

COLLAGE EDITION WELLINGTON'S OFFICERS BOOK 3

CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON

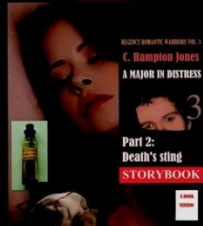
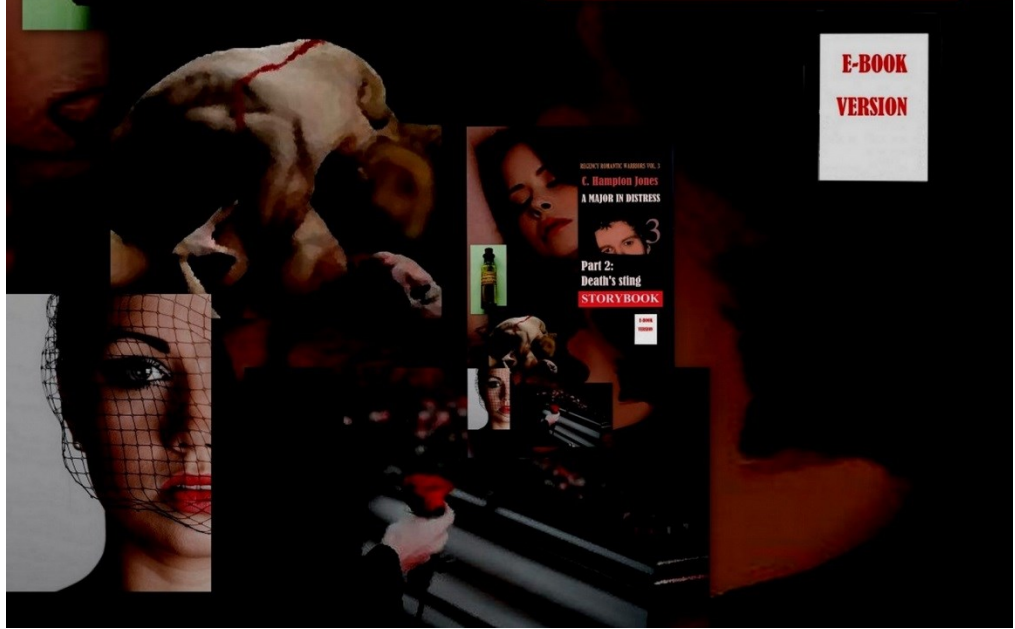


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A MAJOR IN DISTRESS

PART 2: DEATH'S STING

E-BOOK
VERSION



CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON

A MAJOR IN DISTRESS
PART 2 :
'DEATH'S STING'



Vol. 3 Collage edition Wellington's officers

by

CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON

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A Major in Distress: Death's Sting is the sequel to A Major
in Distress part 1: Deceptions

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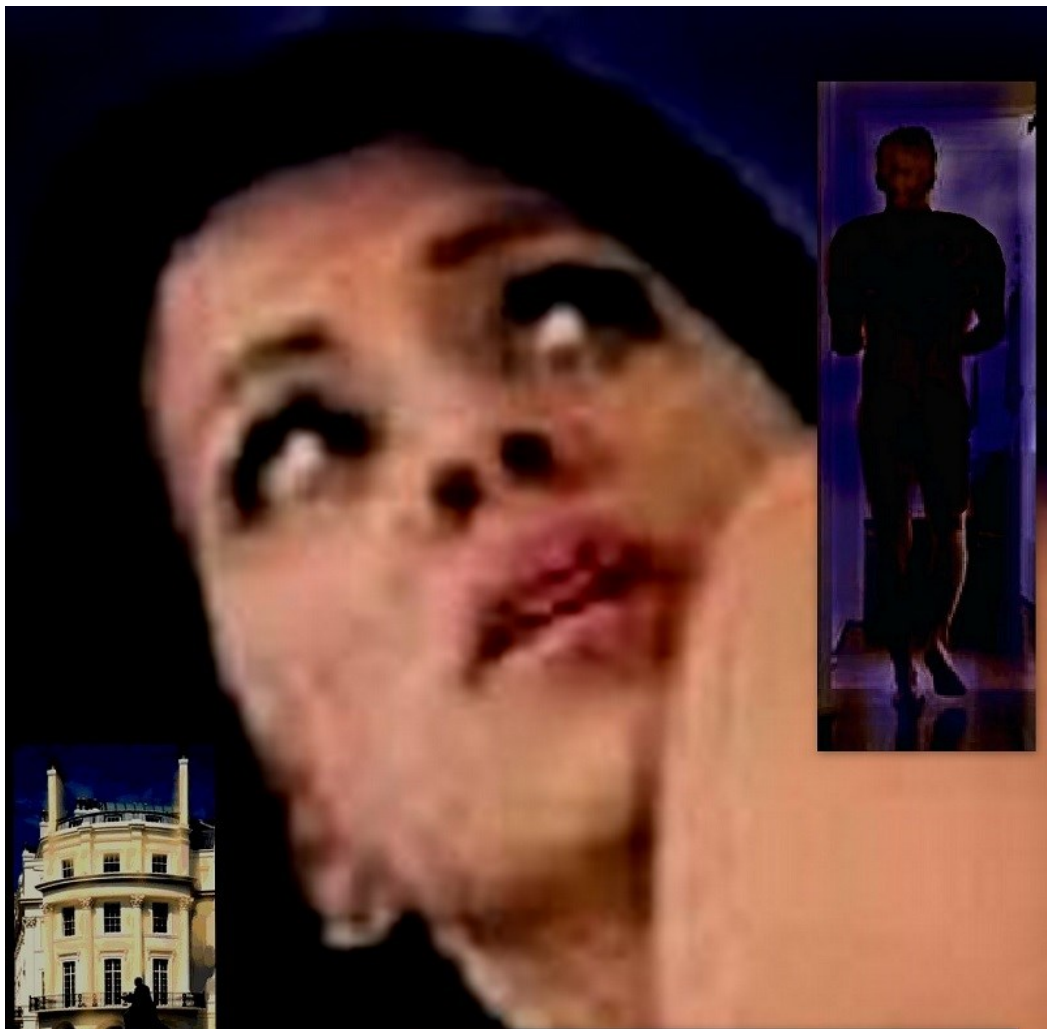
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PROLOGUE: THE DECEIT

