

COLLAGES EDITIONS BOOK 1 WELLINGTON'S OFFICERS

CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON



**A LIEUTENANT
AT LARGE**



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**> 50
COLLAGES**

SPECIAL STORYBOOK EDITION!

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A LIEUTENANT AT LARGE

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BY

CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON

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Volume 1 in Wellington's Officers,
Collages Edition

SPECIAL 50 + COLLAGES EDITION

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COLLAGES EDITION WELLINGTON'S
OFFICERS BOOK 1

with artful illustrations (collages)

or

a novel with graphics

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Chapter 1: JOHN MONTGOMERY'S PROLOGUE



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

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

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

Mr. Tubbington sent the young lord an exasperated look.

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

"Wash?" John asked with a frown.

One washed in the morning after a night of rest soured one's mouth, and one bathed in the evening when invited

to the ducal dinner table. His valet Smithy would dunk him in a bath after a particular fall from a horse into a mess, or when he smelled...

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

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

He looked back to see the Duke's twelve year old son seating himself hesitantly on one of the straight-backed wooden chairs in the waiting room. He nodded in approval while straightening his face immediately back into a bland sort of severity. Then Tubby flicked two fingers at a young under-footman who had been standing motionless in the

hallway, and sent him on his errand after an urgent whispered conversation.

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

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

Somebody shrieked in the room next to the antechamber.

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

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

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

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

He heard his father mumble something inaudible. That was nothing new either; his mother seemed to possess all the available power over everybody who lived in their London household. Even over his father, despite the fact that his father was an acclaimed war hero from the long gone days when he was the

colonel of his own regiment, and despite the fact that now that he was the Duke of Rothford, one of the most powerful men in the Realm.

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

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

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

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

Ah, yes, was mother talking about that very beautiful blond woman John once met when he and his father were taking a ride all the way from the castle in

Stirling to a 'strong house' near Bannockburn?

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

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

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

John was not able to tell the true color of his mother's hair, as he had never seen her real hair; it was always tucked

under the huge colorful elaborate wigs she wore. His mother's dresses were more than enormous; they were like battleships enfolding her entire figure, giving her an unreal doll-like appearance.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Duchess started to say something but she got stuck in a coughing fit. The

Duke urged her not to upset herself so much.

Then John heard his father agree.

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

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

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

Quick calculations told Lord John that he would be twenty-four by the time the girl was marriageable, so he decided not

to worry about this arranged marriage with a little chit nobody knew a thing about, apart from his hysterical mother.

As he had expected, she had been lying fully dressed on a chaise, sporting a three-foot peruke with a large cartwheel hat on top. When she sneezed, she lost a chunk of maquillage from her cheek which fell unnoticed into her high, white powdered, corseted bosom. She wore lace gloves, which he kissed once carefully, after making her an obligatory deep leg. He remembered acutely how the girl from the North had drawn him against a soft bosom which smelled of woman, lilac soap and, strangely, a bit like his father.

She had kissed him goodbye with gusto and a smile. He imagined sometimes he could still feel those soft lips on both his cheeks and in his dreams as a boy, who was waking up to



sensuality, they tended to turn into something very exciting. Since that day he always seemed to remember the smell of her lingering arms and her wondrous blond hair.

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

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

John felt regret that his mother had passed from one world into another, which he could not reach, but was not surprised when tears would not fall. He had been closer to his nurses and his nannies, rather than to the doll who had

been a duchess and maybe even once a mother because the doll had birthed him more than twelve years into the past.

