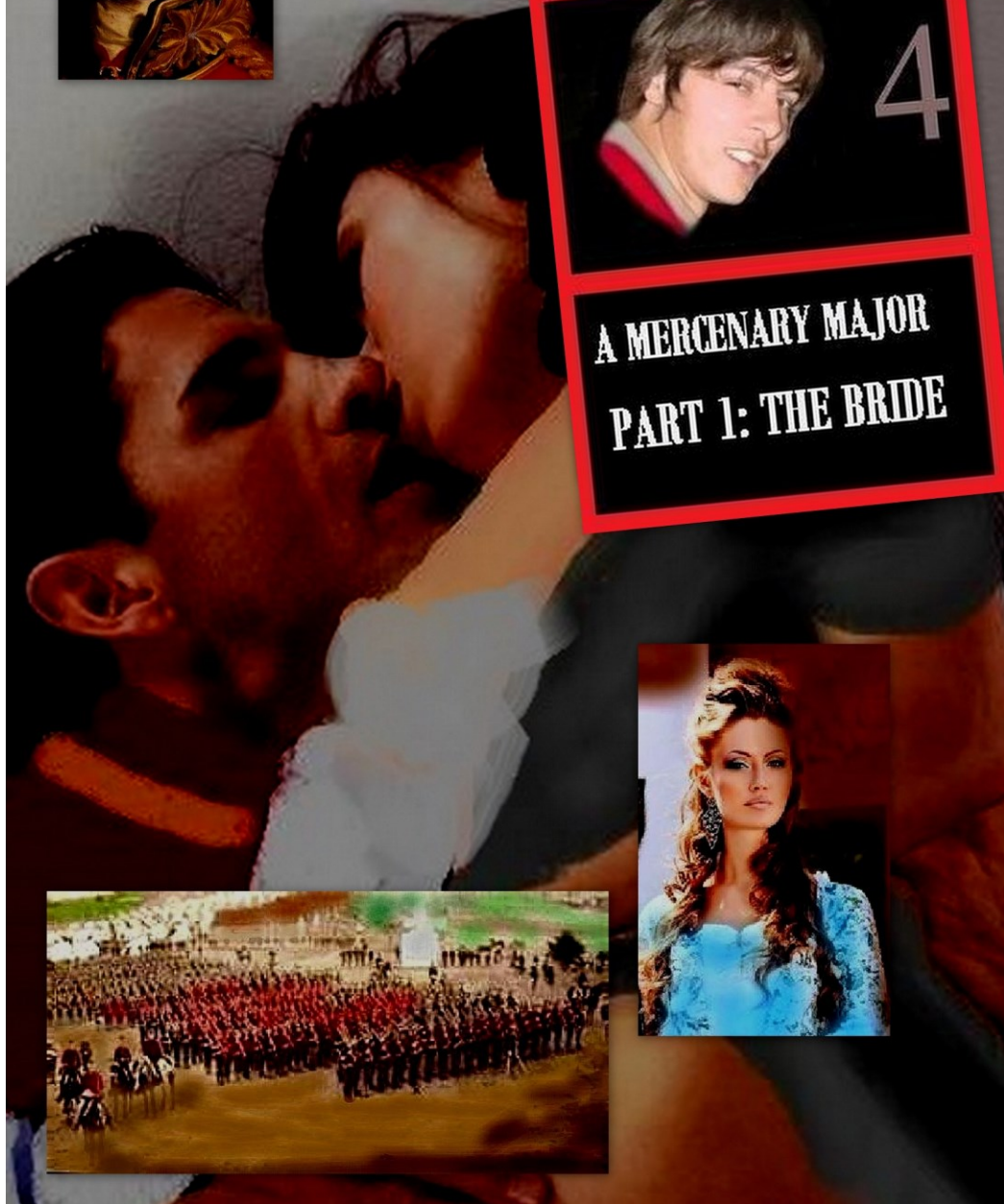




COLLAGES SERIES
CONHSTANCE J. HAMPTON



A MERCENARY MAJOR
PART 1: THE BRIDE



CONSTANCE J. HAMPTON.

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A MERCENARY MAJOR

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Volume 4 in the
COLLAGE SERIES WELLINGTON'S OFFICERS

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PROLOGUE: A BAD DAY FOR ELLEN BURROUGHS

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Port of Rotherham, 1794

“Milord?”