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“I did not expect you to come tonight!”

Marguerite turned on the pillow to touch Hengist’s face with her hand. She had to concentrate on his breath because the room was very dark and she could only feel and smell him.

“Why not?” he asked in a whisper.

Voices were hard to recognize if one whispered, he knew. Marguerite would not be able to hear the darker timbre in his voice, which his brother’s lacked.

“You... you were so indifferent today!”

“I wasn’t,” he assured her, “for God’s sake, you must believe me that I wasn’t. I have a problem showing my feelings!”

He smiled inwardly, because that was true at least.

“I adore you,” he sighed, wriggling closer to her side.

He had miscalculated the place where she was lying in the dark.

Her roaming hand slid alongside his skin close to his heart. Her soft hands circled slowly towards his shoulder blades.

He was hardening to a state that felt like marble and was too distracted to notice that her fingers started to delve into the groove of the scar on his muscled back.

“What’s this?” she asked, nuzzling his shoulder, sliding one hand all the way down the badly sewn and healed slash that he had incurred during one of the first raids in the Peninsula. She had felt the scar before but in the throes of her passion had not thought to ask.

Hengist almost cursed. How could he explain about the bayonet knife that had carved a deep groove into his skin?

“I had a stupid accident as a kid,” he grumbled, thinking fast, “I fell on the front

grate of the fire place and raked my back against the sharp ends.”

He felt her pucker her lips.

“That must have hurt,” she whispered searching for his ear to press a kiss on it. “And this? Also a grate?”

Ah God, the girl was paying attention! Her hand was now lovingly following the wide scar on his midriff from the recent saber slash which had almost cost him his life last September. His skin had gaped like a whale’s mouth until the surgeon had sewn it all together with impatient strokes. Curse that man to hell! If he had taken a few more minutes, his chest would not have looked like a badly repaired mattress. The infection had not helped either; curling around the stitches, forming rims of scar tissue.

“A duel, unfortunately,” he invented quickly, again not untruthful either.

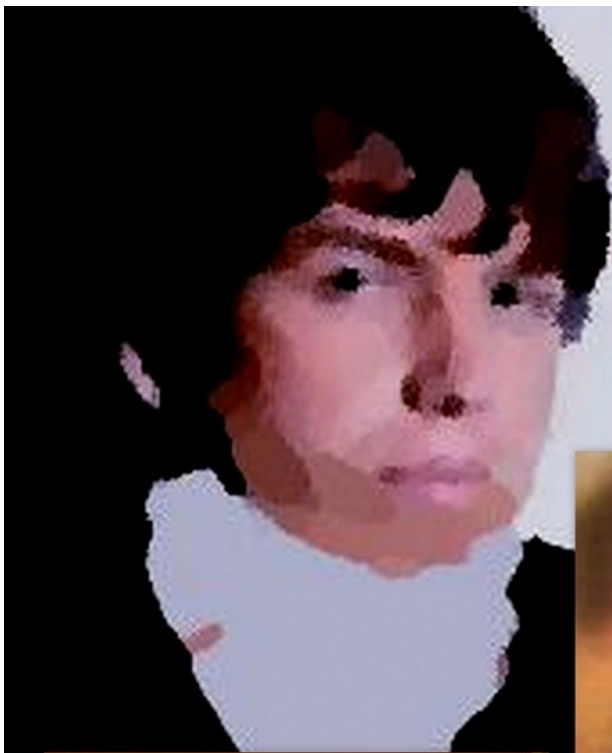
“A duel?” she asked incredulously.

“Why?”

“Mercenary reasons, I suppose,” he answered languidly, trying to distract her by reaching for that delicious spot between her thighs.

She moaned and clasped his cock, humming with delight when she found him hard and willing... forgetting everything about his war wounds, thank God!

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Chapter 1: A DUKE'S INVESTMENTS

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The Duke's brochure had arrived, delivered by one of the ducal footmen, and Stevie had almost jumped upon it. He pulled a disappointed face when it bore Hengist's name.

Darn! It would hardly do to open the Major's mail. If a morning could be a "yes" or a "no", it was definitely a "no" morning.

He heard the pounding of footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see a kilted Hengist in his formal major's regalia descend the stairs.

"Going on parade, Major?" Stevie dared ask after looking wide-eyed at the insignia on Hengist's dark blue Black Watch coat.

Hengist grinned sheepishly at him. Like all the true warriors, he disliked the showy parade dress that was only good to impress

the fawning crowd of debutantes and interfering mamas at a very formal ball.

“I need to meet my peers at the London barracks and pick up my horse there. Biggles informed me he would be welcome at the stables here.”

He looked down at his coat.

“I look like a damned Christmas tree, don't I?”

