“Come along, then, no more chatting.”

Patrick looked at the determination in my face and gave a defeated snort, “All right. After Mass, we’ll go together.”

“You don’t have to come.”

“You’re not going alone—”

“Patrick! Rebecca! Stop that chatting now!”

\*\*\*

Well, Mass was tedious as was our new Reverend Father and his hellfire and brimstone sermon, especially since all that my heart held right at that moment was murderous intent. I couldn’t have got out of there quick enough, barely genuflecting and splashing holy water in a rough semblance of the sign of the cross.

Patrick was on my heels, “Wait. Wait!” He grabbed my arm again.

“Stop doing that!” I protested, “What do you want?”

“You can’t just barrel up there like the Mad Woman in the Attic.”

He caught me off guard; I didn't know he'd read Jane Eyre, "What do you suggest then, Mr Rochester?"

I caught him off guard, "Well, at the very least you acknowledge that we'll be married," he retorted and continued, "I suggest *I* go and see if Sarah's all right—which she will be—with the excuse that Pa wanted to know something about the panelling in the new place. Does that sound feasible?"

"No," I mocked, "Harper's not smart but he's not stupid, either."

"Well, the only other choice is none. You're not going and I'll make sure you don't even if I have to tell Pa. And he won't be pleased with you at all."

Neither of us heard Mr Morrison and the rest of the staff approach, "What won't please me, Patrick?"

Patrick and I were both startled. Patrick stammered, "Pa...Nothing, Pa...Becky, ah, wants to wear her trousers for the rest of the day."

Mr Morrison looked at me, "Is that so, young lady?"

Patrick replied on my behalf, "I told her it wouldn't please you."

Mr Morrison was suspicious, "Hmmm," and walked past us, "Come along then, time to help Cook prepare luncheon."

Patrick and I exchanged glaring looks and followed the troupe back to the hotel.

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The time couldn't come quickly enough for me. Luncheon was over and done with and Patrick and I were on our break until dinner. I did change into my trousers and donned a plain shirt, jacket and boots, topping it off with an old cabbage tree hat just in case it rained.

Patrick met me and Napoleon at the bottom of the back stairs and we hurried off together, through the back lane and toward Palmer Street and on to Palmer Lane. I was pleased to know that Patrick was actually concerned with Sarah's fate—perhaps not as much as I was—but he was a fair and just young man and he cared. He cared about me, about Sarah and, generally, he cared about people. He would make some young woman a wonderful husband.

The streets were busy with families and courting couples on their Sunday afternoon promenades, going to and coming from Moore Park and its sports and entertainments, even

though it was a little chilly. Those foolhardier took to the dangers of the Lachlan Swamps for their adventures or trysts.

When we reached Palmer Lane, Patrick stopped and looked at me earnestly, “Becky, you wait here. I will go up and see that she’s all right. You wait here, all right? Promise me.”

With much reluctance, I nodded my head.

Patrick hurried halfway up the lane to the stairs and turned to look at me, possibly for encouragement but most likely to make sure I hadn’t moved. He then disappeared up the stairs and out of my sight.

I stood backed up against a paling fence, nervously fidgeting with Napoleon’s ears and apprehensively looking about. I was in a bad position should Harper appear around the corner. How would I explain my presence? Certainly nothing to do with the wainscoting as Patrick had schemed.

After a few long minutes, Patrick returned. His look of mystification told me no one answered his call.

“Maybe they’ve gone to visit her parents,” Patrick offered, “You said they lived in Parramatta?”

“Maybe.” But I didn’t believe it.

“I knocked several times and looked through the window. I couldn’t see anyone in there, no movement.” He looked at my worried grimace, “It’ll be fine, Becky, you’ll see. Let’s get back before Pa notices.”

We started on our way back except for Napoleon who stood statue-like staring toward the stairs.

“Napoleon,” I called, “Heel, boy.” He gave one sharp bark, turned and followed Patrick and me.

Patrick commented, “You know, for a carpenter, it should be easy for him to take care of those stairs. They’re downright precarious.”

\*\*\*

I spent another restless night, tossing and turning, worrying about Sarah, wondering what I could possibly do to protect her, where we could run away to.

My eighteenth birthday was coming around and I was aware that my darling mother had left a small sum of money in Mr Morrison's care until I came of age. Perhaps that would be enough to take me and Sarah away from these problems and start a new life together, perhaps in Queensland, perhaps in Victoria. The discovery of gold there made it a very hectic and disorganised place and one in which we could easily find anonymity and refuge.

These were the hopes and plans I had as I rose that Monday morning.

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The new extension to the hotel was almost complete so it meant that very soon Sarah would no longer deliver Harper's midday meal to him and I would no longer see her and spend the wonderful hour or so with her before she had to return home.

I eagerly anticipated her arrival that day, if only to make sure she had not been mistreated by Harper.

The time of her usual appearance had now come and gone and I was beside myself with worry. It was no use talking to Patrick, he would only make more excuses and offer probable reasons for her nonarrival. I didn't want to hear excuses or reasons, I wanted to see Sarah. And I didn't want Patrick to stop me so, when everyone was busily occupied serving the guests their luncheon, I slipped out the kitchen door, into the back courtyard and through the passageway to the front of the hotel. Napoleon, my shadow and protector, as always, followed me.

We waited on the footpath, scanning the distance for Sarah but to no avail.

"Damn the consequences," I thought; I resolutely entered the new extension where Mr Rourke was inspecting the finishing touches with two of his workers. Napoleon stood by my side and peered into the distance, the hackles on his back erect. In the corner of the room, in shadow, we could see Harper sweeping shavings and offcuts into a pile.

Mr Rourke saw me and greeted me, "Young Miss Rebecca, how can I be of assistance to you this lovely day?"

"Has Mrs Harper been today? With Mr Harper's lunch."

"No, my sweet, Johnno's brought his own today."

This news momentarily stunned me. The worst images flashed through my mind, “Ah... are you sure?”

“As sure as any culchie with two eyes and half a brain can be sure, Missy.”

Napoleon growled; I looked up to see Harper staring at me with such hatred and intensity it made me shiver. At that moment, I loathed him. I wanted to say things, do things, but I seemed rooted to the spot and dumbstruck.

Mr Rourke’s general announcement broke the tension, “Lunch break, boys,” then to me, “If you’ll excuse me, Miss, I have an errand to run.”

Suddenly, it was just Harper, Napoleon and me.

Harper took a few steps toward me, his eyes never leaving mine, and picked up his tiffin box. He moved a few steps closer to me, offering his meal and sneered, “Want to share?”

Napoleon growled.

I knew what Harper meant. “No,” I said decisively.

“And neither do I. KEEP AWAY!”

Napoleon reacted fiercely to Harper’s shout with a barrage of angry barks and snapping lunges.

Harper struck out with his foot, “Mongrel!” and, with a kick to Napoleon’s abdomen, sent him flying, “Keep that animal away from me.”

“You’re the animal!” I yelled as I collected my whimpering Napoleon and comforted him.

“Next time, I’ll kill it!”

“You don’t deserve Sarah.”

“And you’ll never have her!” He turned, gathered the rest of his belongings and marched outside leaving me with Napoleon cowering with his tail between his legs.

I was not going to let this bully get the better of me. I knew what he was capable of doing but I was not afraid of him. I was nowhere near as strong as he was but I was infinitely smarter and that would be the way to save Sarah. But I needed to know that she was not harmed.

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Napoleon's ribs were sore but not broken and after I carried him up to my room, I changed into my workman's outfit, collected the book, which I had carefully wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, and headed off to see Sarah.

Harper would be on site until about five so I had a few hours. I would explain and apologise to Mr Morrison and Patrick later; it was easier to do that afterward than to get permission beforehand.

It didn't take me long to get to Palmer Lane, running most of the way. When I reached the bottom of the staircase, Patrick was right, they were rickety and dangerous and why wouldn't Harper take the time to repair them?

I climbed them carefully and, reaching the top, looked around. This place was as deserted on a working day as it was on the day of rest; no one around. It must be eerily dark and foreboding at night, I imagined.

I turned to the closed door and knocked.

No answer.

I knocked again a little louder.

Still no answer.

I went to the window and peered in. It was dark and there was no movement.

"Sarah," I called quietly, "Sarah, it's me, Rebecca. I have something for you."

It was too quiet and it worried me, "Sarah—"

I heard the bolt to the front door slide and the door open slightly. I turned to it and spoke softly through the crack, "Sarah, it's me, Rebecca—"

"Rebecca, please go away."

"I have something for you."

"I really can't see you."

"Please let me in. I'll only be a minute. I promise."

"Rebecca..."

I could hear by her tone that her resolution was waning, "I promise."

The door slowly swung open just enough for me to sidle in.

The room was dark even so, I was taken aback by the sheer poverty of possessions the Harpers displayed. I felt a deep sympathy for Sarah and her situation. She was always



so cheerful and buoyant when we were in each other's company. She had never made any reference to her desperate circumstance.

Sarah stood in the penumbra of the room. I shook off the feeling of despair I felt for her and took a few steps toward her, "Sarah, I have this for you."

As I drew nearer, I was shocked to see her bruises and swollen forehead and blackened eye and a small weeping gash on the ridge of her brow. "What happened?" I said in complete horror, "and don't tell me you tripped and fell and hit your head on the table."

Sarah smiled with irony, "That is what happened, I did fall and hit my head on the table."

"What made you fall?" I asked angrily.

She hesitated and, as usual, changed the subject, "You said you had something for me?" she gently asked.

I knew what must have caused her to fall and let it go – for now. I proffered the paperwrapped parcel.

She took it and tenderly unwrapped it, "This is the first gift you've given me."

"Apart from the apple."

She smiled at that and upon removing the last of the wrapping, smiled even more brilliantly, "Oh, my dear Rebecca, a book on China. It's lovely. Thank you."

"I thought you could read up on China and decide where you'd like to go."

She looked at me puzzled.

"I'll be getting my small inheritance soon and I want to take you as far away from here that it will take us."

She collapsed into a chair; tears welled in her beautiful, sad eyes, "That would be impossible."

"Nothing's impossible, Sarah, nothing." I was at her knees, clasping her hands, "We are young, we are strong, we will have funds and we will have a plan. Nothing can stop us, you'll see."

"Rebecca—"

“I promise you this, my darling Sarah, I will protect you with my dying breath. Nothing will harm you ever again. We will be together for the rest of our lives. Believe me. Trust me. Please.”

She looked earnestly into my eyes and gave that piteous smile I had learned to mean that she believed that I believed in the impossible.

I reached up to her and kissed her mouth. It was a comforting kiss that was reciprocated and it quickly turned into an expression of our passion and love for each other. With immense regret I broke the kiss, apologising, “I must go. Mr Morrison will annihilate me when I return.” I rose and went to the door.

“Keep safe, my love,” she implored.

“And you read that book,” I replied, “I love you.”

\*\*\*

I literally ran back to the hotel, up the stairs to my room, changed back into my morning livery and made sure Napoleon was all right.

The kitchen was still abuzz, now with clearing the luncheon dishes and with Cook baking the teatime delicacies.

Patrick stood washing the dishes and eyed me as I nonchalantly strode in.

“Where have you been,” I asked him casually.

“What?” he exclaimed, “Where have *I* been?”

“Yes, I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

Patrick was well aware of my ruse and just shook his head. He advised, “Just tell Pa when he asks that you were in your room not feeling well. You have your you-know-whats.”

I laughed. I laughed because Patrick always indulged me and took care of me; I laughed because I saw Sarah and we had made plans; I laughed because I was happy, finally.

The rest of the week passed quickly. It was Friday; Harper kept away from me and I kept away from him; Napoleon was his old rambunctious self again and I knew that Sarah was recovering from her ‘accidental fall’ having resumed her tiffin box delivery service to her husband.

The new extensions to Morrison's Family Hotel were now complete and ready for the grand opening Saturday afternoon. The new rooms and amenities had doubled the number of guests we could accommodate and, consequently, Mr Morrison had taken pity on us and put on two more maids—one chamber and one kitchen—and a footman who would double as a factotum just like Patrick and I were.

Now, all that was left was for Mr Morrison to pay the final instalment to Mr Rourke and for Mr Rourke to pay his last three workers their final wages. Normally, this last part of the transaction would have taken place in Mr Rourke's office but, his office being nonexistent, Mr Rourke made his final payments in Mr Morrison's office situated off the public bar. Both Patrick and I were preparing for the usual Friday night swill—outdone only by Saturday night's—and the office door was open.

We could hear the transactions taking place.

"There you go, Gareth, young son. Sign here," Mr Rourke said addressing one of his men, "Caleb, here's yours. Here."

I heard the tearing open of envelopes and one of the young men saying, "Thank you, Mr Rourke, thank you."

"Don't thank me, Gareth, just continue doing the job like you have and there'll be a little extra in each packet for you both."

The other also was very appreciative, "Thanks, Mr Rourke."

The only dissenting voice was Harper's, "Where's the rest of it?"

Mr Rourke dismissed the other two, "I'll see you both on Monday." As they left through the bar and past me and Patrick, Mr Rourke continued, "Johnno, the job's finished. You knew the advance was only until now. Son, I've put a little extra in there for you as well."

"A very little extra. This isn't going to be enough." Anger was mixing with desperation in Harper's voice, "I need more."

"I've got a new job starting on Monday, John. You're the best carpenter I have and I don't want to lose you. Once we get that underway, you'll have more—"

"Monday's too late. I must have it tonight. You can advance me, Mr Rourke."

"You know I can't do that—"

“Well, fuck you, then.” Harper snapped and stormed out of Mr Morrison’s office. Patrick and I stood there flabbergasted by his outburst. I was barely able to jump out of his way as Harper barrelled toward me, hatred consuming him.

Patrick and I stood in his wake watching him push past the few patrons that wandered in through the front door.

My thoughts immediately turned to Sarah and prayed that she would be all right; Patrick was keeping me in check and I could not leave.

The night wore on and I saw no more of John Harper but I heard from Corporal Roberts that he had seen Harper walk into the Greenwood Tree Hotel shortly after he left here.

\*\*\*

The Greenwood Tree Hotel was one of the first opened in the area, catering to the largely Irish population employed to build the now twenty-six-year-old Victoria Barracks. It was a little run down but well-patronised by the old swills.

Five o’clock was early to start drinking and it was now close to six. The public bar currently accommodated only the oldest of its most faithful patrons, most of whom were no longer fit for work, each smoking a newfangled machine-made cigarette or sucking on their meerschaums or handmade clay pipes. The one exception was a dark and miserable figure slouched alone at a table in a corner: John Harper. A number of empty pots scattered on the beer-soaked table attested to his state of inebriation.

There he sat in complete self-pity counting his dwindling wages.

The barman removed the empty tankards. In a conciliatory tone, he asked, “Shouldn’t you be making your way home, son?”

John tossed a coin in the barman’s direction, “Another pint.”

The barman could only shake his head and collect the coin with the empties.

In time, the bar filled with its regulars and its regulars filled themselves with Irish whiskey and Guinness and, before long, the place was abuzz with jolly brogue banter, songs from the old country and patriotic calls of “Erin go Bragh”.

By this time, John had drunk away almost half of his wages and was practically insensible.

A trio of merrymakers pushed their way through the crowd toward John's empty chairs and, placing their drinks on the table, one asked, "Oy, matey, are you minding if we set ourselves at this table?"

John barely acknowledged them as he collected the meagre remainder of his wages, stuffed the coins in his pocket and pushed his way through the crowded room and out through the front door. Once outside, it was obvious that it was the crowd that had been holding him upright and he stumbled and fell.

A couple of old Irish workers picked him up and set him on his way, "There you go, son."

The autumn night was dark and chilly and it was nothing short of a miracle that John was able to find his way home, winding his way down the low hill toward his home in Darlinghurst. He was drunk but sombre and resigned to his fate—he knew what was to come.

Stopping by the water pump near the toll gates, John pumped some water up and drenched his head under the flow. It awakened him but he was still drunk, woozy and his thoughts befuddled. He managed to thread the correct streets and mostly stay out of the path of hansom, coaches and dogcarts on the roads and pedestrians and other inebriates on the footpaths.

As he turned into Palmer Lane and saw the staircase to his upper floor home, he thought he was home safe and sound, home and hosed.

With one hand on the bannister rail and one unsteady foot on the first step, a male's voice whispered effeminately close to his ear, "You missed our appointment, Johnny."

John was horrified and turned to face his addresser, a plump, ruddy-complexioned man of about fifty years of age, dressed opulently and stylishly. His manner, as were his clothes, was flamboyant and exaggerated.

"Mr McDonald...I didn't—" John faltered as he caught sight of a large, burly monolith of a man standing a few feet behind the fop. Just as McDonald was the epitome of fashion, Oxley, his companion, was the antithesis, clad in the baggy, ill-fitting, mismatched clobber of a dockworker.

“Didn’t what, darling boy?” McDonald asked, drawing John’s attention back to him, “Didn’t know it was me? Didn’t know it was Friday? Didn’t know it was past five of the clock? Didn’t know today was the day you promised to pay the piper? You’ve had a merry tune, my boy.”

“Mr McDonald...I need more time. My boss didn’t pay me what was due.”

“Is that another of your little excuses, Johnny? Like those you told me last week? And the week before that? Was it a lie that you would pay back today?”

“No! No...My wife, Sarah...she shouldn’t have—”

“But she did,” McDonald let out a feigned regretful sigh, “What are we to do, my dear?”

“Look,” Harper desperately spat out an offer, “Look, Mr McDonald, what if we pay you...in kind?”

McDonald smiled seductively, “What do you have in mind, my sweet boy?”

“My wife...my wife could...satisfy your...you could have her...for your—”

“For my what, dear boy? Pretend wife? Concubine? For my pleasure? Hmm?”

McDonald’s chubby belly was now in contact with John’s; they were face to face as McDonald continued, “I’d be more persuaded if you offered yourself to be my pretend wife. Or concubine. Perhaps we *can* come to some arrangement.”

“No! No,” the thought horrified Harper, “I’ll pay you back, Mr McDonald, I promise, I’ll pay you back!”

Stepping back, McDonald glanced back to his malevolent shadow, Oxley, then spoke to Harper, “You’ve made that promise before, John. Twice before in fact. You don’t seem to understand what a promise is. Or a debt.”

“I’ll pay you on Friday, Mr McDonald, I promise.”

“John, I regret doing this, I really do. You are such a comely young man but you must understand that a debt must be repaid and a promise must be kept.”

“Please...no...”

“This is so you remember to keep your appointment next Friday.” McDonald stepped aside and Oxley stepped forward.

“NO!” Harper’s scream was ineffectual as Oxley grabbed Harper by the coat and pulled him away from the stairs.

“Not the head.” Instructed McDonald as he turned his head away and brushed away some minute dust particle from his shoulder.

What followed in that dark and deserted back alley was a brutal barrage of Oxley’s fists to Harper’s chest, back and abdomen and, once Harper was curled up on the ground, Oxley completed the mnemonic with a kick to Harper’s body.

McDonald reached over and placed a gentle hand on Oxley’s shoulder, “That should suffice, Mr Oxley,” then to Harper, “Please remember your appointment, John. Otherwise Mr Oxley will be most disappointed. And you would not want to disappoint Mr Oxley once again, would you, John?”

As McDonald and Oxley disappeared into the darkened laneway, a figure opened the door to the upper floor home. Sarah stepped onto the landing and stood looking down at her husband lying beaten and bruised, writhing and sobbing in pain.

She felt some sympathy toward him but, at the same time, no empathy. How many times had he left her in that condition? It angered her that he would offer her body to that usuring pawnbroker to pay a debt that he could have easily serviced had he not drunk all his wages away. So many times he had resorted to drink when faced with problems but the problems were never resolved; the money was gone and the problems remained.

Looking down at him, lying there, moaning in pain, she wondered what it was that had made her fall in love with him; did she really fall in love with him or fall in love with being in love? Her father warned her that John’s family were wastrels but she was convinced that John was different. He was a hard worker. He was attentive. What she didn’t know then was that John’s father was a brute and a drunkard who beat his wife and two sons. John’s mother finally left them when his father beat her so badly that she lost an eye. John was only eight. None of them had heard from her since.

With the assistance and advice of her parents, Sarah and John left Parramatta for Sydney town, not only to find work and make a new life but to escape John’s father. But distance was not the cure; John was clearly his father’s son and drink was the demon of the Harpers; the solution to their problems. Would she wait until she, too, lost an eye? Should

she run away with Rebecca? And, if she did, would she be using Rebecca to escape? She did have strong feelings for Rebecca, different to those she had had for John, but were those feelings love or gratitude? Could two women truly love each other?

Sarah was conflicted and confused looking down at Harper, lying in a heap and groaning.

Harper struggled to his knees and vomited, collapsing to the ground once more. Sarah carefully hurried down the stairs to help him and, with much difficulty, they clambered up each unstable step to the landing. Harper whimpered with each effort but was otherwise accepting of Sarah's assistance.

Inside their home, Sarah helped her husband to their bed, flopping him like a rag doll onto it. She proceeded to remove his vomit-stained coat and shirt but he roughly pushed her away, "Leave me!" he growled, "I don't need you."

"John, please let me help you," Sarah implored, "Your clothes are soiled."

"You could have helped," he slurred, "You could have helped..."

"I give you everything I earn, John, everything—"

"You could earn more if you didn't spend all your time with that...that...unnatural bitch tom."

"John—"

Harper lifted himself to a sitting position, "What do you two get up to, eh?"

"John, nothing. We talk—"

"Yeah, talk. Sucking each other's cunnies—"

"John!" Sarah was appalled, "No! We just talk..."

Harper lifted himself from the bed, the pain in his ribs negated by the rage in his heart. He advanced on Sarah, she retreated, he continued his invective, "We'd be better off if you offered your cunny down at the barracks, instead. But who'd shag you? Look at you, you scrawny piece of scrag. Who'd pay a farthing to tup you?"

"John, you don't know what you're saying. Sit down. Please."

John stopped his advance on Sarah and stood wavering in his drunken stupor and staring at her. His face screwed up and Sarah knew that this meant an explosion was building.



“WHERE ARE WE GOING TO GET THE MONEY?” he screamed.

Sarah shrank back visibly. She tried to appease him, “I’ll ask...I’ll ask Mr Morrison. He’s a good man. He’ll help us—”

Harper lunged at Sarah and grabbed her by the throat and shook her, “You’ll stay away from there! Do you understand? Do you?”

Barely able to breathe, Sarah gasped, “Yes, John.”

Harper released her with a rough push; Sarah gasped for her breath. Harper calmed down a little, “You keep away,” and flung himself into the chair at the table, exhausted and in pain, his stomach churning again.

Sarah was horrified to see that she had left Rebecca’s book on China on the table just at the moment Harper caught sight of it. “What’s this?” Harper picked it up and turned to Sarah, “Who gave you this?”

“John—” Sarah pleaded.

“It was her, wasn’t it? It was that bitch, wasn’t it? She was here. In my home! You let her into my home!” Harper got to his feet, book in hand and once more threatened Sarah, “You won’t ever learn, will you, you stupid trollop. This is what I think of her.” Harper violently tore the book apart, sending shreds of paper in every direction, “And this is what I think of you.”

Harper grabbed Sarah by the arm and hair and pulled her close to him, bending her backward. She cried in pain but he didn’t relent, his face in hers, his voice low and menacing, “If I ever catch you with her again, I will kill the both of you.”

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## CHAPTER 5

### Hollow Celebrations

I rose early Saturday morning. Sleep eluded me, concerned that Sarah was all right. Knowing I couldn't go to her because of the preparations for the grand opening of Mr Morrison's hotel extensions made my anxiety even worse.

Combined with that apprehension, my eighteenth birthday was only a few weeks away and I lay awake calculating how far my inheritance would take us and formulating ways and means of getting there with Sarah—to China, to the Americas, to Mother England, to anywhere.

Mr Morrison had invited the entire population of Paddington—all two thousand of them—including the new mayor of Paddington, Benjamin Cocks, Esquire, our Reverend Father Hellfire and Brimstone, the builder Mr Rourke, Corporal Roberts and his coterie of course, all the hotel's current guests, and all of us, his family and staff.

It took us all day but, by five o'clock, the bunting was hung, the tables laid out with the most exotic morsels Cook could concoct, the band from the barracks all tuned up and eager to impress, and the best beer, wines and spirits our young colony produced in abundant supply.

It felt as though all of Paddington fit into Mr Morrison's new premises and he was pleased. I should have been happy for him but my thoughts were elsewhere.

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Sarah had slept restlessly as well. Her husband, John, had finally succumbed to his inebriation and lay unconscious beside her in their marital bed.

So many images swirled inside her head as she lay there and they persisted in depriving her of much wanted and needed sleep. She finally gave in to her insomnia and rose to watch the sun rise but the sight of the pages of Rebecca's cherished book on China, torn and strewn about the floor, brought tears to her eyes and a feeling of desperation, of entrapment and of futility.

With a heavy heart she collected all the scraps and placed them on the table. She would explain to Rebecca... what? How could she explain this? What could she possibly say that wouldn't bring herself shame in telling Rebecca that she had failed as a wife?

She looked around the barren room and her heart sank further. Is this what her life had become? A struggle and a fight against poverty? Would there ever be a way out? Seeing John in peaceful slumber made her wish for the days when they were first married. What had changed him?

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It was late morning when she rekindled the stove and put on the kettle for tea and a little porridge. She dressed silently and sat down to her breakfast alone with her thoughts.

She was tired and her head and neck ached but worse still was the ache in her heart. She knew she couldn't continue the charade of loving John, of believing that he would change, of hoping that everything would work out for them.

She watched John as he slept deeply; he would be of no use to anyone today. He would most likely sleep all day and well into the night. That's what he was like after every bout of heavy intoxication. And when he woke, he would be remorseful and apologetic, as always but, even so, he would blame Sarah for each of his outbursts.

Sarah spent the day brooding and introspective while she maintained their little hovel and prepared the evening meal, such as it was.

The sun was now low in the western sky and it would be dark soon. Every now and then she would go to John who lay there still, breathing deeply. "If only..." she thought. She loved being with Rebecca. She loved Rebecca.

Her decision was made.

Gathering her shawl quietly from the top draw of the chest, she left closing the door carefully behind her and fled down the stairs and ran...

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“Hey, Becky, why so glum?” Patrick’s voice, shouted into my ear, was barely audible over the cacophony of the revellers. He continued, “Pa knows how to do a turn, eh? Want to dance?”

The barrack band was banging out a lively polka—one of my favourites—but I was not in the mood. “No, Patrick, not now. I’m tired.”

“Come on. You’ll feel better when you do,” Patrick insisted and pulled me toward the mass of sweaty bodies bumping into each other as they swirled around the floor clasped to each other in pairs.

Patrick grabbed me around the waist with one arm and grasped my hand with the other and literally carried me into the throng of whirling dervishes. I clung on to him for dear life as he galloped one way and then the other, laughing with each bump and jostle with our neighbours. For a brief moment I forgot my cares and became caught in the moment and laughed...until I caught a glimpse of Sarah in the distance near the door, craning her neck and scanning the room.

“Sarah...” I gasped.

I disentangled myself from Patrick’s embrace with a vague apology and pushed my way through the crowd toward my Sarah. Reaching her, I took her by the hand and led her away toward the service rooms and kitchen.

The kitchen was empty save the pile of dirty dishes that awaited my attention the following morning. I turned to Sarah, so happy to see her until I noticed the bruising on her neck. I was appalled and I knew but I asked anyway, “What happened?”

Sarah discounted my query and said, “I’m leaving John.”

I was stunned and struck speechless as I absorbed the meaning of what she uttered.

“Did you hear me, Rebecca? I’m leaving John. I want to be with you. Forever.”

“I heard you, my love. I could not believe what I heard.”

We embraced each other with such fervour and enthusiasm that I felt we would break.

Letting go of each other, I asked, “Where are your things?”

“I have everything I need, my parents’ locket and you.”

I reached for the locket around Sarah’s neck and carefully opened it. Harper’s photograph had been removed.

Sarah smiled, “That’s for your image.”

This pleased me immensely as it confirmed her intentions, “Have you told John?”

“No.”

“You’ll need somewhere safe to stay while we make plans. I’ll be of age Sunday fortnight and be able to retrieve my inheritance the Monday after.” I took in Sarah and could not believe that she felt the same way about me as I felt about her. “Come, let’s celebrate.” I pulled her toward the party.

“No. Please, Rebecca, I’d rather not.”

I understood her reluctance. “Come to my room. Mr Morrison won’t miss me. And it’ll be a little quieter there.”

We left through the kitchen’s back door and proceeded toward the back stairs. The night was chilly and dark and all the noise we could hear emanated from the new hotel extension. Sarah observed, “All of Paddington must be here. The streets are deserted.”

I smiled, “Mr Morrison certainly knows how to entertain.”

We reached the top floor and I led Sarah into my room and lit the kerosene lamps. Closing the door behind us, I slipped the bolt only to ensure our privacy.

Napoleon roused from his nap and met Sarah with an enthusiastic wag of his tail. Sarah bent down and ruffled his head, “Napoleon. Sorry to wake you, boy.” She looked at me, “Is he all right?”

“Yes, fully recovered.”

“It’s a wonder he can sleep at all with all that partying going on,” she quipped.

“The volunteer band may not be good, but they’re loud,” I added, “Come sit and tell me what happened.” I patted the bed and Sarah sat next to me, letting her shawl drop to the bed.

“Not now,” Sarah hesitated, “Please, I’d rather not. Let us talk about us.”

I took Sarah's hands in mine and kissed each gently then looked into her eyes. She moved close to me and our lips met.

Napoleon growled.

"Napoleon, it's all right. We're not hurting each other," I assured my dog but then realised he was looking at the door. "Napoleon..."

The dog barked viciously and incessantly. "Napoleon! Quiet!"

A mighty crash and the door burst open, splinters from the door and door frame flew everywhere and showered Napoleon. Sarah and I jumped to our feet, shocked and shaken.

Napoleon snarled and growled ferociously and viciously; I had never seen him so fierce.

A hulking form stood in the doorway. It was Harper. His fists were clenched and his look was murderous.

"What do you want?" I screamed, "Get out!" I picked up a book and threw it at him.

Sarah shrank away into a corner of the room, shocked.

Napoleon continued his violent barrage, baring his fangs and snapping at Harper.

"I want my woman!" Harper growled and took a purposeful step inside.

Napoleon attacked and grabbed Harper's trouser leg in his jaws. Without hesitation, Harper kicked Napoleon so hard that he yelped and released his grip. Harper kicked him again and sent him careening across the room.

I immediately rushed Harper and attacked him with my fists. A punch to my head sent me to the floor, dazed.

Harper advanced on Sarah. I managed to grab Harper's leg as he passed me. He retaliated by turning on me, "You're dead, you fucking bitch!" and grabbed me by the bodice of my dress, pulled me up and drew back to strike me.

Sarah grabbed his raised arm, "No, John! Don't!!"

Harper turned on Sarah and grabbed her by her throat and flung her across the room like a rag doll. The force hurled her onto the end of my bed, striking her head on the wrought iron bed head. She lay there stunned and holding her head.

Napoleon was injured but managed to renew his determined attack and hooked his fangs into Harper's thigh. Harper screamed in agony and violently pushed me away. I fell to the floor, dizzy, disoriented, groggy and in pain.

Harper punched Napoleon to the head time and time again until Napoleon let go but Harper did not relent. He continued to punch and kick Napoleon until blood oozed from my beloved dog's head and he lay motionless on the floor.

Harper turned his attention to me; his voice gravelly and threatening, "I told you what I'd do," he took a step toward me, "I told you to stay away."

"*This damned skirt!*" I thought, trying to disentangle my legs from it. I struggled to my feet just as Harper was upon me again. This time I was prepared and struck him with my fist in his throat. It had the effect I wanted and he doubled over trying to catch his breath. I hit him again and again to his head but he was far stronger than I was and, once he had caught his breath, fended me off effortlessly.

I backed away; he advanced upon me with a look I will never forget. He was like a demon possessed with the destruction of all living things. I looked about for anything I could use to defend myself and picked up the closest object, a large book and threw that at him.

It glanced off him and he barely flinched. He had me backed in a corner and was within an arm's length.

"John!" Sarah cried in desperation as she tried to come to my aid from my bed, "John, don't hurt her! I'll come with you! Don't hurt her!"

Harper stared at me as he responded to Sarah's plea, "Oh, you'll come with me, my love." And grabbed me by the throat and punched me to the head and to the body. I don't know how many times but I do remember Sarah screaming, "No! No! Rebecca!" as the world went black around me.

Then all was still and quiet.

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"Becky...Becky...Oh God! Becky..."

Pain seared through my body. I could feel someone's hand on my face but I couldn't see anything and could just barely hear...then darkness.

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The next sensation I felt was that of being lifted. My pain was excruciating. I could barely breathe, my chest and head hurt so much. I remember groaning and I remember hearing Mr Morrison telling someone to be careful. I remember uttering, “Sarah...”

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When I woke, unfamiliar smells of carbolic acid, urine and vomit filled my olfactory senses. It was difficult to open my eyelids; they were painful and swollen but I did make out that it was daytime and I was lying down and surrounded by shadowy, indistinct figures.

“Sarah?” My voice was hoarse and my utterance barely a whisper.

“Becky...” was the gentle reply to my question.

I turned my attention to the voice, “Patrick?” That’s when the intensity of the pain in my chest caught me unawares, “Oh, God!”

“Shh, Becky. You have three fractured ribs. You’ve been badly beaten. Lie still.”

I closed my eyes to the overwhelming pain then the awful memories came flooding back. Harper! “Sarah,” I begged, “Where’s Sarah? Is she all right?”

“Becky...Sarah’s—”

“Rebecca...” I reopened my eyes to Mr Morrison’s gentle interruption, “Rebecca, you need to rest. Doctor is here.”

Barely able to move and just able to open my eyes, I took in the scene around me. I was surrounded by Patrick and his father on either side and two nuns and a doctor. “Where am I?” I asked.

“St Vincent’s hospital,” Mr Morrison informed me.

“And Sarah? Where’s Sarah? Is she here?” Panic caused me to breathe erratically and that caused me pain. I groaned in both agony and anguish.

A deep male voice interjected, “You must rest, Miss Davies. Sister.”

One of the nuns pushed a syringe into my mouth and squirted a bitter liquid into it, “Swallow,” she ordered. I gasped as I swallowed involuntarily.

“This will help you sleep,” the deep male voice added, “Come, Mr Morrison, Master Morrison. The sisters will take good care of her.”



Before I could utter another word, my eyes closed and I was free of pain once more.

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During the six days they held me captive at the new hospital under the soporific effect of laudanum, I had only one dream that I remember. It was very vivid and terrified me: Harper's malevolent face was pushed up close to mine and his voice was harsh and threatening as he whispered, "I told you I would kill you both but you didn't believe me." I could even smell his rum-soaked breath hot on my face. That awful image replayed itself every time I regained consciousness.

There were times when I woke and all was darkness. I was thirsty and I was hungry and I was alone with my pain and my distress for Sarah. I would call for Sarah but only a nun would come to attend my needs. Other times, during the day, Patrick would be there and took care of me with such love that I knew I could never reciprocate. But I did love him. Through all this, no one would tell me about Sarah.

Time did heal the wounds but only those of the body. My chest still hurt but I could move without too much pain and the swelling to my face had lessened which meant I could now see even though I had bouts of dizziness and headaches. I was finally released from the custody of the Sisters of Charity and given into the care of Mr Morrison with the recommendation that I be kept in a calm and quiet state of mind. But calmness and quietude for me were lost to fear and worry for Sarah. I was determined to know that Sarah was well and with her parents in Parramatta.

The short buggy ride home over the uneven Old South Head road caused me to feel the injuries I had despite the medicine the nuns administered on my departure. That same medication caused me to feel quite drowsy and unable to form coherent sentences. My brain was working but my mouth was not.

When we arrived at the courtyard of the hotel, I was helped out of the carriage by Mr Morrison and Patrick and led to the back stairs. My limbs felt like jelly as I held onto the banister at the bottom step.

"Hold on, Becky," Patrick gently ordered as he scooped me up in his arms and carried me up the three flights. I clung to his neck in a painful stupor.

Mr Morrison preceded us and, upon reaching the top landing, opened the door to my room and we went in. I realised where we were and the memories flooded back. An anguished cry escaped me as Patrick rested me on my bed. I sobbed uncontrollably.

Patrick tried consoling me, “Becky...”

I took Patrick’s arm and begged, “Where’s Sarah?” I knew the answer...

Mr Morrison sat on the end of the bed and cradled my legs. “Rebecca, my darling Rebecca...Sarah’s dead.”

Every muscle in my body spasmed and an unbidden, unnatural guttural cry filled my room. I turned to Patrick and curled up, numbed to any physical pain. His arms gently encircled me as I wept for Sarah. So many emotions swirled and pulled at me: sadness that someone so young should be taken; anger that I was unable to save her; hatred for the man who took her from me; remorse that we had not run away sooner, but the most overpowering emotion was revenge. And he would pay for murdering Sarah.

I don’t know how long I stayed this way; I was all cried out, the opiates administered to me induced an overpowering lethargy and I must have fallen into a deep slumber. When I woke, it was nightfall and I was covered with a blanket.

“Here, drink this,” Patrick said as he approached me with a cup of hot tea, “It’s fresh and it’s hot.”

I gingerly sat up and gratefully took the cup.

Patrick pulled a chair close to me and looked at me with such compassion that I felt a tear escape. He was as devastated as I was, “I’m so sorry, Becky. I know what she meant to you.”

The tea was a welcome restorative to some sort of normality. After a few minutes, I regained control of the thoughts roiling through my mind and whispered, “Napoleon?”

Patrick shook his head remorsefully.

I shed a few more regretful tears for my beloved dog and his courage in protecting me and Sarah. At the very least, I knew that justice would prevail and that bastard would hang for killing Sarah. Anger overcame me, “Tell me he’s in gaol.”

Patrick looked away, lost for words.

“Patrick?”

“No.”

I did not understand his single word reply, “No?”

“The police superintendent said there nothing they could charge him with.”

I was stunned, “Sarah’s dead. He killed her. He threatened to kill us both. And he did his damndest to kill me. I will testify to that and more.”

“Becky, Pa and I tried but the police determined that Sarah’s death was an accident. Pa even went to see the Inspector General of Police, John McLerie.” I was completely confused. Patrick continued, “She was found at the bottom of the stairs in Palmer Lane. The staircase had come away. You know how rickety it was. Harper said a scream and a crash woke him from a deep sleep early Sunday morning. He went to see what it was and found Sarah at the bottom of the stairs, motionless.”

Words escaped me.

“Pa and I both know it’s complete and utter horse shit but there is no proof of what he did to you and Sarah. And Napoleon.”

“Who, then, did this to me and Napoleon?” I asked completely staggered.

Patrick scoffed, “A burglar. The police said you most likely disturbed a housebreaker when you came up. Harper swore that he and Sarah never left their place Saturday night.”

“He was here! Harper came here to take Sarah back. She left him when he beat her again.”

Patrick hesitated, confused, “I didn’t find a case with her belongings.”

“No. She left what little she had behind. He must have followed her. Sarah came here! You saw her.”

“I didn’t see her, Becky. You and I were dancing and you pulled away and left. I didn’t know where you went or who you went with. The place was crowded and completely crazy. But I do know she was here.”

“Someone must have seen Sarah arrive, Harper break the door in.”

“The police made enquiries and no one came forward. No one saw or heard anything that night. Remember that almost everybody was here on Saturday night and it

was quite raucous. Palmer Lane is deserted at the best of times. You saw what it was like when we went. And if they took the back streets and dunny lanes...And he has an alibi.”

“An alibi? Whoever gave it is lying.”

“Rourke.”

“Rourke? He was at the party.”

“Rourke said that he called on Harper after he left the party and Harper was asleep in bed. He said that Sarah answered the door.”

“Liar!”

“I know. It’s in his interest to lie. Most of the skilled trades have gone off to the goldfields. Rourke started the new job last Monday and I heard that he put Harper on and gave him the advance he was after. And he gave Harper a glowing character to the police.”

I was falling deeper and deeper into a mire of desperation. “Napoleon mauled Harper’s thigh. Did they check that?”

“I didn’t know that, Becky.”

“I’ll tell them. And I’ll tell them Rourke’s a liar. Take me to the police.” I threw the rug off and attempted to climb out of bed. Patrick gently stopped me.

“I won’t make a difference, Becky. The police super has closed the case.”

I was devastated. Harper had won. “No! He can’t get away with murder!”

“Becky, I want him to hang as well but, other than your word, there’s no proof that he did it. And everyone knows how you felt about Sarah and how much you hated Harper. The police will see your evidence as spite. We have no actual proof that he was here and that he did this to you. Or Napoleon...or Sarah.”

I felt desperate and helpless once more, “She was here, Patrick, Sarah was here and Harper did this to us.”

“I believe you, Becky.” He went to my tallboy and removed a folded article from the top drawer. “I found this when I cleaned up your room,” and handed me Sarah’s shawl.

I gasped and took it reverently in my hands. I buried my face in it and breathed in Sarah’s essence, “Sarah...” my tears flowed again.

“And this,” he continued, handing me Sarah’s silver locket and chain, “This was tangled in the bedclothes. I had the chain repaired.”

I took it tenderly in my hand and remembered the first time I saw it around Sarah's neck. All those wonderful times we spent together; the promises we made. I let Sarah down. I did not protect her. She died because of me. I burned with hatred and the injustice of Sarah's murder. But I could not understand why Sarah had to die. "Oh, Patrick, how could anyone do what he did?"

"Because he is what you said he is. A drunkard and a bastard. And he's got away with it."

I looked up at Patrick. I felt helpless and useless; I felt that my reason for living had died with Sarah. "Where is Sarah now?"

"At St Patrick's Roman Catholic cemetery. Her parents took her back to Parramatta. They didn't want Harper to have anything further to do with her or her funeral. He came to see you, you know. At the hospital."

I looked at Patrick, confused. Patrick continued, "On Thursday, when I came to see you, there he was, like nothing had happened, standing over you. I don't know what he said to you but when he saw me, he promptly left. I followed him out and warned him off and I told him that he wasn't welcome at the hotel either. In his usual, charming manner, he told me to...well you can imagine what he told me."

It wasn't a dream. "He told me he was going to kill me."

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Mr Morrison was very considerate and allowed me all the time my body needed to mend itself; my heart and soul, however, would never mend. I wore Sarah's silver locket and kept her shawl beside me on my bed. I mourned her and I mourned poor Napoleon and I found myself weeping without knowing. I had not shed as many tears for my mother and I loved her more than anyone. The suddenness of this catastrophe made my loss profound.

Patrick attended to my every need and whim and made sure that I remained in close proximity to him; he feared Harper would try to fulfil his promise.

My eighteenth birthday anniversary was less than a week away and I was not looking forward to it or the celebration that Mr Morrison and Cook had been planning well before my attack by the supposed burglar. I felt empty and weary and could not find any purpose to my life anymore.

My days were spent in the kitchen with Cook, trying to be of help, or in the bar with Patrick. Corporal Roberts would try to make me laugh and the patrons were conciliatory but this only made things worse and only brought on the tears; I just wanted to be alone. Night time was the only time I had to myself but only after Mr Morrison installed a hefty door bar to keep intruders out—Mediaeval, but effective.

Two days out from my birthday, the yearning I had to see Sarah overcame me and, at the communal breakfast table, I announced to no one in particular, “I’m going to Parramatta to see Sarah.”

The silence that descended on the family and staff was palpable as each looked to one and then the other.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, Rebecca,” Mr Morrison softly declared, “You don’t know who’ll be there.”

“I want to pay my respect,” I urged.

“Not by yourself.”

I looked to Patrick, who offered, “I’ll go with her, Pa.”

“I don’t like it.”

Patrick reassured, “Harper’s working in Botany now and, if he’s not there, he’d be dead drunk in Darlinghurst. Why would he visit Sarah, anyway?”

Clearly, Mr Morrison was not happy with this proposal and he took his time to deliberate. “All right, son, but I want you to take the revolver with you.”

Patrick and I exchanged horrified looks. Mr Morrison added, “You just don’t know what feral dogs you might come across.”

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Later that morning, after I had collected a large bunch of banksias and grevilleas growing wild at the back of the barracks, Patrick and I took the omnibus to the new Redfern Station close to Devonshire Street. It was now the middle of autumn and the weather was cool and it threatened to rain. Much to Patrick’s dismay, I dressed in my trousers, collared shirt and jacket, rather than a skirt and bodice, as much to keep warm as to not feel restricted should the worse happen: that we encounter the “feral dog” Patrick’s father spoke of but Patrick reassured me again that this would be most unlikely. Nevertheless, Mr Morrison’s old

revolver was wrapped in a cloth and carried in the satchel slung across Patrick's shoulder and at the ready.

The twenty or so mile train journey took us through the stations at Newtown, Ashfield, Burwood, Homebush, Parramatta Junction then on to Parramatta Station and, at each stop, I apprehensively scanned the passengers on the platform awaiting to embark. Perhaps I was being paranoid but I didn't want to be taken by surprise again.

Alighting at Parramatta Station, we were only a few blocks away from St Patrick's Roman Catholic Church and its cemetery...and Sarah.

It didn't take us long to locate Sarah's resting place. Her parents had erected a beautiful headstone to her memory. It was made of sandstone and stood four and a half feet tall. Beneath the Calvary cross the chiselled words brought a lump to my throat and then surprised me:

*In Memory of our Beloved Daughter*

*Sarah Kathleen Harper*

*nee O'Dwyer*

*Born 16<sup>th</sup> July 1853*

*Died 28<sup>th</sup> March 1874*

*Weep not for me or my brief life;*

*I was a loving daughter and a dutiful wife;*

*My life was taken by a worthless sot*

*And God will punish whom the Law did not.*

We both stood in silence reading the words over again. There was no doubt that Sarah's parents knew Sarah had died by Harper's hand and that they were, as we were, helpless in bringing that murderous bastard to justice.

Patrick put a reassuring arm around my shoulders. More to Sarah than to him, I whispered, "Harper will pay. I swear this on my mother's grave, he will pay with his life."

"Becky..." Patrick's words were more a warning than a comfort, "Becky, he'll drink himself to death before long."

I put the grevilleas and banksias at the foot of the headstone, made the sign of the cross and bowed my head in a silent prayer for Sarah's eternal peace...and for God to give

me strength. Patrick did the same and, after a few minutes' silence, we turned and left the cemetery and Sarah. I did not know at the time that I would never visit her again.

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The next day, the eve of my eighteenth birthday, the heavens roared with thunderstorms and drenching rain. The day was as dark and gloomy as was I. Visiting Sarah made her death and my loss real. My own mother's death hadn't affected me this way. There was no feeling of injustice in my mother's death; it was God's will. Sarah's? Was it God's will or the act of a man driven by his demons, by jealousy, by possessiveness? Surely not the act of a benevolent God but one of Satan. I made Sarah promises before that I had not kept but this last promise that I swore to her, I would keep and I intended keeping very soon.

After supper and after the day's work was finalised, I excused myself, bade everyone a good night and went to my room by the internal stairs.

Once there, I changed into my trousers and jacket and put on my mackintosh and cabbage tree, as it was still raining but the violent storms had passed.

Going down by the external stairs meant I would not be seen by the family or staff. I carefully opened the stable door and made sure the groom was still with the rest of the family and staff playing whist and selected my favourite pony, Whiskey.

With an apology for waking him, I led him by his halter out through the door and out the back gate where I easily jumped onto his back. We walked off down the laneway in the drizzling rain. I was a reasonably good horsewoman and had ridden bareback many times. Whiskey was docile and compliant so we would have no difficulty reaching my destination quickly and without incident.

We took the Old South Head road toward the city right up to George Street and then down toward Circular Quay. There was little pedestrian traffic this night and that which was there hurried along to get out of the rain. The carriages and omnibuses, too, appeared to be scurrying for shelter.

Reaching the end of George Street and the infamous Rocks, I looked for the street signs and found what I was seeking: Harrington Place.

I turned Whiskey into it; it was dark, the street lighting was poor, and the only movement I saw was from the shadows of doorways: the burning red tip of a cigarette; the



wispy smoke from a pipe decimated by the rain; a shiny water-soaked rat scampering from one pile of rubbish to another.

Corporal Roberts' words echoed in my head: *It's a bad place, Harrington Place. Keep well clear of it. And them.*

Whiskey walked on until we came across a woman huddled in an entranceway. She was dishevelled, old and probably didn't have the money for a bed.

Retrieving sixpence from my pocket, I offered it to her, "Do you know where I can find Jeramiah Hickson? The Push?"

The old woman looked at me with suspicion, "What would you be wanting with him?" she croaked.

"Where?" pushing the coin closer.

"Wharf three. The shed," she said snatching the coin from my hand.

"Thank you."

It didn't take long to find what I sought. The old wooden shed next to the wharf was dimly lit from inside and, under the sound of the rain pelting the ground, I could hear the disorderly carryings-on of several men.

With apprehension, I slid off Whiskey and knocked on the door.

Everyone inside fell silent. After a moment, the door opened slightly and a husky, ambiguous voice demanded, "What do you want?"

"Jeremiah Hickson. I was told he was here."

"And who are you, dearie?"

I didn't want to announce myself so replied, "Tell him it's the girl from Morrison's Hotel in Paddington. He probably won't remember me—"

"Course I remember you! The comely lass," Hickson sneered as he pushed the interrogator out of the way, "Come in, come in."

"No...thank you."

"All right, you're the one what's getting soaked. What can I do for you this fine evening?"

This was it. There was no going back once I made my declaration. I hesitated.

Hickson was not a patient man, “Ain’t going to wait all night, me lovely,” and began to close the door on me.

I pushed it open, “I need your help.”

“Of course, sweetness, but I ain’t no charity.”

“I can pay,” my heart was pounding.

“Up front.”

“I’ll have the money on Monday.”

“Then I’ll help you on Tuesday.” He looked me up and down and his lecherous thoughts amplified onto his ugly face, “What is it that you want from me, my timid little titter?”

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## CHAPTER 6

Sunday, 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1874

### Coming of Age

The much anticipated night had finally arrived—much anticipated, that is, by everyone but me. My dream had been that Sarah would be with me to celebrate the event and to plan our future together. But this night, in the midst of fifteen jovial people, I felt sad and so alone.

My mother, bless her memory, made sure that I would be provided for and that my eighteenth birthday would be my ‘coming of age’ as she deemed, with the guidance of her mentor, Mr Morrison, I would have been mature enough to lead my own life and control my own finances. She had entrusted Patrick’s father with looking after my small inheritance until that time and it was this that I now avidly anticipated.

The table in our private dining room was extended to accommodate all of the staff as well as my dear friends from the barracks, Corporal Roberts and his company of merry men.

The meal was splendid; Cook had prepared all my favourites: fricandeau of veal, stewed cucumbers with white sauce, potato ribbons and stuffed onions, and now we were chatting and reminiscing amiably but I did notice that nobody spoke of Sarah or what had happened to me.

Mr Morrison was doing his best to keep me in the right mood and spirit of the event but my heart just wasn’t responding.

Patrick, as usual, was seated beside me and every now and then glanced at me to see how I was coping.

With a look to his father and one to Cook, he and Cook rose from their seats and disappeared into the kitchen. Moments later, they returned, Patrick carrying a large iced cake with a burning candle atop it. With their entrance, the assembled crowd rose to their feet and gave a mighty cheer.

I was both befuddled and embarrassed that such a fuss was being made. It was a beautiful confection decorated with sugar roses and leaves. I was dumbfounded and awestruck.

Patrick carefully set the cake down in front of me; Cook resumed her place with a proud smile on seeing my reaction.

Mr Morrison stood with a glass in his hand and gently tapped it with his knife, “Quiet. Quiet, please.” Everyone’s attention turned to him and he continued, “Thank you,” then addressed me directly, “Rebecca Victoria Davies, today you have completed eighteen years on God’s earth—” At this, the crowd cheered and stomped their feet and those who weren’t encumbered with a glass of frothy beer, clapped their hands.

Mr Morrison signalled the crowd to settle down then continued, “I remember thinking, on the day you were born and hearing you cry for the first time, ‘this one’s trouble.’”

This brought on another round of hooting and laughter, subdued once again by Mr Morrison, who resumed his homily, “But, despite your propensity for wearing trousers and beating Patrick to a pulp at fisticuffs, you have grown into a fine young lady.”

I felt so deceitful when the crowd cheered and agreed; if they only knew what was in my heart.

Mr Morrison continued, “Your dear mother, Anwen, may God rest her soul, asked me to read these words—her words—to you tonight.” He retrieved a folded sheet of paper from his pocket as the crowd fell silent. Everybody in the room knew my mother and I know they each held her in the highest regard. She was educated, well-spoken and gentle. She would do anything to help anyone. After six years since her passing, I still missed her.

Mr Morrison read slowly and with compassion and, as he read, I heard my mother's lilting Welsh voice saying these words directly to me, "My darling daughter Rebecca, how I wish I could be there to celebrate this important milestone with you but it is not God's will. Today, you leave your childhood behind and step tentatively into womanhood. How I wish I could be there to guide you through the dark, twisting alleyways of self-doubt into the broad, sun filled boulevards of love and devotion. There is nothing more precious than respect and love; respect that is earned and love that is given. In the scant twelve years I have known you, my dearest Rebecca, I know that in whatever you choose to do, you will choose to do it for the right reasons and with honesty, integrity and love. Your lucky star will guide and protect you, and I will watch over you forever. May God bless you with a long and happy life. Your loving Mother."

I thought that I had no more tears left yet I found them falling once again. Were they for the grief of losing my mother; for the love that was given to me by her and Sarah; for the betrayal of integrity and honesty that was about to come?

Whatever my reasons, I found that the room had become deathly quietly save for the sniffles of those that, like me, had been affected by my mother's words. Patrick wiped his eyes and blew his nose on his handkerchief and even Corporal Roberts was lost for words.

Finally, Mr Morrison took his glass up and addressed me, "Make a wish and blow out the candle, dear."

I did as requested. The wish I made that day ruled me for the rest of my life: that God give me the strength to never again allow anyone to escape justice for harming any woman or girl.

Once the smoke from the candle has swirled and dissipated, Mr Morrison raised his glass and solemnly entreated, "Charge your glasses, ladies and gentlemen and be upstanding," at which we all stood, "Long live Queen Victoria."

We echoed, "Long live the Queen," as sipped from our glass.

Mr Morrison then addressed me directly, "Rebecca Victoria Davies, may your life's path be straight, may the sun always be at your back and may you live a long and happy life."

“Hear! Hear!” cheered the assembly and drained their glasses. All but Patrick resumed their raucous festivities. He turned to me and whispered so that only I could hear him, “Rebecca Victoria Davies, will you marry me?”

The look of fright, shock and perhaps even horror that I returned must have caused Patrick some concern as he added, “Of course, you don’t have to answer me now. Think about it.” With a flash of embarrassment, he turned to speak to Cook about some inconsequential matter.

I felt stunned and completely taken aback. If I had ever wanted to be married and have children, it certainly would have been to Patrick as I knew of no other more sincere, caring, supportive or funny young man in the whole colony. But I had never felt matrimonially or maternally inclined to him or anyone. How could I tell him this without hurting his feelings and damaging his pride? I was glad that Patrick had given me time to think about my answer – even though I knew what it would be—because I didn’t know where I would be in a week’s time.

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As promised, Mr Morrison took me to the Bank of New South Wales the very first thing the next day, Monday, and formalised the transfer of my mother’s bequest to me. It was a tidy sum, more than I had expected. Mr Morrison was an astute business man and, while I certainly wasn’t the richest eighteen-year-old in the colony, my inheritance would have made a very handsome dowry.

Once the transfer was completed, we took care of a few errands in town and then made our way home where, outwardly, nothing had changed.

Patrick was his usual ebullient self even though I knew he was smarting from my tacit rejection and Mr Morrison still treated me like his own daughter even though I knew he was concerned that I would squander the small fortune. And I pretended that all was well even though the plans I had devised meant that everything would change forever, and imminently.

After the luncheon ritual had been completed, I made an excuse that I needed to take Whiskey and go into town again to buy a special book to commemorate my coming of age. However, I declined to tell Mr Morrison that my first stop would be the bank. I drove

Whiskey along faster than his normal unhurried pace and we made it to the bank just before closing time.

Our next stop was one which made my heart sink but I pushed all doubts aside and carried my resolution through with unwavering determination and headed for the wharves.

After completing my third and the only task I had declared, Whiskey and I returned home with my new purchase, *Murray's Hand-book Turkey in Asia and Constantinople*, and to Patrick's mocking comments about how long that simple task had taken and that either, or both, Whiskey and I were getting on in age and may be heading for the knackery before too long.

Notwithstanding Patrick's poor attempt at humour, I slept fitfully that night. My internal angels and demons were warring and the pendulum of virtue and justice swung wildly from one side to the other.

The new day brought with it cloud-laden skies and incessant rain and the darkness that was in the heavens was reflected in the gloom of my heart. Patrick, ever observant, approached me apologetically as we washed the breakfast dishes. "Becky," he began tentatively, "please don't be mad at me. I'm sorry if I put pressure on you the other night. Take all the time you need and I won't be too disappointed if your answer is 'no'. For now," he added with an impish smile.

I returned his smile and reassured, "I'm not mad at you, Patrick," and gave him a comforting hug, "I do love you, you know that."

He returned my embrace more enthusiastically than my sore ribs could tolerate and I let out a short gasp.

"Oh, Becky, I'm sorry," he apologised and immediately released his hold on me.

"It still hurts," I feebly explained.

Patrick knew what I meant.

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Because of the heavy rain, it was unlikely that there would be any activity at the many building sites around the city and surrounding areas. The roads were drenched and muddy as were the few patrons who ventured out in such inclement weather to share a beer with their mates, consequently there was not very much to do in the bar that evening.

The evening wore on and each time I looked at our longcase clock in the foyer, the passing of an hour seemed to take twice as long as the one before.

Closing time had finally arrived and the rain had abated but still persisted. After completing the last of my chores, I said my ‘good nights’ and headed up to my room where, rather than changing into my night dress, I donned my shirt and trousers and laid down on my bed, my eyes fixed firmly on my little mantle clock. It was quarter of eleven. “Only a few hours left,” I found myself whispering. I felt nothing but the righteousness of my actions.

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The room that Sarah had kept so clean and neat a few short weeks ago was now an untidy, unkempt confusion of empty rum bottles, discarded clothing and unwashed kitchen utensils, which the one fat tallow candle, burning slowly near the bed, pitilessly highlighted.

Strewn haphazardly across that bed was the unconscious, dishevelled form of John Harper, a bottle of rum clenched in his fist.

The rain sizzled on the corrugated iron roof and seeped through the several rust holes in it, plopping onto the tin floor. The only other sounds were of Harper’s snoring; he was in a deep, alcohol-induced sleep. Unable to work because of the rain, his day had been occupied by drinking away the wages he earned from Rourke the builder. He had paid his debt to McDonald but was close to approaching him again in order to keep his supply of grog coming. The rains meant no work and no work meant no pay.

Since Sarah’s death, Harper’s sleep had been restless and his dreams nonexistent and, every night since her death, he had mollified his abhorrent actions with stupor-inducing rum.

Harper didn’t hear the front door opening.

“Wake up, princess,” a harsh mocking voice intoned close to Harper’s ear, “Wake up, your highness.”

Harper felt his shoulder being prodded. He didn’t want to dream and flung the offending hand away, “Go away!” his slurred and turned away. But the hand was insistent and was joined by another which shook his shoulders violently.



“Rise and shine, your majesty.”

Harper suddenly became aware that this was not a dream and, startled, turned to see the obnoxious face of Jeremiah Hickson, practically nose to nose, smiling cruelly at him. Harper pushed himself upright and realised with some apprehension that there were three others standing behind the owner of the ugly face. “Who are you?” The shock of seeing these loathsome intruders standing over him set his pulse racing.

“Let me introduce ourselves. That’s Ratface, Shingles and Tuppenny. And I’m Jeremiah Hickson,” was the rough and pretentious reply.

“What do you want? I don’t have any money.”

“We know that, sunshine, money ain’t what we want.”

“I don’t have anything worth stealing,” he begged as he pushed himself against the bedhead.

“An apology.”

“Wha—?”

“You heard, petal, we want you to say you’re sorry. An apology.”

Harper was confused and befuddled. A glimmer of recognition came through his muddled mind, “You’re...you’re the Larrikin mob from Morrison’s pub—”

Hickson grabbed Harper by his shirt and pulled him off the bed, “Got it in one, darling. Now for that apology.”

Hickson pushed Harper toward the table while Ratface, the shabbiest of the four, cleared the table of its unwashed cup and plate and placed a sheet of paper and pencil on it.

John was slowly regaining his sensibilities and, not comprehending why these four men were there, railed at the intrusion. He struggled with Hickson but his arms were grabbed by Shingles and Tuppenny, both larger than Hickson, who thrust Harper into the awaiting chair and held him there unable to move.

“Let me go!” he ordered, his voice filled with anger and yet fearful.

“Soon,” promised Hickson, pushing the piece of paper and pencil toward Harper, “Now let’s make this simple and to the point. Write, ‘I’m sorry for everything’.”

Harper didn’t want to even if he could; his arms were held tight. He struggled to free his arm, “Tell him to let go of my arm!”

Hickson nodded and Tuppenny released Harper's arm. Seizing the opportunity to break free, Harper sprang from the chair and pushed Shingles away but was only able to take a few steps before he was overpowered by all four louts. A heavy punch by Hickson to Harper's diaphragm quickly subdued him and he was thrust back into his chair, doubled over, winded and trying to breathe.

Hickson bent over him and threatened, "Don't make this harder than it need be, Johnno. It'll be over soon and we'll be gone. Now write."

Harper, still gasping for breath, picked up the pencil and scrawled as Hickson slowly dictated, "'I'm sorry for everything.' Good boy. Now sign it."

Ratface, peering over Harper's shoulder, queried, "Ain't 'everything' with a 'k'?"

"Shut up, idiot." Hickson picked up the sheet of paper and admired it, "Good. Good," he teased and placed it in the centre of the table.

Harper glanced from one to another, fear and apprehension exuding from every pore, "You got what you wanted, now go."

Hickson sneered, "Not quite done yet, laddie," then nodded to his men who understood exactly what they were to do.

Shingles produced a long coil of rope and tossed one end over a rafter; that end was tied as a noose.

Harper realised what was to come, "No! NO!" and sprang to his feet in a life-and-death flight for the door. Hickson caught him by the legs and tackled Harper to the floor. In a heartbeat, Ratface and Tuppenny were on top of Harper as he thrashed about in a desperate struggle to free himself. Had he not been as drunk as he was, he may have been able to fend off these three men. His energy depleted, he stopped struggling and begged for his life, "No, please don't," as they lifted him up and dragged him toward the awaiting rope. "Please, please," he cried, tears streaming down his face, "What did I do to you? Please don't do this."

Hickson took hold of the noose and managed to push it over Harper's head, assuring him, "This won't hurt a bit...it'll hurt a lot!" bringing peals of cruel laughter from his gang.

"No...no...NO..."

Harper felt the rope tightening around his neck as he saw the other end being pulled taut by Shingles. He was now being lifted by his neck, his feet just barely making contact with the floor. The three men holding him released him. Harper desperately grabbed at the rope around his neck that was slowly strangling him, trying to loosen it. The three men joined the fourth and pulled down on the rope in unison.

Harper was lifted several feet into the air, thrashing his legs, twisting and turning, unable to breathe, unable to speak, unable to beg for mercy.

Hickson and his boys found immense amusement in this horrendous sight.

“He’s a fine dancer, ain’t he?” quipped Ratface.

Harper’s struggles became involuntary twitches as the life was squeezed from him by the tightening noose. His body finally stopped moving and hung there limply.

Hickson wrapped the end of the rope around a post and securely tied it.

“Top’d and twisted,” Hickson said as he placed the chair near Harper’s feet then kicked it over, “Job’s done. Come on, boys.”

Looking about, Hickson watched as Ratface rifled through the chest of drawers, “Oy! What are you doing?”

“Just seeing if there’s anything worth having,” was the frank reply.

“Leave it, idiot, suicides don’t steal from themselves.”

They filed out of the hovel and all was silent save for the sizzle of the rain on the corrugated iron roof and the plopping of the drops on the tin floor—and the creaking of the rope as it stretched under the weight of the dead John Harper.

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I stood at the foot of the stairs and peered up to see a feeble light flickering through the window. The rain had stopped and the sallow moon peeked from its hiding place low in the western sky. I tied Whiskey’s halter lead to the railing and took my first tentative step up the stairs. Was it I who was shaking or the stairs? With each step upward my apprehension grew; it was I who shook with trepidation, not the stairs.

I stepped onto the landing and avoided looking through the window. My hand went to the silver locket around my neck. Steeling myself against what I imagined I would find when I opened the door, I grasped the door handle and pushed it open.

What I saw in the dim, flickering candlelight made my stomach turn and I involuntarily dry retched. Regaining my composure, I forced myself to look at the horrendous scene before me: John Harper, his unseeing eyes bulging through his eyelids, his swollen tongue protruding from his blue lips, suspended from the ceiling rafter, slowly turning like a carousel in a fairground. His corpse was limp and had lost control of its bodily functions; urine and excrement soiled his trousers and the floor beneath him.

I stared at him for a long time, conflicted by what I had put in motion. My fingers tightened around the silver locket.

Had he not been John Harper and had he not murdered Sarah, killed my dog and tried his damndest to kill me, I could have found sympathy for this man and have prayed that God take his soul in peaceful rest. But he was John Harper and he had escaped man's justice and this, his end, was what he deserved and what he would have received if he had been served true justice. May the Devil take him and may he rot in hell for eternity!

I did do the righteous thing.

I willed my anger to dissipate and looked about the room that until a few weeks prior, Sarah had filled with her light and presence. Despite the chaos of Harper's living habits, I could see Sarah there. I imagined what horror her last few hours must have been, the fear she felt and the pain she suffered at the hands of this animal. The last vestiges of sympathy or remorse I may have had for this bastard disappeared with these thoughts.

I wanted something more to remember her by even though I possessed her shawl and her precious silver locket. I turned to the chest of drawers and opened the top one carefully. It was as disordered as the rest of the room and held only Harper's few items of outer and underwear. The middle drawer was empty save for an old tin can with some shirt studs in it.

The bottom drawer was filled with an old woollen, moth-eaten blanket. There was nothing of Sarah's in any of these drawers. Not a comb, not a glove, not a pair of shoes or stockings. The bastard had rid himself of his wife and all that reminded him of her.

I pulled the blanket aside and heard the clunk of metal against the side of the drawer. Lifting the blanket, I discovered an old revolver and a small canvas bag with a

dozen or so cartridges in it. The gun was loaded. If only Sarah had known of its existence, she may have been able to protect herself.

Knowing what my intentions were, I thought the gun would serve me better than leaving it here for the police to find so I slipped it and the canvas bag into my coat pockets.

I closed the drawer and stood up taking one last look about the room and a long look at the result of my promise to Sarah.

It was a long way back to my bed, both Whiskey and I exhausted by the long day and night. In a few hours, the sun would be rising bringing a new day for most in the colony of New South Wales, but not for one.

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“Did you hear the news?” Patrick panted as he ran into the dining room. We had just sat down for our luncheon break when Patrick interrupted us. He sat in his usual place next to me and continued, spreading his napkin across his lap and helping himself to the food, “John Harper is dead.”

A gasp of horror echoed though the room.

“Yes,” he continued, “Brendan Rourke went to his place to collect him when he didn’t show up for work this morning and found him hanging from the roof beam. Suicide. There was a note that said he was sorry.”

“His conscience must have got to him,” offered Mr Morrison unsympathetically.

“Should have done it months ago,” I said vengefully, “then Sarah would still be alive.”

Everyone fell silent.

Patrick broke the silence, “Corporal Roberts told me that there were muddy footprints on the floor. He could have had visitors.”

“Or they could have been Rourke’s,” I suggested. “Are the police going to investigate or assume suicide just like they assumed Sarah’s death was an accident?” I sarcastically enquired.

Patrick gave me a strange, quizzical look and asked, “Why would they think otherwise?” then turned to his father, “Rourke’s in a state of apoplexy. Not only has he lost one of the few carpenters left in Sydney, but he’s lost the hefty advance he gave Harper

when he started the new job. Harper left nothing of any value except the few tools he hadn't yet pawned."

Patrick turned to me again and gave me a long, long look. I knew what he was thinking but I wasn't about to say another word and resumed eating my meal.

For the remainder of the day, I kept to myself and completed my chores quickly then retired to my room for my afternoon break after I had spoken to Mr Morrison in private. I wasn't there half an hour when a frantic knock on my door took my attention away from the list I was making.

"Come in, Patrick," I assumed.

Patrick closed the door behind him and sat on my bed. He didn't say a word and appeared to be struggling with his opening gambit.

"Just say it, Patrick."

"Pa just told me you're going away. Why? Where to?" he sounded hurt and I did feel for him.

"I need to get away from everything that reminds me of what happened."

"But this is your home. You've never been away. You've only ever gone as far as Manly and...and—"

"Parramatta?"

"You want to get away from me? From Pa?"

"No, Patrick, I don't want to get away from you or your father but, unless you both come with me, there's no other way," I half-heartedly joked, "I can't stay. I don't want to stay."

"Harper's gone. He's no longer a threat. Why must you leave?"

I pang of guilt squeezed my heart. I couldn't tell him; that would make him complicit in my crime—for what I had paid to be done was a crime and one for which I would surely hang, regardless of my reasons for doing it. I had to leave and not be found should the truth be discovered. "I need to find some peace, Patrick, and I won't find it here. Once I have achieved that, I will return, I promise."

"I'll come with you."

“And leave your father to manage the hotel that one day will be yours? Would that be the right thing to do, Patrick?”

His deflated look told me that he agreed. “When are you leaving?”

“After I’ve sorted out my room.”

“This room is yours. I’ll keep it for you... forever if necessary.”

I smiled in genuine gratitude and while I doubted that I would ever return, one could never foretell the direction one’s life’s path would take.

Patrick asked, “Where are you going to go?”

“Wales,” I lied, “Cardiff, to see where my mother was born and where she lived until she came here.”

“Well,” he said, “at the very least she left you with enough to take care of the passage and then some.”

“Yes,” I lied again, for most of my inheritance was used to pay for services rendered by the Push.

Patrick stood up and came over to where I sat. “You will come back, won’t you Becky? You are the only girl in this whole colony that I would ask to marry me.” He took my hand and guided me from my chair and into his arms, gently folding them around me.

I returned his gentle embrace and replied in all honesty, “And you are the only boy I would ever consider marrying.”

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A few frantic days later, I was ready to travel. I had packed everything I needed in two red leather valises. For my own safety, I dressed in male clothing but had also packed a couple of skirts and bodices together with extra shirts and trousers. With much reluctance, I left all my precious books behind, save two.

I wore Sarah’s locket about my neck and Harper’s revolver was wrapped in Sarah’s shawl in one of my valises.

The buzz that surrounded Harper’s death had subsided and the police, according to Corporal Roberts, were to submit their report to the Coroner who would most likely return a finding of suicide, driven to it by the grief over the death of his beloved wife.

At last, I was ready to go. I stood in the middle of the room that had been my world since I drew breath eighteen years ago. I looked around and could see my mother reading to me; Sarah sitting beside me on my bed laughing at my silliness; Napoleon, as a puppy, gambolling about; these were happy memories filled with love...then darkness. I heard Sarah's screams, Napoleon's yelps, Harper's violent threats...

Patrick broke my trance, "Hey, Becky, the buggy's ready. Are you sure you don't want me to see you off at the docks?"

"No, Patrick, I don't want tears in public."

"It's all right for you to cry, Becky," he consoled.

"Not me, you!" I joked.

With his customary good humour, he prodded me in the ribs, which made me flinch; they were still quite painful. His immediate reaction was to apologise. I was going to miss him.

With a contrite look, he picked up my valises and we left. "You will write, won't you?"

"Every day."

I was finding it easier and easier to lie. What I didn't tell anyone was that I was not going to the docks but to the Cobb office in the town; that I was not going to the Mother Country but to Melbourne and the goldfields; that I would not write to Patrick or anyone else.

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## CHAPTER 7

September, 1905

London

I had a restful sleep and woke to a pleasant autumn day. The bath had cleansed my mind as well as my body and although my dear Patrick's letter brought back some terrible memories, it also made me feel homesick.

Once I was released from this assignment, I vowed to myself, I would write to Patrick and tell him the truth about the past thirty-one years of my life. I did so want to see him again. His father had passed away some years ago and the Morrison Family Hotel was now Patrick's and he had done exceptionally well by all accounts.

But the job at hand was the breaking up of this ring of anarchists or communists that was abducting our heiresses.

It was eight and I expected Wills to collect me at one. With renewed vigour, I washed and dressed in my customary Special Branch clobber: black calf-length split skirt, knee-high riding boots, white shirt with stiffened linen collar and cuffs, a black tie and a loose black cropped jacket under which I concealed my holstered Webley in a bespoke harness that nestled under my bosom against my abdomen. Inside my right boot I carried a switchbladed stiletto—all issued by the Metropolitan Police to their Special Branch officers. In reality, I was as much a spy and assassin as Wills and the eight men in his charge.

My portmanteau accompanied me wherever I went and it contained the remaining tools of trade: my blacks, a battery operated flashlight, manacles and other devices I would need to subdue or eliminate threats.

I checked my reflection in the mirror in my bathroom—something I rarely did—to ensure my short-cropped white hair was in place and avoided looking at the small scar over my right brow or the much larger one to my left cheek that traced from temple to my jaw where the slash from that wretched Mohammedan’s dagger had just missed my eye. I was not ashamed of these but I was well aware of the reaction from those who laid eyes on me for the first time.

Checking the watch strapped to my wrist, I collected my overcoat and kit bag, and, satisfied that all in the room was as it should be, locked my front door behind me.

Exactly on time, a hansom pulled up and I joined Wills and we settled back for the short journey to New Scotland Yard.

“I had a letter from Patrick,” I started before any greetings were exchanged.

“Oh? And what tale have you spun in your reply?”

“That I’ll be leaving the service of Mr and Mrs Quinn as soon as the children go to boarding school.”

“As long as the children *have* been sorted and *are* in school. You’re not leaving until then, old girl.” He looked at me, “You don’t really want to leave me, do you?”

“No. Just the service of Mr and Mrs Quinn.”

Ours was a special relationship, one that Mrs Major Reginald Williams did not understand or appreciate. She was sure that Wills and I were more than colleagues even though Wills went to great pains to explain to her that I would have been more interested in bedding her than him. This, of course, disgusted her and made her dislike me even more than she did, if that were at all possible. But that suited me; it meant that I could keep her at arm’s length and not socialise with her as socialising was not something I enjoyed doing— with her or anyone.

We sat in silence for the rest of the way as it was indiscrete to discuss our ‘work’ in public.

It was not until we reached the inner sanctum of Wills' compact office that he appraised me of his recent endeavours. "We've been taken off the case," he casually informed me as he hung his Homberg on the coat rack.

I was taken aback, "What do you mean?"

Wills settled into his old swivel chair as I stood over his desk, "Hawthorne's put Yabsley in charge and we're to take leave."

"Yabsley? That's as good as locking a mad dog in a hen house."

"I went to see Alexander Quinn after I dropped you off yesterday and reported what we overheard at the Marlborough and, as we suspected, this fellow Colonel Humphries has nothing to do the Metropolitan Police or the Home Office. The only connection he and Hawthorne have is that they fought together in South Africa. Quinn was intrigued as to why Hawthorne was conferring with Humphries on a confidential case."

"Why take us off the case?"

Wills smiled that smile he gives me when he's won a point. "Hawthorne approached Quinn yesterday evening and requested that you and I be removed because of the foul up in securing the girl's safe return."

I must have looked quite perplexed, so Wills continued, "The report Hawthorne gave Quinn did not correspond with the one I gave him. Hawthorne glossed over some very salient facts, such as the confusion over the coordinates. Quinn is no fool. This morning he summoned me and we discussed at length our suspicions that the next victim will be the Duchess of Bramwell. He's not willing to risk another woman's life through lack of action, so you and I are going on a lovely holiday in Hertfordshire."

"When do we leave?"

"As soon as we've packed and finalised the paperwork here."

"What about Hawthorne? Who's looking into his activities?"

"Quinn will set things in motion there. If he is connected with this conspiracy, the secret investigation will uncover it. The most important thing now is to foil another murder and to apprehend the perpetrators."

I was very pleased that we were not thwarted yet again by Hawthorne and that we may, at last, bring these fiends to justice.

“What about Timmy?” I enquired, genuinely concerned for his wellbeing even though I was ready to finish him off when I first laid eyes upon him. He was a dupe and I knew firsthand what it was to be desperate for money and being gulled into doing something criminal.

Wills hesitated, “The boy’s dead.”

I was stunned and lost for words, “Dead? How?”

Wills explained, “Yabsley...Mad dog,” and shook his head.

“He took the death of Perkins out on the boy,” I offered angrily.

Wills looked at me and said quietly, “Rebecca, rage is an emotion we all need to control.”

I felt gently scolded. “What about his dog?” I eventually asked.

“The goaler was told to get rid of it.” My horror must have registered because Wills continued, “But I managed to find Mikey and took him home to Cornelia before I collected you.”

When my look of dismay changed to one of approval, and before I could say anything like ‘marshmallow’, Wills added quickly, “For Reggie, you understand. A boy needs a dog.”

He shuffled the papers and files on his desk, not daring to look at me, then added, “Right then. Quinn wants to see the both of us before we’re officially suspended. Ready?”

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Alexander Quinn was an extremely busy and important man but always made time for my Major Williams. Whether it was the several citations and medals Wills had earned during his military career or Wills’ connection with Major General Stokes was hard to determine but it was a mystery to me why my Major Williams was not in Hawthorne’s position and why Hawthorne was. Like me, Wills admitted he enjoyed and preferred the field work, and disliked the paperwork, and he felt he was of more benefit to the empire being involved in protecting the aristocracy and the monarch.

Wills and I were greeted cordially by Quinn. Our meeting was brief and our orders succinct: proceed to Abbotsford Hall, protect the Duchess of Bramwell and capture alive any person who threatens her life. That last order was directed at me.

We had only a few days to prepare for our indeterminable stay and to get to the country seat of the Norlands, one of the oldest families in England. The modus operandi of these insurgents seemed to be to abduct one frail female, hold her to ransom—which appeared to be in ever increasing amounts—and then despatch the victim once the ransom was paid.

Hawthorne had a contingency of more than eight well trained men but seemed to flounder in making decisions based on evidence and probabilities; every one he had made so far led to dead-ends. He had blamed the inaccuracy of the evidence, the inability of certain men to carry out their assigned tasks and, finally, Wills for fouling up the coordinates and allowing the perpetrators to escape.

Something was definitely amiss in the Chief Administrator's office.

After our meeting with the Head of the Special Branch, Quinn immediately contacted the Home Secretary, Aretas Akers-Douglas who contacted the Prime Minister and a meeting was arranged between Quinn and the Duke of Bramwell, Charles Dunmore Norland. Quinn was to travel to Abbotsford Hall a day ahead of our arrival.

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The duke's study in the large eighteenth century country house was opulent and displayed all the characteristics of an ancient family's background, breeding and wealth.

The duke was an elegantly handsome man of sixty-five years, lean and stylish and softly spoken but his gentlemanly mannerisms belied the incisive and shrewd mind of the businessman. His wife of thirty-six years was Mary, the second daughter of the twelfth Earl of Chestermere, equally as elegant, quietly spoken and stylish with an impish outlook on life that exerted her to dress in the latest fashions.

It was here in the study that Alexander Quinn explained his concerns and plans in detail to both the duke and duchess, finishing his dialogue with, "The threat is very real, Your Grace."

Mary was not impressed and maybe just a little peeved, "What utter nonsense, Mr Quinn. I don't need to be coddled like a child."

The duke, always the oil on troubled waters, offered, “It’s for your protection, my dear. And I would not like to see you harmed in any way. Besides, it’s only for a week or so, isn’t that right, Quinn?”

“Yes, Your Grace, perhaps three weeks.”

Mary pleaded with her husband, “But Charlie, to have these people shadow my every move, really!”

Quinn intervened and assured Mary, “If I may, Your Grace, I assure you they will be discreet. There’ll be a man outside your chamber while you rest and a woman will be with you at all other times.”

The duke questioned, “A woman? Surely, if the danger to the Duchess is as great as you say—”

“Let me assure you, Sir, this particular woman is vastly experienced and has been commended personally by our late gracious Queen herself. There is no one more suited to this task than she.”