Cyril Fairfax, Earl of Rotherham, looked up with a frown. One of his grooms had just brought his favorite horse to the quay.

“Captain Bouchier?” he asked when he saw the captain of the ‘Countess Anna’ descend the gangway.

“This young man here,” Bouchier pointed at a boy of about eight years that was following him, “says someone would like to see you at the inn.”

Cyril’s frown deepened, but the boy had already gone ahead, right into the only inn Rotherham possessed.

She was waiting for him in a private parlor. When she turned around he could not help but gasp with shock. “Ellen? My, God, who has done that to you? Not...?”

He was not even aware that he had taken her into his arms until a very young voice shouted: “Unhand my mother, sir!”

He slowly let go of a disheveled Ellen to turn around.

A boy stood there, his hands clenched into fists. Cyril had a déjà-vu of his long-dead brother Perry about to punch him in the nose.

“Make a leg to the Earl, Jeffrey!” Ellen commanded him with an imperious voice.

The boy threw his mother an uncertain look, but then bowed at Cyril in an impeccable leg.

“Jeffrey?” he asked Ellen.

Ellen Burroughs, Baroness of Caversham, nodded at him with a frown and sat down on a high-backed chair.

“My youngest boy,” she said, “I apologize for inconveniencing you, Cyril, but I heard your ship was to deliver you here. I... I need...”

“Caversham has beaten you?”

His hand went to her jaw that looked black and blue.

Ellen peered at her sons. The three of them were standing silently near the window of the parlor. Silent and knowing.

“He went into a rage after I asked him for money for food. Cook has deserted us. He went for her with a whip. She did not want to work for a madman, she said. I only have young Gareth left in the house, although he went without pay for months. He drove us here.”

Cyril felt his temperature rise to steaming rage.

“Where is he?”

Ellen shook her shoulders. She was wearing an old fashioned cotton dress that must have seen about all of the nine years of her marriage to Guy Burroughs, Baron of Caversham.

“York, probably. Worst is that he took all the money that I kept in the house.”

“You only have one footman left and no money?” he asked in amazement.

That produced another shrug of her delectable shoulders.

“Did you eat today?”

“That’s why mother took us here!” her youngest son interfered in the conversation.

Without answering the boy, Cyril walked to the door, threw it open and shouted for the innkeeper.

“How were you to pay for it, if not ask for credit?” he asked her later when they had all had a big bowl of stew, cheese and bread.

“I was going to pawn my pearls. I’d have asked the goodman’s assistance with it. He’s an honest man.”

She was referring to the innkeeper.

“Your pearls?”

Not the ones he had given her a few years ago?

She bent her head. "I'm sorry, Cyril."

She was damned sorry?

He felt the old pain creep into his chest. Damnation, he should have married her all those years ago! Then she would not be in this dreadful situation with a wife-beater, a gambler and a crook. He looked at the young boy again, the one that had been brash enough to tell him to keep his hands from his mother. Damnation, the boy was Perry incarnated! He lifted his brows at her and then sent a look at the boy. He was only five years old, but very tall for his age. Ellen just shrugged again. True, one could never guess the parentage of a child, even if he looked so much like Perry. Caversham was also big and blond.

"Listen," he said, "this is what we're going to do..."

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PROLOGUE: ELLEN'S FLASHBACK

Rotherham, 1789

She opened her eyes slowly when he started to stroke her fleshy hip again.

“Cyril?”

Her smile became wanton when he kissed her full, soft lips.

“You were falling asleep, darling, but I want you once more...”

She lifted her hand to her honey blond hair that spilled around her oval face.

“Cyril,” she whispered, “What, again? We just... you only...”

“Well...”

He hesitated.

“Maybe you’re right, and I should go home?”

He contemplated hurrying off to Annette who was going to have the child probably today. Her pains had started in the morning, but according to his still inexperienced

opinion, he had decided that Annette might wait a bit longer to bring his heir into the world. The midwife was not going to allow him close to his wife, anyway.

He guessed he had been too eager to steal this hour with Ellen, but now that they were both still here, why not take them both for another ride into bliss? Ellen was the best when it came to it. She had always been the best.

He looked down at his body that for some reason was losing its enthusiasm rapidly.

Ellen sat up, purposely showing off her lush assets.