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

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

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



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

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

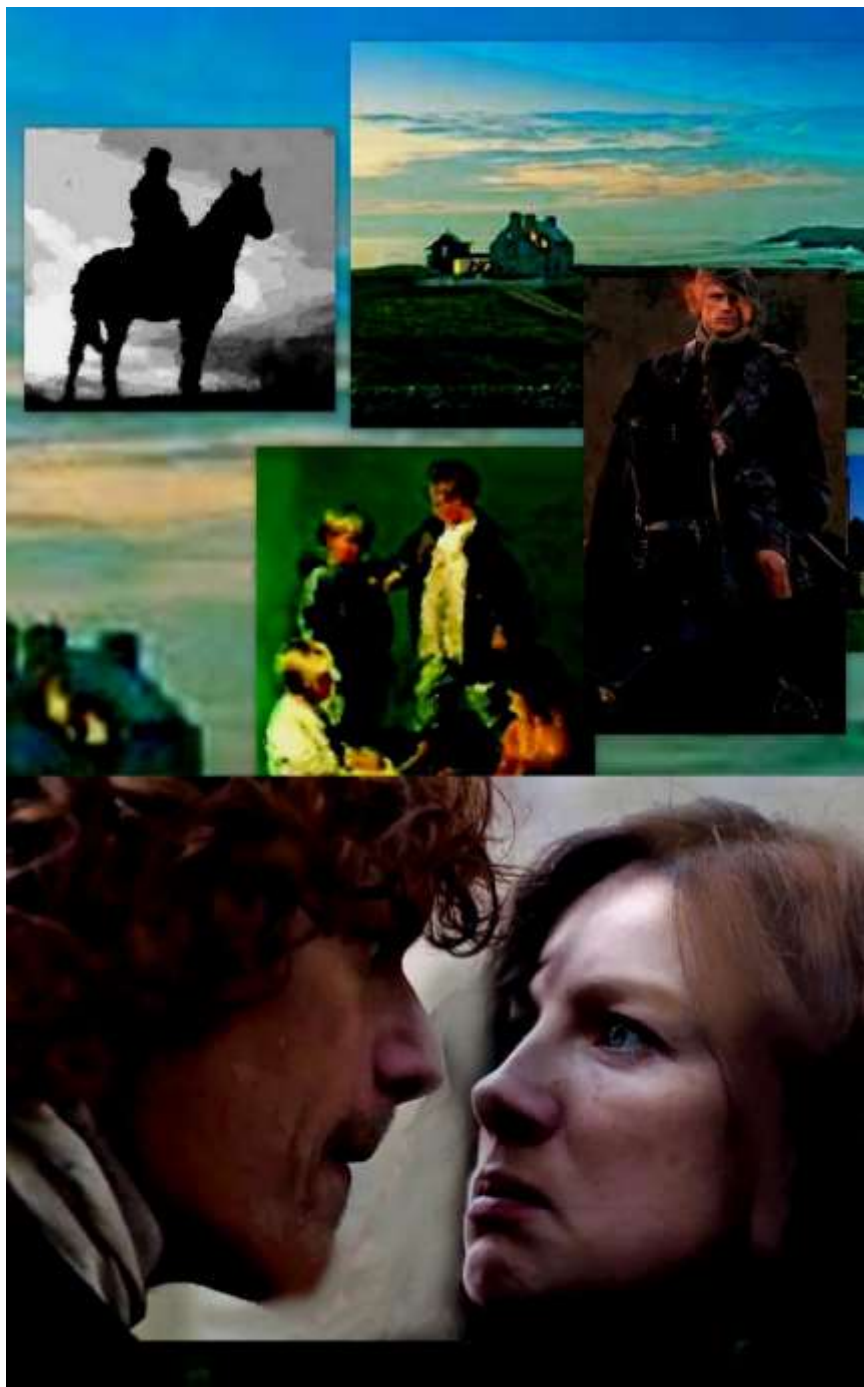
Randolph did not mind handing over that title 'in advance' to his little brother, because he would become the new Duke of Rothford, which was a more elevated title anyway. The title of Marques of

Lorna and Kintyre was only a courtesy title, normally given to the heir. So Lord John, by that time a spoiled cad with a bad reputation and the worst sexual appetites, prepared to go to Edinburgh to marry the Right Honorable Elisabeth Campbell, a chit without a dowry or any ancestry of note, in exchange for being Marques one day.

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

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

Chapter 2: LOCHIEL'S PROLOGUE



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

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

She turned and pushed him hard against his chest.

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

"But Catriona..."

She hovered over him, her hands on her hips.

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

He slowly scrambled up from his humble position.

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

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

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

She turned and marched into the kitchen.

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

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

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

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

He stared at her in bitter disappointment. Hard headed? His wife accused him of having a skull too hard to understand what she was saying?

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

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

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

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

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

She pointed to the front door.

"My mam's inheritance paid for this farm, Cat! Why would I leave? Every-

thing's mine by right."