The duke was not entirely convinced but he had other concerns, “I’ll keep you to your word, Quinn, no harm had better come to the Duchess or it will be your head, old man.” Quinn tacitly conceded and the duke continued, “I have some very important business with my niece that I cannot defer—”

“And I have a house party of fifteen Saturday,” added the duchess.

“It is imperative that you not change any plans,” Quinn insisted, “If what we suspect is correct, this house is already under observation. Possibly from within.”

This alarmed both the duke and duchess; the duke offered, “All our staff have been with us for years—”

“I cannot imagine any one of them being so desperate as to resort to such treachery,” added the duchess.

“I sincerely hope Your Grace is correct. However, I beg that only your most trusted servants know of our arrangement.”

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It was another fifteen minute coach ride to Abbotsford Hall after the three hour, monotonously hypnotic train journey. Wills and I hardly exchanged a word, as was our

wont, so accustomed to each other's company that we were content not to be in constant conversation.

Wills was comfortably and impeccably attired in a dark brown three-piece suit, his cherished Homberg and an overcoat while the only concession to formal attire I made from my usual Special Branch outfit was a pair of black leather gloves and a jaunty bowler hat.

Wills occupied his time reading through volumes of reports and making notes while my thoughts led me through the incidents that brought us to this conclusion. It was more than once that they veered away and into the distant recesses of my past and I realised how similar the circumstances between young Timmy and me were. I had been the same age as Timmy.

I toyed with my silver locket as I gazed at the distant landscape.

"Penny for your thoughts," Wills bid, "Oh, all right, a sovereign," he raised when I glared at him.

Wills was as gentle and considerate as Patrick had been. Patrick was two years my senior and Wills five years my junior. While Wills was officially my 'superior officer' and mentor, his attitude toward me showed that he considered me his equal in every way. We made a good team.

"Thinking of home again? Of Sarah? London's your home, Bec."

"I'm tired, Wills. That letter from Patrick brought home to me just how much I've missed of his life in Sydney."

"That's his life; this is your life."

"He's a respected member of parliament and I'm a...a...Just what am I, Wills?"

"You're an agent of the King, and your job is to protect him and his realm."

"Hawthorne and Yabsley are right. I'm a misfit and an aberration of humanity."

"What utter horseshit."

"I can tolerate other people hating me but I'm beginning to hate myself. I'm a murderer, Wills. I was ready to blow Timmy's brains out without a second thought."

"Pull yourself together, Davies, we have a very difficult task at hand. I don't want you being maudlin and feeling sorry for yourself."

He was right, I was drowning in self-pity.

Wills must have felt guilty over his outburst and added, “Besides, what would you do with yourself if you gave this game away? You don’t have a husband to support your...peccadillos. What would you take as employment? Nurse? Governess? Teacher? I’d be happy to write you a character: ‘To whom it may concern. Miss Rebecca Victoria Davies, proficient spy and assassin, deadly shot with pistol or rifle, lethal wielding a garrotte or stiletto, excels in stealth, subterfuge and cunning.’ Yes, highly sought-after qualifications in the art of looking after children.”

He was right again; I was no good for anything useful in the normal world.

“Now pull yourself out of that funk. I won’t hear any more of that rubbish.” He returned to his pile of papers then sheepishly looked up at me, “And you would miss me, wouldn’t you?”

I chuckled and replied, “As much as you would miss me.” He gave me a broad smile and again resumed his reading.

I looked at him and smiled. I knew he truly cared for me—in a platonic way. He was a gentleman and had never tried anything with me—except that time, all those years ago, when we were both so drunk—what a fiasco that was, one that we vowed never to mention ever again. Once we returned to England, Wills settled down and finally proposed to his longtime sweetheart, Cornelia Coltrane, and had been happily married ever since. They had only one child, a much-loved seven-year-old son, Reginald Junior. Of course, being who and what I was, my presence at the family residence was not ever requested by Mrs Williams.

I returned to gaze out the window of the coach, seeing nothing but blurry images of trees flashing by. My thoughts turned once more to Timmy and how he and his father and uncle had been used. Images of my own flight from Paddington came flooding back—that damned letter from Patrick!

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## CHAPTER 8

May, 1874 - Saturday

Beechworth, Victoria

The red and yellow coach-and-five trundled along the stony bush road to Beechworth, made slushy by puddles from the newly fallen late autumn rain. The driver was a middle-aged American who deftly handled a separate rein for each of the five horses. He had graciously and unexpectedly introduced himself at the beginning of the journey as Lucas Taylor from San Francisco and we reciprocated. From that time on, he addressed each of us by name.

Inside the dark coach, arranged on thinly padded wooden seats, were four women, two children and an elderly man all being jostled together with each bump and knock from the rutted road. I was pleased to be sitting on the carriage roof with the luggage arranged and strapped down around me and, huddled under my mackintosh and hat, I felt quite safe and cosy. My ribs were still sore but I had bound my chest tightly so that the jarring from the rough road caused me only some discomfort at times.

Next to Taylor sat a young man, Godfrey Saunders, most likely a clerk by his attire, who had paid a small 'gratuity' to be allowed to sit on the box seat with him. Had I the wherewithal, I would have done my best to outbid Godfrey Saunders but I was content enough up here. Garbed in my trousers and jacket, and having introduced myself as Robert Davies, rather than Rebecca, Taylor had assumed me to be an adolescent boy and allowed me to nestle on the roof, something Cobb and Co would not allow females to do.

This was far better than sitting in a dark, stuffy carriage with the only conversation being of children's illnesses, temperaments and mental aptitude, during this long haul. Up here, apart from some light rain, the air was fresh and the conversation interesting. Taylor was garrulous and kept up an incessant string of chatter with Saunders and me, even though I was not in any particular mood to be talkative.

We travelled at an average of around seven miles an hour and every fifteen to thirty miles or so, we changed horses for a fresh team. Each team was perfectly matched in colour and made a fine showing. Compared to train travel, where it was available, it was slow going but what little money I had left meant I had to economise and the railways were out of the question.

Our next change station was going to be just outside of Beechworth, nestled in the May Day Hills and along the Reedy Creek, which was as far as my money was allowing me to go. This township had grown considerably with the discovery of gold some twenty years before and now had settled into a stable country town determined to have a railway connection. I had to find some sort of employment there so I could continue my journey to Melbourne, and anonymity, some hundred and eighty miles away.

"What are your plans in Melbourne?" Taylor enquired of Saunders over the clatter and rumble of hooves and wheels.

"I'm to oversee our branch office in Elizabeth Street," Saunders replied.

"Married?"

"Not yet. My fiancée will join me once I've settled in and found a house."

"Ah, family. I have a boy in Bendigo just about his age," Taylor said referring to me. "And you, Robert," he said over his shoulder, "you're leaving us in Beechworth. What are your plans?"

Reluctantly, I replied, "Look for a job to pay for the rest of my fare to Melbourne."

"Not gold prospecting, then?" Taylor laughed, "Make a quick buck?"

"No. I wouldn't know how."

"Easy come, easy go," Saunders chimed in, "An honest day's work for an honest day's pay is the best way. There's really no other choice."

Saunders' rhetoric spurred me, "There's always a choice, Mr Saunders. Sometimes we have to choose something that may seem wrong to others."

Saunders half turned in his seat to face me, "You see, I don't believe that. Your path is predetermined by God. There's no choice. Whatever you do, God has chosen for you. You can't go against God's will."

"I disagree, Mr Saunders. God always gives you two choices. His will is the choice you make, not the other way around."

Taylor chuckled to himself, obviously enjoying the discussion.

Saunders persisted, "Are you saying, then, that God wills you to be bad?"

"No, you're saying that. I'm saying that you choose to be bad or good. You choose to be drunk or sober. You choose to hurt someone or love someone. Nobody makes you do anything except you—you have a choice; you make the decision. And it's the coward's way out to blame someone else for the choices you've made."

Taylor remarked, "It sounds like you're speaking from experience there, son."

Immediately, I felt that I had said too much; Saunders, however, was relentless and insisted, "No. I believe that our lives are predetermined by God and nothing you do will change that divine plan."

"You believe what you like, Mr Saunders, and I will follow my path, making a choice at each fork in the road."

The rear wheel hit a rather nasty bump and sent us all six inches into the air with squeals and gasps from the women and children, and a cry of pain from me.

Taylor called back, "Apologies, ladies!" then looked back to me to see if I was unharmed, "You okay there, son?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," I lied as my chest was still stinging from the jolt.

Taylor must have been concerned as he continued, "You say you need a job? Maybe I can help you, son. The German who runs the change station is always in need of help. I'll put in a good word for you."

"Thank you, Mr Taylor."

"You're welcome, son," and, as an aside to Saunders, I overheard him say, "Looks like he could use a good feed, too."

The few remaining miles to Beechworth were relatively smooth and uneventful and it was getting close to sunset. The thick bush was thinning out to pastureland and fenced paddocks and, in the distance, we could see the curling smoke from homesteads' chimneys scattered about. The evening air was filled with the distinctive scent of the eucalypt trees and the sounds of the bush birds, calling their last farewells of the day to each other. We were all weary from the long distance travelled that day and I, for one, was looking forward to a plate of warm food and a bed.

Taylor reached beneath his seat into the compartment of the fore boot and retrieved a bugle. He pursed his lips to the mouthpiece and blew a huge lungful of air through the instrument, emitting the most ear-piercing screech I had ever heard. The horses, rather than being frightened by it, seemed to be comforted by it perhaps knowing that rest for them was not far off.

Within a few minutes, we had reached our destination, the change station on the periphery of Beechworth. It was a collection of stone and weatherboard buildings, a few paddocks and a small cluster of fruit trees peeping from behind the main, double-storey building, which, I surmised, was the inn. This and the other buildings were not new but were well looked after. There was a kitchen attached to the inn with inviting aromas emanating from it—I was hungry. Another building close to the capacious stables was the stable hands' and groom's quarters. A chicken coop and a barn that housed a few goats, cows and sheep would have provided the family and guests with ample eggs, milk, cream, butter and cheese.

Taylor applied the brakes and gently reined in his five, "Whoa, whoa there boys!" and came to a stop between the stables and the inn.

From the stables, two young men ran out to greet the coach and take hold of two of the three lead horses to settle them.

At the same time, two women darted out from the inn toward the coach. They looked quite similar; one was older and the other most likely her daughter. Both were dressed neatly and cleanly, in clothing that suited hardworking women.

"Mrs Schwartzman!" called Taylor in an amiable tone.

“Mr Taylor,” the older woman called back, equally affably, “Herzlich willkommen!”

The coach door swung open and one of the young men quickly placed a small box at the door and assisted the ladies, children and elderly man from the coach as Taylor and Saunders climbed down from the box. I clambered over the luggage and threw aside my mackintosh and I, too, descended from the coach via the box.

I peered about me in the dim evening light and took in the freshness of the area while I stretched to relieve the compaction of sitting for so long.

Taylor made the introductions, “Ladies and gentlemen...and children...this is your hostess for the night, Mrs Schwartzman and her daughter, Hilda. You won’t find two lovelier ladies in all of Victoria. Or better food,” he added jovially.

Mrs Schwartzman openly flushed at the compliment and in a dense German accent replied, “Mr Taylor, you make me blush. But thank you and herzlich willkommen everybody. Hilda will take you inside and register you. Hot supper and warm bed is ready for you all.”

While I waited to see if Taylor could secure me a position with this company, I caught a glimpse of the two young stable hands as they unhitched the horses. They were sniggering to each other, looking at me and looking at Hilda. My attention diverted to Mrs Schwartzman’s daughter who, while ushering the other passengers into the inn, kept glancing toward me with a provocative, ‘come hither’ look. The youths found it quite amusing that Hilda should be paying me so much attention, attention I did not seek or desire.

“Son!” Taylor called to me, catching my attention. He gestured for me to join him and Mrs Schwartzman, “Missus, this young lad here, Robert Davies, is in need of employment and I reckon you could do with a spare pair of willing hands right now.”

Mrs Schwartzman appeared to be troubled by this request, “Mr Taylor,” she faltered, “Mr Schwartzman does all the hiring and he is in Melbourne presently with our son, Gerhardt.”

“Another reason to put young Robert on until the lord and master returns. Then he can decide to keep Robbie on or not. I’m sure he’ll do an excellent job even though he

don't look like much, eh?" he turned to me, "Eh, Rob? You'd do a good job, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, Sir. I worked in a hotel in Sydney all my life."

"*All of your life, you say?*" Taylor repeated with a touch of unintentional sarcasm. He turned to Mrs Schwartzman, "What do you say, Missus? Why not give the youngster a try? If he don't oblige then you can throw him on the next coach through here. Or under it. He won't be no trouble."

"I really don't know—"

"He's a good lad. And he's smart, too."

A long moment passed while Mrs Schwartzman considered her options. There was something that concerned her more than putting on a worker without her husband's approval; her concern went far deeper than that. Perhaps the looking-over that Hilda gave me and the amusement it caused the two stable hands had something to do with it. She was well aware that her two stable hands were struggling to manage the five horses and unloading the overnight baggage of the guests. Finally, she made a decision, "All right, Mr Taylor, I will give Robert a position here but only until Mr Schwartzman and Gerhard return in two days' time."

"Thank you, Missus. You won't regret it, I'm sure. Say thank you, Rob."

I obliged with a truly grateful, "Thank you," even though this whole situation didn't feel quite right.

Mrs Schwartzman directed, "Robert, since you will be a worker and not a guest, take your valises to the stablemen's quarters. Wolfgang and Daniel will show you which bed you can have. You can have supper with the guests for tonight but, tomorrow, you will eat with the staff. Mr Schwartzman will discuss wages with you when he returns. Is that suitable with you?"

I could only agree—the alternative was not feasible.

I took my two cases to the stable hands' cottage but decided to keep the case with my female attire and Harper's old revolver with me. It also held my Sarah's precious shawl and I didn't want to let that out of my sight.

In the warm and inviting dining room, my travelling companions had settled into little groups at various tables and were being served plentiful plates of stewed meat, vegetables and hot crusty bread. Tea and coffee were on offer for those of the temperate persuasion and beer and ale for the others.

Taylor sat alone at a table and was looked after by Mrs Schwartzman while Hilda attended to the other guests. I looked about for a spare table and must have appeared quite lost when Taylor spied me and invited me to join him, which I gladly accepted.

Once again, Hilda caught my eye but this time she was paying particular attention to Godfrey Saunders, quite overtly and scandalously flirting with him. Every now and then, she would glance over to me to see if I was watching but I tried my best to ignore her. Taylor noticed it all and commented between large mouthfuls of stew, “Don’t pay no heed to Hilda, son, her pa keeps her on a short lead and she tends to play around a bit when he’s away.”

“I won’t, Mr Taylor,” I replied breaking some bread and preparing to enjoy my meal, “I need this job more than I need any encumbrance.”

“Encumbrance,” Taylor chuckled, “That’s a mighty big word for such a young feller. You know how to spell it?”

“Yes.”

“I knew you were a smart one. What’s for you in Melbourne when you get there?” he quizzed as he took another scoop of stew into his mouth.

I paused as I reflected on the reason for my flight. “Nothing,” I replied indifferently, “I suppose this is my ‘grand tour’.”

“Well, you take care, Robert my boy. It’s a mean and nasty world out there and there are many who would take advantage of someone like you,” he advised most solicitously.

“Thank you,” I earnestly replied, “I will. I don’t intend letting anyone take advantage of me or those I care for.”

Taylor gave me a genuinely warm and fatherly smile and we ate the rest of our meal in companionable silence.

When supper was finished, the other guests sat and chatted or played games while I returned to the stable hands' quarters with my case. There, Wolfgang and Daniel were sprucing themselves up for a night on the town, this being Saturday night.

Wolfgang was the taller and of obvious Teutonic heritage being fair-haired and blue-eyed like I was. He spoke with a slight Germanic accent and it was quite probable that his position here was because of his parentage. Daniel, on the other hand, was a tawny-skinned, dark-eyed and dark-haired lad and spoke with a distinct colonial twang: a mixture of Cockney, brogue and Cornish, as all we currency lads and lasses did.

They were of that age between adolescence and adulthood where they looked like adults but behaved like children—and that's what all that sniggering was about.

Preening themselves in the small common mirror on the adjacent wall, Wolfgang addressed me through its reflection, "Coming to town with us? Do the block?"

Daniel chimed in, "Lots of girls," and giggled immaturely.

"No," I replied, "It's been a long day. But thanks."

Wolfgang simpered, "Maybe girls don't interest you?" which caused Daniel to laugh boisterously and elbow Wolfgang with a knowing wink.

"Come on," Daniel urged Wolfgang.

"Don't wait up," Wolfgang advised as they both rollicked out by the only door to the quarters.

I did not know at the time what they were inferring: did they suspect me not to be male or that, if I were, I was a molly? I was too tired to try to work it out and, at that point, I really didn't care. I needed this job to earn some wages to get to Melbourne. "Keep your head down and keep out of trouble," I said to myself as I placed my valise on the bed and opened it. Lying on top was Sarah's shawl. I took it up and buried my face in it. It was only four weeks since that dreadful night. I was still mourning Sarah's passing and thought of her every day and prayed for her soul every night, asking for her forgiveness at the end of each prayer for all my broken promises.

I shook off my despair and replaced Sarah's shawl, closed the valise and stowed it under my bed. The other valise stood at the bed end together with my mackintosh and hat. Hefting the case onto the bed, I opened it and rummaged to find my night dress—a long



shirt—to change into. I uncovered Harper’s ancient revolver and the terrible images of that night, a little more than a week ago, rushed back. He had to pay for what he did and, if the law of the land failed, then... He had to pay. He did pay.

I buried the gun into the folds of my shirts and closed the case. Removing my jacket, I placed it neatly on the end of my bed and then removed my shirt. Sarah’s silver locket was around my neck and the bandages were still tight and firmly in place, wrapped around my chest from armpit to waist. I was a little concerned that the physical work in store for me tomorrow may cause me some grief but the thought of getting to Melbourne helped to firm my resolve.

“Why didn’t you go with Wolfie and Daniel?” Hilda’s low and husky query startled me and I turned to her and modestly held my night shirt up to my chest.

She approached me with a determined and suggestive look, “What happened?” she asked referring to my bindings.

“Ah...a horse threw me,” I lied.

Hilda chuckled, “That’s very honest of you, Robert. Most boys would say they had been in a fight and won.”

She was now a soft breath away from me. Hilda was about the same size as Sarah, a few inches shorter than me, her hair was light brown while Sarah’s was a lustrous dark auburn; Hilda’s eyes were hazel, Sarah’s a deep brown that I fell into every time I saw them. How different these two women were; how I missed Sarah.

Hilda must have wondered what I was thinking as she glanced from my eyes to my mouth, “Penny for your thoughts,” she whispered, her breath caressing my naked throat.

All I could do was shake my head slowly as words failed me.

Hilda chuckled again, “We have time,” she promised as she took a small step back and looked at the locket at my neck. She took it between her fingers and said, “Pretty. Your sweetheart’s?”

“Yes,” I answered as I gently prized it from her fingers and quickly put on my night shirt.

“Lucky girl,” Hilda retorted as she draped herself across my bed. “Mr Taylor said you’re smart. I suppose you read a lot. My father has lots of books. Maybe you’d like to read some of them? They’re mostly in German. But I could teach you.”

“I won’t be here that long.”

Hilda launched herself upright once more and sidled up to me, “Maybe you would stay if there was a good reason...?” and caressed my face with the back of her hand.

I wanted to push her away but I needed employment but, if I yielded to Hilda’s wanton needs, that, too, could see me expelled, so I did nothing. This was all Hilda needed and, without provocation or invitation, she captured my mouth with her lips.

She was not Sarah and while I needed comforting, I could not betray Sarah so soon and with someone so brash. Taking Hilda by the arms, I gently pushed her away. “I think you’d better go,” I said.

Hilda turned to leave and, half turning back, invited, “The library’s always open for you, Robert.”

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We were up before dawn the next morning and out in the hitching yard after a quick breakfast of hot sweetened milk and bread. I don’t know what time Wolfgang and Daniel returned the night before but I was fast asleep when they did. Now we were all three hitching five chestnuts to the rails; the two stronger and larger polers in the back row and the three smaller pacers in the front row. The centre horse was the leader and was the most valuable to the driver as this horse was instrumental in steering the coach.

As we worked, Wolfgang gave me a backhanded compliment, “Looks like you know what you’re doing, Robert. Dan and I had a bet. I won.”

Daniel snarled a grunt of disappointment.

Wolfgang continued, “We saw Hilda come in after we left last night.”

Daniel interrupted, “She don’t waste no time that one. She’s fast. Did she ‘show you around?’”

“A word of warning, Robert, if her papa finds out—”

“You’re dead,” Daniel helpfully concluded.

“She doesn’t interest me,” I said in all honesty.

Daniel sniggered in his usual, annoying way, “That’s what we figured,” he ridiculed.

We had completed the harnessing when Taylor approached, paying particular attention to the centre lead horse but showed kindness and affection for all the horses in his care and control, “How’s it coming along, boys?”

“All ready, Mr Taylor,” Wolfgang answered as Taylor checked the rigging. Taylor’s appearance was followed by a straggle of some of the passengers, most of whom were still half asleep.

“Time to load up,” Taylor instructed Wolfgang, adding, “not you, Robbie. Best you give them ribs a chance to heal.”

“You can muck out the stables before church,” Wolfgang ordered as he and Daniel stacked the passengers’ overnight baggage onto the hind boot and the passengers arranged themselves in the coach.

The rakes, shovels and barrow were stowed just inside the stable doors in the tack room. Grabbing one of each, I went into the first of the empty stalls and began the arduous but necessary task of removing the horses’ night soil and replacing the straw with a clean covering. There were twenty stalls in all, twelve of which were still occupied and whose tenants would be removed to the paddock by Daniel once the coach had departed.

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The sun was just breaking over the horizon and it was going to be a beautifully sunny autumn day. Laughing jackasses and lorikeets were all around, calling and screeching their morning overtures. The coach was ready to depart but for one passenger: Godfrey Saunders.

Taylor went inside the inn to hurry him along when he saw Saunders and Hilda in a cosy tête-à-tête in a far corner. Knowing Hilda and her overt flirtatiousness, it was obvious to him why Saunders was late.

“Mr Saunders,” Taylor called, “we’re ready for you, if you’d care to join us.”

The unwelcomed disruption to their hushed and very private conversation caused Hilda to scowl and Saunders to ashamedly jump to attention, “Righto, Mr Taylor,” he offered, “just finalising my account with Miss Schwartzman.” Saunders made his farewells

to Hilda and scurried past Taylor who stood, hands on hips, in silent admonition. He shook his head at Hilda who turned and left in a huff, nose in the air.

With the loading of the coach complete and the baggage properly stowed and secured, Wolfgang and Daniel returned to the stables to begin moving the spare horses into the paddock. Saunders sheepishly emerged from the inn, followed a few steps behind by Taylor, and both climbed onto the box seat. Taylor settled in and took up the reins just as Mrs Schwartzman came from the kitchen annex to farewell her itinerant guests and Taylor—something she always did, come rain or shine. Taylor had nothing but admiration for her and what she had to endure. He could not say the same for her husband, a bully of a man, nor his son, a milksop, nor his daughter, a trifler to say the kindest of her.

With a click of his tongue and a gentle flick of the whip, the coach resumed its rattling, bone-shaking journey to Melbourne.

Mrs Schwartzman returned to her cooking duties and the dust from the coach's wheels had barely settled when, from the north, four horsemen clip-clopped toward the inn. They and their horses were bedraggled, scruffy and quite weary having travelled most of the night. The four riders were unshaven and wore their wide-brimmed hats low over their eyes. Two displayed a holstered sidearm just visible from their opened oilskin dusters; all had rifles strapped to their saddles or in carpetbags or bed rolls. They may have been stockmen on their way to a new job but they certainly appeared to have lived a hard life on the road.

Pulling up ten yards or so from the inn's doorway, they looked about surveying the lay of the land. "This'll do," the leader announced as he dismounted, removing his carpetbag and sleeping roll. The rest followed suit.

The leader was Johnson, about late middle-age with a snarly, leathery, weather-beaten face that didn't invite sympathy in any form. He wasn't terribly tall but certainly taller than two of his compatriots, Tanner and Pitt. The younger of these two, Pitt, was baby-faced and in his mid-twenties. He sported a sparse blondish beard and hair that spiked from beneath his hat like straw. Tanner was wiry and about the same age as Johnson and his feral, wide-eyed look and toothy, crooked grin would have sent shivers down the spine of even the bravest of men.

The last man was Percy, tall, brawny, swarthy and stern but did not display any arrogance or malevolence, only wariness. He was half-caste Aborigine and, while he was as dishevelled as the other three, his attire was altogether of a better quality than theirs.

After a final visual reconnaissance of the surrounds, Johnson handed Percy his horse's reins and, indicating the stables, ordered, "Give them a rub down and a feed." Tanner and Pitt handed their reins to Percy with a smirk and followed Johnson into the inn.

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Hilda had repositioned herself behind the registration counter and was busily doing nothing but daydreaming and doodling when the three unkempt wayfarers strolled in, scrutinising every corner of the room. Aware of the imposition on her valuable time, Hilda looked up and was jolted to attention when she caught sight of them.

"Ah...yes...good morning...gentlemen," she stuttered.

Johnson leaned his elbow on the desk and uttered, "Morning, Miss. Me and me lads need a couple of rooms for a couple of nights."

Hilda hesitated.

"Is there a problem?" Johnson enquired, "You don't seem to be run off your feet."

"Ah, no. No problem. Sorry. How many? Three?"

"Four. And four horses."

With some reluctance, Hilda pushed the registration book to Johnson who inked the pen and began writing as Hilda tried being cordial, "Here on business?"

"Yeah."

"To do with the mines?"

"Yeah." This response from Johnson made Tanner let out a squeal of a giggle, which earned him Johnson's glare.

"Where are you headed?" Hilda nosily questioned.

Pitt, seeing a chance to obtain some 'extra service', replied tactlessly, "Myrtleford. Want to come with me?"

This earned Pitt a deathly glare from Johnson. Pitt immediately took a step back, eyes downcast.

Hilda smiled and persisted with her innocent interrogation, "Are you assayers?"

Tanner stifled a laugh. This annoyed Johnson who cut the conversation short, “How much, Miss?”

“Ah...a shilling for each bed and sixpence for each horse, two nights, twelve shillings, please. Breakfast’s included but not dinner.”

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I was up to my sixth stall and barrow-load and not looking forward to the remaining fourteen now that Wolfgang and Daniel had moved the horses to the back paddock. I don’t know where they’d got to but I was by myself with this task and my ribs were starting to complain.

The sound of an abrupt “Hey, boy,” caught my attention and I turned to see the silhouette of a tall man holding onto four horses in the doorway of the stables.

“Yes?” I queried.

“Can you take care of these animals? Feed and water. And a rub down.”

“Sure,” I said as I dropped my rake with pleasure and joined the man, taking the reins from him, “You staying here?”

“Yeah. A couple of nights.”

It was then that I realised this man was aboriginal and some sort of reaction must have registered on my face; he added, “Is there a problem?”

“No,” I said, “Sorry. Are you a full blood?”

He looked at me suspiciously; I explained, “I’ve never met a full blood before. I’m down from Sydney.”

The man relaxed and even gave a faint smile, “Nah. Half. My father was a white fella.” He added, “You?”

I looked at him nonplussed; I was white, blond and blue-eyed. Then his big toothy grin revealed that he was larking, so I responded, “I don’t even know who my father was. So I could be.”

He laughed and that made me laugh.

“Well, this is a fine establishment,” he said, “I don’t know if I want to stay in a place that lets a boong and a bastard in!” He looked at me and held out his hand, “Percy.”

I took it and shook hard, “Robert.”

“Robert the muckraker. Been working here long?”

“First day. Saving to go to Melbourne.”

“Someone waiting for you there? Fiancée? Wife?”

“No! I just turned eighteen!”

“Don’t get hitched too soon,” he earnestly advised, “They can be a millstone, wife and kids.”

From near the inn came a loud, “Hey! Perce!” interrupting our cordiality.

Percy turned to him and replied, “Tanner. What do you want?”

“Get your black arse over here!” The man who approached us had a face that would scare the freckles off a highlander. Tanner was as ugly as the pile of fresh excrement in my barrow and the contents of my barrow actually smelt better than he did.

He looked me over and said to Percy, “You like the white fella, eh, Perce? Taste better than black fellas?”

“Shut up, Tanner.” With an apologetic look thrown back to me, Percy led Tanner back into the inn.

Diverting my attention from that curious transaction to the four horses in hand, I realised that, while they were tired and dirty, these four mounts were actually of high quality; one was even a thoroughbred. I thought it unusual for four men of that calibre to have four horses of this calibre.

Leading the horses toward the newly mucked out stalls, I realised that one of the saddles still had the bags and rifle tied on.

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When I reached the inn with the rifle, carpetbag and sleeping roll, I found Hilda arguing with Johnson, “You didn’t say one of you was a...a—”

“Boong?” Johnson offered.

Tanner sniffed the air and remarked sarcastically, “Is that what it is?”

“Shut up, Tanner.” Johnson turned to Hilda, “His money not good enough for you?”

“It’s just... my father doesn’t want blacks in here. Or Chinese.”

Johnson conceded, “I can understand Chinks—”

“Maybe he can sleep in the stables,” Hilda suggested.

This wasn't the Christian thing to do. I had to say something. "He's not an animal, Hilda." I gave the carpetbag to Percy, "You left this."

"Robert! This is none of your concern."

"I'll wager that even your German bible says that humans were made in God's image. Who's to say He wasn't black?"

"That's sacrilege!"

"Or a woman, for that matter," I added.

Percy addressed Hilda directly, respectfully and eloquently, taking her by surprise, "I assure you, Miss, I won't be any trouble to you. I left my nulla-nulla and spears in my humpy back in Bathurst."

Hilda was wavering; she didn't know what to do. Perhaps they would be gone before her father returned. "Two days," she warned Johnson, "Only two days." She would explain to her mother who surely would understand, especially since she, too, had made a decision without first consulting the head of the family. She turned to me, "I do this for you, Robert Davies. You owe me."

The threat was implicit. I only hoped that, when the time came to service my debt, I'd have enough saved to leave for Melbourne.

One final indignation for Percy was the rider Hilda added, "You can stay. But use the back door. Please."

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During the course of that Sunday, I discovered that Wolfgang and Daniel, once they had paddocked the coach horses, told Mrs Schwartzman they were off to church and I didn't see them at all for the rest of the day. I was given a few more chores to complete before I, too, attended mass and, apart from soreness, I didn't mind at all as it gave me the opportunity to show I was a willing worker...and it kept Hilda at bay.

After resting for most of the day, the four horsemen took to the saddle again and rode off to the west, toward Wangaratta, and returned just as the sun was shedding its last rays for the day.

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The next morning, Wolfgang and Daniel, having returned late the night before, were still soundly sleeping as I rose. It was just before dawn; I had had a long and deep sleep, and now wanted to have a thorough wash, in private and uninterrupted. The little lavatory attached to the quarters was lockable and didn't have any windows so I was confident I could carry out my ablutions undisturbed.

With my valise in hand, I locked myself in and stripped off, removing the bindings from my chest. The bracing, icy water felt good as I cleansed my body and wondered how I would conceal my “you-know-whats”, as Patrick delicately put it, when the time came. I quickly dried off and rebound my chest if only to hide my breasts, for the discomfort of my mending ribs had lessened somewhat.

A fresh shirt and half-stockings made me feel new; I would wash the discards later. I was now ready for the new day.

A coach was expected late in the afternoon and all was in readiness for it. By midday, the three of us had mucked out the stables, fed and watered all the horses including the four belonging to the ‘assayers’, polished up the tack and were ready for a break and a light repast. Wolfgang and Daniel headed off for the kitchen while I prepared to do my laundry by gathering up my discarded clothing I'd left in the quarters.

“We have a laundress, you know.”

Hilda startled me—she certainly was stealthy and I was annoyed, “Don't you ever knock?”

“Why? What do boys do when no one's watching?” Her smirk told me she knew very well what boys did when no one was watching.

“What do you want, Hilda? I'm busy.”

“You owe me.”

I didn't expect the piper would want payment so soon, “So what do you want?” I threw back.

“You know what I want,” she whispered as she cornered me.

“If your pa finds out—”

“Are you going to tell him?” Her breath once more caressed my throat.

“You might be the one who's sorry,” I warned enigmatically.

“Try me.” Her voice trailed off as she pressed her body against me and pushed her mouth against mine.

Against my wishes, my body responded to her insistence and, aware that she would be seeking a reaction from my nether regions—a reaction that would not be forthcoming—I raised my thigh to press against her pubis and avoid discovery. My mouth and hands, however, took hold of her and our tongues fought for supremacy while my hands fondled and stroked every part of her body they could reach.

Within a few short seconds, we were breathless and broke our kiss. Hilda’s hands reached for my belt; I quickly took hold of them and warned, “No.”

“I want to see. I want to touch,” she pleaded trying to free herself from my grip.

“No. I’ll give you what you want but not that way.”

Hilda looked at me, puzzled, then realised what I was offering and smiled wantonly.

“The bed,” I ordered, equally as wantonly as she had, as I guided her to it. She lay herself down on it, her gaze never leaving me. I climbed onto the bed and knelt beside her, my hand finding its way up the inside of her leg and to its destination. Her breath became laboured and the pupils in her eyes dilated. I imagined her to be Sarah and that this was the culmination of our love for each other, a love we never had the chance to consummate.

Hilda’s eyes closed in rapture as I gently probed and began the repayment of my debt. With each ministration, Hilda’s breath became more rapid and with each breath, my ministrations became more determined until she stopped breathing altogether and I felt a tightening. She finally expelled a long, laboured exhalation and I withdrew.

“Oh, Robert,” she sighed, “I have never felt that before.”

All I could do was gaze at Hilda in awe; this was the first time I had made love to another woman or, in fact, to anyone else, and I was bewildered by its effect on me. How I wished it had been Sarah. Tears welled in my eyes and I quickly turned away before Hilda noticed.

The rumble of a horse and cart roused us, followed by Mrs Schwartzman frantic calls, “Hilda! Hilda! Dein Vater ist zu Hause!”

Hilda sprang off my bed and adjusted her skirts and mumbled, quite irritated, “He wasn’t supposed to be back until tomorrow,” then hurried out, leaving me in a state of perplexity and confusion.

Through the window, I could see a heavily laden cart pulled by a solitary, overworked Clydesdale, driven by an older, potbellied man and a youth, whom I assumed to be Hilda’s father and brother. The only resemblance they bore to each other was the colour of their hair and eyes: blond and blue, except the older man’s hair was grizzled. They were otherwise chalk and cheese in appearance and demeanour.

Hilda ran to her mother’s side and, Mrs Schwartzman seeing from where Hilda had come, asked in a hushed tone, “Was hast du da drin gemacht?”

“Nothing, Mama.”

“Du weißt, was dein Vater tun wird, wenn er findet,” she warned her daughter.

“There wasn’t anyone in there, Mama.”

Mrs Schwartzman, defeated, sighed, “Was soll ich mit dir machen?”

Having heard both the cart’s clattering and Mrs Schwartzman’s calls, both Wolfgang and Daniel raced out, munching on the final bites of their meal. I thought it best not to appear shy so I walked out from the quarters and joined the greeting party much to Mrs Schwartzman’s surprise and disappointment that Hilda had lied to her.

The cart trundled to a stop close to Mrs Schwartzman who was happy to see her husband and son, in a restrained way, “Herman, es ist so schön, dich zu Hause zu haben. Hat dir Melbourne gefallen, Gerhard?”

Gerhard was the same age as Patrick, I guessed, and replied to his mother with controlled enthusiasm, “Yes, Mama, it’s a big city.”

“Ich habe dich erst morgen erwartet, Liebes,” she said to her husband.

Schwartzman tone was as gruff as his exterior and, with a guttural German tone replied, “We had to push on and beat the weather before it flooded the river. Und speak English, Ursula.”

He only then noticed his daughter and his bearish behaviour changed appreciably, “Schatzi!” he called as he climbed down from the cart and engulfed his daughter in a smothering hug.

Hilda, struggling to breathe, asked, “Papa, did you bring me something from Melbourne?”

He let go of his daughter and reassured her, “All in good time, Schatzi, all in good time.” Looking around he soured again and addressed his workers, “What do you want? An invitation?” This spurred them into action and they began unloading the provisions from the cart. I expected to be introduced so I waited. Gerhard, all this time, had been watching me, his face unreadable.

Schwartzman looked at me and asked his wife, “Who is that?”

Mrs Schwartzman, most reluctantly and almost apologetically replied, “Oh, that is Robert Davies. He needed a job...Mr Taylor...He’s a good worker, Herman.”

“No, we don’t need anyone more.”

“Mr Taylor recommended him. It is only for a short time. He needs to earn his fare to Melbourne.”

Schwartzman shook his head in disapproval, then looked at Gerhard. He leaned toward his wife and said, “Not the sort of boy I want around Gerhard.”

She was stunned, “I am sure you are mistaken, Herman.”

Hilda agreed, “He’s not like that, Papa. He has a sweetheart. In Sydney. He is not like that,” she reiterated firmly.

Like what? I asked myself.

Schwartzman was in a quandary, “Hmm. Boy,” he addressed me, “any trouble and you are out? Understand?”

“No trouble, Sir,” I reassured the old despot, giving Hilda a look that conveyed that I was not about to jeopardise my employment there.

He emitted a grunt and gave me a warning look as Mrs Schwartzman linked her arm in his and led him toward the inn, “You must be starving.” Addressing her son with a backward glance, “Gerhard. Come.”

Gerhard jumped from the cart’s seat and followed his parents. He, too, gave me a look that made me shiver but for a different reason. It was then that I realised what Gerhard was all about. What was it with this family? I felt unsafe and trapped.

Hilda was the last to join the procession to the inn. She gave me an enigmatic smile and advised, “You’d better take your lunch in the kitchen...if you’re still hungry.”

Inside the inn, in the area set aside as the dining room, all the tables were vacant save one which accommodated Johnson and two of his companions, Pitt and Tanner. They had helped themselves to the limited-in-variety but plentiful-in-supply offerings on the buffet table and were devouring their selections in their usual slovenly manner.

The family came in and Schwartzman, seeing the three, asked of his wife, “Business good?”

Mrs Schwartzman, relieved that Percy was not present—she wanted to delay that explanation for as long as possible—replied, “Yes, Liebes, these...gentlemen are assayers but will be leaving us today.”

Schwartzman turned the registration book to him and grunted with approval as he scanned the pages, “When is the coach due?”

“Half past four,” Hilda replied, “Everything is ready for them. Robert is a good worker, Papa.”

“Well see, Schatzi, we’ll see.”

Gerhard had made his way to the buffet table and dished up a portion for himself well aware that he was being watched by three pairs of eyes as they scoffed their food. He took himself to the table furthest away from them and ate. This amused the trio, Tanner in particular.

Much to Mrs Schwartzman’s dismay, Percy descended the stairs from the rooms upstairs and approached the desk with a letter in hand. Addressing Hilda, he requested, “Do you have a penny stamp, Miss. I have a letter to post.”

Schwartzman’s face reddened when he saw Percy and took his wife by the arm, pulling her into the corridor leading to the kitchen annex.

In the kitchen annex, I had helped myself to some sliced beef and buttered bread and pondered my fate. The intrusion on my contemplation brought my attention to corridor where Schwartzman interrogated his wife, “Why is that black in my hotel?”

Mrs Schwartzman, flustered, reverted to her native tongue, “Liebling, er ist ein guter Mann. Sauber—”

“English!”

“He is very clean, Herman. And polite. He and his friends will be gone today. Please. Remember what the constable said.”

“Why do I leave you in charge? And you give me a useless son! I can’t take my eye off him for a minute! Argh!”

She stood there, visibly shaken, and watched his back as he stormed off.

The anger displayed by this man and the treatment of his wife brought back painful memories and I felt deep empathy for this mentally abused woman but this situation was something she and her family had to overcome. I was not about to involve myself. My future was in Melbourne.

I finished my lunch and quaffed a glass of water ready to resume earning my wages.

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It was midafternoon, a coachload was expected in a few hours and the ‘assayers’ would be leaving us soon. Wolfgang and Daniel were still sorting, stacking and storing the provisions from the cart in the forecourt and I was assigned to the stables and the preparation of the fresh horses for the coach.

Gerhard, having finished his lunch, came out to give a hand with the provisions when he noticed me in the stables. Making his excuses to Wolfgang, he strolled over to the tack room then, with a precautionary look outside, came to the stall I was.

Catching my attention, he said as I rubbed down one of the dappled greys, “Hilda told me all about you.”

This was a statement I wasn’t going to expand upon, “Oh?” I said impassively.

“She said you are from Sydney and you have a sweetheart.”

“Did she also tell you that I don’t want any trouble?”

He laughed, “You’re already in that, my friend, if my father finds out.”

I moved around to the other side of the horse and brushed the offside leaving Gerhard in the vacuum of my indifference.

He followed me around, “I don’t believe it,” he continued, and waited for a reaction. “I don’t believe you fucked my sister,” he clarified.

My only reaction was a sideways glance, which was enough for him to continue, “I know what you are.”

This last statement did elicit an unexpected response from me: an unbidden gasp.

He sidled up close to me and whispered, “Dan and Wolfie won’t have her so she wants you. But you’re like me, aren’t you, Robert Davies?” He put his hand on my shoulder and slid it down to my hip.

“Don’t fool yourself, Gerhard, I’m nothing like you.”

I pushed the back end of the horse away from me so I could get out of the stall and left the little molly there. I remember thinking that I had left two horse’s arses in that stall that day.

A few paces out of the stall stood Percy. The disappointed look on his face told me he had overheard the conversation. I was angry that Hilda told her brother; I was angry that he assumed he knew me; I was angry that my life had become so complicated; but I wasn’t angry with Percy. I calmed myself and addressed my aboriginal friend, “Percy. I suppose you heard?”

All he did was raise an eyebrow apologetically.

“I’m not like that,” I reassured my friend.

“It doesn’t matter to me if you are, Robert. You’re a decent fellow. Even if you are not the manliest of men,” he chuckled and smiled broadly, “Don’t let those who don’t know you rattle you, boy. You just be the best you can be and that’s all anyone can expect of you.” He laid a reassuring hand on my shoulder, “Now, to business. We’ll be heading off just before the coach comes. Have our horses ready to go by then, all right?”

“All right.”

“By the way, where’s the post office? I have this letter for my wife.”

“I’ll take it for you.”

“Thank you,” he said, handing me the stamped envelope, which I dutifully put it in my jacket pocket.

“Hey! You! Boy!” was Schwartzman’s rude and abrupt demand, “I don’t pay you to stand around and talk all day. Get back to work!”

I wondered just how long I had to put up with this before I had enough cash to get to Melbourne.

The few hours that followed had me helping Wolfgang move stock into the storeroom and, thankfully, out of the surveillance of both Hilda and Gerhard. One week of this and I'll be gone, I reassured myself.

The time came to saddle Percy and his mates' horses, my job as Wolfgang and Daniel were readying for the coach.

I entered the first stall and saddled and bridled Percy's mount, checking that the girth was not too tight and the channel and gullet sat in the right position. Content with that, I moved to the next stall, to the third and, finally the fourth, completing the tacking up of each horse quickly.

Leaving the final stall, I was horrified to see Gerhard in the adjacent stall, watching me intently as he was very obviously masturbating.

"Come here," he ordered in a husky tone, "I want to show you something."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Come here, I said!" His insistence resulted in more feverish activity as he braced himself against the railing. "I'll tell my father about you and Hilda..."

I reluctantly moved into his stall and watched as he rubbed his phallus roughly back and forth. "Come here...Finish me...And I'll do you."

I wasn't shocked or disgusted; I was furious and outraged that he should put me in this situation, "Put it away, Gerhard. I'm not interested."

"You are. I can tell. Come here!"

I stood my ground.

"Come here, I said!" he repeated angrily and unexpectedly lunged at me, grabbing me by the arms and pushing me against the railings. He pressed his body against mine. I writhed and pushed him off; he staggered backward, losing his balance and hitting the railings on the opposite side of the stall. Before I could move out, he regained his equilibrium and grabbed my shirt and hurled me against the rails again, my ribs taking the brunt of the impact, doubling me over in pain. I was momentarily incapacitated. Gerhard



saw his chance and pulled me up and spun me around and slammed me, face up against the rails, his body pinning me there.

“Get off me! Let me go! You bastard, let me go!” I yelled as I struggled to free myself.

“You want it! You know you want it!” he spat in my ear as his hands quickly pulled down my braces and reached for the buttons of my fly.

“I’ll kill you!”

He tore my fly open and pulled my trousers down. I could feel his erect penis pushing against my buttocks as he fumbled to pull down my drawers.

“No! Let me go, you bloody mongrel! Let me go!” I yelled, tears forming in my eyes.

Suddenly, Gerhard released me. I turned to see Schwartzman, seething, snarling at Gerhard whom he had pulled off me and flung across the stall. In an instant, he turned on me, “Get out! Get your belongings and get out of here!”

“Papa...” Gerhard’s feeble plea as he pulled his clothes together, attracted more venom.

“You, shut up!”

I pulled up my trousers and tried to appeal to Schwartzman, “It wasn’t my fault. He attacked me!”

“I told you to get out!”

“You owe me wages,” I whimpered, suddenly feeling desperate and powerless.

“There’s nothing owing!”

“Two days,” I said, sounding more like an appeal than a demand.

“You’re lucky I haven’t broken your face. Now get out of my sight. Now!”

There was no reasoning with this vile human. I angrily wiped the tears from my face and stumbled out of the stall and into the forecourt, righting my dishevelled clothing as I headed for the stable hands’ quarters.

By the time I’d reached the door, the full realisation of the ramifications of what had just happened hit me. No money, no friends, nowhere to go and I had almost been violated

in the most brutal of ways. Self-pity and despair overcame me; my legs gave way and I fell back against the wall and slid to the floor, the tears starting up again.

I didn't see the shadow loom over me but I heard the rough voice admonishing me, "That ain't no way for a man to behave."

I looked up to see the repulsive face of Johnson sneering at me. I was angry and didn't care for any criticism.

"What's it to you?" I barked back, angrily wiping my face and getting to my feet.

"I heard what the old Hun bastard said. Maybe I can help." I stared at him, daring him to continue. "There's five quid in it for you."

"That's a lot of money."

"Do you want it or not?"

I considered my options. None. Maybe Godfrey Saunders was right.

"Yeah," I said, "I want it."

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Johnson's three cohorts were playing cards in Johnson's room in the inn when Johnson returned and made the announcement, "We're set."

"Who'd you find?" Tanner quizzed with an evil smirk on his twisted features.

"The molly boy."

"The owner's son?"

"Nah, the other one. Robert," Johnson confirmed, bringing an onset of cackling from both Tanner and the younger Pitt. Percy, on the other hand, was alarmed and most concerned.

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With renewed optimism—and a little trepidation—I spent the rest of my afternoon in the quarters packing my few belongings and reliving the journey that brought me to this time and place. I pondered each and every decision I had made and, without exception, I would not have made a different choice if I had the time over. Were they God's will or mine? Was this God's will now? Would I be able to live with the outcome? What was the adage about being hanged for a sheep as a lamb?

A gentle knock on the door caught my attention and before I could say anything, the door slowly opened.

“May I come in?” Hilda timidly asked.

“What do you want, Hilda?” was my terse and unwelcoming reply.

“Mama told me what happened. I just want to say I’m sorry, Robert. I didn’t mean to—”

“Why did you tell your brother?”

“I...I just wanted to see if—”

“I liked boys or girls? I like girls, Hilda, girls,” was my truthful yet ironic reply.

“I didn’t know he’d do that.”

“Do what? Your brother rape me or your father fire me? I needed this employment, Hilda, you knew that, yet you chose to play games. With my life.”

Hilda slowly approached me, “I am so sorry, Robert. Please forgive me.” She did sound truly sorry but I was not in the forgiving mood. I forcefully grabbed her in a tight embrace and violently assaulted her mouth with mine, for it wasn’t a kiss, it was an aggressive invasion; she practically swooned. I let go of her and pushed her away.

“Did you like that, Hilda?” I asked her, mocking her reaction, “Did you?”

I picked up my jacket, mackintosh and two red leather valises and headed for the door, leaving her in my wake, mouth agape. At the door, I turned and let her know, “I’m like you, Hilda.”

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## CHAPTER 9

### The Set Up

I left Hilda in the stable hands' quarters to ruminate my last statement. While I had been packing up my hopes and belongings, Percy returned from Beechworth town with an aged hack and even more aged saddle for me to ride. As I strapped my two valises onto the horse's flanks, Johnson, Tanner and Pitt joined us on the horses I had tacked up earlier. They, too, were clearing out.

We left along the western road just as we heard the bugle announcing the arrival of the late afternoon coach a short distance behind us. I wondered what those travellers would make of that flawed family I left behind.

We travelled well into the night westward toward Wangaratta taking bush tracks instead of the main road and finally made camp at a small billabong obscured by tall gums from any road. Throughout the whole journey here, no one said a word to me and what was spoken between them, was spoken in hushed tones. Even Percy kept his thoughts to himself and frequently shot me a glance and a rueful smile. I knew what I had agreed to do and I was prepared to do it. I needed the money; all would go well, I reassured myself. No one would be hurt.

It was an icy night and the campfire and my mackintosh did their best to keep me warm but I hadn't eaten since lunch and I was hungry and cold. Johnson and his boys had come prepared with a pack of cold food but I was too proud to beg for some so I sat

huddled in my mac against an old gum and watched the group squatted by the fire, sharing the pack.

Percy looked over to me and rose to his feet with his share of the food. “You want some?” he said offering me some of his food.

I looked up at him and then to Johnson and the other three. Percy insisted, “Don’t mind them. This is from my share. Take it.”

I took the offering, “Thank you, Percy,” and didn’t waste a crumb.

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The next sensation I had was of my feet being kicked.

“Get up,” Percy urged, “We’re moving out.”

It was daybreak and, what I could see of the sky, it was cloudless and promised to be a sunny day. I roused myself as Johnson, Tanner and Pitt were dousing the campfire by urinating on it.

We saddled up and headed for the predetermined place about ten miles west of Beechworth.

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They left me perched on the top of one side of a low rocky alluvial valley, keeping a lookout. The valley was only relatively short—about five hundred yards—and the compacted sandy road that ran through it connected the lower plains on either side of the rocky outcrop that extended several miles in either direction. This rutted, boulder-strewn part of the road was the most direct way between the two townships of Wangaratta and Beechworth, about twenty-four miles apart.

I left my poor old hack at the foot of the rise, in the shade of the scrubby gums that dotted the stony area, discreetly tethered to one of them. I could not see Percy and his boss, Johnson, or his mates, from my position but I guessed they could see me.

So I sat and waited and watched the road, the warm sun on my face—at least, it wasn’t raining.

After an interminable length of time, I saw some movement at the far end of the valley, to the east. They’re here! Time to earn my five pounds!

I scrambled down the blind side of the rise and, as instructed, tossed myself onto the ground and rolled about, soiling my clothes, face and hands and lay there, holding my leg and moaning.

It wasn't five minutes before the leader of the convoy came into view. I was staggered to see that this was not the small gang of bushmen that Johnson had told me had robbed them but a large company of troopers escorting a wagon. This wasn't a reckoning, this was a robbery! This was not the easy five quid Johnson promised. I was dead scared. These twenty or so troopers were not a small gang of mismatched miscreants but a well-trained body of soldiers who knew how to kill.

The leader was a sergeant and, upon seeing me, raised his hand and called, "Halt!" to his escort. He scanned the valley walls apprehensively and ordered, "Weapons at the ready!" and drew his pistol as I writhed about as I was told to do.

The sergeant warily urged his mount toward me, his gun trained on me. "You there," he called, stopping some ten yards away, "Hands where I can see them."

I complied by showing him that I was unarmed. He continued, "What's the matter with you?"

My mouth and throat were dry through fear but I managed to continue with the ruse as I lay on my back, "A big brownie...My horse skittered...I think I've broken my leg..."

The sergeant suspiciously glared at me then looked around once more and saw my horse a short distance off. With consternation and some reluctance, he called back to his men, "Hold there. Stay alert," then dismounted and strode the few paces toward me.

"Let's look at your leg, laddie," he said as he holstered his gun and bent down to inspect my leg. The instant he touched my leg, I groaned loudly feigning extreme pain.

The sergeant looked at me with concern and said, "I can put you in the wagon and take you as far as Wangaratta."

"Thank you," I whispered, fearful of what was about to happen.

The sergeant turned to his troop and ordered, "Bring the wagon up!" and stood up. The soldiers did as ordered and, confident of their safety, holstered their weapons.

The wagon was only a few yards away from me and the entire convoy completely within the valley when a single shot rang out. The sergeant crumpled to the ground beside me, blood streaming from a gaping wound to his head, dead.

The troopers jumped to alert, guns drawn. One trooper, a corporal, called out, “A trap!” and with wild fury levelled his gun at me but, before he could fire, was shot and he fell from his horse. This was the beginning of the massacre; one by one, the troopers were cut down by unseen gunmen. Horses, too, were not spared. When the wagon driver attempted to race away, one of the four horses was felled. The driver wasn’t spared either.

I watched all this in horror; the shooting didn’t stop until all the soldiers had fallen. A few of the spared horses bolted.

Then all fell silent.

Slowly, I staggered to my feet and took in the carnage with horror.

A shot rang out. It whizzed past my head! Then another! They were shooting at me! I dropped to the ground partially obscured by the Sergeant’s body and curled up, making myself as small a target as possible. Another two shots rang out just missing me but hitting the dead Sergeant! I slumped pretending I had been hit, hoping they would stop firing. It worked.

Lying there, bent into a ball, breathing as shallowly as possible and with my eyes seeing through the narrowest of slits to my eyelids, I prayed to God and asked His forgiveness for all my grievous sins. I wasn’t afraid to die. I was afraid that I would not go to heaven and be with Sarah but to hell and endure eternity with John Harper. These were the irrational thoughts I had at that moment.

The crunch of footsteps coming closer made my heart pound as I lay there motionless. Not far away, I could hear the maniacal screeching of Tanner, gloating as he plundered the bodies of their valuables and weapons.

The footsteps stopped just behind me and I heard the click of a single-action revolver, its hammer being primed.

The seconds that passed felt like hours as I lay there waiting for the coup de grace.

“Get on with it, Perce!” Johnson’s unmistakable voice yelled, “We ain’t got all day!”

“Yes, Boss,” Percy replied as he came around to face me.

Tanner’s mad enthusiasm for violence called out, “Got a live one here, Boss!”

I heard the wounded trooper, lying helpless on the ground, beg, “Please...I’ve got a wife—”

A shot rang out.

“Widow,” Tanner derided and laughed. “Hey, Perce,” he called, “How’s the little molly boy? Need any help there?”

Percy looked down at me; I could see remorse in his eyes.

A look of shock came over him when I involuntarily blinked. I didn’t move. Percy hesitated then called back, “He’s a goner.”

“Blood oath. Took me four shots!” Tanner complained.

Pitt chimed in, “You need more practice, mate!”

They laughed that same vicious, dissolute laugh that Jeremiah Hickson laughed when I paid him his blood money. Percy laughed as well but it was not the same. I could feel his loathing for Tanner and Pitt.

Percy’s eye caught a glimpse of the chain of Sarah’s silver locket protruding from my shirt collar and he pulled it out and yanked it off me. Rummaging through my pockets, he called out to his mates, “This little bugger’s poorer than a church mouse. He really did need that fiver.”

Standing, he reached over me and rifled through the sergeant’s pockets, collecting sundry items, coin and his pistol.

Johnson called out, “Get a move on!”

He gave me one final, unreadable look then strode toward his cohorts.

The dead horse had been unhitched from the wagon, leaving three to pull the load. The dead driver had been irreverently pushed from his seat and replaced by Johnson. Pitt jumped up and sat next to him until Tanner got in and pushed Pitt into the back; Tanner felt it was his right to sit with the boss. Percy jumped into the tray, knowing he would have been relegated there anyway.



“Change of plans,” I overheard Johnson say, “Tarrowingee. Dixon’s. That little strumpet at the change station took too much interest in where we were going,” and with the crack of a whip and a “Geehar!” and the wagon trundled off.

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I don’t know how long I lay there too scared to move, too scared to call out. I had to do something, but what? I couldn’t go to the police, I was part of this butchery and, if they captured Johnson, he would implicate me and I would surely hang.

I had no money to take me anywhere, no food and the angle of the sun told me that it was around midday. The skies were greying over with foreboding clouds to the south and it would be night soon. I was miles away from anywhere. If someone came across this carnage, how would I explain my being here? I had to go but to where?

I gingerly stood up and took in the horrible slaughter around me. The blood of so many honest men soaked the rocky ground. The horses that had escaped injury or death and hadn’t run off, were standing near their fallen riders or gathered in little groups.

“This wasn’t my fault,” I told myself. “If I hadn’t been the dupe, someone else would have been. I didn’t kill these men, they did and they tried to kill me.”

Standing there, amid the horror, I forced myself to realise that no one was going to help me out of this. I was on my own. I could simply lie down and wait to die...or I could act and save myself.

A plan was quickly formulating itself.

Godfrey Saunders was wrong: I did have a choice and I made it.

My horse stood where I’d tethered it.

Unstrapping my two valises from it, I opened one and took out Harper’s old revolver. He had not looked after it and I chided myself for not oiling and testing it after I stole it from him. I put the gun in my belt and hoped, too, that the cartridges in the chamber and those in handkerchief would fire. Thrusting the handkerchief in my pocket, I felt something there: Sarah’s silver locket. Percy...

I shook Percy’s kindness from my thoughts and, donning my mackintosh and hat, I unfastened the reins from the tree branch and urged my old horse to join the others then selected the best of the troopers’ horses still standing. I needed a strong, fast horse and the

sergeant's was the biggest. Securing my valises to it, I assured myself that I was only borrowing his horse. The police would eventually discover the owner of mine by its branding and that would link it to Percy, not to me.

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The sergeant had chosen his mount well: he was a strong bay gelding with a good speed to him and very compliant to my urgings.

I had been able to follow the route the wagon had taken but soon it would not be possible to see. It was apparent they were heading toward Wangaratta, the intended destination of the gold! The gloomy night was catching up to me and, even if there had been a full moon, it would have been obscured by the scudding clouds.

My thoughts were flipping from what lay ahead to what would have transpired behind me. It was most likely that the authorities in Wangaratta, awaiting their shipment of gold and bank notes, were becoming concerned that it hadn't arrived. They would be mounting a search party soon and I had to get off the main road. Knowing that Johnson had changed their destination to Tarrawingee meant that, if Hilda had been aware of their 'business' and reported it, she would not have known of their new destination. At least, this is what I was hoping for.

The rain began. Only a drizzly shower at first and then a little heavier. I could still see the road ahead but the tracks were being obliterated quickly by the persistent raindrops. Luck was on my side: I reached a junction in the road and a road sign: "*Wangaratta 14 mi; Tarrawingee 5½ mi*" one way west, "*Beechworth 10 mi*" the other way east and "*Everton 3½ mi*" along a bush track heading south.

I spurred my horse toward Tarrawingee, the town Johnson nominated.

The tiny village was dark and quiet when I reached it. I guessed it was about seven o'clock and the rain kept everyone indoors except for one late night patron leaving the Star Hotel, one of the two public houses in the village. Accosting him mid-stride, he wasn't in any mood to dally and immediately directed me to Dixon's, a homestead a few miles south along the Dry Creek Road, even though he seemed surprised that I should want to go there.

My hunger and exhaustion were overridden by my determination. It was still raining lightly and obstinately and I was soaked to the skin when the simple sign on the gate

proclaiming, “*DIXON – KEEP OUT*” presented itself. The gate was all there was, the softwood post and rail fence it had been attached to was almost nonexistent, destroyed by white ants long ago.

In the distance, through the misty rain, I could just barely make out the homestead on a low rise, with a smoking chimneystack and a feeble light glowing from a window. Dismounting, I led the bay along the fence line making my way along the side toward the back of the hut where the scrub had been left to overgrow and impinge on the back paddock and stables.

Crossing the fence line at a wide gap in it, I cautiously picked my way through the sparse bush and tied the bay where he wouldn't be seen.

Whickering from the stables put me on full alert; I stopped dead in my tracks waiting for any movement or sound from the hut.

Nothing.

Carefully, I pulled Harper's gun from my belt and hesitantly stepped toward the hut. The sounds of boisterous, alcohol-fuelled laughter wafted over to me on the sodden night air. Tanner's strident screeching told me I had the right place.

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Inside, Dixon's two-room hut was lit by one kerosene lamp and a blazing fire in the open fireplace over which was suspended a cast-iron cauldron of stewing meat. The table in the middle of the larger room was a crude confection of roughly hewn slabs of tree trunks attached to trestle legs at each end. The chairs were of odd sorts, some factory-made, and which had seen much better days, and the others homemade of whatever material was at hand. Accompanying this coarse furniture were mismatched place settings scattered across the table surface, soiled with the remnants of the stew partaken hurriedly and indelicately. Several large stone jars of home-distilled liquor lay on the table and floor, their contents in partially consumed mugs and cups and splashed on the table.

On the table also, among this chaos of victuals, was a large metal strongbox, its lock smashed apart and discarded and its lid thrown open. Piles of bank notes, gold sovereigns, sundry coins and gold bullion, separated into neat, equal piles, stood along the centre plank of the table like a regiment of soldiers at attention.

Dixon and his son, Junior, sat at one end of the table, the greed in their eyes tangible as they ogled more riches than they would ever see in their lifetime. Dixon was quite elderly, thin and stooped. Hard work should have been the cause of his frailty but it was more likely to be disease and his dipsomaniacal habits. His son, Junior, was far heftier and, by the size of him and the condition of the farm, he was not in love with honest work. But this, the offer of easy money, they did love and had assisted many local duffers and thieves for a small recompense. Johnson had quickly changed to Dixon's once that stupid loose-tongued Pitt had blurted their original destination of Myrtleford to that little trollop at the change station.

Johnson, Tanner and Pitt occupied three of the remaining four rickety chairs while Percy stood by the fireplace, nursing his cup and quietly musing his past and future. They had each netted the equivalent of ten years' wages in one afternoon's work. He could now give this game away and return to Bathurst to his wife and three children and, perhaps, turn his hand to a trade. His accomplices didn't have any plans other than inebriation and fornication.

"You know what I'm going to do tomorrow?" boomed Tanner senselessly, slamming his cup on the table, "I'm going to go back to the Hun's daughter and tup her till her ears fall off!"

"If you can get it up," laughed Pitt, "You're so drunk your prick's gone into hiding!"

This brought on another round of strident laughter and guzzling from those at the table.

Once the cackling had died down, Johnson took control, "Well, boys," he said gulping down the last of the contents of his cup, "a nice haul. Dixon, Junior, "he said handing the old man a few bank notes, "here's your twenty for the use of your place. Tanner, Pitt, Percy, an equal cut each, give or take a farthing. I'll sort out the bullion tomorrow."

With little hesitation and much voracity, Tanner and Pitt scraped their respective hoard toward them and filled their pockets while Percy ambled to the table and collected his.

I heard all of this as I stood paralysed outside the door, gun in my hand and heart in my throat. “*This could all go terribly wrong,*” I thought. With a silent prayer for deliverance by God, one way or the other, my next thought was, “*Now or never.*”

Now!

I flung the door wide open and stood at the entrance of my hell and took in the scenario. The shock of my bursting in took everyone by surprise and they sat there in stupefied transfixion. Immediately, I aimed my gun directly at Johnson, who sat with his back to me barely four feet away and turned his head to see me.

“You forgot my share,” I said trying desperately to not show how terrified I was.

Tanner and Pitt made a shaky effort to get to their feet.

“Don’t...” I warned.

Johnson played along, “Steady, boys,” and indicated them to sit down. Turning slightly in his chair to meet me eye to eye, he grinned, “Careful, son, that ancient thing could be loaded.”

“I just want my money.” No matter how tightly I held onto that gun, and with both hands, it still trembled.

“You’ll get your money. Just put that thing down. No one has to get hurt,” Johnson promised.

“Yeah,” I scoffed, “you left me there. You tried to kill me. Just give me my money and I’ll go.”

Johnson was relaxed and debated, “How many rounds you got? Five? Six? Let’s see, one, two, three...” he counted, “I hope you’re a quick, dead shot, boy, because I reckon you’ll only squeeze off one before—”

“And that one will be yours, you bastard. Give me my money!”

Percy, quietly, interjected, “Fair enough, Boss. He did his part. Give him his fiver.”

“A share,” I said looking straight at Johnson.

“Eh?” Percy queried.

“You heard. I want an equal share.” I was going for broke and I didn’t care. These murderers planned to kill me all along. I was dead in their eyes, anyway.

Tanner and Pitt laughed at the absurdity of my demand. Johnson smiled at me and said, almost in admiration, “You got balls, I’ll say that, boy.”

“Just give me my share, you prick. You tried to kill me.”

This brought on a round of mirth from Pitt who mocked, “Looks like you do need more practice, Tanner.”

Tanner was not impressed and glared at me. The situation was becoming a standoff when Percy, once again, tried to calm everyone down, “Boss, no need for any more bloodshed. We got plenty. Give the boy a hundred.”

Tanner objected vehemently, “What’s to say he won’t snitch to the coppers?”

“I was your decoy, you imbecile. I helped you murder those twenty troopers. I’ll hang as high as you lot if I do.”

“Come on, Boss,” Percy urged then addressed me, “a hundred, all right?”

My options were limited and a hundred was far better than five, “A hundred.”

Johnson took up the negotiations, “A hundred. Out of your share, Percy.”

Percy was momentarily flummoxed then acquiesced, “I’m good with that, Boss,” and peeled off some bank notes from his share and took the few steps that separated us toward me, stretching his arm out to me. I snatched them out of his hand and stuffed them into my pocket.

“I don’t want to see you anywhere near me, you understand, my fancy-boy?” Johnson warned, “I’ll kill you if I do, you understand? Now piss off!”

“Just go, Robert,” Percy solemnly advised.

With that, I took one last look at the astonished, contemptuous faces staring at me with homicidal eyes, and I slowly backed out of the door, slamming it behind me. I turned and ran as fast as I could, the rain hindering my progress but also hiding my tracks. Reaching the dead sergeant’s horse, I jumped on and spurred him into a full gallop.

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Johnson was calm, murderously calm, as he devised his next move. All about him were silent and anticipating his next words and when they came, they were spat out with venom, “You fucking moron, Percy! What sort of black tracker are you? Can’t tell a corpse from a catfish?”

“He was playing possum, Boss,” stammered Percy.

“You’ll be playing a corpse if it happens again. Now go and get that money back! Pitt, you go with him. I want that little bastard’s balls!”

Percy was hesitant; he didn’t agree with Johnson but there was too much to lose if he argued. He looked over to Pitt who had a defiant smirk smeared across his face.

“Well?!” boomed Johnson, “What the fuck are you waiting for?!”

Percy snatched up his oilskin and hat and stormed out for the stables. Pitt followed but was stopped by Johnson as he passed, “Black balls, too.”

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I rode like the Devil possessed me, occasionally looking back to see if I was being followed. My horse was sure-footed and had a long stride, the rain and scrubby earth giving him very little impediment. We dashed back along the dirt track from Dixon’s to Tarrawingee and, once on the Wangaratta Road, slowed down and, seeing a narrow break in the bush along the road, detoured into it. The rain had stopped but it was cold and very dark. This bush track led us south and into more densely vegetated bush. As the track narrowed, we slowed to a canter, then a trot and finally a walk until it petered out. Ducking low-hanging branches, we pushed through, the canopy of branches obscuring the night sky, until we came across a small clearing. “*Must have been a bushie’s rest camp,*” I thought. It didn’t matter what it was; the horse and I were completely depleted and, deep in the bush, this was as good a place to rest as any.

I dismounted and tied the bay nearby where there was some good growth of grass for him as he must have been as ravenous as I was. Looking around for a place to rest, I found a large old tree with protrusive roots. I settled into it, slouched against it in an upright position, my mackintosh covering me like a tent and the tree roots cradling me. I was shivering with cold and fear, knowing that they would come after me and praying that they would not find me. It was all in God’s hands now. My eyes closed in prayer but, before I was aware of it, my exhaustion overtook me and I slumped deep in slumber.

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I don't know how long I slept if, indeed, I had slept at all, but my consciousness was suddenly awoken by the sound of a twig snapping underfoot. Startled and alarmed, I looked up only to have a gloved hand cover my mouth and push my head against the tree trunk.

“Shhh...” was the only sound I heard. I turned my eyes to the sound and to the man crouched beside me. Percy.

“Shhh,” he reiterated, “Pitt's close. Keep quiet.”

I nodded my understanding of his command and he removed his hand from my mouth. My mind was awash with questions, my eyes darting to find where Pitt was. Pitt was not the maniac Tanner was but he was still a murderer and did as he was told.

“Johnson wants the money back,” Percy whispered, “and your balls. Give me the money and I'll say you got away. I don't want to hurt you, Robbie.”

Once again, my mouth was as dry as the sands on Tamarama. I didn't have a chance to utter a word when Pitt emerged from the darkness, gun in hand, and a malevolent grin on his face. “Kissy, kissy, Percy?” he mocked.

Percy stood abruptly and faced Pitt, “No need to harm the boy, Pitt—” he submitted.

“Move off, Perce, I want a clear shot,” Pitt warned.

“Just take the money and let him go.”

“Without the money, he'll snitch. Besides, Perce, you're not the Boss. And I don't take orders from black mongrels. Now move off!” Pitt was still drunk and unsteady on his feet as he waved his gun about menacingly.

“Think about it, Pitt, another death on your—”

A shot rang out, then another and Percy slumped to the ground, dead.

“It don't matter a whit to me,” Pitt said, addressing Percy. He then looked at me as I sat stupefied by the cold-bloodedness and ease with which this man could end a life. He took a staggering step toward me and uttered, “That's one...” and raised his arm to fire at me.

Two shots rang out: one narrowly missing me and lodging in the tree trunk, the other from my gun hitting Pitt in the hip. Pitt looked at me stunned and incredulous, “You bastard. You shot me.”



I jumped to my feet and levelled my gun at Pitt, “Don’t...” I warned, fearfully.

Pitt took shaky aim at me and fired again, wildly missing me. I fired at him again and again and again until the chamber of my gun was emptied. All of my bullets found their target and Pitt crumpled to the ground, gaping wounds oozing with his life’s blood.

I stood petrified by what had happened and by what might have been. I slowly made my way to Pitt, my gun trained on him even though it was empty and of no use. He did not move or make a sound, his eyes staring blankly into space.

A sudden fear overcame me: where were the others? Percy said Pitt was close. Were the others close enough to hear the gunshots? I looked blindly into the darkness of the surrounding bushland, listening for any sound or movement.

Nothing.

I stood there, listening and watching for what seemed to be an eternity. “*They came alone,*” I finally conceded to myself.

Looking down at Pitt once more, I crouched beside him and did to him what he had done to those troopers: I prized his revolver from his hand and rummaged through his pockets, relieving him of his share of the booty, his fob watch, a pen knife and his cartridge pouch. Feeling a stickiness on my hands, I looked at them to see they were covered with Pitt’s blood. The realisation that I had taken a life made me tremble with repulsion and wiped my hands on his jacket...and I retched. While I had orchestrated Harper’s reckoning, this felt different...or, perhaps, it felt the same...I cannot say; I was the instrument that had taken both lives.

Pulling myself together, I looked at Pitt; I did to him what he was about to do to me. I was not sorry, I insisted. He and Harper deserved to die; both had tried to kill me. Both had failed.

I looked to Percy and went to him. Kneeling beside him, I made the sign of the cross and said a silent prayer for God to take his soul and give him eternal, peaceful rest. This man tried to save my life and I was truly indebted to him but there was nothing I could do for him now. Except...

Rummaging through Percy's pockets, I removed his share of the plunder and all his personal items, including a neatly tied bundle of letters postmarked 'Bathurst', bundling the meagre collection into his handkerchief.

Percy's gun was still in his grip when I had an idea. Returning to Pitt, I placed Harper's old weapon in Pitt's hand. It was a ruse that may or may not work but it meant that, at the very least, I was now in possession of a much newer weapon and cartridges. I had gambled that Harper's old abused gun would not misfire or the cartridges explode on ignition.

Rustling from the undergrowth set my heart racing and I took cover by the tree that had cradled me. Pitt's gun was at the ready when Percy's handsome mount, the thoroughbred, trampled his way in toward its slain master. There was no other movement anywhere.

The horse seemed to understand that its master was dead and it stood there, head bowed nuzzling Percy.

I carefully made my way to it, hoping it would remember me and the rubdown and feed I had given it. "Easy, boy," I coaxed, "I won't hurt you. Easy."

Taking hold of the reins, I led it to the sergeant's horse and transferred my valises from it to the thoroughbred.

I took one final look at the scene before me and bowed my head to Percy, "I'm so sorry, Percy," then, wiping the tears from my eyes, mounted his horse and left.

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We lumbered along the road, Percy's thoroughbred and I, both dead tired and hungry; I hadn't eaten since sharing Percy's food the night before last and the only fresh water I had had was, thankfully, the rain. To the east, the first glint of day was pushing forth.

I wanted to know more about the man who saved my life not once, but twice, and read the last of the letters his wife had sent him. It was a letter full of love, hope and positive aspirations for a better future for them and their three children. Percy was a good man driven to desperation because of the colour of his skin. "One day," I mused, "this will all change when we are all the of the same skin tone, a mix of red, black, white and yellow." I snorted, "Not in my lifetime."

It was almost dawn and I could make out a large township in the distance: Wangaratta. It boasted a new railway station linking it to Wodonga to the north and my destination, Melbourne, to the south. The fairly large population meant there was a good selection of hotels and a certain amount of anonymity for me.

I skirted the township and came in from the south end, stopping at the first stable I came across on the town's outskirts. The old stable owner met me and agreed to agist Percy's horse for a month paying him with gold sovereigns I had taken. The stable owner was much impressed by the horse and so would not have any trouble selling him and his tack when I didn't return in a month's time. I asked the owner where I could find a good cheap establishment to bathe, eat and rest and he directed me to a small hotel not far from the stables. I also asked him which was the best hotel in the town proper.

The town was still awakening so there weren't many people around and, lugging my two red valises, I found the place, the Prospector's Inn, and registered under the name of Patrick Morrison.

The rest of the day was occupied by taking a hot bath, eating a hot meal and sleeping much of the day and all night.

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“Ahem.”

The gentle clearing of my throat alerted the desk clerk of my existence. He immediately looked up at me and graciously offered, “Good morning, Miss, and welcome to the Royal Victoria Hotel. How may I help?”

What he smiled at on the other side of his counter was Rebecca Davies, not Robert, clad in my Sunday best and with a newly purchased bonnet to cover my short hair. I smiled at the clean-shaven young man, who was dressed in a black suit, white shirt with a stiff winged collar and black tie, and replied courteously and demurely, “I would like a room, please. With a bath if at all possible.”

“Of course, Miss. The Royal Victoria can accommodate any request. How long will you be with us?”

I looked about me and took in the richness of this new establishment, which had been recommended to me—rather, to Robert—by the stable owner. “When is the next train to Melbourne?” I asked.

“The day after tomorrow, that is, Friday, Miss. In the afternoon.”

It was a little later than I had hoped but, other than another Cobb coach ride—this time on the inside—I decided to wait for the train. “Then I’ll be with you until Friday, the day after tomorrow, thank you.” The clerk smiled pleasantly at me then appeared hesitant. I understood his dilemma and put him at ease, “How much will that be?”

“Thank you, Miss. That is always the most difficult part of my job. That will be one guinea. Meals can be provided in the dining room at an extra charge.”

That was a little more than I anticipated and something I should have expected knowing that this particular hotel was built with no expense spared and had its own theatre. I withdrew my coin purse from my reticule and counted out the one pound and one shilling upon which the young man turned the register around to me and handed me the pen. I filled in my name, ‘*S Davies, Sydney*’.

“Travelling alone, Miss?”

“Yes.”

“Quite dangerous, if I may say so. Just the other day a gold escort was bailed up on its way from Beechworth. Twenty good men lost their lives.”

The news, coming from this perfect stranger, shocked me. It was as though my secret had been discovered. I must have appeared as distraught as I felt.

“Are you all right, Miss?” the clerk earnestly enquired.

“Yes...yes...I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” The realisation that my actions had caused so much pain to these men and their families stabbed me deeply and tears welled in my eyes.

“Please don’t fret so, Miss. It won’t be long before those callous murderers are brought to justice. They will hang.”

“Do they know who did it?”

“The Johnson gang. They had the audacity to stay at Schwartzman’s change station in Beechworth. Black trackers traced them to Tarrawingee.”

“They got away?”

“Not all. Two of the gang were found in bushland some miles away. Dead. They shot each other. A feud, police say. Honour among thieves. As if there were such a thing!”

“Indeed,” I agreed numbly.

The clerk handed me a key and rang the bell on the table at which sound a younger man stepped up and took my two red valises.

“Room seventeen,” the clerk instructed the porter then turned to me, “Do enjoy your stay, Miss Davies.”

I hesitated, shook the despair and anguish out of my head and asked, “May I ask a favour of you? Could you arrange my ticket to Melbourne, please? I am quite weary and would dearly like to rest.”

“Certainly, Miss. First class?”

“If you would. And I have a small package to send to my friend in Bathurst.”

“We can take care of that, too.”

I handed the clerk a small, paper-wrapped parcel that contained Percy’s personal effects and his full share, together with a letter I had written to his wife explaining that Percy had met with a terrible accident while saving a friend’s life and these were his savings and possessions – mostly lies but the truth where, it mattered most. I signed it ‘Robert’ with no return address. The letter Percy had asked me to post had been in my jacket pocket, forgotten, after that awful encounter with Gerhard and what followed. I handed that to the clerk as well.

With these transactions finalised, I followed the porter to my room.

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They were on the same road I had taken and were overlooking the same vista I had the day before: the township of Wangaratta.

“Reckon the little molly is there, Boss?” Tanner asked.

Johnson didn’t reply but his steely, piercing gaze confirmed that he did.

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## CHAPTER 10

September, 1905

Abbottsford Hall

“Ah! It appears we have arrived,” Wills observed, glancing out of the coach’s window.

Abbottsford Hall, the seat of the tenth Duke and Duchess of Bramwell, sat in the middle of splendidly tended gardens in an immense acreage that had its own forest and river. These had provided the current duke’s ancestors private hunting and fishing grounds which had also been enjoyed by various monarchs over the centuries. The current duke, however, was no shooter or angler, preferring his books to guns and making a killing on the stock market to making a killing in the fields no matter how many subtle intimations the current king’s equerry made.

The hall itself was an immense and imposing pile—a veritable palace. I was impressed by the majesty and grandeur of this holding and understood why the duchess was to be the next victim: the ransom demand would be enormous. I surmised that the previous three abductions had been mere rehearsals. This, if our information and deductions were correct, would be the biggest haul yet.

Wills concurred and, once again, pressed, “Full, undivided attention, Davies.” I acknowledged his concern and slipped Sarah’s locket back into the top of my shirt and smiled at him.

The coach drove to the stairs leading up to the main entrance—something we didn’t expect as we were, in effect, servants and should have used the servant’s entrance at the

rear. There to meet us was the butler and three footmen, again a surprise for both Wills and me.

“Welcome to Abbotsford Hall,” greeted the butler as he opened the carriage door for us. “The footmen will take your luggage,” he said as we alighted from the coach and one of the three attempted to relieve me of my portmanteau.

“I’ll keep this with me, thank you,” I insisted, glowering at the unfortunate servant.

“Very well, Madam,” the butler graciously replied with a slight bow and led us up the stone stairs, through the imposing portal, inside to the vast vestibule and up the impressive staircase, followed closely by the three footmen carrying our few cases.

Wills glanced at me and noticed my stern expression. He leaned in and whispered, “Don’t frighten the Duchess, Davies,” then gave me one of his mischievous grins.

Our arrival at the duke’s study was announced by the butler with dignified formality, “Major Williams and Miss Davies, Your Grace.”

Wills and I stepped into the room, leaving the butler at the door.

“Ah!” smiled Alexander Quinn as he approached Wills with his arm outstretched, “A good journey, I hope.”

“Yes, Mr Quinn,” Wills replied taking the offered hand and shaking it warmly.

The other two occupants of the room were obviously the Duke and Duchess of Bramwell, casting a critical eye over us from afar. I could not immediately discern if they objected to us and our intrusion or welcomed it.