“What is it? Ah, you are suddenly impatient to go home to your countess, is that it? Don’t worry, darling, first babies are never in a hurry to come into this world, not even yours.”

She drew herself against him, moving her hands slowly over his broad, bare chest, down to his muscled hips.

“Christ,” he murmured, “you are my goddess, Ellen. See how I worship your body! I’m so ready for you!”

Ellen worried her lip with her teeth. God, the man was always so easily aroused!

Her hand wavered above his arousal, which had come alive anew.

She peered at the strikingly handsome man, who had been her lover and her childhood sweetheart for years now.

Her eyes seemed to change from their usual grey of a quiet sea to the dark slate of a thunderstorm.

“Tell me about it, Cyril,” she whispered, “tell me why you allowed Guy to marry me! Tell me why you have a pregnant French slut awaiting you now in that very fancy house of yours!”

He did not want to hear those spiteful words. God, he hated it when women made a scene or nagged him. He only wanted her

expert hand to touch him. It wasn't like Ellen at all to nag him!

“Christ, Ellen, touch me and I promise to tell you why. Come on, Ellen...! Do it now! I need you!”

She clasped him tightly and he fell backwards on the rough cot with a moan. Ah, but he had been very happy that his clinging wife had become too big with child to care where he spent his afternoons.

Ellen moved to cradle his lap and sat leisurely over his thighs. He felt her sweetness on his leg and moved his hips to shift her closer to him, but Ellen just smiled a wan smile, refusing to budge.

“Tell me now, Cyril. Why did you marry that chit instead of me?”

Oh God, the dreaded question! Why were women not like men and happy with the pleasant tumble now and then?

He looked into her indignant face.

“I married her for her money, of course; what else, Ellen? Don’t nag me, I had to marry one day, and you were married to Burroughs for over three years when I decided to do the honorable thing, at last.”

Ellen pleased him with short rapid strokes.

“Ellen, darling, please,” he pleaded, “let me get inside of you!”

She smiled broadly, and then put her lips on him, grazing him with her teeth.

“What is it, my beautiful love? You would not want to hurt me, would you? You know you do not have to be upset about Annette! Ouch, darling, easy, easy!”

She suddenly launched herself on top of him, taking him inside her in one swift movement.

His hands roamed over her lovely, pendulous breasts.

“God, Ellen Fitzhenry,” he breathed, “you’ll be the death of me one day!”

”What money?” she asked harshly,
“Annette did not have a penny!”

He groaned, turning his head in the hard, straw-filled pillow. His hands stopped to cradle her breasts and his hips moved upward with abandon.

“She was dirt rich, don’t you know? She cashed every penny she could get her hands on in France. She sold everything; her father’s castles and lands, everything. She bought me, my precious, and that...is...a...bloody...fact!”

The last frantic move of his hips brought Ellen over the edge and they climaxed almost at the same time, crying out with abandon, enhanced by the fact that they knew they were all by themselves in a distant hovel.

He slowly lay back on the pillow, breathing heavily, pulling Ellen’s head onto his chest.

“Now,” he croaked, still speaking with an effort, “what was that all about?”

His hand started to caress her long blond tresses.

Ellen hid her face in his chest.

“I’m bloody breeding again, Cyril.”

His hand stilled. He moved his head to look at her.

“Is it mine?”

She let out a slow, resigned sigh.

“How am I to tell? My husband still comes to my bed. He’s only thirty-one and as horny as they come, remember?”

Cyril muttered an oath and pushed her away from him.

“I thought you despised the man!”

She sat up beside him.

“Do you think that keeps him away from my bed? Think again, Cyril. He likes it when I loathe him while he gets the better of me.”

Cyril got up with an exclamation of disgust.

“Let’s go,” he growled, his voice heavy with unspoken anger, “the Tanners are due to come back anytime.”

She moved to the edge of the bed.

“When will I see you again?” she asked quietly.

He pulled on his breeches and tugged his boots on.

“Tomorrow!” he promised.

He could never stay away from her. She had always been his very first desire and would probably be his last. He never understood why. The world was full of willing women, but Ellen Fitzhenry had been stuck in his head, and another place, for a long, long time.

He kissed her neck before putting on his shirt. “Unless she takes all day to have the child. I’m not sure if I can escape the harridans that crowd my house now.”