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

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

Blood rose high in Lochiel's cheeks.

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

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

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

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

"Just go, Lochiel," she said almost pleadingly, "you know there's nothing for you here. I'll take care of our bairns. I am sure I'm doing this right. *Is é Dia amháin a thabharfaidh breithiúnas orm!*"

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

"Come back for the boys when you can find the time; on Sundays. Now just

go, there is a world waiting for you out there."

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

He was not welcome anymore in his own house.

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

Catriona had birthed four sons in almost as many years, not a small feat at thirty years and up. Now she had sent her husband off to make the extra money she needed for herself, the boys and her bloody clan, without the benefits

a husband earned for his efforts; a place in her bed when he came home.

He clenched his jaws together.

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

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

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

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

He turned back to see if Catriona would be standing in front of a window

to wave goodbye, but there was no one to witness his shameful retreat.

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

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Chapter 3: LADY SOPHIA'S HAVEN



He stirred when she entered the bedroom.

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

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

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

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

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

He grinned in her hair. "But I was, my love. Can't you see I raked the fire?"

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

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

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

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

"Do I smell coffee?"

He sniffed profusely.

She hastily untangled herself from him.

"Coffee and honeyed scones," she confirmed, grabbing a big porcelain cup by the ear. "Drink it quickly, before it gets cold. That kitchen is miles away from this room."

She sat up against the headboard. He followed her example and scrambled up

from the big pillow, pushing it behind his back before he took the cup from her.

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

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

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

early-morning odors toward her. She bent to kiss his head.

"It's Sophia's."

"What?"

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

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

His nudge, no doubt, she mused.

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

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

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

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

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

Audrey had mourned Richard Grey's decision to marry the ninny, but at twenty-six, no young man of the Quality could be considered wise. She had hoped however that Richard would have

chosen a girl like his older sister; Sophia was extremely beautiful, intelligent and forceful. She ruled the extensive ducal households since she was a slip of a girl of fourteen. Richard and Sophia's father William Grey, Duke of Lindley, had died of a liver disease when Richard had been less than three years old.

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

Jonathan Montgomery, Duke of Rothford, shrugged.

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

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

"Don't you ever worry about my stepchildren, dearest! They are on my

side, remember. I have been their surrogate father for almost thirty years."

She could only nod.

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

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

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

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

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

She had never set eyes on Jon before. Agnew hated to entertain "Sassenachs," the Gaelic word of mockery for the English. When she had her come-out in London, Jonathan was governing his

duchy in the North together with his ailing father.

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

Audrey knew he had almost dueled with old Lindley over her in earlier

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

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

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

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

She had never been known for her beauty and Agnew had only married her for her money, bragging to his friends

that he would take her from behind, so that he would not have to see her ugly face. To hear that rumor had hurt her deeply, but then she had already been pregnant with their first-born, Philip, and it had taken the future Earl about a year to come back to her bed. He had not bedded her the way he had bragged to his friends that he would. In fact, he was quite amorous, strangely enough, until she ended that by telling him there was a new child on the way. Since then she had locked her door to him. He had tried to approach her a few more times after Hengist was born, but she had denied his rapprochement, suspecting that he did not have any of his disgusted lovers available and therefore turned to her as some last resort.