“Let me present you,” continued Quinn leading Wills to the duke with me following a step behind.

The butler, still standing at the door, enquired, “Will that be all, Sir?”

The duchess interceded, “Thomson, ask Florence to bring tea for our guests, would you?” with a smile at me that immediately made me feel welcomed.

“Right away, Ma’am,” Thomson replied and closed the door behind him.

“Your Grace,” Quinn beamed like a proud father, “may I present to you Major Reginald Williams of the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides and the Metropolitan Police’s Special Branch.”

Wills stood to attention and bowed his head sharply, “Your Grace.”

“And his Assisting Clerk, Miss Rebecca Davies,” Quinn continued.

My bow was somewhat less snappy and more casual, “Your Grace.”

The duke was impressed as he addressed Wills, “Major Williams. The Queen’s Guides, you say?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He gave an approving “Hmm,” and then addressed me, taking in my facial disfigurement and giving me a restrained sympathetic smile, “Miss Davies. You come with quite a reputation, I must say.”

“I trust a good one, Sir,” I enquired, “and ‘Davies’ is sufficient. Sir.” That last bit caused an audible gasp to escape Quinn but earned another smile from both the duke and duchess.

“Is that an Afrikaans inflection you have there...Davies?” the duke asked.

“Australian, Sir.”

“Ah, yes, wool, wheat, beef, irrepressible subjects. A rich, young country.”

“Sir, if I may...” interrupted Quinn, “fill in the major with our discussions?”

“Of course, Quinn, go ahead.” Taking a seat, he added, “Please, make yourselves comfortable.”

Wills and I occupied the upholstered antique sofa with Quinn and the peers taking up one of the several matching chairs each.

“Chippendale?” I asked the duchess.

She nodded adding, “The sixth duke’s acquisition. A very shrewd man,” and gave her husband an approving look.

“Williams,” began Quinn, “you have been installed in a suite on the same floor as the Duke and Duchess. Being on the same floor means you will have easy access to the Duchess at night should the need present itself but it will also mean that questions will arise from the other servants as to why you haven’t been relegated to the upper floors since you are not a peer or related.

“Davies, because you will accompany the Duchess during her waking hours, you have been assigned a room on the floor above the Duchess’. The device we have employed is that you, Davies, have been engaged as the Duchess’ personal secretary and, as such, is



required to be at her side every minute of the day, barring meal times unless otherwise invited.

“Williams, as you will be active only at night and sleeping during the day, your purpose here is that you are conducting an audit of the Duke’s entailed estates and will be working within the confines of your suite. That should explain your daily absences.

“All servants, except two trusted chamber maids, the Duchess’ maid and the duke’s valet, have been expressly debarred from being on your floor Williams, on the pain of instant dismissal and without a character, if they disobey.

“Only the butler, Thomson, whom you’ve met, and the house keeper, Mrs Plummer, know of your identity and real purpose here. Both Thomson and Mrs Plummer have been in the employ of His Grace for more than forty years and are completely trustworthy.

“Oh, and another thing, the Duchess’ niece, the Countess of Chestermere, will be along day after tomorrow to conclude some business with the Duke. She will be in a suite on the same floor as you Williams. Of course, her maid will have access also.

“To keep everything as normal as possible, the Duchess’ planned weekend will go ahead Saturday. Those fifteen guests will be allocated rooms on the floors above. Thomson has arranged three extra footmen and two extra chamber maids to be provided by the agency and they should arrive Friday. Any questions?”

Wills and I looked at each other; Wills responded on our behalf, “No, Sir, I believe your rundown and the brief you have already given us is all we need.”

A gentle rapping on the door diverted our attention.

“Enter,” said the duke.

The butler, Thomson, opened the door for the maid, a young woman of pale complexion and rosy cheeks, entered wielding a very large silver platter with silver teapots, creamer and sugar bowl filled with lumps of white sugar, delicate cups and saucers and silver teaspoons.

She skilfully manoeuvred her way to the low table in the middle of the room and dexterously placed the tray on it without so much as a clink of teacups.

“Please serve our guests, Florence,” the duchess instructed. Addressing me, she asked, “Miss Davies, how do you take your tea?”

“Black, thank you.”

Florence carefully poured a good measure of rich, hot tea into the cup and brought it to me. Handing it to me, she looked up at me for the first time, “Madam—Oh!” and caught sight of my facial mutilation. The jolt to her sensibilities sent the tea cup off balance and some of its contents into my lap and onto the floor much to her additional horror and dismay. “Oh, Madam, I am so terribly sorry...”

Thomson ran to her aid as she tried desperately to soak the hot liquid from my skirt with her white apron.

“Don’t fuss,” I said trying to suppress my irritation, “I’ve had worse things happen to me.”

Thomson waved poor Florence off, “Go!” was the only instruction he uttered as he finished the mopping up with several napkins from the tray. Florence raced from the room, hiding her tears.

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“Oh, Mrs Plummer,” wailed Florence as she burst into the housekeeper’s sitting room and threw herself into the only armchair there, “I’m going to be sacked!”

“What? Again?” was the nonchalant reply from Mrs Plummer, not even looking up from the ledger book she was checking.

“I’m done for!” she said wiping the tears from her eyes.

Mrs Plummer put down her pencil and looked up at Florence sprawled like a rag doll across the chair, “Tell me what happened this time.”

“I’ve just had the awfulest discombobulation. There was I, serving tea as proper as you please, when I look up and see this...this...woman—”

“Lady,” the housekeeper corrected.

“She weren’t no lady, Mrs Plummer. Not like what normally visits Her Grace and His Grace. She was like...like...well, I mean to say, her hair was real short, shorter than a badger’s eyebrow, and her face all cut up. She looked daggers at me and gave me the trembles when I spilt tea all over her. And the rug.”

“Oh, Florrie, what am I to do with you?”

“Her face. It was like she’s been through the wars. Or a window! And I’ve seen women like her when I worked in Berlin.”

“And what women would they be then?”

“Well, I mean to say, you know...men haters.”

Mrs Plummer heaved a long sigh and stood up, “Florence, that ‘woman’ is here at the behest of His Grace to take care of Her Grace’s needs. Both she and Major Williams. You are to treat her with respect and refer to her as Miss Davies, no matter what you may or may not think she is or what she looks like.”

“She’s real scary, Mrs Plummer,” Florence whined as she stood.

“Have you been listening, Florence? How are you to treat her?”

“With respect, Mrs Plummer.”

“Good. We have an understanding. Now back to work before I discombobulate you.”

Florence slouched through the door, closing it behind her.

Mrs Plummer couldn’t help herself and muttered, “‘Discombobulation’ indeed. Where does she pick up these Americanisms?”

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In London, Sir Giles Hawthorne was enjoying a quiet evening alone at the Marlborough Club, away from his wife, reading the evening Times and sipping his favourite port when Colonel Humphries appeared in front of him.

“Giles! I didn’t expect to see you here this evening.”

“Neville. My wife...you understand. Won’t you join me?” invited Hawthorne, folding away his newspaper.

“My pleasure. Thank you,” Humphries accepted as he made himself comfortable in the large upholstered chair next to Sir Giles. “I heard what happened last week to that poor unfortunate...er, Timothy? Rotten luck, old boy.”

“Yes, that damned heavy-handed fool Yabsley went too far.”

“What now? Any indication as to who the abductors were?”

“None, I’m afraid, we got nothing but the ramblings of a confused imbecile’s mind.”

“Hmp,” retorted Humphries with an ambiguous grunt as he took out his silver cigarette case and offered a cigarette to Hawthorne.

“At least one good thing has come of all this,” Hawthorne crowed as he took a cigarette and put it to his mouth.

“Oh?” Humphries’ interest was piqued. Brandishing his new Matchless Cigar Lighter, he lit both cigarettes arousing Hawthorne’s curiosity.

“I say, old man, that’s an interesting gadget,” Hawthorne said taking the lighter from Humphries and admiring it, “where did you get it?”

“From the United States. You were saying? Something good?”

“Yes. Quinn—upon my recommendation, mind you—saw fit to suspend Major Williams and that vile excuse of womanhood, his so called ‘Assisting Clerk’, for fouling up the operation in the forest. We had those abductors in the palm of our hand.”

“They’re no longer on the case?”

“No, thank God. Quinn listened to me for once.”

“Have they been assigned to another case?”

“I believe Quinn ordered them to take leave, as I suggested. Not that I give a damn,” Hawthorne replied handing back the lighter and taking a draw on his cigarette.

“Do you know where they are now?”

Hawthorne became a little annoyed that Humphries always steered the conversation away from his sway over the Special Branch Head, “You seem awfully interested in those two, Humphries.”

“My interest is only out of concern for you, dear boy,” Humphries offered, “The further away from you and the case, the better I say.”

“Quite. I have no idea where they’ve gone. On suspension until further notice is all I need to know. Good riddance, I say.” and took a long, satisfied draw on his cigarette.

“Yes. Good riddance.”

A short pause ensued during which time Humphries fell into deep thought. He broke the silence with a well-considered suggestion, “You know, dear boy, your quandary has been dogging my thoughts...”

“My quandary?”

“Yes. Not being able to find the perpetrators of these heinous acts.”

“Not a quandary. All I need is a police force with an ounce of intellect. The buffoons I currently have are nothing more than fopdoodles and cumberworlds.”

“Quite so but have you thought that the more hostile trade unions may be behind these monstrous crimes? Since they were legitimised—”

This suggestion intrigued Hawthorne, “How so? What have you heard?”

“Well...perhaps it’s nothing...mere speculation—”

“Out with it!”

“My man tells me he overheard three of the labourers on one of the East End building sites talking about a kidnapping and how much their union would benefit from the ransom. I can’t attest to the veracity of what my man heard but I can say that if it came to pass—another abduction, that is—it would be a black mark against anyone who didn’t follow this through and a gold mark for the man who did and prevented another mindless murder.”

Hawthorne stared at Humphries. What was racing through his mind was his current account with the Head of Special Branch and what a gold mark would mean to his chances of promotion. “Which unions are you talking about?” he quickly demanded.

“Well, I quite don’t know but the building site engages workers from the National Association of Builders’ Labourers, the National Amalgamated Labourers’ Union, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners to name a few.”

“Send your man to me so I can have a word.”

“I’m dreadfully sorry, old man, but he had to leave for Ireland hurriedly. His mother, you know. I will get word to him by telegraph.”

Hawthorne was a little put out by not being able to interview Humphries’ ‘man’ himself but was grateful for what seemed to be, finally, a positive lead to catching these murderers.

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The next day at Abbotsford Hall was, for me, a lesson in household management. This was a large and complex household which was easily and deftly managed by the duchess by delegating to Thomson and Mrs Plummer who, in turn, managed their charges with utmost

proficiency and economy. The staff comprised about thirty individuals employed as valets and footmen, maids of every description, groundsmen, gardeners and stable hands, and handymen and boys. Apart from these permanent workers, when social events were in the offing, as was the case in hand Saturday, extra staff would be taken on to help even though guests, more often than not, would bring their own retinue of one, two or three servants.

As arranged, Thomson had provided complete list of permanent employees, which had been passed on to Scott. Despite his debilitating injury to his leg, Scott had valiantly volunteered to remain in London and remain on duty. So long as he had his crutches, he asserted, he could work and help bring these miscreants to justice. His assignment was to investigate each employee and report his findings to Wills. The review of the extra three footmen and two chamber maids was going to be more difficult as the agency would send whoever was available at the moment. All in all, this situation would mean that Wills and I had a difficult task and had to be extra vigilant and cautious.

Lady Chestermere, the duchess' niece, would be accompanied by her maid, her chauffeur and her business secretary, all of whom were held in the highest regard by Mrs Plummer and Thomson and, indeed, the duchess herself.

Those accompanying the fifteen guests due Saturday, however, were an unknown quality and quantity. "*One problem at a time,*" I thought.

The duchess took me on a 'Cooks' tour' of the extensive grounds, introducing me as Miss Davies, her personal secretary, to those in charge of the various departments. The stables were of particular interest to me as, while I endured riding in a hansom or a coach, I enjoyed sitting astride a good mount and giving the horse its head. This was something becoming more difficult to do within the confines of a city like London. There was nothing like racing across the countryside on a brisk autumn morning with the wind in your hair, short as mine was.

The stables were vast and accommodated all of the estate's equine inhabitants, from Hackneys to Shires, all in excellent condition and well-tended by the head groom and his assistants.

Strolling down the spotless centre aisle, the duchess must have seen my eyes light up when they set upon a magnificent seventeen-hand thoroughbred.

“Peleus,” the duchess announced, “the Duke’s favourite. He’s won Ascot, you see. Beat the King’s horse by a head. He’s a wonderful animal,” she confirmed impishly, scratching his proffered inquisitive nose, “and that’s Tommy, his companion. They are inseparable.” In the stall next to Peleus, watching us intently, was a smaller chestnut gelding, also a handsome specimen of horseflesh, being enthusiastically brushed by a lad of about nine or ten who, himself, was also watching us intently.

“He don’t run half as hard as when Tommy’s with him,” the lad declared.

“And that’s Henry,” the duchess introduced, forgiving him his lack of manners.

“Henry, this is Miss Davies, my secretary—”

The duchess barely finished her introductions when Henry’s hand shot through between the rails and offered it to me, “Pleased to meet you, Miss...Gaw! What happened to your face?”

His naïveté took me—and the duchess—by surprise but I took his hand and shook it. “An unfortunate accident,” I replied.

“It must have hurt some.”

“Quite some,” I confirmed.

“Don’t matter but. Peleus likes you. He usually bites them that he don’t, so you must be all right.” He resumed brushing Tommy, “I’m going to be a jockey. The duke said I could race Peleus when I’m old enough. I ride him now but just a walk or a trot in the yard.” He was quite nonchalantly adamant of what his future held as his voice trailed off and he concentrated on his task at hand, virtually dismissing us. I somehow found admiration for the young fellow.

The duchess simply smiled at me and we walked on. “Do you ride?” she asked casually.

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Very good. The countess is quite the horsewoman and we’ll be on the bridlepath every morning she is with us. Bright and early,” she added with a warning glint in her eye.

All that piece of information did was raise my concerns over how obscure the trail was and if it presented the perfect opportunity for an abduction to take place. I would need

to speak to Wills about this. It would be better if the duchess stayed in the company of more people rather than fewer.

The duchess, accompanied by the housekeeper, Mrs Plummer, then showed me through the truly palatial house, from top to bottom, finishing the expedition in the large kitchens where I met Mrs Russell, the cook who, by a quirk of coincidence, reminded me of Mr Morrison's cook all those years ago. They were both a little portly of body, a little grizzled of hair and a little ruddy of complexion, which deepened to ruby red whenever a problem presented itself.

There, in the servant's hall, Florence and I once again crossed paths.

"I believe you've met Florence," Mrs Plummer asked me, "and I believe she owes you an apology. Florence," she commanded, "I would like you to meet Miss Davies and offer her your apology for spilling tea all over her, yesterday."

"That's not necessary, Mrs Plummer," I scowled, giving Florence the deadliest look I could muster, "As long as she does as she's told." The object of this blunt threat was to keep the young dither-brain in line and to keep her off the duchess' floor. Poor Florence visibly trembled and awkwardly curtsied as Mrs Plummer waved her away.

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Wills and I had our discussion that evening in his suite of rooms opposite the duchess'. He thought it best to just go along with what was planned as any change to normality could raise suspicions. "If that's what the Duchess and countess usually do," he advised, "then continue doing it."

"Oh," he added as an afterthought, on my way out of the door, "I borrowed a copy of Debrett's from the Duke. It's on your desk. I thought you'd like some background on the countess since she and the duchess are likely to spend all their free time together. The entry is marked with a slip of paper."

My room on the third floor was almost as big as my flat in Newington and included a small study area with a desk, a sofa and low table on which stood a very generous platterful of cold meats, cheeses, bread and various condiments. There was also a private bathroom and water closet, and an enormous double bed.



I made up a thick sandwich and went to the desk to write up my report, eat my sandwich and go to bed. Debrett's was there, just as Wills had indicated and, munching on my snack, I opened the book at the mark and easily found the entry:

*'CHESTERMERE, COUNTESS OF (Delaney) - Katherine Agnes Stuart Delaney (Countess of Chestermere); b. 1865...'*

I read through the whole, full page entry and was impressed by the achievements of this woman and her lineage. She was, indeed, forty and unmarried and a countess in her own right having succeeded her mother, Agnes, upon her mother's death in 1879. Agnes has also been a countess in her own right, the title having a Special Remainder and going to the eldest child, male or female. The Duchess of Bramwell, Mary, was Agnes's younger sister who married the Duke of Bramwell while Agnes herself married a commoner, a Scotsman. It was interesting to note that the current Countess of Chestermere was one of only two 'in her own right' countesses, who were not dowagers or widows, listed in Debrett's. She was the fourteenth to hold the title.

"Impressive," I mused, "with all that and not married, what is wrong with her?"

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After a good night's sleep—the bed was very comfortable—I rose early, bathed and dressed, ready for the day ahead and the arrival of the Countess of Chestermere and her entourage and the headaches that would bring. I was not looking forward to listening to the interminable, inconsequential chatter that seemed to be the only occupation of women of high social status and wealth. While the duchess was undoubtedly charming and had made me feel very welcomed, she still had that air of aloofness that brought into focus my very lowly status. I was well aware of my lack of social standing, lack of breeding and obvious physical defects but I'd be damned if I allowed others to make me feel less worthy than they. A final glance in the mirror confirmed I was scrubbed, macassared and combed, and my necktie straight. "*As good as it gets,*" I thought and gathered my daily report for Wills and my 'secretary's notebook' and headed downstairs.

I encountered Wills in the corridor on the duchess' floor, striding along and reading a ledger book as officiously as possible.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said looking up from his ledger and seeing that he didn’t need to keep up his pretence, “What time is it?”

I looked at my wristwatch, “Seven o’clock.”

“There’s a fluster of activity in there,” he advised referring to the duchess’ suite.

“The arrival of her niece, I expect,” I confirmed and handed him an envelope, “My report.”

“Thank you. With any sort of luck, Scott should have something on Croft and his accomplice by now. I’ll telephone him before I hit the sack,” Wills said as he took a step toward the stairs. With an afterthought, he stopped and whispered, “Listen, regarding the niece. I read she’s near forty and unmarried. Don’t frighten her too much and make her any uglier than she already is. Countess or not.” He smiled that all-knowing smile that sometimes annoyed me and other times made me smirk. This time it annoyed me.

“Bugger off.”

“Good night,” he said and walked away grinning.

I watched his back with a feeling of foreboding then turned to the duchess’ door when it swung open and the duchess flounced out, her face beaming, and leaving her maid in the room in midmotion of installing the last of the hairpins to the duchess’ hair.

“Good morning, Davies. Beautiful morning, isn’t it?” she said as she breezed past me.

A few loping strides and I had caught up to her, “Good morning, Your Grace.”

We passed two chamber maids at the linen closet who immediately stood aside and curtsied.

“Good morning Bertha. Good morning, Candice.”

“Good morning, Your Grace,” they said in unison, their voices fading quickly as we raced down the stairs to the morning room. The Duchess of Bramwell could have won at Ascot herself, without a horse, at the rate she was travelling.

Into the morning room she swept with me trailing in her wash.

“Good morning, Bramwell,” she chirped to her husband as she hurried to the buffet and helped herself to an assortment of breakfast treats, “What a glorious day!”

“Good morning, dearest.” replied the duke looking up from his freshly pressed, four page, salmon-pink Financial Times and noting, “My, my, if I had to guess, I would say that you’re expecting someone rather special today.”

Her reply was a beautiful beaming smile as she took her selection to the table. Instantly, Thomson was at her side pouring hot coffee into her cup.

“Good morning, Thomson,” she acknowledged, taking a sip of coffee.

“Your Grace,” he replied with a slight bow and replenished the duke’s cup at the other end of the table.

I took myself to a corner of the room near a window overlooking the gardens at the rear of the building and looked out. Amid the profusion of floral colour and lawns stood a magnificent white wrought iron gazebo. Three gardeners were tending the grounds, mowing the lawns and trimming the rose bushes in readiness for Saturday. One was cutting some long-stemmed roses and handing them to Florence who added them to the already large collection in her basket.

“And when may I have her all to myself?” was the pleasantly posed question from the duchess.

The duke chuckled and put down his paper, “We should have all the documents and contracts signed and sealed by teatime, dear, if Hollingsworth doesn’t dither over the small print.” It was then he noticed me at the window, “Good morning, Davies.”

“Morning, Sir.”

“You will have your work cut out for you keeping up with the Duchess and her niece and their incessant cacklings.”

My shoulders drooped; it would be as I thought: *tedium ad nauseum*.

Mary intervened, “Now, Bram, we don’t cackle, we discuss. By the way, Davies,” she continued, turning to me, “I’ve arranged a nice beast for you tomorrow.”

“Riding?” The duke was concerned, “Is that wise, dear? With all the goings-on? Perhaps it would be better—”

“Pish, dear. You know very well how I feel about this supposed abduction.” She rebutted, taking delicate morsels into her mouth.

It surprised me that the duchess did not take the threat to her life more seriously. On the other hand, perhaps Wills and I were mistaken; perhaps we were wasting our time on a wild goose chase and the abductors were ready to pounce elsewhere.

“Mary, what if the threat is real? What if this little jaunt puts you in danger? And Katherine? And Davies? Remember that Davies is risking her life to keep yours safe. I strongly urge you not go riding until this is concluded. And certainly not through the forest.”

“I concede to your infinite wisdom, Charlie. We will take the river path,” she impishly acquiesced after a second’s worth of consideration.

The duke was annoyed by this concession and informed her, “Roberts tells me that he found poachers had been at the Catfish lodge. Left an awful mess. I really think you should reconsider.”

That piece of inconsequence aroused my interest; something I would need to investigate further.

“Poachers poach, dear, they don’t abduct,” countered the duchess, “besides, you said they’d left.”

All the duke could do was shake his head in defeat. Knowing the duchess as he did, her mind was made up and that was the end of the discussion. He looked at me, “You do ride, Davies?”

Before I could answer, the duchess jumped in, “Of course she rides. She’s Australian.”

“Ah, yes. Damned fine horsemen, Australians.”

“Language, Bramwell!”

“Forgive my errant tongue, my dear. Horsewomen, too. Is that where you met Major Williams? Australia?”

“No, Sir, Afghanistan.”

“You don’t say. I was there in eighty. The end of the second Afghan war. Dreadful business, that. You?”

“Eighty-five, Sir.”

“In heaven’s name, what would a young Christian woman be doing there at that dangerous time?”

I hesitated to reply; the memories still raw. I subconsciously fingered the scar on my face. Not even Wills brought up our time there unless I initiated the conversation. The duchess perceived my hesitation and interrupted, addressing the duke, “Er...did I tell you that Katherine acquired a motor car?”

“A motor car? Damned noisy contraptions! Forgive my errant tongue, dear.”

“It’s a fine British make, Rolls-Royce, I believe, and she’s driven it all the way back from Glasgow.”

“Terrifying all the horses and villagers along the way, no doubt. What say you, Davies? Motor cars.”

I was reluctant to offer any opinion but couldn’t restrain myself, “It’s the way of the future, Sir.”

“Hmp!” was the only answer.

The duchess addressed her husband, “I will drag you into the twentieth century if it’s the last thing I do, dearest.”

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Colonel Neville Humphries had made his way to the Marlborough Club in Pall Mall early that morning, partly to avail himself of the fine breakfast offered there and partly to await an important telephone call. It came as he was finishing his coffee in the reading room when the porter brought in the telephone set.

“Pardon me, Colonel Humphries. A telephone call for you, Sir,” he announced and placed the unit on the table and plugged in the cord at the wall.

Humphries waited for the porter to leave before picking up the receiver, “Colonel Humphries here.” He listened intently to the scratchy vocalisations on the line, his demeanour slowly changed from attentive to concerned to incensed, and he finally directed, “Keep me informed. But not here. Not at the club.” He replaced the handset and sat in stern and concentrated contemplation then, his plan formulated, picked up the receiver.

“Yes, put me through to 715, London Wall.” He nervously tapped his finger on the upholstered easy chair’s armrest as he waited impatiently. “Gregory? Gregory, I’ve had

word our train may have come off the rails...No, it will still proceed but we need a deviation. This is what I want you to do...”

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After breakfast, the duchess and I relocated to her study, which overlooked the long driveway from the main gates and forecourt. She and Mrs Plummer were at her desk poring over the account book and the entries of purchases and payments, while I peered out the window, making mental notes of the activities of various servants.

“Mr Graves?” queried the duchess, quite annoyed, “Are we still dealing with that awful man?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” apologised Mrs Plummer, “Regrettably, Mr Woods was unable to supply the provisions for the weekend in time.”

A small dust cloud near the front gate caught my attention and, barely a moment later, Emma, the duchess’ lady’s maid, raced into the room and excitedly announced, “Your Grace! Lady Katherine!”

The duchess and Mrs Plummer, in unison, rose to their feet, abandoning the account audit, and excitedly hastened out the door, with Emma at their heels.

A second glance out the window confirmed that a motor car was approaching quite fast. I gathered my wits and my notebook and followed the excitement out the door, down the stairs and to the grand entrance door. Thomson and three footmen were already lined up and standing at attention as the duchess, followed closely by Mrs Plummer and Emma, descended the imposing stone staircase to the gravelly ground and eagerly awaited the arrival of the Countess of Chestermere and her entourage. I remained at the top of the stairs, obscured within the shadows, observing all, my notebook wrapped in my arms and my Webley nestled against my chest, beneath my jacket.

The shiny, new, green and brass Rolls-Royce motor car pulled up near the greeting party, close to Thomson. The crunch of the gravel under the car’s tyres was actually louder than the purr of its engine. This was not the noisy contraption the duke had expected. It was a massive automobile with an open compartment for the driver and a footman, or the like, beside him. The passengers’ compartment was fully enclosed with large windows all around and it appeared to be capable of seating four comfortably. The roof was fitted with

side grilles to keep the cases, trunks and luggage in place, and these were doing a capital job at the present.

I could see two occupying the front seat: the driver, a young man neatly dressed in a grey suit, cap and goggles and, beside him, a young woman, also with goggles, dressed in a duster coat, and a wide-brimmed sun hat, which abjectly failed in keeping her frizzy red hair contained. I assumed these to be the chauffer and the lady's maid.

The passenger compartment, therefore, must have held the countess and her business secretary. What I could make of the business secretary was that he was very well dressed, clean-shaven and around the same age as the chauffeur. I could not see the countess for the duster coat and the large veiled hat she wore.

Thomson took a step and, with great purpose and aplomb, opened the passenger door with a bow, his actions contrasting the fervent activity of the chauffeur and the business secretary who sprang from their seats to assist the lady's maid to alight. Even though the chauffeur reached their objective first, the secretary shouldered him out of the way and held out his hand for the maid. Rivals for her affection, no doubt.

My attention returned to the sedate Thomson who extended his hand to the countess and assisted her out of the compartment. By this time, her maid had reached the countess and swiftly assisted in removing her dust coat revealing not the dumpy, frumpish form I had expected but the personification of the modern feminine ideal: the American Gibson Girl.

In a trice, the duchess was upon the countess just as the veils were lifted away from the countess' face, revealing a genuinely affectionate smile—all I could see from my elevated position. Mary warmly embraced her niece and kissed her on both cheeks; there was no doubt as to the closeness of these two women.

Mary held the countess at arm's length and admired her, "Katherine, my sweetling, how wonderful you look."

"Thank you, Aunt. And you look so well."

"Pish!" she replied with appreciative humour, then leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, "There is so much to tell you, my dear." Diverting her attention to the

business secretary who had joined the countess and the maid, she welcomed him, “George. How nice to see you again.”

George snapped his chin to his chest and smiled, “Your Grace.”

“How is your mother?”

“Exceptionally well, Ma’am. But she refuses to retire even though Lady Katherine has set aside a lovely cottage for her.”

“Retire?” Mary queried feigning indignance, “Your mother is barely my age! Pish, young man, we have many good years left in us yet.”

George became quite flustered, “I...I beg your pardon, Ma’am, I didn’t—”

Mary smiled her impish smile and moved to the maid, “Turner, I see you are doing an excellent job keeping Lady Katherine in form.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Turner replied with a curtsey and a broad Scottish brogue, “Her ladyship is mostly amenable to my suggestions. Mostly.”

In the background, Thomson directed the flurry of activity from the footmen, and a disgruntled chauffeur, in unloading the valises and trunks.

“Come, dear,” Mary said as she hooked her arm into Lady Katherine’s and led her toward the staircase, leaving an embarrassed George to be consoled by Turner. Sidling up behind George, the chauffeur leant in and teased in a broad Mancunian accent, “You can remove your foot from your mouth now, *Mister* McPherson.” The emphasis on ‘mister’ definitely indicated a rivalry between these two men.

This earned him a swift reproach from Turner, “Jimmy Isham! Shame on you! He’s your better.”

“Hah! He’s still the housekeeper’s son,” Jimmy shot back as he returned to unloading the car.

Turner put a hand on George’s shoulder and comforted him, “Don’t you pay him any mind, George.”

Mrs Plummer and Emma, their faces beaming, curtseyed in unison as Lady Katherine and the duchess approached.

Lady Katherine met each with a smile, “Mrs Plummer. Emma.”

Mrs Plummer spoke for both, “Welcome to Abbotsford Hall, my lady.”



“Mrs McPherson sends you her regards and trusts you are well.”

“Very well, my lady, and not ready to retire, either,” giving George a disapproving look. “Everything is in readiness for you in your usual suite, my lady.”

The duchess and Lady Katherine led the procession up the stairs, Katherine commenting, “I must say, Aunt, the groundsmen have done a wonderful job.”

“Yes. It’s been a truly exceptional summer and they have done an excellent job,” the duchess confirmed as they took each step upward slowly. “They went through every cottage on the estate as well. We even had poachers for the first time in years in one of the fishermen’s huts. They left an awful mess or so Bram informed me this morning. By the way, did you attend the concert by that Ravel chap?”

Only when they had reached the top of the stairs did I see Lady Katherine’s face. I must have audibly gasped; she resembled Sarah—my beautiful Sarah—in so many ways: her delicate complexion, her large soft, brown eyes, her lustrous dark brown hair, her soft, moist lips—I could not help but stare. A feeling overcame me, one which I hadn’t felt for thirty years, one which I never wanted to feel ever again.

The instant Lady Katherine caught sight of me in the shadows, her step faltered and her face registered mild shock. Mary noticed and immediately commented, “Oh. My day shadow. I’ll explain all presently, my dear” and placated her niece with a pat on her hand and an engaging smile, and continued their stroll through the vestibule.

I followed several yards behind, my mind numb. “*Pull yourself together, Davies!*” I thought, admonishing myself, “*The Duchess is the business at hand.*”

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We arrived at the suite of rooms prepared for the countess, we, that is, the duchess, Lady Katherine, Mrs Plummer and Turner, the remainder having peeled off to take up their various tasks and assignments.

Lady Katherine quickly looked about her rooms and was very pleased to see the large vase brimming with roses, “Oh, Mrs Plummer, they’re beautiful. And so fragrant.”

“Late bloomers, my lady. I know how you love roses so.” The housekeeper confirmed proudly.

“Thank you. Aunt, this has always been my favourite room.”

“Well, you rest now. Lunch is at one and Mr Hollingsworth will be here at three. Mrs Plummer will send up some refreshments.”

Having regained my composure and purpose, I stood by the doorway, observing, well aware that Turner kept glaring at me as she unpacked one of the small cases she had brought up with her. Her defiance amused me, “*This woman is going to give me grief,*” I thought, “*she won’t win,*” I reassured myself and maintained my stern demeanour. I was also aware of the countess not giving her aunt her full attention, every now and then giving me a furtive glance. I knew my visage was discomfoting to most but her interest in me seemed more than appalled curiosity.

“Katherine...? Katherine, did you hear me?”

“Aunt,” Lady Katherine said jolted from her musings, “I beg your pardon, you were saying?”

I wondered what the countess was thinking before she was brought out of her reverie.

“Never mind, dear, freshen up. Lunch is at one in the morning room.” As she passed me, the duchess gave me a most disconcerting look, one of warning.

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The duchess had decided to have lunch in the morning room, just the three of them, aunt, uncle and niece, and to have Thomson serve—the countess had to be told of the senseless situation and it was best to do that in private.

“Jimmy achieved speeds of fifty miles an hour on some of the better roads. Quite unnerving, yet thrilling,” Lady Katherine admitted with a laugh.

“Hmp.” The duke was not impressed.

“Shall we acquire one, Charlie?”

Bramwell gave his wife a withering look, which initiated giggles from the two women.

“Aunt,” began Katherine, “who was that woman?”

“Ah, my day shadow.” the duchess replied innocently, “Oh, she’s someone the Special Branch Department sent along to preserve my life,” she said offhandedly.

Katherine was confused, “Special Branch? I don’t—”

“Mary, this is not a trifling matter,” the duke interjected, “please don’t treat it as one. Katherine, there have been several horrible murders over the past six months, all abducted for ransom.”

“I have heard rumours.”

“The details were suppressed by the court. There is evidence that points to your aunt being the next victim.”

“Aunt!” Katherine was appalled and shocked.

“Pish! Katherine, I will tell you as I’ve told your Uncle Charles, it’s all theory and conjecture. The idea is as laughable as it is ludicrous. No criminal anarchist movement is about to abduct me.”

“And that woman...?”

“Her bodyguard,” the duke added.

“Is that all the Special Branch has to offer as protection?” Katherine was becoming incensed.

“Oh, there’s two of them,” Mary added gleefully, “quite a nice chap, really. Pity he’s married,” she added pointedly.

“I’m appalled, Uncle. Shouldn’t you take Aunt Mary away somewhere? Keep her safe?”

The duchess supplied, “Oh, no, dear, the Special Branch wants me here so they can capture these scoundrels and bring them to justice.”

“By using you as bait?”

“Katherine, sweetling, don’t be so concerned. Nothing will come of it. You’ll see. Besides which, each of my two Special Branch people has a most impressive curriculum vitae. I have faith they will keep me safe should something untoward happen. But it won’t.”

An awkward truce fell upon the room and each fell silent.

Mary became uncomfortable and hesitated before raising the subject,

“Katherine...That woman, my day shadow—”

Katherine stopped mid-bite.

“Her name is Rebecca Davies and... I saw how she looked at you. Katherine, sweetling, I love you as my own child...I don’t want to see you hurt again.”

Katherine put down her fork and laughed unconvincingly, “Aunt! That was more than twenty years ago. A girlish infatuation.” She picked up her fork, “I had forgotten all about it,” and resumed eating.

Mary doubted that Katherine had forgotten such a painful betrayal but played along with her niece, “Good. There are two very eligible gentlemen I think you should meet. They’ll be here on Saturday. One is a peer’s son from an old Aberdeen family and the other a wealthy American entrepreneur.”

“Aunt, I thank you but I’ll be going on to my estate well before the weekend.”

“And to an empty house.”

“This is beginning to sound like one of the many conversations we’ve already had, Aunt.”

“And we’ll continue having it until one of us raises her hand in defeat.”

“Uncle—” Katherine looked to the duke for salvation. All he was capable of doing was raising his hands in surrender.

“No, don’t seek assistance from your Uncle. You need to marry and settle down.”

“I am settled.”

“But are you happy?”

“Immeasurably.”

“By what measure?” the duchess lost her impishness and was quite serious, “Guineas? Acres? Or perhaps factories and farms? If so, then I concede you should be extremely happy. No, my dear, the measure of happiness is having no regrets. Beautiful as you are, you are getting on and your looks won’t last forever. And children—”

“Those are definitely the last thing on my mind.”

The duke could see this conversation ending the same way as all the others had and asked, “How fast did you say you were going?”

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Since the morning room and its occupants were safe and secure, I took the opportunity to wander around the mansion and try to understand why this feeling had overcome me. I did not want to feel this way again.

My thoughts returned to Wangaratta...

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## CHAPTER 11

May, 1874 – Thursday

Wangaratta, Victoria

My room in the Royal Victoria had luxury appointments and having my own private bathroom was another indulgence I gratefully appreciated but my night was sleepless. Now that my fatigue and hunger had been sated, the course of awful events and atrocious acts leading me here played over and over again in my mind. The images of Percy being killed, the disbelief on Pitt's face when I shot him, the needless slaughter of so many good men, the molten hatred of that German tyrant for me, my detestable treatment of Hilda, Harper's limp body gently swinging by the rope around his neck...and Sarah. If only I had not loved Sarah. My overwhelming desire for this beautiful young woman caused all these people to suffer so.

The morning sun slowly lit up my room and, as its intensity grew, so did my resolve to not be the cause of any more harm to anyone. My kind of love was poisonous and, if this meant I could not love as my heart desired, I would not love at all.

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Johnson and Turner had camped in the scrub just outside of Wangaratta Wednesday night, convinced their prey, Robert Davies, had come this far and was heading for Melbourne by the fastest means possible: train. Their plan, cooked up that night along with a rabbit they had shot, was to find the little bastard and, not only to relieve him of the cash he had stolen from Pitt and Percy, but also his life. Johnson decided to start searching all of the hotels,

boarding houses, doss houses and bordellos in the area at first light; if he was here, they were determined to find him.

The township of Wangaratta was slowly shaking off its sleepiness as the two unkempt riders walked through the town's outskirts and surveyed each of the buildings sparsely scattered along the road. As the buildings became more concentrated, Johnson and Turner stopped at each that offered accommodation or travellers' respite, enquiring the whereabouts of their 'missing little brother, Robert'.

Each of the first dozen or so establishments had turned up nothing but Johnson was resolute and adamant that the little snake was here, somewhere.

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I spent the day in my room, calling for the chamber maid and porter to bring me each of the local papers as they were published, and my meals, handsomely rewarding them for their service. I scoured the local newspapers for any news of the robbery and the efforts of the police but, other than the information the desk clerk had provided, there was nothing more.

The day wore on slowly.

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It was coming onto dusk and Johnson had spoken to almost every owner of each of the places a youth on the run could hide out when, on the southern edge of town, they came upon a stable with a paddock holding several horses.

Turner pulled up his horse and commented to Johnson, "Ain't that Percy's nag over there? The bay?"

Johnson peered at the magnificent animal and, without acknowledging Turner's comment, turned his mount toward the stable and the man near the entrance. "You there!" Johnson called, "the bay thoroughbred in the paddock, who owns it?"

The stable owner looked at Johnson suspiciously, "Why do you ask?"

"Er, my little brother has one just like it and he's run away from home and his ma and pa are worried. He's a little slow-witted."

This didn't quite wash with the stable owner, "Slow-witted, you say? The fellow who's agisted that bay certainly isn't an imbecile."

"Yeah, yeah. You know what families are like. They expect more than they get."

“Yeah, I can see their disappointment.”

Johnson was becoming impatient with this old bugger but persisted as politely as his anger would permit, “I’ll describe him to you, all right, mister? Just tell me if you seen this bloke, all right? He’s about five and a half feet tall, skinny, blond hair and peach-fuzz face.”

“Yeah,” added Turner, “and a bit of a milksop.”

The stable owner stroked his chin, “Family, you say?”

Turner jumped in, “Yeah, our ma and pa are real worried.”

“You two are brothers?” queried the stable owner.

Turner’s comment caught Johnson off guard and he lost his patience with the stable owner, “Look, you old codger, that’s his horse over there. Just tell us where the little bugger is and there won’t be no trouble.” Johnson pulled back his oilskin coat and put his hand on the pistol on his belt, “Do you understand what I’m getting at?”

The stable owner gave Johnson a wry smile, “No need for that, son. The young fellow who left the horse asked for cheap lodgings and I told him the nearest one was the Prospectors Inn up the road and two streets to the left. He took his two valises and left.”

“When was this?”

“Yesterday morning.”

Johnson gave Turner a shifty look, then returned his steely gaze to the stable owner. Without a word, they turned their horses and followed the directions the old man had given them.

By the time they reached the Prospectors Inn, night was quickly enveloping the town. Johnson, sure that they had cornered their quarry, told Turner to wait outside with the horses and to keep their carpetbags safe—and to shoot the little bugger should he try to escape.

Johnson trudged in and scanned the reception room and its few occupants for Robert Davies. Failing to see him, Johnson approached the desk and demanded of the man there, “You got a Robert Davies here. What room?”

“What?” the man asked, perplexed by Johnson’s rudeness.

Johnson snatched the register and spun it toward him.



“Hey!” the man objected, as Johnson ran his finger down the names.

Thwarted, Johnson lent over the desk and grabbed the man by his waistcoat, “A boy, five and a half feet tall, blond, carrying two valises came here yesterday morning. Where is he?”

The man was visibly shaken by this unwarranted act of violence and replied shakily, “A boy...yes...a boy like you described did come in yesterday...but his name was...was—”

“Did he have two red valises?”

“Yes.”

“Where is he?”

“G...gone...He must have left before dawn...No one saw—”

Johnson jerked the man closer, “If you’re telling me bullshit...”

“No...no...He’s gone. His room’s empty. I swear...”

Johnson pushed the man back and stopped to think. After a moment’s deliberation, he turned back to the man, who shrank back fearfully, and demanded, “I want a room for the night—his room. And you’d better not call the coppers.”

“No...no, Sir...”

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I was sorry to have to leave the Royal Victoria Hotel; the staff had been particularly hospitable, the premises maintained to an excellent standard and the food tasty and plentiful—all the qualities Mr Morrison strived for and attained in his hotel in Paddington. How I missed Mr Morrison, Corporal Roberts and, in particular, Patrick.

“Enough sentiment!” I silently chided, “You made your choices.” I heaved a deep regretful sigh and took one final look around my room, making sure I had left nothing behind. It was only seven a.m. and my valises had been collected by the porter and stacked with others on the trolley ready to be wheeled to the railway station.

One final check of my reflection in the mirror saw a forlorn, grown-up Rebecca Davies: long, dark blue skirt, matching bodice, white undershirt tied at the neck, three-quarter length olive green coat and my newly purchased bonnet tied in place. Robert was securely packed away in one of my valises. Pitt’s revolver was safely nestled in the new

canvas satchel I had the chamber maid purchase for me the day before. Everything was in readiness for my six and a quarter hour train journey to the Melbourne Terminus in Flinders Street and my new life.

There was quite a lot of excited activity in the reception area of the hotel as many of the guests were, like me, catching the train, due to arrive from Wodonga at seven forty-five and leave for Melbourne at seven-fifty promptly. I watched as the porter wheeled the trolley, laden with trunks and valises of many types, out of the front door. My two were in amongst that jumble and each of them tagged with the Royal Victoria's label indicating their station destination; mine were "*RD, Melbourne Terminus*".

I had already settled my account but, as an afterthought, I decided to ask the desk clerk the name of a hotel in Melbourne he recommended. My turn came and the young man who tended me upon my arrival, greeted me warmly, "Miss Davies. Good morning. I trust your stay with us was to your satisfaction."

"Very much so, thank you and please convey my thanks to the chamber maid and porter. I know you are extremely busy, Sir, but could you recommend a quality hotel in Melbourne?"

"Certainly, Miss," he said with a genuine smile as he reached under the counter and retrieved a calling card. Handing it to me he said, "The Menzies Hotel in Bourke Street is highly recommended. If you prefer, I can send a reservation on your behalf by electric telegraph."

"Thank you. That would be ideal. One week, please."

"My pleasure, Miss," he said as he handed me the card, adding, "I'm sorry to see you go...if I may be so bold to say."

I smiled at him and gave him an apologetic nod. This just added to my remorse; he was a nice young man and, had circumstances—and I—been different...

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Johnson and Turner strode toward the Prospectors Inn stables, carrying their heavy carpetbags and sleeping rolls, no less unkempt or soiled than they were the day before. Fixing their belongings to their saddled horses, Johnson turned to Turner, "If that

jackanapes was here yesterday and Percy's horse is here, then he would have wanted to get to Melbourne the fastest way."

"Coach?" Turner queried.

"Rail."

"But that costs money."

Johnson looked at Turner incredulously, "He's got money, you idiot, our money!"

The penny dropped, "Yeah, right, Boss, lots of money."

"Let's go have a chat with the station master," Johnson said, mounting his horse.

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At precisely half past seven, those of us leaving by train were ushered onto an omnibus, provided by the hotel, for the short journey to the newly built Wangaratta train station, our luggage having preceded us there to be loaded onto the train by the porters.

There, we were invited to proceed to the waiting room and for the ladies to avail themselves of the seating provided therein.

I followed the group of fellow travellers toward the waiting room and, at the edge of my bonnet, my eye caught a glimpse that horrified me: Johnson and Turner, holding the reins of their horses, accosting the station master. My heart skipped several beats and I stopped mid-step.

"Are you all right, Miss?" a male's voice from behind me asked, jolting me out of my stupor.

"Yes...yes. I beg your pardon," I apologised when I realised I was holding up traffic. I joined the rest of my party in the waiting room and sat in controlled panic, watching Johnson through the window, standing over the station master who, in turn, shook his head and turned his back on the two inquisitors.

It was then that Johnson looked my way; I became breathless and quietly opened my canvas satchel slipping my hand inside to clutch Pitt's revolver. I prayed to God that this would not lead to further bloodshed or loss of life.

Johnson gave his horse's reins to Turner then strode purposefully toward me in the waiting room. My grip on the revolver tightened. I bent my neck so that the bonnet obscured my face. The man who was concerned about my well-being had sat beside me and

was keeping a watchful eye on me. He noticed my apprehension over the approach of this dirty, unshaven ruffian and offered his reassurance. “Miss, do not concern yourself. No need to fear. If you will permit me,” he said gently as he took hold of my free hand. I looked up at him and saw the kindly face of an elderly gentleman with a benevolent smile.

Johnson stepped into the waiting room to the unwelcoming stares and glares of those waiting with me. I held my breath, clutching onto the elderly gentleman’s hand as Johnson looked over each of us. He took a step in my direction; my gentleman friend whispered words of support and I relaxed and rested my head on his shoulder.

Johnson gave one final look around the room and left with a condescending snort and a scowl on his face and rejoined Tanner just as the train from Wodonga pulled into the station.

One by one the awaiting passengers stood and prepared to embark the train, commenting to each other about the vile character of that interloper. I turned to my protector, my mouth so dry with fear that I had difficulty saying my words, “I can’t thank you enough, Sir. That man—”

“No need to explain, dear girl. Travel these days is very dangerous for anyone, let alone a young woman such as yourself. You may not have heard about the recent murders of the troopers from Beechworth. Senseless waste of human life.”

All I could do was nod feebly in agreement. If he only knew...

I joined the rest of the passengers boarding the first-class carriage of the train and found my allocated seat next to the window. Down along the platform, I could see our luggage trolley being unloaded into the baggage compartment. My valises were near the bottom of the stack.

Johnson and Turner had now remounted their horses and were watching the goings-on with intense scrutiny when Turner observed from a distance and pointing to the trolley, “Ain’t them the red bags what belong to our molly boy?”

Johnson snapped his attention to the trolley and spurred his horse toward it, pulling up a hair’s breadth from one of the porters. He jumped from his mount and found the label attached to one of the handles and tore it off.

“He’s on board!” he yelled to Turner who prodded his horse along. Johnson threw his reins to Turner then jumped aboard the train.

I panicked. I looked about me not knowing what I could do. If I stayed, Johnson would surely find me. If I left the train, Turner would wonder why and most likely pursue me. Either way, someone would get hurt—all three of us were armed.

Behind me, the ticket collector entered our carriage to check and punch our tickets, “Tickets, please,” he asked of each passenger.

Johnson had progressed through the second-class carriage and was now at the door of my carriage.

“Ticket, please, Miss,” the collector requested. I fumbled in my pocket and retrieved my train ticket. “Thank you, Miss,” he said as he checked it and punched it.

Johnson was now inside my carriage and less than six feet away from me, looking at every person with such maniacal intensity I had never seen before.

“Ticket, please, Sir,” the ticket collector demanded of Johnson.

“Get out of my way,” Johnson demanded as he attempted to push his way through.

The beefy ticket collector stood his ground, “If you don’t have a ticket, get off the train. Sir.”

Johnson stood up to the ticket collector, almost nose to nose. As the situation became more tense, several gentlemen, including my saviour, stood in their seats in tacit support of the railway employee. Johnson could see he was outnumbered even though he did have a weapon. He quickly looked at the remaining passengers and decided Robert Davies was not present. With a disdainful look, he turned on his heels, pushing one gentleman aside and sneered, “Fuck youse all,” much to the gasps of shock and horror of the ladies present.

I finally took a breath and sat in my seat trembling. The rest of the passengers spoke to each other, appalled by the actions and language of this cowardly delinquent blackguard lowlife who dared to interfere with them.

Peering around my bonnet and through my window I watched Johnson get off the train and be met by Turner. He mounted his horse and said something to Turner, something I couldn’t hear over the noise of the engine and the clamour within the carriage.

“All aboard!” and we were on our way followed by the evil stares of Johnson and Turner.

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It was going to be a long journey to my destination. Along the way, some passengers alighted while others embarked at the sixteen stops to Melbourne. I was not in a convivial mood and found myself staring out of the window, enveloped by my own thoughts and internal conversations. I wondered what was in store for me there.

\*\*\*

The efficiency of the Royal Victoria’s desk clerk in Wangaratta astounded me. Not only did he send an electric telegraph to reserve a room for me at Melbourne’s Menzies Hotel, but he also arranged for a hansom to collect me and my luggage at the terminus the Friday afternoon to take me directly to the hotel, only a few streets away.

There was a small problem, however, when only one of my valises was presented to me. After some energetic confabulation and checking of the manifest, the second, untagged case was found and agreed to that it was, indeed, mine.

Notwithstanding this minor setback, I was nevertheless most grateful for the desk clerk’s organisation and made a mental note to send my thanks along to him once I was in a better frame of mind.

The Menzies Hotel was a magnificent three-storey stone building with a columned arcade and pavilion towers on each corner, and occupied the north-west corner of the block on Bourke and William Streets. As I entered the opulent reception room I was taken by the décor and the robustness of the furnishings. It was very obvious that no expense had been spared to make this the best hotel in a city which rivalled London in its wealth, thanks to the discovery of gold twenty or so years prior. Even the owner of the hotel, Mr Archibald Menzies, made his fortune in the gold fields. It seemed ironic that it was gold that brought me here.

I was checked in by the manager of the hotel, no less, Mr Romsford, who was impeccably attired in a formal morning suit and quickly shown to my room by a concierge who, also, was perfectly groomed and uniformed, the epaulets of which bore the Menzies tartan. My room was on the top floor, facing northward and overlooking busy Bourke

Street, and was only a few blocks away from the Yarra River and Prince's Bridge at the end of Swanston Street to the south. The décor here was equally as sumptuous: walnut panelling lined the walls and a French bedstead ornamented the bedroom—first class luxury, which did little to pull me out of my funk. I should have been delighted but my thoughts relentlessly hovered over the events that led me here.

Hanging my green overcoat in the immense wardrobe with my meagre belongings, and placing my underwear in one of the drawers in the dressing table, the only items left in one valise were my trousers and shirts, mackintosh and hat. The other held a thick wad of bank notes and a bag full of gold sovereigns. I stared at that small fortune, mesmerised, and it stared back at me rightfully accusing me of being a thief and murderess.

I should give myself up and accept the consequences of my actions but, if I were not to be hanged for my part of the gold robbery, I would surely be hanged for my part in Harper's murder, for murder it was and I was the instigator.

Giving up the bank notes and gold to the police would only raise questions that I would not want to answer; spending the bank notes certainly would lead the police directly to me; the notes had serial numbers and those would have been registered by the issuing bank and circulated to the authorities. While the gold sovereigns were untraceable, and I had what amounted to more than several years' wages, they would soon run out given the profligacy of my current style of living. I needed to find a ladies' boarding house and I needed to find a paying occupation; I certainly could not maintain this standard of lavishness indefinitely.

My head was reeling and it was all I could do to stop self-pity from appropriating my thoughts. Hunger pangs reminded me that I hadn't eaten since breakfast and, being three o'clock, I decided to avail myself of the coffee house located on the ground floor of the hotel.

As I descended the grand staircase, I noticed an elegantly dressed young woman in conversation with the desk clerk, a different one to the one who checked me in earlier, and couldn't help overhearing.

"...Miss Dubois, you know the rules," the desk clerk said firmly but politely.

“Mr Hemmingsworth is expecting me.” Miss Dubois’ voice was smooth and cultured and without a hint of annoyance in it.

“No doubt. But we do not allow unescorted...er, ladies into gentlemen’s rooms. You know that.”

“Please, Hobson—”

It was quite obvious to me that these two had crossed swords before but paid no further attention and made my way to the coffee house but I did hear Hobson suggest, “Perhaps you’d care to take a coffee while you await Mr Hemmingsworth...?”

I wandered into the coffee house filled with ladies and gentlemen enjoying light refreshments and was disappointed that there seemed to be no available tables. A matronly waitress accosted me from behind and kindly asked, “Table for one, Miss?”

I nodded and gave her a faint, appreciative smile.

“This way, Miss,” she said as she led me toward a small table against the wall not far from the door and handed me a bill of fare.

As I settled in and perused the menu, Miss Dubois presented herself at the doorway much to the disapproval of my waitress who approached her and informed her rather brusquely, “I’m afraid, Miss Dubois, there are no vacant tables at present.”

I watched her crane her neck to see if the waitress, indeed, was telling her the truth. Miss Dubois was elegant in both dress and speech, beautiful of face and shapely of frame, and was about ten years my senior. She intrigued me, this Miss Dubois. Before I could stop myself, I caught the waitress’s attention, “Miss...Miss, I am happy to share my table.”

“There,” said Miss Dubois triumphantly, “a willing confederate.”

The waitress was most displeased and, showing Miss Dubois to my table, said to the lady in a barely audible voice, “She obviously doesn’t know what you are,” which only earned her a broad smile.

I don’t know what prompted me to invite this person to join me—loneliness, desperation, comfort—it was done now, no uninviting her.

“Thank you, my dear,” Miss Dubois graciously said to me as she slid into the chair opposite, removing her gloves, “Madeleine. Madeleine Dubois,” and extended her hand to me.



I took it and shook it gently, “Rebecca Davies.”

The waitress stood waiting for our requirements.

I offered the menu to Madeleine, “Would you care to see the menu?”

“No, thank you, dear girl. I believe our waitress knows what I usually order.” She looked up to the scowling face of the waitress who turned her attention to me with a marked change of attitude, “And what would Miss like?”

“Oh, ah, coffee, I suppose, and perhaps a portion of cheese pudding, please.”

“Right away, Miss,” and with a swirl of her skirts, the waitress left us with a final disparaging glare for Madeleine.

We sat in awkward silence for a few moments while I took in Madeleine’s exquisite features; I didn’t know what to say. Thankfully, Madeleine broke the impasse, “Are you visiting Melbourne?”

“Yes.”

“On business?” The question flummoxed me. My quizzical look brought an explanation, “The Menzies has many commercial rooms. Thousands of pounds worth of property, fleece, wheat, gold change hands here every day.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. Is that what brings you here?” I said without even thinking.

She was momentarily stopped by my apparent insight into her ‘business’, “Yes. I suppose one could say that. And you, are you here with your parents on business?”

“No. I’m travelling alone.”

She was surprised, “How old are you? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

“Eighteen,” I answered a little more tersely than I should have.

“Still quite young to travel unescorted. From where do you hail?”

“Sydney.”

“And what brings you here?”

I could not answer that question. What did bring me here? I could not tell her the truth.

A younger waitress interrupted us, bringing our orders of coffee and pudding for me and a coffee for Madeleine. Madeleine sugared her coffee and, stirring it thoroughly, looked up at me and offered, “You are running away.”

My look of horror at being discovered brought further comment from her, “Perhaps from an unsatisfactory marriage arrangement?”

I didn’t deny her assumptions. She continued conspiratorially, “No need to fear, Rebecca, I will keep your whereabouts secret. Marriage is so constrictive. For women, that is. Men, on the other hand, can continue enjoying their premarital proclivities, so long as they have the wherewithal to support their indulgences. Thank God for that, I say,” she added with a laugh.

It was then that I understood what her ‘business’ was. I looked at her and wondered what it was that made her choose this profession. She had grace and beauty and could have had the choice of any number of suitable beaux.

“Are you staying long?” she enquired sipping her coffee.

“A week. I’ve booked in a week.”

“Perhaps I could show you the city sights, if you have the time?”

“Ah... yes. Yes, I’d like that.”

“Excellent. What room?” My questioning look prompted her to add, “So I can leave you a message.”

“Of course.” I looked at the tag on my room key, “Two thirty-two.”

“Oh, that’s a lovely room. You’ve chosen well.”

Our matronly waitress returned and addressed Madeleine curtly, “Your gentleman ‘friend’ is waiting for you.”

Madeleine turned in her seat to see Mr Hemmingsworth standing at the door. She smiled affectionately at the stout, well-dressed sexagenarian, then addressed me, “I’ll leave a message for you.”

I watched her interact with the portly gentleman and marvelled at how well she comported herself against the very obvious disapproval of her profession by those here. As they left, arm in arm, Madeleine turned to me and gave me a wave and a smile.

I no longer felt alone.

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After finishing my coffee and pudding in a far better mood than I had when I came in, I returned to my room but it wasn’t long after that there came a knock on the door. I opened

it to a porter who informed me that Miss Dubois was in the foyer and requesting I join her. I was surprised by this invitation as I thought she would have been otherwise occupied for the evening and night.

Seeing Madeleine in the foyer, smiling that engaging smile of hers, made me happy.

“Rebecca, wonderful news. Mr Hemmingsworth’s wife has unexpectedly arrived from Geelong.”

I was mildly shocked to say the least, “Oh? Wonderful news?”

“Yes. My gentleman friend had arranged an evening at the theatre for us and supper afterward.”

“Oh, I’m sorry your plans have been spoilt.”

“Not at all. Mrs Hemmingsworth hates the theatre.” She produced two theatre tickets and continued, “and she hates wasting money on expensive restaurants.”

I was both elated and disappointed, emotions that did not evade Madeleine’s attention, “What’s the matter, my sweet girl? I thought you’d be delighted.”

“I don’t have...I didn’t bring the proper evening attire to attend such events.”

“Is that all? Don’t concern yourself. Come with me.”

It was a short hansom ride to her apartment above a haberdashery shop at eighty-seven Collins Street. Her abode was small, or so it seemed, as it was brimful of beautiful furniture, oriental vases, shawls draping the settees and Persian rugs cluttering the floor. I was most impressed; I had not ever seen such richness and luxury. Madeleine was pleased that I was impressed and then told me to turn around. My jaw must have almost hit the floor when I took in the full-size portrait of Madeleine standing at the water’s edge, looking wistfully at the breaking waves—completely naked!

“Do you like it?” she asked, obviously amused by my reaction.

“Ah...” I did not know what to say.

“It was painted by one of my clients. It’s a copy of Andromeda by Poynter.”

“Is that really you?” I naively asked.

“In the flesh. Come.” She took my hand and led me to her bedroom; I could not tear my eyes away from the painting until we entered the room. There, two large mahogany armoires filled an entire wall. A matching dressing table with a full-length mirror, a wash

basin and stand and a large bed with a superb bedhead each took their place along the other walls.

With a grand gesture, she flung open the doors to both armoires and declared, “Day dresses. Evening dresses. Which would you like to wear?”

I could not believe the Aladdin’s cave of riches this young woman had. “How did you acquire so many wonderful things?” I asked enthralled by the splendour of her possessions.

“I have some very generous, and very rich, patrons and this is how they thank me for treating them in a way their wives will not,” she replied raising an eyebrow expressively. “What do you think of this?” she asked as she took an evening dress from the rail and sized it up against my body. “It should fit you perfectly.”

It was a lush golden jacquard woven silk dress with ruching on the front skirt panel with a wide, shallow neckline abundantly trimmed with rows of lace that revealed the tops of my shoulders and more of my chest than I should have dared to show.

“Try it on,” Madeleine enthusiastically urged, helping me out of my coat.

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I felt like a princess when we entered the Theatre Royal. Even though my short hair posed a problem—no lady cut her hair short unless she had been ill—Madeleine hid it under a jaunty narrow-brimmed hat trimmed with feathers—much à la mode.

We had arrived by hansom promptly at seven and were ushered to the dress circle. The heads of whomever she passed turned to Madeleine, the men smiling in appreciation, some acknowledging her with a slight nod of the head, others with a sly look. Some ladies also admired her but mostly they either ignored her or looked upon her with mild contempt. Madeleine was unruffled and acknowledged only those who acknowledged her—I supposed it was a courtesy of her profession to be discreet.

At half past seven, the programme began with a farce and was followed by an original play specially written for the brilliant American actress May Howard.

My prior preoccupations and fears dissolved during those hours of excellent entertainments and we left the theatre in a lighthearted and jovial mood for a little supper at a nearby restaurant. I was excited and wanted to ask Madeleine a million questions. This

was the first time I had been in the exalted company of dress circle attendees and the first time I had been to the theatre at night. I skipped along beside her down the street toward our destination. Along the way, we passed several narrow, darkened laneways of which Madeleine seemed to be very wary; villains ready to pounce on us, I thought.

We had almost reached our destination when a rough, hoarse voice called out from the shadows, “Maddie.”

Madeleine stopped dead in her tracks and her demeanour changed to one of dread. The owner of the voice approached from behind.

“Maddie, you haven’t been to see me,” he croaked.

Madeleine turned to face her accoster, an ugly brute of a man badly dressed in otherwise fine clothes and explained nervously, “I told you I’ll be there tomorrow.”

“And who’s this? A new recruit?” he slavered, looking me up and down.

“No. A friend. Only a friend.”

The man snorted then threatened, “Tomorrow. Don’t forget. You know what happens when you forget.” We watched him slink back into the shadows of the laneway; he reminded me of the rain-sodden rats I saw in the Suez Canal.

“Who was that?” I asked, both annoyed and afraid for Madeleine.

“Nobody. Come, let’s have supper.” Madeleine was visibly shaken and did her best to make light of the incident but she wasn’t the same after that. Throughout our meal, Madeleine was distracted by her thoughts. I could not help myself and had to enquire, “What did that man want, Madeleine?”

“Don’t concern yourself, my sweet child. You can’t do anything to help. Finish your jelly and I’ll take you to your hotel.”

“Will I see you tomorrow?”

Madeleine contemplated her reply for a moment then smiled warmly, “No. Sunday. We can cruise up the Yarra River in a paddle steamer.”

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I didn’t get to bed until two o’clock that morning and had very little sleep. Confused images tumbled incessantly through my mind: Madeleine laughing, the antics of the farcical actors, the horrid implied threats from that disgusting man, the American actress

May Howard, Madeleine's agitation and fear...why did that hideous man frighten her so much?

Madeleine said she would see me on Sunday as Saturday nights were always busy for her. So, given my lack of sleep, I decided to stay in bed a little longer than usual and make a lazy day of it.

\*\*\*

The train from Wodonga pulled into the Melbourne Terminus right on time, at one fifty-eight p.m. bringing with it visitors from New South Wales who had transferred from Albury, as well as Victorians boarding along the route. Alighting along with these passengers from the first-class carriage were two rough-looking men both carrying several heavy carpetbags and sleeping rolls: Johnson and Turner. They first made their way to the Left-luggage Office and emerged a few minutes later without two of their bags and headed for the cabbie's stand. There, they waited their turn to hire the next available hansom, furtively looking around them for constables.

When their turn came, Johnson pulled out a crumpled, bloodied business card and instructed the driver, "Menzies Hotel."

The driver looked at each of these two slovenly, unshaven ruffians and queried, "The Menzies? Are you sure?"

"Yeah, we're sure," Johnson insisted, quite annoyed and threw his bags into the cab as they both got in.

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It was now half past two and I was washed and dressed and had decided to spend the rest of the day, after a very late breakfast at the coffee shop, at the Melbourne Public Library in Swanston Street. I was missing my favourite pastime of reading and was particularly interested in reading more from Charles Darwin's book "*On the Origin of Species*". Finding me a suitable boarding house was something that I would ask Madeleine to help me with tomorrow, so today, I would spend with Mr Darwin.

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"You there!" Johnson's impatience caught Hobson off guard as he sorted the guests' registration cards with his back turned to the desk.

“Yes, s—” Hobson said as he turned to face the owner of the annoyed voice. He stopped mid-sentence when his eyes met the repugnant countenances of the slovenly Johnson and Turner. “Sir. May I help you?”

“You have a young man, a boy, here, goes by the name of Robert Davies. What room is he in?”

Hobson looked at each suspiciously, “I’m awfully sorry, Sir, but I cannot give out that sort of information.”

Johnson palmed three gold sovereigns onto the desk, “What about now?”

Hobson was more offended than surprised by the bribe, “I’m sorry, Sir, but we only sell rooms here, not information.” Hobson half-turned to resume his task.

“We’ll have a room, then.”

Turner looked at Johnson, “Wha...?”

Johnson ignored Turner and insisted, “A room,” then withdrew some notes from the inside pocket of his jacket and threw several ten pound notes onto the counter, “That should be enough for a few nights, right?”

An impasse was looming. Hobson clearly didn’t want this riffraff in his hotel but they had actually done nothing to warrant denying them a room.

With much reluctance, Hobson slid a blank registration card toward Johnson, “Please complete your details, Sir.” He turned to the board of keys and removed one.

Johnson filled out the form as required but with false information, and slid it back to Hobson, who, reading it, slid the selected key across the desk to Johnson, “Room two thirty-four, Mr Flinders...and Mr Spencer.”

Turner shot Johnson a half-witted look which earned him a surly look in return.

Hobson rang for the porter but Johnson declined, “We can carry our own bags. What floor?”

“Second floor and to the right.”

“And send up something to eat.”

“Yeah,” added Turner, “Lots of grub. I’m hungry.” He looked at Johnson and sniggered, “Mr Flinders?”

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My green coat and bonnet on, I checked that I had my room key and a few shillings in my purse for incidentals and opened my door just as two men passed by.

I stopped dead in my tracks. Those carpetbags! No! It can't be!

I quickly shut the door just as Johnson turned his head to see who had opened it. Fumbling nervously, I inserted the key and locked the door. I turned and stood petrified against it, awaiting the dreaded moment Johnson would pound his fists against it, cursing me and demanding to be let in. My heart felt as though it would burst through my chest, my mouth was dry and I could hardly breathe.

That moment seemed to last forever.

I gathered my wits and ran to the chest of drawers and pulled out my canvas satchel. With Pitt's gun in hand, I sat in my chair facing the door and waited for the inevitable. Questions raced through my mind: How did they find me? Who told them? Did Hobson say something? How would Hobson know I was Robert? Were they looking for Robert or Rebecca?

Think, think...

Johnson did not come to my door so Hobson didn't tell him. Then how did he know I was here?

Think, think...

The missing luggage tag! But it only had "*R.D. Melbourne Terminus*" written on it. Only the Wangaratta desk clerk knew I'd be staying here at the Menzies Hotel. Why would he give me up to these murderers? He wouldn't, unless they threatened him...

They've come for me and they've come for the money. I needed to leave this hotel immediately and the money had to come with me.

Heaving the valise with the wads of stolen banknotes and several bags of gold sovereigns onto the bed, I flung the lid open and took a handful of sovereigns and put them into my canvas satchel along with Pitt's gun and cartridge pouch and slung it over my shoulder.

Carefully unlocking the door, I cracked it open to see a waiter wheeling a trolley laden with covered dishes past my door and stopping two doors down.

"Room service," he announced as he knocked.



The door opened and I heard Johnson’s distinctive gruffness order, “Bring it in.” They were just up the corridor two rooms away from me! Could it get any worse? A few minutes later, the waiter returned sans his trolley and I heard the door to Johnson’s room close and the key turn in the lock.

With my heart in my throat, I took a deep breath and quickly dashed toward the stairs. The bag was heavy but I managed to get it downstairs and to the front desk where Hobson, thankfully, was still on duty.

“Mr Hobson,” I said in a breathless whisper, “I need to keep this valise safe and out of sight. It has some valuable...family heirlooms in it,” I lied, “and I know you are careful about whom you—”

“Miss, I do apologise for lodging Mr Flinders and his associate on your floor but we had no other rooms available. I do understand your concern and I promise to keep your heirlooms safe and out of sight.”

“*Mr Flinders?*” I thought as Hobson came from his position behind the desk and relieved me of my red valise with a slight grunt.

“My, Miss Davies,” he commented, “you are stronger than you look.”

I gave him the best smile I could muster under the circumstances, “Thank you, Mr Hobson, I am indebted to you.” I hesitated and wanted to tell him of my anxiety over the reason these two murderers were here but thought the better of it; it would raise those awful unanswerable questions again.

“Is there anything else, Miss?” he asked with some consideration upon seeing my hesitation.

“Um, no, thank you, Mr Hobson. I, um, have an appointment I need to keep and may not be back until quite late. I would like to keep my key with me if you are in agreement.”

“Of course, Miss.”

With one final look toward the stairs, I thanked Hobson and made my way to eighty-seven Collins Street, Madeleine’s apartment, and hoped she wouldn’t be cross with me for arriving unannounced.

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I ran up the stairs to her apartment and reached the landing just as Madeleine was locking the door behind her.

“Rebecca! What are you doing here? I was about to leave.”

“Madeleine,” I apologised, catching my breath, “I’m sorry. I had to see you.”

“Goodness me! You look as though you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I...I have. I need your help. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know who to turn to.”

Madeleine put her arm around my shoulder to comfort me, “My sweet child, tell me what has happened.”

I could not tell her everything; I did not want to involve her in my criminal acts, I just needed a safe place to think things through. My reluctance was obvious.

“They’ve found you, haven’t they? Your parents?” she said quietly.

“Yes...yes, they’ve found me.”

Madeleine looked at me, searching my eyes for the truth. I could not hold her gaze.

“Rebecca, I cannot help you if you don’t tell me the truth. Who has found you?”

I looked around. While we were standing at the top of the stairs and hers was the only apartment here, I needed privacy if I were to tell all. “Can we go inside?”

She seemed agitated by this request but acquiesced and unlocked her door. As we stepped inside, Madeleine glanced at her mantle clock then showed me to the sofa. I removed my bonnet and we sat next to each other. Taking my hand, Madeleine gently said, “Now tell me all. The truth.”

“I am running away,” I began, telling the truth but not the whole truth, “but not from a marriage, from two men who believe I stole from them. I haven’t. The money is mine, I earned it. They want it back. They arrived at the hotel this afternoon. But they don’t know it’s me they’re looking for.”

“Don’t know it’s you?” Madeleine queried.

“No. They’re looking for Robert.”

“You’re a boy?” The surprise in her voice was almost comical.

“No. I’m a girl but I was dressed as—”

“That explains the short hair. Just who are those men? Private detectives?”

“Madeleine, please don’t ask questions. I don’t want to involve you. All I need is a place to stay while I work out what to do next.”

Madeleine glanced around the room and looked at me apologetically, “My sweet, I sometimes conduct my business here—”

“Anywhere. I don’t know where to go.”

“Obviously, going to the police is out of the question,” she said perceptively, “Rebecca, I need to meet someone and I am quite late already,” she said with some controlled anxiety. “You’re very welcome to stay here until I return then we can work out what to do next.”

Just as she finished her sentence, the door was flung open, catching us both by surprise. Madeleine’s look of horror as she stood up shocked me; she was always so calm and self-possessed. The man who burst in uninvited was the same bully that accosted us in the laneway after the theatre.

“Harry...” Madeleine’s words were filled with fear, “I was on my way to see you, I swear—”

“Yes, I can see that,” Harry gruffly replied with a smirk on his ugly face, “by the way you two were canoodling. Where’s my money?”

“Here,” she said standing abruptly and rummaging through her purse, “I have it here.”

Harry grabbed the folded bank notes from her grasp, gave them a quick glance then grabbed her by the arm, “You’ve got more. I know you’ve got more. Here somewhere.”

“No, Harry, please, there’s no more. You have your cut. Please leave.”

“Oh, you owe me more than this,” he threatened with a lecherous grin that showed his tobacco-stained teeth.

“I know. I’ll give you what you want but not here. Not now. Please.”

This beautiful woman was begging this ruffian. I stood up beside her very aware of the weight of the revolver in my satchel; I watched the play between them, fearing what was to come.

Harry pulled her closer, “You missed our appointment.” and dragged Madeleine by the arm toward her bedroom.

I was horrified.

Madeleine struggled and begged, “Harry, please, not in front of the child.”

He stopped and turned to me, “Your new recruit? Do you want to watch? Learn a thing or two?” He then turned back to Madeleine, “You know the cost when you’re late,” and pushed her further along to the bedroom.

Madeleine looked at me as I removed the revolver from my satchel. She screamed, “No!”

Harry assumed she meant for him to stop and sneered but he didn’t know how close to meeting Satan he had come as I reluctantly replaced the gun in my satchel. The bedroom door slammed shut behind them. I just stood there, transfixed and angered, knowing what he was doing to her and I did nothing. This was my fault. I delayed her. This wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t come to seek her help.

It didn’t take long. The brute emerged from the bedroom with self-satisfied contempt, doing up the buttons to his trouser front. He shot me a glance then snatched up Madeleine’s purse and removed the few remaining bank notes from it. All I could do was to glare at him as he passed by me, shouldering me almost off my feet.

He left, giving me one last loathsome grin before closing the door behind him.

I went to the bedroom, fearful of what I would find there. Madeleine was standing with her back to me adjusting her skirts and turned when she heard me approach. All her mirth had drained from her being.

“I’m so sorry, Madeleine,” I started, “I didn’t know—”

“It makes him feel powerful, to have control of my body. But he will never own me,” she said in tones that were both resolute and vengeful. “It’s not your fault, my sweet child. Come,” she continued with an ironic smile, “I have time now.”

She led me back to the sofa but stopped by a cabinet and found two glasses. After pouring brandy from a flask into each, she joined me on the sofa and, handing me one, she asked, “Have you tasted brandy before?”

I smiled and, taking the glass, confessed, “I’ve worked as a barmaid since I can remember. There is nothing I haven’t tasted before. To the Queen.”

Madeleine added derisively, “To the king of Dudley Mansions.” To my puzzled look, she explained, “Mr Harry Kepple grew up in a shanty on the Dudley Moors and rose to riches on the backs of whores, larcenists and burglars, and by fencing stolen goods. He now lives in Carlton, in a new, fancy pile on Grattan Street. His taste in clothes extends to his taste in architecture. His is the gaudiest, most repulsive townhouse on the street. Long live the king.”

We sipped the fine brandy in reflective silence and, after another sip, I asked her, “Did he hurt you?”

Madeleine laughed, not a laughter of joy but one of irony, “He has a very small penis and even when it is fully functional, is hardly anything to crow about. No, the only thing he hurt was my pride. This is the only aspect of my profession that I detest but one which I can do nothing about.”

“Why can’t you?”

“He is my protector.”

“Protector?” I was confused, “but he...he raped you.”

Madeleine tried to console me, “Rebecca, my sweet child, this is a means to an end. I won’t be doing this for the rest of my life. I will be leaving Melbourne and Australia for good as soon as I have enough saved for my passage and to start a new life in the Mother Country.”

“How much more do you need?”

Madeleine regained her good humour again and gave me a wonderful smile, “Do you intend financing me?” She became quite serious and confessed, “I would have had enough by now if it were not for that limp-cock demanding his exorbitant protection money.”

“Can’t you leave him?”

“Nobody leaves Harry Kepple. I knew a young Irish girl, Aoibhin, who took to this trade, under Harry’s protection. After a few months, she wanted to leave...”

“And?”

“She was found floating in the Yarra, strangled. She was such a beautiful young girl.” Madeleine’s eyes glistened with tears. She composed herself and reiterated, “Nobody leaves Harry Kepple.”

“How will you, then?”

“By keeping my plans secret. By not telling Harry everything I earn. By keeping my savings hidden here and not in a bank. It won’t be long now.”

“Why are you telling me this? Aren’t you afraid I’ll tell someone?”

“My darling Rebecca, I think you are holding greater secrets than I. I know of no other young lady who carries such a large weapon in her canvas bag, or who confesses to have masqueraded as a boy, or who can afford the most expensive hotel in Melbourne yet has not a change of clothes to her name. If, in fact, your name is Rebecca Davies.”

“It is.” Now was the time for truth, “I have done things, Madeleine. Worse things than you could ever imagine. Two men are after me. They are cold-blooded killers. And they will stop at nothing to get what they believe is theirs. I intend leaving Melbourne and Australia, but I don’t have a plan. That’s why I came here. I need to sort my head out. I’m so sorry, Madeleine, I caused you this grief. I will find somewhere to stay—”

“Nonsense!” she insisted, “you’ll stay here tonight and we’ll work something out together.” Madeleine downed the last of her brandy and stood up, “Now, I must get ready for my paying appointment this evening. But first, I must wash the fetid discharge from that disgusting limp-cock mongrel bastard off my body...” Madeleine was quite appalled by her choice of words, “Oh my, I do hope I haven’t shocked you with my vulgar language.”

All I could do was smile.

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An hour or so later, when Madeleine emerged from her bedroom, she was resplendent in a magnificent crimson silk gown studded with brilliant rhinestones and with an almost immodest décolletage; a vision that awed me. Her face, beautiful as it was before, was now powdered and enhanced with rouge to her lips and cheeks. It was at that moment, and the only time in my life, that I wished I’d been born of the other gender, for the desire I had for her made me forget my tribulations.

“Don’t look at me like that, Rebecca,” she said with a seductive smile as she floated to me, “or I may change my mind and stay,” and tapped my nose with her gloved finger, “and I believe that’s yet another secret you hold.”

All I could do was flush with embarrassment; was I so readable?

Taking a fur-trimmed stole from the closet near the door, she turned to me and advised, “Lock the door behind me. Make yourself at home. I won’t be back until the small hours of the morning. We’ll make plans then.”

I did as she asked, locked the door then removed the satchel and my coat and hooked them both on the coat rack near the door. Her apartment certainly was full of treasures, new and old, but what I appreciated the most was the painting of her as Andromeda. I could not help but stare at it in admiration and wonderment and, perhaps, a little lustfulness.

My attention was diverted to a key being twisted in the lock to the front door and, anticipating Madeleine had forgotten something, I turned to meet her. Instead, to my horror, the door was opened by Harry Kepple who wasn’t at all surprised to see me. He strolled in and closed the door behind him then stood and regarded me with perverse disdain.

My satchel and the gun within it were hanging by the door beside him. All I could muster was, “What more do you want? You got what you came for.”

“Ah, the new recruit,” he said malevolently taking slow and purposeful steps toward me, “sit down on the sofa and stay there and you won’t get hurt,” he snarled.

I made a dash for my satchel but he caught me by my arm and swung me around, throwing me into the sofa, “I told you to sit!”

With renewed vigour, I jumped up and pushed past him but, again, he overwhelmed me with his brute strength and punched me in the stomach, winding me. A savage backhand to my head sent me reeling and I stumbled backward, striking my head against the wall. I slid to the floor, gasping for breath, the pain in my head so intense I began dry retching.

“Get up from there and I’ll beat you senseless,” he warned then set about ransacking the place, pulling out and emptying drawers, upturning vases, upsetting tables and chairs before moving to Madeleine’s bedroom.

I was fading in and out of consciousness, a million cicadas were screeching in my ears, my eyes could not focus and my lungs were labouring to get some air into them. It wasn't long before the whoremonger returned and grabbed me by my neck.

“Where is it?” he shouted in my face, “Where does she keep her stash?”

The best I could do was emit a groan but, even if I had known, I wouldn't have told the lowlife scum. He tossed me back to the floor then looked about. The only piece of furniture he hadn't despoiled was the sofa. With a rage borne of wanton greed, he upturned the sofa and stopped. He snorted in triumph when he found what he was looking for: Madeleine's hiding place. Cleverly stitched into the canvas covering to the base of the sofa was a deep pocket. He savagely ripped it open and bundles of neatly folded and tied bank notes fell out and lay strewn about the floor.

“Ah, Maddie, you lied to me,” he smirked as he looked upon the destruction of Madeleine's life, “You will pay dearly for this. No one leaves Harry Kepple.”

He stooped to collect all the packets of notes and stuffed them into his coat pockets. Not satisfied with ruining Madeleine's dreams, he loomed over me and prodded me with his boot, “You. Recruit. You tell Maddie to come and see me tomorrow, you understand? Do you hear me? If she doesn't show, I'll come after her. And I'll find her. She can't hide from me. You understand? You tell her.”

He was going kill her.