She was still sitting on the bed, in all her naked glory, when he left the room.

She smoldered with anger. He was going back to that one, wasn't he? After all his promises, he had allowed her father to sell her off to the detestable Guy Burroughs, Baron Caversham.

Her father had wanted her out of the way and he was not going to wait for a fickle man to propose to her, if she could land Guy Burroughs.

He had hated Cyril from the start; for his handsomeness, his easy manners and his roguish pirate ways. Back then Cyril was only the old Earl's second son and Terrence Fitzhenry had wanted a title in his family; a title he found in Caversham's young, new, but dissipated baron.

He had never shown any regret about her marriage to Guy after Cyril had landed the title of Earl of Rotherham when his brother Perry died in a fight at sea.

Terrence Fitzhenry had known that Cyril Fairfax would never ask for his daughter's hand in marriage because he had recognized the opportunistic streak in Cyril Fairfax, something which Ellen always preferred to ignore.

Why buy the cow when the milk was already being given away free?

Cyril Fairfax would move on to grab fortune and possible glory wherever he could. He did not need Ellen at all.

Terrence had cursed his strikingly beautiful daughter's wantonness and had planted her with Guy Burroughs, who had been after her for years.

Cyril had not dared to show himself for a long time after the bloody event of her marriage, until he came home with that French bitch with her crooked accent and her sweet manners.

Not much later, Cyril had told Ellen what a bad mistake his marriage to the French

countess had been and she had fallen for his excuses... again.

If she could only deny herself the pleasure of those afternoons in the Tanners' little hut! Nevertheless, she knew she would keep stealing those afternoons until she was too big with the new child to ride a horse.

“I wish I could hate you, Cyril Fairfax!” she said aloud.

At least now she understood that there had been a dowry, that he had not married Annette du Plessis for love; small consolation that!

She dressed slowly. Tonight she would tell Burroughs that she was breeding again. Maybe he would leave her alone now and go to one of his milkmaids, who did not disapprove of his cruel bed manners, or get himself back to York to his whores. She wanted a long reprieve from her sadistic husband's rough ways.

Outside the hut, she untied her horse.

She looked at the sun.

It was late; the children would be awake when she came home.

She slid on her saddle and sighed. She could have slept in Cyril's strong arms forever: this new babe was dragging all the energy out of her already.

Her thoughts shifted to Annette du Plessis, who at that moment was crying out in the throes of labor.

Good luck to you, Countess, she thought darkly.

You bought him with your gold, but that could not keep him from bedding with me while you are thrashing about in pain due to the babe he put in your belly.

Cruel world, no?

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KIT BRONDEMEIRE'S PROLOGUE

London, 1807

“Good lord, Kit! Are you still here?”

Anthony, Marques of Andover, fell onto the couch in the brothel's sitting room next to his brother.

“I don't think he intends to go anywhere except for another turn upstairs,” a lazy voice commented.

Tony looked at the disheveled figure of John Montgomery, Marques of Lorna and Kintyre, who lay slouched in an oversized wing chair.

“He's awaiting Broadhurst's return. They happened to fancy the same chit tonight,” Lorna declared with a yawn, reaching for his brandy glass.

“They threw up a coin as to who could have her first and now the loser is still at it.”

Tony frowned at his tall dark-blond sibling.

“Shouldn't you be home with your new little wife? I understand you are under orders to go to Southend in a few days?”

Kit lifted a lazy shoulder.

“Home to do what, Tony? I understand the few times I was allowed within two feet of her I was only shooting blanks anyway. In any case, the little Lady Brondemeire has been indisposed for weeks on end, if you care to know. If you want an heir for Andover you'd better get your sorry ass back to Pamela.”

Tony sat down next to Kit and frowned. Pamela birthed a girl earlier in the year and claimed not to be ready for any marital relations. He knew his beautiful little wife was sulking.

He heaved a sigh.

A fine mess he had made there! He should never have married her in the first place! He should have known better than to fall in

love at thirty-two with Devon Broadhurst's little sister.

She was such a little beauty at eighteen, ethereal and innocent. The old reprobate in him had fallen painfully hard for her. His father's anger at his idiocy had only driven him on. He had wanted her badly; the little innocent beauty who became his heart's desire.