Stevie felt very much like stroking a hand along Hengist's broad chest, but he knew he would be in for a facer if he did not refrain from that urge. His intuition had told him already on Hengist's arrival that Hengist was not the kind of man to take that sort of male attention lightly. Hengist was a ladies-man; Stevie had seen him gaze at Marguerite whenever he was in her vicinity. It had amused him to no extent. Obviously, Marguerite's and Hengist's attraction for each other had been mutual for years

without either of them ever realizing it, or to be able to cash in on it. Poor sods!

“I think some mail for you arrived, Major,” he said pointing at Richard Grey's missive with the ducal seal.

Hengist cocked an eye.

“That should be Lindley's brochure. I won't have time for it now, young Stephen...”

“Brochure? The one you talked about at dinner? The Marylebone project, wasn't it? Would you mind if I had a look at it?”

Stevie was enough of an actor to feign surprise.

The Major pounded him on the shoulder with a gloved hand.

“Developing an interest in architecture, are ye? Be my guest, Stephen, I'll look at it when I get back, so you can leave it in the library when you're done.”

He turned around to the front door, almost colliding with his brother who had just

entered the house wearing a greatcoat and boots.

“Good Christ, Philip!” Hengist exclaimed, “The sparrows are falling from the roof with this heat, and you are wearing a coat fit for a winter storm!”

Philip scowled at his brother.

It was indeed a very sunny day, almost rare for London this time of the year. He had not dared to walk back into the house in his evening wear. One could forgive a man for coming back at six o'clock in the morning in his formal dinner clothes, the London Quality would not bat an eye at that, but to come back at noon dressed for the evening was quite another matter.

He had stayed in his room at Gents until ten o'clock, making passionate love again to a rested and enthusiastic Denning.

He sent a boy to the house for the greatcoat and his boots, in order to hide his evening clothes. He remembered in time not

to send a footman in Gents' obvious blue and silver livery. Apart from Stevie and John Row, nobody else was supposed to know about his lucrative position in the place. Hengist obviously knew some about it because he had been there, but that meant that too many people were already in on the secret.

Philip unbuttoned his coat with a sour face and handed it over to the head-footman who had opened the door for him.

Hengist nodded at his brother.

“I need to talk to you when I get back.”

Philip shrugged indifferently.

“I'm not going anywhere until tonight.”

Hengist sent his brother a fierce scowl and reached for the doorknob to open the door himself before the head-footman could race him to it, almost tripping over Philip's greatcoat.

He slammed the door shut behind him.

Stevie's look shifted from Philip's face to his boots.

“New fashion, I presume?” he asked, pointing at the riding boots that hugged Philip's evening breeches.

Philip just sent him a dark look before running hastily up the stairs in search of John Row.

Stevie looked sadly at his former lover's ascent. The man had been away from the house all night. The bad thing was that he had heard the upstairs maids gossiping about the state of the new Lady Morvern's bed. It had been well used last night, but not only to sleep in. He hoped they would not notice that the bridegroom had not been home at all last night. That would be a cause for disaster.

Stevie narrowed his eyes. Hengist had looked smug and contented, a man well satisfied. He happened to know that the satisfaction had not been caused by the

nymphomaniac upstairs maid Macy, who had at last had her chance with one of the young footmen in the attic last night.

He had heard that tidbit when John Row and Minnie came back from their breakfast in the servant's hall. Macy had forced Minnie to sleep on the footman's cot in the attic while the footman had taken Minnie's place in the bed she shared with Macy, Minnie complained to a very understanding valet.

At least it was certain that she could not have been the cause of Hengist's obvious contentment.

His sister had sported blue smudges under her eyes, and Stevie had noted the love bites on her long neck.

Love bites; not scratches due to vermin or insects.

He wondered about them. His sister had never been one with a roving eye, except maybe for Hengist. As far as he knew

nobody but fat Alexander had ever visited her bed.

He turned around to follow the new head-footman into the wardrobe.

“Porter?”

Ian turned around after quietly and professionally hanging Philip’s coat on its hook in the wardrobe.

“Yes, master Stephen?”

“You’ve not just witnessed that scene with the Viscount.”

Ian raised his eyebrows.

“What scene, sir?”

Stevie turned on his heels in thought, heading for the stairs.

“Somebody is sending you a lot of mail,” his sister said, closing the door of the morning room.

When Stevie stared at her in wonder, she laughed and pointed at the big envelope he held in his hands.

“Oh, that?” he harrumphed, “The Duke of Lindley sent this to the Major. It is the prospectus of the Marylebone building project, by the design of Mr. Nash. I understand the Duke is a most fervent sponsor of the project and seeks more investors.”

Marguerite looked askance at her brother.

“If it’s the Major’s mail, why do you have it?”

Stevie coloured a deep red.

“The Major allowed me to read it first and afterward I need to leave it in the library.”

He hesitated artfully before asking: “Would you like to read it as well? I understand investments in buildings are quite the thing at the moment, certainly now that the Prince has put his support behind it.”

Marguerite took the big envelope and weighed it in her hands.

“Why don’t I study it? Or did you want to...”

Stevie shook his head hastily. There were some things he had to arrange post-haste.

“No, leave it on the library table when you’re done with it, Sis.”

He watched her turn to the library before he took the stairs two at a time.

“Rose?”

Stevie stuck his head around the door of Marguerite’s bedroom, where Rose was putting some unmentionables away in a drawer.

“What is it, Master Stephen?”

Rose looked up from her work and stretched her back. She was not getting any younger and her concern about her lady made her feel a hundred years old.