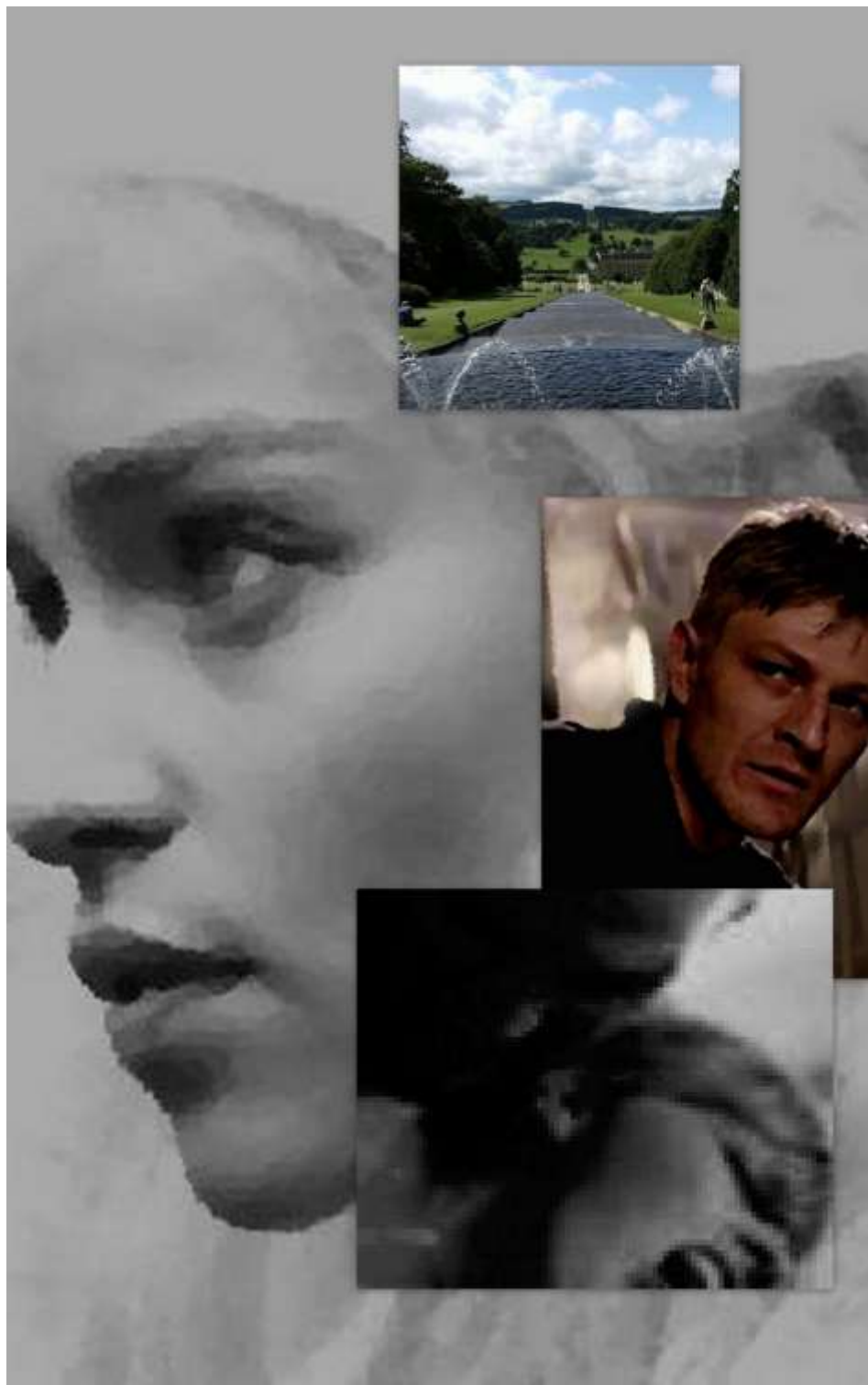
She had felt such a relief not to have to share his bed anymore!

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

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

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

"Jonathan, we have to leave!"



She squirmed in his still strong arms.

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

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

My beauty. He had said it again.

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

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

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

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

Then he kissed her firmly on her lips.

"Elisabeth was a passion from the time I was a young foolish buck. True, I married her in haste after Lindley died

and if I may believe the stories, it was better than a fairy-tale."

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

He pulled a face, holding her close.

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

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

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

She smiled bashfully.

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

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

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

He only continued after a long lingering kiss.

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

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

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

"After she had Randolph she stayed in London. The Queen wanted her as a Lady of her court. That suited her damn well. She needed the admiration of the courtiers, the Queen and the King more than she needed my company. When I was back in Stirling, I saw Maighread again. There were precious few Scottish girls who could compare with her beauty..."

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

"I knew of Maighread since she was thirteen years old. She was Stirling's miracle girl. Her old father, a MacDonald sired her when he was in his sixties and her mother had already passed by her fiftieth birthday. Her beauty was absolutely blinding. When I

came back to Stirling she was nineteen years old and I managed to seduce her. Our son was born before Elisabeth had John."

Audrey's eyes widened.

"You have a bastard son in Stirling?"

Jon shrugged.