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Madeleine found me propped up against the wall on the floor next to the door. My satchel lay beside me and Pitt's revolver in my hand. Blood from the gash to my head when I hit the wall had dried and covered my ear where it had pooled. I still had buzzing in my ears but my vision had cleared. Upon hearing the door open, I raised my gun; if that was that mongrel again, he wasn't going to leave this place alive.

The first thing that met Madeleine's shocked and horrified eyes was the utter destruction of her apartment, “No, no, no!” she cried in anguish and disbelief. She then caught sight of me and screamed, “Rebecca! My dear God!” and dropped to her knees to comfort me. “Rebecca—”



“I’m all right,” I managed to utter as I lay the gun on top of my satchel, “Kepple came back.”

“Look at you,” the pity in her voice made me fear my injuries were worse than I felt them to be, “My God, my sweet Rebecca, we must get you to an infirmary.”

“No. I’m all right now, just a little dizzy. Madeleine, you’ve got to leave. He might come back again. He knows you were going to leave. He wants to kill you.”

Madeleine slung one of my arms over her shoulder and put her arm around me, “Let me help you to a chair,” she said as she lifted me upright. We hobbled over to an upturned armchair and with great dexterity, righted the chair and sat me in it. Examining the gash to my head, she confirmed, “Thank goodness it’s only a small cut. Sit still.” Madeleine quickly went to her bedroom and returned just as quickly with a basin of water, a blue bottle of carbolic acid and what appeared to be a clean menstrual cloth. Carefully washing the congealed blood from my face and hair, she assured me, “He won’t return—”

“He found your money, Madeleine,” I interrupted with much anxiety for her safety, “he knows you were going to leave. He wants to see you—”

“First we’ll fix you. Then we’ll fix Harry.” She daubed some carbolic acid on my wound, which made me flinch and brought back memories—bad memories. Madeleine continued, “I’m sorry. This must be quite painful.”

“I’ve survived much worse,” I quipped.

She cupped my chin and looked me squarely in the eyes, “You are an enigma, Rebecca Davies. Another secret?”

She wasn’t listening to me, “Madeleine, he wants to kill you!”

“He won’t. I’m his best asset. He may rough me up a little and insist on more frequent coital access but he won’t kill me.”

“How can you be so complacent? How can you give yourself to that animal? Look what he’s done to your place! And he’s stolen all your savings!”

Madeleine stopped pampering me and took in the utter destruction of her beloved apartment and possessions. She finally confessed, “This isn’t the first time this has happened, my sweetness, and it won’t be the last. I will pick myself up again. I will leave this place and I will make a new life for myself in England.”

She was a pessimist and an optimist all rolled into one and she called me an enigma. “How much did he take?” I asked quietly.

“One thousand, six hundred and twenty pounds.”

I was astounded, “That’s a small fortune. Why didn’t you keep it in a bank?”

“Harry has spies and informers everywhere, even in a bank. He would have found out that I was cheating him soon enough. And, do you know what the upshot of all this is? He does the same.”

“What do you mean?”

“All his money—and now all of mine—is hidden in his place. He doesn’t trust the banks. ‘Who needs the piddling interest when I’ve got my little whores and footpads,’ he says. Come, let’s get you something to eat and into bed.”

“I could do with a measure of your fine brandy...”

“Of course.” Madeleine went to her cabinet and found two unbroken glasses amongst the debris and poured a good quantity in each.

“You’re not going to see him?” I asked desperately hoping she would say she wouldn’t.

“I’m not going to run, Rebecca,” she said handing me a glass, “To the Queen.”

It saddened me to watch Madeleine survey her broken treasures lying strewn around her apartment along with her dreams of a new life. I was determined that this time another person would not pay for my stupidity.

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The hotel foyer was almost deserted when the large longcase clock chimed the half hour after three. A porter sat beside his trolley quietly reading the previous day’s newspaper. The desk clerk, his back turned to the room, fingered through a file of reservation cards on the back wall shelf and one dishevelled guest sat sprawled on the richly upholstered Borne settee in the centre of the lobby, snoring.

After sneaking away from Madeleine, I had made my way to the Menzies and entered the lobby. It was with horror that I came across this scene for I recognised the incongruous pile of mismatched attire that clothed Turner. I quickly rushed by him, my head bent and my face concealed by my bonnet, ignored by both the desk clerk and the

porter, and silently ran up the stairs toward my room, without interrupting the rhythm of Turner's wheezing.

Sauntering down the stairs, too intent on cursing Turner for sleeping on the job to register who I was, was Johnson. My heart to skipped a beat as we passed each other on the first floor landing.

Reaching the top of the second floor, I ran to my room, my hand so jittery, I could hardly insert the key. Once unlocked, I hastened inside and secured my door to the outside world.

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Johnson reached the dozing Turner and kicked his boots. "Is this the way you keep a lookout for the boy?" Johnson's whisper demanded.

Turner sat up and stammered, "It was only for a second, Boss."

Johnson looked about then approached the desk clerk. "Where's the other fellow, Hobson?" he asked curtly, startling the clerk.

"Mr Hobson doesn't work Sundays, Sir. May I assist you?"

"Yeah. He was going to tell me if you had a Robert Davies staying here. From Wangaratta. The Royal Victoria."

The young man hesitated, "Sir...I do apologise...but I am not permitted to divulge that sort of information."

"You got the cards right there in front of you. Take a look."

"Sir...I can't..."

Johnson withdrew the revolver from his belt and placed it on the desk, his intention clear, and said, "Yeah, you can."

The shocked desk clerk looked around nervously, catching the eye of the porter who stood, discarding the newspaper. Johnson noticed this and nodded to Turner, who, despite his lack of mental acumen, understood and rose to block the porter.

"Look!" Johnson demanded of the clerk.

The clerk fretfully fingered through the file of cards and announced, "Sir, there is no Robert Davies here."

“Give me that!” Johnson demanded. With shaky hands, the clerk passed Johnson the file box. He rummaged through quickly and found no Mr Robert Davies. He went through the cards again and, this time, stopped at Miss Rebecca Davies and pulled the card out. Further down the card, the clerk had written, ‘*Referred by the Royal Victoria, Wangaratta*’.

“Room two thirty-two,” crowed Johnson, “Found you.” He turned to Turner, “This way,” and led the way loping up the two flights like men possessed of the devil.

The desk clerk called to the porter, “Fetch the constables!”

On the second floor, Johnson and Turner stopped in front of two thirty-two, guns drawn.

“This ain’t our room, Boss.” Turner astutely observed.

“Shut up, you idiot. The molly boy’s here.”

Turner’s confusion was obtuse, “Two rooms away?”

Johnson tried the door knob. Locked. With a massive effort, Johnson kicked the door open and they burst into the room. What they saw there was no one. A quick search of the room—under the bed, inside the wardrobe—confirmed the room was empty except for a red valise. Johnson grabbed it and flung the lid open. It, too, was empty save a mackintosh, trousers and shirt, and a crumpled cabbage tree hat. The chest of drawers contained little more: some under clothes, a rolled-up bandage and personal grooming items.

Turner picked up a pile of clothing from the floor: a skirt, bodice, bonnet and a green overcoat. “Wrong room, Boss, this is sheila’s clobber.”

“He dressed as a slammock, you moron. That’s why we couldn’t find him.” Johnson wandered to the window and peered out into the predawn darkness and saw a figure running down the street, away from the hotel, “There!”

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After I locked the door behind me, I tore off my outer clothing and fumbled quickly through my valise, frantically donning my trousers and shirt. I had managed to climb out of my window and gingerly work my way along the face of the building to an open balcony which led inside to the corridor just as Johnson and Turner burst into my room. I was

grateful that the hotel provided these quiet open-air areas for their guests. Making my way stealthily along the corridor, I found the service door and ran down the servants' access to the rooms to the ground floor and out the side door.

There, I ran for my life eastward along Bourke Street, then turned into Queen Street toward the river. I thought I could find refuge in St Paul's Cathedral, even though it was Anglican. My plan to help Madeleine had fallen apart and what I needed now was a safe haven to think. The gun in my satchel thumped heavily against my side as I dashed through the deserted, gaslit streets, and dark, unlit alleyways, empty of all traffic save a night soil cart going about its business. Soon, in a couple of hours, worshippers would be on their way to early morning mass.

Running down Elizabeth Street, I finally reached Flinders Street and saw the cathedral only a block away. I looked behind me and was aghast to see Johnson and Turner in pursuit. I turned into Flinders Street and ran for my life toward the cathedral. Reaching Swanston Street, I made a hasty decision and turned toward the Prince's Bridge, deciding not to cross over it but to jump the railway lines and make a dash down to the river's edge to hide beneath it.

My boots slogged in the river's swampy verge, slowing me down considerably. This was not good. Scaling back up the incline to the grassy rise, I fumbled for Pitt's revolver in my satchel and, just as I took it out, a shot rang out and the projectile whizzed by my head. I stumbled and fell, losing the grip I had on the gun.

"Don't shoot, you idiot!" I heard Johnson yell to Turner, "We need him to get the money back! Get him!"

I groped around in the dark desperately trying to find the gun and could see Turner closing in on me followed a few feet behind by Johnson. Turner was upon me just as I got to my feet and turned to run. He walloped me from behind knocking me off balance and, once again, I was on the ground smarting from the blow to my back.

Johnson ambled over and found Pitt's gun in the grass. Slipping it into his belt, he stood over me and said, "Keep calm, you little prick, and you won't get hurt."

Staggering to my feet, I sputtered, "Yeah, I'm sure I can trust you," as I painfully straightened up to meet my nemesis, face-to-face.

Turner, standing behind me, emitted his shrill maniacal laugh, his foul-smelling breath hot on my neck.

“You killed my boy Pitt,” Johnson accused.

“He was going to kill me,” I said defiantly.

“Then you killed Perce.”

“No, Pitt killed Perce but you know that. You told him to.”

Johnson found humour in my correct assumption and snorted a derisive laugh.

“Where’s the money?”

“Seems to me if I give you the money, I’m dead.”

“Seems to me you’re dead either way, boyo. The question is whether you want to die quick or slow? Where’s the money?”

I considered my options: none. “In my valise,” I said, “in the police station.”

This caught Johnson by surprise, “You’re bluffing. You’re a defiant little prick, aren’t you?” Without warning, he punched me in the ribs. I fell to the ground, the pain to my newly mended ribs was so intense I lay there cradling my ribcage, trying to alleviate the excruciating pain.

“Pick him up,” Johnson ordered Turner, who gleefully obeyed immediately, grabbing me by the shirt and lifting me upright to face Johnson once more; I was the meat in this repulsive sandwich of putrid bread.

“Let me have a go at him, Boss,” Turner urged Johnson over my shoulder, “I’ll make him talk. Then I can shoot him, yeah?”

The thought of Madeleine and Sarah kept running through my mind; these were violent times but why were the submissive and weak sought, humiliated and hurt? If the meek were to inherit the earth, then it seemed to me that it would be only when the strong were done with it.

I could not—would not—allow these two thugs to stand over me. I had only one chance and I took it.

With all the force I could muster, I elbowed Turner in the stomach and pushed Johnson backward and made a desperate dash for the bridge. Both thugs recovered quickly and, in less than four strides, Turner was on me and tackled me to the ground. I turned and

he was on top of me, attempting to grab my flailing arms as I pummelled him with all my remaining strength.

It didn't take long for him to subdue me, pinning my arms to the ground, his stinking body completely covering mine. I gave up the fight and glared at him, his malevolent grin telling me he was relishing in the thought of harming me further. A look of befuddlement momentarily overcame him, then realisation. To my utter disgust, he slid his filthy hand over my chest and, with a sneering, debauched grin informed Johnson, "Hey, Boss, the boy's got paps," and ground his pelvis into mine. I struggled to free myself from this animal when Johnson pulled him off me and pulled me up to face him once more.

"Is that so?" Johnson remarked as he tore open my shirt to reveal my camisole and the form of my breasts beneath. "Well, well, well," he said, looking at me with pruriency, "that explains much." The glint of Sarah's silver locket around my neck caught his eye. "A nice little trophy," he sneered, "I'll have that when we're through with you."

Turner got himself to his feet and slavered, "Let me have some fun, Boss."

"Maybe we'll both have some fun. You little trollop. Then you'll tell me where you hid the money."

Johnson tore open the rest of my shirt and grabbed me around the waist. I closed my fist and hit him as hard as I could about his head. He released his bear-like grip and grabbed my throat with his large hand and squeezed hard. His other hand struck me across the face with such force that scintillas of light shot across my vision. He raised his hand again...

No more!

The look on Johnson's face was one of disbelief and horror when he realised that I had shot him. I had grabbed my gun from his belt and fired at point-blank range into his stomach.

Turner stood transfixed, "Boss?"

I stepped back and watched as Johnson's knees buckled and he fell to the ground, blood gushing from the gaping wound.

Turner raced to his side, skidding to his knees next to him, "Boss? Boss, what happened? You all right?"

I could only stand and watch as the life drained from Johnson's body, Pitt's gun hot in my hand.

Turner's confusion finally cleared when he felt the stickiness of Johnson's warm blood on his hands and pooling around his knees. He swivelled on his haunches to me, grabbing at the revolver in the pouch on his belt only to see the gun in my hand pointed at his head only a few inches away.

"Don't," I warned, "you don't have to die. Just let me go—"

"You bitch!" he yelled, as he pulled out his gun. In that instant, I fired. The bullet penetrated his skull under his eye and exploded from the back of his head sending shards of bone and brain onto his now-dead boss. Turner's hand spasmed, causing the gun to discharge twice into the blackness and his limp carcass slumped to the ground.

All was quiet—deathly quiet. The drama that ended with the death of my pursuers went unobserved and unmourned. I looked at their blood-soaked corpses and felt nothing: no remorse, no pity, no grief; I did not even feel the relief that this should have brought me, relief that this was finally at an end.

With renewed determination, I rifled through Johnson's and Turner's pockets and found some cash, a pocket watch and other miscellaneous items and ephemera, all of which I left. In Johnson's waistcoat pocket I found their hotel key and a receipt from the Left-luggage Office at the Melbourne Terminus. Also there, was my missing valise tag and, smeared with dried blood, a business card for the Menzies Hotel. That's how they found me! And by the looks of the card, the Wangaratta desk clerk did not give me up easily.

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I crested the bank of the Yarra as the faintest glint of first light became discernible in the east.

Something had changed in me; something took hold of my conscience and shook out all empathy and remorse. Nothing mattered anymore—not what I had just done, not what I had done to Pitt or Harper, not what I was about to do. My soul would surely burn in hell when my time came but now it was my heart that burned fiercely, with hatred, retribution and a primal rage for justice.



Reloading and securing the gun in my satchel, I did up the few buttons that remained on my shirt and ran my hands through my hair in an unsuccessful attempt to make myself presentable to the first person I met. And the first person I met was a railway waggonette driver loading the last of the previous day's parcel arrivals at the railway goods shed in Flinders Street.

I fronted the wiry fellow and my soiled, dishevelled clothing and my dour expression gave him a start. He must have heard the shots but made no mention of it.

“Can I help you there, matey?” he asked warily.

“Carlton. How do I get there?”

“It's about one and a half miles straight up Elizabeth Street. I'm taking this load to the university. Carlton's on the way if you want a lift.”

I gave a slight nod of my head. This was much gratitude I could muster.

“Right-o. Hop on,” he instructed as he secured the last of the few parcels on the tray. Pulling himself onto the bench beside me and taking up the reins, he gently flicked them on the horses' hindquarters and urged his team on with a click of his tongue and a quiet, “Walk on.” He gave me a sideways glance and remarked, “Looks like you could do with a visit to the hospital.”

“Grattan Street,” I said ignoring his concern, “you know it?”

“I'll say.” then looked at me square-on, “Now what would a young fellow like you be wanting in a fine place like Grattan Street?”

I sat looking forward, oblivious of his question.

He persisted, “You're not looking to do any thieving, are you? Because I won't be—”

“I'm looking for someone.”

This seemed to placate his fear of being an accessory to a crime. He smiled, “Right-o then. What's the address?”

“The gaudiest house on the street.”

The wiry driver chortled, “Ah, the Kepple eyesore. And what would you be wanting with that 'gentleman'?” The tone of his remark told me much about the snake who manipulated Madeleine's life like a puppeteer.

I gave the driver a cold stare and said quietly, “You need not know.”

It was then that the driver noticed the blood spattered on my trousers and shirt and his friendly demeanour changed to one of concern, not for me but for himself this time.

Situated on higher ground east of Elizabeth Street and near the Carlton Gardens that only thirty years prior had been a grassy forest, the ‘Kepple eyesore’ stood brazenly among the more elegant piles of stone and brick. What the new, three-storey mansion lacked in taste was more than made up for in size, taking up two allotments and protected from intruders by a six foot high wrought-iron fence topped with spearpoints. I gazed at the garish monolith from across the street in the dim early morning light. No one was on the street even though the church bells at the nearby Roman Catholic churches were calling. The rich, obviously, attended the midmorning mass, not early morning. But I doubted that Harry Kepple was a man of faith. What I didn’t doubt was my ability to get inside.

The utter lack of remorse and the single-minded determination that had consumed my very essence saw me enter through the front gates and try the front door without a care that anyone saw me. It was locked, as I had expected, so I made my way around the periphery of the building until I came across the door to the kitchen at the back. Turning the knob, I found the door was unlocked. I momentarily hesitated. Godfrey Saunders and his words came to mind: *Your path is predetermined by God. There’s no choice. Whatever you do, God has chosen for you. You can’t go against God’s will.*

“If God has predetermined my life,” I thought, “and my destiny is to die here, so be it.” With renewed resolve, I withdrew the revolver from my satchel and entered. All was quiet. There were no servants scurrying about as should have been the case, no fire had been rekindled in the stove, no aromas of cooked food; perhaps Sundays were the servants’ free day.

I stole my way through the kitchen, along the passage, through the green baize-lined door and into the foyer. Not a soul to be seen and not a sound to be heard. I climbed the two flights of stairs without any interruption. The house was, for intents and purposes, completely deserted.

At the top of the second-floor landing, a faint whimpering caught my attention and I stopped and listened. It sounded like a dog and it was emanating from the last room at the end of the short corridor. As I neared the room, I noticed the door was slightly ajar and, accompanying the whimpering, I could hear sibilant grunting.

Carefully looking about me and making sure I was alone in the corridor, I slowly pushed the door a little further open and what I saw made my contempt and loathing boil the surface: there, on a narrow bed in this small, windowless room, was the object of my hatred, Harry Kepple, completely nude and lying on top of a young, naked girl, engaging in coitus. She was not more than twelve years of age and her arms and legs were bound to each corner of the bed. She was struggling, whimpering and in obvious pain, her eyes screwed shut, her childish face distorted into an anguished grimace.

This despicable, fat, repulsive being that I refused to call human, was destroying another life. How I abhorred him and how I wanted to put my gun to his head and put him down, and out of everyone's misery.

Neither heard me close the door behind me or saw me approach.

I stuck the muzzle of my gun against the back of this bastard's head and ordered in a low, controlled tone, "Get off her."

He stopped in mid-stroke and turned his head to me.

"I know you. The recruit." In an instant, his reaction was to make a grab for the gun. My reflexes were much sharper than his despite the beating I had just endured, and I evaded the grab, retaliating with a brutal smash of the gun against the side of his head. This only stunned him momentarily and, once again he reached for the gun, so I hit him again, and again for good measure.

Subdued, still conscious and with blood oozing from the blows to his head, he groaned but remained in place. The girl struggled violently but, tethered as she was, she was pinned down by this beast. I reiterated in the same tone, "Get off her. Now!"

Groggily, he stumbled off the bed and stood bent over, trying to gain his equilibrium. Looking at this vile apology for a creature made in God's image made me sick to my stomach.

"Untie her," I ordered, pointing my gun at his corpulent, hairy body.

From his doubled-over stance, he slowly turned his head to me and a malevolent sneer crossed his face. A few drops of blood dripped onto the floor. “You will pay for this, with your life,” he promised savagely.

“What makes you think you will survive this?” I countered calmly, “Untie her now.”

He stood to his full height and faced me. The sight of his swollen belly and the rest of his flabby, hirsute body, was truly repugnant. “Or what?” he snarled.

“Or this,” I said and shot his foot, the bullet passing through it and lodging in the floorboard.

He screamed an unholy cry and collapsed to the floor in agony. The girl screamed and became more distressed, crying and struggling in desperation.

“You bitch. You fucking bitch. I’ll kill you and that whore, Madeleine,” he yelled.

“I said untie her.”

“You’re dead,” he panted, less resolutely than before as he lifted himself off the floor with great effort and grunting with pain. With intense exertion, he undid the bindings to the girl’s wrist and ankle closest to him. She immediately lifted herself up and with much agitation, attempted to undo the knot to her other wrist, crying uncontrollably all the time.

“The other side,” I said.

He understood me, and hobbled around the end of the bed, his face even uglier, contorted by the pain to his foot.

“You won’t get away with this,” he threatened as he undid the two remaining constraints. The girl immediately got off the bed and ran to a corner of the room and huddled down into it, sobbing uncontrollably.

I was appalled to see blood smeared on the sheet. She must have suffered tremendous pain by this callous monster when he forced himself into her. He was going to pay for this and he would never do this to anyone else.

“Get on the bed,” I ordered, “face up.”

He hesitated. “What do you want?” he said, his rancor changing to appeasement and expecting to placate me, “You want Maddie’s money? Is that what you came for?”

“Yeah, I want Maddie’s money. And much more. Get on the bed.”

“I’ll give you her money. Let me get it for you.”

“Kepple, on the bed. I’m not going to tell you again.”

He finally acquiesced, groaning as he lifted his damaged and heavily bleeding foot onto the bed and lying down on his back.

I slowly approached him and warned, “If you move, I will shoot you again. In the head. Stretch out your arms.”

He complied. I quickly lashed his arm with the same binding he had used on the girl, then went to the other side and did the same, stretching out his arms as far as they would go. He cried in agony as I tied his ankles, pulling his legs as far apart as he had done to the little girl. I looked at his penis, shrivelled and flaccid and prodded it with the end of my gun.

“You know, the Mohammedans punish offenders by removing—”

“You won’t get out of this house alive,” he threatened, panicking, “They’ll be here soon. And they’re not as nice as I am.”

“Then we’d better get on with it,” I said, calling his bluff. “Where’s Madeleine’s money?”

His reply was to scowl at me.

I shot his other foot, not a clean shot, unfortunately, grazing his ankle but the result was the same—an indescribable shriek of agony followed by unmanly sobbing.

The girl cried in fear and shrunk lower into her corner. My intention was not to make the girl more frightened than she already was. Strewn on the floor were some soiled pieces of clothing, which, when I picked them up to cover her, realised they were hers. She must have been a street urchin picked up by this mongrel to sell off in his whoremongering trade.

Handing the rags to the girl, I said gently, “Everything will be all right. Put these on.”

She hesitantly took the items, looking up at me with her tear-soaked face and pleading eyes, her sobbing abating to a hiccough.

“What’s your name?”

“D...Daphne,” she choked.

“Daphne, put on your clothes. You’re coming with me as soon as I finish with this...man.”

Daphne rose to her feet and it was then that I saw the brutality she had suffered by the hands of this animal. Her small, emaciated body was covered in welts and bruises, mostly to her inner thighs. There, too, was evidence of blood, her blood, and emissions from that animal.

“He won’t hurt you again. Ever,” I promised, controlling the anger and hatred I felt for this vile destroyer of lives.

I turned to the perpetrator of those heinous acts on the girl, “You’ll pay for this, Kepple. And for what you did to Madeleine. And not just by returning the money you stole from her.” I was by his side and put the muzzle of my gun to his shoulder, “Where. Is. The money?”

Kepple was sobbing, writhing, hurting, bleeding—everything Daphne experienced—but he would not answer me.

“I have no qualms about shooting you—”

“I know where it is.” Daphne’s feeble, quavering voice offered Kepple a reprieve. I turned to her and saw her pleading face looking up at me, fearful and trembling, “I saw where he put some money.”

Kepple turned his head and spewed out an invective, “Shut up you little guttersnipe! Shut up!”

“Show me,” I asked.

Daphne led me downstairs, the pain to her small frame was obvious as she gingerly took each step. She led me into the kitchen and pointed to the wide, square flue that connected the kitchen stove to the chimney stack, “There.”

If the cache was there, it would explain why there was no fire in the stove. I removed the access cover that was about a foot up along the flue and felt down inside it. My hand connected with a metal handle, which, in turn, was connected to the lid of a metal strong box that fit neatly inside the venting shaft.

I pulled it out and was dismayed when I saw it was locked.

“He put the key there,” Daphne proffered, now a little more composed than before.

I pulled out the drawer she pointed to and found a small cluster of keys tied together with string, nestled amongst the knives in the drawer. Also hidden at the back of the drawer was a new snub-nosed revolver. I understood now why he was so willing to lead me to the money.

It took me only two tries to find the correct key. The box was filled to capacity with bank notes and gold sovereigns. I recognised the wads of notes on top as being Madeleine's and, without hesitation, I emptied the entire contents of the strong box into my satchel, filling it to overflowing.

My mission was almost complete. Replacing the box in its original cavity and securing the cover to the flue, I turned to the youngster who stood, statue-like, following my every move, "Daphne, where are your parents?"

Her eyes lowered to the floor, "I don't have any," she whispered apologetically.

"Do you want to come with me?"

She looked up at me confused, scared and undecided. Her eyes darted from my face to my trousers, back and forth, until it dawned on me how I presented to her.

"Daphne, I'm a girl. Like you. I'm not like that man up there."

I could see the confusion and turmoil this was causing her and I gently reassured her, "I won't hurt you, I promise. Will you come with me?"

Even though her face was crinkled with doubt, she gave me an almost indiscernible nod, then returned her gaze to the floor.

"Will you stay here and wait for me? I have to do something."

She looked up at me again and gave another slight nod.

"Promise?" I asked.

"Promise," she said quietly.

I gave her a smile and went to the knife drawer and tossed the keys back in, removing the small pistol and a knife. "I'll be right back," I said, "wait here, all right?"

With her nodded confirmation, I left.

When I returned a few minutes later, Daphne was exactly where I had left her; she kept her promise just as I had kept mine—to Kepple.

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There was an ample number of hansom cabs running along Grattan Street, ferrying worshippers from midmorning mass back home or to the numerous entertainments around town but I had trouble hiring one. We didn't offer a picture of the normal Sunday recreationalists, Daphne and I, she, wearing oversized shoes and one of Kepple's jackets, which she obstinately refused until she realised how chilly it was, and I, dirty, dishevelled and spattered with dried blood, carrying a canvas bag heavy with secreted gold, bank notes and firearms. However, once I showed the next cabbie the two gold sovereigns I would pay him, he begrudgingly took us to our destination.

Once arrived at eighty-seven Collins Street, I knocked on Madeleine's door—I needed her assistance once more and to explain why I had left without notice or warning.

The door opened to a cautious crack but, once she saw it was me, Madeleine flung it open and exclaimed, "Where did you go? Why did you dis—" She stopped mid-sentence when she took in my appearance. "Why are you dressed like—Are you hurt?" She was even more bewildered when she saw Daphne, "Who is this?"

"May we come in, please?" I asked gently in an attempt to allay her alarm.

Madeleine stepped aside, baffled, as I ushered in Daphne.

"This is Daphne," I began, "and she needs our help."

Madeleine looked from me to the girl and back to me, "Is that Harry's coat?" she asked fearfully.

My reticence only confirmed what she suspected. Madeleine's reaction was one of shock and disbelief, shaking her head and envisaging the terrible consequences my actions would most likely bring upon her.

Madeleine looked about the room and took in what little she had left, the rest having been destroyed by the wrath of this maniac. She had worked diligently all morning to remove the aftermath of Kepple's fury and her apartment was tidy but it was bereft of her gregarious personality.

She visibly blanched and her knees gave way as she sat on an armchair to ponder her fate. Her next utterance was filled with fear, "What have you done? Do you know what he's capable of doing?"



“He won’t do anything,” I quietly assured her and took Daphne’s hand in mine. “Daphne’s been hurt. She needs someone to help her. Where’s the nearest infirmary?” I asked, fully expecting Madeline to ask us to leave.

Madeleine’s demeanour changed, “Oh, child, I am so sorry.” She looked up at me, “What happened?”

I was reluctant to be specific, for Daphne’s sake; I didn’t want to frighten her any more than she already had been. “Do you know the little windowless room on the second floor?”

Madeleine was horrified; she knew that little room very well and she knew what went on in it.

“That’s where I found her,” I continued, “He was there...”

Madeleine got to her feet immediately and took Daphne’s hand and questioned me only with her eyes.

I replied, “I made him stop. She is in a lot of pain.”

“Come with me, Daphne.” Madeleine said, leading her into the bedroom, “We’ll try to make the pain go away.”

The satchel was heavy on my shoulder. Opening one of the drawers to the display cabinet, I emptied the notes and sovereigns quietly into it, retaining both firearms, then sat myself down on the sofa. I was dead tired. All I wanted to do was sleep. From the bedroom, I could hear Madeleine talking kindly and gently to Daphne, reassuring her that she would mend and everything would be all right as she washed the girl’s body and tended to the callous inflictions. She asked questions but Daphne was withdrawn and unwilling to relive the trauma she suffered.

My mind was numb, devoid of any feeling. My entire body was in pain where it had been punched and pummelled by three of God’s most despicable creations. I must have dozed off for the next thing I heard was a rapid and frantic rapping on the door.

Madeleine flew into the room from the kitchen, terrified. I leapt to my feet, pulled out Pitt’s revolver and aimed it at the door—no one was going to harm any of us anymore.

The pounding on the door became louder, insisting to be let in.

“Maddie!” called a female voice, “Maddie, are you in there? Open up!”

“That’s Christine,” Madeleine said as she ran to the door and unlocked it.

The second it was opened, an hysterical young woman pushed her way in and blared, “Have you heard? Have you heard? Someone’s done Harry in! Harry’s dead!”

“What are you talking about? Harry? Dead?” Madeleine glanced at me with a look of panic.

“Yes! Georgiana went this morning to pay her dues and found him in the Chamber tied to the bed... with his throat slit.”

Madeleine gasped in horror. I replaced the gun in my satchel and sat down, reluctantly reliving the events.

“He was totally naked! And,” continued Christine, with a certain amount of glee coating her shock, “both of his feet had been shot off!”

Madeleine looked at me in wide-eyed disbelief as Christine gave further gory details, “And his cock-a-doodle was cut off—”

“Oh, God,” Madeleine cried; I sat unmoved by the details or my actions.

“...and shoved in his mouth!”

This was too much for Madeleine; her legs gave way in a swoon and she crumpled to her knees to the floor, her back to me. She buried her head in her hands and her shoulders convulsed. Christine was immediately on her knees beside her, consoling her.

I couldn’t believe that news of the demise of that extorting mongrel would bring Madeleine any sort of grief for him.

Madeleine looked up at Christine, her hands still covering of her mouth, and asked, “Do the police know who did it?”

“No, and quite frankly, I don’t think they give a damn.”

“What about his hoard? Has anyone found it?”

“Georgiana said she was going to get some of the girls and tear the place apart and find it.”

I watched them both as they sat there, looking at each other and digesting the news and its ramifications. Finally, Madeleine whispered, “My God, Christine, do you know what this means?”

All Christine could do was nod her head and agree when Madeleine added, “We’re free of that bastard.”

Madeleine turned to me. Her initial look of shock and disbelief slowly turned to one of realisation. I watched her as the fear she felt was replaced with hope. She turned back to Christine and asked, “Who else knows?”

“Apart from Georgiana and the police, you’re the first I’ve told,” she said as she made her way to her feet, “He treated you the worst, even though you were the best.” She made her way to the door and declared, “I’m off to tell the rest of the girls,” and, with a big smile on her face, added, “And to look for that money!” She disappeared through the doorway as quickly as she had appeared, closing the door behind her.

Madeleine rose to her feet and approached me, “Rebecca—”

“Please don’t ask me anything,” I said, then added as an excuse, “Consider this another of my secrets.”

I was exhausted and desperately needed rest, a bath and sustenance.

“Daphne’s settled and I’ve given her a draught to help her sleep,” Madeleine said sitting closely beside me. “Let’s tend to you.”

With much gentleness, Madeleine took care of my bruises and helped me wash. Her ministrations were loving but borne of gratitude, not of desire. She prepared a meal for the both of us and then I slept for the rest of Sunday. Mass and confession were discounted; God didn’t abandon me, I abandoned God.

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“There are things I have to do,” I said to Madeleine as we finished our late breakfast. “May I borrow an outfit, please?”

My last task, before I left Melbourne for good, was to finalise my dealings with the Menzies Hotel and the occupants of room two thirty-four.

Madeleine provided me with a fresh outfit from her ‘day dresses’ armoire and, in the early afternoon, I made my way to the Left-luggage Office of the Melbourne Terminus. There, I produced the receipt I had taken from Johnson’s vest pocket and was shown the two carpetbags he had left there only two days prior—it seemed like a lifetime ago.

They were heavy and, opening them in a private room, I was not too surprised to find they contained the proceeds from the gold escort: wads of bank notes, a few bags of newly minted gold sovereigns and twenty pounds of pure gold ingots. Quickly calculating the value of those ingots alone, at the current Royal Mint rate of four pounds, five shillings, per ounce, resulted in a total of one thousand, three hundred and sixty pounds, or about ten years' wages.

Once again, my conscience was in turmoil. Once again, my need won out over rectitude. "*They would have been insured,*" I thought, ameliorating my guilt.

I emptied all the bank notes into one bag and returned it to the Left-luggage Office, paying a week's further storage on it and the storage due up to now: two shillings and ten pence, and advising that my 'cousin' would be back from the country to collect it then—a lie, of course.

My next stop was the Menzies Hotel.

With Johnson's heavy carpetbag in hand, I struggled to the cab rank and lifted the bag into it, requesting the driver to take me to the hotel. "And, driver," I added, "I need to make several stops. Will you attend me at these stops, please? It will be worth your waiting."

"Certainly, Miss."

It was only a short ride to the Menzies. As I alighted, I handed the driver threepence—half the fare—and reassured him, "I shan't be too long. I need to collect the rest of my luggage. Thank you, driver, for waiting and for trusting me."

"My pleasure, Miss. If you can't trust a well-dressed young lady going to the grandest hotel in Melbourne on a beautiful Monday afternoon, the world is lost to the devil."

I smiled at his good humour and hurried inside where I was met by a scene of some commotion. The foyer was abuzz with several porters and a few guests still discussing the events of early Sunday morning: a door was kicked in and a guest was kidnapped! Or, at least, that was the gossip.

Mr Romsford, the hotel's manager, was frantically busy behind the desk when I approached.

“Miss Davies!” he exclaimed, confounded, “We thought you were lost to us.” This brought the unwanted attention of all those around.

“Ah, no, Mr Romsford, I am safe,” I reassured the manager, adding with as much feigned surprise as I could muster, “Whatever made you think otherwise?”

“A dreadful incident, Miss,” he announced with much drama, “two ruffians, unknown to us, gained access to your room by breaking down the door and, when you didn’t return yesterday, we all assumed the worst scenario, that you had been taken by force and held for ransom.”

I laughed, not only to allay his fears but at the absurd theatrics of his proclamation. “As you see, Mr Romsford, I am well but I do confess that, if what you say is true, I am quite shaken by the fact that this could have taken place here. I did notice that you admitted two rather...shall we say...odd persons to take up residence on my floor. A Mr Flinders and friend?”

“Hmm, ah, yes. I’ve spoken to Hobson with regard to that however, they have been very quiet and reclusive and have been of no trouble at all.”

“Ah...” I replied, relieved that their true identities had not yet been discovered and I hoped that their bodies had been found and lying unidentified in a cold morgue somewhere.

“Miss,” Romsford hesitated, “Detective John Stevens would like a word with you. Only so that he knows you are safe.”

“Of course,” I said, inwardly cringing at any contact with the police lest they suspect anything of me, “is he here?” I hoped he was not.

“Not at present but I can summon him.”

“Do not bother him. I will drop in on my way out.”

“You are leaving us?”

“Yes. My cousin has offered me a room—in Toorak—until I can find other suitable accommodation. May I retrieve my belongings from my room?”

“Of course.”

“And Mr Hobson stored a red valise of mine for safe keeping. I will take that when I leave.”

“Of course, Miss. We are sorry to see you go.”

With that, I hurriedly climbed the stairs to room two thirty-two, my legs quivering at the thought of being found out in my litany of lies.

The door to my room had been quickly and expertly repaired and, once behind my locked door, I packed all my belongings, few as they were, and left my second valise just inside the door.

I opened the door a little and made sure there was no one around in the passageway. Sneaking out and quickly making my way to room two thirty-four, I slipped the key I had taken from Johnson into the lock. It worked and I entered their room. The chambermaid had tidied it up and possibly had not informed Mr Romsford that neither ‘Mr Flinders’ nor his companion had availed themselves of the room Sunday night.

Rummaging through Johnson’s and Turner’s bed rolls and carpet bags turned up very little of value, except a few gold sovereigns, which I pocketed. I left all their other possessions in place, including two rifles. From my purse, I retrieved the Left-luggage Office’s receipt for Johnson’s remaining carpet bag and I placed it in a prominent position on the dressing table. With a final survey of the room, I was content all was in place and, as discreetly as I entered, I left and locked the door behind me.

One last act was to dispose of Johnson’s room key. Back in my room, I opened the window and, making sure no one could see me, I threw it as far as I could across the road. If anyone should find it, it would surely be returned to the hotel and questions asked.

I collected my valise and headed downstairs where Mr Romsford had retrieved my stored valise ready for me. With a few more pleasantries exchanged, the porter took both valises and loaded them into the waiting cab. The last words to Mr Romsford were my promise to see Detective John Stevens on my way to Toorak, which would become another broken promise to be added to the deficit side of the Eternal Reckoning Account.

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I stayed with Madeleine and Daphne for another few weeks until the departure of the Nubia, a steamship of the Peninsular and Orient Steam Navigation Company destined for Europe, Egypt, India, China and Japan. During that time, I had directed Madeleine to the drawer full of Kepple’s ill-gotten gains—an immense sum of money that had been dishonestly garnered from all his working girls—and left it to her discretion to disseminate.

She would share it fairly and equitably with all the mistreated women he had had under his misogynistic control.

Daphne recovered from her injuries and, in time, also would from the traumatic abuse by that monster. She grew stronger day by day and was able to tell Madeleine of her kidnap and brutal rape. She also confessed that she was glad he was dead and that she wished that I had actually shot off both of ‘that man’s’ feet, as Christine had so dramatically reported. I said it was lucky that I had found the kitchen door unlocked. Daphne put forward another revelation: late on Saturday night, after his destruction of Madeleine’s apartment, Daphne had been spotted by Kepple on the streets and enticed her by the offer of a free meal to accompany him to his house. There, he took her in by the back and locked the kitchen door, which immediately alarmed her. She witnessed him hide Madeleine’s notes, and the keys to the strong box and, being wary of his intentions, unlocked the door when his back was turned, so that she could escape. Unfortunately, his strength overcame her and he carried her away to the ‘Chamber’.

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Madeleine and Daphne would form a strong bond that would see them travel to England together and start a new life as adoptive mother and daughter away from brothels and whoremongers.

The steamer Nubia would take me to India and to my adventures in the subcontinent and the East. It would be some twenty-five years before I set foot in Mother England for the first time.

How different my life would have been had I gone with them. Then again, I would never have met Wills.

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## CHAPTER 12

September, 1905

Abbottsford Hall

My thoughts were brought back to the present by the sound of a motor car's engine idling and the chattering of a man and boy.

I found myself at the vast mews of Abbottsford Hall where, in the courtyard of the stables and carriage houses, the countess' chauffeur, Jimmy Isham, was demonstrating the workings of the internal combustion engine to young Henry, the stable boy. They were on the near side peering into the engine under the opened bonnet.

"What?" exclaimed the stable boy incredulously, "It's got thirty horses in there?"

"No, lad," explained Jimmy, patiently, "it's got the strength of thirty horses."

"Stronger than thirty Clydesdales? All pulling together?"

"Aye, and you don't have to clean up the muck after them."

"You're pulling my leg, Mr Isham," Henry said with a good-natured laugh, just as he caught sight of my approach. "Miss Davies! Come look! There's thirty horses in here!" he said mirthfully mocking the chauffeur.

"Henry," I greeted, standing beside him and looking in, and placing my notebook on the top of the car's roof, "thirty of them?"

"Yes! Clydesdales!" he laughed.



The chauffeur became a little exasperated with Henry's mocking but chose to ignore him as he introduced himself to me, "Jimmy Isham, Ma'am, Lady Chestermere's chauffeur."

"Rebecca Davies, secretary to the Duchess," I extended my hand, which somewhat perplexed Jimmy but he took it and shook it gently.

"She's got the awfulest scar, Mr Isham," Henry offered naïvely.

"Ah...yes, I see it, Henry," Jimmy said apologetically.

"It hurt lots, didn't it, Miss?"

"Lots, Henry."

A harsh call of "Boy!" from the stables caught Henry's attention and he flew off without a parting word or syllable, leaving Jimmy and me in the wake of his candour.

I broke the silence, "Thirty Clydesdales, eh?" Jimmy snorted a smile. I added, "How fast does she go?"

"Top speed of fifty-five," he replied proudly, then added, "but we only made fifty...under the direction of the countess, of course."

"Of course," I repeated, impressed firstly by the speed of the motor car and secondly by the derring-do of the countess knowing that she could have been fined ten pounds for exceeding the speed limit of twenty miles per hour on country roads...had she been caught.

"Have you been in her ladyship's employ long?" I asked. This was not idle chitchat. I wanted to know more of the countess' servants as well as the countess herself.

"No, Miss, only five or so months. I came with the car," he added with a conspiratorial smile that invited my questioning look. To this he answered, "When Lady Chestermere purchased the car, she needed someone to drive it and look after it. A mechanic. I'm a mechanic. I worked in Mr Royce's factory in Hulme and was charged with delivering the completed car to her ladyship."

"Is that when you met her maid and were smitten?" I asked nonchalantly.

He was aghast that I guessed correctly but offered, "Em, actually, her ladyship was most generous in her offer—"

“Seems to me the maid’s affections lie elsewhere,” I interrupted, continuing my line of discourse.

“She’ll come around. There’s no future for her with good old George McPherson. He may be the housekeeper’s son but he won’t be looking to marrying a lady’s maid.”

“Why is that? Or is that jealousy talking?”

“Not jealousy, Miss. Lady Chestermere’s grooming him personally in her business affairs. Put him through varsity. He’ll be looking to marrying a banker’s daughter or even a ‘Lady Someone’. And poor Jessie will be left in the lurch.”

“From what I’ve seen of Jessie, she doesn’t seem like one to put up with nonsense.”

“Fiery of hair, fiery of temperament. One thing’s for certain with Miss Turner, you won’t be spared the truth.” His smile was warm and appreciative until the sound of Jessica Turner’s voice made him jump.

“Jimmy Isham! Where have you been hiding? I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

Jimmy turned, his smile transforming to a frown, “Not hiding from you, Jessica.”

“Miss Turner to you!”

“And Mr Isham to you!”

Jessica glared at me then continued her officiousness toward Jimmy, “Lady Katherine needs some provisions from the village. You will take me there at once,” she ordered and clambered into the passenger’s side of the car, almost pushing me aside. Once inside, she looked at me and advised, offhandedly, “And the Duchess said to tell you she’s finished lunch. And you’re to attend her immediately.”

That last sentence was added simply to exert her assumed authority over me as I was fully aware that the duchess would rather not have me follow her every move. I could only smile at this young woman’s air of superiority which was, no doubt, strengthened by the knowledge that she served one of wealthiest noblewomen in England.

Jimmy started the motor and I reached up to retrieve my notebook from the car’s roof when Jessica caught sight of the gun nestled in its holster underneath my short jacket. She glanced up at me with a look of alarm and I returned her gaze with one of warning.

I watched the motor car depart and then took myself off to the morning room where the duchess sat alone waiting for me.

“Ah, Davies,” she began spiritedly, “we have an exciting afternoon of perusing the menus Mrs Plummer and Cook have devised for the weekend. Are you up to it?”

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The Duke of Bramwell and his niece, Katherine, the Countess of Chestermere, sat by the large oaken desk that occupied one end of the duke’s study. Seated nearby were George McPherson, the countess’ business secretary, and Mr Angus Hollingsworth, their solicitor and banker, both perusing a thick folder of documents. Mr Hollingsworth was in his mid-fifties and had made his way up to this position through honesty, hard work and strict Christian scruples, qualities which the duke and countess admired more than inherited titles.

“Hm, this seems to be in order,” Mr Hollingsworth said putting that document aside and requesting, “Balance sheet.”

George duly handed him the requested item.

“Yes...yes...Directors’ statements?” He read through the papers diligently amid the silence and anticipation of the other three in attendance. Finally, he set those papers aside and, squaring them up neatly, announced, “Your Grace, my lady, Mr McPherson, all seems to be in good order and ready for your signatures.”

He handed the title deed to the duke who took up his black onyx fountain pen and signed the document with a flourish. The duke passed it and the pen to his niece who added her signature.

Hollingsworth was intrigued that Lady Katherine was left-handed. “I didn’t realise your ladyship was left-handed,” he said taking the document offered by the countess.

The duke interceded on her behalf, “Believe me, old chap, her governess, her parents, her teachers all tried and failed to have her use the appropriate hand.”

Lady Katherine’s smile had a hint of triumph as she screwed the lid back onto the pen.

“Thank you, my lady and congratulations. Once the title deeds are registered you will be the new owners of Clydebank Shipbuilders of Scotland Limited.”

“A small company now,” added the duke, “but with excellent potential for growth, and all thanks to Mr McPherson’s comprehensive investigations and to my niece’s tenacious negotiating skills.”

Hollingsworth beamed at the young George, “You are a very lucky young man, George. Would that I had, in my formative years, the sponsorship of such a fine lady as the Countess of Chestermere.”

“I thank you, Sir, I am very fortunate, I know.”

Hollingsworth gathered all the paperwork on the desk and placed it, together with the newly signed deeds, in his leather briefcase and stood.

“Not staying for a celebratory dram, Angus?” the duke asked a little disappointed.

“Sir, I thank you but the sooner I return to London, the sooner I can register the deeds and release the funds.”

The duke graciously acquiesced then offered, “Katherine, perhaps your driver can see Angus back to the railway station?”

“Uncle, I sent Jessica on an errand,” she apologised.

“No matter,” said the duke rising and pulling the servant’s bell cord, “I will have Thomson arrange a carriage for you.”

“No motor car, Sir?” was Hollingsworth’s surprised query.

“We are still in fervent negotiation, the Duchess and I,” the duke replied with a mischievous grin.

“Ah!” Hollingsworth acknowledged, “Understood, Sir. A good day to you all.”

Once the solicitor left the study, George who had been standing by, gathered his papers and briefcase and requested, “Your Grace, my lady, if you no longer require me?”

Lady Katherine replied, “Of course, George, and thank you.”

George bowed and he, too, left the room closing the door behind him.

The duke watched as George left then addressed his niece, “He’s an able young man.”

“Quite.”

“He has a good future and a good marriage will only enhance that. A poor marriage...”

Lady Katherine hesitated, “Uncle, I am loathed to interfere with the workings of the heart.”

“Hm. Pity. I have nothing against the Scots—your father was one and I had nothing but admiration for him—however, a prudent marital alliance will see that young man achieve great things,” the duke said then added warily, “as it would for you, my darling Katherine.”

Lady Katherine stood up and smiled, “You’re beginning to sound like dear Aunt Mary, dear Uncle,” and kissed him on the cheek before leaving him standing there ruing his last comment.

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It was midafternoon at New Scotland Yard and the large office that accommodated the eight desks of Sir Giles Hawthorne’s handpicked Department of Special Operations were unoccupied save the one being used by Scott. Piles of papers littered his desk as he flicked from one to another diligently pencilling notes on sheets of paper. He was immersed in the assignment he was given.

One floor above, Sir Giles’ outer office was enjoying the peace of an unoccupied room when the tranquillity was broken by the strident screech from the speaking tube on the wall, “Fawkner! Fawkner!”

A few moments later, a flushed and angry Sir Giles burst into the room from his office, “Where the devil are you?” he screamed. It was apparent he was not having a good day. Flustered, he stormed out of the outer office and down the stairs to the DSO facility. Bursting through that door, Sir Giles was annoyed to see only one agent there, Scott, who looked up from his work. The sight of a red-faced Sir Giles bearing down on him made the detective constable involuntarily rub his injured calf as though massaging one pain would make another go away.

“Where the hell is my man, Fawkner?” Sir Giles demanded of Scott.

Scott was flummoxed and replied hesitantly, casually covering the notes he was making with a file and resting his arm on it, “Sir Giles...I don’t...There’s only myself here, Sir.”

Sir Giles looked about then asked, “And who are you?”

“Scott, Sir Giles, Robert Scott, Detective Constable,” he replied a little miffed at being so inconsequential.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Sir Giles said as he approached Scott’s desk, “and the others, Yabsley, Dolby...and er—”

“Hewitt and Byrne, Ramsay and Hathaway, Sir?”

“Yes, yes.”

“On assignment, Sir.”

Sir Giles appeared mystified.

“Investigating those trade unions as per your orders.” Scott elucidated, “You felt they had a hand in the abductions and murders and wanted us to find links to them.”

“Quite. Quite. And you?”

Scott warily answered, “Consolidating the evidence, Sir—”

At this, Sir Giles’ hand darted to the papers Scott was holding down with his forearm.

“Sir! Ah, these are just my scribbled notes,” Scott apologised, “I will have them properly typewritten and presented in due course, when complete. If it pleases you, Sir.”

Sir Giles clearly was not happy with, firstly, being fobbed off by this flunkey and, secondly, with not being able to find his missing, ne’er-do-well of a secretary. “Tell Fawkner to present himself to me immediately or he can find himself another position,” he ordered and turned on his heels and left.

“Yes, Sir,” Scott replied, “if he happens by, I will tell him.”

Once Sir Giles had left the room, Scott gathered together various papers and reports and retrieved a large manila envelope from his drawer. He carefully placed the twenty or so folios inside and sealed it. On the outside he wrote, ‘*For the Attention of Mjr R Williams, Abbotsford Hall, Herts. Strictly Private and Confidential*’. He slid that into his briefcase and, with great effort, lifted himself from the chair and onto his crutches and hobbled off for the post room with the briefcase.

It didn’t take long for that envelope to reach Abbotsford Hall, the special messenger taking the same route Wills and I had taken a few days before.

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After her meeting with the duke, Lady Katherine and her aunt enjoyed the warm autumn afternoon in the gazebo surrounded by the fragrant rose beds and lush lawns while Thomson and Florence served afternoon tea. I stood by at a distance of ten yards in the shade of a large oak tree discreetly observing the goings-on of the various gardeners in the distance.

Every now and then, a wave of refined laughter wafted across to me on the scented breeze drawing my attention to the Countess of Chestermere. I could not help but notice that, from where she sat, I was in her line of vision and wondered if that had been purposeful or accidental. It did not matter as there was no doubt that her beautiful countenance enthralled me—and I fought assiduously against being so enslaved again.

It wasn't long before the duchess gave instruction to Thomson who approached me and requested, "Miss Davies, Her Grace wishes you to join Her Grace and Her ladyship."

I was puzzled by this request but acceded and joined the aristocrats. I was further surprised when Thomson showed me to a chair at the table. I stood there befuddled until the duchess invited me to be seated.

"Your Grace," I wavered, "I really must not—"

"Oh, pish, Rebecca...if I may call you that, sit."

With much reluctance I did sit and I felt terribly out of place. Doing my best to ignore the countess, I concentrated on the duchess even though I could feel Lady Katherine's gaze upon my disfigured face and wondered to what depth of revulsion she was reaching.

"Rebecca," continued the duchess, "you haven't been properly introduced to my niece. After all, you will be spending quite some time in our company until her departure Friday."

I glanced at the countess but could not see any sign that she was repulsed—a true aristocrat, I thought.

The duchess continued, "Katherine, may I present to you Miss Rebecca Davies, Assisting Clerk to Major Reginald Williams of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. Rebecca, my niece, the Right Honourable, the Countess of Chestermere, Lady Katherine Delaney."

“Miss Davies,” Lady Katherine intoned in a voice as soft as velvet.

“My lady,” I replied meeting her eyes and holding them captive until the duchess broke the spell.

“Rebecca is my day shadow,” explained the duchess to her niece with purpose, “and the major is my shadow of the night. Rebecca will be riding with us tomorrow morning and she assures me she won’t fall off.”

This caused me to scoff and Lady Katherine to smile.

The duchess continued in a far more serious tone, “I read your dossier, Rebecca, and I understand your mother was Welsh. Your father?”

“My father?” What was the duchess contriving? It fazed me not as I was well resigned to being known as a bastard. “I don’t know who my father was, Your Grace. I’m a bastard,” I admitted with a smile.

This didn’t appear to be of any concern to the countess as the duchess continued with a persistence I couldn’t fathom, “And it doesn’t state your religion. Are you an Atheist?”

It didn’t take me long to understand where the duchess was heading with this interrogation, so I gave her as much information as I could to condemn myself in the eyes of her niece, which was her intended objective.

“God and I don’t see eye to eye, Your Grace. He believes justice and retribution are His domain alone. I believe in not waiting for Him but to expedite the repayment of criminals’ debts to humanity. I also drink to excess, but not in public, swear like a sailor, but not in front of ladies, and enjoy other improper pleasures in my leisure time. I am a liar when it suits me and I break my promises more often than I keep them. And I cheat at cards. I am certainly no saint. I am a woman who has survived adversity through persistence and fearlessness, and I don’t shrink from my duties. And it is these attributes and convictions, Your Grace, that see me here in this place and moment in time.” I rose from my seat and added, “With your permission, Your Grace, I will resume my obligation,” and turned to Lady Katherine, “Your ladyship.”

I left Mary, the Duchess of Bramwell, lost for words and perhaps a little miffed at me but I was damned if I allowed anyone to take my history and make me feel less worthy



than they because of it. I was sure that it was nothing personal against me but, rather, an effort by the duchess to protect her niece from me. For this, I forgave her; she was not to know that I was not about to seduce the Lady Katherine—tempting as that was; I did not want to fall into that emotional trap again.

“Rather well put, don’t you think, Aunt?” I heard Lady Katherine playfully chide the duchess. This made me smile. I believed that I may have found a friend.

It wasn’t long after that the two peeresses retired to their respective boudoirs to prepare for dinner and for me to hand over to Wills. I accompanied the duchess to her suite, making sure her rooms were secure. As I was about to leave, the duchess addressed me somewhat apologetically, “Davies...this afternoon...I would like to explain my actions—”

“No need, Your Grace,” I said cutting her off.

“No. Please listen. My niece...Katherine is more like a daughter to me...to us. She’s been in our care since my sister and her husband passed away suddenly. Katherine was only fifteen. The last thing I want for her is to be hurt...in any way. She holds a very important place in Society and her good reputation is paramount. You do understand.”

“Your Grace, I understand your concerns. I know my place and I know my worth. Once this assignment is brought to an end, you won’t see or hear from me again.”

Emma, the duchess’ maid presented at the door, drawing our discussion to a close.

“Good night, Your Grace,” I said with a slight bow and left to confer with Wills.

In his suite on the same floor as the duchess, Wills was up and ready for the night’s work. He had received the large envelope from Scott and was flipping through the pages when I knocked on his door.

“Come in,” he called. When he saw it was me, he said, “Close the door. Scott’s reports. Interesting. And disturbing.”

I sat next to him at the desk and queried, “How so?”

“Interesting because the Croft we’re seeking is most likely Norman Croft, imprisoned at Newgate until its closure and then removed to Pentonville until a year ago when he was released on licence.

“‘Mean Man’ is most likely to be Harry Hogan, Croft’s partner in crime since they were both nine years of age. He fits Timmy’s description. Look.”

Wills handed me a prison photograph of Hogan and he certainly fit Timmy's description of being ugly. His wrinkled, wart-covered face was further disfigured by a nose that had been broken and set lying almost flat against his face.

Wills continued, "They both have arrests and convictions stretching back thirty-odd years. House breaking, stealing, all with acts of violence. And depravity. They certainly are not new to crime. And certainly, don't have the intellect required to be the puppeteer behind these abductions. Hogan was released at the same time as Croft."

"Have they been picked up for questioning?"

"No known address. They absconded after being released."

We sat for a moment in contemplation. "And the disturbing news?" I hesitated to ask.

"Scott informs me that Hawthorne has taken all the investigating agents away from seeking the whereabouts of Croft and Hogan and set them looking for links between the abductions...and trade unions."

"Trade unions? It doesn't make sense. Some of the bank notes from the Richardson abduction turned up at the Russian Embassy. How is that connected with the trade unions? Surely, it's more likely that these abductions are for the Russian revolutionists' cause not the trade unions'," I theorised, exasperated by Hawthorne's stupidity.

"I agree, but that's what Hawthorne has directed."

"Did Scott find any connection to the abductions and sudden deaths of locals?"

"He's still investigating." Wills rose from his chair and handed me the file, "Go through these and tell me what you find. Put your report on my desk."

He donned his suit jacket, straightened his tie and left me in his room with a backward glance and a smile at the door.

I sat there pondering the events of the day. Croft and Hogan most certainly were the perpetrators of these abductions but not the instigators—a higher intelligence was at work here. Hawthorne changed focus from foreign revolutionists to internal trade unions—why? Were Wills and I on the right track—or completely wrong? Timmy was killed—what more could he have told us and who could have ordered his death? Everything seemed to point to

Hawthorne. Was he the mastermind of a grand scheme or simply incompetent? And what influence did this mysterious Colonel Humphries have on the old bugger?

My thoughts veered to the duchess: why was she warning me off? I had made no overtures toward her niece. Yet she perceived some sort of subterfuge on my part. She knew nothing of me or my preferences... but she did know her niece. And her niece's history. A sudden revelation hit me: The Most Honourable the Countess of Chestermere was... A smile overcame me and I left Wills' suite having stripped away the Lady's aristocratic veneer to reveal a woman who was as much like me as she was different. And what the duchess was most concerned with was protecting her niece's reputation and, in doing that, protecting the vast investments her husband the duke had made with their niece. This certainly shone a different light on the hitherto frivolous and playful duchess.

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The dinner gong sounded, indicating dinner would be served in half an hour. The duchess and countess both emerged from their suites at the same time and proceeded down the main staircase to the formal dining room, chatting amiably. Both peeresses were dressed in the haute couture of leading fashion houses and sparkled with tasteful ostentation. Wills, who had been waiting at the far end of the long corridor, admired their elegance and followed them down at a discreet distance.

Jessica Turner, Lady Katherine's maid, emerged from her mistress's boudoir with an armful of clothing and, instead of heading for the servant's stairs, turned to the duchess' suite and stopped at the partially open door.

"Emma," she called softly.

Within a second, the door opened wide and she was greeted by Emma with a smile, "Jessie. Does her ladyship need something?"

"No," Turner replied, "What's going on? The Duchess has a secretary now? She dinnae remind me of any secretary I've seen. She wears a gun!"

Emma looked up and down the corridor then pulled Turner inside the duchess' room and closed the door. In a conspiratorial whisper, she told Turner, "You're not to tell a soul, Jessie. Promise."

"Promise? Promise what?"

“I can’t tell you anything unless you swear to God that you won’t say anything to anyone.”

“I swear. What’s going on?”

“Swear to God.”

“I swear to God.”

“Swear on your mother’s grave.”

Turner’s patience was running out, “I swear on my mother’s grave. And on my father’s grave. And on all my ancestors’ graves. What’s going on?”

“Mr Thomson said that the man and the woman, Mr Williams and Miss Davies, are from the government and here to take care of their graces and that we’re not to interfere with them or talk to them or ask them anything but that we are to answer any of their questions and do as they say.”

Turner was stunned, “Take care of them? Are their graces in trouble with the king?”

“Well, I don’t know but I do know the Duke always makes excuses when hunting season comes around and always goes abroad or closes the house for renovation or declares some sort of ailment. I swear, the last time King Edward was here was when he was Prince of Wales and Prince George was a lad of twelve. Well before I was born and well before my mother was born.”

Turner was not impressed, “That’s a secret? Not much of one.”

“That’s all I know and that’s what Mr Thomson made me swear to.” As an afterthought, just to add some spice to what Turner considered to be an insipid secret, Emma added, “And I believe Miss Davies to be a tribade.”

“A trivet?” Turner said screwing up her nose in confusion, “You’re a daft wee lass, Emma.”

“No, a tribade. A woman who...you know...with women. Not men,” she said raising an all-knowing eyebrow.

“I have not got the time to waste. Talk to me when you’re ready to talk the King’s English.” With a scowl of exasperation, she turned on her heel and marched out the door leaving Emma dumbfounded and disappointed.

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The night air had a bite to it and Wills regretted not having brought along his overcoat as he trod the grounds of the Hall in the darkness, vigilant of anything untoward. Checking his pocket watch made him aware that dinner would be almost complete so he made his way back into the Hall and into the drawing room where he expected the duchess to retire to after dining.

In the dining room, the duke and duchess, their niece and George McPherson were in pleasant conversation after enjoying the last course of their splendid meal.

Folding her napkin and placing it on the table, Lady Katherine said appreciatively, “My compliments to Mrs Russell, Aunt. That was a superb dessert. I must take the recipe to Cook.”

The duke addressed young George, “Care for a cigar and port, George?”

“I don’t smoke, Your Grace, but a port would be most welcomed.”

The duchess rose from her chair with the help of Thomson, prompting the duke and George also to rise. “Katherine,” she said, “shall we repair to the drawing room?”

“Aunt, if you don’t mind,” Katherine replied standing, “I’d like to take some air.”

“Of course, dear, then I’ll bid you all a good night. I’m rather weary and we have an early start tomorrow.”

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I had read all the intelligence from Scott and written up my daily report for Wills—not mentioning my discourse with the duchess—and had shed my boots, jacket and holstered Webley. Tired from standing all day vigilant and observant, and with very little physical activity, I was ready for bed. My body was objecting to the lack of movement, missing its usual routine of attending the gymnasium and performing sets of calisthenics. These, together with honing my skills in fencing and jiu-jitsu with my sparring partner, Wills, helped alleviate the monotony of my occupation when I wasn’t active in the field. When I had participated in dangerous fieldwork and bloodlust had overwhelmed me, the only relief from the nightmares was absinthe, hashish and whoring, all especially effective in Miss Sophie’s company.

The day’s revelations caused many conflicting thoughts to race through my mind; sleep was going to be difficult to achieve. What would have greatly assisted in summoning

Hypnos would have been my bottle of absinthe but I had left that at home; Wills would not have been pleased had I brought it along. However, tomorrow, I vowed, I would secure a bottle and keep it at hand.

A glance at the mantle clock confirmed the time to be quarter of ten so I went to the window to close the shutters when a movement in the grounds below caught my eye. It was Lady Katherine strolling in the garden alone. I wondered what was going through her mind: business? Pleasure? She was truly a beautiful creature. My hand went to the silver locket about my neck and thoughts drifted to my own beautiful Sarah who would have been fifty-two had she survived the murderous actions of her husband. I wondered where we would have been today? Where I would be?

I pushed these useless thoughts out of my head, determined not to allow myself to be coerced by love and its false promises again.

I closed the shutters and retired to bed.

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The early morning air was crisp and refreshing, and the activities of the stableboys and grooms were in full swing when I accompanied the duchess down to the mews.

At the servants' entrance to the Hall, delivery wagons, dog carts and bicycles were busily coming and going providing the household with their daily newspapers, post and provisions from the nearby village and railway station, as well as the extra provisions required for the coming weekend.

Lady Katherine had not yet arrived but I could see the three mounts that had been prepared for us being attended to by the young stableboy, Henry, an older man, Pitman, who I discovered was not only the stablemaster but Henry's father, and Reynolds, a stable hand. I recognised the magnificent bay thoroughbred, Peleus, standing tall among them, flanked by Tommy, Peleus's stable companion, and another beautiful black mare. Peleus and the black mare were fully tacked up with side saddles but Tommy had only a bridle and saddle blanket.

"Good morning Mr Pitman, Reynolds, Henry," the duchess said greeting each with a smile.

And each in turn gave a slight bow and returned her greeting with a cordial,  
“Morning, Your Grace.”

Young Henry was holding onto Tommy’s reins as the duchess informed me,  
“Davies, this is your mount. I do hope he meets with your approval.”

“He’s a fine animal, Your Grace,” I said rubbing the horse’s nose, “just fine.”

I had noticed a change in the duchess’ attitude toward me. Perhaps I spoke out of  
turn the day before and perhaps she hadn’t realised that, as much as I was not her equal, nor  
was I her servant.

“What saddle would you like, Miss?” Henry interjected, “Side or general?”

“General, thanks, Henry.”

“Yeah, I thought you would,” he replied rather presumptuously and threw a  
backward comment to his father as he led Tommy back to the stables, “Told you, dad.”

The senior Pitman moved the black mare away from Peleus and a mounting block  
was positioned on her near side for the duchess to use. By process of elimination, this  
meant that the towering Peleus, being settled by Reynolds, was to be ridden by the  
countess. I was impressed.

A commotion caught everyone’s attention and we turned to the Hall to see the  
driver of a heavily laden delivery cart take his whip to the horse and yelling profanities at  
the unfortunate animal. One of the cart’s wheels had become lodged in the loose gravel on  
the verge of the driveway. The horse was very obviously old and not in very good condition  
nor was it of a size that should have been pulling such a heavy load.

“Oh, dear,” cried the duchess, “That awful Mr Graves! Pitman, see what you can  
do.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

The stable master loped to the wagon and called, “Hold there, Graves! Stop  
whipping that animal! We’ll help you out.”

“Mind your own business, Pitman,” the recalcitrant driver yelled back, flogging the  
horse once more, “or I’ll settle some of these on you!”

Pitman clambered onto the driver’s seat and attempted to take hold of the whip only  
to be pushed off by Graves who then took the whip to the fallen man.

It didn't take long for my blood to boil and with a few rapid strides, I was upon Graves. I caught the airborne whip's tail and wrapped it around my wrist. He yanked it back hard but a solid jerk from me saw Graves pulled out of his seat and fall out of the wagon and onto the ground on top of Pitman.

I pulled the whip from his hand and tossed it aside. My other hand grabbed Graves's collar and tie and I dragged him off Pitman, pushing him back onto the ground. My knee dug into his soft belly and my hand gripped his throat and I squeezed hard causing him to gasp for air.

Graves was furious and sputtered expletives to my face as his feet scrabbled to find purchase on the gravelly surface, "You fucking bitch! Get off me! Let me go! Let me go!! I'll—"

He stopped spewing his foul language and ceased his violent struggle immediately he felt the cold muzzle of my Webley pressed against his cheek. My implacable glare brooked no argument.

I released the grip I had on his throat and stepped aside, my gun trained unwaveringly on him. "Get up." I ordered quietly, "Get out."

Graves scrambled to his feet and turned to his wagon.

"No," I said, "walk."

Graves's scowl threatened all sorts of things, things he didn't have the courage to vocalise. All he could muster was a cold and hateful, "Them's my goods. My horse. You can't take them."

Pitman, who had righted himself, offered Graves, "If Her Grace allows, I can get the wagon back to the village once we've unloaded it."

"But not the horse," I insisted.

Graves became agitated again, which made me angrier. I levelled my gun at Graves, "The horse needs to be put out of its misery. I don't know which would be better: to shoot it...or to shoot you. Get out of my sight before I make that decision."

We had reached an impasse.

Graves backed down first and, with a grotesque sneer, leaned in to me and threatened, "You'll die regretting this, bitch. And the Duchess will get hers." He smirked



knowingly and shot the duchess a menacing glance. He spat on the ground and stalked away, watched in disbelief by all present.

My eyes followed his retreating figure as I holstered my gun. It was of great concern to me that this vile individual had threatened the duchess. Why would he do that? I needed to find out more about this obnoxious man and his relationship with Her Grace.

Behind me, I could hear the sounds of normality returning and turned to make my way to the duchess only to see Lady Katherine watching me. Her look was one of mild horror and I wondered at which point of my dealing with Graves she became so. Turner stood behind the countess, struggling to contain the invective she was wanting to hurl at me.

“Morning, my lady,” I said with an almost indiscernible nod of my head, “Turner. You’re looking rather flushed,” I added, just to needle the lady’s maid. It was unnecessary but I enjoyed making sport of her.

Behind me, Pitman called upon several stable hands to unharness the old overworked plug and hitch a more suitable draught horse to pull the wagon out of the rut.

By this time, Reynolds had assisted the duchess onto her mount and she approached me. I did not regret my actions but thought it best to offer some sort of explanation to the duchess.

“Your Grace, I apologise for putting you in this position but the maltreatment of work animals appals me. I will arrange compensation to Graves for his horse but I ask that you keep the animal here until I can make suitable arrangements.”

The duchess took a moment to consider my request then replied, “That poor animal is on its last legs. I think we can accommodate its final days here and I will speak to Mr Graves about restitution.” She looked down at me and added, “I cannot tolerate violence in any form, Davies, but I thank you for going to the aid of my stablemaster.” She swung her horse toward Peleus.

I watched as Lady Katherine patted Peleus and rubbed his nose, actions which were well received by the thoroughbred. With the assistance of Reynolds, she took her seat and was handed her crop by Turner.

Henry returned with Tommy, all saddled up. As I checked the straps, he said with some enthusiasm, “You showed that basket what for, eh, Miss?” then added humbly, “My dad’s getting old, you know.”

I smiled at him then quietly asked Henry if he knew that Graves fellow.

“Oh, yes,” Henry confirmed, “Everyone knows that bluster ball.”

“I want to talk to you about him when I get back, all right?”

“All right,” he echoed with a wide grin.

“Oh, and Henry,” I added taking two sovereigns from my pocket and speaking quietly to him, “Can you buy me a bottle of absinthe, please?”

“Ab-what?” he said puzzled.

“Let’s make that whisky. The best, all right?”

Henry was a most accommodating young boy and, at times, reminded me of Patrick when he was that age. The smile he gave me when he said, “All right, Miss,” was one of those times.

As an afterthought, and pocketing the coins, Henry looked straight up at me and said in a knowing and most disconcerting way, “You’re not a real secretary, are you?”

All I could do was smile.

I took to the saddle and made myself comfortable fully realising that, while I had made a friend of Henry, I had most likely alienated both the duchess and the countess.

This was going to be a long, long day.

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The remaining active officers of the Department of Special Operations—all seven of them—had been summoned for an early extraordinary briefing by Sir Giles Hawthorne: Yabsley had uncovered some vitally important information regarding the link between the trade unions and the abductors, which would change the course of their investigations.

Hawthorne sat imperiously at the desk normally occupied by Yabsley, who was the most senior officer in the room. Gathered around him and seated on the edges of several other desks were Hewitt, Ramsay, Byrne, Dolby and Hathaway. Scott sat apart from them at his own desk, listening intently but not demonstrating his disagreement to what was being said. His crutches stood propped up against his desk.

Yabsley held the floor as he informed those gathered of the progress and important revelations he and Byrne had made:

“Gentlemen,” Yabsley expounded in a superior tone, “yesterday, Detective Constable Byrne and I questioned John McGregor, the leader of the Amalgamated Plasterers and Renderers Union of Greater London at his home in Bromley. While I conducted the interview, Byrne here made a search of the premises and found these hidden in a drawer.” With a flourish intended to impress, Yabsley withdrew a wad of bank notes from his coat pocket and slapped it onto the desk. “These, gentlemen, are bank notes from the Richardson ransom.”

The declaration had the desired effect of causing a ripple of murmured comments to flow through the assembly.

Scott, sitting quietly, nudged Hewitt who was standing near him and whispered something to him. Hewitt leaned across and picked up the bundle of notes and handed it back to Scott.

“Of course,” continued Yabsley unaware of the notes being removed, “McGregor vehemently denied any knowledge of the money. We then conducted a more extensive search of his lodgings and uncovered these handwritten plans for the next abduction, of one Lady Felicity Penworth, the eighteen-year-old third daughter of Viscount Bonningwick.” He held up the several sheets of crumpled paper scribbled over with notes and drawings.

A new round of mutterings filled the room.

“We brought in McGregor for further interrogation and he is being held in the cells below. Today, with Sir Giles’s approval and authorisation, you will conduct extensive searches of McGregor’s known friends and accomplices while Byrne, Dolby and I interrogate McGregor further.”

“Well done, Yabsley.” enthused Hawthorne as his protégé retreated to stand behind Sir Giles like a subservient valet. Hawthorne addressed the meeting, “By the evidence Yabsley here now has presented, it appears that the line of investigation Major Williams had been pursuing was completely wrong. I say it was a good job that I urged the Head of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch, Mr Alexander Quinn, to insist the major go on enforced leave, thus allowing the rest of us to carry out our duty unimpeded by false leads

and misinformation. This afternoon, I will inform Mr Quinn of our success, that we have broken this vile and vicious criminal ring.” Turning to Yabsley, he added proudly, “There will be a citation in this for you and Byrne both.”

The collection of special officers broke out in spontaneous applause—except for Scott who had shuffled through a file and the bank notes and now sat quietly with a perplexed look. He was not convinced.

Hawthorne noticed this blatant refusal to acknowledge a fellow-officer’s success and called out to him, “You there...er...Scott, you don’t agree?”

Scott was reluctant to say anything but offered, “Sir, I’m confused. What affiliation does the Amalgamated Plasterers and Renderers Union of Greater London have with the Russian embassy?”

“The ransom money, man, the ransom money!”

“But, Sir, please forgive me, the three lists I have at hand indicate that the notes Byrne found in McGregor’s residence were from Lord Meagher, not Mr Richardson.”

Hawthorne glared at Scott then looked up at Yabsley over his shoulder, “You checked the serial numbers. Who did they come from?”

“Richardson, Sir, both. My list categorically confirms that both the Russian notes and the McGregor notes were given by Richardson to the abductors. No doubt.”

“Sir,” countered Scott, “the three lists of bank notes I have were issued to me as and when each lot of the notes was withdrawn from the bank—weeks apart. The Russian Embassy received notes from those on the Richardson list and the notes from the McGregor house are on Lord Meagher’s.”

“Your lists are wrong!” insisted Hawthorne. “Notwithstanding your assertion, Scott, doesn’t it give strong credence to the fact that the Russians are in league with the trade unions to bring this mighty empire to its knees?”

“Perhaps so, Sir, but it also gives rise to the question of why Yabsley’s list differs to mine. It appears that we have discrepancies within this office and that should be of some cause for concern to us all.”

The reaction to this assertion, even though Scott put it to them quite meekly, raised some debate between the officers.

Hawthorne's face bloomed with redness, "Quiet! Quiet!" Once the mutterings had died away, he continued resolutely, "Scott, the facts are these: the Russian embassy is in a state of flux under the upheaval of the social revolutionists in that country. Our trade unions are full of communists and socialists wanting to destroy our constitutional monarchy and the capitalists that have made it great. They are feeding off our aristocracy and wealth."

Hawthorne took a breath and calmed himself, ending, "And, apart from these facts, Scott, what you have there, in your so-called lists, is another monumental foul up by Major Williams and that immoral, reprehensible excuse of a woman he calls his Assisting Clerk. Just like they bungled the coordinates last week, they botched the lists. The matter is finished, Scott. We have our man."

Scott withered a little from the unwarranted verbal onslaught and said no more. Hawthorne, satisfied with Scott's withdrawal, turned to Yabsley and directed, "Yabsley, I want to know everything that traitor, McGregor, says. I want him and everyone involved with him charged with these heinous crimes, sent to trial and suffer the capital punishment they deserve."

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As promised by the duchess to her patient and uncomplaining husband, we didn't take the bridlepath that led into the woods but another which led to the river.

The three of us left the mews at a walk, then, once past the tended lawns and gardens and onto the open field, urged our horses into a trot and then into a comfortable canter. The duchess on her black mare and the countess on the thoroughbred preceded me and Tommy; a position I was happy to hold as I could scan the countryside for anything suspicious.

The two peeresses were certainly in their element and were excellent horsewomen, easily told by the way they held their seat. They were enjoying the brisk fresh air and the pale sunlight, chatting and giggling to each other girlishly.

The incident at the mews was still of concern to me: why had Graves threatened the duchess? I was determined to find the reason behind his contempt for her. My thoughts came back to the job at hand when I noticed Lady Katherine glance back at me and then to

her aunt. Without warning and with a gentle slap of her crop on Peleus's rump, she urged him into a full gallop emulated enthusiastically by her Aunt Mary on the black mare.

Tommy was no slouch and, without much prompting from me, launched himself into a full gallop, heroically keeping up with the two in front. I own that I was enjoying this as much as anyone there, woman or beast.

We rollicked along the grassy bridlepath at a scorching pace and finally came to the banks of the river that cut through the duke's estates. The duchess and Lady Katherine slowed their pace to a walk allowing their mounts to cool down and catch their breath. Lady Katherine looked back to me and gave me a mischievous smile. I had been tested it seemed and, while I had enjoyed the flight immensely, I didn't enjoy being scrutinised so.

I drew up beside the duchess as we walked along the pathway that ran upstream along the riverbank. The other side of the bridlepath was flanked with low bushes and dotted with old-growth trees. Very rustic and pleasant but not as safe as I had imagined.

The duchess was the first to speak, "You did well, Davies. What do you think of Tommy?"

"A courageous animal, Your Grace." But I really wanted to know more about the fishermen's cottages. "Your Grace, I understand that you recently had poachers in one of the cottages along the river."

"Yes. Nothing extraordinary. They come along every now and then. Our estate manager, Mr Roberts, reported that Catfish Cottage had been left fouled and disarrayed. He's had it returned to its proper condition."

"This river cuts through the estate?"

"Yes. Quite beautiful, don't you agree?"

"What lies upstream?"

"Woodland. Quite wild and with excellent hunting, should His Grace ever decide to partake of the blood sport."

"Downstream?"

"Our village."

"And the railway station?"

“Yes, as well as the post office and our main provisioners and other businesses that supply the farmers of the area.”

“How far?”

“Oh, about five or six miles.” The duchess was becoming annoyed by my incessant questioning. “Why do ask these questions, Davies? We’ve had poachers in the past and I am certain we’ll have poachers in the future. As much as we do try to provide for our tenants, they do have to eat and are sometimes too proud to ask for assistance.”

My suspicious nature wouldn’t allow the simplicity of the explanation. I persisted in finding out more, “How many cottages are there along the river?”

“Goodness me, Davies, so many questions!” This also drew a concerned look from Lady Katherine.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, but I must know. How many?”

“Three. Carp, Catfish and Pike, spaced at two mile intervals. The seventh duke built them for the fishing competitions he held annually, a hundred years ago. Now they stand mostly disused but kept in good repair.”

“And they each have a boat ramp or jetty?”

The duchess looked at me with confused annoyance, “Why do you ask all these questions? Are you planning to holiday here?”

“No, Your Grace. Does each have access from the river?”

“Yes. Now, if you please, I would like to converse with my niece.” That was her rather oblique invitation for me to drop back and leave them alone.

I was uneasy with what the duchess has told me. The river provided a route to and from the village and the train station a way into and out of the area. My concern was heightened to the point of alarm when I took in the surrounds: the low bushes could certainly hide anyone with evil intent.

It was only another ten minutes of riding at a leisurely pace when we came to the first of the fishermen’s cottages, the so-called ‘Carp Cottage’, a simple, single-storey structure of stone with a tiled roof. A path led off the bridlepath to the wooden front door, which had a sash window on either side of it.

“Your Grace,” I called from my position behind her, “I would like to inspect the cottage.” I diverted Tommy to the front door and dismounted. I could see the duchess was displeased with my curiosity but both she and the countess stopped and watched me as I looked through the window and checked the handle on the door.

“It’s kept locked,” the duchess informed me.

Through the window, I could see that the cottage was a simple, one-room affair with the opposite wall being a mirror of the front with two windows on either side of the door, which, I presumed, was also kept locked. I strode around to the back and there saw a short pier jutting into the river. Five yards all around the cottage was cleared of all vegetation except for a carpet of lush grass. I walked back to the front and remounted Tommy.

“Are the other two cottages like this one, Your Grace?” I enquired as I approached the duchess.

“Yes. More or less. May we proceed?”

I nodded the affirmative and felt quite put out that the duchess’ attitude indicated that I was wasting her time. But the smile that Lady Katherine gave me was far more appreciative of my concern for her aunt’s safety and well-being.

The rest of the ride was at a leisurely canter and took us past the two other fishermen’s cottages and through beautiful countryside, looping back to Abbotsford Hall along a wagon road that circumvented the dense woodland. I was anxious to interview Henry and find out more about Graves.