She had not slept much last night; she had snoozed on the ottoman in the Major's

bedroom and then had forgotten to warn the Major to go back to his chambers.

Thank God for the man's discipline never to sleep late; he had been back in the room early in the morning when it was still dark and Rose had the chance to ask him to hide the Viscount's robe in one of the drawers.

He had discarded the thing and folded it into his dresser in the bedroom.

Rose's eyes had widened when she saw his body in all its nakedness; he truly was a very formidable man.

She did notice the wide ugly scar on his back and stifled a gasp. When he turned around, he frowned.

“Still here, Rose?” he whispered, “You'd better find your bed, it's almost morning. You should not have stayed up so late, I can find my own way in this room!”

She had seen a glimmer of amusement on his face and could not help to smile back at

him. She raked the front of his glorious body.

“You’re scarred!” she remarked, pointing at the enormous scar on his midriff.

He looked down and shrugged his huge shoulders.

“As long as she never sees my brother ‘au naturel’ she won’t be the wiser.”

He laughed softly.

Rose turned and made for the door.

My, my, she contemplated; no wonder that bed was carnage that night; the man is huge even when he is limp!

She had chuckled, thinking of the impotent William.

Take that, fatso! I hope you’re watching from your front seat in hell!

She was still smiling when she found her lonely bed in her attic room.

It was two narrow stairs up from her mistress’ bedroom. She had her own sleeping place in the servant’s quarters,

unlike that slimy John Row, who slept in his master's dressing room behind a screen. It was just not done, that a servant slept in his master's quarters, even if it was only a dressing room.

When her mistress was awake at past ten she hastened down to take care of the mistress' bed before one of the upstairs maids could get their hands on the sheets.

That had proven to be a futile mission, as Macy, a bit red-eyed from her last night's adventures, had already been making the bed.

Rose had frowned at the girl's forwardness. She was not a lazy girl, but she was never in a hurry to tend to the bedrooms either.

Macy looked straight-laced when she walked out of Marguerite's bedroom with the laundry, but Rose could not help trace a certain smugness.

Oh, dear! No doubt those sheets would be the talk of the staff's hall today, for lack of something else as remotely interesting!

John Row had not yet been downstairs for his master's breakfast claims, which meant that the Viscount was still asleep.

Just as well, Rose had mused, until she had seen him at noon.

She had heard his footsteps in the hallway and had spied on him when he entered his own apartment.

Oh, Lord he was still in his evening wear, his elegant breeches stuffed in his riding boots! Damned, that she had not had the chance to bring Marguerite's sheets down herself, to hand them over to the new laundry-girl and wait until they disappeared in the boiling water of the big washing tub! That evidence of another night of the Viscountess' lovemaking with the wrong person had been in Macy's hands and Lord

knew what she would do with the information those sheets provided!

Rose shook her head.

My, my, it was certain that the Major had taken the job seriously again! That was all that mattered, in the end; that there could be a baby. Even a baby-girl could keep her mistress away from the frequently visiting blues, although a boy would be preferable.

Rose had frowned.

How long was the Major going to stay? There was talk downstairs that he would visit his father in Edinburgh, soon. Scotland was a long way. What if Cherie did not conceive before he went away? What if all her efforts to get her mistress breeding were for naught?

Her hands trembled when she was putting away the newly washed stockings and other unmentionables.

When Master Stephen called her, she looked up with a harassed look in her eyes.

Stevie quickly stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

He glanced at the big bed where his sister used to sleep. There were no signs of last night's happenings left; the counterpane was neatly covering it, and the pillows were all tucked against the headboard.

“We need to talk Rose...”

Stevie sat down on one of Marguerite's dainty bedside chairs.

The room looked bright and welcoming with its cream-coloured curtains mixed with gold and soft pastels.

Rose sent him an uncertain look. She had known Stevie since he was a babe in arms, a wonderful little brat, but he had changed a lot in the last year since he had been in London. His friendship with the Viscount seemed like a blessing to her, until she had interpreted yesterday's remarks downstairs in the servant's hall about Lord Morvern.

After what she had heard about the Viscount's depravity she wondered if his very young friend who had brought him into the house might be a part of that unnatural style of friendship the Viscount seemed to prefer.

She frowned when she remembered that Stevie had been the one to insist on the wedding between the Viscount and Marguerite. She now suspected he had even called in his formidable meddling mother who had achieved the feat of the betrothal in less than a few hours. Lady McKenna's arrival had been a bit too convenient to be coincidental.

She frowned at him, standing straight-backed against the chest of drawers.

"I heard the upstairs maids chat about the state of Marguerite's bedchamber last night and the night before."

Rose looked aghast at the young man who sat in the chair with indifferent elegance.

“I will tell Mr. Biggles that the girls feel too free to gossip about their mistress, Master Stephen,” she said breathlessly.

Stevie’s mouth turned up into a smile.

“That is not why I mentioned it,” he answered crisply, “you see, Rose, if everybody thinks the marriage is being consummated with quite some vigor...”

Rose blanched at his words.

The rascal knew! No doubt about it.

“...While the Viscount has never been at home during the first night of his wedding or the second...”

Rose gasped.

Oh, Lord, the chickens were coming home to roost!

“Then whom...” Stevie continued, enjoying his cat and mouse game immensely, “...has been sharing my sister’s bed?”

She could only gasp again, wringing her hands in front of her bosom.

“Oh, Master Stephen,” she uttered with difficulty, “it was all a misunderstanding, especially on the wedding night!”

“Ah.”