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

all came about. A 'tit for tat' she called it. I could never tell John what was lying underneath this situation of his marriage, though."

"Do John and Randolph know about this half-brother?"

He shook his head.

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

"I can only tell them when I lie on my own deathbed."

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

His grin suddenly appeared again.

"Now that I told you my story, you owe me a big fat swive, Ma'am!" She watched him closely, her green eyes turning from tenderness to lust.



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

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

Jonathan Montgomery had been her lover for the last two years. They had met again at the court of George III. She could not believe her luck when the most handsome Duke of the kingdom started stalking her. When she had given

in to his wish to share a bed with her, she had been amazed. Bedding Jonathan had been so very different from her husband's rough attentions. She had never known what lovemaking could mean to a woman, and Jonathan, perceptive to the core, had taught her what it could be like. She now feared that she was addicted to him, hardly believing her luck and her fortune of being chosen as his mistress.

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

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

'cover the situation up.' The man who had dared to rape her daughter was too ineligible to become her husband. He had only been one of the Prince's 'low-life cronies.'

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

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

She sighed when he rolled her on her back.

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

He cracked a laugh.

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

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

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Chapter 4: LOCHIELS SLIGHT PREDICAMENT



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

Gads, but the man had really superseded himself tonight!

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

There was nothing for it. Taking him by the legs would lift the short battle kilt the lieutenant was wearing and give all and sundry the sight that should normally be reserved to wives and lovers. He just could not do that to the lieutenant: Lochiel Cameron was known to be as prudish as a virgin. He might be lying passed out in a tavern of bad

repute but he would never touch the women there. As far as Sergeant Burns knew, he was still a fervent believer in his wedding vows even after his wife had liberated him from them by refusing him access to his own farm and marital bed.

"Stupid sod!" the burly sergeant muttered.

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

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

"I bet you'd welcome some help," a low voice rumbled behind him, "we'd

better get him to my mother's house, Colin. There's no way we can get him back to the barracks in that state."

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

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

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

Prepare yourself for a long haul; my mother's house is on the outskirts."

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

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

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

Hengist Agnew turned his face away from Lochiel and swore.

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

Burns laughed.

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

"We'll take him between us, Sergeant. That will be easier. We'll put him on my horse even if the poor beast will probably balk at his smell. You'll have to come inside the house as well; there is enough staff to clean us all up. I understand my brother came to the house for the wedding already. My mother insisted and lo and behold, he listened. She has the house entirely staffed now to tend to Philip's specific needs and her own when she's back." Hengist put his foot against the door to

open it, as nobody in the tavern seemed inclined to give them a hand at all.

"The wedding, sir?" the sergeant inquired.

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

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

Hengist rasped a laugh.

"I know. I've known him for years, since the happy days when he hadn't yet taken it upon himself to provide the MacGregors with a bunch of boys for their clan. I heard she threw him out of

the house. His house. Never marry a hag, Sergeant, they get to you and you'll have to turn in whatever you possess, and then you'll find yourself out on the cobbles."

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

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

On the other hand, it had not stopped the lieutenant from flirting with other

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

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

Lochiel woke up with a blinding headache.

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



Laced sheets?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lochiel opened both his eyes wide.

"Hengist?"

He noticed his voice was only a croak.

The man pulled a chair close to the bed.

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

He turned to somebody Lochiel could not see. "Here, my friend," Hengist said,

holding a glass with a straw close to Lochiel's mouth. "That's Derrick's special cure against hangovers as big as a Bengal tiger. The doctor told me you would need to lie down for a few days. You may have a bad concussion." Lochiel's eyes squinted after he had drunk the potion Hengist fed him.

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

"Can't stay," he groaned, "I need to pick up Montgomery's chit in Ayre. Nairn told me to get it done as soon as possible." Hengist's look darkened.

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

Lochiel dared to shake his head. "He'll be arriving nigh on the night before the

nuptials. He won't spend one more hour here than needed."

"Why you?" Hengist asked.

Lochiel sighed.

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

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

Lochiel looked almost cross-eyed at his friend.

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

There was no answer. Lochiel was asleep again.

Hengist shrugged and walked out of the room.

Chapter 5: AN ESCORT FOR LIZZIE CAMPBELL



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