Once we had arrived at the mews, we dismounted and three stable hands took charge of our mounts and returned them to the stables for hosing and feeding. I called Henry over to me and told him to go to the servants’ entrance and wait for me there until the duchess was at lunch. I accompanied the duchess and the countess into the Hall and left the duchess in her boudoir once I had ensured it was safe and secure.

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As instructed, Henry was there at the servants’ entrance, sitting on a step and rolling a pair of dice. Next to him was a small hessian sack. As soon as he saw me, he pocketed the spotted cubes and shot to his feet.

“Miss Davies!” he cried enthusiastically, “Can I see your gun?”



“No, Henry, it’s not a toy. Come with me,” I said. He picked up the sack and I led him away from any listening ears.

We found a bench under a large oak and sat there away from the household’s activities.

“What do you know about this Graves fellow?” I asked.

“Are you a lady detective?” Henry asked me with such conspiratorial earnestness, it made me smile.

“No, I’m just a secretary.”

“Yeah, who carries a gun and can dustup a bluster ball!” he laughed at my apparently ridiculous assertion.

“Tell me about Graves,” I said attempting to discount his disbelief.

Henry calmed down and relayed what he knew. “Nobody much likes him, not here, anyways. He’s a real windbag and uses bad language all the time, even in front of Her Grace,” he explained wide-eyed.

“Did the Duchess have words with him? Angry words?”

“Not what I heard. But I know that Mrs Plummer did. She went real crook with him when he cheated her and Her Grace.”

“How did he cheat Her Grace?”

“Dunno. Something about he was short.”

“Short? As in short delivery? Short supply? Cheating by not delivering everything he billed the Duchess for?”

“Yeah. I heard Mrs Plummer tell Mr Graves that unless he brung the stuff over, she would call the constable. And he swore oaths that I ain’t never heard no one here ever say before.”

“Has Mr Graves always lived in the village?”

“No. I think only a couple of years.”

“Is he married?”

“Who’d want to marry that gasbag?” Henry answered with a laugh.

“Quite so,” I replied keeping him in good spirits, “Do you know his Christian name and where he came from?”

“I think it’s Stewart ’cause my dad calls him Stupid,” Henry laughed again.

I laughed along then pulled his attention back to my query, “And where did he come from?”

“Dunno. But I wish he’d go back there!” Henry laughed so hard he almost toppled off the bench.

I fished a coin from my pocket and gave it to him, “Thanks, Henry, you’ve been very informative.”

Henry looked at the shiny coin, “A crown! Thank you, Miss,” he said awestruck and took off for the stables, leaving the hessian sack behind.

I could just barely call out a warning to him, “Don’t gamble, Henry!”

“I won’t, Miss!” he called back.

I sat there in the shade of the oak trying to delve into the minds of the abductors and how they schemed to take the duchess. Much depended on what Scott was able to uncover. If Scott’s report did confirm that locals were employed to assist Croft and Hogan, then it was very likely that Graves already had been approached. This would explain his arrogance toward the duchess and me.

The so-called poachers reported by the estate manager could have been Croft and Hogan surveying the best place to take the duchess. Rowing downstream to the village would be far easier than upstream and then removing her to a place by wagon or rail where they would... I hesitated to think of what they would do to her before they killed her.

If all this conjecture were true, then we needed to discover when the planned abduction would take place. Two things were certain: Wills and I had to be extremely vigilant and we needed immediate assistance to protect the duchess and prevent her capture by these foul murderers.

I needed to discuss this matter with Wills urgently but I was reluctant to waken him. I planned to pen my suspicions during the course of the day and slip the note under his door. There was no time to lose but now I had to return to the Hall.

Standing up, I realised Henry had left behind his hessian bag. I looked inside and discovered a sealed bottle of Chivas Regal, one of the best Scotches money could buy and, clinking against the bottle in the bottom of the bag was the change from the two sovereigns

I gave him. An honest young man; yes, Henry was proving to be more and more like Patrick.

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Like clockwork, the last post of the day was delivered to the Hall late in the afternoon. I was eager to see what information Scott had uncovered regarding any sudden deaths of the locals and I hoped that Wills had time to digest the notes I left under his door.

I accompanied the duchess to her suite so she could dress for dinner then went to Wills' rooms. There, I found his door ajar and him pacing the floor with a wad of paper crunched in his fist. He was furious.

"Come in. Sit down," he commanded and handed me one of the creased pages. "Read."

I read through the crumpled page as Wills continued to pace.

"But—" I said looking up at him, confused, "Quinn is recalling us?"

"Oh, but there's more." Wills stood in front of me and handed me a few more pages, "The trade unions are the culprits. Unequivocally. Indubitably, according to this report by Hawthorne."

"The trade unions?"

"The Amalgamated Plasterers and Renderers Union of Greater London to be precise. And Lady Felicity Penworth, third daughter of Viscount Bonningwick, the next abductee."

"How? Why?" I was becoming as vexed as he was. "None of the demands has ever been for better working conditions or wages, only for money. The unions might be aggressive but they haven't taken up arms. And how are they connected with the Russian embassy?"

He shook his head, "I would have been more convinced if they had discovered the ransom money with any of the Irish nationalist groups. But the trade unions..." defeated, he sat down next to me. "I've read your report and your theory, Rebecca, and I agree with you. This," he said flicking the papers in my hand, "is total claptrap and balderdash. I'll be making a telephone call to Quinn and telling him as much as soon as the opportunity arises."

“Do you think this is a diversion? To draw us away from Abbotsford Hall?”

“If that’s the case, then the informer is already here.”

“Wills, there has to be a spy within the DSO as well.”

Wills considered my assertion, then replied, “Yes. But who? Every man in the DSO has been vetted and handpicked by Quinn personally. Even Hawthorne.”

We sat for a moment in perplexed contemplation until Wills remembered the last report still in his clutches.

“This is from Scott,” he said handing it to me. “Untimely and unexpected deaths occurred at both the locations of the Lord Meagher and Richardson abductions, just as you suspected. The first was of a woman who had been a chamber maid at the earl’s estates and who had been sacked for theft. And the other a gardener of the Richardson household who had been badly beaten by Richardson himself after he had attempted to seduce Mrs Richardson.”

“Both with grievances against their respective families—”

“And both suffering an untimely death,” Wills concluded.

The dinner gong sounded.

Wills rose to his feet with a most dejected look about him and headed for the door. “Get some sleep,” he advised, “We’re going to have a fight on our hands and not just from without.”

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I climbed the stairs to my second-floor room reading and re-reading the reports Wills gave me. More and more these did not ring true. Once inside my room, I paced the floor trying to make sense of every conflicting detail until my head was just a jumble of misinformation and suppositions. I needed fresh air and I needed the contents of that hessian bag.

Grabbing it and a glass from the table, I turned for the door then paused and looked back at the tray. I collected a second glass from it and left thinking that I might have company. That thought made me smile... Making my way through the green baize door and down the servants’ stairs, I encountered no one, all being otherwise engaged with preparing or serving dinner.

Once outside, I returned to the old oak tree and the bench Henry and I occupied earlier that day, and made myself comfortable. The night was dark and the only light came from the Hall but here beneath the oak's branches, I was unseen in the shadowy, unlit corner of the garden. I opened the bottle and poured myself a generous draught, sipping it slowly while reflecting upon the day's events. This was a splendid drop.

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From the first night of Sir Giles Hawthorne's marriage twenty-something years ago—he didn't care to remember the exact date or to recall the event—his wife had insisted on his being home by half six every evening and without fail or woe betide him! She asserted that a family must partake of the evening meal together otherwise it would fall apart. The so-called 'family' comprised himself, his domineering wife and her even more domineering mother. After their 'family' meal together, he was released from his bonded duties and free to do as he pleased only so that his wife could enjoy the rest of the evening in the company of her mother and without the intrusive, boorish company of a male.

This pleased him immensely as the endurance of two hours of dining in either icy silence or nonsensical gossip would be more than recompensed by an enjoyable evening of male companionship at his club.

The London night, this night, was foggy and chilly but that didn't prevent him escaping to the refuge in the exclusivity of the Marlborough Club; at least here he was his own man.

He had had a bastard of a day, getting nowhere in his hunt for the perpetrators of the abductions and murders. The interrogation of John McGregor had led absolutely nowhere and the last thing he wanted was to be harassed by a wife who was more interested in the balanced display of her best china than the stresses he was currently and barely enduring.

Settling into his favourite armchair with a cigar, a port and the Evening News, he felt respected and appreciated in this selective environment where he was left to enjoy his free time in peace and quiet and as he pleased. He had barely read the weather forecast on the front page when a familiar voice broke into his much-needed solitude.

"Sir Giles, old boy," exclaimed Neville Humphries cheerfully, "I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

Sir Giles looked up over his shoulder and was somewhat disconcerted to see Humphries who asked, “May I join you?”

“Actually...” Sir Giles hesitated, “I was—”

“Thank you, old boy,” Humphries presumed and folded himself into the armchair facing him. “I hear you’ve had a most successful day.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. The confession. And may I be the first to offer you my heartiest congratulations.”

Sir Giles was confused, “Confession?” He was unaware of any such development. He had left the Yard at the usual time and had received no news.

Humphries explained, “Yes. McGregor confessed. The kidnap ring. You’ve broken it.”

Sir Giles released an exasperated sigh, “Not quite, old boy. I don’t know where you got your information from but as of this afternoon, McGregor maintains his innocence and refuses to confess.”

“Oh. My mistake,” Humphries admitted, shrugging off his apparent faux pas with very little concern.

Sir Giles peered at Humphries and queried, “How did you hear of it?”

“Of what, Sir Giles?”

“The confession, man.”

Humphries innocently and quickly supplied, “Why, from Quinn himself, dear boy. Rather, Quinn’s wife told my wife who told me. Why do you ask?”

This answer put Sir Giles suspicions back in their box, “Hmm. Right.”

“I suppose you’ll be needing all hands on deck, so to speak, to round up the rest of his trade union gang?” Humphries nonchalantly enquired as he took out a cigarette and lit it with his newfangled lighter.

Sir Giles gave him a perplexed look, prompting Humphries to clarify, “I mean to say, old boy, you must be stretched what with one man dead, one man incapacitated and two on enforced leave. That would leave you only with, er...how many active in the field? You may need to call in reinforcements...or rescind the enforced leave.”

“Hmm...” was Sir Giles’s exasperated, noncommittal reply as he resumed reading his newspaper.

Humphries assessed the situation then continued in a jocular manner, “Perhaps I could ask my wife to speak to Quinn’s wife about getting Quinn to rescind the enforced leave of those two...?”

The scowl elicited by that suggestion made Humphries admit, “I’m joking, old man. You look as though you could use a little levity.”

Sir Giles was not impressed, “I don’t know where you’re getting your information, Humphries, but the situation is well in hand. You may tell that to your wife and she can pass it on to Mrs Quinn.”

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The first glass of Chivas Regal had fulfilled its purpose commendably. I was in a calm and mellow mood, my thoughts almost freed of their previous encumbrances. A little more libation would see them gone altogether so I poured myself another tippie. There was a chill in the air but I felt the warmth radiating from inside. I leaned back against the bench and stretched my now-relaxed legs. A barn owl screeched in the distance and every now and then a whinny drifted across from the mews but otherwise all was quiet. I felt at peace in the dark as I always had; the blackness of the night absorbing the blackness my sins and absolving me of them.

The rustle of a skirt and the redolence of a floral perfume alerted my senses. I turned to see Lady Katherine strolling in the garden, peering unseeingly ahead deep in thought. Over her haute couture gown, she wore only a light shawl wrapped about her otherwise bare, graceful neck and magnificent shoulders; she must have felt the chill. I watched her as she came closer oblivious to all around her. I marvelled at the exquisiteness of her features even in the sallowness of the artificial lights from the Hall.

Uncorking the bottle of whisky, I poured a measure into the spare tumbler. The clink of glass and the gurgle of the liquid startled the countess, eliciting a gasp and snapping her attention to me. I held up the glass and invited, “A wee dram, your ladyship?”

Lady Katherine was relieved by the familiar voice and approached me, “Miss Davies. I didn’t expect anyone to be out.”

I proffered the glass once more. The countess took it and noticed the bottle on the bench, “Chivas Regal,” she said, “my favourite.” Indicating the bench, she asked, “May I?”

I nodded, very pleased she had come along and wanted to join me. She sat, rigid and formal, next to me, the Chivas Regal between us acting as chaperone. Raising her glass, she toasted, “*Slàinte.*”

I replied, clinking her glass, “*Do dheagh shlàinte.*”

My reply met with her approval, “Your Gaelic is impressive.”

We sat back and peered out into the infinite darkness, sipping the amber liquid and quietly retreating into our own thoughts. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the furtive glances she gave me. Something was on her mind.

After what seemed to be an eternity of silence, Lady Katherine enquired, “Are you married, Miss Davies?” Then, realising what she had said, gave a stifled embarrassed laugh, “Of course not, otherwise you’d be *Mrs* Davies, wouldn’t you?” She took another sip of her drink and, summoning her courage, asked, “Have you ever been married?”

“No.”

Another sip of courage brought forth this question, “Why not?”

I languidly turned my head to her and replied softly, “I suspect for the same reason you’re not.”

She sat motionless, save for the rhythmic heaving of her chest, and stared into the depth of the night. She was processing my response as well as searching for her own reason.

I watched her intently, then asked softly, intentionally teasing, “Were you flirting with me today?”

The look of mild horror she gave me as did the colour that rose in her cheeks made me smile—I had discovered her secret. But she didn’t leave in a huff or chastise me for my impertinence. Rather, she looked at the glass in her hand and composed herself. “Jessica, my maid, said that my aunt’s maid, Emma, told her that you were a trivet.”

This revelation made me chortle out loud, “A trivet? I’ve been called many things in my life but never that.”



Lady Katherine beamed a beautiful smile and added, “I knew what she meant...” then added seriously, “Are you?”

I considered my reply carefully before answering, “And if I were, would that make a difference...to you?”

Lady Katherine stared into the deep, dark distance but said nothing; I could only imagine what thoughts were going through her mind.

“My lady,” I said turning to face her, “I earnestly own that you are a most desirable woman and, in another world, I would have acted on my desires.”

She turned to look at me and I felt a melancholy from her as she uttered, “But...?”

“Our universes have momentarily overlapped. But they are on divergent paths.” I regretted the brutality of my frankness and a sadness overcame me for I truly wanted to know this lady better. Many reasons why I should not take this path flashed before me: the duchess’ warning, the wide social gap between us and, predominantly, my own reluctance to fall in love again.

“You are an extraordinary woman, Rebecca. I have never known anyone like you,” she softly admitted.

Her loneliness was tangible and her eyes spoke of her need. Here was a woman whose wealth could buy anything she desired but what she desired most could not be bought: true love. I would have given mine to her, freely and unencumbered, but it would mean certain heartbreak for one of us and I was not prepared to suffer that anguish again.

Long moments passed until I put down my glass and stood. I offered her my hand and said softly, “I think we should go inside, my lady.”

Placing her glass on the bench, she looked up at me. The look of desolation and rejection broke my heart. With a forlornness that I did not think such a vivacious creature could display, she took my hand and stood in front of me. I marvelled at the softness of her hand and how cold it was.

“You’re cold, my lady.”

She gave me a feeble smile, “For many years.”

I felt her warm breath on my face; the warm closeness of her body aroused feelings in me I had suppressed for so long. She looked up into my eyes and searched them solemnly then uttered in a barely audible whisper, “I want you.”

This was not a command but a plea borne of isolation and desire.

And I wanted her.

No matter how I had tried to ignore or deny my feelings, I realised that moment that I had fallen in love with her the instant I saw her. I tried to fight the need I felt to be with her. This was the same need I had had for Sarah, which I had long since buried with my beloved. It had been resurrected against my will.

I searched Lady Katherine’s eyes and saw nothing but desire, her mouth inviting me to capture it with mine. Whatever it was, it came unbidden. Her lips met mine and were soft and moist, with a faint hint of whisky. The kiss was gentle and tender and yet conveyed an undeniable yearning. She leaned into me, her hands hesitantly resting on my shoulders. I was lost and helpless; my arms involuntarily wrapped around her and pulled her in close as our kiss deepened.

It felt so comfortable, so right, to have her in my arms and to share this intimate moment. She gently pulled away and looked at me in a surprisingly shy and demure way. This was not the voracious New Woman for the new century everyone believed her to be but an innocent girl who had found passion and desire and pleaded for more.

“Will you stay with me tonight?” she asked hesitantly.

I wanted to...my God, how I wanted to.

“I can’t,” was my apologetic and pathetic reply. “Your aunt. If anything were to happen to her on my watch...”

Her disappointment was moving, “I understand,” she whispered. “Perhaps I’d best go inside. It’s become rather cold out here.” Lady Katherine drew her shawl tightly around her shoulders and left me watching her retreat into the warmth of the Hall and the coldness in her heart.

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One in the morning and, just as in Moore’s *‘A Visit from St. Nicholas’*, *‘...not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse...’*, it was so here as I stole my way down to Lady

Katherine's bedroom, unseen by anyone, not even Wills who was diligently working away in his rooms opposite the duchess'. His door was open and he could see the duchess' door but not the countess' further along the corridor.

Dressed in my regulation field blacks of turtleneck pullover and trousers, and wearing my black rubber-soled shoes, I quietly and quickly slipped into the countess' darkened boudoir through her unlocked door and closed it just as silently behind me.

The room was almost devoid of any light save that from the glowing embers in the fireplace and the warm air hinted at the fragrant scent of the woman sleeping peacefully in the large bed.

I gazed longingly at her delicate features and recalled the gentle touch of her lips upon mine and the warmth of her body as I pressed it against me in her tentative embrace. I relived the restrained passion she displayed and her desperate entreaty to take her to erotic places. I had gone to my room and tried to sleep, thoughts of my duty to the duchess combatting my desires for the countess. My desires had finally won out.

Kneeling beside her, I touched Lady Katherine's hair, brushing it away from her face. Her eyes fluttered open and, upon seeing me hovering over her, she did not show any sign of alarm or displeasure. Instead, she raised her hand and lovingly caressed my face, "Rebecca..." she whispered.

I sat on the edge of her bed and leaned into her caress, my heart pounding. Her desire overwhelmed me and I took her mouth with mine and kissed her insistently and passionately. She replied with equal fervour. Long and ardent, that kiss conveyed our mutual craving, our longing for love and our consent to each other.

We were breathless when we broke from that kiss. I searched her eyes for any hesitation or regret; I found only hunger and ardour. I kicked off my shoes, shucked my pullover and trousers and revealed to Katherine my naked, scarred body. Sarah's silver locket that dangled from my neck glistened in the dimness as I sat beside Katherine, leaning over her.

Katherine's hands began a journey of discovery along my arms to my shoulders and down my chest, cupping each breast; a look of wonderment filled her as she explored the most intimate parts of me with her hands and eyes. A faint gasp of dismay escaped her

when her fingers encountered one of the many nubbly scars that marred my skin. Her empathy made me love her all the more.

Without a word spoken between us, Katherine gently pulled aside her coverlet in invitation to lie with her. I gratefully cupped her face and kissed her. The neck of her nightdress was drawn closed by a loop-knotted ribbon, which I gently undid and opened revealing those glorious shoulders I had silently admired earlier that evening.

I kissed her neck and shoulders, each glance of my lips on her skin eliciting a delectable gasp from her. With great care, I drew down her nightdress revealing her breasts. She disencumbered herself of the sleeves and I pulled the garment down past her hips and to the end of the bed.

She was magnificent. Her pale skin was smooth and as soft as down. She watched me intently as my rough hands explored her every curve, crest and valley. Her body arched and her eyes flickered closed when my touch hovered gently on her secret parts.

I kissed each breast with equal fervour, caressing each nipple with my tongue. My hand moved down over her belly and rested between her legs, cupping her most secret of places and eliciting an involuntary spasm.

Without warning, she pulled my head to her face and captured my lips with hers with unbridled urgency. Her tongue invaded my mouth and I responded with equal intensity. My thumb found her clitoris and the touch extorted another gasp from her; the wetness beyond told me she was ready. My first exploratory incursion caused Katherine to expel a cry of surprise and to grip my arm tightly. Was this an entirely new sensation for her? Had she not been with another before? Had she never pleased herself?

I made sure she consented with proceeding and she released her tight grip on my arm. I kissed her again deeply, passionately, and gently probed further and further in, increasing the depth and intensity of my ministrations. As my rhythm increased, her vicelike grip on my arm tightened again. She squeezed her eyes shut and threw her head back, her breathing erratic and each exhalation accompanied by a muted moan.

It didn't take long for my unrelenting efforts to cause her body to stiffen and for her breathing to stop altogether. I felt her spasming muscles clamp around my fingers. I stopped so she could take in the pleasure of her pulsating contractions. Her body convulsed

in waves and then quietened. With a long expulsion of air, she groaned and her body relaxed. She was covered in a fine sheen of perspiration and her face and neck bloomed with a rosy flush. I gently withdrew and gazed at her; she was beautiful. When she opened her eyes, the look of wonderment, and the tear that escaped from each eye, told me everything I needed to know.

I drew the coverlet over us and wrapped my arms around her, pressing my naked body against hers, her soft breasts against mine. Once again, we kissed and, once again, we made love.

We had said not a word during our amorous congress and yet we had conveyed the depth of our innermost emotions to each other.

Cradled in each other's arms, we fell asleep.

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At quarter of seven, I was up and ready for duty after having left Katherine asleep only a few hours before and returning to my own room to prepare for the new day. I was tired, yet strangely uplifted and was contentedly looking forward to the morning ride with the duchess and countess.

Turning into the corridor, I encountered Wills near the duchess' rooms. He appeared agitated and summoned me close foregoing any polite greeting. The horrible thought of having been caught out with the countess was quickly dispelled when he stated, "I had a long telephone conversation with Alexander Quinn last night while the Duchess was at dinner."

"And?"

"Yabsley and Byrne have arrested the leader of the Amalgamated Plasterers and Renderers Union of Greater London, a John McGregor, for the abductions and murders," he advised as calmly as his anger would allow.

"What! Why? On what evidence?" I asked, confounded by this surprising revelation completely out of the blue.

"Written plans for another abduction and bank notes from the Richardson ransom were found in his house."

"How? How did they know to go there?"

“Hawthorne got a tip-off,” Wills replied, then added for extra effect, “from that Colonel Humphries.”

The look of astonishment and disbelief I shot Wills was caught by him and he agreed, “Yes, stroke of luck, what?” he added sarcastically.

I was completely flummoxed, “And Croft and Hogan? Is there a connection?”

“McGregor didn’t mention them in his confession.”

“He’s confessed? McGregor confessed?” My incredulity multiplied exponentially.

“Yes. And strange he should not mention his henchmen, those who carried out the murders, don’t you think?”

The revelation came quickly to me, “Because only you, I and Scott know of their existence.”

“Hmm-mm,” Wills concurred. “The poor bastard will hang alone.”

“You don’t believe his confession, do you Wills?”

Wills’ anger had abated; he scoffed, “It’s all too pat, Rebecca. None of this makes any sense. Why would anyone keep such incriminating evidence lying about in a drawer? Where’s the rest of the money? Quinn told me that Byrne delivered him the signed confession a few minutes before my telephone call. And that it had been read and initialled by Hawthorne. I telephoned him at nine.”

I laughed derisively, “Hawthorne never stays later than six. His wife won’t let him.”

“Exactly.”

It took a few more moments of mental gymnastics before I came to realise the ploy. “It’s a forgery, obviously. Someone wants us gone from here.”

“Precisely. And it has achieved its goal.” Wills’ anger returned, “Quinn has ordered us to return immediately to take charge of the investigation and to round up all the trade unionists involved.”

I was alarmed, “Surely not. That’s madness. Can’t he see this for what it is? And if the Duchess of Bramwell is taken? What then? Notwithstanding what they’ll do to her—God forbid—we will have lost the only opportunity to capture these bastard villains. What did you tell Quinn?”

“I argued that the information young Timmy Saddler gave us is proving correct and that it corresponds with what we’ve uncovered so far. I pointed out that the two previous abductions involved the coincidental deaths of dismissed servants and that it was a very real possibility that one Stewart Graves here is the link to the planned abduction of the Duchess of Bramwell.”

“And?” I asked becoming more and more apprehensive of the outcome.

“He was sympathetic to our assertions but he said they were just that, assertions. He said he had a signed confession in his hand and that he needed every available man to investigate the trade unionists. He reiterated that that we are to leave immediately.”

I stood before Wills in dumbfounded disbelief. This action meant the certain death of the duchess, there was no doubt.

Wills, too, was as concerned as I and knew what I was thinking. He offered further information, “I spoke to the Duke after the Duchess retired and explained the developments—”

“We must move the Duchess to a safe place,” I said, voicing the only option left to us.

“Yes. And there’s the difficulty.”

“She believes all this to be piffle—” I added with some admonition for the duchess.

“And she has her fifteen weekend guests arriving Friday.”

I snorted ironically, “It appears that we must abduct the Duchess ourselves for her own safety.”

Wills smiled guiltily, “I thought of that. But the Duke was not impressed. The best he could offer, without upsetting the Duchess and her plans, was to employ a number of private detectives to keep watch over her at all times.”

“They won’t get here before we have to leave.”

Wills took in a deep breath, demonstrating both his exasperation and weariness; he had been up all night and needed recuperative sleep. “Rebecca,” he said, expelling his breath and rubbing his eyes, “the train to London leaves the village at three. Go ahead with whatever the Duchess has planned for the day then pack up ready to go while Her Grace is

at lunch. And then pray to the merciful God that nothing happens to her before the detectives arrive. Not a word to Her Grace, though. We'll leave it to the Duke to explain.”

He turned to return to his room but stopped and queried, “You look tired. Didn't you sleep well?”

The door to the duchess' rooms opened and Mary, the Duchess of Bramwell, elegantly outfitted in her riding costume, strode out with the ever-attentive Emma following closely behind.

“Major Williams,” the duchess cheerily acknowledged, “good morning to you. And to you, Davies.”

“Morning, Your Grace,” we both returned with a slight nod of the head.

Lady Katherine emerged at the same, obviously predetermined, time and was greeted warmly by her aunt, “Sweetling, good morning. Sleep well?”

“Exceptionally well, Aunt,” Lady Katherine returned and, with a nod to me and Wills, greeted us, “Good morning,” while slipping on her gloves. Although she smiled at both me and Wills, the coy look she gave me didn't get past the notice of her aunt.

The duchess turned her head to look at me over her shoulder and the look she gave me was both questioning and accusatory, one to which I replied with a slight smile of defiance.

The duchess, I supposed, had guessed. Lady Katherine had an aura about her which her Aunt Mary noticed and silently queried. It was obvious to her that her niece was more wistful and serene, her eyes dilated and her cheeks rosy.

The air hung heavily between us, carrying our tacit provocations and accusations until Wills, in his innocence, interrupted our silent war, “Well, enjoy your ride, ladies. Davies.”

“Thank you, Major Williams. Come along, Katherine, we have much to discuss.”

I followed the two peeresses with a sense of foreboding. The duchess' obstinacy was going to be the death of her—literally. It would be now up to the duke to keep her safe between the time we left and until outside assistance could arrive to take our place. My other regret was that I would not see the countess again after we returned from our ride, nor could I tell her of my imminent departure. Our paths would never cross again and I felt a



sadness akin to loss. This thought I quickly dispelled reasoning that we were from completely opposite worlds and her reputation was paramount.

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It was a dingy little flat in a less-salubrious part of London Town but the building did boast a telephone set in the parlour. It was here that the retired Colonel Neville Humphries had made his home...and headquarters.

His neighbours found him pleasant enough but rather secretive. He never had any visitors, possibly due to his being away most of the time. They knew him to be a member of the most exclusive—and expensive—Marlborough Club and couldn't fathom why he couldn't, therefore, afford more luxurious accommodation and in a better part of town. The building wasn't dirty or rundown, just small and economical.

What they also didn't know—as did no one in his circle—was that he was newly estranged from his indulgent wife. She could no longer cope with her husband's mood swings and irrational rages. Better for all concerned, she said, that he finds himself accommodation elsewhere.

Humphries had consumed his breakfast of a cup of tea and buttered bread, that he made for himself in his flat, and now stood before the telephone set in the tiny parlour on the ground floor of the building. Most of the other residents were either breakfasting or had already gone off to work so he was sure he would have a few moments to himself.

“Seven one five, London Wall, please,” he said speaking quietly into the telephone mouthpiece.

A few edgy moments passed before Humphries' face became animated once more, “Gregory. Where were you last night? You must stay close...Never mind that. Listen. Everything is set. The cargo will be ready for collection at four, just before tea. Have the chaps ready to move at half past three. The train leaves for London at three. Have you got that? Not before half three. And, Gregory, I want you there to supervise. I don't want a replay of that fiasco.”

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Just like the previous day, our three mounts were waiting for us, saddled up and excitedly anticipating their early morning run. The duchess and countess were assisted onto their side

saddles by Pitman and Reynolds, while I easily climbed on board and sat comfortably astride Peleus's stablemate, Tommy.

Henry ran out from the stables toward me calling, "Miss Davies! Miss Davies!" causing Tommy to become agitated.

"Henry," I acknowledged, "What is it?" I quietly asked trying to calm him and Tommy down.

"Me and Dad went into the village yesterday and, guess what?" he said looking up at me wide-eyed, "Stewart Graves has got himself a new horse!" he added before I could answer him.

"Well, let's hope he treats this one better than the last," I said.

"And he's been telling everyone that he's going to leave the village. That he's got lots of money coming to him."

"Wouldn't that be the money that the Duchess owes him for the provisions he's supplied?"

"Yes but no. Dad says that he owes everyone. Lots of money. And that he gambles. Lots."

"Hmm," I said trying not to sound too interested in this information for fear of giving too much away to the young boy, "is that so? Did anyone say when he was going to leave, exactly?"

"Maybe today. That's why he's got a new horse. But his wagon wasn't loaded yet."

That information, if correct—and I didn't doubt it was—made me feel very uncomfortable with Wills and me being forced to leave today.

I smiled at Henry, "Thank you, Henry." As an afterthought, I added, "Henry, you'll look after the Duchess, won't you? Make sure Her Grace is not troubled by the likes of this 'Stupid' Graves?"

Henry laughed, "'Stupid' Graves! Right Miss."

"You've been an excellent information gatherer, Henry. Thank you."

"Does that mean I'd make a good 'secretary' just like you?" he asked impudently.

"Yes, Henry, just like me, perhaps even better."

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Sir Giles Hawthorne ambled to his third-floor office not eager to recommence the interrogation of that trade union leader, John McGregor. He had an irritating feeling that they had the wrong man but he couldn't let his subordinates know of his doubt.

He also felt a little rattled by Neville Humphries' preemptive congratulations at obtaining a confession from the fellow, thus solving the case. He was determined to interview the suspect personally and read the confession before approaching Quinn.

It was also of great concern to him that wives were privy to secret information and bandied it about like so much gossip over afternoon tea. Another thought then struck him as odd: wasn't Colonel Humphries estranged from his wife? Something about his uncontrollable rages? Certainly, during his time in the army with Humphries, the colonel was prone to overwhelming anger and furies but those were battle responses and he had calmed down appreciably since he retired from the service. Hawthorne conceded that he was certainly now a new man in full control of his temper, so much so that he was considered by some to be flippant.

All these thoughts were pushed to the back of his consciousness when he entered the office of his DSO team and found it empty except for the incapacitated Scott who was seated at his desk, diligently poring over reports.

"Where is everyone?" Hawthorne demanded stridently, startling Scott.

"Sir Giles! Er...They're searching the premises of John McGregor's associates...as you ordered last night."

"What?" Hawthorne was confused; he didn't order any such search, "What in Hades is going on?"

Scott was flummoxed; he was only following orders. "Sir?" he queried then offered, "As I understand it, after you left, Yabsley and Byrne interrogated McGregor once more. Yabsley returned about an hour later and said there was no more information to be had and we packed up and went home. When we came in this morning, Yabsley had a note from you instructing us to continue the raids."

Hawthorne looked at Scott in complete bewilderment. Was he going mad? He could not remember doing such a thing. Taking control of his anger, he took a new tack, "I understand McGregor confessed."

“I am not aware of that, Sir,” Scott replied apologetically.

“You are here day and night and you don’t know what’s going on?”

“Sir...” Poor Scott was the only one there and was being verbally pummelled mercilessly.

“Come with me. I want to speak with this John McGregor myself.”

“But, Sir—” Scott’s entreaty fell on unavailable ears as they and Hawthorne had already left the room. Scott struggled to his feet and propped the crutches under his arms and hobbled along trying to catch up to his superior.

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Hawthorne reached the underground cells in good time—perhaps a little puffed—but in good time. Waiting for the police guard to come along and unlock the outer door didn’t assuage his anger any but aggravated it—but it did give Scott time to catch up.

The police guard finally showed up and unlocked the door, “Good morning, Sir Giles. Apologies for the wait.”

“Yes, yes, good morning. Where’s McGregor? I want to speak to him.”

“Follow me, Sir, I’ll bring him to you in the interview room,” the guard said and led Hawthorne and Scott into a room that, although it was a place of detention, offered a table and several chairs. Hawthorne and Scott accommodated themselves and it was only a few minutes until two brawny constables bundled in a large, dishevelled, unshaven man of about forty years, and pushed him into a chair opposite them. His wrists were manacled and he was ropable. The constables hovered close by watching him intently.

This was John McGregor, a fierce Scot, who was furious that he was accused of such crimes and even more furious that he was not allowed to speak to his family or solicitor. He had vehemently protested his innocence and had demanded to be released but to no avail. This was a matter of national security and the DSO had powers to keep any suspect for as long as was deemed necessary. The night McGregor spent locked in a cell, away from his family, and for trumped up reasons, brought him to the end of his patience and tether.

“What’s the meaning of this!” McGregor roared. “I demand that you release me at once! And who the bloody hell are you two?”

“Calm down, Mr McGregor—” Scott said politely.

“I am calm!” McGregor stormed, “You don’t want to see me riled, laddie!”

Hawthorne took over, “I am Sir Giles Hawthorne, the Chief Administrator of the Special Branch DSO and I want to talk to you about your confession.”

“I’ve done nought to confess! I’ve been cooked up! I want my solicitor!”

“Soon, Mr McGregor. As soon as you tell me about the confession you’ve already given.”

“You’re speaking out of your arse, man, I ain’t given no bloody confession. Your dogs are barking up the wrong tree! And you’d better let me out of here real bloody soon or I’ll tear this bloody place apart!”

Hawthorne glanced at Scott, puzzled. “No confession?”

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Hawthorne and Scott left the two constables to deal with the implacable John McGregor and made their way back up to the general office. Sir Giles didn’t say a word and was mentally regurgitating all the contradictory information coming at him from all sides.

They reached the door to Scott’s room and here Scott limped in while Hawthorne absentmindedly carried on, lost in his own thoughts.

Scott realised that Sir Giles had not followed him. He turned and hesitantly called after him, “Sir Giles...Sir...?”

Hawthorne’s brain was awash with unrelenting questions: What was he to do with McGregor’s information? Were his dogs barking up the wrong tree? Why would his friend Neville Humphries give him misleading material? Perhaps Humphries was being misled by his Irish manservant. Or was he, himself, the dupe? Should he call off the raids? But he had no other leads. Was he inept? It was not his fault, he asserted. Everything was of someone else’s doing. Should he go to Alexander Quinn and admit he was lost? Would Quinn bring back Major Williams and that detestable man-woman affront to humankind? The last was not an option he entertained with any relish.

He had done everything within his power: Viscount Bonningwick’s daughter, Felicity, shortly would be whisked out of the country and all his available men were now

bringing in and interrogating all the trade unionists associated with John McGregor. That should sort it out.

Other than that, he now determined, it was best that he did nothing but wait.

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The three of us rode the same route we had the day before and in the same manner: a frantic gallop to the riverbank then a walk along the road connecting the fishermen's cottages and finally a canter back to the mews, skirting the woods. We held the same formation as well: the duchess and the countess riding abreast in front and me taking up the rear.

Every now and then Lady Katherine would glance back at me and give me a smile that held a secret only the two of us knew.

During the more sedate pace of our ride, the two aristocratic ladies chatted between themselves, excluding me in all conversation. This suited me as I did not want to unwittingly give my innermost feelings away. I already felt dispossessed of Lady Katherine's love but that was the condition I had accepted when I allowed myself to be consumed by my desire for her. And I was fearful for the duchess if the duke did not convince her that she was, indeed, in a dire situation and that they take appropriate precautions immediately.

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It was now one o'clock—merely twelve hours since our secret encounter—and Lady Katherine had joined her aunt and uncle for lunch, accompanied by her business secretary, George McPherson.

I was in my room, packing my scant belongings in my valise. I checked my kit bag that all was present and correct. My Webley, as always, was strapped to my chest, cleaned and loaded ready for use.

With my two bags in hand, I trudged down the stairs to Wills' rooms. As I approached Lady Katherine's suite, I paused. Fresh memories came to life and once again I tasted her lips and felt her warm supple body against mine; her scent filled my senses and her passionate gaze filled my heart.

"Rebecca," Wills' mellow voice echoed softly along the empty corridor, pulling me out of my trance, "Ready?"

“All packed,” I replied meeting him at his door.

“I’ve had a word to the Duke and he has assured me he will keep the Duchess indoors and watched by Thomson and Mrs Plummer at all times until the detectives arrive.” He looked at his watch, “Have you had something to eat?”

I nodded.

“Good. A Surrey cart and driver are ready to take us to the village railway station.”

That was it; no goodbyes, no farewells, no promises of trysts or secret rendezvous. I was saddened but it was for the best.

This is what I told myself as I slouched back into my seat next to Wills aboard the cart and peered into the distant countryside as it trundled along the road that skirted the woods. Reynolds, our driver, was taking the same road we had ridden back to the Hall that morning.

Wills knew something was gnawing at me but didn’t know what. His curiosity finally forced him to ask, “Not still thinking of quitting, are you?”

“No,” I answered unconsciously and without turning to face him. “Yes,” I recanted not really knowing what I was saying or wanted to do.

“The Duchess will be fine,” he assured me, assuming that she was the cause of my detachment. “Once we’re back at the Yard, we will convince Quinn that Hawthorne was badly mistaken and that we are on the right track. Scott will be there to back us up. We’ll catch those bastards, Rebecca, even if we both are discharged from the force in doing so.”

That’s what I most admired about my colleague, his passion for justice.

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## CHAPTER 13

### The Abduction

The railway station at the village was a simple raised concreted platform with several wooden benches along its short length. A small, neat and clean wooden structure on it provided the services of a ticket office, goods shed, waiting room and cloakroom, and telegraph office all in one. A single pair of steel tracks touched the periphery of the village, which was one of quite a number that were serviced by this line. The train would arrive from London in the morning and, once having reached its destination fifty miles along, return to London passing through the village in the afternoon. It reminded me of the train I took from Wangaratta so many lifetimes ago.

Reynolds, our driver, assisted us with our luggage then departed for Abbotsford Hall leaving Wills and me waiting for the train alone on the platform. I could see someone in the telegraph office whom I assumed to be the station master. Other than him, there was no one around.

Wills and I took our places on one of the wooden benches and waited for the train in our usual companionable silence. It was due at three and we anticipated a wait of only five or so minutes.

On the other side of the tracks, emerging from the high street of the village, I caught sight of a familiar wagon and its driver. It was Stewart Graves and, indeed, he had somehow acquired a new horse. The wagon was empty save for a weathered tarpaulin opened out across the tray and draped over its low sides.



“That looks like the wagon that Stewart Graves owns,” I informed Wills as it headed toward the railway crossing. “I wonder where he’s going?”

Wills and I watched until we lost sight of it as it passed behind the station building. He replied with a little doubt eating away at his conviction, “The Duke assured me that his wife would be well protected.”

We were uneasy with the situation but there was nothing we could do so sat back and waited, trying not to be troubled by this.

It was ten minutes after three and the train was quite obviously late when the station master emerged from the telegraph office and approached us.

“Sir, Madam,” he began reluctantly, “I’ve just received a telegraph message from two stations up the line. The train’s been delayed due to an obstruction on the track. Workers are clearing the debris as we speak. It should not be too long in coming.”

“How long?” Wills asked; he was anxious to get back to Scotland Yard as soon as possible and to speak to Alexander Quinn this day.

“Perhaps an hour, Sir. I do apologise for the inconvenience.”

Wills looked at his pocket watch. “Thank you,” he said to the station master dismissing him and turned to me unhappy with the circumstance, “We still may be in London before dark.”

Time wore on lethargically. Nothing was stirring; the station master was in his little room reading a newspaper; Wills was dozing on the bench—his sleep had been cruelly curtailed by this sudden change of plans—and I paced the length of the platform so many times that I knew exactly how many paces there were from one crack in the concrete to the next.

The monotony of the wait was broken when a small dogcart pulled onto the platform. The driver got out and went to the station master’s office. I presumed it was the village post master expecting to collect the Royal Mail from the now-delayed train.

A glance at my wrist watch confirmed it was now twenty-six minutes past four. I looked up and, in the distance, billowing through the canopy of trees, I could see the telltale pall of grey smoke and steam of our approaching train.

From the other direction, on the road from Abbotsford Hall, a frantic scream pierced the air, “Miss Davies! Miss Davies!” accompanied by the rumble of hooves pounding the compact earth.

The desperate cries startled both Wills and me and we turned to see Henry on Peleus bearing down on us at an alarming speed. The mighty thoroughbred jumped onto the platform and was on a collision course with us. Henry, wide-eyed and wild with panic, pulled the horse up with all the might his small frame could summon. The horse skidded to a stop, the friction from its shoes on the concrete sending sparks into the air.

Wills and I grabbed the horse’s reins; Peleus was jittery and skittish and trembling with excitement. We pulled his head down and managed to calm him.

“Miss Davies! Miss Davies!!” Henry cried, “They’ve taken her!!” He was in a state of fearful frenzy, tears streaming down his face.

“When, boy? When did they take her?” Wills demanded. Wills was as distressed and alarmed as I was.

Poor Henry was so overcome with anxiety and breathless from the flight, he couldn’t utter a word.

“Boy—!”

“Wills, let me,” I urged Wills then spoke calmly to Henry, “Henry, calm down. Breathe, breathe. Listen to me. Who took her? When?”

“Dunno,” Henry sobbed his breath catching with every intake of air, “dunno. She was in the garden... went for a walk in the garden and never came back... There was blood...”

“Goddammit!” Wills cursed, “He was supposed to keep her inside! Bloody hell!!” Wills was beside himself with anger and furious with himself for not going with his instinct and with Quinn for not listening to him.

My mind tumbled processing the events of the last few days...

“Wills,” I said trying to control my panic, “I know where they’ve taken her.” The moment froze in time. “The cottage.”

I ran to the bench and picked up my gladstone.

“Cottage?”

“The fishermen’s cottage,” I said as I lifted the distressed Henry off the saddle and onto the ground. “There were poachers there. Must have been Croft and Hogan scouting the place.” I spoke to Henry trying to quieten him, “Henry, it’ll be all right. We’ll find the Duchess and we’ll get her back safe and sound.”

“Not the Duchess,” he cried, “Lady Katherine. They took Lady Katherine!”

This dreadful revelation knocked the breath out of me. My mind screamed, “NO!”

My anxiety raged with anger. I jumped onto Peleus, laid the bag across my lap and grabbed hold of the reins.

Wills became even more agitated, “Where are you going?”

“To find Katherine. Henry knows where. Get help.” I swung Peleus around and kicked him hard into a full gallop. He responded unreservedly.

I left Wills and Henry staring after me in my wake.

Wills looked down at Henry, “Come with me, son,” and headed for the post master’s dogcart. They clambered on board just as the station master and post master darted toward them. Wills called out to them as he whipped the pony into action, “Metropolitan Police! Official business!” and took off in the direction of Abbotsford Hall.

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*A few hours before...*

Stewart Graves had had enough of trudging the straight and narrow. He had done his best but everyone was against him succeeding.

In the five years since he had come to the village, he watched his thriving, newly acquired grocery store fail and, with that, the failure of his eighteen year marriage. His wife had had enough of him and his promises and left him. At least, he thought, that was a blessing—one less to feed and clothe.

He owed money to everyone in the village and beyond, and his luck at cards only pushed him further into debt rather than saving him from it.

When the opportunity came to assist a couple of transients with some local knowledge, he grabbed it. They were willing to pay and he drove a hard bargain, or so he boasted to himself, for they had accepted his terms with very little haggling.

He didn't know why they wanted the information but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. These funds would be the means to escape this village, his woes...and his debts.

Step-by-step these two townies revealed what was required. Each step caused his concern to escalate but, rather than decline to help them further, he demanded—and, to his surprise, received—the promise of higher recompense. Payment, they assured him, would be delivered to him as soon as the 'goods' were delivered to them.

When he finally realised that these 'goods' were to be the Duchess of Bramwell, he quickly pushed aside any thought of compassion. It was she, after all, who accused him of short supply of goods and had withheld payment until he had made up the shortfall. And, if that was not bad enough, she told him she would be pulling all the estate's business from him and giving it to the new grocer in the village, Woods, a young husband and his wife.

It would have been an easy fix if only that confounded Mrs Plummer had not checked her records further back and found a few more anomalies. And Graves thought that trust between parties was paramount. It just went to show how much the duchess didn't trust him. She was the cause of his business failing.

While it was of considerable concern to Graves that abduction was a capital offence, these two fellows had not only assured him that he would not be implicated but he would have plenty of money and be long gone before anyone knew what had happened. Besides, they said the old lady would come to no harm.

These were the thoughts and justifications that ran through Graves's mind as he drove his horse and wagon out of the village at three o'clock that afternoon and headed for Abbotsford Hall. He had draped the wagon's tray with a tarpaulin and lying beneath it was one of the two men who had contracted him, one Harry Hogan.

Crossing the railway tracks, he didn't notice the two people waiting on the station's platform. He flicked his whip on the rump of the borrowed horse urging it to up its speed to a canter.

It wasn't long before he reached the fork in the road that led to the riverside. He carried on toward the Hall.

The wagon rolled down the road and through the impressive gates of the estate and along the lengthy drive to the mansion.

Carefully manoeuvring the wagon to the servants' and service entrance at the back, he scoured the surrounds and found that the gardeners were working elsewhere and the grooms and stable hands were inside the stables or coach house—the grounds, for all intents and purposes, were deserted.

He pulled the horse up near a wall that was devoid of windows and got down from his bench. He crunched his way on the gravel to the back of the wagon and discreetly lifted the tail end of the tarpaulin to see Hogan looking up at him from his lying position.

A voice startled him, "Mr Graves," Florence said, surprised, "I thought you'd delivered everything we ordered for the weekend." She had emerged from the wash house with a basketful of bed linen and was heading for the back door.

"I want to see Her Grace," Graves replied brusquely, lowering the flap of the tarp.

"Well, come inside, then," Florence said making for the door again.

"No, out here. Tell her to come out here."

Florence stopped and peered at him, taken aback by his impertinence, "Her Grace ain't at your beck and call, Mr Graves. Besides, she's otherwise engaged."

"I want to see her," Graves insisted.

"Tell me for why and I'll take her the message, Mr Graves," Florence insisted in reply, quite annoyed.

Graves became visibly flustered. He needed the money and he needed her outside. "Look, you pumped up little slattern, tell her to come out—"

A cultured voice interrupted the escalating discussion, "Mr Graves, is it?" Lady Katherine's enquiry came from behind Graves, startling him. Lady Katherine addressed the maid, "Thank you, Florence, I'll see what Mr Graves wants."

Florence curtsied, "He wants a good thumping, my lady, if you ask me," she offered and quickly made her way through the doorway, giving Graves a scowl for good measure.

Lady Katherine moved gracefully toward the wagon to face Graves still standing at the back of it, "Now, Mr Graves, what is it that you need from the Duchess?"

Graves was aware that this was a lady of some standing but didn't know what her relationship was with the duchess. He enquired rather coarsely, "And who are you?"

The raising of Lady Katherine's eyebrow was her only reaction to the rudeness of this person, "Lady Katherine Delaney, the Duchess' niece," she replied politely even though she was annoyed by this man's arrogance and impertinence.

Grave's expression changed from one of irritation to one of revelation and opportunity. He stepped away from the back of the wagon then slowly stalked around Lady Katherine, "The Duchess' niece, right?" he echoed almost mockingly as he stepped closer to her. She stepped back. He was invading her personal space and she didn't like it. He continued, taking another step closer, "She'd be quite fond of you, right?"

She stepped back again getting closer to the back of the wagon, "Mr Graves!" Lady Katherine protested, "You forget yourself."

"Perhaps, my lady, so long as the Duchess don't forget you."

She had been manoeuvred to the back of the wagon and was quite annoyed this vulgar man's behaviour. Lady Katherine demanded, "Explain yourself, man."

Graves ignored her instead looking around. No one was around. No one to see what was to happen next and raise the alarm.

"Now's a good time," Graves said coolly, completely flummoxing the countess.

Without warning, the tarpaulin flew up. Hogan scrambled out from under it and grabbed Lady Katherine by her arms from behind. Taken by surprise and shocked by the assault on her person, she struggled fiercely to free herself but was seized by Graves.

She managed to free herself and turned to Hogan flailing her arms and striking him repeatedly. The countess resisted heroically but when Hogan struck her brow with his fist, it stunned her and knocked her off balance. It was only that Graves had her by the waist that she didn't fall to the ground.

Blood gushed from the cut to her eyebrow, streaming down her face and onto her delicate white linen shirtwaist. But she didn't give up her fight. Regaining her balance but dazed, she resumed her valiant efforts in the violent scuffle. Hogan grabbed at her arms again, part of her bloodied sleeve tore away when his grip slipped. He roughly discarded the scrap and struck her again, this time knocking her senseless. Her legs buckled and, before she collapsed to the ground, Hogan and Graves picked her up and threw her into the back of the wagon. Hogan quickly slid in under the tarpaulin with her. Graves covered

them and jumped back onto the driver's seat. He whipped the horse into a fast gallop and sped away unseen, unheard and unnoticed. The only evidence of this violent episode was the remnant of bloodied sleeve lying discarded in the gravel.

The horse and wagon sped back up the driveway and out of the impressive gates.

From her study, the Duchess Mary's attention was drawn to the wagon racing off. She could not imagine why that awful Mr Graves would be back. She had settled the accounts and sorted the kerfuffle over the old horse. Perhaps he had forgotten something... She thought no more of it and returned to her letter writing, as suggested by her husband she do.

Graves urged the horse toward the riverside but veered it onto the woodland road that cut through the dense forest. Under the tarpaulin, Lady Katherine lay unconscious, the wound to her brow still weeping blood. Her carefully coiffed hair now tangled and in disarray and her fine clothing torn and untidy, soiled by the grime of the tray's floor.

It was not long before the wagon and its occupants were swallowed up by the dense forest and twilight shadows.

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Jessica Turner, Lady Katherine's attentive maid, had prepared her mistress's tea gown ready for afternoon tea with the duchess and George McPherson but her mistress was unusually late. This was most unlike her very punctual countess.

She went to the duchess' suite and knocked. Emma opened the door.

"Emma, is Lady Katherine here?" she asked quietly.

"No, Jessie. Have you asked Mr Thomson?"

"Who is that, Emma?" the duchess asked from within her room.

"Turner, Your Grace, enquiring after Lady Katherine," Emma replied.

The duchess came to the door. "My niece may be with the Duke. Have you enquired there?"

"No, Your Grace, I'll do that now. Thank you." Jessica curtsied, and rushed to the duke's study, her concern rising. Her countess always told her what she'd be doing and where she was going. This was most unusual. She said she'd be back from her walk in time to prepare for afternoon tea.

Jessica interrupted the discussion the duke and George McPherson were having but they, too, had not seen Lady Katherine since lunch when she stepped out for some air in the garden.

In the servants' hall, Thomson, Mrs Plummer, nobody, had set eyes upon her since lunch. Jessica was becoming quite alarmed.

Florence ambled back into the servants' hall with her empty linen basket and noticed all the fuss, "What's all the to-do about?" she asked depositing her basket on a sideboard.

Jessica jumped in, quite agitated and concerned, "Florrie, have you seen Lady Katherine?"

"Oh yes," Florence returned casually, "I left her ladyship confabulating with that awful Mr Graves at the back."

"When?"

"Oh, about half hour ago. Why? What's up?" If it weren't for the seriousness of the situation, Mrs Plummer would have pulled Florence up for using another of those awful Americanisms, "*What's up*", *indeed!*" jumped into Mrs Plummer's thoughts and was just as quickly dispelled from them.

Just outside the servants' hall door, Henry jogged along for his usual midafternoon treat from Mrs Plummer, a piece of apple pie or cake. He had long suspected that Mrs Plummer was sweet on his dad and so treated Henry with little favours like these, which he gladly accepted.

A piece of bloodied rag caught his eye. Curious, he ran to it and picked it up, puzzled as to who left it there and why. Mrs Plummer was a fussbudget when it came to cleanliness and tidiness—or so Florence insisted.

Ambling into the servants' hall, he came across the commotion and only when he became aware that Lady Katherine was missing did he offer his find to Jessica.

"I found this outside, Miss Turner," he said, his smooth forehead crinkling with concern.

Jessica took it and examined it. "This is hers! This is from her shirtwaist!" she exclaimed in fear and panic. "Someone's taken Lady Katherine!"



The commotion and distress this announcement excited in all those there left Henry in wide-eyed alarm. He had to do something. But what?

He remembered that when he helped Reynolds rig up the Surrey cart that morning, Reynolds told him that Miss Davies and Major Williams were leaving and that he was to take them to the railway station. He remembered feeling disappointed that Miss Davies didn't say goodbye to him.

But he pushed all that aside. That's where they were! The railway station! If anyone could help, it would be Miss Davies!

Without a word to anyone in the servants' hall or at the stables, Henry quickly saddled and bridled Peleus and took off at speed for the station, leaving his father calling out to him, in vain, "Henry! Henry...!"

It didn't occur to Henry that the train would have been long gone by this time but then Henry would have pursued the train along the track all the way to London if he had to.

It was most fortuitous that there had been a delay...

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It was about half past four when the wagon driven by Graves broke out of the woodland and approached the stone cottage.

The last rays of the western sun sparkled on the river that ran behind the cottage and all was quiet save the swish of the water racing toward the village. Tied to the little pier was a four-oared rowboat.

Graves had taken the shorter route through the forest as it afforded cover for their covert activity. Even though there was still enough light outside, the kerosene lamp inside the cottage was lit and the warm glow of the flame softly radiated from the windows.

Upon hearing the cautious approach of the wagon, Norman Croft emerged from the cottage carrying a shotgun at the ready.

"About bloody time," he called as Graves pulled the wagon up near the doorway. "Did you get her?"

Graves jumped down and went to the back and pulled away the tarpaulin, "No."

Hogan pushed himself up and clambered down from the tray and unceremoniously dragged the still-unconscious countess to the edge. “Got something better, Boss,” Hogan sneered.

“The Duchess’ niece. Some Lady Katherine Delaney,” added Graves.

Hogan looked down at her and his dirty hand fondled her breast, “There’ll be some fun to be had here, boys,” he snarled lasciviously.

“Bring her inside,” Croft ordered.

Hogan and Graves picked up Lady Katherine and carried her into the cottage.

The disused stone cottage was always kept clean and tidy by the duke’s groundsmen, as were its sparse furnishing of a table, chairs, campaign cots and cupboard. The fireplace had been readied by Croft and a kettle of water hung over it.

“Put her there,” commanded Croft pointing to one of the campaign cots that had been opened out.

Graves stood back as Hogan and Croft ogled the poor woman lying there completely defenceless. He was not entirely happy with doing any more harm to her. He was appalled that Hogan had punched her so ferociously but he dared say nothing should they withhold payment.

So he just stood there, doing all he could to convince himself that he was not a wicked man. He only wanted to get back at the duchess for discovering his flimflammy. That other woman, however, the one who shoved a gun in his face, she was a different matter. She was not a normal woman and he would get back at her for humiliating him.

He plucked up his waning courage and with a little reluctance he said to Croft, “I done my bit. Payment?”

This drew the attention of both thugs away from the vulnerable countess. They approached him menacingly.

“Payment’s when we get paid,” Croft sneered with a contemptuous curl of his lip, “I told you that.”

“I just want my money and go.”

“Why?” replied Croft sardonically, “you got somewhere else to be? You’ll go when I say it’s time to go. Besides,” Croft added menacingly, “you got one more job to do.”

This surprised Graves. “That wasn’t the deal. I done what you said. You got your goods.”

“The deal is whatever I say it is.”

Taking a crumpled note from his pocket, he handed it to Graves who reluctantly took it.

“That,” Croft said carefully and forcefully, “you take to the Duke and make sure he gets it. And then you return here and your money will be waiting for you.”

Graves became agitated and protested, “They’ll take me if I go back. They saw me, one of the servants—”

“Well, you’d better make sure they don’t see you this time.”

Graves was overwhelmed by the thought of being captured and hanged; he didn’t want to go back, “I’ll hang...I won’t go—”

Croft’s reaction was swift: the barrel of his shotgun swung up and caught Graves under his chin, forcing his head backward. He froze, wide-eyed with fear, staring down his nose at Croft.

“Now listen here, you mongrel clodhopper,” Croft calmly intoned, practically nose to nose with Graves, “Take the note or I’ll blow your fucking brains out. The choice is yours.”

Graves’ fear manifested itself through large beads of perspiration forming on his brow and upper lip.

“Well?” Croft asked, “What’s your decision?”

Graves was barely able to breathe let alone speak, “The... the note,” he whispered.

“What? I didn’t hear you.”

“I’ll take the note,” Graves said hoarsely, his mouth dry.

“Good.” Croft removed the deadly threat from under Graves’s chin and pushed him roughly toward the door. “Go! And if you come back with anything other than yourself, you’re dead meat.”

Graves scrambled out of the door to the mocking laughter of Hogan who just loved scaring the shit out of people.

Hogan, the brutish and uglier of the two, turned to Lady Katherine and leered at her. “Let’s have some fun,” he sneered to Croft.

“Not yet.” Croft replied sternly, “Not until we don’t need her no more.”

“Argh!” remonstrated Hogan, “what’s the difference? They all end up the same anyway.”

“Sit down and shut up,” ordered Croft, “you’ll get a go when the time comes.”

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It was nearing home time when the speaking tube on the wall squawked with Fawkner’s voice, “Sir Giles, Mr Quinn on the telephone for you, Sir.”

Hawthorne’s thoughts were elsewhere and hadn’t heard the telephone ring. “What the devil does he want now?” he mumbled to himself. It had been a long, unproductive day and the cells were full of angry, uncooperative unionists. All he wanted to do was go home and sit in silent detachment while his wife and mother-in-law prattled on over trivialities. That would have afforded him welcome respite from the turmoil in the office.

With a disconsolate sigh, he lifted the handset to his ear, “Mr Quinn.”

“I’ve just had a most alarming telephone call from the Duke of Bramwell.” There was something in Alexander Quinn’s voice that Hawthorne hadn’t heard before: controlled anger.

“The Duke of Bramwell?” Hawthorne was confused: who the hell was the Duke of Bramwell?

“His Grace was most distressed. His niece, the Countess of Chestermere, has been abducted.”

“Ab...abducted? Who...? Why...?” Hawthorne dithered.

“The anarchists, man!” boomed Quinn.

“Can’t be! We have them all in the cells!”

“And you have a confession. Or so you claim. But it is!”

Hawthorne took a moment to straighten his thoughts, “It must be someone else. With respect, Mr Quinn, someone’s made a mistake.”

“Yes, Hawthorne, and it was I who made the mistake in listening to you! I should have gone with my instincts and assigned more officers where they were needed rather than the wild goose chase you’ve had them on!”

Hawthorne was flabbergasted. He had never been spoken to in such a manner as this, not by his superior and certainly not by his subordinates. “Mr Quinn! Really! I must object to your tone. I have done everything in my—”

“Get a squad of men together,” Quinn was not about to entertain excuses, “The train leaves for Abbotsford village at six fifteen tomorrow morning. I want you and six officers to be on it.”

“Me?” objected Hawthorne.

“You. Not that injured officer... Scott, Robert Scott, even though he seems to know more of what’s going on than the lot of you put together.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday—”

“And the day after is Sunday.”

“My wife...” Hawthorne was most reluctant to share this, “er...my wife has insisted that I assist her in our church’s fete tomorr—”

“Are you requesting time off? Because, if you are, Sir Giles, I can easily arrange as much time off as you need. Permanently.”

“Perm...?” Hawthorne was caught between two vengeful antagonists and he had to choose the one with the less cataclysmic repercussions.

“What is it to be?”

“Of course. I understand, Mr Quinn,” Hawthorne conceded reluctantly, “You need a captain in the field and I—”

“No. Major Williams will head the squad—”

“Major Williams?” This threw him completely, “He is on enforced leave—”

“You will go there,” insisted Quinn, “under his direction and see how it’s done.”

Hawthorne’s scoff of indignation transmitted itself to Quinn who queried, “Do you see any difficulty with that, Sir Giles?”

“You expect me—”

“Do you see any difficulty, Sir Giles?” insisted Quinn.

Deflated and angry, Sir Giles managed his reply through gritted teeth, “No, Mr Quinn, no difficulty. No difficulty at all.”

“Good.”

And, with that, the telephone call ended with a loud crash in Hawthorne’s ear.

Beads of perspiration were forming on Hawthorne’s forehead. He was stewing in his own furious resentment at being relegated in the first instance and, in the second, at being kept in the dark as to Williams’s real objective. This was not the way an organisation should be run. He was in charge, damn it! He called the play, goddammit!!

He shot to his feet and paced the floor, the sequence of events leading to this moment played over and over in his mind. *How dare they do this to me! I am knighted! Major Williams! That pumped up piece of nothing! Without Quinn’s support, he would have been out on his ear years ago. And that...that...insult to womanhood. How dare they! Of course, without a confederate in the office to do their dirty work... Scott! I’ll see to him! He wants a squad of six, eh? I’ll give him six.*

He surged to the speaking tube and yanked it off the wall, “Fawkner! Get Yabsley in here. And, Fawkner, get the Marlborough Club on the telephone. Now!”

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Yabsley had come quickly and gone with his orders within a matter of minutes. He was to assemble Dolby, Hewitt, Ramsay, Hathaway and Byrne at the railway station early the following morning. Sir Giles gave no other explanation or chance of reply, and bluntly dismissed his second-in-charge.

Fawkner hailed Hawthorne via the speaking tube, “Sir Giles, the Marlborough Club is connected, Sir.”

Without any further niceties, Hawthorne put the handpiece to his ear, “Sir Giles Hawthorne here. Take me to Colonel Humphries.”

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Peleus was responding well to my urgings as we thundered back down the road toward Abbotsford Hall. He was a true thoroughbred with a mighty heart and he seemed to understand the urgency of this dire situation; he was, after all, Lady Katherine’s mount, ridden almost exclusively by her.

At the railway station, I had left Henry with Wills and presumed that they would be getting a search party together to find Katherine.

I didn't quite know what I was going to do or where I was going but I did know what these mongrels would do to her if I didn't reach her in time.

Sunset would be in about an hour and the tall trees of the woods I was skirting were already casting long shadows. I worked better under the cover of darkness but I had to reach her as soon as possible.

If the ransom note had been left, it would give the duke twenty-four hours to raise the sum demanded. Given the wealth of these two families, it would not be a trifling amount. If these bastards followed the same *modus operandi* then Katherine would be dead soon after the ransom was paid. Worse still, those animals would have defiled her in the most atrocious way before they killed her. I would not let that happen even if it meant laying my life on the line to prevent it. I had failed once thirty years ago; I would not fail again.

In the distance I could see Abbotsford Hall. This road would branch off, one road leading to the Hall and the other to the riverbank and onto the three fishermen's cottages.

It was time to change. I pulled Peleus into a shallow clearing amongst the trees and jumped off. Quickly removing my jacket and skirt, I pulled out my blacks from the portmanteau, drawing the black turtleneck sweater over my white shirt and the gun strapped to my chest. I pulled the trousers on over my underwear and donned the jacket. The pockets held all I needed: gloves, balaclava, a pack of twelve rounds, manacle and my garrotte. I reconsidered the manacle. I only needed it if I intended to take a prisoner. I tossed it back into the bag. My switchblade stiletto was where it always was, in my right boot.

Mounting Peleus and leaving my discards in the undergrowth, I spurred him on.

It was twilight when I reached the fork in the road. There was no apparent movement from the Hall. I turned Peleus toward the riverbank and prodded him on. There was no sign of Graves's wagon and the earth on the rutted road was too compacted to show any new wheel tracks. I concluded that Graves was complicit in the abduction.

Now was the time for caution for I knew these monsters to be ready to kill without provocation and Katherine's safety was paramount.

I could feel Peleus tiring. He was a gallant steed but he had been pushed this morning when Lady Katherine took him for their early morning jaunt, and pushed again when Henry raced him to the railway station. And now I was pushing him hard. He was sweating, his gleaming brown coat white with clammy froth. But he wasn't complaining.

We shortly approached the first of the cottages, the Carp.

I pulled Peleus up into the wooded side of the road and dismounted, making sure the horse was tethered and unseen. I moved furtively across the track and into the scrub that bordered the cottage. There was no movement or light coming from the interior but nonetheless took the circuitous route through the undergrowth and reached the back of the dwelling.

I peered through the window. Deserted.

Damn!

I ran across the bridlepath and jumped onto Peleus and pushed him onto to the next cottage, the Catfish. This was the cottage the so-called poachers had sullied.

It was now becoming dark. The last light of day was fading quickly.

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It was well past his home time and his wife and mother-in-law would be most upset that he had not shown up for dinner. The note he sent along to her would not appease her at all. He would make suitable amends later; this was far more important. He had a score to settle.

Sir Giles Hawthorne strode purposefully and resolutely through the long, wood-panelled corridor and into the reading room of the Marlborough Club where he expected Colonel Humphries to be waiting for him.

Colonel Humphries was, indeed, waiting for Sir Giles and stood to shake his hand when he approached.

“Sir Giles, old boy, what on earth is so urgent that you miss dinner with your esteemed wife and mother-in-law?” Humphries crowed knowing his remark would rankle his old friend.

“Indeed,” Hawthorne replied, taking a seat opposite. He was still quite peeved by the way Quinn had spoken to him but didn't want to start the conversation on a sour note.



“It appears your valet was misinformed about the unions and I’ve been ‘leading a wild goose chase’ according to the ingenious Mr Alexander Quinn.”

While he became somewhat uneasy by this sarcastic comment, Humphries was guarded in his reply, “What are you saying, dear boy? The unions are not involved? Wild geese?”

“Not only has Quinn shut down my investigation of the trade unions, he has also directed me to another part of the country! The nerve of the pup!”

“What do you mean?” Humphries’ jovial repartee was instantly replaced with concern.

“What do I mean?” Hawthorne looked about, “Where’s the waiter? I can use a stiff brandy...”

“Sir Giles—” Humphries stopped himself short and realigned his demeanour, “Sir Giles,” he continued with a benevolent smile, “tell me what has you so upset. Perhaps we can work something out together. As we always have.”

Sir Giles took a deep breath then expelled it with self-pitying resignation, “I’m to head a squad of six of my men to someplace in the country, a small village in Hertfordshire, somewhere.”

Humphries’ smile dropped off his face, a change Sir Giles noticed.

“I say, Neville, you’ve gone as white as a ghost.”

Humphries brought back the smile with a forced chuckle, “Er...just had a bit of a spasm. The old war wound playing up. So, you’re off to this country village, you say. When might that be?”

“First light tomorrow. Are you sure you’re all right, old boy?”

“Yes...yes...Perhaps you’re right, Sir Giles. Perhaps I should take myself home and rest. I’m feeling a little ragged.”

“Right, right.”

Humphries stood to take his leave, a little shaken and withdrawn.

“I’m feeling much the same, old boy. Not looking forward to confronting Williams and that abomination.”

Hawthorne stopped. “Pardon?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re saying Major Williams and that Davies woman are at the village?”

“Yes. And I’m not happy to have them under me. A bit of a conspiracy, I say. That Quinn has a lot to learn about leadership—”

“Yes...Please excuse me, Sir Giles, I must go.”

“Of course, of course. You do look ill. Look after yourself, old boy. Waiter! There you are...”

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A large flagon of rum stood on the table in the fishermen’s cottage, opened and the contents partially consumed. Croft and Hogan sat at the table, their veins infused with the intoxicating spirit, but they were not drunk. It would take a lot more to make them so. They drank and waited and watched the countess intently.

The ugly Harry Hogan was the more salacious and callous of the two. His face betrayed his vile and indecent intentions as he leered at the defenceless Lady Katherine lying battered and unconscious on the cot. He couldn’t wait to take this woman and have her fight and scream as he did whatever he wanted to do with her. He enjoyed that. He enjoyed the power he had over them. He enjoyed watching them suffer. He enjoyed watching them die.

This one was the most valuable prize yet. A countess, no less. And she’d be all his. He was getting horny just thinking of it as he undressed her with his eyes and ravaged her with his thoughts... Oh, yes, he was going to have fun and lots of it.

Norman Croft was no angel himself. He had known no other life than one which involved thievery, housebreaking, thuggery and all shades of malefaction up to and including rape and murder.

He enjoyed taking the same carnal advantages as Hogan—and would do so again with this woman when the time came—but he was more concerned with avoiding an appointment with the gallows. Consequently, he had to make sure that all loose ends were tied. That meant leaving no one to testify against him and Hogan. Only two would survive to see the end of the week.

A soft moan pulled the men's attention out of their obscene thoughts. Lady Katherine was regaining consciousness.

Where she had suffered the blows to the side of her face was swollen and her eye partially closed. The blood from the gash to her brow had congealed and dried blood encrusted part of her face and neck. Her once-immaculate shirtwaist, now torn and sullied, was also spattered with her blood.

She slowly stirred, groaning and wincing in agony. The touch of her hand to her damaged face caused her to cry in pain. She was confused, hurt and disoriented. She cautiously opened her eyes but her vision was blurred.

"Jessie..." she feebly cried as she turned her head. The dizziness brought on by this movement caused her to dry retch and cough. She turned back with a groan and closed her eyes.

"Ah, the lady awakes," Croft snarled as he stood over her.

With the shock of suddenly remembering what had happened to her, she was horror-struck when she opened her eyes and took in the form of a brute standing over her. She composed herself as much as she could but was on the verge of hysteria.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Lady Katherine managed to utter, panting with terror.

Hogan came up and loomed over her and sneered, "No need to fear, m' lady, I'll take care o' you good and proper." His malicious cackle did nothing to assuage her fear.

Croft leaned down over her, his rum-soaked breath caused her nausea to rise again. "You just lie there and don't move. It'll be over with soon enough."

Lady Katherine's vision had adjusted and she recognised where she was and was a little relieved to know that she was still on her uncle's estate.

"Why? Why are you doing this?" she murmured wanting to understand their motivation.

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Keeping to the edge of the bridlepath and ready to veer into the woods if necessary, Peleus covered the two miles to the second cottage at a good steady pace. It was becoming a

hazardous ride. In the dark, the horse could misstep and we could tumble. That would be disastrous.

I caught a glimpse of the cottage ahead. We slowed down and approached cautiously.

There was no light or any activity. I assumed this cottage also to be deserted. But I had to make sure.

Once again, I dismounted and left the horse in the roadside scrub and quickly made my way to the back of the cottage.

No sign of life anywhere. She was not here, either.

Was I mistaken assuming she would be brought here? Could they have taken her somewhere else? Where?

Oh, God, please, no.

This was the first time in years that I had prayed. I was becoming desperate. I was beginning to panic.

One last chance. I prayed again, please God, keep her safe.

I didn't know that Stewart Graves was on his way to Abbotsford Hall to deliver the ransom note. He took the more direct road through the woods.

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It was nightfall when the pony and dogcart reached the Hall with Wills and Henry on board. Along the way, Henry excitedly explained to Major Williams all that he had told Miss Davies about Stewart Graves. He rattled off the information which came out confused and frantic but most of it Wills already knew through Rebecca's reports. Wills was impressed by the courage and responsibility this young fellow had shown toward the duchess and countess.

All the lights and torches of Abbotsford Hall were ablaze, illuminating the frenzied activity in the forecourt of the large manor house.

A number of excited saddled horses were being kept in check by armed stable hands and grooms standing near the duke. The duke, too, was readied for action and armed with a shotgun. Thomson and Pitman were close by their master and the three of them peered apprehensively into the depth of the night toward the entrance gates.

The countess' Rolls-Royce stood idling with its doors flung open ready to receive passengers. Lady Katherine's chauffeur, Jimmy, stood with George, checking and readying a rifle each. Jessica anxiously looked on hardly able to stand still.

Emma, Mrs Plummer and Florence hovered around the duchess who was fraught with worry, offering her their physical and moral support. And all the remaining servants were there, all waiting in frenzied anticipation for something.

Pitman was the first to spot the dogcart and called out, "Your Grace! There!" and ran to meet it. "Henry!" he called when he saw his son, "Thank the heavens you're safe!" then realised there was no champion thoroughbred, "Where the devil is Peleus?"

"It's all right, dad, Miss Davies has him."

The duke hurried to the dog cart, "Major Williams! Thank God! My niece has been taken!"

Wills tossed the reins to Pitman as he jumped from the cart. "So Henry said. What have you got here?" he asked looking over the ragtag assortment of armed and angry men gathered around.

"I'm waiting for the constable from the village. I telephoned to him to come immediately. I also telephoned to Akers-Douglas and Quinn to send help right away..." the duke was in a state of controlled frenzy and rage, and continued without a breath, "...we're going to look for her as soon as the constable arrives."

"They won't get here in time, Your Grace. Davies believes that Lady Katherine has been taken to one of the fishermen's cottages and then will be removed from there.

"Then we must go at once! We are ready!"

Wills looked over the collection of armed men and said, shaking his head, dismayed, "The men we are pursuing are dangerous and will stop at nothing if they are cornered. They've killed one of my officers and wounded another. I can't allow you to risk your lives—"

"She's my niece!"

The gathered crowd, loyal to the duke and his family, became turbulent in vocal support, brandishing their weapons.

Wills raised his arms, “Quiet! Listen! Listen to me!” he shouted over the clamour. They quietened down.

Wills addressed the duke, “Sir, with respect, and with thanks to you all but if we descend on them like this, they are very likely to kill Lady Katherine and make their escape. Please, leave it to me and Davies.”

The duke was inflamed but calmed down.

Wills continued, “The car is the fastest means of getting there. And it has lights. I need the driver, if he’s willing.”

“Aye!” called Jimmy ferociously, “I’m willing and I’m a bloody good shot!”

“Good. You know the way?”

“I know the way,” squeaked Henry who had pushed himself between Thomson and his father.

“No. You stay here,”

Pitman volunteered, “I know the way.”

“I’m coming with you, Major,” insisted the duke.

“Me, too,” called George and Jessica in unison.

“No,” Wills insisted, “no women and no children. Far too dangerous.”

Jessica protested but to no avail, Wills would not listen. Time was being frittered away haggling. Every second counted.

“No,” he said definitively. “All right, you men,” he continued, “follow my orders unreservedly and without question, understood?”

Everyone agreed and hurried to the car. George, the duke and Pitman clambered into the enclosed passenger cabin while Jimmy and Wills filled the two front seats.

Wills called out to Thomson, “Summon a doctor. Knowing these bastards, there will be bloodshed!”

“And Thomson,” the duke called out, “make sure the Duchess remains inside and, for God’s sake, keep her safe!”

Jimmy thrust the car into gear and quickly moved off. With no warning, Henry ran to the car and hurled himself into the front seat and across Wills’ lap. He scrambled off and snuggled himself between Wills and Jimmy.

“I’m coming, too!” he insisted, “I got to look after Peleus!”

Jimmy looked to Wills for instruction. Wills gave up, “Go! Just go!” The last thing he needed was to have a child underfoot but he’d sort that out when the time came.

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“Where the bloody hell is Dickie?” Croft said peering out the front window. “We could have had all this sorted by now.”

Hogan sat on a chair lecherously staring at the countess lying on the cot, curled up on her side. Her head throbbed and she was desperately afraid of what was to become of her. She knew the fate of their previous victims but was determined not to relinquish her life without a fight. And she resolved not to show fear or to beg.

Dickie’s delay upset Hogan inasmuch as it meant a delay in having his way with the Right Honourable Lady Muck lying there staring at him defiantly.

Hogan had draped himself over a chair facing her, his arms slung over the back of it and his legs wide apart. While Lady Katherine had had very little experience with men, she was quite aware of what caused the growing bulge in that horrid man’s trousers and what it would mean for her. The lewd sneer on the coarse face of this piece of vile humanity only served to confirm her eventual fate.

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The Rolls-Royce had quickly come to the junction in the road where one way led to the riverside and the other through the heavily wooded forest.

“Through there!” called Pitman from the seat inside the car closest to Jimmy, “Through the woods. It’s faster and you can turn back out to the first cottage.”

Jimmy veered as instructed, the bright headlights illuminating the way ahead. The motor car’s superb suspension handled the rocky, root-bound roadway with little discomfort to the anxious passengers.

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I was still some distance away but as I cautiously approached the last of the three fishermen’s cottages, I could just make out a faint light from the windows. My hopes were now raised. Lady Katherine was here. I prayed that she was still alive.

There would be at least two men with her and most likely three: Croft, Hogan and Graves. What I didn't know was if there would be any others there. I needed to reconnoitre with utmost care.

At the back of my mind, I was certain that Wills had managed to raise assistance and was on his way. But I couldn't wait. Time was as much my enemy as those who took Lady Katherine were.

I was on the edge of the bridlepath within fifty yards of the cottage and there was no movement outside. Dismounting, I led Peleus deep into the woods. He needed to be protected as he was our only means of rapid escape. I tethered his reins to a low-hanging branch then pulled the balaclava over my head. My white hair and pale skin would be like a beacon in the pitch-black night.

I headed toward the bridlepath and the cottage.

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Steward Graves was regretting everything he had done in his life up to this minute. He was sure he was heading toward his execution for his part in this heinous crime. He hadn't really wanted to hurt anyone. Why couldn't they all have treated him with respect? If they had, he wouldn't have taken this path.

It was with apprehension and foreboding that he unwillingly drove his wagon and borrowed horse back to the mansion with the letter of demand when he saw a pair of bright lanterns coming toward him at speed.

Desperately finding that there was no way off the road because of the encroachment of the trees, he pulled back on the hand brake and reined in the horse.

In the Rolls-Royce, Jimmy could just barely make out the horse and unlit wagon approaching from the opposite direction.

"Sir!" Jimmy called to Wills, "There!"

"Pull up, man!" he instructed Jimmy.

Jimmy managed to stop his vehicle within a foot of the horse which shied away in fear.

Graves didn't sit still. He knew the game was up, jumping off the driver's bench and scrambling toward the dense woodland.



Wills was at his heels immediately and grabbed Graves by the neck of his jacket and pulled him back onto the road and into the motor car's lights, throwing him onto the ground.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” demanded Wills.

The rest of the passengers in the motor car piled out and stood around Wills. Henry pushed his way through the legs and called out, “That’s him!”

Wills looked down at Henry as Pitman confirmed, “Aye, that’s Stewart Graves.”

Now was not the time for gentle persuasion. With a violence borne of concern for his comrade in arms and for the missing countess, Wills yanked up the terrified Graves and thrust him against the radiator of the motor car.

“Where is she!” he demanded.

“I don’t...I...” was all Graves could utter before Wills struck him hard on the side of his head.

“Where!”

Graves buckled, sorry and hurt. If he told them, he would be complicit; if he told them nothing, he would be beaten...and then he would tell them. He raised his arms in defeat. “Pike. The Pike Cottage.”

“That’s the last along the line,” Pittman confirmed.

Wills threw Graves to the ground and withdrew his manacle, throwing it to Jimmy. “Cuff him!”

Without warning, Jimmy and George descended on Graves, wrenching him up from the ground and bundling him off toward the nearest tree. Jimmy was the first to punch Graves in the stomach and the head.

“That’s for Lady Katherine, you piece of shit,” Jimmy yelled.

George pushed Jimmy aside and continued the pummelling until Graves slumped to the forest floor bleeding and groaning.

“If Lady Katherine is injured in any way, I will come back and I will kill you, you worthless bag of scum,” George added with unrestrained vehemence.

Jimmy looked down at him and kicked him once for good measure before handcuffing him.

“That’s enough!” Wills called.

But it was all over and done with in less than thirty seconds leaving Henry reeling from the violence meted out to this unarmed man, violence that he nonetheless deserved for his part in hurting a woman who was gentle and considerate of everyone regardless of class or creed.