In the end, there was one month of marital bliss for him. Until the fateful day that his father put a pistol into his mouth and pulled the trigger, after having lost his last bit of un-entailed property to the loan sharks who had hovered around the dissipated marques for years. He was not addicted to the card tables only, but was also dependent of the stuff that came all the way from China, which was eaten and smoked by many an addicted man in the dark hells of London.

Pamela Broadhurst had brought him nary a pound when she married him in the chapel

of the rickety Allington Castle, the home of her father, the Earl of Allington.

Tony, in the throes of his love for her, did not mind her impoverished state in the least, because he was unaware at the time that his father was heading down the road of his final degeneration, dragging everything of worldly value into the pit with him.

Before he fell hard for Pamela Broadhurst Tony was too busy courting the King's daughter, hoping that the old monarch would not object to a future marques of the realm as a son-in-law.

He had been such an idiot!

He still was not certain if the little princess had been playing him false.

It was a moot point, anyway. She had died of an affliction of the lungs, leaving a trail of whispers that the lung disease had been brought on by the pox, which the King's doctor's son had transmitted to her person in the age old way. For God's sake, he was

not even allowed to kiss her hand, but that filthy lowly swine had been seducing her and sharing her bed!

Tony turned elsewhere. This time it was the sister of a duke of the realm, but it was made clear to him soon enough that Lady Sophia Grey had decided to ignore her dead mother's wishes for a good marriage, however much she liked Tony Andover, heir to a Marques, out of spite and hatred for a self-centered egotistical mother.

When he fell in love with the beautiful sister of his younger brother's best friend, his sudden devotion to Allington's daughter seemed to have fogged his brain, making him unaware of the dire events that were threatening his father's sanity and the family's welfare.

He looked around the brothel, taking in the lush hangings and the expensive furniture.

Damn, he had earned his night with an expensive whore! He was always working hard, always, spying and manipulating, plotting and deceiving. Because he wanted it all back, all and more: the wealth, the power, the King's respect, everything.

He frowned.

His father's destruction of the Andover wealth had carved deep ruts into his mind.

Ruts that had almost extinguished all the feelings that a man could have for his wife, the one he had married for love and now despised because whatever she brought him had no value at all; her beauty did not fill his coffers and her sweetness had left her after so many ruthless rows and fights.

Ruts that had managed to extinguish the last of his tender feelings towards his mother, who had once been so beloved. Now, she was nothing more than a raving lunatic, frightening the daylight out of his little daughter.

Ruts that had already started to mar the last good feelings he still seemed to possess: his love for his younger brother who was going to leave him soon for a soldier's life on the Continent.

Dark thoughts started to swirl in his head. The years behind him had been the devil's bad luck and he wondered if he would ever see the end of it.

Some wise woman had told him that they would never end, not for him, not as long as he saw the use of his dark powers as the only way to survive in this world.

Esmeralda the beautiful fortune-teller was the epitome of one of his perverted sins as well: he had not done one important thing without having her peering over the cards to investigate the chances of the future. He had been perverted enough to pay her for her efforts with his body. She never wanted money, just his physical 'love' and now

Tony dared not presume what that had made him into.

He gnashed his teeth. What if he kept going on, making the same mistakes all his life, doing the wrong things to get everything right?

He watched John Lorna with a frown. The Marques of Lorna must have been married for three years now, but there was no rumor of his wife carrying a child. Fat chance she would be, with her living in Edinburgh and him playing the cad in London!

John's mother had forced his father, the Duke of Rothford's hand on her deathbed. John had been twelve years old at the time, the girl had been in diapers. John had never understood why his mother had wanted him to marry the girl, until he had unexpectedly found out that she was offspring from his maternal grandfather's adventures in Scotland. His mother had wanted him to marry the chit to bring this granddaughter

of her father back into the highest London Ton.

Who would serve that purpose better than the spare son who would never become an heir, with his brother Randolph the next Duke of Rothford supposedly sowing his wild oats wherever he fancied. How mistaken the old Duchess had been... Randolph preferred the company of handsome men a lot more than that of women, although he was known not to shun indulging in a sexual act with either. He had just always avoided marriage.

It seemed now that the future of the dukedom of Rothford was to fall into the hands of a rake, who bedded every woman he could put his hands on, except his own wife.

Tony took his handkerchief from his sleeve and blew his nose. Damn, did they have lilies in the brothel? He always got

into sneezing fits when there were lilies somewhere.