Stevie could hardly hide his elation at her quick confession.

“I did not know that the Viscount had not exchanged his guest-room for the master bedroom,” she babbled, “I thought it was him waiting in the master bedroom, so I urged him to go and...”

“Fulfill his duty to my sister?”

Stevie cocked a mocking brow.

“Then who have you sent to the Viscountess on her wedding night?”

Rose gulped like a stranded fish.

“The Major was put in the master bedroom, sir. I don’t know how that came about.”

Stevie nodded slowly.

The Major indeed; he could not have imagined a better stud.

Brilliant! It had been his suggestion to put the Major in the blue room, the one next to Marguerite's.

“So, if the Major went in there that first night,” he nodded into the direction of Marguerite's bed, “all by mistake as you claim, how come he has lain with the Viscountess again last night?”

The chest of drawers made a chunking sound when Rose leaned against it with some force. She looked down at the carpet; one mass of nerves.

“Because... because I asked him to, Master Stephen!”

It came out inaudibly. Stevie had the best ears in the world, however.

“You asked him to!” he repeated ominously, “Why?”

Rose came out of her nervousness. She suddenly looked at the young master with contempt.

“He had made her a very happy woman that first night, Master Stephen! Because he is a big virile man who can give her a beautiful babe, that’s why!”

Stevie raised his eyebrows at her outburst.

“Woman, you sent a stranger to my sister’s bed...”

“Don’t you 'woman' me, Master Stephen!” Rose suddenly hissed, “Don’t you dare criticize me! It was you who brought about a marriage with a foul debaucher, a... a... sodomite! If he never visits my lady’s bed I won’t be sorry!”

She brought her hand to her mouth in horror; not truly knowing if it was because she had called the Viscount a sodomite, or because she had snapped at Stevie.

Stevie clenched his hands into fists and pursed his lips. So the secret was out?

“How did you get this sort of indecent information about the Viscount?” he snarled.

Rose heaved a deep sigh.

“The servants downstairs, sir. They don’t know the right of it as I have told them that the Viscount was with her Ladyship those two nights. But they wondered, sir, they wondered about it as they had thought he was... He had been so brazen as to touch one of the junior footmen intimately. On his... on his behind.”

Stevie felt like swearing.

Why, oh why, could Philip not keep his hands to himself in his own household?

Bloody, bloody idiot!

“A playful pat and they think he is deviant?”

Stevie hoped to keep his voice innocent, although he steamed with anger. Philip had turned out to be a damn fool!

Rose shook her head.

“They think he slept with the Viscountess, but we both know otherwise! The first night he did not come home until five o’clock in

the morning and this morning he came back at noon, less than twenty minutes ago. I saw him enter his apartments in his evening clothes. He is definitely not interested in Lady Morvern, Master Stephen! If he was, he would not have left her in the days of her... *their* honeymoon!”

Stevie got up from his chair.

He brought his mouth close to Rose’s ear.

“We need to do some damage control here, Rose,” he whispered. “Things have got out of hand already. It will not do for the staff to find out the eventual truth about his Lordship’s... ah... preferences.”

He took a deep breath.

“The last thing we want anybody to know is that somebody has taken over the Viscount’s duty to her Ladyship; although I must commend you for your choice of a stud!”

He smiled mockingly at her startled face.

“In the meantime, let’s not interfere with the Major and my sister. The way things look any heir will be an Agnew anyway, although he may not be entirely a Morvern.”

He strode to the door.

“What will you do?” Rose cried after him. He looked at her with clenched jaws.

“Damage control, Rose; you play your part and you play it well! Take care that the servants won’t be the wiser about who’s sleeping with my sister in reality. I’ll talk some sense into the Viscount about his nightly wanderings.”

The door closed behind him with a click.

Rose sat down on the ottoman, covering her face with her gnarled hands, trying not to cry out in fear or confusion. She wished it had only stayed a secret between her and the Major! She knew perfectly well that Stephen had changed into an opportunistic and manipulative young man. He was not to

be trusted with such sensitive information! He was sure to use it to his own advantage, no matter whom he could hurt with it.

Her only hold upon Master Stephen might be the assumption that he had been the Viscount's lover.

She shook her head in anguish. Oh, my God, she was really too old and too humble to be drawn into such an intricate web like this!

It was only six steps from Hengist's to Philip's room and Stevie knocked imperiously on the door.

John Row answered it at his leisure, irritating Stevie to no end.

“His Lordship is taking a bath, Master Stephen, maybe you'd like to come back later?”

“No, I won't.”

Stevie pushed the unsuspecting bigger man aside.

“Row, go and have your lunch and be back in half an hour!” he commanded.

John Row looked questioningly at his master who was lying on his bed wrapped in towels, his hair still wet from the ablutions of a quick bath.

Philip looked with amusement at Stevie and then shrugged and nodded at his valet.

Stevie waited for the valet to disappear and then sat down on an ottoman.

“Not joining me on the bed, my prince?” the Viscount asked him in a mocking voice.

Stevie looked sternly at his former lover.

By God, the man behaved like a fool!

“We need to talk.”

“Talk?” Philip raised a brow, “Have some brandy, my gorgeous; it’s a delicious soft kind.”

He took a glass from the bed table obviously filled to the rim by his industrious valet.

Stevie shook his head. It was only about noon was it? Since when had Philip started to indulge in hard spirits before five o'clock in the afternoon?

“Philip,” Stevie started in a neutral tone, “you have been married for two full days now, and the hours at night you have been at home cannot be counted on one hand.”