“Pittman, unharness the horse, and you two,” Wills directed Jimmy and George, “help me push the wagon onto its side so we can pass. Quickly, now!”

Without being asked, the duke and even Henry, assisted and the wagon was easily tipped over leaving enough room on the road for the motor car to pass.

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In the dark, Croft wandered about the back of the cottage, shotgun resting on his shoulder, peering up and down the river with impatient anticipation. He checked the rowboat, making sure it was secure, then ambled back into the cottage through the open back door.

“He should have been here by now. Where the bloody hell is he?” he said to no one in particular as he walked to the window on the other side of the room.

Croft was concerned that the fellow who was supposed to be in charge was nowhere to be found. They could have been in the rowboat and well and truly gone by now. Waiting around made him nervous. With growing irritability, he peered out the front window for any sign of movement.

“Wait here,” he commanded Hogan, “I’m going to wait outside for the bastard, Dickie.”

“Right, Boss,” Hogan replied with a malicious smirk that caught Croft’s attention.

“And, Harry, don’t touch her.” Croft warned, “I don’t want none of your poxy cum on me. She’s mine first.”

“Right, Boss,” Hogan repeated but his intentions were clearly otherwise.

With a last warning look to his lifelong accomplice and a sideward glance to the damaged countess, Croft plodded through the front door and closed it behind him. Outside, he trudged up the short pathway to the bridlepath and scanned the track both ways. With a grunt of annoyance, he settled himself against the trunk of a tree to wait for his supposed commander-in-chief, cradling his gun like a babe in arms.

Lady Katherine gingerly sat up on the side of the cot. Her body was badly bruised and ached from being violently manhandled and thrust into the wagon. She was still faint and giddy and in pain from the blows to her head.

But her refined breeding was that she show no uncontrolled emotion: no raucous laughter, no plaintive wailing, no hysteria, no anger, rage or fear. Only calmness and reason were the accepted aristocratical traits.

With this attitude, Lady Katherine suppressed her fear and looked up at the despicable man in front of her. She addressed him with as much composure as she could gather, “Why are you doing this...Harry, is it?”

Calling him by his first name made him smile contemptuously, “‘Harry’ is it?” he mocked. “Doing what? Going to kill you? Or going to fuck you before I kill you?” Hogan was enjoying this.

Lady Katherine closed her eyes, controlling the dread of what was to come. Opening them, she replied, “Hurt me. Why do you want to hurt me?”

Hogan crowed a hateful laugh, “Because I can, m’ lady. Because I can.”

He stood up abruptly and grabbed Lady Katherine by the shoulders and pulled her off the cot to face him. The sudden jolt caused her to emit a stifled yelp. His grip on her arms was vicelike and she winced in pain. Her struggles were in vain. She could not free herself—he was far too strong.

Croft’s words of warning to Hogan were vanquished by the lust that overcame him. He pushed her against the wall and ground his groin into her. Lady Katherine whimpered and turned her head away from him and the stench of his breath.

“Feel that, m’ lady?” he sneered into Lady Katherine’s ear as he pounded his engorged phallus against her, “that’s for you.”

Hogan let go of Lady Katherine’s arms and instantly pinned her against the wall with his forearm under her chin.

Her arms now free, she flailed her fists against her attacker’s back and sides with no effect. His arm was choking her; she was finding it difficult to draw breath and losing her strength. Her energy was flagging. Her will to fight driven away.

He jeered at her futility. “Don’t give up just yet, m’ lady, the best is yet to come.”

With that, his free hand went to his trousers and unbuttoned his fly with manic frenzy, releasing his syphilitic phallus. Lady Katherine regained her resolve and desperately tried everything she could to push him off her, to kick him, to fight him, to free herself. It was useless; her skirts were an encumbrance and he was far too powerful.

She clenched her eyes shut and felt his hand pull up her skirts and fumble with her drawers. His feet pushed her legs apart. She was pinned to the wall unable to move. She could not bear to look at this loathsome animal and watch him take hateful pleasure in violating her.

To her utter disgust, she felt his hand fondle her pubis, then she felt his penis touch her skin. Repulsion and fear overwhelmed her, filled every part of her being.

Then everything stopped.

His arm fell away from her throat and she no longer felt the pressure of his body against hers. His licentious panting changed to a string of stifled gasps.

Terrified, Lady Katherine opened her eyes and took in the horrific sight of this obnoxious man gasping for air. His eyes bulged, his mouth agape and his head pulled backward by a wire tightly looped around his neck and cutting into his flesh. His arms were at once wildly flailing about and desperately grabbing at the wire. It was he who was now fiercely struggling to free himself. He twisted and turned his body frantically fighting his unseen assassin, desperate to free himself, desperate to keep on living, until his body finally gave in to unconsciousness. His fight and life now over, he slumped to the floor on his belly and into his own ejaculated semen.

I followed him down, my knee pushed hard into his back, relentlessly pulling back on the garrotte with all strength I could summon, my strength magnified by the rage that overwhelmed me for what this monster had done before and what he was about to do now.

Another twenty seconds.

I didn't have the luxury of time. The blood to his brain had stopped flowing and he had stopped breathing but it would take another minute to ensure he was dead. But this had to be enough. He was no longer a threat—to anyone, ever again.

It was only then that I looked up to Lady Katherine and saw the panic and terror she was going through as she slid slowly to the floor in utter fear and horror of what she had just experienced and witnessed.

I must have appeared to be a demon from the underworld, clad in black from head to toe. Dexterously unravelling the wire from around the bastard's neck, I stood and took a step toward Lady Katherine, extending a hand to help her up. She shrank away.

“Katherine,” I whispered, “we must leave. Now.”

“Rebecca...?” she hoarsely replied, looking into my eyes, bewildered. She recognised me, “I...” Tears filled her eyes, she was pale, bloodied and trembling with terror and shock. She was unable to move.

“Come,” I softly urged, helping her gently to her feet. “Come with me. You're safe,” I lied.

It broke my heart to see this beautiful, gentle creature so fearful, hurt and abused. What Croft and Hogan had done to Lady Katherine, and to those three innocent women before her, filled me with such fury that I wanted to empty the cylinder of my Webley into that murderous Norman Croft who stood outside waiting for ‘Dickie’.

But Lady Katherine was my first concern. There was no time to lose. Knowing the urgency to remove her to a safe place immediately was all I needed to control that rage.

“Come,” I urged; I would deal with Croft and ‘Dickie’—and Graves—later.

The clothing Lady Katherine wore was completely unsuitable for the task ahead but thankfully her dark green skirt would blend into the verdant forest. Her white blouse, however, even in its dirtied, bloodied and torn state would stand out in the night. I quickly removed my jacket and helped her with it on. She was unable to move, her gaze fixed on the lifeless Hogan. God knows what horror she was reliving...

“Katherine, we must go...”

We had to get back to Peleus who was on the other side of the bridlepath some hundred yards deep in the forest. Crossing the path would be fraught with danger. Croft was watching the path for ‘Dickie’ and his imminent arrival, or so I had overheard him say to Hogan.

I wrapped my arm around Lady Katherine's waist and drew her away from the corpse and out the back door through which I had come just minutes before. She was now more compliant and we quickly made our way to the thicket beside the cottage. I had already discounted using the rowboat as it would have left us open to being fired upon should Croft have been alerted to our escape and I didn't know if Lady Katherine was able to swim.

Leading the way as stealthily as possible through the trees and thick undergrowth, we made our way toward the bridlepath and readied to rush across it as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

"Shh!" I said pulling the countess down to a crouch. "Listen."

I could hear the approach of a motor. I was hoping it was Wills coming to our assistance. I looked at Lady Katherine, "Your motor car?"

She shook her head. She was right. This motor was not as refined or smooth as the Rolls-Royce. And it was approaching from the village end of the path rather than from the Hall.

"Stay here. Don't move." I insisted.

Her wide-eyed fear was tangible.

"I'll be right back," I assured her.

Hidden by the waist-high brackens, I crouched down and crept through them closer to the cottage, and saw a motorcycle and rider draw up to Croft who met him curtly, "About bloody time! What took you so long?"

"Flat tyre. These bloody country roads!" he said dismounting. "Never mind that. Has the note been delivered?"

This must have been 'Dickie'. He was about forty-five, lean, tall and straight; military bearing, I thought. His speech was not that of a vulgar common reprobate. This man had some education. Was this the 'Dickie' of whom both Hawthorne and Humphries had spoken? Were Hawthorne and Humphries complicit in these atrocities? Sir Giles Hawthorne was most certainly a fool and clearly inept but I never would have thought of him as a traitor or, worse, a murderer.

“Yeah,” replied Croft interrupting my thoughts, “that country bumpkin, Graves, took it. He should be on his way back by now.”

“You know what to do with him.”

Croft sniggered, “Yeah.”

“Is she alive?”

“Yeah, but we got a countess, not a duchess.”

“What?”

“The Duchess’ niece. As good as the Duchess, Boss. And half her age,” he added with a derisive snort and lewd smirk.

“I don’t care what you do with her once we’ve got the money,” Dickie said dismissively as he strode toward the cottage, followed by Croft, shouldering his shotgun.

I watched them until they reached the threshold, then hurried back to Lady Katherine.

“Quick,” I said urgently, “Dickie’s arrived and they’re going into the cottage.”

Lady Katherine’s breath quickened. I gave her a reassuring look and pulled her up. We crossed the bridlepath as fast as we could then disappeared into the thick, shaggy undergrowth that covered the forest floor, heading for Peleus.

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Dickie opened the cottage door to find the backdoor wide open and the room empty save for the inert carcass of Hogan sprawled on the floor.

“Where the fucking hell is she!?” Dickie screamed as he ran to the back door with Croft at his heels.

“She’s gone!” Croft announced stupidly.

Dickie came back inside, trying to work out what happened, “The boat’s still there.”

Croft crouched down beside his lifelong confederate, “She killed him! That bitch killed Harry. How the hell...?” He was rattled.

“Forget him! We’ve got to find her!”

“She can’t be long gone, Boss, I only left them alone for a few minutes,” Croft explained.

“Why did you leave them alone at all, you moron?”

Croft didn't like being called a moron, especially by someone who was no better than he was. He stood up to Dickie, "Don't call me a moron, you trumped up piece of shit."

Dickie backed down. This wasn't the time for infighting. He had his orders. "Get out and look for her! She can't have gone far! Bring her back. Alive!"

With a scornful, lethal glare, Croft turned and marched out through the front door, shotgun at the ready, leaving Dickie inside pondering the ramifications if the woman could not be recaptured.

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I led Lady Katherine the long way around, through the thinner scrub and grass rather than heading straight to where I had left Peleus. It was circuitous but her long skirts were impeding our progress making the most direct route through thick brush hard going. Thankfully, the moon was yet to rise; my friend, Darkness, enveloped and protected us and I knew the horse wasn't far off.

However, not knowing where Dickie and Croft were concerned me greatly. Most likely, they would be in pursuit of their escaped victim. My senses were on full alert to every sound.

"Where are we going?" Lady Katherine whispered as I led her by her hand through the undergrowth. "The Hall is in the other direction." There was some distress in her hushed tone.

"Peleus," I replied in a low voice, "we're close."

A thrashing of bushes in the distance caught our attention. We stopped dead in our tracks. I pulled the countess down to a crouch on the forest floor and signalled her to remain silent.

"Countess, oh, Countess, come out, come out wherever you are!" Croft's strident voice rang through the forest, baffled by the trees. Like a game beater, he was tormenting us trying to drive us out into the open by whipping the shrubbery.

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Croft assumed that the countess had escaped by her own device so was smug that he would find and recapture her without any trouble. She was only a woman and a coddled one at that. She was going to pay dearly for what she did to Harry. His obscene imaginings were



running riot through his mind as he trudged along the bridlepath, shotgun primed, hitting the bushes along the verge with a stick he had picked up. He chided himself for not bringing the lantern but, then again, his quarry didn't have one either.

Scouring both sides of the dense forest for any movement, he mockingly repeated, "Countess, I will find you. You cannot hide. Come out now and I will be nice to you!"

He hadn't seen us but, by the sound of his voice, he was not far off. There was no movement through the scrub so he still must have been on the path.

Plodding along that path, Croft noticed the sedge we had trampled when we pushed through into the undergrowth.

A feral grin exposed his yellowed teeth; Croft was on his quarry's trail. "Last chance, Countess!" he called as he took the deviation and followed our escape route.

"Stay here," I whispered, "keep down and don't move." I crouched as low to the forest floor as possible and moved away from her, at times crawling on my belly.

Croft was moving closer, his taunts louder, "Give up, Lady Muck, and I promise not to hurt you!" He followed that with an obscene laugh that promised the opposite. "I know you're in here, Countess," Croft jeered as he drew closer and closer.

Lady Katherine was trembling with fear but kept down and silent.

He was now only a few yards away from her but he still had not seen her. He took a step closer. "I forgive you for killing my mate, Harry. Come out, now!"

Croft was upon her. Lady Katherine looked up at him with horror and gasped with fear.

"There you are!" he roared in malicious triumph. He grabbed her by her arm and pulled her up.

In that instant, I was at his back. With one hand, I pulled his head back over my shoulder and with the other I drew my stiletto blade across his throat, slicing into it deeply. The unexpectedness caused him to drop his weapon and the only sound he emitted was a low gurgling from his severed windpipe. Blood spurted from his gashed arteries and his life pulsed out of him.

I threw his body to the ground and wiped my blade on his jacket. I felt no remorse, only hatred.

Lady Katherine looked on in utter horror and distress. It grieved me that my actions brought this anguish upon her. But we had no time to lose. There was one more out there to deal with. Knowing this Dickie had a connection with both Hawthorne and Humphries, it would be only a matter of time before Wills and I would capture him. Right now, Lady Katherine took precedence and her safety was paramount.

I took the countess' hand once more and led her toward the horse and our means of escape.

It only took us a few minutes to reach the place I had left the thoroughbred and was heartened to hear his whinny as we approached.

"Peleus," Lady Katherine cried softly, much relieved to see her favourite mount where I left him.

I sensed something was amiss.

She took a few steps toward her horse but stopped dead in her tracks when Dickie emerged from the shadows like a spectre. I was at her side immediately and moved her behind me. He was barely ten feet away from us.

He levelled a revolver at me and advised magnanimously, "I was tempted to put a bullet through his skull but he's such a beautiful animal. It would have been a shame. Probably worth a quid or two as well, eh?"

I watched this man intently. My gun was in its holster under my sweater. The safety was on. I may not have been able to retrieve it, flick the safety catch and get a shot off before he fired at me. I needed to be clear of the countess.

He continued with his mockery, "And you, in the skirt, you must be the countess. The niece. If my research is correct you must be the Countess of Chestermere. Am I correct?"

I carefully moved a step to the side away from the horse and the countess as he persisted with his derision, "Nasty bruise you have there, my lady. I do apologise for any heavy-handed enthusiasm. I take it Croft won't be joining us?"

I took another step to the side, his gun following me. "Take off the balaclava," he ordered.

I did as was told but kept the balaclava in my hand and close to my chest.

“Ah. I thought as much. A woman,” he said with a smirk, adding, “no, not just a woman but *the* woman.”

I moved another small step sideways. I was now a yard clear of the countess. At the same time, I slid my free hand under my sweater and slipped the safety on my gun, my movements obscured by the balaclava.

He continued, “It all makes sense now. You must be that ‘abomination’ I keep hearing so much about.”

I spoke in low deliberate tones, “Let Lady Katherine go and I won’t kill you.”

His laughter was loud and cheerless, “It seems to me you’ve misinterpreted the situation, my dear. I have the gun. I give the orders!”

“You’re just a puppet, Dickie. You follow orders.”

“Don’t call me Dickie,” his tone was threatening.

I persisted with my needling, “Just like those two dead bastards, Dickie, a puppet.”

Dickie became agitated, waving his gun menacingly at me.

I was relentless, “Who’s the puppeteer? Who’s pulling your strings? Dickie.”

“You’re a persistent slut, aren’t you, Davies?”

I was surprised he knew my name.

He regained his composure, “It’s of no consequence to you who I work for,” he scoffed, “you’ll be dead in the next minute.”

“If it’s of no consequence to me, then tell me.”

“He’s right. You are a conniving bitch.”

“Who’s right?” I pushed, “Sir Giles?”

He was becoming quite agitated and aggressive; I was getting to him, “Colonel Humphries?”

That was it!

Everything happened in a split second: Dickie fired. The bullet struck my left hip. Lady Katherine screamed, “No!” My knees buckled. I withdrew my Webley. He fired again. The bullet pierced my left arm. I fell backward. I fired blindly at him. He fell to the ground. Lady Katherine was at my side.

“Rebecca!” she cried, hunched beside me, not knowing what to do. I tried to get up. I couldn’t move. The pain was intense. It was all I could do not to scream.

“Dickie...” I gasped, grimacing in pain, “the gun...”

Lady Katherine understood what I meant and stumbled to the prone figure of our persecutor. She rushed back to me and fell to her knees beside me, “He’s dead.”

Relieved by the pronouncement, I expelled a long breath and allowed my body to succumb to the pain. I could feel the blood oozing from my wounds. The countess peeled back the lacerated clothing from my side and arm and was alarmed.

“Your arm! You’re haemorrhaging!”

I could just make out the pulsing flow of blood from the wound. “Tourniquet...my belt...” I was feeling faint and beginning the shiver. Shock was setting in. I had to stay conscious.

Lady Katherine, her hands covered in my blood, urgently removed my belt and strapped it on my upper arm.

“Tight...tighter...” I panted.

She pulled it as tight as she could. I could just barely make out her face; I was fading in and out of consciousness. Tears streamed down her face but she uttered not a word of fear or panic.

She pulled away my blood-soaked trousers and blouse from my hip and gasped at the gaping wound the bullet had made. Without a second thought, she removed her petticoat and tore it in two. One half she deftly folded into a pad and pressed it hard against my hip. I squirmed at the pressure and choked down a yelp.

“I’m sorry!” she pleaded. All I could do was touch her face with a trembling hand.

With the other piece of cloth, she wrapped it as firmly as she could around my arm to help stem the flow.

“Go...” I urged, “find Wills...” expelling the words between spasms of shivers.

“No. I won’t leave you,” she insisted as she removed the jacket I gave her and spread it over my chest. She cradled my head in her lap and looked down at me. I willed my eyes to stay open for as long as I could. If this was to be my end, then I wanted her beautiful countenance to be the last sight I beheld.

The night was still and darkness enveloped us. I could see nothing; I could hear nothing. I finally felt at peace.

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## CHAPTER 14

### The Aftermath

Rebecca Davies lay unconscious on the forest floor, her head lovingly cradled in Lady Katherine's lap as she knelt beside her comforting and protecting her. Both women were spattered with blood, their bodies bruised, their clothing torn and hair dishevelled. Only ten feet away lay the slumped dead body of an unknown male with a single gunshot wound to the head. Peleus, the champion thoroughbred had calmed down and stood only a short distance away from the corpse. He had been through much this day and was dead tired. His head drooped.

Tears fell from the countess' eyes as she looked down on her rescuer. She needed to get help but couldn't leave Rebecca.

"Don't die, my love, please don't die," she sobbed.

A distant sound caught her attention.

A motor car...was that a motor car approaching? Her Rolls-Royce motor car?

They were deep in the forest and the motor could easily drive past. She fumbled around in the trampled grass for Rebecca's dropped Webley and found it.

Lady Katherine prayed it was her car and not another of the abductors coming. She waited until the drone of the motor came closer then fired a shot into the air.

She listened.

The sound continued; the motor car was still moving. She fired again and listened again becoming more apprehensive that she had made the right decision.

The motor car seemed to have stopped.

She fired again and waited.

From the same direction, she could hear the thrashing of undergrowth, someone was approaching.

She fired once more.

She had only one cartridge left and was saving it should... she didn't want to consider shooting anyone but, if she had to, she would.

Her fearful anticipation made it seem a long wait as she trained her gun in the direction of the imminent incursion.

The elegantly clad figure of Major Williams breaking through the forest's vegetation, gun in hand, made Lady Katherine almost collapse with relief.

"Here!" Wills called over his shoulder and ran to Lady Katherine and Davies, holstering his gun.

"My God!" he uttered, "Rebecca!" He fell to his knees to see if she was still breathing, checking the pulse in her neck and opening her eyelids.

"She's alive," Lady Katherine whispered, "please help," she begged.

Wills looked about apprehensively and saw the body of a man nearby and asked urgently, "Where are the others? He wasn't working alone."

Lady Katherine replied quietly, "Two more... and Mr Graves."

"We have Graves..." he looked at her questioningly and was appalled. "Oh, Lady Katherine, you're hurt," he apologised sympathetically as he took in her torn and blood-imbued shirtwaist, her bruised, bloodied face and her swollen, blackened eye.

"They're dead. Rebecca's shot...She's lost a lot of blood...Her arm..." Lady Katherine's words were frantic and urgent.

Major Williams immediately inspected the wounds and was aghast when he saw the amount of blood soaking the ground. He inspected the bandaging and looked at Lady Katherine giving her an approving and appreciative nod.

Jimmy and George burst onto the scene from one direction and the duke and Pitman from another with young Henry following close behind his father even though he was told to stay in the car.

They each stopped and took in the awful scene that confronted them. Quickly realising the unknown man was of no threat, they lowered their weapons and turned their attention to the countess.

“Katherine!” the duke called and ran to his niece, “Thank God you’re safe!” He helped her to her feet and gathered her into his arms, “Thank God...thank God...” he repeated trying to ameliorate his guilt. Jimmy and George wanted to comfort their mistress but they knew their place so stood back and watched on compassionately.

“You’re shivering...” the duke observed and immediately removed his jacket and draped it over his niece then enveloped her in his embrace once again.

Young Henry stopped in his tracks when he saw Miss Davies lying on the ground, covered in blood. He took a few steps toward her whispering in disbelief, “Miss Davies...? Miss Davies...?”

Pitman ran to the fallen Dickie and confirmed he was, indeed, dead. The elder Pitman picked up Dickie’s weapon then noticed his son gawping at the injured woman.

“Henry!” he called, wanting to distract him from the awful carnage, “Peleus! Take charge, boy!”

Unable to take his eyes off Miss Davies, Henry stumbled toward the horse. “Is she dead, Pa? Is she?”

Pitman replied enigmatically, “God listens to all them that pray in earnest, Henry.”

Henry reluctantly attended Peleus and comforted him with gentle words, pats and petting, all the time glancing toward Miss Davies.

Wills’ experience in the field meant he was quickly able to interpret the extent of Davies’ wounds. It was evident that his comrade has lost a tremendous amount of blood and needed urgent medical attention. She had to be kept warm and conscious lest shock set in. He took off his coat and draped it over her own. This selfless action was copied by both George and Jimmy.

“Rebecca!” Wills urged, patting her cheeks, “Rebecca, wake up! Wake up! Sleeping on the job again! Wake up!” His gentle slaps and urgings roused Davies who uttered almost indiscernibly, “Katherine...”



“Stay awake, Davies. No excuses, stay awake!” Wills ordered. He turned to the duke, “Sir, we must get her to a doctor immediately. The motor car?” he implored desperately.

“Of course, Major, of course.”

“You there,” Wills commanded Pitman, Jimmy and George, “Help me.”

Wills lifted Davies’ shoulders off the ground and slid his arm beneath them, instructing Pitman, “The other side. Cradle her shoulders. You two, her legs. Under her buttocks. Lift.”

A long, low groan escaped the semiconscious woman when they lifted her waist-high.

Pitman called back to his son, “Henry, follow close with the horse,” and they began their trek back to the waiting motor car.

The duke and his niece followed closely behind. The duke kept his arm tight around the countess’ waist as though he was afraid someone else would try to steal her. Lady Katherine was grateful for her uncle’s physical support. She felt faint and weary. The worst of her ordeal now over, the abuse she suffered to her head, arms and body was manifesting itself with a painful vengeance. But her concern for Rebecca pushed her own afflictions aside and she prayed silently to God to deliver this brave woman to safety.

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It didn’t take long for the Rolls-Royce and its damaged cargo to reach the Hall, racing along at top speed, its acetylene lamps clearly lighting the way back through the forest, passing the upturned wagon, its horse and its beaten and subdued driver.

Rebecca Davies, fading in and out of consciousness, lay across the back seat with both Wills and Lady Katherine attending her with wordless anxiety. The duke sat introspectively contemplating the numerous ‘what-ifs’ and silently thanked God once more for His hand in this. He was distressed to think of the consequences if Henry had not found that shred...if he had not summoned help...if the train had not been delayed...if Davies had not overheard...if the ‘poachers’ had not been discovered...if Peleus... It was too much for him and tears filled his eyes and his heart swelled with compassion as he watched his niece and her tenderness toward the injured woman.

Major Williams, previously strong and resolute, was now worried and despairing that this woman may succumb to her injuries. The duke felt all the emotions his niece and the major were feeling as he once again thanked God.

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Pitman and his son rode Peleus back slowly, stopping at the upturned wagon and securing the still-groggy Stewart Graves onto his borrowed horse and leading them both back to the Hall. Pitman warned Graves that he should not try to escape; the gun was loaded and he, Pitman, was only too eager to pay him back for the whipping he'd received.

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The instant the Rolls-Royce came into view on the long drive to the Hall, the call went up and, once again, the forecourt was abuzz with all the estate's servants fronted by the duchess. Thomson and Jessica, Emma and Mrs Plummer, all stood behind her and all apprehensively awaiting its arrival. The village doctor, a young, theoretically able man, but otherwise inexperienced, hovered close with his medical bag in hand. Beside him stood the constable, a mature man familiar with each and every inhabitant of the village and estate. With his rifle slung over his shoulder and holding onto a truncheon, he was clearly not a man open to manipulation or corruption.

The motor car skidded to a stop close to the stone staircase leading to the front door and immediately the throng of servants surrounded it, agitating to know if their master's niece was safe.

Wills and the duke pushed their way out of the back while Jimmy and George jumped from the front seat.

“Stand back! Stand back!” Jimmy called, “Fetch the doctor!”

“Here!” called the young man, pushing his way to the car and ushered into it by Wills.

Mary, the duchess, worried sick that it was her niece who needed urgent medical attention, pushed through the throng, the way being prised open by Thomson and Mrs Plummer with Emma and Jessica in close pursuit.

“Katherine!” the duchess called.

The duke was instantly at his wife's side and pulled her away, comforting her, "She's all right, Mary, she'll be fine—"

"She's hurt?"

"She'll be fine," he reiterated.

Jimmy found Thomson in the commotion and implored, "Mr Thomson, please clear everyone away from the motor car."

"What has happened? Is Lady Katherine safe?" Thomson was just as worried as the rest.

"Yes, yes. We need room—"

George took the initiative and mounted several steps of the staircase so he could be seen and heard over the clamour.

"Everyone!" he shouted, "Everyone listen! Lady Katherine is safe—" a cheer went up; he continued, "The perpetrators of this heinous crime have been brought to account." Another cheer but this time filled with angry words and oaths. "Please! Please...please disperse so the doctor can attend to Miss Davies. Constable, if you would..."

The village constable immediately ushered all the household servants, gardeners and stable hands clear of the vehicle, but they all stayed on at a distance holding their torches and lanterns aloft.

Thomson and Mrs Plummer, taken aside and instructed quietly by the duke, hurried back into the Hall.

Satisfied that all would be readied expeditiously by his senior staff, the duke led the duchess toward the enclosed compartment of the motor car. Emma and Jessica followed closely behind, eager to assist but fearful of what they would find there. George and Jimmy joined them, murmuring comforting words to both Jessica and Emma, knowing what they were about to see.

Inside, the doctor had hastily introduced himself as Dr Benjamin Werner and was taken aback by the state of the insensible woman and the injuries to the other woman attending her. He had seen some fairly horrific injuries in his brief medical career but none as bad as this.

Wills and Lady Katherine quickly appraised the young doctor of the extent of Davies' wounds and a quick assessment of the unconscious woman gave Dr Werner deep cause for concern.

“Her pulse is very weak. She's very cold and she's lost a tremendous amount of blood—”

“She needs a transfusion, Doctor,” Wills interjected impatiently.

Dr Werner stared at Wills bewildered. “Uh...” was all he could return as his mind flipped through his medical training. Then, noticing Lady Katherine, “Madam, you're injured...” he stated, trying to avoid the harder task in front of him.

Lady Katherine's concern was edging into desperation, “Doctor...please...Miss Davies—”

“Do you have the equipment?” Wills demanded irascibly.

“Yes... in my dog cart...I always carry...but it's hazardous...it's disfavoured—”

“You've not performed one before?” Wills was irritated and exasperated.

“In theory...but perhaps a rectal saline solution—”

“Goddammit man! Get your equipment! Quickly!” The doctor scrambled out of the motor car and did as ordered almost colliding with Thompson who had returned posthaste with two footmen and a stretcher. Wills immediately recognised the stretcher as one from the Boer conflict in South Africa. The irony did not escape him. This time their roles would be reversed and this would be a debt he'd willingly repay.

With utmost care, Davies was transferred onto the stretcher by Wills, Jimmy and George and carried into the Hall by the two footmen, accompanied solemnly by Wills and Thomson.

Jessica and Emma, rendered speechless watching the litter as it passed them, stood back with George and Jimmy. Even in the dim light cast by their numerous lamps and torches, the bystanders could see the glossy sheen of blood that soaked Davies' black clothing. They gasped and whispered to each other.

The duke reached into the car offering his hand to its remaining occupant. Lady Katherine hesitantly emerged from it, not wanting to cause concern and, absurdly, shameful of her appearance. She pulled the duke's jacket tight around her to cover her torn and soiled

shirtwaist. Her hair was loose and tangled and knitted with forest detritus, and her face... She raised a hand to it to hide of it what she could but that didn't prevent her aunt's reaction.

"Oh, my dear God!" the duchess cried, tears welling in her eyes, appalled by the extent of the brutality meted out to this gentle lady. "Sweetling!" she lamented, shaken and alarmed, cradling her niece lovingly in her arms, "My darling Katherine...dear God." It didn't escape her that her niece had suffered what was intended to be her own fate. For this, and for her flippancy, she was truly sorry.

"I'm all right, Aunt, I'm all right," Lady Katherine whispered, trying to play down her injuries. The warmth and tenderness of her aunt's embrace, and the comfort she felt there, was a welcomed salve to her mental wounds and she melted into it.

Jessica couldn't hold back her anger and outrage any longer, "Those *sleekit bastards!* I'll kill—"

"Jessica, please," Lady Katherine said softly, putting a quieting hand on her maid's shoulder, "*dinnae fash* so. It's over now."

"Come, Sweetling," the duchess said holding onto her niece and turning toward the stairs, "the doctor must attend you immediately."

"Please, Aunt, take me to Rebecca." Lady Katherine's only desire was to be with Rebecca Davies. If there was anything she could do to save this woman's life, she was willing and ready to do it unreservedly.

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Davies was carried through the grand entrance foyer through the green baize door and into the servants' hall. This was the only room available on the ground floor that was large enough, and private enough, to accommodate so many people at once and it was close to all anticipated amenities. The dining table had been cleared and chairs pushed aside to make room for the injured woman and doctor.

The footmen carefully placed the stretcher on the table and gawped at Davies.

Mrs Plummer quickly ushered the footmen out and drew the blinds for privacy. From the kitchen, several maids brought in large empty bowls and receptacles, and kettles of boiling water. The laundry maid carried in a stack of clean, folded linen. Mrs Plummer,

with the authority of a general preparing the troops for battle, directed each of the maids deftly and expertly. Their tasks complete, the curious kitchen maids were shown back to the kitchens by ‘General’ Plummer who remained behind to assist.

Wills and Thomson arranged the stretcher and its patient and prepared a chair nearby, readying the room for the doctor.

“Raise that end,” Wills ordered Thomson who immediately chocked up the foot end of the stretcher with some biscuit tins.

A low groan escaped Davies as she drifted back into consciousness. “Katherine...” she whispered, “she’s hurt...”

Wills replied softly, “Lady Katherine’s being looked after. You just stay with me, Davies, you hear me?”

“Shooting star...?” said fluttering her eyes open toward the ceiling.

“No shooting star, Davies,” Wills reassured her then added feigning disappointment, “I’m not so lucky.”

Davies smiled and let out a long, exhausted sigh and closed her eyes.

Wills could barely contain his grief. Choking back a sob, he whispered, “Don’t you die on me, woman, I need you...”

The meaning of this exchange escaped the butler and housekeeper. They didn’t know Davies’ history or her earnest belief that her life’s thread would be cut by the whim of a passing meteor.

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Outside in the forecourt, the duke had taken the constable aside and appraised him of the circumstances that had befallen his niece and where to find the miscreants who carried out this despicable act. The constable called for volunteers to find and recover the bodies of the abductors and, to a man, each servant, gardener and stable hand stepped forward.

Out in the mews and with the aid of a footman, the doctor hurriedly retrieved all the bags and boxes of equipment he needed from his dogcart. He was extremely concerned that he would not be able to save the injured woman. Her wounds were severe and she was clearly in shock: pale, shivering and perspiring. And he had never actually performed the new procedure for transfusing blood from one person to another as prescribed by Alexis

Carrel. So many things could go wrong with a procedure which had now become frowned upon.

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Rebecca Davies, at times semiconscious and moaning in pain; at other times, quiet and still, was the focus of all the activity in the servants' hall. The jackets that covered her chest were discarded and her blood-soaked sweater had been cut away from her body. Wills removed the empty Webley holster from her chest and, with Mrs Plummer's assistance, carefully cut away the blouse, exposing her bloodied flannel undershirt.

"Cut the sleeve off at the armhole," Wills instructed the housekeeper as he concentrated on doing the same to the left sleeve just below the tourniquet. He cautiously peeled away the blood-drenched bandage that the countess had tightly wrapped around the wound. He was impressed by the countess' presence of mind in tending his friend.

With the wrap discarded, Wills pulled away the bloodied undershirt sleeve to reveal the gaping channel the bullet left when it tore through the flesh and nicked the artery on Davies' upper arm. An ugly bruise had formed around the injury.

The tourniquet and bandage had stemmed the flow of blood but the tourniquet could not stay in place much longer lest gangrene set in. Wills prayed the doctor, young as he was, had the ability and wherewithal to be able to suture the vessel closed. Tiny as the hole was, it had to be closed. If not, a transfusion was useless and his cherished Rebecca would not survive.

While Wills and Mrs Plummer worked on Davies' upper body, Thomson's task was to remove the clothing from Davies' hip which he did efficiently and expeditiously. Thomson was no stranger to gunshot wounds having served with the duke in the second Afghan War. This wound was serious; the bullet appeared to have glanced off the hip bone but, if still there, needed to be removed lest infection set in. He had seen more good men die of infection than from the bullets themselves.

This was the scene that greeted Dr Werner when he swept into the servants' hall followed by the footman, both laden with medical apparatus. The young doctor took a deep breath and fortified his resolve to do the best he could. He instructed the footman to set his equipment down and began opening each in readiness.

The footman lingered, mouth agape, transfixed by the sight of the immobilised woman until Thomson cleared his throat and indicated the door. With an apologetic nod to the butler, the footman hurriedly retreated.

Dr Werner removed his coat, rolled up his sleeves and donned his apron—the task ahead would be bloody. From his medical bag he removed a bag and used the contents to scrub his hands scrupulously clean in a bowl of boiling water.

“Mrs Plummer,” he said drying his hands and indicating a roll of instruments, “In boiling water if you would.”

“Wills...” Davies whispered, awake again and agitated by her urgency to report her discovery, “Dickie...He’s...working...” but the pain was excruciating and she was unable to express the words.

“I’ll need to put her under,” Dr Werner announced. “Mr Thomson, that box, if you please.”

With unexpected ease, the young doctor unpacked the new Braun ether inhaler his father had provided, filled the jar with the appropriate mixture of ether and chloroform and instructed Thomson on how to keep the mask applied over the patient’s nose and mouth.

“Keep the mask firm until I tell you to remove it.” He adjusted the taps on the top of the jar to allow the correct amount of vapour to be inhaled via the India rubber tube.

Within a matter of moments, Davies had settled and her body relaxed. The doctor proceeded to carefully assess the extent of the injuries suffered by Davies.

“The brachial artery has been damaged,” he announced, vocalising his assessment to no one in particular, “A small tear but that will need to be sutured before we can release the ligature. The second bullet has glanced off the top of the hip girdle and there appears to be some fragments of bone. There is an exit wound but we need to make sure that shards of lead have not remained. We will take what we can see now and get her to hospital for an X-ray for anything we’ve missed.”

Without further consultation, he unplugged a large bottle of pure carbolic acid and generously sponged over both wounds then washed off the excess with absolute alcohol.

“Mr Thomson, the mask.” With these few words, Thomson removed the mask and stood by at the ready.



Liberally dousing his own hands with carbolic acid, he set to work stitching up the damaged blood vessel in Davies' arm with minute, delicate sutures.

Wills' apprehension that Dr Werner was not up to the task was slowly evaporating; he seemed to know what he was doing...so far. He was impressed by the proficiency and expertise with which the doctor was carrying out this delicate task.

A gentle rap on the door took Thomson's attention and he opened it to the duchess and Lady Katherine. There was no hesitation in allowing the mistress of the house and her niece to enter but he did frown when both Jessica and Emma followed closely behind.

Lady Katherine stifled a cry of despair when she saw the pale and bloodied prostrate form of her rescuer.

"She's being well looked after, my lady" Wills reassured the countess.

Dr Werner looked up from his task at hand. "Your Grace, my lady," he apologised, "Please...Mrs Plummer, you'll find some antiseptic swabs and bandages in the bag. Take the carbolic. Please be seated, my lady. I'll be with you very shortly—"

"No, doctor," Lady Katherine demurred anguished, "Rebecca. She must not die."

Mrs Plummer took charge and showed Lady Katherine and her aunt to a chair. "Let me help you, my lady." With the same authority she previously assumed, she addressed the maids, "Emma, Jessica, draw a bath and prepare clean clothing for Lady Katherine. And a restorative pot of tea. What are you waiting for? Go," and sent them on their mission. With careful administration, Mrs Plummer set about cleaning and disinfecting the damage caused by the brutes that mistreated the countess.

The suturing complete, the doctor carefully loosened the tourniquet and was relieved that the stitches were holding—not that there was an abundance of blood to flow past them.

"The hip wound can wait. The pressure pad has stemmed the blood flow. I'll work on that while we get some blood into her. Are you ready Major Williams?"

Wills sat in the chair beside Davies and offered his bare arm.

"Do you know your blood group?" Dr Werner asked as he unboxed his new and unused blood transfusion kit and prepared to make the appropriate incisions.

"It's compatible," he replied tersely through worry, not anger. "Paraffin," he added.

The doctor looked at him puzzled.

“Use paraffin on the cannulas. It prevents the blood from coagulating.”

“Where did you—”

“In South Africa. It’s a long story. Just do it.”

While Dr Werner had admitted to never having performed this procedure before, he was well-read on the latest in direct blood transfusions and carried out the task with precision and swiftness. He swabbed Wills’ wrist with disinfectant then administered a local anaesthetic there. He then deftly applied a ligature to Wills’ upper arm above the elbow, and incised Wills’ artery at the wrist inserting the cannula attached to the India rubber tube. He deftly sutured the artery closed around the cannula and then proceeded to Davies. He inserted the cannula at the other end of the tubing into the vein in Davies’ right arm at the elbow finishing it off as he did with Wills. Slowly releasing the ligature on Wills’ arm, he was relieved to see the tube gently pulsate. He had no way of knowing how much blood was being transferred but, as long as the tube throbbed, he knew the blood was not congealing.

With extreme apprehension, Dr Werner watched the sutured artery on Davies’ left arm and was both pleased and relieved that the stitches were holding. Fingers on Davies’ wrist confirmed a pulse—a weak one—but nonetheless a pulse.

While keeping an eye on Wills and the tube, he attended the wound to Davies’ hip, firstly dousing it liberally with most of the remaining disinfectant. He watched for any reaction from his patient that would indicate she needed more chloroform but there was none so he carefully probed the bruised flesh. He removed several tiny shards of bone and once again flushed the wound with what was left of the carbolic acid. Satisfied that all was clear, he closed the tear with neat stitches and applied a sterile iodoform gauze and plaster to it.

Mrs Plummer and the duchess Mary attended to Lady Katherine, cleaning away the filth and dried blood from all her exposed skin. They tried not to show the alarm they felt when the extent of Lady Katherine’s injuries became evident: a gash to her forehead that needed stitching, bruising to her arms, face and neck; a swollen eye that was closing; scratches to her legs that her torn stockings and skirts failed to protect.

Lady Katherine sat stoically submitting to the loving ministrations of her aunt and housekeeper, her gaze fixed on Rebecca Davies, her only thoughts a fervent entreaty to God that He give Dr Werner the knowledge and capability to save her beloved liberator.

Slowly, colour returned to Davies' lips and skin.

Wills, on the other hand, was becoming faint and pale.

“That's enough, I believe,” Dr Werner said decisively, and retightened the ligature on Wills' arm. He watched as the pulsations through the tube ceased. “Mr Thomson, a bowl, please,” the doctor ordered.

Placing the bowl under Davies' right arm he instructed Thomson, “Press here,” indicating a point on Davies' arm just above the incision. He deftly removed the cannula allowing the remaining blood in the tube to flow into the bowl while he stitched the wound shut. With a rapidity that impressed Wills, Dr Werner applied a tight bandage to the incision then reverted to Wills.

“Press here,” he repeated to Wills, and just as quickly and expertly removed the cannula from Wills' wrist, sutured and bandaged it as he had done with Davies.

Exhausted but pleased with the outcome, Dr Werner checked Davies' pulse once more then took in Wills' wan complexion, “A cup of tea and something to eat for the major, I think,” he instructed Thomson.

“Perhaps a cup of tea all round, Sir,” Thomson suggested leaving to arrange the curative.

“Will she—” Lady Katherine voiced what everyone was thinking.

Dr Werner's sigh was almost disheartening, “I've done what I can, my lady. It's in God's hands now. Let me see to you,” he offered and attended to the countess' injuries. “Mrs Plummer,” he asked, “perhaps some blankets?” indicating the major and Davies.

Without hesitation, the housekeeper carefully spread several blankets over Davies and bundled Major Williams up like one of those Indian papooses she had seen in Florence's American magazines.

The door to the servants' hall flew open. Much to everyone's surprise the diminutive form of the irrepressible Henry raced to the unconscious Davies.

“Miss Davies! Miss Davies!” he cried, looking at her inanimate body; he was most distressed at seeing her like this. “Is she dead?” he gasped, tears welling in his eyes.

Mrs Plummer took up the query, quietly assuring him, “No, Henry, she’s resting.”

“Will she die?”

“Not if you pray for her.”

“She won’t die, then,” Henry assured everyone in the room, his usually smooth forehead nonetheless managing a few worried creases.

Wills rallied himself and asked, “And what of Mr Graves? Do you have him?”

Henry’s demeanour changed instantly. He laughed that uncontrollable laugh of his as he wiped an errant tear from his face and managed, “The doc will have to see to him, too. He fell off his horse three times coming here.”

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## CHAPTER 15

### Recovery

“...Thomson and Mrs Plummer have reallocated all the sleeping arrangements for our weekend guests. Unfortunately, it was too late to cancel the party but I assure you, my sweetling, that you will not be disturbed. They won't even know you are here. Nor you, they. Miss Davies will be brought up to the suite next to yours and Major Williams will have his own room back. Doctor Werner will be kept on until Miss Davies is out of danger and you have fully recovered. Uncle Charlie has let Mr Quinn know of your rescue and he expects both him and Sir Giles Hawthorne to arrive tomorrow in the forenoon, or rather, today, along with some of his constabulary. I'm sure they will want to speak to you but I will keep them away until you are ready...”

The endless flow of words from the duchess washed over the countess as they climbed the long staircase arm in arm. Her aunt was using her irrepressible proclivity for small talk to do the best she could to distract her treasured niece but Lady Katherine's ears had barricaded themselves against the intrusion.

It had been a dreadful day for everyone in the household, from the duke to the stableboy, the thoughts of each tumbling through a jagged chasm of emotions, exhausted by the experience and thankful it was over.

Hers were the worst of all but, like the aristocrat she was, she carried them all sealed within her, impassively pushing through fear, pain, anger and grief that continued to riot deep beneath the hatch that imprisoned them.

All that could be done for Rebecca Davies had been done and it was now up to her body—and God’s will—to recover from those near-fatal wounds. She had requested of her aunt that Rebecca be brought to the rooms next to her own. Lady Katherine was determined to keep vigil over the woman who almost surrendered her own life for her, and to whom she owed her very being.

Major Williams, too, would be returned to his former room to recover. She had seen firsthand the love he had for Rebecca and thanked God again and again for bringing them together and to her.

It was well after midnight when they entered her suite of rooms followed attentively by Mrs Plummer who was on hand to make sure every requirement would be carried out expeditiously.

As instructed, Jessica had drawn a hot bath—several times over—since she and Emma had been dismissed from the servants’ hall. Each bath had gone cold waiting for her mistress and Emma had left hours ago.

“...You are to rest, my dear, and think no more of it. All is well. Turner, come.”

Jessica emerged from the bathroom and approached. “My lady!” the gentleness of Jessica’s softly spoken cry of horror at seeing the pale and drawn countenance of her beloved mistress brought the countess back to reality. Jessica couldn’t repress the pity in her voice, “Oh, my lady!” she cried as she took in the angry bruising to her mistress’s face, neck and arms, which had now grown much more livid.

“What did they do to you?” The maid was much appalled and distressed by what she could see.

Lady Katherine’s step faltered. The hatch was besieged.

“Come, your bath is ready,” Mary urged gently, “you’ll feel much better once you’ve immersed yourself in the hot, soothing water.”

Lady Katherine stopped; her body stiffened; her eyes unseeing. “*What did they do?*” her inner voice questioned. She looked at her hands; they had been washed but dried blood was still evident in the folds and creases. She looked down at her skirt; dark, stiffened patches soiled much of it. Her shirtwaist, too, was bloodied and torn. Blood. Her blood. Rebecca’s blood. Rebecca’s blood was everywhere, soaking her to her skin.

“*What did they do?*” repeated itself like an endless echo through her mind. Her head throbbed; her body ached. The hatch was giving way.

Visions and memories came flooding back in waves of horror. The brutal violent deaths of three men, the violation of her body...what they threatened to do to her...she would be dead now if...

The breach was made. Fear, violence, pain, anger, grief all surged in, crashing against the walls of her inner sanctum. Her knees gave way.

“Katherine!” Mary cried.

Lady Katherine’s suppressed emotions had won and taken control of her mind and she lay curled up on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably and shaking fitfully.

Immediately, Jessica was by her side; Mary cradled her niece; Mrs Plummer ran from the room, her words trailing behind her, “I’ll fetch the doctor!”

“There, there, my darling Kateling,” Mary consoled, “You’re safe now—”

“Nanny Fee...” were the only words Lady Katherine was able to utter between her gasping sobs, “Please...”

Jessica immediately knew what the countess wanted. She looked to the duchess for approval and permission.

“Yes,” the duchess agreed compassionately, “Telephone her now. Send the motor.”

Jessica scrambled to her feet and ran.

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Poor Jimmy Isham had barely lain his head on his pillow when Mr Thomson roused him.

“Wake up, lad, you’re needed!”

The motor car was the fastest way of getting to Lilyfield Manor and Jimmy was the only one there with a driver’s licence; indeed, he was the only one there who knew how to drive a motor car.

“Mr McPherson will accompany you. To keep you awake.”

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At a quarter of one in the morning, a strident bell rang incessantly throughout Lilyfield Manor on the three telephones installed there. The nearest to them was in the butler’s

pantry when both the butler and the housekeeper arrived there from different directions, pulling on their dressing gowns.

“Who on earth could that be?” mumbled the housekeeper as the butler lifted the earpiece from the wall-mounted apparatus and spoke testily into the mouthpiece, “Chestermere. Do you have any idea what time it is?”

His tone changed to one of surprise, “Jessica... Yes, she’s right here.”

He handed the earpiece to the woman beside him announcing with a large degree of inquisitiveness, “Jessie?”

Stretching her small frame up to the mouthpiece, she queried, “Jessica, is that you? What is the matter, lassie?”

The rapid exchange of information saw her manner change from curiosity to one of stupefaction. “Yes, I’ll ready myself,” she said numbly as she replaced the earpiece into its cradle.

Looking up to the butler with unseeing eyes, she hesitated, “Lady Katherine... She’s not well... She’s asked for me... Jimmy’s coming to fetch me...”

So many questions raced through her mind: “*What could be so urgent that her ladyship needs me at this time of night? Why send Jimmy? Why didn’t she call me herself?*”

The butler broke the silence and brought the housekeeper back to him, vocalising what she was thinking, “Fiona, her ladyship was due to arrive today. What could be so urgent? Why telephone at this time of night?”

“I don’t know, Peter, I dinnae ken.” She looked at the butler, fear overtaking her senses, “I must get ready.”

Fiona Cameron was twelve years of age when she went into service as a tweeny in the household of Donald Stuart of Glenross, in the plain of Forth and Clyde. Before long, with hard work and diligence, she had risen through the service ranks to chamber maid, parlour maid and, with the impending marriage of her laird’s eldest son, Ailbeart, she was to be the intended bride’s nursery maid when the time came.

Ailbeart was a handsome young man who set young Fiona’s heart aflutter whenever she was in his presence but she could see that his passion was for the beautiful Lady Agnes, elder of the two daughters of the Earl of Chestermere.



Lady Agnes was only a year older than Fiona and they had immediately formed a bond the first time they were introduced.

It was just after Lady Agnes's twentieth birthday anniversary that her only child was born. Fiona doted on little Lady Kateling, the pet name she gave baby Katherine, and the infant grew to know two mothers: the beautiful Lady Agnes who taught her the ways of the aristocracy, and Nanny Fee who took care of her education and her every other need and whim.

As Lady Katherine grew beyond infancy, Nanny Fee became her governess and, when Lady Katherine entered college, it was Nanny Fee who accompanied her to London as her devoted lady's maid.

Before then, when Lady Katherine was nine years of age, Fiona married Ian McPherson and had a bonny son, George. All the while, other than during her confinement, she remained Lady Katherine's nanny and governess—something most unusual but such was the bond between the three women that it was never a question to let the maid go.

Now, Nanny Fee was Mrs McPherson, the housekeeper of Lady Katherine's country house, Lilyfield Manor, and Delaney House, the London townhouse in Mayfair. And she was the only person to whom Lady Katherine turned when her needs were the greatest, as now.

These were the worrying thoughts that occupied Mrs McPherson as she quickly packed her valise, "What needs would be so great as to summon me at this time of the night?"

Peter and Mrs McPherson sat in silent contemplation in the servants' hall each nursing a cup of tea Peter had thoughtfully prepared, awaiting Jimmy's arrival. Thankfully, the season had finished and the household was at the country estate, not London, and much closer to Abbotsford Hall. The wait would not be as long as it could have been.

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The Louis XVI Directoire mantle clock in her bedroom chimed the quarter hour after four and the draught of laudanum Dr Werner administered to the countess had the desired effect initially but was now wearing off.

Lady Katherine tossed in her bed, restless. Images were manifesting themselves again and her much-needed sleep was fitful. The harrowing events of the past day revisited her, playing over and over. She could not escape the pain and brutality visited upon her no matter how much she willed herself to. Horrible images tumbled one upon the other; horrible sounds of obscene threats and lewd laughter; horrible smells of stale clothes and filthy bodies. No matter how she tried, how she tossed and turned, she could not escape. Perspiration formed and soaked her bed clothes; her muted calls for help could not stave off the inevitable—she was being humiliated, degraded, raped and killed!

An anguished cry escaped her and she awoke with a start, pushing herself upright in her bed, her eyes open in shocked disbelief. She took in her surroundings, bewildered and confused, gasping for breath, her head throbbing.

It took her a few moments to realise it was a nightmare she was living and she was safe. Slumping back down into her bed, she pushed those images as far out of her mind as she could. They were dead. They were all dead, those who wished her harm.

Relieved and calmed, her thoughts turned to her own heroine—her Rebecca. It was very early but she had a need to see her.

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The room next to the countess' was a little smaller than her own and afforded all the same comforts even though Rebecca Davies was unaware of them.

Lady Katherine, clad in her dressing gown, quietly opened the door and stepped inside the darkened room. The fireplace held a few smouldering embers but she could make out the prone form of her saviour lying peacefully on the large bed. The rhythmic rise and fall of her chest gave hope to Lady Katherine that all would be well.

Silently moving closer to the patient, she was startled to see the sleeping figure of Major Williams slumped in a chair next to Rebecca, his head resting on the bed and his hands clasping hers.

Lady Katherine was moved by the tenderness and compassion this man had for this woman; their bond was unmistakable and irrefutable. Inexplicably, the countess felt no jealousy toward him, only kindness and respect.

Major Williams stirred and looked up to see Lady Katherine.

“My lady,” he said, a little surprised and standing up unsteadily.

“Please, major, don’t get up,” the countess replied softly, moving closer to the bed.

“I just wanted to see how she is.”

“Thank you, my lady,” he said bringing another chair closer to his. “I had the same concern. Please,” he offered, indicating the chair.

Lady Katherine took the seat beside him with a gracious nod and fixed her eyes on Rebecca.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, “I thought I’d come and help young Henry with his prayers,” Wills explained with an impish smile. He sat and took Rebecca’s hand once more. Turning to the countess, he asked almost apologetically, “And how are you, my lady?”

She couldn’t help but notice his eyes were glistening.

Major Williams was a man’s man but, in times such as these, when situations could have been avoided, when innocents had been hurt, he was prone to suffer those damned female afflictions: empathy and emotion.

“I am so sorry,” he stuttered, “so sorry to put you through that hell. It shouldn’t have happened. We should have—”

“Major,” Lady Katherine interrupted, gently placing a hand on his and looking lovingly into his eyes, “she will pull through this. We will pull her through this. Together.”

Wills shook his head, “You...”

“I will mend. If it weren’t for Rebecca, and you...” the enormity of the outcome had Rebecca not found her in time overwhelmed the countess and, once again, those horrid, fleeting images came the fore and she lost control. Unable to stop her panting sobs, she uttered behind her hand, “Forgive me...”

Major Williams broke with protocol and gathered the countess into his arms and gently rocked her back and forth. She unashamedly wept on his shoulder, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

“Don’t cry, my love,” I whispered, “you’re safe now.” But she couldn’t hear me... No one could hear me.

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The duke called for all the staff—maid servants, man servants, gardeners and stable hands—to be assembled in the mews immediately after breakfast on Saturday.

Everyone there was dead tired having had very little sleep after the turmoil of the night before but it was imperative that everyone there knew what was expected of them.

The corpses of the three abductors had been retrieved and taken to the village lockup, together with Stewart Graves, after Doctor Werner had attended to him, and the areas cleaned up as much as possible.

The duke stood on the mounting block and addressed the servants gathered around him.

“Men, women...boys and girls, we have all been through the gates of hell and, with God’s benevolence, have emerged unscathed, but weary. I thank you, each and every one of you, sincerely for your part in this most awful and appalling episode.

“Lady Katherine is resting and will recover from her dreadful ordeal. Miss Davies, too, with God’s mercy and Doctor Werner’s invaluable ministrations, will recover but will need time and quietude for her convalescence.

“It is for this reason that I ask one more solemn request of you, each and every one.

“You have all done a splendid job preparing for the Duchess’ Saturday-to-Monday. Regrettably—and most lamentably—it is too late to cancel the event. The first guests are already on their way and due to arrive shortly before noon.

“For the privacy and well-being of my niece, no one is to know what transpired here yesterday. Not one guest is to have any inkling of the near disaster that befell her and us all. Can I depend on you?”

A murmuring went through the assembled crowd as each conferred with the other in total agreement.

The duke, satisfied, continued, “The Duchess and I thank you from the most profound depths of our hearts. One last thing: the Metropolitan police will be here shortly and they may want to speak to some of you. This must be done with complete discretion. Mr Thomson will arrange any interviews. The east wing of the Hall is closed off to all, without exception,” he warned with a purposeful look to Henry.

Henry feigned surprise, “Me, Your Grace?”

“Without exception,” the duke repeated.

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It felt as though I had been trampled by a stampeding herd of draught horses, such was the pain through my left side. I had not felt such intense discomfort since the beating I took from John Harper or the knifing and rape by those Mohammedans.

Through a muffled jumble of sounds, words jumped out and insisted on being heard: “Doctor...”, “... Rebecca...”, “...Will she...?” Different tones, different pitches, the disembodied voices were familiar but I couldn’t distinguish one from the other. My eyelids felt heavy; they seemed to have been welded shut. Where was I? Why was I hurting so much?

I felt my lungs expel a long breath and, with it, a sibilant hiss.

“Rebecca...Rebecca...” I recognised the gentle call to wakefulness. Wills.

With determined effort, my eyes opened and became aware of pale sunshine pushing itself through the partially opened shutters on the windows. My vision focused on the worried face that hovered over me.

“Wills,” I rasped, my voice unexpectedly scratchy, “Where am...what...?” The pain stopped me from finishing any sentence. I felt faint and weak.

“I’ll give her a few more grains of morphine...”

“No, doctor, I need her coherent,” Wills explained emphatically. “Rebecca, can you hear me?”

Of course, I could hear him but the words that formed in my brain seemed to get stuck in my mouth.

“Rebecca,” he continued gently, “listen to me. Quinn and Hawthorne will be here shortly and they will want to speak to you. Are you up for it?”

I nodded my head but the word, ‘yes’, stuck in my throat.

“Good for you, old girl. We’ll have this sorted quickly and you off to hospital before you know it.”

I smiled, albeit a crooked one.

“The doctor wants to examine you. Make sure you’re not malingering,” he added with a mischievous grin.

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It was that period between breakfast and lunch that George McPherson liked to call ‘brunch’—a legacy of his student days—when he and Jimmy completed their errand of compassion and brought his mother from Lilyfield Manor to Abbotsford at breakneck speed.

On the way to Lilyfield, he and Jimmy, the chauffeur, had put aside their rivalry for Jessica’s attention and were in concert as to what they should have done to that bastard Graves who assisted in taking their mistress by force. They both felt that justice had been served to the three others involved by their black souls being delivered into the arms of Hades. They unrepentantly wished them to burn in hell for eternity for their carnal and mortal sins.

On the way back, George sat with his mother in the closed compartment and explained in minute detail what had befallen Lady Katherine and how she was rescued. He also added that, while Lady Katherine had been hurt physically, it was evident that the damage and pain went much deeper. He had known the countess all of his life and had never seen her so restrained and stoic and yet so vulnerable and scared. With tender insight, he could not understand how one human being could do such a thing to another. His anger still raged for his beloved mentor.

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The instant the Rolls-Royce entered the perimeter gates, the duchess was there, in the forecourt, ready to greet her niece’s housekeeper, someone she had known for all but the first eighteen years of her life.

They greeted each other warmly but with scant words, and hurried up the stone stairway, leaving Jimmy and George, with a weariness borne of a worry relieved and of very little sleep, to drive the motor car around to the mews and take a well-deserved rest in their respective quarters.

The duchess rushed the housekeeper to Lady Katherine’s suite—an area Mrs McPherson was well acquainted with. It was in these rooms that she spent those difficult times some twenty-five years ago when the fourteen-year-old Lady Katherine found herself suddenly and tragically orphaned.

With no other relative living in England at the time, her mother's sister and her husband, the Duke of Bramwell, took the grieving youngster under their protective wing and raised her as one of their own such was the love they had her.

The duke was a canny businessman and had gotten along extremely well with his Scotch brother-in-law, the Laird Ailbeart Stuart of Glenross, and together they had formed a profitable business relationship. The adolescent Katherine had shown not only interest in her father's business dealings but also an aptitude for mathematics, law and languages. It was then no surprise to anyone that after suffering such a profound and sudden loss, she applied herself with astounding vigour and determination to succeed in the masculine world of enterprise and continue in her father's footsteps.

Of course, Mrs McPherson accompanied her young charge everywhere as her chaperone and lady's maid: to Queen's College in London, then to the new, nondenominational Somerville College at Oxford.

With the loving benefaction and guidance of her aunt and uncle, Lady Katherine blossomed and, by the age of twenty-one years and gaining her majority, Lady Katherine Agnes Stuart Delaney, the Countess of Chestermere, entered the world of finance and commerce and resumed control of her family's vast country estates, the London townhouse and the Stuart seat of Glenross in Scotland.

The care, concern and regard for her staff and tenants only confirmed she was a woman who truly embodied the essence of *noblesse oblige*.

Only Mrs McPherson truly understood her mistress' nature and never tried to change any part of what made Lady Katherine who she was: not her left-handedness, not her drive to excel in a man's world, not her choice of whom she loved.

These were the memories that flashed through Fiona McPherson's mind as she approached Lady Katherine's room. She was afraid that the brutality meted out to her would change this woman and break her spirit—she prayed it would not.

The Duchess Mary swept into the room followed by Mrs McPherson, startling Jessica who had settled into an easychair beside her mistress and had fallen asleep. She, too, had had an anxious and disturbed night.

Jessica jumped to her feet. “Your Grace! Mrs Mac! I...I—”

Mrs McPherson reassured the young maid, “Shh, lassie, all will be well. Go and get some rest now.”

Jessica curtseyed and quickly left giving her mistress a final look of grave concern.

Lying in her bed and still wearing her dressing gown, Lady Katherine seemed to be at peace.

The two older women, looking down on the bruised and damaged sleeping form of the middle-aged peer who meant so much to both of them, their hearts seemed to want to burst with sorrow and compassion.

“Oh, my sweet Kateling...” Mrs McPherson whispered brushing aside a stray strand of hair from the countess’ face.

“This morning, Doctor found Katherine in Miss Davies’ room and chided her,” the duchess explained quietly, “He sent her to bed and gave her another draught of laudanum to settle her.”

Fiona directed her attention to the duchess, “Miss Davies? George explained it was she who saved her.”

“Yes,” affirmed Mary, “I’m afraid my niece has formed...an attachment.”

All Mrs McPherson could do was look at the duchess with numerous questions forming.

Mary shied from pursuing the topic—unspoken truths were not truths until they were spoken—and offered instead, “The doctor said she will have a tiny scar on her brow,” then continued hesitantly, “and that should fade in time...but the biggest scar will be—” Mary was unable to finish her sentence. Pent up emotions broke free; her knees gave way and she slumped onto the bed and covered her face with her hands.

She could no longer hold back her tears. “That should have been me, Fiona. Not sweet Katherine. It should have been me...”

Mrs McPherson sat on the bed beside Mary and gathered her in her arms, comforting her, “Your Grace... please... Dinnae blame yourself—”

“I should have listened...I was a fool...an old, old, silly fool.”

“Shhh...All will be well, by the grace of God.”

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Before long, and as anticipated, the first two of the fifteen weekend house guests arrived by motor car, a Wolseley. However, being greeted without the usual fanfare or fuss, the couple was much disappointed. Only the butler and footmen were there to receive them and show them up to their room. Thomson was apologetic but, as instructed by the duke, gave no indication or excuse as to the reason this high-ranking pair was being put into the older west wing of the building, rather than the usual accommodation on the same floor as the duchess in the east wing.

It wasn't long afterward, that there came a gentle but insistent rapping on Lady Katherine's door.

Mary composed herself as Mrs McPherson went to the door and opened it with a sombre, "Yes?"

Emma showed herself in and addressed the duchess in almost a whisper, "Lord and Lady Whitmore have arrived, Your Grace."

Mary became quite flustered and announced to no one in particular, "I should have cancelled." She took a deep, indurating breath then asked, "Has Thomson seen to my son?"

"Yes, Your Grace but Lord Whitmore asks why they've been relegated to the west wing, Your Grace."

"You've said nothing?"

"Nothing, Your Grace, much to his lordship's annoyance. He would like a word," Emma replied with concern.

Mary expelled a defeated sigh, "I'll be right there, Emma. Thank you."

Mrs McPherson closed the door behind Emma and returned to the bedside.

Wearily, the duchess made for the door saying, "Fiona, if there's anything you need, just ring. Anything," and reiterated ruefully, "I should have cancelled..."

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The train from London arrived on time and deposited the Met's Special Branch contingent on the Abbotsford Village station platform. Another fifteen minutes and the two carriages which carried the seven men arrived at the servants' entrance at the Hall. There they were sombrely met by a fatigued Major Williams, "Sir Giles..."

Sir Giles was not in a forgiving mood and replied tersely, “Fancy seeing you here. What the blazes is going on, Williams?”

With an acknowledging nod to the remaining policemen and with a brief, “Please follow me,” Wills ushered them quietly and quickly inside.

To avoid unwanted speculation and attention, Wills took them through the back stairs and into the duke’s study where the duke was waiting for them. Much to the newly arrived officers’ surprise, also in attendance was Alexander Quinn, the chief of the Special Branch.

“Mr Quinn!” was Hawthorne’s astonished greeting upon entering the study.

Alexander Quinn dismissed the rudeness and made the introductions, “Your Grace, may I present to you Sir Giles Hawthorne, my chief of the Special Operations Department, Detective Sergeant Yabsley, Detective Constables Hewitt, Ramsay, Byrne, Dolby and Hathaway.”

“Sir Giles, gentlemen, normally, it would be a pleasure to meet you all. However, under these most distressing circumstances—”

“We are here to find your niece—” Sir Giles interrupted.

Quinn cut him off, “The countess has been found...”

This piece of news had the seven officers looking at each other perplexed.

“She is safe and as well as can be expected.” Quinn continued, “And the perpetrators have been... neutralised. They are in the village lockup.”

“How? When? When did you know this?”

“Very late last night. Well after I spoke to you, Sir Giles. His Grace telephoned to me at home and gave me the good news. I wanted to contact you, Sir Giles, but as you do not have a telephone set in your home, I sent along a note. You, obviously, did not receive it.”

Hawthorne ruminated the information; there was no note on the salver; his wife had said nothing this morning. But she did have her mother’s streak of vindictiveness and this ‘oversight’ was most likely in settlement of his neglect in letting her know about his alternative dinner arrangements the night before.

Quinn continued, “I travelled all night by motor car to arrive here before you. Major Williams has given me a detailed account—”

“Yes,” interrupted Hawthorne, his annoyance colouring his speech, “and just how did the good major know about all this before me?”

“I will discuss that with you later, Sir Giles. Meanwhile, we still have some very important information to gather.”

“What, the major hasn’t solved the case yet?”

Quinn was becoming irritated by Hawthorne’s petulance and tried to interject only to be cut off again, “You want us to interrogate the perpetrators? Do you trust us with that, Mr Quinn?”

Quinn took a deep breath to calm his rising anger then replied, “They’re dead.”

Stunned silence enveloped the seven officers as they looked at one another. With a remarkable jump of logic, Hawthorne announced, “Davies. This has the vengeful arrogance of that despicable woman stamped all over it. Tell me she didn’t murder our perpetrators as she did the last lot. And where is she anyway? Have shame and guilt finally overcome her?”

Wills could not remain silent any longer, “She’s been shot.”

The only response from Hawthorne was a cold, “Dead?”

“She’ll survive,” Wills confirmed, unable to conceal the contempt he felt for the pompous, so-called ‘knight’ that stood in front of him.

Hawthorne’s resentment could not be masked. He turned from Wills and addressed Quinn, “Why did you keep this from me? I am the Chief of the DSO.”

Quinn hesitated, unwilling to carry on with a conversation that should be private.

“This was another line of enquiry and I did not want to jeopardise your reputation, Sir Giles, if Major Williams’ theory was incorrect. As it happened, it wasn’t and we have, by the grace of God, managed to save one innocent woman from despicable acts and ultimate death.”

The discussion was becoming quite heated and, in reality, not serving any useful purpose other than making the six attending policemen very uncomfortable. The duke used the bell cord and, within moments, Thomson appeared at the door.

“Your Grace?” Thomson asked.

“Ah. Thomson. Gentlemen,” the duke said addressing the six, “Cook has prepared some refreshments for you. If you would follow Thomson, please. Mr Quinn, Sir Giles, Major Williams, please remain behind.”

Detective Sergeant Yabsley, eager to assist his besieged chief, stayed back and looked to Sir Giles for confirming instructions.

Sir Giles’ temper mellowed and urged Yabsley, “Have lunch. I’ll be with you shortly.”

The study, emptied now of all but four and the door closed, became quiet but the air hung with acrid hostility.

Much needed to be said and Hawthorne resumed his tirade before anyone could dampen his fire, “Davies is a loose cannon! She does as she pleases and she can’t be trusted! She is a murderess!”

“Steady on!” Quinn warned, but this didn’t stop Hawthorne.

“She is the only one in my department who has not been vetted by you, Mr Quinn. She’s a damned colonist! An opium eater and a self-gratifying abuser of women! And she is Williams’ pet—”

Williams could not hold his temper any longer; these vile accusations incensed him and threw back at Hawthorne, “Instead of vilifying her, why don’t you accept her for what she is? She is worth ten of your men but you’re too arrogant to see it!”

Quinn was losing his patience, “Major! That’s quite enough!”

Hawthorne persisted, “Who killed all those who could have led us to the head of this conspiracy? Who had access to the coordinates? Who had the opportunity to change the lists of bank notes? And plant the evidence in that unionist’s home—”

“Excellent questions, Hawthorne! Why don’t you do a little investigating yourself and find out? It wasn’t Davies! She was with me!”

“That raises another question,” Hawthorne submitted and, snapping his attention to Quinn, accused, “Why is Williams permitted to run his own investigation? Goddammit, Quinn, you are aiding and abetting this fiasco!” Waving an accusing finger at Wills, Hawthorne spat out, “For all we know, *he* could be head of the cobra!”

The duke could take no more. “Gentlemen! Please! We are getting nowhere with this. My niece is lying upstairs with contusions and lacerations to most of her body and, if it had not been for the quick-wittedness of the so-called vengeful, arrogant, despicable woman, Rebecca Davies, *and* Major Williams, my niece would now have been brutally raped and murdered! Can you imagine how I feel? Can you imagine how she feels?”

“With respect, Sir,” offered Sir Giles firmly, “you have no idea what sort of woman this Davies is. She is not natural—”

The duke could no longer hold his temper in check. “I understand how you feel about women such as she but, from what I have perceived of Rebecca Davies, she is a most capable woman with an uncanny aptitude to analyse situations correctly. This, alone, should be cause for plaudits not reprehension.”

Sir Giles shook his head, resolutely deflecting the duke’s acuity, “You don’t see—”

“You, Sir Giles, should be singing her praises instead of maligning her! My niece is alive because of her! Only because of her! Davies risked her life and she may yet die...”

Tired and uncharacteristically testy, the duke became overwhelmed by the trials of the previous twenty-four hours and propped himself against his desk, head bowed. “Forgive me...” he uttered, “My apologies,” he said straightening himself up again, “it has been quite an eventful day.”

Quinn spoke, “Your Grace, perhaps it’s best we leave you.”

“No, Alexander,” the duke returned, his resolve broken, “I will see to our guests. Thomson will bring you refreshments.”

The duke, weary and overcome with pent-up emotion, resignedly took his leave, abandoning Quinn, Wills and Hawthorne to resume their bitter discussions.

The three men stood in silent contemplation, frustration and anger bubbling just beneath the surface.

Quinn was the first to speak, “What do you have to say for yourself, Sir Giles?”

Hawthorne had much more to say all of which, however, would have jeopardised his pension. He vacillated.

“Out with it, man!” insisted Quinn.

“Very well,” Hawthorne agreed, “Firstly, you have relegated me to third in command after you and Williams. How does that make me look in the eyes of my subordinates? And you, Williams, went behind my back to Quinn, instead of coming to me with your...your theories.”

“You would have discounted them.” Wills explained firmly.

Hawthorne scoffed at the idea.

Wills hesitated then with resolute determination announced, “We have a spy in our department, Sir Giles.”

Quinn watched Hawthorne’s reaction; Hawthorne’s response appeared to be one of genuine shock and incredulity. “What? What...a spy?”

“Think about it. The wrong coordinates, misleading information, incriminating money in the unionist’s home, written abduction plans. We have a spy—”

“You have the wrong end of the stick,” interrupted Hawthorne, “You think about it! Count the bodies, Williams. The two men with the boy and his dog. Dead! These three blackguards. In the palm of our hands. Dead! It is she who needs to explain her actions!” He turned to Quinn, “Was it not you who said that you wanted these criminals taken alive? To interrogate them? We can’t do that with corpses. Can we, major? Secrets are safe with dead men.”

“The major has adequately explained why each of them was despatched. The countess’ life was in peril. There seemed to be no other choice.”

“Hmm, ‘seemed to be’,” was all Hawthorne would concede.

A gentle knocking on the door brought the argument to a sudden halt.

“Come in,” called Quinn.

The three stood there simmering with anger as the butler and two maids brought in trays of sandwiches and pots of hot tea and coffee.

Hawthorne approached Thomson and spoke in subdued tones, “I need to get a note to my wife. I take it the house has a telephone set I may use?”

“Of course, Sir, if you will follow me.”

“Excuse me,” was the perfunctory phrase Sir Giles spat out as he left the room.

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Thomson left Sir Giles in the privacy of a small room adjacent to the cloak room off the entrance hall.

“Thank you,” he said and waited until he saw the butler leave.

“Operator, a London number, please. The Marlborough Club.”

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I had asked for the shutters to be closed so I could find some sleep without being doped into unconsciousness. I was ready to give my evidence to Alexander Quinn but was not in the least eager to have Hawthorne interrogate me. So I lay there, eyes closed, willing the analgesics to reduce the pain. Thankfully, the anodynes Dr Werner had administered had not dulled my senses as much as laudanum or other opioids would have done. But I certainly could have done with a draught or three of that Chivas Regal, which, I hoped, was still packed in my valise.

The handle on the door clicked and the whisper of a skirt alerted me that someone—a woman—had entered my room and approached me. This was a game I liked to play: guess the intruder.

This woman’s respiration was measured and calm—certainly not Jessica Turner—her normal state was one of agitation and nervous tension. It certainly wasn’t Lady Katherine; the fragrance that hung about her was of delicate roses. This woman’s scent was of perfumed soap so, it wouldn’t be any of the maid servants; they would not be able to afford such luxury. And the duchess preferred violets.

I capitulated. Without opening my eyes, I voiced calmly though croakily, “Who are you?” which made the woman gasp.

Opening my eyes, I saw peering over me the matronly visage of a woman with grizzled red hair not dissimilar to Jessica’s. She was hiding a smile but kindness showed in her eyes.

“Fiona McPherson, Lady Katherine’s housekeeper,” she pronounced with a thick Gaelic-Scottish inflection.

“Ah,” I returned with the best smile I could form under the circumstances, “George’s mother.”

“Aye, that too. I came to make your acquaintance and to—” she broke off, took a deep breath, then continued, “to see if there was anything you needed.”

I gave a rueful smile and a snort for speaking was still difficult. “How fares Lady Katherine?” I managed to rasp out.

“Sleeping. Doctor says her hurts will mend.”

I smiled and closed my eyes satisfied; it was indeed good news.

Mrs McPherson added with some hesitancy, “Doctor also says you almost didn’t make it.”

I looked up at her and screwed up my face—the only part of me that didn’t scream with pain, “Only the good die young...” It was painful to laugh but I managed a little chuckle that made the housekeeper’s face light up.

She looked at me in a most curious way then announced, “I ken now. I’ll leave you to your rest.”

And, without any further word, Lady Katherine’s housekeeper turned and left me there wondering what she meant.

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Sir Giles Hawthorne was not used to being kept waiting. It was past lunch time; he hadn’t eaten since he gulped down an early breakfast and he wanted his share of the sandwiches.

Finally, a voice crackled through the handpiece he held to his ear, “Who is calling?” The question was guarded and posed almost threateningly.

“Humphries? Is that you? Sir Giles here.”

“Ah. Old boy.” His response was one of quiet relief, “You caught me...” He was flustered but continued, “What, er...what news?”

“Dead, old boy.”

Humphries was momentarily unable to register the statement. “Who...? Davies?” he hoped.

“The three abductors.”

“Three?” This news was devastating. “I...I understood there were only two involved.”

“Four apparently. Three dead and one captured.”



“Oh? Who survived?” The question was filled with hopeful expectation.

“A local shopkeeper,” Hawthorne confirmed. “This brings me to my call to you. Neville, I need your guidance once more.”

Humphries was unable to speak; the news knocked the wind out of his sails.

“Neville? Are you there?”

“Yes...yes...What is it you need?”

Hawthorne took a deep breath then stated, “It was Davies who despatched the three felons. I firmly believe that she is involved in all this, that is, in being part of the conspiracy to abduct and ransom these women. She had to kill them so they wouldn’t indict her. There are too many other things that point to her but I don’t know how I can prove it. This is where I need your guidance.”

Humphries responded, “Yes...yes...I see the connection...and motivation...Have you approached Quinn with your theory?”

“Yes, but the fool is blind to the facts and deaf to my assertions. He can’t make a decision to save his life.”

“Is there any evidence of her involvement?”

“I believe so but it’s all circumstantial. All hearsay.”

Humphries hesitated as he thought the situation through, “Have you checked her place of residence? Perhaps there—”

“No. We haven’t.”

“Perhaps you could send those two...er, Yabsley and...you know, those who found the evidence in that union fellow’s place, to check things over. Tell them what you’re looking for and—”

“If there’s nothing? Where do I go from there, Neville? The Home Secretary?”

“I’m sure you’ll find something if you tell your men what to look for.”

Hawthorne’s brain was ticking over and envisioning various scenarios, “Yes...yes...You’re right...”

Another faint voice transmitted over the line, “Colonel Humphries, your valises have been loaded. The carriage is ready for you, Sir.”

“You’re going somewhere, Neville?”

“Oh, er, yes, Sir Giles. A little respite. My war injuries are playing havoc with my insides and Doctor insisted I take a little break.”

“I see. Where can I contact you if I need to?”

“I will telephone to you when I reach my hotel. I must go now. Good luck with Davies and everything at Abbottsford Hall.”

Without waiting for a response, Humphries put down the phone and left Sir Giles Hawthorne puzzled and confounded.

“I didn’t mention Abbottsford Hall,” he said to himself but immediately shrugged it off as inconsequential.

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Sir Giles attended the lunch buffet in the morning room segregated from the invited weekend guests and, with a plateful of sandwiches, approached Yabsley who was seated with Detective Constable Byrne.

They stood when Sir Giles pulled out a chair and joined them.

“Gentlemen, please,” he invited, indicating their chairs then continued after taking a bite of his snack, “You are aware of how I feel about this Davies woman and, no doubt—especially you, Yabsley—you both feel the same way.”

Byrne and Yabsley glanced at each other then returned their attention to Sir Giles who resumed, “The difficulty in terminating her services is that we have no hard evidence to put before Quinn. This is where your expertise is required.”

Sir Giles took another mouthful of his roast beef and bread, leaving both officers waiting in anticipation.

Sir Giles wiped his mouth, “I will arrange that you two return to London with the three deceased and, once there, I want you to search that woman’s flat for evidence. Turn it upside down if you have to but I want hard evidence that she is part of the conspiracy. Do I make myself clear?”

He withdrew a slip of paper from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to Yabsley, “This is her address in Newington.”

Yabsley read out loud, “Louisa Mansions, Borough Road. Er...how do we...?”

“I don’t have a key. Use your initiative.”

Byrne had been attentive but silent throughout the discourse but now appeared a little apprehensive. “Sirs,” he said with a little reluctance, “my mother...she’s unwell and needs to know where I can be contacted. May I make a telephone call to her?”

“Hm,” Hawthorne replied, “find the butler. He’ll show you where it is.”

“Thank you, Sir Giles.”

“Whatever it takes, gentlemen, to be rid of her once and for all.”

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It was midafternoon when Doctor Werner paid me another visit to check his handiwork and change the dressings on my wounds. I was still in much pain but felt better than I did earlier that day. My voice was easier to use and my head clearer.

He asked permission to loosen the neck of my nightdress so he could access my left arm and, pleased with its condition, lifted the dress up to my hip and examined that injury. Pulling up the sleeve to my right arm, I asked him why it was bound. Doctor Werner went to great lengths to describe the complex procedure of transfusing blood from the ‘gallant Major’ to me, sheepishly adding that he had never done one before but was modestly well-pleased with himself.

After his thorough examination, he announced that he was satisfied that there didn’t appear to be any infection at the three surgical sites, then took a breath to make another announcement, when I interrupted him.

“When can I get out of bed?” I asked impatiently.

Doctor Werner looked down at me with some surprise and, with a hint of admonishment, gave a stern, “Two weeks.”