He stared at his younger brother who seemed to have fallen asleep where he was sitting.

Kit had recently married Julia Fortescue, but Tony doubted that it was going to be a prosperous union with Kit lounging in a brothel all night. At least with Julia's money he could afford expensive whores now, though that did not seem to make Kit any happier.

Tony scoffed.

Kit was too handsome for his own good. Standing inches taller than Tony, with his wild, wavy hair, and his deceptive brown eyes, which promised tenderness but gave none. He sported long muscled limbs and a broad chest. He only had to look a woman in the eye and she would lay herself down in front of him, lift her skirts and spread her legs in invitation.

Tony assumed that Kit was here because someone was apt to whisper of his debaucheries into the indignant ears of his shrewish wife. Tony knew how Julia Fortescue would pinch her lips together, and then balefully tell her father not to transfer their monthly allowance to the household in Lancaster Street, but rather to keep it in a secret location so that her whoring husband would not profit from that mercenary part of their marriage.

Vengeance would be short-lived for Julia though: Kit had owned a big bank account since the day they had wed; he did not need to dip his hands into the household funds to pay for a whore.

The door to the parlor opened and a young ensign came tiptoeing in.

Kit awoke and looked at him through half-closed eyes. “What are you doing here, Montague?” he asked, yawning, “Don’t tell me you’re looking for me!”

The boy could be sixteen at the most, Tony mused, looking at the young ensign dressed in an expensive red uniform of his Majesty's hussars. It was rich Basil Montague's little half-brother.

The ensign's eager eyes flicked to the men all sleepily splayed out in the brothel's fine leather chairs. His gaze lingered longingly on the red, plush carpeted stairs that lead to the rooms of pleasure, above.

Kit scratched his scalp under his officer's wig. He wondered if there had been lice on the cushions of Paulina's feather bed, the woman who had been his choice for the night. She was in big demand these days and allowed to have a new visitor every hour, not to waste income on sleepers. No doubt one of them had transported vermin from his dirty hair onto Paulina's pillows.

Kit hated lice and every other form of vermin. He would have to ask his batman to inspect his hair the moment he returned to

his lodgings; otherwise he might be in for nights of frantic scratching and no sleep.

He threw a sour look at the young ensign. No doubt there had been another change of orders, which were going to prevent him from sleeping in Tony's apartments near Grosvenor Square. They were a wonderful luxury compared to the cold and bare military barracks in London, where he had to share a bunk with Barry Armonk, a lieutenant of the Fifth.

He had left his own house on Lancaster Street days ago, with no intention of going back there after the last humiliating row with his wife.

Kit sighed heavily. It would have been nice if his marriage had brought him some peace and quiet in his life. He had been haunted with worry and stress since the day his father had decided to end his life with one of Tony's finest Manton pistols.

It had been devastating to see what havoc his father had created with his last actions on this world.

Kit had watched his beloved brother change from a charming roguish rake into a hard, determined, and unscrupulous Lord of the Realm. He had to endure seeing his loving mother descend into a state of near insanity. He had watched his chances of a peaceful life at his own viscountcy Brondemeire dwindle to nothing when the Andover family turned out to be destitute.

“Orders have changed, sir,” David Montague said hastily, “Lieutenant Armstrong asked me to insist that you come back on the double. You are supposed to bring the men to Southend at six o’clock, he says, sir.”

Kit rose unsteadily. “Damn,” he muttered, “that leaves me little time to sleep, doesn't it?” He looked up the stairs, listening sharply.

“Broadhurst's still up there. You'd better warn him as well! Second door on the right, if you please, Ensign Montague!”

He watched the ensign race up the stairs and grinned. “Might be very educational for our little Montague,” he jested.

He grabbed his tricorne hat from the couch, straightened his uniform, took a last swig of his brandy, and performed a short bow for the two men who had accompanied him in the parlor.

“My pleasure, gentlemen!” he drawled. “I'm off to war again! Hold the fort for me here!”

He was not certain if the look his brother threw him was one of mocking or of worry. He shrugged, placing his hat at a jaunty angle on his head.

From now on, Tony would be on his own, because no doubt Kit Andover would be off to a real war, thank God!

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ANTHEA FAIRFAX'S PROLOGUE

Caversham, 1811