Philip took a large gulp of the brandy.

“So?”

“You have a specific duty to perform.”

Philip put his glass down with an irritated sigh.

“Not that again!”

“It needs to be discussed.”

Stevie folded his arms. He had to play this well; Philip could not have known about the other man visiting his sister's bed.

“I can take care of the matter; for a price though.”

Philip started to laugh.

“My prince on the white horse again?”

Stevie almost groaned. Why could his bloody Lordship not be serious?

“Do you want me to take care of it or not?”

Philip sent him a curious smile.

“Of course I do. Go ahead!”

“I can arrange it, but it will cost you.”

“How much?” Philip had stopped smiling.

“I need your full cooperation in this matter. If we want this to work, you need to come home at midnight for the next three weeks. You can leave at six in your riding-clothes, for all I care, but you must promise me to keep to your rooms between twelve and six, understood?”

The Viscount sent him a piercing stare.

“How much, Stevie?”

Ah, yes. The mercenary matter. If Stevie got four hundred pounds for his share in Gents last week, than surely Philip must have had double that price.

“Four hundred quid and payable now.”

The glass fell on the floor when Philip sat up in his bed.

“Four hundred and I don’t ever have to visit your sister’s bed?” he asked happily, “That’s done, my friend! It’s a bloody bargain!”

“Is it?” Stevie asked smugly.

That would be four hundred pounds for something that already had been dealt with! He’d never made such fast money in his life.

“I want it now, Philip,” he said impatiently.

With Philip, one never knew.

“In my yesterday’s dinner jacket,” Philip pointed.

He did not seem to care a whit.

When Stevie strode to the dress-boy where John Row had hung the jacket for airing Philip said; “No servants, and not you either, my little Prince!”

Stevie turned around to the man elongated on his bed.

“You don’t think...” he ground out.

“You and your sister? No, not really. I’d never thought you were one for incest.”

Philip grinned hatefully.

Stevie counted out his four hundred pounds from a big roll of paper money, trying to keep a straight face after Philip’s insinuating remarks.

Sticks and stones... he thought. And words can never hurt me.

“I need your word that you will be at home for the next week between midnight and six or in the company of your wife.”

Philip’s shrug was indifferent.

“Will I be allowed to watch?” he asked, “You know, when she and whoever are at it?”

“Christ, Philip,” Stevie stammered, “I never knew a man as perverted as you! We’re talking about my sister here!”

He stormed out of the room, leaving a very amused Philip, still drinking from the brandy bottle.

“What do you think?”

Stevie watched the big man reading through the papers.

The Major sat behind the big table concentrating on the prospectus.

Stevie had studied Hengist’s face with eagerness. There was no doubt about the man’s powerful charisma; even just sitting at the huge mahogany table, reading, he gave the impression of unstudied magnificence.

Hengist closed the booklet.

“I cannot find much fault with the project.”

“Neither does my sister,” Stevie hastened to assure the Major. “She was actually quite impressed with the whole thing. She said

she may be able to invest fifty thousand in it.”

The last part of the remark was a lie. Marguerite had read the prospectus and had shrugged, saying she would ask her man of affairs to look into it.

His sister, Stevie knew, had shown herself a businesswoman with some acumen. She would never throw herself into any deep investments without a thorough study of the case. At least that was one of the very positive accomplishments of her marriage with the horrible Alexander, apart from the fortune she had inherited of course.

Stevie had always been surprised that William had allowed her to inherit so much. Fat William had been part of a big family throughout England and Scotland and as far as he knew, they got nothing at all when he died, not a farthing.

Hengist chuckled.

“Unlike yourself, your sister must be very rich,” he said.

“Rich and happy,” Stevie nodded with emphasis, looking Hengist very straight in the eyes.

Hengist had an unusual intuition when it came to people; probably because he had worked with them all his adult life.

He cocked a brow, looking intensely at his lover’s brother.

“Why, young Stephen, do I have the impression *that* was not just a statement?” he drawled, holding Stevie’s gaze sternly.

Stevie had the decency to blush.

Trying to get Hengist where he wanted him was an entirely different matter compared to the indifferent Viscount. Philip had been amused with what Stevie had been suggesting, however indecent his proposal had been.

He had to dare now; otherwise he would have to disappoint David and that was the last thing on Earth he wanted to do.

Oh, David, his ardent and decent lover!

There was some desperation in his voice when he said: “I know you have visited my sister’s bed!”

Hengist laid his arms on the table, trying not to show the turmoil Stevie’s remark caused him.

“I beg your pardon?”

He was clearly stalling for time.

Stevie swallowed.

“I know you slept with my sister, your brother’s wife.”

“Ah, is that so, Master Stephen?”

Hengist pushed a fist against his jaw.

“So why would you bring a thing like that up, after you made me study the Marylebone building plans?”

It was most uncanny how the Major was able to put such a quick link between

Stevie's remark about his sister and the prospectus.

Stevie's cheeks reddened.

"I only would like to ask a small favor of you, Major."

"In exchange for what? Your silence maybe?"

Hengist frowned. He hated blackmail and that was what Stevie was bluntly offering.

Stevie almost fell over his words.

"A tit for tat, Major, nothing else; my intended ignorance about the situation as against a very small favour."

Hengist snorted. He'd got himself into a fine pickle here!

"Who else knows?" he growled, squeezing his hands into fists.

"Me, Rose, and you," Stevie confessed with a blush that reached as far as his ears.

"What if I deny it all?"