“What!”

“Maybe one week if you look after yourself and do as I say.”

“Doctor—” I began, challenging his edict but was cut off mid-syllable.

“Miss Davies, your hip won’t be able to carry your weight until it mends properly. And your arm, dear lady, your arm must be kept immobile lest the stitches give way. The external sutures can be mended but the cat gut to your artery, internally, should it tear away, well, that could be disastrous, even fatal.”

He rummaged through his kit and withdrew a square of cloth. “It’s best that we keep your arm immobilised and close to your chest,” and with little warning, folded and tied the cloth around my neck and threaded my injured arm into it. The sling was set.

“Doctor,” I pleaded, “perhaps a wee dram of Scotland’s finest every now and then will assist—”

“No.” His reply was absolute, “No alcohol. It will interfere with the analgesics and one ‘wee dram’ too many could just kill you.”

I was shattered and he sensed my utter disappointment and, possibly, my dependence on the stuff.

“I trust you will heed my advice and do as I say,” he warned looking sternly into my eyes.

While inwardly I was planning an insurrection, outwardly, I compliantly nodded my head.

“Good,” he said, “now, let me help you sit up. You need sustenance.”

Before I could accept—for I was very hungry—there came a knock at the door instantly followed by it being opened by the doctor.

I was surprised to see Mrs McPherson enter with a large bed tray filled with silver dish covers.

With the doctor’s assistance, I struggled to prop myself up against numerous pillows, overcoming the throbbing to my hip, “Mrs McPherson,” I bantered, my voice now much stronger, “this is an honour.”

She smiled and placed the tray across me. “Just doing my duty, Miss.”

It was then that I noticed Lady Katherine had entered the room. She was dressed in a most becoming tea gown and her hair was immaculately coiffed. Had it not been for the fierce bruising to her beautiful face, she would have appeared to me as an angel from heaven.

“Lady Katherine,” I gasped for she did take my breath away, “It’s good to see you looking so well.”

She approached me and, reaching out her hand, gently stroked my disordered short white hair into submission. “It’s good to see you looking so well,” she echoed, “I was so afraid that—”

Her eyes strayed down to my throat and rested on my silver locket, then fixed themselves on mine and gifted me a most beautiful smile.

Mrs McPherson uncovered the bowls and plates to reveal an array of foodstuffs: broth, sandwiches, cold meats, cheese, jellies and a large pot of steaming hot tea. She then brought a chair for her mistress and placed it next to me.

I could not take my eyes off the countess. Was she saying what I thought she was saying? Did I misinterpret her meaning? Her eyes told me ‘no’ but my head wouldn’t believe that such a woman would have feelings for me. Not those feelings. What we had shared a few nights ago was, I thought, not an act of love but one of need. Whose? I cannot say. I truly believed our paths would never cross again.

“Please,” Lady Katherine gently urged, “eat. You must be starving. Let me pour you a tea.”

Packing up his medical bag, Dr Werner announced pleasantly, “I’ll leave you ladies to it. Miss Davies, I urge you to heed my advice and take bed rest for at least a week, if not two. I’ve left some more pain relievers on the bedside table. Take them sparingly. Lady Katherine, if you need anything at all, please don’t hesitate to call me. The Duke has asked me stay another day.” With a gentlemanly nod, he farewelled, “My lady, ladies,” and closed the door behind him.

Taking the tea Lady Katherine had prepared, I enquired earnestly, “How are you, my lady? Did sleep find you?”

“Morpheus certainly did. In the form of laudanum.”

I felt much compassion for the countess; she had seen and suffered more than any woman should. This terrible episode would leave deep scars on her psyche for many years to come. I knew that from my own experiences.

Lady Katherine seemed at ease in the company of Mrs McPherson who was busily fussing with the shutters and curtains. I glanced at the older woman and then at the younger

one and, taking another sip of the hot tea, I looked at Lady Katherine over the rim of my cup.

It was as though she had read my mind. “I’ve known Fiona all of my life and Fiona knows everything about me,” Lady Katherine stated, finishing with an enigmatic smile.

“Aye,” interjected the housekeeper from a corner of the room, “and I’m very protective of my lady, if you ken my meaning.”

“I ken, Mrs McPherson, I ken,” I reassured both women.

An easy silence befell the room. Between sips of the hot tea, and looking at the countess, I voiced as nonchalantly as I could, “Thank you.”

She looked at me somewhat perplexed.

“For preserving my life,” I explained.

She demurred in a most appealing way, “It is I that owes you her life.”

Tears welled in her eyes and, if those beautiful brown eyes could have spoken, I believed they would have expressed her love for me.

My own eyes were beginning to prickle with tears. Crying was something I loathed doing so I made light of the situation, “I believe I owe you some articles of clothing.”

“Oh?”

“The bandages.”

Mrs McPherson piped in, “Aye. That was one of your best Swiss cotton dickies, my lady.”

My attention was immediately captured. “What did you say?” I demanded.

Mrs McPherson was taken aback by my sudden change in demeanour. “Em...I was jesting—”

“About the Swiss cotton. What did you call it?”

“The petticoat? A dickie. That’s what my grandmother, God rest her soul, called it.”

Flashes of Humphries and Hawthorne at the Marlborough Club filled my head; the photograph in Hawthorne’s office; the man Croft was waiting for... It had to be...

“Mrs McPherson, would you find Major Williams, please? I need to see him urgently.”

“Of course,” stammered the housekeeper as she quickly left us, confused and mystified.

“What is it Rebecca?” Lady Katherine enquired, equally as mystified as her housekeeper.

“That last man, the one with Peleus, I think I know who he is. And, if I’m right, we may know who is behind all these abductions.”

It wasn’t more than five minutes after Mrs McPherson had left us that the door swung open and drew our attention to the rude intruders.

“I hear you’re looking for Major Williams,” trumpeted Sir Giles Hawthorne, leading the charge into the room ahead of Yabsley and Byrne. “He’s gone off to the village lockup to interrogate that shopkeeper, Graves.”

Lady Katherine was appalled by this man’s presumption. “How dare you enter a lady’s bedroom without invitation!” Lady Katherine said, standing to meet him face-to-face.

“I do beg your pardon,” Sir Giles slithered, “and, by the looks of you, you must be the Countess of Chestermere. I do apologise.”

“And you are?”

“Sir Giles Hawthorne, Chief of the Special Branch, Department of Special Operations. And these are my subordinates, Detective Sergeant Yabsley and Detective Constable Byrne. I’m here to interview Davies.”

“*Miss* Davies is unwell. And she requested the attendance of Major Williams.”

“Hm. I’m here now, so let’s get on with it.”

Lady Katherine was well put out by the insolence of this knight and went to the bell cord. With a defiant glare, she pulled the cord several times, “We’ll see about that.”

Hawthorne’s snort of contempt betrayed that he thought, “*Another ‘New Woman’ with delusions of equality.*” He turned to me and insisted, “What is it that has that old housekeeper all aflutter?”

I was amused that this pompous ass would consider to even attempt to lord it over me.

With the best faux smile I could muster, I declared, “I’m as well as can be expected. Thank you for asking.”

From what I could see of it, the colour was rising in his neck. He took two steps toward me and, with restraint, threatened through gritted teeth so only I could hear, “You arrogant Sapphic jade! You will be found out and you will pay the price!”

A deep, disembodied voice from the doorway enquired sternly, “You called, my lady?”

“Yes, Thomson, these gentlemen seem to have lost their way. Please show them their proper place.”

With a venomous sneer and his cheeks reddened, Hawthorne turned on his heels and left without another word and with his two cohorts trailing closely behind.

Thomson closed the bedroom door leaving me with a disgusted Lady Katherine. She approached me and asked, bewildered, “Does he always speak to you like that?”

“No,” I replied honestly, “He never speaks to me at all. He hates my kind.”

“Your ‘kind’?” the question was almost an insult.

“Yes. Independent women. Colonists in general but more so Australians. And, of course...” I took a deep breath for effect, “trivets.”

This made Lady Katherine burst with an uninhibited chortle. Holding the side of her face she chuckled, “Don’t make me laugh. The hurt hasn’t mended yet.”

She was endearing. I didn’t want to love her but I could feel myself falling for that irresistible combination of beauty, charm and honesty that wrapped around her like a protective aura. And she asked nought of me. If I had, indeed, saved her life, then she had already repaid that debt in full by tending me and preserving mine. Whatever it was that she saw in me I prayed that it would always be there for, at this moment, there was nothing I wanted more than to be with her.

She drew closer to me and touched my face. I took her hand and kissed it with gratitude, love and passion. I wanted more so I gently drew her toward me. She willingly complied and without a word spoken, we kissed.

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The rest of the afternoon and early evening saw the Hall in a flurry of activity and excitement. Guests were arriving in quick succession, eagerly anticipating the events the duchess had planned for them. The duchess was running around like a madwoman with a swarm of bees under her bonnet, organising, reorganising and re-reorganising her guests, all the time keeping them blissfully oblivious to the drama that had unfolded there.

Contrarily, the duke shook off the turmoil and calmly held court regaling his male counterparts with his successes in the world of business and finance.

Their guests were successfully kept segregated from the police and vice versa and the secrets of the east wing of the Hall well preserved. The servants were equally as reticent when asked about the east wing and the ‘unknown gentlemen’ about the place.

I had dozed for most of the afternoon after taking an ample dosage of pain relievers and was woken by Mrs McPherson insisting on helping me with my ablutions.

“Cleanliness is essential for a swift recovery,” she asserted and quickly conducted a well-planned attack on my hands, neck, face and arms with a hot, wet, wrung-out flannel; on my disordered hair with a comb and macassar oil and gave me a new toothbrush and dentifrice to freshen my mouth, which she somehow found offensive. I own that I did feel better for the attention even though I felt as though I was being treated like a newborn and completely helpless but, once she left me, I felt refreshed, warm and comfortable and fell into a light sleep again.

It must have been around the servants’ tea time when a very timid knock on my closed door brought me out of my light nap. Lady Katherine had promised to return so I imagined it was she who rapped on the door.

“Come in,” I invited and was very surprised to see the inquisitive face of little Henry peer in. He looked about warily then sprang inside, closing the door quickly behind him.

“Henry,” I said, “Come in. It’s good to see you but what brings you here?”

He approached me and appeared to be awestruck. “You’re not dead.”

“I’m sore. But not dead,” I assured him.

His face lit up with a huge smile then announced triumphantly, “It worked! My prayers worked!”

“Ahh, it was you! Thank you, Henry! You saved my life.”

“Aye, me and God.” He looked at me with such intense sincerity it made me smile. As an afterthought, he added, “Oh, and Peleus says to say he’s glad, too, that you’re not dead.”

“Well, thank you. That makes three of us.”

“I’ve got to go now. His Grace said no one should disturb you and Lady Katherine. But I don’t think he really meant me.”

“I see,” I conciliated, “You come and see me whenever you feel like it, Henry. Just don’t get into trouble.” As an afterthought, I added, “Henry, do you know where my valise is? The last I saw of it was at the railway station.”

“Leave it to me, Miss, I’ll find it!” he assured me enthusiastically, “I want to be just like you. A detective!”

“I’m not a det—”

Another knock on the door stopped me mid sentence and made Henry jump. The startled look on his face confirmed he was going against orders.

“Come in,” I called and, as the door opened, Henry bolted through it, squeezing himself between the door jamb and Wills’ legs.

“What...?” Wills exclaimed as he watched the little boy streak along the corridor and out of sight.

All Wills could do was smile as he came in, closing the door behind him. “He was there when we found you, you know. And again, when the doctor patched you up. Something a boy that age shouldn’t have seen.”

“He said he prayed for me.”

“We all did, old girl. Well, most of us,” he conceded as he flung his Homberg onto a chair and sat next to me on the bed. “You look much better than you did this morning.”

“Doctor said I had to stay here a week! Can’t get out of bed to pee. I have to use a damned bedpan.”

“How’s the pain?”

“Painful. Manageable. Meditation helps but medication’s better. I need more of those pain relievers Dr Werner supplied. Where were you today? I needed to see you.”

“Interviewing Stuart Graves at the village lockup. He was quite bruised and battered and feeling very sorry for himself.”

“He’ll be feeling much worse climbing the stairs to the gallows.”

“He couldn’t tell us much. In essence, same story as young Timmy Saddler’s family. Needed money, had a grievance with the landed gentry, saw an easy way to get out of debt. Like the Saddlers, his only dealings were with Croft and Hogan. He never met or was aware of anyone called ‘Dickie’.”

“I think I know who Dickie was.”

“That third man? Lady Katherine said she heard you call him ‘Dickie’. And that it annoyed him.”

“I believe he was connected to Hawthorne.”

“Hawthorne?” Wills was astonished by my revelation.

“Quite possibly,” I confirmed, “either by coincidence or by design. Remember when we barged in on Hawthorne and his lunch meeting at the Marlborough with that Colonel Humphries?”

“Yes. Quinn hasn’t found anything more regarding their connection.”

“They were talking about one of their acquaintances, a certain ‘Smithy’ who was cashiered. They referred to him as ‘captain of the dickies’.”

“Yes.” Wills was paying close attention.

“A dickie is an old-fashioned term for a petticoat. And he was given this epithet because he wore a frock to escape the Boers.”

“And...?”

“On Hawthorne’s ‘trophy wall,’ there is a photograph of Hawthorne in South Africa surrounded by his troopers. Only one of them had the rank of captain. And his name was ‘G. Smith’.”

“Smithy. Captain of the dickies.”

“Yes. I didn’t get a good look at all of the men in that photograph but it shouldn’t be too difficult to compare our dead Dickie to this ‘G. Smith’. And it should be easy to find out if Captain G Smith was cashiered and if there is any connection with Colonel

Humphries. From what Hawthorne said, he hadn't heard from 'Smithy' since he was discharged."

"I'll set Scott onto that first thing tomorrow. If you're right, then this Colonel Humphries may be involved. And, if he is involved, we need to get to him, and quickly, before he discovers his henchmen are dead. He's sure to take flight if he is complicit."

"Hawthorne may be complicit, or may be a dupe, but he's involved whichever way it goes."

Wills slumped into his usual thinking pose, head bent, staring straight ahead, then looked at me with a look I hadn't seen before.

"What's wrong?" I asked, "You look as though you're about to go to a funeral."

"Hawthorne has accused you of being embroiled in this conspiracy."

I was utterly astonished; the meaning of his statement floored me. "What? What are you saying? What is he saying?"

"He was in quite a fury this morning and made some very wild accusations about you to Quinn. He asserted that it was you tampered with all the evidence. After Hawthorne stormed out, Quinn asked me if there was any possibility that his allegations were correct. He's planted a seed of doubt in Quinn's mind."

I was flabbergasted by this assertion but I was far more concerned that Wills believed anything Hawthorne had said. "And you? Did he plant one in yours?"

Wills scoffed, "Of course not. But to someone who doesn't know you, his arguments were compelling."

"That bastard," I exclaimed, recalling the intrusion by Hawthorne that morning.

"We must be very careful, Rebecca." Wills looked at me; there was no doubt in that look that he trusted me unreservedly. He added, "Hawthorne has ordered Yabsley and Byrne to accompany the bodies to London for the autopsies."

"His best men to watch over corpses? Is he afraid they'll get up and run away?" I scoffed.

"Something's afoot, Rebecca, just be careful."

"You know the three of them, Hawthorne, Yabsley and Byrne, paid me a visit this morning?"

Wills was aghast, “What? He had the nerve to question you?”

“No, not to question me, to threaten me. He said I would be found out and I would pay.” I smiled at Wills adding, “I thought everybody knew I was a deviant.”

“This is no time for levity, Rebecca. He means you harm. And there’s no love lost between you and Yabsley. Both he and Byrne have been sent to London for more than watching over three cadavers. But what?”

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Over the following two days, Sunday and Monday, Wills directed the investigation effectively and, with a generous helping of undeserved deference, yielded some authority to Sir Giles Hawthorne not so much that he believed Hawthorne to have superior investigative skills but more to keep him where he could keep an eye on him.

The four remaining Detective Constables, Hewitt, Ramsay, Dolby and Hathaway, were directed to interview everyone who knew Stewart Graves and his wife, or had seen any strangers lurking about. They came up with very little we didn’t already know.

Meanwhile, Major Williams kept our suspicions about the Hawthorne-Humphries connection under wraps, even from Quinn, until Detective Constable Robert Scott, who had remained at New Scotland Yard, could uncover information about one cashiered Captain G Smith who served in South Africa with the then Major Giles Hawthorne and was at the siege of Ladysmith.

Young Henry found my valise, as well as my abandoned gladstone, and brought both to me. He would make a very clever detective, I told him as I directed him to withdraw the partially consumed bottle of whisky and place it in the top drawer of my bedside table. He was chuffed that I was well pleased with his efforts and left my room with an enormous self-satisfied grin on his face.

Of course, during those two days, Lady Katherine spent more time with me than her aunt Mary deemed proper. But, after allocating whatever business she could to her secretary, George McPherson, what else was there for her to do? She was virtually a prisoner of the east wing until the weekend party was over and all the guests had departed.

We played cards—I restrained myself from cheating—mostly, and we talked about our lives; rather, I kept her talking about hers as I there was very little I could say about mine that wouldn't have shocked or appalled her.

She spoke of her childhood in Scotland, of her parents, of her country retreat, Lilyfield Manor, and, without forewarning said, “You must come and stay with me.”

My look of surprise had her confirming, “No, I insist. You will come and stay at Lilyfield as soon as this business is over.”

“But, Lady Katherine, what would the Duchess say?”

She gave me an impish grin, “I can only imagine. But you will come, won't you? A train from London to Rusby village and I'll send the motor for you. Promise you'll come.”

How could I possibly have refused?

Those two days were most enjoyable and I found myself thinking of Lady Katherine whenever she wasn't with me. She was the last thought I had before I fell asleep and the first upon waking.

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## CHAPTER 16

Monday Afternoon

New Scotland Yard, London

Detective Constable Robert Scott had worked diligently at his desk for two whole days after receiving that early morning telephone call on Sunday from Major Williams. He had given permission to Scott to kip on the sofa in Wills' office to save time and the effort of climbing three flights of stairs. Besides, this young man was unmarried and lived alone so he had no one to go home to.

And with no one in the office to disturb him, he was able to work uninterrupted and unobserved—the major had asked him to keep his investigations covert. He had uncovered some very alarming facts during those two days and was putting together his report for the major when he was startled by the unexpected arrival of Detective Sergeant Yabsley and Detective Constable Byrne.

“Sergeant! I wasn't expecting you,” he stuttered, trying to conceal some of the reports and papers scattered about his desk.

“What are you working on, Scott,” Yabsley questioned as he and Byrne flanked the seated detective.

“Nothing much, sergeant,” Scott excused, concerned that Byrne was scanning the documents on the desk, “catching up on reports.”

“Get on with it, then.” Noticing Byrne's unwarranted interest in Scott's desk, Yabsley spat out, “Problem there, Byrne?”

“Em, no, sergeant!” Byrne deflected.

“Then get your notebook and we’ll be on our way,” Yabsley ordered.

Byrne gave Scott a threatening look then quickly found his own desk and unlocked a drawer. With his back to both Scott and Yabsley, he removed something and furtively slid it into his inside jacket pocket while, with the other hand, collected a notebook.

Scott, wanting to take the attention away from his desk, asked Yabsley, “What are you doing back so soon? Have the investigations been completed?”

“No. Still open,” Yabsley replied firmly but evasively.

“Ah, sergeant,” Scott timidly enquired, wanting to know what they were up to, “where can you be reached...if Sir Giles asks?”

“He knows,” was all Yabsley was willing to divulge as he led Byrne out of the office leaving Scott much perplexed and troubled.

He looked down at his paperwork strewn untidily on the desk and admonished himself for his disorderliness when he realised what Byrne had seen: reports on Colonel Humphries, Captain Gregory Smith... and his handwritten note with ‘Kieran Byrne’ on it with a big question mark next to it. All he could do was wince with self-castigation.

“Sergeant,” Byrne said as they trotted down the stairs to the street, “I need to telephone to my mother...she’s unwell, you know.”

“What ails her?” Yabsley enquired unemotionally.

“Cholemia, doctor says. May I call?”

“Once we’re done in Newington, Byrne,” replied Yabsley without turning.

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It was easy enough getting into the foyer of the Louisa Mansions flats; the front door that should have been kept locked, wasn’t and the old custodian, Grayson, was nowhere to be seen.

Yabsley led Byrne up the stairs, checking the flat number on the nearest door on each landing until they reached the third floor. There, they quickly found the flat occupied by Rebecca Davies.



“Keep watch,” Yabsley ordered as he removed a wallet from his pocket and retrieved from it his well-worn lockpicking tools. Within moments, they were inside and closed the door behind them.

Yabsley detested the woman that Major Williams insisted on calling his Assisting Clerk and having her around everything the DSO was involved in. She was a self-appointed judge, jury and executioner and the deaths of these last three criminals only proved this. She was a callous murderess with a warrant card.

Not only that—as though that were not bad enough—she was unwomanly. The opposite gender had to be just that: opposite: feminine and ladylike and she was neither. And she possessed that arrogance, that self-assuredness, that gave men the impression that they were beneath contempt—at least, that’s how she made him feel. He did reluctantly concede that Rebecca Davies was somewhat capable both in physical and mental attributes, but she was still a woman and women were not superior to men—and that was that. He would be pleased, very pleased indeed, to be rid of this abomination once and for all. If it was there, he was determined to find the evidence to prove her guilt in this distasteful matter.

“I’ll check the bedroom,” Byrne offered and immediately strode toward it as Yabsley took in the rest of the residence. It was sparsely furnished and neatly maintained so it shouldn’t take long to find incriminating evidence should there be any.

The little dining nook held nothing but a couple of chairs and a table and it was bare save for a few unopened letters placed on it, most likely by the caretaker. A quick rummage through them revealed they were invoices or account statements and one from Australia.

The letters held very little interest for him, so with renewed vigour, Yabsley took to the cabinets firstly and then the drawers in the kitchen nook, opening, carefully rummaging, and turning out the contents. From the bedroom, he could hear Byrne doing the same but with much less subtlety; he was quite heavy-handed, in fact, much the same way he had conducted the search at John McGregor’s.

Yabsley reached the bottom of the four stacked drawers in the cabinet and pulled it out. Peering into the darkened void the drawer left, he was just able to see a small, black wooden container about the size of a cigarette box.

Retrieving it, he carefully opened the hinged lid and was astonished to see, nestled in soft layers of silken cloth, polished gemstones of various shapes, sizes and colours. The afternoon sun caught each and reflected itself in a dazzling show of light; he had never seen such an array of brilliance.

“Sergeant!”

The call from the bedroom brought Yabsley back to the task at hand. He quickly closed the box and slid it into his jacket pocket, “Byrne. Found something?”

Byrne emerged from the bedroom with a triumphant sneer and holding his discovery aloft, “Bank notes! I would wager that these come from the victims’ families.”

Yabsley was both elated by the discovery and sceptical. Was it not the same Byrne who found the same evidence in McGregor’s home? Evidence that was later disputed? Surely Davies was smarter than that; to keep such incriminating evidence where it could so easily be found. Then again, he argued, he did find a hoard worth thousands behind a drawer. How could she be in possession of such a valuable cache? And why was it hidden here and not in a bank vault?

Whatever the reason, it seemed he now had the evidence to rid himself of someone he despised and who should never have been in the DSO in the first place.

Byrne approached him and handed the notes over.

“Where did you find these?” Yabsley asked tersely.

“In one of the drawers, stuffed in a stocking.”

“Show me.”

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The treatment Doctor Werner gave me was expert and effective. Now, four days after being wounded and repaired, and against doctor’s advice, I wanted to take my first steps from the bed—mainly to avoid using that repugnant bedpan.

The good doctor’s pain relief medication was working a treat and I was able to sit up with relative ease, relative, that is, to my previous total incapacitation. With a fair amount of persistent cajoling from me, Wills had managed to find me a walking stick and pair of crutches and Lady Katherine offered to secure me wheelchair commode from

London, which, grateful as I was for the offer, I politely refused; that would have been one degree up from the bedpan.

Of course, a little surreptitious sip of my medicinal scotch every now and then helped to relax whatever muscles were paining.

With the investigation both at the village and at the Hall now near completion, Wills was awaiting further orders from Mr Alexander Quinn who had returned to London the day before, on Sunday. He never did bother to speak to me. Nor did Sir Giles Hawthorne after that first intrusion with his two cohorts. Wills was as mystified as I as to why neither of these men were interested in what I had to offer.

The duke and duchess insisted I stay the full two weeks of recuperation prescribed by Doctor Werner and that Dr Werner himself also stay to ensure I was fully recovered before making the long journey back to London. The doctor was confident that I did not require X-rays on my hip but did insist that I seek further medical attention once home.

Notwithstanding all these generous offers, I decided, that when his orders came through, I would leave with Wills.

Lady Katherine, too, because of pressing business at her estate, made plans to leave for her country manor, Lilyfield, soon after the last of the weekend guests had left. It was with great reluctance that we would part company but, once I was fully recovered and after I had resigned from the service, I would be free to venture wherever my heart and head took me. And, at that moment, I knew exactly where that would be.

I now had a purpose in life.

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The evening autumn air in Abbotsford was crisp and clear. In London, the air was a smoky fog—or as Dr Des Voeux put it earlier that year—a smog.

Through this smoky pall, a dark-clad figure strode through the streets toward a tobacconist situated not far from Whitehall. He greeted the shopkeeper by name, then made his way to the back corner of the premises where a silence cabinet had been installed a few years earlier. This call office was the best and most private way to make contact with his ‘mother’ at tuppence for a three minute telephone call and a penny a minute thereafter.

Detective Constable Byrne opened the half-glassed door to the wooden silence cabinet and stepped inside; it never failed to remind him of entering a large, standing casket. He withdrew a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket, readied his coppers then lifted the earpiece from its cradle.

“Yes. Operator, Enfield 368, please,” he requested, reading from the slip of paper. As instructed, he deposited two pennies into the box and waited for the connection to be made.

After a few moments, Byrne resumed the conversation, “It’s done... Yes, it’ll be there on tomorrow’s train with Yabsley. And the other one...? You have his address...? Tomorrow? I’ll be there. What time?” as an afterthought and just before replacing the earpiece, he offered, “Oh. Bad luck about Smith.”

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## CHAPTER 17

Tuesday Morning

Abbotsford Hall

It had been only four days recuperating but it seemed like four years. I hated being laid up but Doctor Werner was watching me like a mother hen. From my bed, I could hear the magnificent longcase clock in the foyer on the ground floor chime the quarter hour after six.

Even with the shutters closed I knew the sun was still to rise but Mother Nature was calling me with some urgency. I decided to forsake the cumbersome tin pan and try to leave the bed and use the water closet. The walking stick was at hand and I had dosed up on pain relievers. With much effort, I wriggled myself off the bed and took my first tentative steps toward the privy. The good doctor would have been horrified and I certainly was in a lot of pain even with the analgesics but, once I achieved my equilibrium and with one careful step after another, I made it!

After answering the call, I decided to wash whatever I could reach. As much as I appreciated the attention Mrs McPherson generously supplied, I hated being dependent on anyone for anything.

The effort of washing and dressing exhausted the little energy I had but I nevertheless felt a sense of accomplishment as stood in front of the long mirror and took in the sight. There was I, propped up by my walking stick. I never was a pretty sight but, right now, dressed in my spare black trousers and turtleneck sweater, my complexion wan and

my body bent and arm disabled, I own that I would have frightened a classroom full of rambunctious school boys—had I come across one.

With this disconcerting thought, I hobbled to the armchair and lowered myself gingerly into it with beads of perspiration trickling from my brow. How I wished that bottle of Chivas Regal were not so far away.

As I patiently awaited breakfast, my rambling thoughts took me into the presence of Lady Katherine. I smiled.

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The household was bustling with activity; breakfast would be served in the morning room at half eight and, upstairs, with half an hour to go, the family members were putting the final touches to their morning ablutions.

A quick knock at my door and Wills poked his head in, “You decent?”

Not seeing me in bed, he became alarmed, “Rebecca? Rebecca?”

“I’m here, Wills,” I replied from the embrace of my armchair.

“Should you be out of bed?” he queried upon finding me. “Why are you dressed?”

“Ready for our return to London.”

“Hm,” was his disapproval, “Quinn hasn’t given the orders, yet. And I don’t think Dr Werner will allow you to travel.”

“We’ll see,” I threatened.

“We’ll see, indeed,” he said returning to the open door. “Can I bring you something? Or will you come and fetch it yourself and crawl back upstairs?”

Sometimes his drollness amused me—this was not one of those times.

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Wills trotted down the main staircase toward the morning room when he heard the faint tinkling of a telephone’s bell.

“*That would be Quinn with his orders,*” he thought to himself and, sure enough, upon reaching the landing on the ground floor, Thomson approached him.

“Major Williams, a telephone call for you, Sir.”

A streak of human lightning, in the shape of a young boy clutching several pairs of boots, flashed between the butler and Wills upsetting the almost unflappable Thomson.

“Henry! The back stairs!” he called after the recalcitrant lad but to no avail. With a defeated shake of his head, he turned to Wills, “This way, Sir.”

“Thank you, Thomson,” Wills smiled and followed the butler to the ante room off the foyer.

Once inside, Wills picked up the telephone handpiece and formally announced, “Major Williams here.”

Wills’ face fell with the urgency of the caller’s hysteria.

“Cornelia? What’s wrong? What’s happened?” Wills was distressed at hearing his wife’s frantic outburst.

“Reggie!” she cried incoherently between sobs, “Reggie! They broke in! They took us...Help us...!”

“Cornelia! Who?”

The line fell silent.

“Cornelia? Cornelia!”

“Major Williams,” began the calm, cultured male voice, “I don’t believe we’ve been formally introduced...”

That voice! He knew that voice.

It continued, “Permit me. Colonel Neville Humphries, retired—”

Wills was confounded. What was he doing with his wife? Where were they? Why would he threaten his wife? He panicked and snapped, “What the hell is going on?” Anger raged through his entire being, “If you harm—”

“Steady on, Major,” Humphries soothed, “all will be well with your wife and son if you do as I say.”

“If you harm them in any way, I swear, I will find you and I will kill you!”

“You really are in no position to make such a threat, Major. But I promise you, as one officer and gentleman to another, that they will be released unharmed once your task is completed. If you fail...well, let’s not talk about that right now.”

Wills was frantic but there was nothing he could do...Quinn! He would put a call through to Quinn—

“Oh,” continued Humphries intuitively, “It’s of no use to call in the gendarmes. We have removed Mrs Williams and Master Williams. They are under my care and they will be safe as long as you do as I ask.”

The word ‘we’ caught his attention; who was with him? But his wife and son were his main concern. Defeated, Wills barked, “What do you want?”

“Many things,” was the Colonel’s obscure reply, “but, in essence, blood.”

Wills’ heart sank. He couldn’t imagine what he meant by this.

Humphries changed tack and continued, “Do you know what happens to a man when his testicles are removed, Major? He becomes impotent. People ridicule him behind his back. His wife openly mocks him, belittles him. She tells her family and friends and, soon enough, he has been stripped of his dignity. His many accomplishments are nullified, negated. That alone is enough to send a proud and able man falling into the abyss of depression and self-loathing. In order to survive, those feelings of dejection and gloom soon transform into hatred and contempt for those who taunt him; for the women in his life. And for women at large. Of course, modern medicine can help allay those murderous thoughts.

“However, should this man be remiss and fail to take his abrogating medication, a man such as he could quite easily vent his rage on any woman near him. Do you understand me, Major?”

Desperately trying to keep his anger in check, Wills replied, “Your story begs the question, ‘why my wife?’ She has done nothing to you—”

“Simply a means to an end.”

“What end?” Wills was reluctant to ask but frantic to know. His rage caused him to lose the little control he had, “What game are you playing at?” he shouted.

“SHUT UP, MAJOR!” The sudden violent outburst caught Wills by surprise as it did his wife and son. Over the telephone cable, Wills heard their fearful cries and the frantic yapping of their newly acquired little dog, Mikey.

“SHUT THEM UP!” Humphries screamed at his unseen accomplice. Within a few moments, all Wills could discern through the connection were a loud yelp from Mikey, a few sobbing cries from his son and Cornelia comforting him son with soft, quieting words.



Wills' fists were clenched tight with apprehension and helplessness, and he strained to keep calm.

“Now, where were we?” Humphries returned to Wills with a controlled tone. “Ah, yes, blood. You do realise, Major, that an arrest warrant has been issued for your cherished colleague?”

“What?” The news stumped Wills.

“Yes, for treason, I believe. Capital offence, you know. ‘Off with her head’ and all that,” Humphries chuckled with self-satisfaction. His voice changed, “BUT THAT’S NOT GOOD ENOUGH!” he raged. “That woman is a cat with nine lives! She will find a way out! SHE HAS TO PAY!”

It was obvious to Wills that Humphries was deranged and that Davies was the catalyst of his hatred of women in general. He tried to fathom why but his unspoken query was soon answered.

“She ruined everything, that damned woman! Damn her! DAMN HER TO HELL!”

“How? How did she ruin everything? You don’t even know her.”

“It was all planned. This would have been the last. I would have had enough to start over.”

“You?” Wills couldn’t believe what this bedlamite was admitting, “You abducted those women?”

“Is that so incredible, Major? I was an excellent campaign strategist in my time. Highly regarded.”

“Why? Why kill them? You had the money.”

He scoffed and, with a sense of placating impatience, he explained, “They were just women. They served their purpose.”

“They were innocent women. They did you no harm.”

“They were like all wealthy women: pampered, spoilt, selfish, indolent, stupid, uncaring sycophants and adulterers and burdens to the men, the husbands, fathers and brothers, that looked after them. We were taught to treat them like goddesses, with respect and adoration. And what did they do? They abused that veneration—”

It became apparent to Wills that this man was, indeed, insane and the cause of his unbalanced view of women was his own experiences with them. At the risk of making the situation worse, he interrupted Humphries' tirade with a fearfully hesitant, "How is Mrs Humphries?"

"Dead. Now, shall we get on with this, Major? I haven't got all day and your missus may have even less."

All Wills could do was listen to this madman and hear what his demands were.

Humphries took a moment to collect his thoughts. Calmly, he resumed, "You asked me what I wanted in exchange for your wife and son. And dog. Blood. Davies' blood." He quickly reconsidered, "No! Her heart. Yes, I want her heart ripped out and brought to me."

"You're a lunatic!"

"Am I?"

Without warning, Wills was horrified when he heard his wife scream.

"STOP!!" Wills shouted but Cornelia's plaintive cries continued accompanied by his son's desperate pleas for them to stop hitting his mother.

"Understand, Major, only you can make it stop."

"I'll do it! I'll do it...stop...please stop...stop..."

"Well done, Major!" and, with that, his wife's screams became a quiet string of sobbing cries.

"Now," Humphries, having won the battle, continued in a jovial mood, "the details. Let's see. Hmm... there's a small town about twenty-five miles north from there, Wickham Upper. There's a slaughterhouse there. Perfect, don't you think, Major? Get her off her deathbed, into a cart and there after six. Tonight.

"I will have my man waiting there to collect that deviant's warm heart as soon as you've excised it from her chest."

Wills' mind was awash with jumbled contradicting thoughts: those he cared most for in this world were under threat of death and he had to choose who would live and who die. His usually calm and controlled demeanour was now trembling with fear, his handsome face wrinkled and pale with apprehension. He was unable to speak and barely able to breathe.

“Oh,” the retired colonel continued, his manner condescending, “do remember that the arrest warrant will be there by noon with the indomitable Sergeant Yabsley and that our esteemed Sir Giles Hawthorne will hear from said Yabsley once he’s collected the warrant from Mr Quinn.”

“Wha...? Where does Hawthorne fit in all this?”

“Sir Giles? Hah! He’s a fool, an idiot. A little man with a big ego.” As an afterthought, and just to irritate Wills further, he added, “Pity Dickie wasn’t a better shot—could have saved us all a lot of bother, eh?”

Rebecca was right. Even with the anxiety he was experiencing, he acknowledged that all she had surmised was correct. But he needed to hear the confirmation from Humphries, “Captain Gregory Smith. Dickie.”

Wills could almost hear Humphries smile. “Good work, Major! You’re worth your salt.”

“The ‘deviant’ worked it out.”

“Hmm...The last postulation she will make, I’m afraid. Right-o, Major, we’re now off to parts unknown—to you, that is. Don’t disappoint me, Major Williams, and your wife and child will live to see the morrow’s sunrise.”

The disconnecting click of the telephone echoed in Wills’ brain. He stood there in a trance as visions of his wife and son being cruelly mistreated jumbled together with the vision of him killing Rebecca and bloodily extracting her heart...

There had to be a way...there had to be...

But he couldn’t see it.

Stupefied, he turned and stopped in his tracks upon seeing Henry staring up at him open mouthed.

“Gaw, Major Williams, you look like you seen a ghost.”

“Henry...” Wills licked his lips; his mouth had become very dry, “Henry, I need a horse and cart. Do you know where Wickham Upper is?”

“Wickham Upper? Aye, about twenty mile up the Middlebrook Way. Why do you need a horse and cart?”

Young Henry reminded Wills of his own son, always asking questions. “I’ll tell you later. Can you find one for me or should I ask the Duke or your father first?”

“Nah, I know how to hitch a cart. And the Duke said to give you whatever you want.”

“Good boy.”

“Can I come, too?”

“No.” The disappointment on Henry’s young face was touching; Wills explained, “I have an errand to run and I won’t be back until well after midnight.”

“I can help—”

“I said no!” Wills softened, “No, Henry. Just me. Make it ready in an hour, all right?”

“Aye.”

Wills felt bad leaving Henry there sulking but there was little else he could do.

Rather than taking breakfast in the morning room with his squad, Wills wandered into the gardens and drifted back and forth, his heart heavy. What he had to do was kill his only steadfast friend, someone who had fought alongside him for some twenty years, someone who had saved not only his life on several occasions, but his reputation as well. Someone whom he loved dearly and for whom he pledged to give up his life as she had pledged to him. And now it would be he who would take that life away.

He had to choose between the life of his compatriot and that of his wife and son.

There had to be a way...

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Now that the weekend guests were gone and the drama concluded, there was no longer any need for secrecy or to keep the staff segregated from the east wing of the hall. Everyone was free to carry on with their normal duties.

I was amused and a little surprised when, at the knock on my door and my invitation to enter, Mrs McPherson led a rather apprehensive Florence into my room and directed her to place the laden breakfast tray on the nearby desk.

“Good morning, Miss Davies,” greeted Lady Katherine’s housekeeper as she made her way to the shutters. “You should not be out of bed,” she nonchalantly tossed at me over her shoulder, and allowing the morning sun to invade the room. “Did y’ have a good rest?”

“Yes, thank you, Mrs McPherson, and you needn’t bother with our morning ritual. As much as we both enjoy you fondling me, I took care of my lavations myself.” Of course, my comments were meant to rattle Florence, which, by the sound of the clanking of the crockery on the tray, they did and admirably so. This brought a smile to my face and a disapproving scowl on Mrs McPherson’s.

The desk was only a few feet away and I was determined to get there under my own steam.

“Och! Let me help you to the desk,” clamoured the housekeeper rushing to my assistance.

“I can manage, thank you,” I refused, straightening myself up and taking a few unsteady steps to the desk.

“You’re a stubborn woman, Miss Davies.”

“Thank you, Mrs McPherson, I appreciate your insight and candour,” I replied with a smile.

Easing myself carefully onto the prepared chair at the desk, it was then that I noticed that Lady Katherine was standing in the doorway.

“Good morning, Rebecca, I see you have regained your sense of defiance. You must be feeling better.”

“Thank you, my lady. Will you join me for breakfast?”

“No. Unfortunately, I must confer with the Duke on final matters of business before returning to Lilyfield this afternoon. However, I will take luncheon with you so we can discuss plans for your stay there.”

“I look forward to it, my lady.”

“Until then...” There was no mistaking the meaning behind the smile she gave me. My stay at the Countess of Chestermere’s estate gave me hope that my life had finally found some meaning and, as unlikely as it seemed, someone who felt the same way I did.

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He lost all track of time pacing the garden. Checking his pocket watch revealed he had wandered the grounds for more than half an hour. With half-hearted resolution, Wills strode back into the mansion only to be met by a grinning Sir Giles Hawthorne.

“Major Williams,” he began, barely able to conceal his smirk, “Detective Sergeant Yabsley telephoned to me and informed me that he will be on today’s train from Kings Cross. You and Davies will be present when he arrives, I presume?”

All Wills was able to afford Hawthorne was a deadly glare as he brushed past.

All Hawthorne could reply in return was a self-satisfied snort and, “Checkmate!”

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I was left to my own devices and was happily downing my last cup of tea when a timid knock on the door interrupted my final gulp. “Come in.”

A little imp-faced head poked in and looked about.

“Henry!” I called, attracting his attention, “come in, close the door. What brings you here?”

He appeared worried and withdrawn, which concerned me as he was always so cheerful and self-assured.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, “Has Peleus taken ill?”

“Who is Cornelia?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Major Williams got real angry at someone who was with Cornelia. Does he live in Wickham Upper?”

These disconnected statements had me completely flummoxed. “What are you talking about, Henry?”

“Major Williams asked about Mrs Humphries and he got real scared. He ordered a horse and cart to go there and he won’t let me go with him.”

I sat there peering at the moping Henry, his simple unattached sentences making no sense to me at all. I was about to question him further when a sharp rap on the door was quickly followed by Wills stepping inside.

For a split second, time stood still; Wills was startled to see Henry with me; Henry equally startled to see Wills and I was mystified as to Wills’ uncharacteristic disposition.

“What’s he doing here?” Wills queried brusquely.

Before I could answer, Henry darted out of the room.

“I honestly don’t know,” I replied. “Are you all right? You seem agitated. Has Hawthorne—”

“Come on,” he said without ceremony, “we’ve got to go.”

I didn’t understand what was going on but I trusted Wills completely. I pushed myself out of the chair and said, “Let me get my things—”

“No. You won’t need them.”

This stumped me. “I won’t? Where are we going?”

Wills gave an exasperated sigh and his shoulders slumped, “Rebecca, Hawthorne’s got a warrant for your arrest and it’s on its way here with Yabsley.” The way he looked at me told me he was telling me only half the story.

“I’m not going to run, Wills. I’ve done nothing to run from.”

“Don’t argue with me, Davies!” His outburst caught me by surprise; he sensed this and calmed down. “Please. Don’t make this harder than it already is. Put on your jacket and let’s go.”

I took a long moment scrutinising Wills, trying to decipher what was going through his head. What had rattled him so? What had Cornelia, Mrs Humphries, the cart and Wickham Upper to do with my arrest warrant and all this?

A feeling of foreboding overcame me.

“May I leave a note for Lady Katherine? We were to have lunch together.”

Wills grimaced and looked away. I was now convinced that something more than my imminent arrest was causing him this incongruous anxiety.

I quickly penned a note and sealed it inside an envelope, marking it, ‘For Lady Katherine’ and left it on the desk.

Wills helped me on with my jacket.

“My gun. My bag.”

“Leave them.”

That sealed it.

I felt my heart pounding in my chest, my breath laboured; it had come to this.

For long moments we looked at each other unable to speak. The look on his face was one of complete defeat, of fear and regret. I actually felt sorry for him.

However, fate was what it was for the both of us: unchangeable.

I took a deep breath and straightened up. Whatever my fate was, I would meet it head-on. Propped up by my walking stick, I made for the door, “Let’s go, then.”

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The corridor was empty and I gingerly headed for the servants’ stairs. Wills turned back into my room and returned a few seconds later. His action may have been to retrieve the note I left for the countess but the bulge under his coat indicated otherwise; I didn’t really care anymore.

We made it down the back stairs unnoticed by several servants. It was heavy going for me and Wills offered assistance but I shrugged it off. I didn’t need pity.

Just outside the back door of the kitchen stood a pony hitched to a two-wheeled dogcart. The vehicle wasn’t very big but would have satisfactorily performed its original purpose of transporting a gentleman, his loader and his gundogs to the fields had the duke been so inclined. The box under the seat was big enough for three or four hounds and had side ventilation louvres for their comfort. Today, it was closed and empty.

With some effort, I pulled myself up onto the box seat using the two mounting steps and seat rail. My hip ached and my arm throbbed, and perspiration betrayed the pain my exertions were causing.

But I sat quietly staring ahead. Fatalistic thoughts tumbled through my head. Had I been uninjured, I would not have been so compliant. Like this, I could hardly run or ride; hell, I could hardly walk or sit.

Wills took up his place next to me and, reins in hand, gently slapped them against the pony’s rump with a quiet, “Walk on.”

Even now, with obvious turmoil and frustration bubbling under the surface, Wills remained outwardly composed.

We headed out through the main gates at an easy trot and I marvelled that no one from the DSO had seen us or tried to stop us.



The jarring of the gravel road caused me substantial discomfort. Wills gave me a sideways glance then reached under his jacket and handed me the cause of the bulge: my bottle of whisky.

I took it and gulped down a good mouthful to deaden my pain both physical and spiritual.

The scant, confused information that had tumbled out of Henry played through my head trying to form itself into a comprehensible chain of logic.

Another generous swig and the pain eased and my muscles relaxed. Contrarily, my wits sharpened; the individual links were joining up. It was all beginning to make sense: Wills' behaviour, his reticence, the urgency. I decided not to say anything until we had reached our destination.

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The pony and dogcart and its two passengers had driven through Abbotsford village several hours before the train from London arrived and disgorged the Royal Mail and Detective Sergeant Yabsley. Detective Byrne, much to Yabsley's annoyance, requested leave so he could tend his ailing mother.

Within minutes, Yabsley boarded the awaiting surrey that Sir Giles had sent and he was on his way to Abbotsford Hall to serve the arrest warrant he carried in his pocket.

Yabsley was doing as ordered but he had a niggling doubt that this witch, this Medea, this woman he loathed so much, was the perpetrator of these heinous crimes. She was many things he detested but committing brutal crimes against women? He could not convince himself that she could do such things. Her deplorable actions had always been against men who, she asserted, had harmed women.

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Lady Katherine entered Rebecca Davies' room after her gentle knocks remained unanswered.

“Rebecca? Rebecca, are you there?”

Upon finding the room empty, she returned to the corridor just as Florence approached with a tray of covered food.

“Florence, have you seen Miss Davies?”

“She ain’t back in her room, my lady?”

“She left her room?”

“I seen her go down them stairs with the major just after breakfast, my lady. I assumed she’d be back by now. I got her lunch here.”

“Oh.” Lady Katherine was perplexed.

“What shall I do with the vittles, my lady?”

“The what? Oh, the food. Best put it on the desk.”

Florence did as she was bade and returned a moment later with a letter.

“This was on the desk, my lady, for you,” Florence said handing the envelope to the countess, and, with a curtsy, quickly disappeared through the servants’ door at the end of the corridor.

Lady Katherine opened the envelope and read the note.

*“My darling Katherine,*

*I must leave. If it is at all within my power, and God willing, I will be with you once again. If not, I beg that you remember me with fondness.*

*I will love you until my dying breath,*

*R”*

The countess was fixed to the spot, reading and rereading the hastily written words, trying to understand the reason for Rebecca’s sudden flight.

The sound of a group of men bounding up the stairs caught her attention. The sight of Sir Giles Hawthorne leading a squad of five detectives raised her hackles and she stood her ground, ramrod straight.

The squad stopped in front of the countess.

Hawthorne’s supercilious smirk as he spoke made her detest him even more. “My lady, if you would, we are here to see *Miss Davies*.”

Lady Katherine raised an eyebrow and stepped aside.

“Thank you, my lady.” Even in this, his utterance of gratitude, she sensed the vitriol he had for her.

It was therefore with immense pleasure that, upon entering and searching Rebecca’s room, he returned to her, red-faced and in a vile temper, “Where is she?”

“I do not know. And, Sir Giles, I assure you, if I did have knowledge of her whereabouts, I would not impart it to you.”

“Do you know who you’re speaking to, woman! I am an officer of the law!”

“Perhaps you should take this matter up with the Duke. You are his guest here, after all.”

Hawthorne was lost for words. He was angry and snorting like an enraged bull but he did not charge. Instead, his fist clenched around the piece of paper that would have had him witness the downfall of this ungodly, unwomanly, unworthy colonist, Rebecca Davies.

He stormed back down the staircase followed by his cohort, the last two of whom, Hewitt and Ramsay, smiled with genuine admiration for Lady Katherine and, as they passed, acknowledged her with a quick bow, “My lady.”

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We had travelled at a steady pace all day, stopping only once to give the pony respite, some water and a little grain.

The hamlets we passed through along the Middlebrook Way were much smaller than Abbotsford village: sleepy little clusters of thatched cottages nestled in grazing fields dotted with sheep and cattle.

Not a word had passed between Wills and me but I could sense he was carrying a great emotional burden. His face was set stone hard in a determined grimace; the only time I had seen him like this was when he vowed revenge on those three Mohammedans for what they had done to me, so many years ago.

The daylight was almost gone and so was the whisky. I was not drunk but I was almost pain free and certainly carefree. Wills would tell me in his own good time what I had already deduced.

The signpost along the road announced the next village would be Wickham Upper.

Without thinking, I said out loud, “Almost there.”

Wills turned to me with a startled look as though I had uncovered his secret.

Another fifteen minutes or so and we were within sight of the village. In the twilight, I could just make out railway tracks in the distance. This village was more

substantial than Abbotsford and those we had passed through. This must be some sort of central depot for the local farmers. A small town I surmised.

It didn't take us long before we came upon the town itself boasting quite a few shops and an inn along the high street. The shops were now closed and darkened, only the inn and the street's gaslights illuminating the way forward. Apart from one or two local people making their way home or to the inn, the street was empty.

Wills manoeuvred the pony to the upper limits of the little town, passing the railway station and crossing the tracks. There, situated amid fenced paddocks, stood a large wooden and corrugated iron building. Disordered stacks of kegs and broken crates leaned against the walls at irregular intervals. There was no activity within or without; all was quiet and dark; no street lights here—they terminated at the railway station.

Driving the pony closer to the building, I could smell a familiar odour from the war fields, an odour that I had hoped I would not smell again: death.

The sign on the building confirmed what this was: "Wickham Upper Slaughterhouse".

Not only did the acrid odour of decaying flesh take my breath away, so did the realisation that my deductions were correct: this would be my last day on earth and Wills would be my executioner.

I knew I would die one day—that was everyone's fate—and I had always imagined it would be a violent death, such had been my life. But I had never thought that it would be by the hand of someone I trusted unreservedly and loved like a brother.

Wills pulled up the pony alongside one of the several doors along the outside walls that allowed access inside. He climbed down and found a door bolted but not locked.

Looking up at me, he ordered, almost apologetically, "Get down."

I did as directed, stumbling as my injured leg gave way. His attempt to assist me was unwelcomed. I pushed him away and pulled myself upright and, with the aid of my walking stick, hobbled into the building, followed by Wills.

It was dark inside but, once my eyes had adjusted, I could make out that the interior of the building was cavernous. Large, straw-covered holding pens sectioned off the floorspace and were separated by a large corridor running down the middle. Some of the

pens were empty but most held the unfortunate beasts awaiting processing the following day. Injured horses, old hacks, donkeys, mules and oxen that had outlived their usefulness, beef cattle, pigs, wethers, ewes which could no longer reproduce, all here dozing and oblivious to their fate. Or, like me, if they were aware, resigned to it.

“Here,” Will said softly, indicating an almost empty pen with an ample covering of straw.

I entered it and turned to Wills who had followed me in and had withdrawn his Webley. His arms hung limply by his side and his head was bowed. I detected a slight tremor in his gun hand.

“Don’t feel regret, Wills,” I offered, “Your wife and son are more important.”

Wills looked up at me. It was then that I could see the glistening of his tears as they ran down his cheeks into his moustache.

“Do what you must to save them,” I continued, “I am ready.”

His look of pity and disbelief was heartrending.

I lied. I really wasn’t ready to die. I didn’t want to die. Not now; not when I had found someone who loved me as much as I loved her. But why make it difficult for the man who meant so much to me? He had no alternative if he were to save his wife and son, two people who should not pay for my sins. And I had many to account for.

Wills raised his revolver and aimed it at me. His hand trembled and he had difficulty holding true aim. “I’m sorry, Rebecca,” he rasped hoarsely, “I am so sorry...Humphries...He wants your heart...He’s sending someone...”

“He’s the mastermind,” I supplied, adding, “It all makes sense, now. There is still a spy amongst us. Find the spy and you’ll find Humphries. And when you do, kill him. For me.”

Wills dropped his arm and sobbed uncontrollably, “I can’t. I can’t...”

“You must. Think of Cornelia. And young Reggie. I’ve lived my life. And I’m tired, Wills. You know that. Look at me. Of what use am I to anyone now? I’m a cripple. Save your wife and son. Revenge my death.” I couldn’t hold back that damned tear that escaped.

Wills' sobbing convulsions abated and he once again looked at me. His blue eyes scintillated with welling tears and his face contorted with regret. He raised his gun to me again. I closed my eyes and heard him utter, "Forgive me."

In the dark, cavernous slaughterhouse, a single shot rang out startling the condemned animals within.

Major Williams' shoulders slumped and he fell to his knees crying unbridled tears of regret, guilt and self-loathing. There was no going back. He made his choice and he would accept all the consequences of his actions.

Nearby, lay the dead body oozing blood from a single bullet wound to the head.

With a remorse he had never before felt in his life, Wills holstered his murderous weapon and took the switchblade stiletto from his boot and released the catch. His legs felt like jelly and, unable to stand, he stumbled to the lifeless form.

Although repulsed by what he had to do, he plunged the knife into the soft abdominal flesh and ripped a large gash up to the ribcage. His face awash with anguish for the death he had just caused, he panted, "Cornelia...Rebecca...I am so sorry..." and thrust his hand into the ragged laceration finding the heart in the hot cavity.

"Oh, God...God forgive me..."

Struggling to retrieve the heart, he pushed in his other hand and, slicing away all the connecting tissue, veins and arteries, removed the heart. Residue blood from it pooled onto his trousers and jacket.

Cradling the object in his blood-soaked hands, Wills once again was overcome with grief and desperation and wept once more.

It took a few deep breaths for Wills to regain control of his emotions. Using his sleeve, he fiercely wiped away the tears from his face and looked about. He needed a sack or cloth in which to carry the trophy to that lunatic, Humphries. With apologetic reverence, he removed Davies' jacket and wrapped the heart in it.

Staggering to his feet, he stumbled toward the door, leaving Rebecca amid the straw, the butchery, blood and death.

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Outside, the night had turned suddenly cold. Or was it just Major Williams shivering from the thought of the dreadful act he had just committed? His bespoke Savile Row suit was soaked in blood as were his hands and linen cuffs. In those blood-soaked hands he held the sacrificial heart wrapped in his partner's jacket. This was the payment to redeem his wife and child from a vengeful madman.

For long moments he stared at bundle in disbelief. How did it come to this?

A distant rumble slowly brought him out of his inertia to face the approach of a motorcycle racing along the road from the town's outskirts and toward him. It caught Wills in its headlight as it stopped just short of him.

"There you are!" said the rider as he dismounted, leaving the motor running.

The Irish intonation of this statement was familiar. "Constable Byrne?" Wills was confused.

"Right the first time, Major Williams," Byrne confirmed taking a few steps toward Wills. "Is that for me?"

The truth suddenly revealed itself to Wills: Byrne was the pickup man. Byrne was Humphries' lackey. Byrne was the spy. It was Byrne who planted the notes in the unionist's house. It was Byrne who changed the coordinates. And it was Byrne who passed information to Humphries. Rebecca was on the right track. But it didn't make sense.

"Why, Byrne? Why?"

"Ah, Major, it's a long story. Let's just say that it was Mr Arthur Griffith who inspired me and others like me. Ireland should not be ruled by a foreign country. We ourselves should govern it. *Sinn Féin*."

"The ransom money?"

"To buy weapons. If peaceful means don't work, then by violent ones. We will win, Major."

Once more, Wills was puzzled. This was not what Humphries intimated; the colonel's motives were purely selfish. Humphries wanted the money for himself.

Byrne continued, "Now, Major, enough small talk. I have an errand to run. You have something for me, I believe."

Wills reached the bundle over to Byrne and accused, “It was you who harmed my wife.”

Byrne opened the bundle and fobbed off Wills’ allegation, “Ah, ‘twas but a little slap. She’ll survive.” He snorted when he saw the heart, “So this is what an invert’s heart looks like. What mysteries lie within.”

His cheerful, frivolous attitude annoyed Wills. “You won’t get away with this, Byrne. I will track you and Humphries down and I will kill you both for what you did to my wife and son.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. Now, forgive me if I doubt your word but I have orders to see for myself that our esteemed Assisting Clerk is, indeed, no longer breathing this fresh country air. Let me assure you that the old colonel is a man of his word—even if he is English—and, once I get back with this, your wife and son will be released unharmed.”

He gave Wills an unreadable smirk, “You, however—” Without warning, Byrne pulled out his service revolver and fired it point-blank at Wills’ body.

Wills staggered a step backward, grabbing his chest. The look of disbelief transformed to one of agony as he collapsed to the ground, semiconscious and groaning.

Byrne shook his head, disappointed that he needed another cartridge to complete the task. He took the few steps toward Wills and stood over the incapacitated man, placing the muzzle of his gun to Wills’ head to deliver the coup de grace.

“You there! Halt!!”

The shouted commands startled Byrne. He looked up to see in the distance two men sprinting toward him from behind the building. One was carrying a lantern and nightstick and the other a long firearm.

“Murder! Murder!!” yelled the other and blew his police whistle with all the air his lungs could expel.

Without another moment’s hesitation, Byrne fled to his motorcycle, revved it up and skidded away holding the wrapped heart securely in his lap.

“Stop! STOP!!” bellowed the watchman again while the other man with the lantern flew to Wills’ side. Upon seeing the bloodied, still form lying there, he called to his partner with the shotgun, “He’s done for.”



The watchman with the shotgun noticed the open door and called, “Bring the lantern.”

What they saw inside the slaughterhouse sickened them.

“Good Lord! What sort of lunatic would do such a thing?”

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## CHAPTER 18

Mid-September, 1905

### Wickham Upper Slaughterhouse Revisited

Young Henry Pitman didn't know his mother; she died giving him life ten years earlier. He was left in the care of his grandmother, his only other relative, until she too passed away. He was only seven years of age. With the only alternative an orphanage, the elder Pitman begged the grandee of Abbotsford Hall to allow his son to live with him there.

The duke had no difficulty in deciding and, very soon, young Henry Pitman proved himself to be a willing and able help to both his father in the stables and to Mr Thomson as a hall boy.

Henry loved being with his father and around horses more than he did snuffing candles and polishing shoes, and expressed a firm desire to be a jockey as soon as he was able—he was a small boy.

He didn't lack discipline or education—he was intelligent and canny for his age—but he did have a propensity for being stubborn and getting his own way by whichever means were available. He would not accept that he could not do what made him happy and, right now, he would be happiest being a detective like Miss Davies and Major Williams.

It was this desire that found him cramped up in the dog box under the seat of the dogcart going to Wickham Upper with Miss Davies and Major William—but without their knowledge. He had been there for what seemed to be days and he was hungry and needed to

wee. He was comforted to hear Miss Davies say, “Almost there,” for it wouldn’t be long before he would be able to stretch his body and relieve himself.

He could see the day darkening and then street lighting. A short while later, the cart left the illuminated road and the street lights no longer filtered through the ventilating louvres. Through the slots, Henry could see the large building that the dogcart had pulled up near and was about to open the hatch when he heard Major Williams order, “Get down.”

It was his tone and that Miss Davies wouldn’t accept his assistance when she stumbled, that made him stay inside; he sensed something wasn’t right between them.

Henry watched them go into the building and, when all was quiet again, he carefully opened the hatch and crawled out of the box. He climbed off the back of the cart and looked around. The sign on the building concerned him. “*Slaughterhouse?*” he said to himself.

The door had been left ajar—just wide enough for him to sidle his way through.

In the darkness, the first thing he sensed was the offensive smell. A little further down the aisleway he could just make out Miss Davies and the major in one of the pens. Something certainly wasn’t right between them.

His inquisitiveness impelled him carefully onward and, climbing through the posts of a nearby pen, he hunkered down, wide-eyed, waiting and listening. He couldn’t see what they were doing but he could hear what they were saying. Miss Davies was concerned for the major and his wife and she told him she was ready. In this place, ready for what? She told him to do it. Do what? He said he was sorry. Sorry for what?

Without warning, in the dark, cavernous slaughterhouse, a single shot rang out startling Henry. He sat there on his haunches in disbelief, shocked and appalled by what he imagined had happened: Major Williams had shot Miss Davies!

No! It could not be! How could he? Not Miss Davies!

Now, the only sounds he could hear were convulsing sobs, the rustling of straw and the slashing of flesh. The killer, Henry was glad to hear, was sorry for what he had done but that would not bring Miss Davies back! Henry would never forgive him this!

He had to tell someone. Major Williams had to pay for killing Miss Davies. Henry was about to get up and run out to find a constable when the major lumbered by holding a

parcel. Even in the gloom, he was shocked at seeing the amount of blood on the major's clothing and hands—blood he had given her so willingly only a week before and now was all over him. How he hated that monster. How he wanted to avenge Miss Davies' death but all he could do was watch the man as he trudged out through the door he had come.

As soon as Major Williams left, Henry sprinted to the killing pen. He had prayed so hard for her to live before—and it worked—maybe he could do it again.

He timorously approached the pen and caught sight of Miss Davies.

He stood there, mouth agape, wide-eyed and in total disbelief. “M...Miss Davies...”

There she was, amid the straw, the butchery, blood and death...alive and well!

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“Henry!” I gasped, shocked at seeing him, “What are you doing here?”

“He didn't kill you!” he cried and ran to me and gave me such a hug that he almost knocked me off my feet. “He didn't kill you!”

“No,” I confirmed, gathering my composure, “I'm as surprised as you are.”

Henry let go of me and was horrified when he saw the awful, bloodied sight I was standing near. A sow had been sacrificed in my place and it was her heart that Wills had taken.

Henry looked up at me and said earnestly, “I'm sorry for her but I'm glad for you,” and gave me another vicelike embrace.

His concern for me was endearing and I found myself, once again, fighting back the tears. But this was not the time for sentiment. We had to be extremely careful for the sake of Wills and his family.

I put my hand on Henry's shoulder and squeezed. Looking him squarely in the eyes, I warned, “Henry, someone is coming and he must not know that I am still alive. No one must. The lives of Major Williams' wife and son are in mortal danger. Do you understand?”

Henry repeated, “I understand.”

“Do you swear to tell no one, not even your father, that I am alive?”

The moment Henry earnestly confirmed, “I swear,” the sound of a motorcycle's engine became apparent.

“Come,” I urged, “we must go. There must be another way out. Quickly, this way.”

‘Quickly’ was easier said than done. I limped along as fast as I could and Henry, bless him, stayed with me to help.

At the other end of the long corridor was another door but it, too, had been bolted from the outside. The nearby window offered the solution and Henry the wherewithal. Without a moment’s hesitation, he twisted the lock, pushed up the sash, climbed through the opening and slipped the door’s bolt on the outside.

There, we carefully picked our way around the side of the building from one untidy pile of crates to another when we heard voices approaching from the railway station. We stopped and hid ourselves behind a pile of kegs and were safely obscured by them and darkness.

“I’m sure I heard a gunshot. It came from here,” insisted one man carrying a lantern and nightstick.

The other, shouldering a shotgun scoffed, “You’re balmy, mate.”

“Shh. I hear voices,” the first said and listened intently. “There! Around the side!”

A gunshot rang out. My heart sank. Wills! No!!

“This way! This way!” called the first man again as they both ran toward the source of the report.

Henry took a step to follow them but I pulled him back. “No!”

We could hear the watchmen shouting, “You there! Halt!!” and “Murder! Murder!!” and long bursts of a police whistle but Henry and I held tight where we were. A moment later, the night was filled with the sound of a motorcycle’s engine revving up and taking off, screaming away into the darkness, followed by shouts of “Stop! STOP!!”

I was desperately fearful that Wills had been hurt and, pulling Henry along behind, made my way around to the other side of the building where, from behind a large, discarded barrel, we saw the watchman with the lantern crouched over the inert body of Wills.

“He’s done for,” the watchman ruefully informed his partner with the shotgun.

“No...” I silently cried, “Nooooo...”.

“Bring the lantern,” the second watchman called back.

Leaving Wills in the dark, both watchmen made their way into the slaughterhouse.

Henry and I both heard the low groan Wills expelled.

“He ain’t dead!” Henry cried and it was all I could do to pull him back behind the barrel.

“Henry. Listen,” my whispered urgency caught his attention, “Get the major to a doctor. Urgently. The constable will be here very soon. Get him to call Alexander Quinn of the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police. Got that? Alexander Quinn. Special Branch. Tell the constable the major is on a secret assignment and no one must know about this. Or me. Got that? No one.”

With each specific instruction, Henry nodded his head and repeated the last word of it. I was confident he understood the urgency and importance of what he was about to do but I asked him to repeat the directives.

“Major to a doctor quick. Metropolitan Police. Special Branch. Alexander Quinn. Secret assignment,” he whispered back, then added, “and no one is to know you’re here.”

“Good boy. Now go.”

Henry ran to Wills’ side and dropped to his knees. “Major! Major! Don’t die!”

“Henry...?” Wills gasped just before he slid into unconsciousness.

Henry jumped to his feet and yelled, “Get a doctor! He’s alive! Get a doctor!” bringing both watchmen back out. From the high street, a portly man puffed his way to them and panted, “What’s this?”

Henry yelled, “Get a doctor! Quick!”

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The culmination of the events of the long, arduous day saw me reluctantly leaving my most cherished friend dying in the field, and a small stableboy with the task of saving him. I had to leave them there or Wills’ wife and son may have perished should it be known that I had survived.

Hidden behind the large discarded barrel, in the deep shadows of the night, I had watched on as Henry acquitted himself heroically and admirably, as he directed the two watchmen and the town’s constable to fetch a doctor and to call Mr Alexander Quinn of the Special Branch in London. At first, they dithered until he shouted that they would be up for

murder if they let Major Williams die. The boy certainly had audacity and gumption to spare.

Inquisitive townsmen filtered from the nearby cottages to see what the commotion was all about and were astonished by the amount of blood on the dying man's hands and clothing. Conjecture and hypotheses were bandied about but, true to his word, Henry gave not a hint of why this had happened. All he would tell them was that they were just passing through when they were set upon—he was a quick and believable yarn spinner, young Henry.

This is where I left them, hoping and praying that no time would be lost in getting Wills the medical assistance he so desperately needed.

My hasty departure from Abbotsford Hall saw me dressed only in my blacks—trousers and turtleneck sweater. I had no jacket—Wills had taken that—and no coat and I was feeling the chill of the late autumn night.

My only appurtenances were my walking stick and the white calico sling that strapped my arm close to my chest. My Webley, gloves, balaclava, and the rest of my tools of trade had all been left behind in my portmanteau, as had my pocketbook with money and the keys to my flat. The only weapon I carried was my switchblade stiletto hidden in my boot.

I had to find a way back to London without anyone knowing and to recover from my injuries there. It was only then and from there that I could do anything to find Humphries and make him pay for what he'd done to Wills and his family, notwithstanding the atrocities he perpetrated on those three young women and what he had planned for my Lady Katherine. He would pay and he would pay dearly.

The horror at the slaughterhouse and the confusion caused by the congregating townsmen with their morbid curiosity gave me the opportunity to make my way to the train station. Moving about unseen, however, was difficult given my ambulatory constraints and the white sling about my arm, which didn't help in obscuring my movements but I managed. I found the station master's office and broke in. Rummaging around I found an old, tattered blanket, good enough to shut out some of the chill.

The station master's locker was just as easily jemmied, and there I found two penny dreadfuls, a jar of biscuits and a few coppers and a shilling. The stale shortbread confections were enough to keep the hunger pangs at bay and the coins would be enough to get me onto a train and within cooe of a fat pocket to pick. I was in no mood to read hackneyed crime stories so I found a dark corner to wait for the first train through in the morning.

Tired as I was, I couldn't sleep for the worry I had for Wills.

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The old stone farmhouse was small, dilapidated and forgotten for decades. The surrounding gardens now a mass of untidy weeds threading their way through the dry branches of long-dead rose bushes. The night air was brisk and quiet save for the occasional rustling of some animal or other foraging through the tall grasses. The quarter moon shone a pallid glow over the gently rolling pastures and the winding weather-damaged track that led to the small front door of the shelter.

Behind the house stood a dozing horse hitched to a cart ready to go if needed.

A faint, flickering light escaped between the cracks of the poorly fitted shutters on the windows.

"I do beg pardon for the rude accommodation, Mrs Williams," apologised Colonel Humphries, his voice calm and measured—an obvious indication that he had taken his prescribed medication, "I do hope you understand the necessity of removing you here."

Cornelia Williams sat huddled in a corner on the filthy floor of the hovel, trying to suppress her trembling. Her arms were clasped tightly around her son, Reggie, who, in turn, clutched Mikey to his chest. An occasional anxious tear would escape, which she would instantly brush away lest this monster holding them captive would think her afraid.

She was afraid, of course, afraid for her son and for her husband, and for herself. She overheard this madman's ranting diatribe against women. She heard his barbaric demands for Rebecca Davies' heart. Her head still throbbed from the cuffs she had received from that malicious Irishman. He had hit her son, too, when he tried to help her.

"It shouldn't be long now," Humphries conciliated, "My man should be back very soon with the merchandise."



“And you’ll release us?” she asked with an obvious tremor in her voice.

“I am a man of my word, Mrs Williams. If your husband has done as asked, no harm will come to you or your precious son. You will be free to go.”

“And if he doesn’t...can’t...?”

Humphries merely looked at her but she could see, even in that feeble light, the insanity in his eyes.

“Yes,” Humphries said, heaving a sigh of satisfaction, “it shouldn’t be long now,” and returned his attention to peering through the cracks in the shutters.

Cornelia watched him and wondered what Rebecca Davies had done to cause him such hatred and lust for vengeance. She owned that she didn’t particularly like her husband’s so-called Assisting Clerk but she really didn’t know why she felt that animosity. Was it because this woman was a free spirit and did as she pleased? Was it because she professed to being unnatural and wasn’t ashamed of it? Was it jealousy she felt because of the esteem in which her husband held his colleague?

Rebecca Davies was not a bad woman, Cornelia conceded; she was different. By all accounts, she had proven herself most capable and better than most of the men she worked with. But to kill her? To force her husband to carry out this outrageous defilement of her dead body was savagery of the lowest rank.

Reggie looked up at his mother and shivered, “Mamma...”

“Shh...All will be well, Reggie. Your Papa will fetch us soon.”

Humphries’ reactive snort and gloating smirk as he continued staring out into the darkness stunned Cornelia into a horrified realisation of what this meant for her husband.

“Ah!” the colonel said as he abruptly stood up, “the messenger approaches.”

It was then that Cornelia heard the sputtering of an advancing motorcycle and watched intently as Humphries strode to the door to meet the rider. Kieran Byrne loped in carrying a blood-soaked jacket and wearing an unreadable look that bordered on apology.

“You have it?” Humphries asked, reaching for the parcel.

Byrne relinquished the item confirming with slight hesitation, “I do.”

Humphries carefully unravelled the covering and, upon seeing the bloodied, dark red muscle with stubs of severed veins and arteries, began laughing joyously.

Cornelia gasped in horror knowing this was the heart of someone she knew. She found it difficult to breathe; her son was alarmed seeing his mother fret so, “Mamma! Mamma!”

She immediately shielded him from the horrific sight, “It’s all right, Reggie, it’s all right,” trying her hardest to calm down and not terrify the boy.

Humphries ignored her and asked Byrne, “You saw her body?”

“That’s her jacket, there,” Byrne replied evasively.

“But you saw her?”

“Well, no...em...there was—”

“And the major?”

“As you instructed.”

Cornelia rallied, “What about Major Williams? What did you instruct?”

Humphries ignored her. “You’re certain?”

“Well...” Byrne struggled, “we were set upon by two watchmen—”

Humphries growled, his face contorted; he ordered Byrne, “Outside!”

They left Cornelia desperate to know what they were saying; desperate to know if her husband was alive and safe. She strained to hear what was being said but terrified to leave the corner.

Outside, Humphries took Byrne a few paces away from the door.

“Tell me what happened.”

“We were disturbed. But he’s in a bad way. He won’t survive the night. I couldn’t finish him off. One of the watchmen had a shotgun. I had to go. You’ve got her heart. He’s a goner,” Byrne prattled.

Humphries stared at Byrne for long moments.

Byrne wanted to leave and he wanted the money he was promised. One final act of impatience had him demand, “He’s dead. She’s dead. I’ve done my part. I want my share.”

“Hmm,” Humphries nodded as he casually handed the jacket and its gory contents back to Byrne, puzzling him. But Byrne was relieved when Humphries reached into his coat pocket.

“*The money. My share,*” Byrne thought but was horrified when he saw the revolver in Humphries’ hand. Before he could utter another word, two rounds pierced Byrne’s chest. The look of disbelief that Byrne gave him amused Humphries. He calmly took the bundle from Byrne’s hands just as the Irishman collapsed to the ground dead.

“Money for the Irish revolution? I think not,” Humphries scoffed, a royalist through and through.

Humphries returned to the house to find Cornelia weeping hysterically and shielding her son from this maniac.

“Don’t! Please don’t,” she wailed piteously.

“Pull yourself together, woman! I gave my word.” He casually tossed the bundle away and, annoyed by the caterwauling, ordered, “Stop that immediately or you’ll force me to break my promise to your husband.” Cornelia’s hysteria abated to sobbing spasms. “That’s better,” Humphries crooned while withdrawing a coin from the sovereign case attached to his fob chain. “I’ll be leaving now. The town of Wickham Upper is five miles to the left when you reach the top of this road. There’s a train station there. Don’t get lost and be careful, there are some very dangerous men out there! I would wait until morning to leave if I were you.” He gave Cornelia a smile that chilled her to the bone when he added, “and you’ll find your husband there.”

Humphries left Cornelia, Reggie and Mikey huddled in the corner of that disused cottage with the faint lamplight flickering, and climbed aboard the waiting cart at the back, awakening the dozing hack. A flick of the whip had them trotting off along the path to the highway.

When he reached the intersection with the highway he stopped and decided to turn left rather than right. It was a bold and somewhat dangerous move but he had to be certain that both his adversaries were, indeed, dead. Besides, no one knew him at Wickham Upper. A few quick questions and he would turn around and proceed to his prearranged destination.

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The town was still abuzz with gawkers even at this late hour, standing around in little clusters, shaking their heads and tut-tutting at the calamitous atrocities.

Humphries pulled up close to one of these groups and interjected, “Apologies for the interruption, gentlemen, but what’s all the fuss about?” His query was put to them most innocently and with due concern.

“A stranger’s been murdered up there near the slaughterhouse,” offered one solemnly.

“He ain’t dead yet,” another contradicted.

“Won’t be long, but. He’s real bad off,” a third added.

“I see...” Humphries conciliated but he needed to know about Davies, so probed, “The slaughterhouse, you say. What on earth was he doing there?”

“Butchering a grunter,” the first replied.

“Covered in the beast’s blood,” added the second.

“A...a grunter?” Humphries queried, confused.

“Gutted,” another added.

“What do you mean ‘a grunter’?” Humphries asked of the first man.

“A porker, your honour, a pig. You know, oink, oink.”

His two friends couldn’t help but laugh when their friend added, “You’re not from here, are you?”

Humphries sat there, his anger rising, as the realisation of what had occurred manifested itself. He felt cheated. “*A pig! A pig’s heart! Nine lives!*” his inner voice screamed, “*that bitch has nine lives!*” He realised then that he had relinquished his trump card. “*The Williams woman!*”

The poor hack copped the brunt of Humphries’ fury when it was whipped into motion and then turned back the way they had come and whipped further into a full gallop away from the town leaving the group shaking their heads in disbelief.

His maniacal behaviour and erratic driving caused him to almost collide with several other bystanders on the road.

“Out of the way!” Humphries yelled, forcing the clusters to scatter.

It took only half the time to return to the old farmhouse and was heartened to see the faint glow emanating from within.

“*Good. She stayed,*” he thought to himself. “*Stupid woman.*”

Pulling on the handbrake and jumping down from the cart, he raced inside only find the place empty.

Gone!

“Damn!” Humphries howled. “*She can’t have gone far,*” he thought, “*It’s dark. There’s nowhere to hide. She’s here somewhere. I didn’t pass her along the road—*” He hesitated. He remembered almost running down a small dog. “*Was that dog their dog?*”

“Damn!” he shrieked again. He had to find her. But contradicting thoughts rallied: “*What if she’s found someone to aid her? What if she brings them here? And that bitch Davies is still alive! I will find her and I will destroy her. I will find and destroy everything she has, everything she loves. How? How?*”

He was pacing the floor of that old farmhouse, his face flushed and contorted with fury when his violent frenzy came to the fore and exploded, echoing off the stone walls and dissipating into the blackness of the night, “DAMN YOU! DAMN YOU TO HELL, YOU FUCKING WHORES!”

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Cornelia Williams and her son, Reggie, with Mikey ensconced in his arms, had fled the old farmhouse the minute Humphries had boarded the cart and left them there. Desperate to find her husband and to save her son, she didn’t want to wait until morning lest that demented fiend return. She didn’t know what this madman would do to them if he did return, but she did know what he was capable of doing.

Taking her first tentative steps out of the farmhouse and into the blackness of the night, the first thing her eyes fell upon was the corpse of that Irishman, his vacant eyes staring blankly into the deep night sky. It was all she could do to stifle a cry of despair—not for him but for them and their plight.

Reggie had never seen a dead person before and stared at it in wide-eyed curiosity until Cornelia gently took him by the hand and drew him away. It was then that she saw the grip of Byrne’s service revolver protrude from under his coat. With a determination she didn’t know she had, she reached under the dead man’s coat and detached the gun from its holster. It was much heavier than she anticipated; she had never handled a gun before, let alone fired one, but she was adamant she would use it to protect her son at whatever cost.

Resuming their flight, they quickly reached the top of the potholed road that Humphries had only minutes before travelled along. They were panting but more from fear than exertion. Cornelia wanted to be as far away as possible from the murdered Irishman and Rebecca Davies' irreverently discarded heart; she still could not accept that her husband could do that to someone he professed to respect.

As Humphries directed, she turned left along the road to Whickham Upper where she prayed she would find her husband or news of what had become of him.

The quarter moon was low on the western horizon and the night was ominously dark and bitterly cold. She had no idea of what time it was as she hurried along the roadway pulling Reggie along behind her and Mikey trotting closely behind. Even in the gloom she could see that highway ran through open fields sparsely scattered with trees and shrubs dotted haphazardly about. Every now and then, a hedgerow marked a perimeter.

The sound of a galloping horse approaching from ahead froze her mid-stride. Her heart was pounding in her ears as she watched a carriage in the distance hurtling along the road toward her.

As it drew nearer, the driver became more distinct—Humphries!

She could stand and kill the rabid man but what if she missed? He had a gun! And he had threatened to kill them! Split second decision and she pulled her son off the road and ran toward an unkempt cherry laurel, flinging him down under it and herself on top of him as a shield should the worst happen.

It was then she noticed to her horror that Mikey had not followed them but stood like a sentinel watching the cart approach.

“Mikey!” she called in the loudest whisper; he ignored her. “Mikey, here, boy! Here!”

His reaction was to bark, and bark incessantly, at the rapidly approaching vehicle; he recognised the scent of the human who did them all harm. He barked ferociously, as though he were warning him off and to not come any closer.

Cornelia couldn't bear to watch the cart bear down on the little dog and turned her head away from the impending disaster.

The horse and cart hurtled past them and, when she looked up, by some miracle, Mikey had avoided being hit and stood his ground, continuing his remonstrations at the receding cart. Cornelia wondered how Humphries had not seen the dog and was anxious that he would come to realise what had happened, and return.

She quickly gathered her wits and decided to head cross-country, rather than along the road. They would be more difficult to find in the open fields. Staying on the road was far too dangerous.

The shrubs were few and far between but, if she planned it carefully, she should be able to run from one to the other without being seen.

She hadn't gone far when the still night air was cleaved by the scream of an insane man.