The moment the words left Hengist's lips, he was sorry he'd said them. It was bad

enough he got himself into a situation in which this young pup could blackmail him. It was worse when he started to lie about it.

A tit for tat, indeed!

Stevie heaved a shoulder.

“Would it not be the best if nothing was said about the whole affair in exchange for a small favor?”

Hengist sighed very audibly.

“Right. If I give in to this, Master Stephen,” his voice had become clipped and sharp, “then what would the small favor be?”

Elation slid through Stevie’s mind; he was going to give in, this man? But certainly, he could not wish for a scandal, that was easy as pie. Not if he felt the remotest respect for Marguerite.

“There is this man, David Stoner, who was taught by a master mason... He would like a place as an apprentice in the office of Mr. Nash, the architect of the project.”

Hengist looked at Stevie with frank amazement. That was it? No money? Just a favour for a friend?

“Your request surprises me, Master Stephen,” he grumbled, “and although it is not a big request...”

Hell, he could have figured anything but this!

“It is still made under very shady circumstances!”

Stevie pouted.

“As if you would have helped me with this if I did not have the force of a threat behind it!”

Hengist shook his head.

“You could at least have tried. Are you going to carry tales to your sister as well, if she throws in her fifty thousand quid?”

“My sister does not seem to know who is really bedding her, Major!” Stevie said sharply, “So I suggest you do the convincing about Mr. Stoner’s position.”

The chair creaked when Hengist sat back. He pointed a finger at Stevie.

“I’ll indulge you in this, young Stephen,” he said darkly, “but be assured this is the last insult you’ll ever throw at me! Having sexual relations with a man is a hanging offence in my book. So if you ever utter as much as one word about your sister’s situation the magistrate will know about your precious boyfriend, if not about you!”

He rose, turned and left the library, trying not to gloat.

Ah, the joke would be on young Stephen from now on! He disliked throwing a threat back into Stevie’s face, as blackmail was not his style, but he hated the insolence of Stevie’s attitude!

Stephen sagged in his chair.

How could the man have guessed about David so easily?

At least he was certain now that with Hengist's and his sister's contributions David was going to have his heart's desire. That was more important than the Major's returned threat.

He rose and walked to a sideboard to pour a glass of claret.

All in all, it had been a very profitable afternoon: four hundred pounds and the probability that David's dream would come true.

His look darkened when he sipped the excellent wine; he just dreaded to think to what cost eventually.

That Major was not a dim Scot. He had a mind as sharp as a bloody razor.

Stevie suddenly sniggered; at least the future Lord Morvern would have a great mind. No doubt about that!

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Stevie held out his arm, pointing to a red brick house which consisted of at least four

stories. In the middle of the house were broad steps into a darkish maw that seemed to lead to the partly hidden entrance of no less than four doors. They were of honey-coloured oak and gave the impression of sturdiness.

David gaped first at the house and then at his young lover.

Stevie smiled tenderly at the big man. The mason was dressed in an impeccable black woolen coat that clung to his broad shoulders. His breeches were of black velvet and his shirt was white, thick cotton such as gentlemen would wear at times of leisure. The high linen cravat he sported was stiff and knotted in an elaborate 'waterfall.'

Stevie had never thought he would steep as low as to dress a man, but to find David new clothes -- not at one of the fashionable tailors of course -- had been an experience of a lifetime. He looked with pride at

David's very big feet which had sunken into the most beautiful black boots his money had been able to buy.

"Are you... you cannot be serious, my lord!" David stuttered.

His eyes roamed over the solid oak shutters that were to cover beautiful diamond shaped glass windows.

"I've never been more serious in my life," Stevie said smugly, moving toward one of the front doors.

"Look, the entrance on the left will be ours. It gives way to two apartments, the ground-floor one will be yours and your, ah, wife and children's, and the first floor apartment will be mine."

David shook his head.

"You can't... It's too much, my lord..."

Stevie looked around him.

The house at Cowe Street was at a busy thoroughfare and it was perfect for his purpose. His first floor apartment was

spacious, with a big drawing room, a bedroom at the side of the back garden and a good shaped dressing room with a built-in bathtub. The bathtub had drainage going into the garden sewer so that it only needed to be filled with hot water. At the back of the apartment that would be David's was a big communal kitchen, which sported a food- and a hot water lift.

David's drawing room was a bit smaller than Stevie's, because it had made room for a small extra bedroom, which was an addition to the dressing room and the already existing bedroom.

Their communal front door led into a hallway with a door to David's apartment and a stair leading up to Stevie's front door.

Stevie could have kissed Master Lane, his sister's man of business, who had found him the place after having listened to Stevie's serious urgings. A week had gone by before the man had come up with the

keys of the apartments, giving Stevie enough opportunity to prepare and dress his lover and his small family for a new way of life in far more luxurious surroundings.

David's sister Annie was an attractive and quiet woman, somewhere in her twenties. She was slim, tall, and soft spoken, and after having seen her Stevie had no doubt that she was in on David's secret regarding his preference for the male of the species and she clearly did not judge him for it.

That amazed Stevie most of all. He had often asked himself how his own sister would react if she knew of his attraction to men. There had never been a doubt in his mind that she would look upon him with abhorrence if she knew the truth. To have sex with a man was probably something entirely different in her book than mere admiration of one of his own gender.

David did not object when Stevie explained to him his plan; there was of

course a slight opportunistic streak in him, but Stevie figured that a forgivable treat in his otherwise good character. The man had been through hard times and might be considered a gentleman because his father had been a vicar. Most certainly, David wanted the best for his sister and her two little boys.

It was a bit more difficult to get Annie into more decent clothes than the ones she had been wearing. Eventually, Stevie had turned to Rose and asked her to go out and shop for a good dress and necessary underthings for Annie first, before going to a mantua-maker of some repute with her. Annie's clothes were too shabby for words and it was clear that she'd spent all the available money David brought in on her two little boys. She now owned a small black wardrobe because she declared she was still in mourning. Stevie did not bother to ask her for whom; her long dead parents

or her not so long ago deceased and true husband.

David had just shrugged his broad shoulders when he learned of her declaration. It was perfectly suitable for him to wear black with white linen shirts, so people would not wonder about him not wearing clothes of mourning as well.

Both apartments were scantily furnished with a big bed, a sturdy, oak dining room table with six matching chairs, a huge cupboard for earthenware plates and tin cans, and a commode.

Stevie was certain he would go out one day with David to find them some rugs and maybe a painting or two to decorate the bare whitewashed walls. Both apartments had a big fireplace and Stevie certainly wanted some furniture so that he could sit and contemplate by his own hearth. "I could kiss you," David whispered when Stevie opened their communal door with a big key.

Stevie smiled at the blond giant in front of him.

“Well, why don’t you then?” he asked with a meaningful flick of his hand, “Our bedroom is only one stairway away.”

Hengist looked with some confusion at the contracts in front of him. So now he was to participate in the big Marylebone project, just like Marguerite.

The hard paper on which the contracts were written made a sound similar to that of an umbrella when folded in. He stared at them, not really knowing whether or not he should feel elated about the project. He would be in it for twenty-five thousand pounds which would leave him about ten thousand pounds as a reserve. Twenty-five thousand pounds would buy him about eight houses, maybe even ten if he did not buy the biggest ones.

He had discussed the project with Master Lane, Marguerite's man of business, before getting back to the Duke about it. Master Lane had given Marguerite positive advice and she had agreed to invest fifty thousand, just like that.

Hengist had a hard time asking the Duke to negotiate the placing of a certain Mr. David Stoner in the offices of the famous architect Mr. Nash. He had blushed like a peony, not knowing how the powerful man would react, but to his amazement the Duke did not move a muscle at his request.

Well, Mr. Stoner was a lucky man to have the support of a duke, seventy-five thousand guineas, and the unknowing help of a beautiful future-countess. Hengist wondered absently what the said David Stoner looked like.

It was a busy week for Hengist, going to and fro to the Horse Guards for his witnessing of the movements of Lord

Arthur Wellesley, now Marques Wellington. He knew Wellington was under close scrutiny because he had a lot of enemies in Parliament, although the group of his supporters was still bigger than the one against him. It was very clear that Wellington needed a new great victory soon or Parliament would lose interest in him and the money-gobbling war against Napoleon.

The Duke of Lindley's role in the politics regarding the Continental war was everybody's guess and Hengist had stopped thinking about it. He was not apt to readily understand the diplomatic movements involved and reminded himself that there were other pressing things on his mind.

The situation in his brother's household had been almost unbearable for him.

He had stopped coming to Marguerite's bed after her stepbrother's heinous blackmail. Hengist had lost heart, now that three people were into the secret.

He knew he could trust Rose, but Stephen McKenna was another matter entirely. So every night when he tried to go to sleep in the room next to Cherie's he gnawed his teeth, clawing his pillow with longing and regret. Sleep would elude him for a long time, while his longing for her seemed to increase a thousand fold.

He had gone back to wearing his kilt instead of his new breeches, as the cut of the breeches was so tight that the merest stirring of his loins showed. He just could not help himself when he was in Marguerite's vicinity and the tight breeches would betray him if anybody thought of looking down at them when he was in that blasted state of longing for her. At least his sporran sat in his lap like a brick, heavy enough to keep his traitorous cock in check. Even if he hardly moved one muscle when he was close to her, his dick seemed to lead a life of its own; stirring and filling every

time he got so much of a whiff of her scent, or a glimpse, God forbid, of her enticing cleavage or a fashionably bared shoulder.

Hengist did not know whether he was in love with her or only in lust and the knowledge that her bed was empty of her uncaring husband, his dear depraved brother, only made matters worse. He knew his brother would never share the same sheets with his beloved, so his sacrifice not to come to her anymore only seemed more and more useless and idiotic.

Rose always looked at him with frenzied begging eyes, but every time she did so he turned his back on her.

Marguerite, poor dear, was definitely confused with her own husband's behaviour towards her as Philip was indifferent and barely civil.

He made it a point to come home with her after the usual numbers of visits, dinners, musicales, and balls, only to leave her to go

to his rooms, never to reappear until six o'clock in the morning, dressed for riding.

When Hengist once offered to join him in his early morning rides, Philip had only looked sardonically at his brother, muttering that he had better things to do than to go to Rotten Row for a tame gallop.

Hengist had pursed his lips and turned around, understanding that his brother might go out for another sort of ride than he had so friendly offered to share with him.

Lady McKenna's behavior was another nail in Hengist's coffin; her not so subtle pursuit of him became quite relentless and after a week of trying to avoid her propositions he was clearly running out of plausible excuses and he had no other options than to be rude towards her, just to rid her of the notion that he ever wanted to bed her.

At least, to Hengist's relief, her obnoxious and manipulative son had hardly shown

himself. Stephen McKenna had not joined anybody for any social affairs of late. He was in and out of the house at odd hours and seemed very content to avoid any living soul at home, especially his overbearing mother.

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Chapter 2: A DUCAL FAMILY'S