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Doctor Montgomery was a capable and experienced country doctor having tended many gunshot wounds, both accidental and deliberate, in his long professional life. Wills' injury was one which, more often than not, resulted in death. The bullet had passed through his body causing extensive bleeding but, by the grace of God, had not struck any vital organ or rib, or his spine. There was a slim chance that he would survive but he needed to be in a hospital where he would receive better care than the doctor could give him here, in the rudimentary infirmary of Wickham Upper. If the wound didn't kill him, infection would; there was every chance he would die and a very slim one that he would survive.

The soft voice of a ten-year-old boy broke the silence. "He won't die, will he, Doc?" Henry implored. "He can't die. You mustn't let him."

"Son, I've done everything I can for him here. He needs to be in a hospital. We'll get him there first thing in the morning." Dr Montgomery spoke kindly to the little stranger and ushered him away from Wills' bedside. "Come, lad, it's very late and you need to rest. There's nothing more you can do here."

"I can pray."

"Of course, son. Come and lie down on the sofa in my office. You can pray there."

A more mature male voice came from the doorway, "Just a minute, Horace," the constable quietly asserted, "I need to speak to the boy."

Constable Edwin Calthrop was born and raised in Wickham Upper and knew everyone in, and everything about, the town and its surrounding farms. He had never had such an incidence as this happen in his life and he wanted to know the whys and wherefores it came about.

“Not now, Edwin,” the doctor refused sympathetically, “The boy’s been through a lot. He needs to rest.”

Henry stood there looking up at the two men of similar age and build. He silently resolved he wasn’t going to tell anyone anything.

“I’ve just spoken to the head of the Special Branch, no less. In London, no less. And he’s sending the Chief Inspector of the Department of Special Operations, no less. And guess where he’s stationed at present? Abbotsford Hall. The seat of the Duke of Bramwell—”

“No less,” added the weary doctor. “Edwin, the boy needs rest. You can talk to him in the morning.”

Constable Calthrop persisted, “What was this man doing here? Why was he shot? Why was that pig gutted? What’s the boy got to do with all this? He’s not from these parts. He’s the only one who can tell us anything.”

“Tomorrow,” insisted Dr Montgomery, ushering the constable toward the door.

The policeman stopped. “I was told to keep my eye on him. And the man, there.”

“The man there isn’t going anywhere and you can keep your eye on the boy as he sleeps. Now go.”

“I’m expecting this fellow Sir Giles Hawthorne to arrive just after midnight. Make sure the boy’s ready to speak to him,” the constable urged.

The thought that Sir Giles Hawthorne was going to talk to him made Henry baulk. He had had nothing to do with this man but what he did see of him Henry didn’t like. The oath he gave Miss Davies resounded in him mind, “*The major is on a secret assignment and no one must know that Miss Davies was here.*” And no one would.

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It was tough going but Cornelia was sure she was heading in the right direction toward Wickham Upper. The moon had set and she was exhausted; she had been running for what



seemed to be miles. Her fine house dress was torn to shreds by the holly, hawthorn and blackthorn bushes that so ably concealed her and her son as they loped from one to the other in their desperate flight from that lunatic.

“We’re almost there, Reggie,” she encouraged her son, “not far now.” She really didn’t know where they were or how far they still had to go. The night was bitingly cold but she was perspiring. Mikey kept up with them, alert and vigilant.

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## CHAPTER 19

### The Interrogation

The doors of the coach bore the coat of arms of the tenth Duke of Bramwell, and the breakneck gallop of the two perfectly matched Yorkshire Coach Horses was faultlessly synchronised as they barrelled along Middlebrook Way at a blistering pace. The coachman was in absolute control of the vehicle and was as desperate as the men inside the coach to get to Wickham Upper as soon as physically possible but for a different reason: his son, Henry, had gone missing. When he overheard Sir Giles say that a ten-year-old boy was involved, he volunteered instantly.

Inside the elegantly appointed coach, Sir Giles, Yabsley, Hewitt and Ramsay grimly held on, both to their seat, and to the thought that one of their finest had been brought down. Quinn hadn't given very much information to Hawthorne other than to say that everything must be kept locked down and no information given out to anyone until Quinn, himself, attended. This didn't sit well with Sir Giles and, while he was shaken that the major may die, he was his own man and in charge of this squad and he would do as he saw fit.

Following the landau and keeping pace was Doctor Werner in his fully equipped dogcart. He would render as much assistance as he possibly could to the major if, indeed, he had not succumbed to his wounds.

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Doctor Montgomery had fallen asleep at his desk in his leather-bound swivel chair while keeping Henry company. Henry had settled and dozed on the sofa.

The doctor's soft snoring was interrupted by Constable Calthrop.

"Horace! Horace, come quick!"

The doctor roused quickly, as did Henry.

"What...?"

"You're needed," was all the constable would say and led the doctor out into the small reception room. There, he found the innkeeper supporting an exhausted woman and child and helping them into chairs.

"Davey was locking up when he saw these two coming in from one of the fields back of his place," explained the constable. "She's looking for her husband."

The doctor immediately began examining Cornelia and Reggie asking, "Madam, I'm Doctor Montgomery. Are you hurt?"

"My husband...I must know that my husband is safe," she replied almost incoherent from fear and exhaustion.

More concerned for her current state, the doctor enquired, "Madam, what happened to you? Who is your husband?"

"Reginald Williams," she rasped, "I'm Cornelia Williams."

Montgomery looked at Calthrop who looked at the innkeeper. The announcement caused both the doctor and the constable some consternation.

Calthrop addressed the innkeeper, "Thanks, Davey, you did good. We'll take it from here."

With the innkeeper gone, Calthrop was free to speak, "Madam, what happened to you? Why were you wandering the fields?"

"Please, may we have some water?" Cornelia begged.

"Of course, of course," the doctor obliged rushing to his infirmary to fetch the pitcher and glasses.

The constable continued his questioning, "Did your husband bring you here?"

Henry's voice intruded gently, "You're Cornelia?" he said from the doorway of the doctor's office, his face contorted by concern, "*Mrs Williams?*"

The doctor returned with the water and Cornelia helped her son drink his fill before taking any herself.

“The dog. Where’s the dog?” with more alarm than seemed necessary.

“Outside. He’s outside,” the constable confirmed.

“Please. Let him in...”

The constable didn’t want to leave but the lady did ask nicely so he quickly went outside to look for the dog while the doctor saw to Cornelia and Reggie’s multiple lacerations and bruises.

Henry approached them and looked earnestly at Major William’s wife and son and felt pity and remorse. “He’ll live,” he said softly, “I’ve prayed for him.”

“Wha—what do you mean? Where’s my husband—” she panicked.

“Mrs Williams,” began the doctor tentatively, “Your husband is in my sick bay—”

“Oh, thank God!” she uttered relieved she had found him, then realised, “In your— why? What has happened to him? Is he ill?”

“He was shot.”

“My God!—”

“Madam, please—”

“Take me to him! I want to see him!” she cried jumping to her feet despite the pain she was in.

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Cornelia was a broken woman. Everything she and her son had been through that day: her home violated; their being taken by force, not knowing if they would live or die; the violent death of a man; the heart... the human heart... the indescribable horror she felt when she saw the heart; and now her husband at death’s door. She sat alone by her husband’s bedside, weeping and praying that he be saved. He was a good man and didn’t deserve this fate. She was inconsolable. She loved him; he was her life. How could she live without him? She needed him; their son needed him. How had it come to this?

The doctor had left her there in the sick bay to grieve and reconcile their fate. He had explained what happened and what her husband’s prognosis was, and what was

intended for him in the morning. There was nothing more he alone could do but watch over him and wait.

While Constable Calthrop wanted to know more about Mrs Williams and why she was wandering the fields in the middle of the night, Dr Montgomery insisted that she be left alone and barred the constable from interviewing her further.

With her permission, the doctor took young Reggie to his office and put him to sleep on the sofa. Henry still obstinately refused to utter another word to anyone but did agree to join Reggie in slumber on the sofa. At young Reggie's insistence, Mikey nestled in between the two boys.

The constable, defeated by Henry's lack of cooperation and Mrs Williams' need to be with her husband—and Horace's refusal to allow him to interview Mrs Williams—returned to his little police station. He had arranged for the slaughterhouse to be put on lockdown and charged the two nightwatchmen to guard it and keep the morbid curiosity seekers well away until the detectives arrived.

It was pointless going home; it wouldn't be long before Scotland Yard would be there. All these strange occurrences were a puzzlement to him but he needed his rest so found comfort on the cot in the only cell there. It seemed his head had barely touched the pillow when he was abruptly shaken from his sleep.

“You there! Constable! Wake up!” Yabsley insisted.

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Once more, Doctor Montgomery's office was intruded upon, this time by six men accompanied by a tired and disgruntled Constable Calthrop.

The brief introductions by the town's constable were met with an impatient, “Yes, yes,” by Sir Giles Hawthorne who insisted, “Where's the major and the boy?”

Dr Montgomery patiently replied, “Sir Giles, Major Williams in unable to be interviewed. He is unconscious—”

“But alive?”

“Yes. Barely.”

“And the boy?” Hawthorne was in no mood for congenialities.

“The boy is far too exhausted to be of any use right now.”

Dr Werner edged his way to the front and spoke directly to the doctor, “Doctor Montgomery, I’m Doctor Benjamin Werner. Major Williams was under my care recently. May I be of assistance to you?”

Dr Montgomery shook Dr Werner’s hand in gratitude, “Yes, doctor, yes. We can use all the help we can get. The major is in the sick bay—alone—” the doctor said giving Constable Calthrop a meaningful look that wasn’t lost on him, “through that door. Please. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

As Dr Werner made his way to the sick bay, Dr Montgomery could see that Hawthorne was most put out by this usurpation of his authority.

The doctor turned to the constable and queried with a frown, “Did you not say, Constable Calthrop, that no one was to interview these persons until Mr Quinn arrived from London?”

“Pardon? Oh! Yes, quite so,” interjected the constable, “Mr Quinn, yes.” He turned to Hawthorne, “Sir Giles, perhaps you gentlemen would care for a cup of tea and biscuits while you await his arrival. I can have a brew ready in no time.”

From the back of the room, Pitman apologetically interrupted them, “Pardon me, Sir, my son, Henry. Is he here? Is he well?”

“Pa?” the sleepy voice came from the doorway to the doctor’s office.

“Henry! Son!” Pitman cried as he approached the youngster, “I’ve been worried sick!” he said tears welling in his eyes, “You’re going to get a good hiding when I get you home! Come here!” He dropped to his knees and gathered Henry in a crushing hug.

Sir Giles’ hectoring manner persisted, “And deservedly so. Now, boy! Tell me what happened! How in the blazes did you both end up here? Why was the major shot? It was that woman, Davies, wasn’t it, who shot him? She wanted to kill him. Murder him! Tell me!” Hawthorne placed a hand on Henry’s shoulder to pull him away from his father but Henry pushed the hand away.

“I ain’t telling you nothing!!” he screamed.

“You little blackguard! How dare you speak to me like that!” and raised his hand to strike Henry, much to the alarm and disbelief of all in the room.

Yabsley called out, “Sir Giles!”

The doctor quickly interceded, stepping up to Hawthorne. “Calm down, Sir, he’s just a lad and he’s been through much this day. It’s better we all wait for Mr Quinn.” He took a moment to make sure Hawthorne had, indeed, calmed down, then continued, “Now I must see to my patient. Constable Calthrop, if you would make that brew you offered?”

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It was approaching four a.m. when the twenty horsepower Wolseley tonneau turned onto Middlebrook Way toward the township of Wickham Upper. It had been in transit from London since evening and was maintaining an average speed of forty miles per hour.

“*Impressive,*” mused Alexander Quinn for this had been the first time he had ventured so far and so fast in his newly acquired motor car. He wasn’t driving—he gave that responsibility to an experienced constable—he needed to discuss matters with his fellow passenger and he needed them all to arrive at their destination in one piece, and as quickly as humanly—and mechanically—possible.

In the back seat, each bundled up in a thick overcoat and blanket, and their hats pulled down tight to keep the chill of the country air at bay, Quinn sat with Detective Constable Scott, each as appalled as the other that Major Williams had been so brutally gunned down. They had gone over the events of the past few weeks at length and were now talked out so they sat, quiet and subdued, silently reflecting on those events and the part they played in bringing on this dire situation.

Alexander Quinn was hard taskmaster but a fair one. He was extremely annoyed when, very early on, he discovered that Scott was carrying out undercover enquiries for Major Williams and that the results of his investigations were going to Major Williams and no one else. Quinn ordered Scott to provide him with a carbon copy of every report he sent to the major.

Consequently, Quinn was fully apprised of the criminality and involvement of Norman Croft and Harry Hogan; the histories of those who aided them in the first three abductions and murders; the reason behind Captain Gregory Smith’s dismissal from the army, and his connection with Sir Giles Hawthorne. What still remained unresolved was the connection between Sir Giles Hawthorne and one Colonel Neville Humphries. They were acquaintances, having served in South Africa together but, other than belonging to the

same gentlemen's club, the Marlborough, they had nothing else in common and did not associate socially.

The question surrounding Detective Kieran Byrne was, as yet, unresolved but it was certain that his mother was not ailing. She had been located by Scott alive and well and living in Limerick.

Williams was an excellent investigator and Davies, had she been male, would have been his equal in both rank and pay. Of this Quinn had no reservations. Nor did he ever hesitate in approving any line of investigation Williams put to him. Quinn knew from experience that positive results would soon follow.

Agreeing with Williams, Quinn was sure that there was a spy within his DSO and allowed Williams to go undercover at Abbotsford Hall, yet he seriously doubted that Sir Giles was involved. He had proven himself to be a loyal subject but Quinn conceded that, perhaps, he was not up to the task at hand.

Scott had been directed by Quinn that no one was to know that the reports were also being given to himself; and that was spelled out quite clearly to Scott.

The final act of this drama, bringing it to conclusion, was to concede to Sir Giles' ill-founded demands that an arrest warrant be served on Rebecca Davies. This, Quinn was certain, would flush out the perpetrator of these heinous crimes—be he Sir Giles or another—Quinn wanted this case concluded.

His plan had worked in the first instance but had tragically backfired with the shooting of Williams and the disappearance of Davies.

His objective now was to uncover the malefactor behind these crimes.

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The sound of the Wolseley's engine reverberated off the darkened cottages and shops on the high street of Wickham Upper, as it made its way toward the police station where, inside, the five officers of the law dozed or sat in quiet contemplation.

Sir Giles was still fuming at the way he was dismissed by this lowly Constable Calthrop, who was at the moment asleep on the cot in the cell, having refused point-blank to answer any questions until the arrival of Mr Quinn. So incensed was he, that Sir Giles contemplated locking the cell door and throwing away the key.



Detective Sergeant Yabsley was having serious doubts over the motivations of Williams and Davies—he no longer believed them to be the miscreants Sir Giles painted them to be. He, too, was anxious to get on with the job and examine the crime scene and interview any other witnesses. Stymied as they had been, both by the reluctance of the only known witness to the event, the ten-year-old boy, to talk to them, and by the direction of their commander-in-chief to do nothing, all they could do was sit and wait until he arrived

That moment had come.

Upon hearing the exaggerated commotion the motor's engine made in the stillness of the early morning, the detectives roused from their enforced inertia and prepared to meet their commander.

It was Detective Constable Hewitt who peered out the window and announced, "He's here," then, surprised, added, "The motor's gone past. It's going up the street."

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The Wolseley pulled up outside the little house with the brass plaque beneath the bell pull.

"Doctor Montgomery's surgery, Sir," announced the driver.

"Thank you, constable," replied Quinn, "wait here." He turned to Scott, "Come with me."

Without any fuss or fanfare, the chief of the Special Branch alighted and proceeded to the front door followed by Detective Constable Scott aided by his walking stick. They were met at the door by both doctors, Montgomery and Werner, who ushered them into the small reception room where they spoke quietly.

Quinn introduced Scott to Dr Werner, and Dr Werner in turn, introduced Dr Montgomery to Quinn and Scott.

"Thank you, Doctor Montgomery," Quinn began, "how does Major Williams progress? Will he live?"

Dr Montgomery was reluctant to give any unwarranted hope and replied, "Doctor Werner has been of great assistance to me, Mr Quinn, and with his help, and with the grace of God, we hope that Major Williams will pull through. Having Mrs Williams here is certainly a positive—"

"Mrs Williams?" Quinn was confounded, "The major's wife is here?"

“Ah. Of course. You wouldn’t know,” explained Montgomery, “How would you? Poor woman. She’s been through a long and frightening ordeal, I’m afraid. Come.”

The doctor led the group into the sick bay. There, the men saw the pale form of the unconscious detective lying on the cot and his wife, head bowed and in silent prayer, seated on a chair next to him.

“Mrs Williams,” Quinn quietly addressed the woman as he approached her, “What on earth—?” he said, shocked at her bruised and grazed countenance and disordered attire.

Cornelia rose and fell into Quinn’s arms, sobbing with a mixture of desperation and relief, “Mr Quinn...”

“There, there, my dear,” is all he could offer her as he folded her small frame into his comforting embrace, “what in God’s name happened to you?”

She looked up into his eyes, her tears streaming down her florid and scratched face, “Oh Mr Quinn, it was truly awful and then to come here to this! Reginald may die!” Overwhelmed by the thought that her beloved husband would most likely pass this day, her sobbing became uncontrolled wailing. Quinn gently lowered her back onto the chair and looked away for he, too, was feeling distraught for the poor woman.

Dr Montgomery approached her with a small tumbler of brandy and coaxed her to drink it to calm her down.

Once she had settled, Quinn drew up a chair next to her and spoke to her solicitously, “Cornelia, we will find who did this and bring them to justice. This I promise you. But we need your help. Will you tell us what happened?”

Cornelia’s sobbing abated. She wiped the tears from her face and, looking up at Quinn with red, swollen eyes, she quietly related the dreadful events that brought her there: how her home was invaded; how she and her son were taken against their will to someone’s house; the telephone call to her husband she overheard; how they were then taken to an old abandoned farmhouse not far from there; how her husband was made to kill Rebecca Davies; the horror at seeing Rebecca’s heart and the added horror of finding the dead Irishman outside the farmhouse. She omitted no detail.

Scott and Quinn listened in silent loathing and pity, Scott writing down every detail in his notebook. Finally, Quinn asked, “Mrs Williams, do you know who these men were?”

“I don’t know who the Irishman was but the older man introduced himself to my husband as a retired colonel, Colonel Neville Humphries, I recall.”

Quinn looked to Scott and uttered a single word, “Humphries!” His look of anger and hatred said everything that needed to be said. He turned to Cornelia, “My dear lady, if it’s the last thing I do, these villains will be brought to account.”

He gave her a final look of quiet reassurance, then stood to confer with Scott and the two doctors.

“Gentlemen, what we have discovered here must go no further. No one is to know that Mrs Williams and her son are here— “

“Constable Calthrop and the innkeeper know,” informed Dr Montgomery, “but the constable also knows that he is to speak only to you on this matter.”

“And the innkeeper?”

“Davey? He’d be sound asleep and dead to the world right now.”

“Good. Scott, see to it that this Davey fellow is made aware of certain consequences of having a loose tongue. Now, doctor, I need to see young Henry Pitman. I take it he’s in your care as well?”

“Yes. I’ll fetch—”

As was his wont, Henry had been at the doorway of the doctor’s office for a while, listening intently and interrupted, “Mr Quinn?”

“Yes. You’re the brave, young man who raised the alarm.” Quinn approached Henry and extended his hand, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, son.”

Henry shook his hand. Quinn looked around and decided this was not the ideal place to interview Henry and gently offered, “Perhaps the outside office will be a better place to talk. Will you come with us?”

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Tired from the long sleepless night and annoyed that Quinn had not bothered to return, Sir Giles Hawthorne rallied his contingent of equally sleep-deprived detectives and led the charge to where the motor car had been parked—outside the doctor’s surgery.

Inside, young Henry had been sat on a chair in the reception room while Scott had accommodated himself at the little desk near the doorway, ready to add to his already copious notes.

Quinn had not yet begun his questioning when the door swung open and the room was invaded by the four city detectives and one town constable.

“Mr Quinn,” demanded Sir Giles, “I was under the impression you would be conferring with us before interrogating the boy.”

“Yes, yes,” offered Quinn patiently, “my apologies, Sir Giles. I was anxious to see how Major Williams was doing.”

Sir Giles peered at Quinn and then at the boy, in obvious disbelief.

“Hmp,” Sir Giles dismissed, “perhaps we can get on with the interrogation.”

“Of course. But, before we do, I need you, Detective Constables Hewitt and Ramsay, to proceed to the scene of the crime and stop anyone going in until I arrive.”

“But Sir,” interjected Constable Calthrop, “it’s the slaughterhouse and the processors will be starting their day shortly—”

“You must be Constable Calthrop,” Quinn surmised. “You’ve done a fine job, man—”

“Thank you, Sir,” replied Calthrop puffing out his chest.

“But today, the beasts will have a stay of execution. Please show the detectives the way. And I need you to do one more thing for me. Detective Scott here will brief you.”

Much to his annoyance, Sir Giles stood by silently watching as his authority was slowly being stripped away. The town constable conferred with Scott in hushed tones, shot Hawthorne a glance then briskly made his way out the door without another word uttered, followed closely by Hewitt and Ramsay.

“And me, Sir?” Yabsley asked.

“You’re to remain,” confirmed Quinn. “Sir Giles, are these all the men with you?”

“Yes... er, no. The boy’s father, the Duke’s stablemaster, drove us here. He’s with the horses.”

“And your other two?”

“Dolby and Hathaway are at Abbotsford Hall awaiting my orders.”

“Good. Scott, if you will.”

Scott readied himself to take notes but, before Quinn could pose the first question, Hawthorne interjected, insisting, again, for the fourth time to anyone within earshot, “This proves that the Davies woman is complicit in all this! Where is she? Gone! We had the arrest warrant you, yourself authorised. How did she know? *She* is the spy! *She* is the mastermind behind these abductions and killings! Yabsley here found incriminating evidence in her flat. Right, Yabsley?”

“Ah, Sir, yes, but I have reserve—”

“*She* lured Major Williams here and shot him in cold blood because he discovered the truth about her! Why, I saw him yesterday morning and he looked positively devastated. As one would when one discovers one’s friend is one’s enemy!”

It was all wrong. Henry sat there on his hands listening and shaking his head. What he was saying was all wrong.

But Hawthorne was on a roll, “She had motive and opportunity and certainly the means! She’s a murderess! A fact she has proven time and time again!”

Henry was becoming more and more agitated upon hearing these false allegations against Miss Davies.

Sir Giles was unstoppable, “I will find this traitress and bring her to the gallows myself! I will search every hovel and whorehouse, leave no stone unturned. She will hang!”

“NO!” Henry’s cry was like an explosion from his lungs, “She didn’t do it!”

The interruption to the flow of his tirade brought Sir Giles to a sudden halt. “What’s this? How dare you, you little rascal!”

Henry jumped to his feet, “She didn’t do those things!”

“You jumped up little—”

Quinn interceded, “Hold, Sir Giles, let the boy speak. Son, what makes you think Miss Davies did not do these things?” Quinn asked, even though he already knew the truth but needed to hear what the lad had to say.

Sir Giles, speaking directly at Henry, added almost childishly, “We have evidence that says she did.”

Henry looked from one stern face to the other. They were all waiting for his answer: Mr Quinn, Sir Giles, Detective Sergeant Yabsley and Detective Constable Scott. He was in a quandary, even if he didn't know what that meant. He had to tell them in order to save her life but, if he did, he would break a solemn promise and end up in hell.

Impatiently, Sir Giles barked, "Out with it, boy!"

Who could he trust with the secret he promised never to tell? Sir Giles, who he thought was a bigger bluster ball than Mr Graves? Or Detective Yabsley, who very clearly didn't like Miss Davies. And Scott? He didn't know what to think about Scott. That left only Mr Quinn, the boss, whom Miss Davies seemed to trust over everyone else in that room.

Pointing to Quinn, Henry said without equivocation, "I'll tell him."

Sir Giles was insulted, "Who do you think you are, you puffed up little scoundrel."

"That's quite enough. Sir Giles," Quinn voiced calmly. Turning to Henry, Quinn asked, "Why won't you tell us all?"

"I made a promise and I don't want to break it four times."

"Quite right, son. Gentlemen, if you will excuse us."

With extreme reluctance and indignation, Sir Giles led Yabsley and Scott back outside.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Quinn settled into a chair next to Henry to speak to him eye to eye.

"Now son, what is it you know about Miss Davies?"

"You got to promise not to tell anyone."

"But I may need other men to help me. And Miss Davies."

"Promise."

"Henry..."

"Promise!"

Quinn expelled all his exasperation with a long breath then uttered solemnly, "On my word as a gentleman and the Head of the Special Branch, I swear that I will not divulge what you are about to tell me. But! I will act on the information you give me."

"For as long as you live."

“Henry...” Defeated, Quinn sighed but bargained, “For as long as this information puts any lives at risk. All right?”

Henry searched Quinn’s eyes for any sign that he was lying but couldn’t tell. He had to trust someone to help Miss Davies and he was the only one he thought who could and, besides, Miss Davies did tell him to call Mr Quinn and only him.

Henry took a deep breath, “Miss Davies was at the slaughterhouse but it was Major Williams that was going to kill her and take her heart because Mrs Williams and her son were kidnapped and would die if he didn’t...I was with Miss Davies when someone else shot him...it wasn’t her...she didn’t try to kill Major Williams...she wanted to save him...that’s why she left me there...she said it was best that no one knew she was alive or where she was...she made me swear not to tell anyone...am I going to hell?”

The speed at which all this tumbled from Henry’s tongue was bewildering. It took Quinn a few moments to process the information and slot in what he already knew. It all fell into place and made sense.

“No Henry, you won’t go to hell. Why did Major Williams and Miss Davies take you with them?”

“They didn’t. I hid in the dog box.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Because I want to be a detective and I wanted to help because Major Williams looked real scared after the telephone call and I wanted to help is all, I wanted to help...”

“You did help, Henry. You just may have saved Major Williams’ life. The telephone call, you heard what was said?”

“Only what Major Williams said. He was real angry and then he was real scared and then he shouted and then he was real scared again.”

“I see. Did he mention any places? Names?”

Henry thought back to the telephone call and shook his head.

Quinn was clutching at straws. “Did he mention any names at all?”

“No. But he did ask how Mrs Humphries was. And Dickie.”

“Mrs Humphries? Dickie?”

“And Captain Smith or somebody...”

Quinn sat back in his chair and stared at the floor, his eyes darting from one imaginary scenario to another. He threw his attention back to Henry, “Where is Miss Davies now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Henry...” warned Quinn.

“True, Mr Quinn, I don’t know. Will the major live?”

“The good doctors are doing everything they can to save him, Henry.”

“Don’t worry, Mr Quinn, I’ve been praying for him like I did Miss Davies. He’ll live.”

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The coincidence wasn’t lost on me that, whenever I found myself alone and in dire physical trouble, I turned to a prostitute to help me out of it. Such was the situation back in seventy-four as it was now. Madeleine Dubois helped me then and I was hoping Miss Sophie would help me now.

This is where I found myself, knocking on scarlet painted door on a narrow street in Southwark in south London. It was evening and Miss Sophie was most likely preparing herself for the night’s ‘patron’. I knocked again and waited.

My flight from Wickham Upper to Southwark had been successful but not without tribulation. It had taken more than twelve hours to get here.

The stationmaster’s office at Wickham Upper had provided me with shelter, a little food and a little coin, but sleep eluded me. I was well aware of the turbulence outside at and around the slaughterhouse once Henry had screamed for help. That I had made my way to the stationmaster’s office unnoticed in all that kerfuffle was a miracle in itself but the miracle I prayed for was that Wills would not succumb to that callous attempt to kill him. Humphries would not escape me, if it was the last thing on earth I did.

So here I stood, propped up by my walking stick, in a ‘borrowed’ man’s overcoat and cloth cap, waiting for the door to be opened. I was tall enough and battle-scarred enough to pass as a man and my short white hair added further bona fides.

Finally, Miss Sophie’s housekeeper—I should say pimp—opened the door to me. Mrs Jannock was elderly, hatchet faced, as straight in body as she was crooked in morals,



forthright and uncompromising. She protected her girl, Sophie, with her life for Sophie was not merely a gentle soul that could easily be abused by her clients, but also a very valuable asset and income producer.

Mrs Jannock and I had an understanding but that gave me no extra benefit or softened consideration.

“What are you doing here? She has an engagement. What happened to you?”

The last question was not an enquiry after my health but a statement of condescension.

“I need a place to stay. For a week or so. And nice to see you, too, Mrs Jannock.”

She looked me up and down. She knew me, and knew me very well. I had been visiting Miss Sophie for years and had always paid generously for her attentions.

“I can pay,” I added before the whoremongress could slam the door in my face. Coin and she always spoke the same language.

She stepped aside, “Come in, then.”

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Mrs Jannock installed me in the tiny, sparsely furnished garret, supposedly the third floor of this elegant but small terrace house and told me not to leave it. The very last thing I wanted to do was climb back down those steep narrow stairs, which, when she told me I had to climb up them, was *then* the last thing I wanted to do.

My entire being was a mass of unrelenting pain; my arm throbbed to distraction and my leg objected with stinging spasms to every step. I was afraid to look at the bandages on both my arms lest they evidenced the fear that the stitches had torn open. I had no medication and, worse, no whisky. And I was hungry. Those stale shortbreads and the partially eaten sandwich I snaffled from an unwary child were the only food I had eaten in a day and a half.

With a lot of gruff and to-do, but with my promise of extra recompense, Mrs Jannock directed Morton, her goliath of a son, to bring up some welcome food and beverage and, with a fair amount of cajoling, half a bottle of whisky. With a full stomach and completely exhausted and relaxed, I fell asleep immediately my head hit the pillow.

While my body's need for rest overwhelmed my physical being, my mind was in turmoil. I needed to know that Henry had seen to Wills and he was getting the medical care he desperately needed to survive.

Seeing Wills lying there helpless caused me great heartache; he meant so much to me—more than a brother ever could—and I was helpless to give him aid. He saved my life and endangered his wife and son's.

Lady Katherine crept into my concerns. How could I get word to her that I was not dead—yet? Was she being watched in case I contacted her? Who could I turn to? Who hadn't been turned against me? Quite obviously not Quinn for it was he who sanctioned the warrant for my arrest. There was no one else I trusted or who could obtain the information I needed.

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The bed was comfortable and my body's aches had eased even though my sleep was fitful and sporadic.

I awoke to the sounds of robins singing and I wondered, if there was reincarnation as the Buddhists and Hindus believed, what had these lyrical birds been in their previous lives? What would I be in my next?

I lay there with my eyes shut. The reality of this life rather than the next pressing me to process the events of the previous days and to separate the facts from the fallacies. With no watch or calendar, I surmised it was Thursday midmorning and forty-eight hours since Wills and I embarked on our fateful journey to Wickham Upper.

So many urgencies tumbled through my thoughts: Wills' fate was of utmost concern to me; I had to get word to Lady Katherine; I had to find Humphries and make him pay. He will die, I vowed, he will die. But how to find him?

“Rebecca?”

Sophie's muffled enquiry from outside my closed door took me out of my murderous design.

“Sophie,” I replied throwing off the bedclothes and carefully sitting up, “Come in.”

Carrying a small tray with a steaming pot on it, Sophie came in. “I brought you a cuppa,” she said, placing the tray on the little bedside table, “Mrs Jannock told me you were here. What has happened?”

“A very long and complicated story. I just need a place to recuperate.”

She stopped pouring the tea and looked at me questioningly.

I answered her look, “I can’t go back to my place”

“Why? Are you in danger?”

“You needn’t be concerned. You and your...um, Mrs Jannock are safe. I will leave as soon as I’m able. You know I will pay...”

“Of course, Rebecca, we’re not worried about that. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need. And besides,” she added with a playful smile, “It would be nice to speak to someone who actually knows how to hold a conversation. I care for my...housekeeper very much but...”

I fully understood what she meant. Mrs Jannock had her own interpretation of how conversations should run. For her, ‘verbose’ meant running more than three words together and ‘brevity’ meant complete silence.

Taking the offered cup of tea, I ventured, “Sophie, there is something you can do for me. If you’re not otherwise engaged.”

“Free for the rest of the afternoon,” she confirmed with an engaging smile. I liked Sophie very much and, had I been twenty years younger, she may have found herself with a different ‘housekeeper’ and a different occupation.

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The mind of Colonel Humphries had the world, and everyone in it, as owing him for what it, and they, had made him endure. Certainly, he had an extraordinary amount of money from his three previous ‘enterprises’ but that was not nearly enough compensation for the ridicule and embarrassment he had been subjected to by his wife, her friends, society in general, and the army. After everything he had done and endured for king and country to be treated so was beyond acceptance.

It was impossible for anyone to find him; he had covered his tracks like a true tactician. They were all dead: that turncoat Kieran Byrne, the disgraced Gregory Smith and those two blundering bumpkins, Croft and Hogan. Impossible.

The final payment from the Duke of Bramwell would have seen him retire and live out his life most comfortably in the south of France or, perhaps, Spain or even Italy. But for that damned woman... that shameless, immoral excuse of a human being ruined it all and snatched the biggest prize from his grasp!

Well, he'll put that to rights! And for free.

He was far away from his family home, which, by now, unless she'd already been discovered, would not be habitable. The thought made him smile. He had posed her in such a way that was sure to shock the Reverend Father and make his toupée spin on his bald pate. Once too often, dear old Mrs Humphries had bemoaned the lack of intimate congress... well, she's got her fill of sausage now.

'Mad' was he? He'll show them 'mad'. It was no longer about financial recompense; it was about revenge.

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## CHAPTER 20

### Revelations

It had been a long and exhausting day and night for the detectives of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch but there was still much to be done, evidence to be collected and leads to investigate. The most important of these was the last known hideout of Colonel Humphries.

Following the directions given by Cornelia Williams, Detective Sergeant Yabsley and Detective Constable Ramsay found the disused stone farmhouse and, exactly where she had indicated it would be, the body of the Irishman.

They both looked down at the slain man in disbelief.

Ramsay confirmed, incredulous, “That’s Kieran Byrne. What is he doing here? Wasn’t he with his ailing mother?”

Yabsley said nothing but it was obvious that his mind was trawling through the events of the past few months and, each suspicious incident that he had attached to Davies was coming undone and hitching itself to Byrne: the coordinates, the bank notes, the union leader, the wild goose chases. And it was Byrne whom he told to check on young Timothy Sadlier; Byrne was the last person to see the boy alive. Byrne was the traitor among them, not Davies. The worst revelation yet struck him: Byrne shot Williams! Why?

“What do we do, Boss?” Ramsay asked.

Yabsley took a moment to gather his wits. “Er, inside. Go inside and search the place. We must locate Humphries. Turn the place inside out. Anything that will lead us to that maniac.”

While Ramsay carried out his meticulous search, Yabsley went through Byrne’s clothing and turned out every pocket and possible place of concealment finding nothing untoward of an officer of the law. Noticing the revolver missing from its holster, Yabsley scanned the tall grass and weeds, concerned that it was missing. He would arrange a more thorough search for it later, he thought as he thumbed through Byrne’s notebook. A loose piece of paper fell from it and, picking it up, he read “*Enfield 368*”, obviously, a telephone number.

“Sergeant!” Ramsay’s urgent call had Yabsley rush inside to see the young detective peering ashen faced at the discarded pig’s heart partially covered by Davies’ jacket on the floor.

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As planned, Major Williams was carefully removed from Dr Montgomery’s surgery but his destination was kept secret; some townsmen asserted he had died and was taken to the morgue in London; others that he was whisked away by the Duke of Bramwell and ‘that other doctor’; one even suggested that it was all a ruse and that Major Williams had got up and walked away in the dead of night arm in arm with the Devil.

That was all conjecture.

They had seen a hearse but it had been for Kieran Byrne. The duke’s landau had returned to Abbotsford empty save the driver. And the Devil? Every town had a religious fanatic.

Whatever the case, Davey the innkeeper, Constable Calthrop and Dr Montgomery all kept mum and no one outside of the Special Branch ever found out that Cornelia and her son had been reunited with the major.

Young Henry Pitman, too, had been sworn to secrecy. Quinn knew that the boy could be trusted simply on the basis of his dealings with the lad.

Henry and his father returned to Abbotsford Hall each driving one of the two vehicles that had come from there. While Henry had done the wrong thing, his father was

proud of the way he conducted himself throughout this whole series of unfortunate events—but he would still have a stern word with him at home regarding the dangers of doing such rash things.

Henry longed to speak to Miss Davies; he had grown fond of her and prayed that she was all right.

It was then only a matter of days before the investigation at Wickham Upper was wound down. Once statements had been taken from what seemed to be the entire population of the town, Sir Giles and his five detectives returned to Scotland Yard as did Alexander Quinn and Detective Constable Scott, to continue their investigations from there.

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As planned, Lady Katherine, returned to her country estate, Lilyfield Manor, the same day Rebecca Davies had unexpectedly left the Hall leaving that enigmatic note. She had fully expected to hear from Rebecca soon to make arrangements for her visit to Chestermere.

She fell into her usual routine there happily looking forward to the hopefully prolonged sojourn but, as each day passed and no word was received, Lady Katherine quickly became unsettled and worried.

She had read and reread that note so many times that the paper was beginning to come apart at the folds. With each reading, it was more apparent to her that she may never see her beloved Rebecca again.

A week had passed; it was time, she determined, to discover where Rebecca was. A telephone call to Whitehall 1212 to speak to Major Williams was inexplicably transferred to Alexander Quinn.

“Lady Chestermere, good day, Alexander Quinn speaking.”

“Mr Quinn? Forgive me, I had asked to be connected to Major Williams.”

“Ah, my good lady, I’m afraid Major Williams is not available at this moment. May I be of assistance?”

Lady Katherine hesitated, not knowing how to address her concerns to Quinn; she had been ready for an informal chat with the major.

“Well,” she began, “perhaps. I...er...I was expecting to hear from Major Williams’ Assisting Clerk, Miss Davies, and...er...well, er—”

“Lady Chestermere, if I may, both the major and Miss Davies are not available right now. I am more than happy to pass on your enquiry when next I speak to them.”

“Yes...yes, thank you, Mr Quinn, if you’d be so kind. Oh, do you know if Mrs Williams has a telephone? Perhaps—”

“Forgive me, my lady, I believe Mrs Williams and her son are holidaying in Italy.”

A feeling of dejection overcame her, “Italy? I see. Thank you, Mr Quinn.”

Replacing the handset into its cradle, she was not convinced that what she had just been told was true. Never one to surrender, she made another telephone call, this time to her uncle, the Duke of Bramwell.

She detailed her concerns and the transactions that had just taken place with Alexander Quinn and asked him to intercede on her behalf.

Of course, he could, and would, and did, and returned her call by late afternoon the very same day.

“Katherine,” he informed her gravely, “I’ve had the same results you had. I spoke to Quinn and Sir Giles and both reiterated that Williams and Davies are unavailable but neither would divulge where they were or when they’d return. All so very strange.”

“Indeed, Uncle. Thank you.”

“Em...” the duke hesitated, “Katherine, I am aware of a very...em, unusual incident here a few days after your departure. Most of the detectives here left rather hurriedly and the two remaining fellows received a telephone call shortly after. Without fuss or warning, they packed up the belongings of all their group and left. Including those of Major Williams and Miss Davies. They gave not so much as a ‘by your leave’ and were gone before I knew it.”

“No reason?”

“No reason whatsoever.”

“Oh.” This did not allay Lady Katherine’s fears—it only made them worse. “Thank you, Uncle.”

She read the note again.

*“My darling Katherine,*



*I must leave. If it is at all within my power, and God willing, I will be with you once again. If not, I beg that you remember me with fondness.*

*I will love you until my dying breath,*

*R”*

It was Rebecca’s plea to be remembered with fondness that seemed so final.

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Now, a little more than a week since my arrival at Miss Sophie’s, I was much more mobile and even able to scale those three flights without too much pain. In my little attic room, I had pushed myself through my calisthenics regimen every day. My sleep was assisted by a little hashish generously provided by Sophie.

It was now time.

Sophie, with Morton as her auxiliary muscle, did fulfil the few requests I gave her and bought me a revolver and a box of cartridges and some men’s clothing. It would be far easier for me to go about as a man than a woman—it always galled me that women were so restricted in what they could do or where they were permitted to go—in this day and age!

The account with Sophie was mounting but it was within my means and I would settle it as soon as I was able to get to my bank account and passbook.

Sophie also made a number of discreet enquiries after the health of Wills and the safety of his wife and child but was blocked at every turn with a cursory and dismissive, ‘unavailable’.

There was no telephone set in Sophie’s house—something Mrs Jannock insisted was an unwarranted expense—so my priority, now that I was mobile, was to find the nearest call office and telephone to the only person I could trust to any degree.

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The desk sergeant trotted up the stairs to the DSO office, tapped on the open door then strode to the desk occupied by Detective Constable Robert Scott.

The only other person in the office was Sir Giles Hawthorne who was cogitating with Scott when the desk sergeant intruded.

“A telephone message for you, Detective Constable Scott,” he said handing the slip of paper to the puzzled man, “she said it concerns Wickham Upper.”

“Wickham Upper? For me?” he quizzed as he read the scrawled message. He looked up at the desk sergeant, “This should go to Sir Giles.”

“She said to give it to you and only you.”

Scott looked up at Hawthorne then back to the desk sergeant and dismissed him, “Thank you, sergeant.”

Upon the desk sergeant’s departure, Sir Giles enquired, “And?”

“She wants to meet me. Tomorrow, alone. Covertly.”

“You’d better go then. You know what to do.”

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It was helter-skelter at Abbotsford Hall that morning, more so than usual, when the telephone rang incessantly in the anteroom off the foyer. Thomson was busy sorting out a minor crisis with the footmen and Mrs Plummer likewise with the chamber maids. The duke and duchess were taking the crisp morning air in the gardens and the telephone continued ringing until Florence came down on it if only to stop its annoying, relentless jangling.

“Abbotsford Hall,” she snapped, “what d’you want?”

There was a slight pause, which only added to Florence’s annoyance, followed by a smooth, mellow voice, “Good morning, Your Grace. I am speaking to the Duchess of Bramwell?”

Florence tittered at being mistaken for her mistress, “No,” she giggled, “you ain’t but what can I do for you, anyways?”

“Ah, I see,” the male voice continued, “tell me, if you would, I understand there was a little disturbance there a few weeks back.”

“‘Little disturbance’? Good Lord! That little disturbance gave everyone a mighty conniption fit, myself included.”

“The Dickens you say! And have you recovered, my dear?”

“Oh, yes but the Duchess is still a little discombobulated.”

“As I imagine she would be after going through that dreadful ordeal.”

“More so her niece what got took.”

“Pardon me? Her niece?”

“Yes, Sir, her niece the Lady Katherine, Countess of Chestermere. It was her what they took by mistake, the scoundrels. I seen them, I did.”

“Did you now?”

“And, y’know, I heard tell that the woman what saved her took a fancy to her ladyship an’ all. I heard Emma say that she was a trivet, an’ all.”

The line went quiet for a moment causing Florence to shake the handset to see if that would make it work.

The male voice resumed the conversation, “Do you know the name of the woman who saved her?”

“Yes. They called her ‘Davies’. Her Grace’s secretary, indeed! A right proper piece of work she was, too.”

“Pray tell, where is Lady Chestermere now?”

“Oh, her ladyship is back at her country estate, Lilyfield Manor.”

“What is the best way of getting there, my sweet girl?”

“If you ain’t got a motor, then train’s the best. To Rusby village. Then it’s a short ride to the estate.”

“Thank you, my dear. You have been a delight to talk to.”

“You’re too kind, Sir. Can I tell Mr Thomson who called?”

The only response to that was the sound of the telephone line being disconnected.

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At the appointed time and place, Scott arrived alone as directed. From my vantage point, I could not see anyone lurking about suspiciously but, if this were a trap and I were to be arrested, so be it. I had to know, whatever the consequences.

The café was alive with waitresses rushing about, serving a capacity houseful of patrons who were sipping their coffees and enjoying their delicate savouries and sweets when Scott asked to be shown to my reserved table. I felt sorry for him; the limp and walking stick would remain with him forever. I, on the other hand, had discarded my prop, determined to show no debility.

“Scott,” I said approaching him from behind.

Ever the gentleman, he rose awkwardly to greet me and was surprised at my mannish garb.

“Davies,” he said a little timidly, extending his hand, “It’s good to see you well. I heard you had been badly injured.”

“All rumours,” I replied as we both took our seats. “You came alone?”

“As requested.”

A waitress descended upon us and, with a flirtatious smile, asked, “What can I bring you fine gentlemen?”

“Coffees. For two. Thank you,” I ordered dismissively. “Let’s not beat about the bush,” I continued as she left us, “Major Williams. Where is he? And his wife and son? Are they all right?”

Scott visibly shrunk in his seat before offering an excuse, “Davies, the...um, the official response is that the major is unavailable and Mrs Williams is on holiday.”

“And the reality is?”

“I...I am not at liberty to say.”

“Is he dead? Are they dead?” I was not in the mood for playing games.

Scott squirmed. “Come in, Davies. Talk to Quinn and Hawthorne.”

“Yeah, with an arrest warrant hanging over me.”

“It’s been withdrawn.”

“Not that I don’t believe you, Scott, but I don’t trust Hawthorne, or Quinn for that matter. I want to find Humphries, Colonel Neville Humphries. He’s behind all of this.”

“We...” he vacillated, much to my annoyance, “we know. We’re keeping track of his movements.”

I stared hard at him; I couldn’t believe what he’d said. “You know where he is? Why haven’t you arrested him?”

He bowed his head and closed his eyes. His brow crinkled with concern.

“Where is he?” I persisted, “I’m going to find that bastard whether you help me or not. I will do whatever it takes to make him pay for killing Wills and his wife and son. Major Williams didn’t deserve to be gunned down like a dog. And his wife and child—”

“They’re not dead!” Scott interjected, then looked about sheepishly. “I saw them. They’re alive. But the major’s still in danger. They don’t want you to know. Quinn and Hawthorne. They want that bastard alive. They want to know who’s behind all of this. And they know what you’ll do to him if you find him.”

While this news was what I was after and I was relieved that Wills and his family had not perished, I wanted to know more.

“There’s no one else behind this,” I scoffed, “He is it. Only him. It’s vengeance, pure and simple. He’s insane. Help me find him, Robert. Tell me what you know. Where is he?”

Our waitress returned with a pot of steaming hot coffee and a tray full of accoutrements, which she transferred to the table giving both Scott and me a coquettish glance. This break gave Scott cause to reconsider.

“I...I...can’t—”

I lost my patience, “Don’t fuck with me, Scott. Either tell me or piss off. Humphries is the enemy, not me.”

My vulgar outburst rattled the waitress as well as the remaining cups on her tray.

Scott was both appalled by me and apologetic toward the waitress, “Beg pardon, Miss, my friend is from the colonies,” he excused with an awkward smile then turned to me after she hurried away, her kittenish smile vanquished by my eruption.

“Byrne,” Scott continued hesitantly, “Kieran Byrne was the spy—”

“Was?”

“Humphries shot him dead. It must have been Byrne who shot the major because it was Byrne who brought the pig’s heart to Humphries.”

“Well, that’s one less I have to deal with. Go on.”

“Yabsley went through Byrne’s pockets and found a telephone number, Enfield 368. That was the telephone number Humphries used to call Major Williams at Abbottsford Hall that morning. We traced all the calls from that telephone through the exchange. Humphries telephoned to a series of hotels and boarding houses. That’s how we know where he is right now. Our DSO men are watching him around the clock. They will inform

us immediately he moves or someone makes contact with him. Quinn and Hawthorne want him to lead us to the head of this conspiracy.”

I snorted with impatience, “There is no conspiracy. Where is he now?”

“Davies...”

I looked hard at him and said not a word. He relented and his shoulders slumped in defeat.

“He’s on his way to a little village near the coast. God knows why he’s going there. Yabsley thinks he’s going to board a yacht and sail to France.”

“Don’t make me drag every word out of you, Robert. What little village?”

“Rusby.”

“Rusby?” Alarm bells rang in my head.

“There’s nothing there, really. It’s a whistle stop,” Scott explained.

“There is something there. The Countess of Chestermere.”

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I left Scott in the café—and with the bill to pay—and hurried away. There was not a second to lose; Lady Katherine was in mortal danger. I could not comprehend why Humphries was pursuing the Countess of Chestermere; she had done him no harm. I, on the other hand...

It suddenly all made sense.

Humphries must have discovered that Wills was not dead and that I, too, had survived. He must have realised that losing his hostages, Mrs Williams and her son, he had also lost his advantage. And, having discovered that I had feelings for the countess, was now pursuing her to get to me. The bastard wanted me dead, whatever the cost. He was truly mad. His lust for vengeance overrode all rationality but, then, does a psychopath have any sense of logic or reason?

I raced to Piccadilly station and discovered that the next train to pass through the small village of Rusby was leaving very shortly. The gods were smiling down upon me.

The train departed on time and would take a few hours to reach Rusby, time enough to plan. My masculine attire meant that little attention was paid to me; my overcoat concealed the revolver that Sophie had purchased and my cloth cap revealed only some errant sprigs of white hair and the disfiguring scars to my face—more reasons for the

inquisitive to keep away. My stiletto was in my boot and I could fashion a garrotte at a moment's notice if necessary. The final item, which had generously been provided by Sophie, was a few pounds.

From the information Scott had divulged, all the detective constables from the Department of Special Operations were in the village waiting for the nonexistent head of Humphries' criminal group to make contact with him. I had to avoid them in case the lifting of my arrest warrant was a ruse to entrap me.

I sat alone in the first-class compartment and, for the first time in a very long time, earnestly prayed to the Almighty.

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The days seemed interminable, as did her sleepless nights, since her futile conversation with Mr Alexander Quinn. Lady Katherine feared she would never see Rebecca again but, more than that, she would never know why she left or what had become of her.

Day by day she became more and more reclusive and withdrawn, delegating her business affairs to her secretary, George McPherson. The excitement of sealing deals and finding new ventures no longer interested her. Not even her devoted Nanny Fee could bring her out of her profound funk. She spent the late autumn days walking aimlessly through her gardens or reading quietly by the fire. She supped alone and stayed in bed longer than usual. Her sleep, when she was able to attain it, was usually disrupted by nightmares of her ordeals or dreadful imaginings of what had become of Rebecca. Her servants were very concerned for her wellbeing but there was nothing they could do; she kept to herself and grieved alone.

This day was like the one before and would be like the one to come. It was with that resignation to her fate that she once again found solace in her study, enfolded in the sanctuary of her favourite Bergère chair. The gramophone softly filled the room with the sounds of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique* and made her heart heavy with regret. Here, she was not ashamed to allow a tear to stain her cheek.

She heard the gentle tapping on her closed door but was too drained to answer it until it repeated itself.

Wiping the betraying tears from her face, she gently replied, "Come in."

The door opened just enough for the butler, Peter, to step halfway in.

“My lady, please forgive the intrusion, there’s a gentleman here to see you.”

Lady Katherine looked up at him; her expression one of weariness rather than annoyance. Peter understood.

“My lady, he would not give his name. He said it was urgent. Something to do with an Assisting Clerk?”

The countess immediately sat upright. “Rebecca Davies? Did he say ‘Rebecca Davies’?”

“No, my lady, only ‘Assisting Clerk’.”

Lady Katherine found it difficult to breathe.

“Show him to the library, Peter. I’ll be there momentarily.”

“My lady.”

Thoughts raced through her head: she wondered who it could be; Major Williams would have announced himself as would any of the DSO detectives. Nevertheless, this person had news of her Rebecca and she wasted no time in making herself presentable.

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With the hopeful expectation that she would finally know what had become of the Assisting Clerk that stole her heart, Lady Katherine hurried into the library and faced the back of a tall elderly gentleman who was examining the multitude of books on the shelves. Upon hearing the rustle of skirts, he turned and smiled appealingly.

“Ah, Lady Chestermere. Thank you for taking my call. An honour and a pleasure to finally meet you.”

Lady Katherine took in the dapper older gentleman standing in front of her. She did not smile—she did not know this man—and she was a little peeved that he did not have a calling card or give his name to Peter.

“Sir, you have me at a disadvantage.”

“Of course. Please forgive me, I lost my card case. I am here with news of your... er, saviour, I believe. Miss Davies. Rebecca Davies?”

The mention of her name caused Lady Katherine’s breath to quicken.

“What news of her? Is she well?”



“Ah! I can assure you she is alive.”

That small piece of information almost made the countess faint with relief. The gentleman continued.

“It seems that she is indestructible.”

“Thank God. And thank you, Sir.”

“She has asked to see you.”

Lady Katherine was almost delirious with joy, “Of course! Of course. Please bring her here.”

“Unfortunately, your ladyship, that is not possible. But I can take you to her.”

“Where is she?”

The gentleman vacillated. “I cannot say. A matter of secrecy, you understand.”

The countess didn’t really understand what the secret could be but she was desperate to see Rebecca and to make certain she was safe. She took a few steps toward the bell cord.

“I’ll have the motor car brought around. My driver can take us there.”

“No! Er, no, my lady. I have horse and buggy and it’s best we go alone.”

Lady Katherine found this strange but did not want to cause any complications.

“Allow me to get my hat and coat,” she obliged as she tugged on the cord. “I don’t understand the secrecy but I will abide by her wishes.”

Peter was at the door instantly.

“Peter, I will be leaving with Mr...” Lady Katherine looked at her uninvited guest who simply smiled and bowed slightly—he was not going to say anything. She returned to Peter, “My coat and hat, if you will.”

“My lady. I will have Miss Turner fetch them immediately.”

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Peter and Jessica Turner watched the horse and cart as it disappeared along the long drive away from Lilyfield Manor, both concerned for their mistress.

“I dinnae like it,” Jessica intoned just as Jimmy joined them.

“Where’s Lady Katherine off to?” he asked.

“With a man I dinnae like at all,” she replied with deep distrust. “He’s as smooth as rancid oil.”

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“This road leads to Rusby village,” Lady Katherine stated as the driver turned onto the highway, “Is that where we’ll find Miss Davies?”

The gentleman turned to the countess and offered only an enigmatic smile in reply.

“I don’t know your name, Sir. I would be grateful to have it,” she requested firmly but politely.

“Colonel Neville Humphries, retired, at your service, my lady,” was his smug reply, “You’ve heard of me, I trust?”

“I cannot say that I have, Colonel. Should I have?”

“Hm,” was his self-satisfied reply.

Lady Katherine felt that something wasn’t quite right but she couldn’t pinpoint the cause of her growing unease. She persisted in knowing more of this mysterious man.

“How do you know Miss Davies?” she asked.

Colonel Humphries deliberated upon his response before offering, “One could say through the Special Branch.”

“You are acquainted with Major Williams?”

“Hm, only remotely by telephone. But he has a lovely wife and son.”

“You’ve met them?”

“Yes, they were my guests for a short while. Lovely.” It was the sly look he gave Lady Katherine that made the hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end. A discomfiting silence befell her until she resumed her questioning.

“How came it that Miss Davies sought you out, rather than finding me directly? She knew my place of residence.”

“I believe she feared being apprehended by her former colleagues. You do know, of course, that the head of the Special Branch, Mr Alexander Quinn himself, issued a warrant for her arrest?”

This news shocked the countess. “Why? Whatever for?”

“Treason, I believe,” Humphries smirked.

Lady Katherine was dumbfounded. “Treason? How can that be?” She was baffled by this revelation.

“The ways of wanton women have intrigued mankind since the dawn of time,” was the colonel’s inscrutable response, a response which stunned the countess.

“What... what news of Major Williams?” she managed timorously; she was becoming concerned.

“Missing, I’m afraid. We’re trying to locate them.”

“‘Them’? Are you not taking me to Miss Davies?”

“Of course, Of course. A slip of the tongue, my dear. Please do not be alarmed. We are almost there and all will be settled very shortly.”

‘There’ was not the village of Rusby, which she knew very well, but a small cottage on the periphery of the little village.

“Why are we stopping here?” she asked as he drove the cart behind the lodging, “This is Widow Henderson’s cottage.”

“Yes, and a fine and obliging old woman she is, too. Come,” Colonel Humphries directed as he dismounted and helped Lady Katherine alight from the cart. “She went to great lengths to tell me what a wonderful lady you are and of your charity in allowing her to live here rent free. Please, do come in.”

Humphries opened the back door for Lady Katherine, ushering her through the back rooms and into the darkened parlour.

“Why are the shutters closed?” the countess asked trying to keep her apprehension at bay.

“Perhaps the widow is sleeping,” was his flippant reply, as he stood by the front door.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Lady Katherine became aware of a small figure sitting in one of the two armchairs.

“Mrs Henderson?” she enquired as she approached the elderly woman. “Mrs Henderson,” she iterated, placing a gentle hand on the woman’s shoulder. That simple action caused the widow’s head to loll to the side. It was then that Lady Katherine saw that Widow Henderson was dead.

She stepped back in horror and looked at Humphries who smiled with pride at his handiwork.

“Pity,” he offered, “I think she died of fright. She really did sing your praises, Katherine. I may call you ‘Katherine’, mayn’t I? I feel we are going to become quite intimate before long.”

This announcement brought back the unprecedented fear she had experienced not long past, a look which Humphries noticed even in the darkness of the room.

“My dear,” he giggled, “don’t concern yourself. I have no interest in violating you as did those two loathsome animals. I truly deplored their actions but, as you know,” he said in a jocular manner, “boys will be boys.”

“You?” she expelled with dreadful realisation, “You were behind the plan to abduct my aunt?”

“Hm. Unfortunately for me, Williams and Davies thwarted that plan. Now, unfortunately for you, I have devised another.”

“What...what do you want of me?” Lady Katherine could not suppress her fear any longer.

“Bait, my dear, you are bait.”

Lady Katherine searched the room for a means to escape.

“There is no way out, Katherine. I have the key to the doors, which are locked. Why don’t you make yourself comfortable while we wait?” Lady Katherine did not respond, so Humphries continued, “For whom, I hear you ask? Whom are we waiting for? For your Sapphic friend, your female paramour. You know, I should be shocked and appalled by your choice of lovers, even by the fact that you have taken a lover rather than succumbing to marriage. Marriage is a disappointment, I must own, but a woman such as yourself—beautiful, wealthy, titled—could have any man on this blessed earth kissing her lovely feet. Why a woman? It’s truly beyond my understanding. But I should not judge. Please, sit down.”

Lady Katherine seemed to be rooted to the spot; she could not move.

“SIT DOWN!”

The sudden explosion of his command jolted the countess and she nervously found the vacant chair.

“That’s better,” he said, the mirth and mockery had evaporated from his tone, “now we are both more comfortable.”

“What...what makes you think that Rebecca will come? That she will find you here?”

“She’s a clever little fish,” he replied sarcastically, “I’ve left her enough clues.”

“And when she comes?”

Humphries looked at the deceased widow; Lady Katherine understood.

“Why? Why do you want to kill her? Why don’t you make good your escape? Leave England?” she implored.

“Never leave unfinished business, I say. One never knows what may pop back and haunt one. Particularly if one is dealing with the so-called ‘fair sex’.”

“And I? Am I unfinished business?”

He simply pursed his lips and smiled.

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The conductor had announced that the next station would be Rusby so I pulled the cord once to alert the driver I wished the train to stop there and heard the resultant whistle.

Preparing to disembark, I didn’t know what to expect but, if Scott’s information were correct, I expected to see the five DSO detectives keeping surveillance on Humphries if, as I suspected, Humphries were there.

Looking out from the carriage’s window, I spotted Hewitt on the platform peering at the train as it clamoured to a stop and watching for anyone to alight.

My urgency was to get to Lady Katherine and to keep her safe from the insane Humphries, so I took hold of my gun and kept it in my outside pocket at the ready should circumstance require it. I didn’t want any confrontation, especially with my former colleagues, but Lady Katherine’s life was in danger—and she was my first and only concern.

Keeping an eye on Hewitt, I stepped off the train and turned toward the station’s exit as the train pulled away. I stopped mid stride when I spotted Yabsley approaching me

from the end of the platform. I did an about-face but my progress was thwarted by Ramsay coming toward me from the other end. On the other side of the tracks, Hathaway was bearing down on me. Surrounded and with each avenue of escape blocked, and with my hip still causing me considerable impediment, I turned to face my longtime adversary. My hand tightened on the grip of the pistol in my pocket; I'd be damned if I let anyone stop me from getting to the countess.

Yabsley thrust his hand inside his jacket, the gesture being an obvious threat, and approached me at a quickened pace. He stopped a short yard away.

“Don't do anything rash, Davies,” he warned as the three other detectives boxed me in.

“Don't try to stop me, Yabsley.” I looked from one stern face to the other of the four men that surrounded me, “You're not taking me in. I don't care what warrant you have.”

“There's no warrant.”

I was momentarily disconcerted.

“Then get out of my way! Lady Katherine is in danger!”

“Hold, Davies, and listen,” he said firmly but in a tone I had not heard from him before, something akin to compassion. “We know. Humphries has her.”

The news punched the breath from my lungs. “What? Why haven't you taken him down?”

“Sir Giles...” Yabsley appeared to be conflicted, “Sir Giles wants us to keep him under surveillance only. Take no action. He wants to bring down the whole conspiracy—”

“There is no conspiracy.”

“I know that. We all know that now. All except Sir Giles.” Yabsley hesitated, then added, “I've made a decision.” He took a reassuring breath, “Humphries. He wants revenge and he means to take that revenge out on you.

I snorted contemptuously, “Well, my demise would certainly please one or two in the DSO, right Yabsley? Anyway, how do you know this?”

“I spoke to him. He had the arrogance to summon me and lay out his terms and conditions and...”

“And?”

“He wants you there, unarmed, or he will kill the countess. He means to kill you, Davies, and then use Lady Chestermere as a shield to escape. She won’t be safe whichever way we proceed.”

“Then I should go there as requested. Where is she?”

“In a small cottage at the edge of the village. Dolby’s there now. An elderly widow lives there but we don’t know what’s become of her. He’s mad, Davies, utterly insane.”

I could only nod my head, grateful that, finally, Yabsley saw Humphries for what he was: a conniving, homicidal, psychotic lunatic and not part of an international conspiracy as imagined by Hawthorne.

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We made our way to the widow’s cottage, the scant conversation we shared concerned itself with locked doors and shuttered windows, and that Lady Katherine’s wellbeing was paramount to everything.

Inside the cottage, peering through a partially opened shutter, Colonel Humphries gloated with scornful derision, “Ah, your heroine approaches, Katherine, pretending manliness, no less. And what do I see? It appears that the valiant officers of the DSO have us surrounded. Fear not, my dear Katherine, for I need you alive. And they, I am certain, would like to keep you that way.”

Outside, I made a deliberate showing of handing my pistol to Yabsley and removing my overcoat and cloth cap. Now, dressed only in my trousers, turtleneck sweater and jacket, my face and hands felt the nip in the air but my guts were burning with controlled rage. I was about to meet the depraved maniac who had plotted and allowed the abduction and slaughter of innocent women and who would do the same to Lady Katherine. I was ready to meet my fate and my murderer.

I knocked on the door and waited.

It was only a moment before the door opened just wide enough to permit me to enter. As I took my first step over the threshold, I gambled that Humphries would not send me to Hades without spewing out some biased rhetoric or acerbic bile – I needed to face him and talk, and buy time.

As I stepped in toward the centre of the room, the door immediately closed behind me, shutting out all light. I heard a key turn in the lock. In the darkness I could just make out two armchairs, each occupied, and before I could utter a word, Lady Katherine's soft plaintive cry filled the gloom and her warm trembling body filled my arms.

"Rebecca," she sobbed, her arms wrapped tight around me, "Thank God...thank God..."

"Katherine..." was all I could manage before I was overwhelmed by gratitude that she was unharmed. I embraced her and breathed in her scent knowing that this may be the last time I would be with her.

"How very touching," Humphries mocked as he emerged from the darkness. "Shall we proceed with the business at hand?" He stood barely two yards from us.

I reluctantly eased myself out of Katherine's hold and moved away from her. With a calmness honed from years of dealing with thugs and bullies, I addressed our tormentor, "Who is she?" I asked indicating the lifeless form in the other armchair.

"No one of consequence. She was old and widowed, anyway."

I could not fathom what impelled anyone to end another's life. I had ended more than I cared to remember but each had deserved his fate at my hands for I knew that each would have escaped justice otherwise.

"You have me," I bartered, "Let Lady Chestermere go."

His sudden mordant laughter filled the room and just as suddenly turned to enmity, "You stupid, stupid jade! Don't think yourself smarter than I. Katherine will stay and she will witness your demise."

"No!" Lady Katherine cried. It was all I could do to quieten her and keep her away from me.

"Oh, yes, Katherine dear," Humphries countered, "your colonial sweetheart owes me a great debt and today is the day of reckoning."

I remained composed, "You do realise you will not leave this cottage alive if you harm Lady Chestermere."

"Hm. It is not she I wish to harm," he replied smoothly, "not yet, anyway."



Reaching into his jacket he withdrew a pistol and pointed it at my head. Lady Katherine's reactive gasp was to be expected and, without taking my eyes off Humphries' gun, I reassured her with a quiet, "Shhh..."

I recognised the gun as an old Smith and Wesson, made specifically for the Russian military about forty years earlier. Being single-action, the time he would take to cock the hammer would be enough time for me to react. Still, I needed to stall him until all was in place.

"Impressive weapon," I commented, "American special, right? For the Russians."

He seemed both surprised and impressed; I continued, "Is that how you got those Richardson ransom notes into the Russian Embassy? By acquiring the gun from one of the staff, perhaps?"

"Yes," he conceded with a smirk, "rather clever, don't you think? I get a nice weapon and they get implicated in the abductions. 'The international conspiracy' Hawthorne insists on touting," he added with a derisive snort before continuing, "I counted on the Russkies being the secretive bunch of peasants they are and not spilling the beans, so to speak.

"And that dullard, Hawthorne," he persisted, "how on earth he achieved a knighthood is beyond me. He came nowhere close to my ability in field strategy and tactics. You, on the other hand, my dour little she-man—and I sincerely hate to admit this—you would have been a tactical genius had you been of the male gender. Is that why you try so hard? Do you believe that you will eventually grow the right equipment?"

"And you, Humphries, how are you faring without yours?"

His demeanour flipped to maniacal; I should not have provoked him thus but his misogyny was getting under my skin. His look was wild and murderous but I stood firm, staring him down and waiting for his thumb to cock the hammer.

And, just like the pendulum on a clock, his mood swung again back to gloating.

"Tell me, my androgynous misanthrope, how came it that you survived Dickie's onslaught?"

"Captain Smith's?"

"Hm. He hated that epithet. But he earned it, you know. Coward that he was."

“But you used him anyway.”

“He served a purpose. And he was suitably rewarded. Had you not put him down, I would have had to eventually. Can’t leave witnesses, you know. So I thank you for your service.”

I had to keep him talking, biding time, “Why kill Major Williams?”

Humphries became pensive, then answered, “Hm. I didn’t want to do it, you know. But, witnesses and all that. Nice chap. You know, he admired you. He told me all about you and your quick wits. Pity your wits are going to be plastered all over these walls momentarily. Tell me, how fares my friend?”

Calling Wills his ‘friend’ got my goat but I remained calm. “Alive. Unlike Kieran Byrne. Why kill him?”

“He was using the money to fund an Irish revolution. Can’t have that, now, can we? For king and country, and all that.”

I scoffed at the idea that this madman was a Royalist.

An almost indiscernible clink drew our attention to the back rooms. Another scrabbling at the front door had Humphries turn to me with the shocking realisation that the game was up.

“You bitch!” he yelled as he cocked the hammer of his gun with his thumb. I rushed him, grabbing his gun hand and pushing it upward and away from me. The gun discharged into the ceiling. We struggled violently but he managed to wrap his free arm around my neck and twist me back against him, holding me tight against his body. He was taller and stronger, and he was strangling me. Clinging onto his gun hand with both of my hands, trying to hold his gun at bay, I was unable to extricate myself or to reach the switchblade stiletto in my boot. As hard as I tried, he still managed to get the muzzle to my temple.

“Die!” he yelled.

I heard the click of the hammer and, from the corner of my eye, I saw Lady Katherine descend on Humphries like a woman possessed of the devil, grabbing his gun hand and pulling it away the instant he pulled the trigger. I felt the rush of the bullet fly past my forehead, missing me by a hair’s breadth. The sound of the report deafened me and caused a shrill ringing in my ear.

“Fucking whore!” Furious at the intervention, Humphries flung the countess off him. She tumbled backward against the armchair, momentarily incapacitating her. That interference caused him to loosen his stranglehold on me just enough to contort myself to the side and, before he was able to cock his revolver again, I grabbed a handful of his groin. I pulled, squeezed and twisted the flaccid flesh until he released me, screaming in agony. He doubled over clutching his groin, insensible to anyone around him.

I turned on him and kned him to the face, breaking his nose. He dropped to the floor and cowed in a foetal curl, whimpering in pain with blood oozing onto his clothes and floor.

I rushed to Lady Katherine and helped her to her feet.

“Are you hurt?”

“No. Look out!” she warned when Humphries, lying helpless on the floor, painfully struggled to aim his gun at me and fulfil his insatiable desire to see me dead. Before his trembling hand could cock the hammer, I took the few strides to him and stamped on his fingers. He screamed and released the weapon. I picked it up and kicked him in the stomach for good measure. I felt no sympathy. He was the cause of so much sorrow and heartbreak for his own twisted revenge.

The hatred I felt for this coward impelled me to thrust the barrel of the gun to his head and cock the hammer.

At that moment, both front and back doors crashed open and the five DSO detectives burst in.

“Hold, Davies!” Yabsley ordered, “We need him alive.” Yabsley strode over to me and took possession of the Smith and Wesson, “You didn’t call the code word.”

“And you made a hell of a racket picking the locks,” I replied somewhat annoyed.

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## CHAPTER 21

November, 1905

### Epilogue

The house that Major Reginald Williams rented had lain empty for the past five weeks. Mrs Williams' cherished gardens were overgrown. The rosebushes, which she meticulously tended each year at this time, remained unpruned and straggly, as were the bordering hedges.

None of their neighbours knew what had become of the genial major, his wife and son, or their little dog, Mikey. But, since the rent was continuing to be paid, the lease stood and the house remained empty.

Those neighbours were still gossiping about that incident, weeks ago, when Mrs Williams entertained those two gentlemen at that unseemly early morning hour and then unexpectedly left with them. They, the gentlemen, seemed agreeable enough, army friends of the major, they said. Anyway, that's what the neighbours told anyone who cared to ask – and there had been a few who had come around and ventured a few probing questions.

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The dingy little flat that Colonel Humphries rented in that less-salubrious part of London, too, had been hastily vacated weeks ago leaving the landlady owed a good deal of rent. She had thought herself a good judge of character when she let that little room to that older gentleman without character references. He did say he was a retired colonel and he was a smooth talker. Well, she'll know better next time.

The Marlborough Club, also, was feeling diddled. It was unusual for an officer and a gentleman to default on his commitment and not pay his annual fees. Consequently, this particular colonel had been summarily blacklisted and would not gain entry to the club should he have the temerity to do so. What remained undisclosed to all at the club—except Sir Giles Hawthorne—was that the recalcitrant Colonel Neville Humphries was declared insane by the court and was being held at his majesty’s pleasure in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum. It was unlikely that he would ever see the inside of the Marlborough Club—or the outside of the asylum—ever again, especially after the desecrated, decaying body of his wife was finally discovered in the cellar of their home.

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Many questions purposely had been left unanswered by the head of the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police. It was in the nation’s best interest, Mr Quinn determined, to keep certain facts locked away. Once the Department of Special Operations had concluded its investigations into the abductions and murders of the three wealthy women, he released his alternative ‘facts’ to an insatiable public blooded by the hitherto unsolved Ripper murders.

With the cooperation and agreement of their families, the deaths of Lady Cecilia D’Arcy, Mrs Charles Richardson and the Honourable Wendy Warburton had been stated as accidental and unrelated. The knowledge that the perpetrator of these heinous crimes, and his minions, all had been brought to justice by one means or another, had satisfied their families. None of them wished to have the brutality and degradation suffered by their daughters or wives made public. Whatever ransom monies had been recovered were returned to their rightful owners.

Sir Giles let it be known that Detective Constable Kieran Byrne had resigned from his position in the DSO of the Special Branch due to his mother’s failing health and had returned to Ireland. There was no further disclosure regarding the disposition of his body.

The deaths of Norman Croft and Harry Hogan were duly noted on their files and their cadavers sent for anatomical studies to an undisclosed medical research college.

The body of Captain Gregory “Dickie” Smith, he having no known living relative, was interred in a pauper’s grave at the expense of the public purse.

Stewart Graves was charged with a number of serious crimes, including kidnapping, which, if convicted, would result in the death penalty. The general consensus was that he would be sentenced to hang but that it would be commuted to life imprisonment with the first twenty years' hard labour.

The bodies of young Timothy Sadlier, his father and his uncle were returned to their families and their deaths attributed to Croft and Hogan through misadventure.

It surprised me that Sir Giles Hawthorne remained head of the DSO even though it was through his failings that Humphries almost succeeded with his plans. Hawthorne would not, at first, believe that his friend could be behind such atrocities but, once the evidence was put in front of him by Alexander Quinn and Detective Sergeant Yabsley, he was convinced. He conceded that he had been played for a fool but, nevertheless, he was exonerated from being involved in any part of the conspiracy and kept his position and, more importantly, his pension.

I made my peace with Yabsley, rather, he with me. It was immediately after we had returned to London with Humphries, and I still had not returned to my flat. I had intended to hand in my resignation once I had spoken to Wills and was in Wills' small office clearing out my few possessions there when he approached me.

"Davies," Yabsley said indifferently as he stood in the doorway, "I heard you're leaving."

"Come to gloat?" I threw back at him without looking up.

"Came to return this," he said offering a small black box.

I looked at it immediately recognising it, and I looked at him. "You've been to my flat," I said taking the few steps toward him and removing the item from his grasp.

"There's nothing missing," he explained. "I thought it best to hold onto it just in case—"

"I carked it, right?"

"—it got into the wrong hands." He hesitated; there obviously was something he wanted to get off his chest. "You were right all along."

His admission was like a quasi-apology, so I let him continue.

"I...I am, ah..."

“What, Yabsley? What are you?”

“I’m sorry to see you go,” he announced quickly.

It was all I could do to not scoff at this sudden revelation of his. “Well,” I said, adding with mock concern, “Perhaps Quinn won’t accept my resignation. Would that make you happy?”

He allowed my jibe to slide by and said, “That’s a small fortune in gemstones you have there, Davies. They’d be safer in a bank.”

“Perhaps,” I said as I put the box into my bag and continued with my packing.

“They appear to be from the subcontinent.”

“Afghanistan.”

“How did you come by them?”

“Let’s just say it was compensation for injuries perpetrated on my body.”

He peered at the scar on my face. “That’s where that happened?”

Yabsley had never shown the slightest interest in me or my history until this very moment and I didn’t quite know how to take it. I put my sarcasm away and replied civilly, “Yes. And it’s where I met Lieutenant Williams. He saved my life.”

“I’d like to know more,” he requested solemnly.

“Maybe one day,” I said closing my portmanteau. “Now, I’m off to visit Wills.”

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The train pulled into St Columb Road railway station in Cornwall and I collected my valise from the overhead rack ready to disembark.

The previous afternoon, after my encounter with Yabsley, I had returned to my flat in Newington to find it in disarray but relieved that my bank passbook had been left in place. I was particularly thankful that it had been Yabsley who found my gemstones and returned them to me. Had Byrne discovered them, I was sure they would have been in the possession of the Irish revolutionists by now.

I had packed for a prolonged stay away, and bathed and rested—for I truly did need to recuperate—and, the following morning, bright and early before embarking on the train, I ran a few errands. After visiting a dealer in gemstones, I went to my bank and sorted some business out there and then on to Miss Sophie and Mrs Jannock, where I settled my

account. I was surprised that the gun had cost me nine pounds, but appreciative for the assistance and kindness they had shown me. I doubted that I would see Miss Sophie in her ‘professional’ capacity anytime soon.

Stepping from the train felt like stepping into a new me and a new existence. Everything had changed, even my outlook on life. I no longer felt jaded and worn-out; I felt refreshed and invigorated, not by the restful night I had had but by what was to come.

The taxicab—in reality, just a horse-drawn hansom with a newfangled taximeter attached to measure the distance travelled—took me the two and a half miles directly to Rachel’s Way, St Columb Major, and a cottage situated in the middle of a large, well-ordered country garden.

The late autumn day was sunny with a fresh, wispy breeze that added a perfecting note to the day.

“Rebecca!” Wills’ voice was strong and clear as he called from the front door of the cottage. “Welcome to my humble abode!”

We met at the boundary gate, which he gallantly opened and swept a low bow in a welcoming gesture. That gesture caused him to hold his chest and wince in pain for the gunshot Byrne had delivered was still giving him some discomfort. Nevertheless, he engulfed me in an overwhelming bearhug and whispered in my ear, “My little bastard colonist. How good it is to see you again.”

I pulled back and looked at him; his eyes had unashamedly welled with tears.

“Marshmallow,” was all I could muster before my voice betrayed my own feelings for him and damned tears added to that betrayal.

The yapping of an approaching dog averted our attention to the cottage where Cornelia and Reggie Junior stood watching our pathetic display. Mikey playfully jumped about our legs, yapping incessantly.

“Reginald! Are you going to stand there all day or are you going to bring our guest inside for tea?”

Wills looked at me and took my valise in one hand and my arm in the other, “The mistress has spoken. Come.”

Yes, my world had indeed changed.



Cornelia no longer saw me as a rival for her husband's affection but as what I truly was: a friend, a colleague and a brother-in-arms. She accepted that and actually spoke to me, albeit reservedly, showing interest in my native country and my travels.

I stayed a few very pleasant days with them, days in which Wills and I discussed the final events of the case. He added a few salient facts that had puzzled me, the most pressing was why Quinn had issued a warrant for my arrest.

"That was to flush out the true spy," Wills explained. "I only found this out recently when both Quinn and Hawthorne paid me a visit. I was as confounded as you, as to why he would do that."

"I know Humphries went over the edge and killed his wife," I said. "What caused that?"

"Many factors. Firstly, he was already prone to rages which medication helped to inhibit. He had a suspicion that his wife was having amorous affairs while he was on campaign. When that cannon blew apart in South Africa and shrapnel tore into his abdomen and groin, he could no longer function as a husband and that only added to his rage and suspicions. Quinn said they could find no evidence that Mrs Humphries had ever been in the company of other men and concluded that Humphries was delusional because of his incapacitation."

"Poor Mrs Humphries," I added solicitously.

"Scott uncovered the connection between Smith and Humphries. Captain Gregory Smith was in Major Hawthorne's company and was cashiered, as you know. But Smith wanted to get back at Hawthorne for not supporting him at his court martial and, when Humphries knew of 'Dickie' and his fate, he contacted Smith and propositioned him. Smith should have been satisfied as a printer's assistant rather than going down the path of vengeance. Like someone we know."

Wills gave me a stern look one which I avoided by asking, "What about Henry?"

"Henry? Ah, Henry," Wills smiled, "he saved us both. If it hadn't been for him..."

"He wants to be a detective," I said admiringly. "He's certainly perceptive enough and quite a quick study."

"A real-life Sherlock Holmes, eh?" he chuckled.

“I want to give him to have a bit of a head start. I’ve set up a passbook account in his name to help him when the time comes. A hundred pounds.”

“A hundred pounds! That’s a hell of a lot of money—” He stopped mid-sentence, then continued, “Is this from...?”

I nodded. “I sold one of the stones. Might as well put some of it to good use.”

While officially frowned upon by those in command, a blind eye was generally turned to whatever spoils were ‘confiscated’ during wartime as long as it was not spoken of.

“Would you speak to his father?” I asked.

“Of course.” Wills smiled approvingly then continued, “I should be back on duty after Christmas. And you?”

I smiled, “I’ve tendered my resignation.”

“Well that won’t work. You’re in my employ, not theirs.”

“And so?”

“You’ll be back,” he said with a confident smile.

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He could be right. The world was rapidly changing; there was insurrection everywhere in the British Empire. And my ghosts from the Middle East and Australia might not stay dead and buried.

But now, striding through the magnificent gardens toward Lilyfield Manor on a chilly winter’s day, my heart was full with eager anticipation.

Despite the often comically hostile opposition I would receive from Jessica Turner, I would nonetheless be welcomed into the household by Mrs McPherson as ‘companion’ to the countess. The housekeeper would be delighted by the uninhibited happiness her ‘Sweet Kateling’ would have.

My pace quickened—I had a date to keep with a countess.

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