

The English Swordsman

A Romance of the Regency Period

by

Daniel Winterstein

with affectionate hinderance from

Rebecca Smith



Part One

Prologue

In which we meet His Grace the Duke of Wessex, and see something of his mettle.

Chapter 1

In which an older generation asserts its right to intervene in the affairs of a younger one, and three people begin separate journeys which will have a common end.

Chapter 2

In which Miss Carlyle and Miss Montgomery prepare to meet with Society.

Chapter 3

In which we see some of the dangers of a dance.

Prologue

In which we meet His Grace the Duke of Wessex, and see something of his mettle.

It was a cold morning in the spring of 1790, in the latter part of King George III's reign. The green expanse of Hampstead Heath, London, was damp with dew and there was a chill in the air as two men prepared to fight a duel.

Ranolph Fitzwilliam, Duke of Wessex, eyed his opponent balefully.

"A stupid waste of time getting up this early." he drawled.

His sword dangled nonchalantly from one pale hand.

"You could withdraw your suit."

The Duke was a well attired in a fine white linen shirt and a delicate silver on black waistcoat. His neckcloth was tied in complex flamboyant folds. In spite of his complaint about the hour, he had clearly allowed time for its arrangement. His opponent cut a less elegant figure. Lord Buckstead was a burly man with a florid face. His waistcoat was an example of plaid at its worst, and the tie a common affair.

"Put up your sword!" he snarled, his breath condensing in the cold air as if he were a dragon puffing smoke.

"If I must I must," sighed the Duke, "Though over Lady Buckstead's honour" - his mouth twisted into a sardonic smile on the word honour - "it seems rather an extravagant gesture."

"Put up your sword." Lord Buckstead repeated through clenched teeth.

Languidly the duke complied, moving into a parody of the en garde position. With that the duel began. Lord Buckstead leapt into the attack, but he was clearly outclassed.

His wild strokes were easily parried by the Duke, who slipped back gracefully, content for a while to allow the other man to tire himself out. The two men's seconds waited patiently for the inevitable conclusion.

After a few minutes' swordplay, the Duke switched from defence to attack. His timing was perfect. Fast and fluid, his sword danced forward and cut a neat slice into Lord Buckstead's shoulder. Parrying an inept counter-attack, Fitzwilliam withdrew out of sword range.

"There," he said lowering his sword, "I trust your Lordship is satisfied."

"You are pinked my Lord", observed Buckstead's second, "Bad luck."

A trickle of blood ran from his Lordship's shoulder, clashing garishly with his paisley waistcoat.

"Honour is served." added Fitzwilliam's second.

"Be damned it is!" Buckstead bellowed at them, and with a hoarse cry he charged at Fitzwilliam.

It was a near thing, and for a moment the Duke's sharp blue eyes showed a flash of fear. But his sword arm reacted instinctively. Buckstead's sword flashed past to the Duke's left whilst he collided with the Duke. There was a horrified silence, and everything was still. Then with a horrible gurgle, his Lordship fell backwards, a great red stain spreading across his shirt front. Above him, Fitzwilliam's sword dripped red.

Buckstead's second ran to his side. The Duke took a long look at his fallen opponent, then turned on his heel and marched to his carriage and leapt up behind his horses. His second ran to the door.

"Good heavens Ranolph, you've killed him!" he cried.

"So it appears Max. I'm sorry to run, but I don't care to discuss this matter with the magistrates."

"You didn't mean to kill him."

“But it could be the gallows nonetheless.”

“Yes.”

“I believe a holiday is in order Max. Somewhere outside of England. I shall write to you anon when I am settled. You'll forgive me if I am unable to dine with you tonight.”

“Ranolph!” his friend exclaimed.

“Oh, and my apologies to Lady Buckstead, on so many accounts“

With that, the Duke signalled to his groom who leapt up beside him and the carriage raced off.

Chapter 1

In which an older generation asserts its right to intervene in the affairs of a younger one, and three people begin separate journeys which will have a common end.

At this time Scotland was joined in union with the other nations of Great Britain, and had been for some time. The crowns had been united almost two hundred years previously by King James the IV and I, and the parliaments had been joined in 1707 by the Act of Union. Scotland still enjoyed it's own laws and customs though. It remained a separate state, or a provincial backwater, depending on whether one was in Edinburgh or London.

It was late afternoon in Edinburgh. The soft summer sun filtered through the treetops and caressed the wide lawns of Abercrombie house. It lit the beautiful flowerbeds and the well set pond, and shone through the windows of the white conservatory where two women took their tea.

"I just don't know what we're going to do about him. It drives me to despair." said Lady Agnes Delaney. With an exasperated sigh she collapsed back into her chair, "By the way Katherine, I love the way you've redone this place."

"Thank you Dear," replied her companion, Katherine Montgomery, the Dowager Countess of Glamis. "It is hard to find a decent decorator in this city but I got Belper in."

"Oh yes, I thought I recognised his touch."

"He ordered the furniture and wall hangings all the way from Paris."

"Paris, oh my." Lady Delaney was now even more impressed by the decor. "I've been trying to persuade Alistair to get him

in to redo the blue salon, you know how dowdy it's looking. But he won't have it touched. Charlotte chose all the furnishings."

"Charlotte! But goodness that was five years go. He's not still in mourning surely. He's been about on the town for every season I can remember. He goes to all the parties and routs."

Agnes expressed a mixture of sadness and frustration with her son.

"Oh no he's not in mourning, but he acts like he's still married. Everything must be done as Charlotte liked it, everything she arranged is left just so. And he's not so much looked at any other woman. He's staying faithful to a ghost."

The Countess shook her head in sad agreement and sipped her tea. "He always was such a romantic boy, but never fear even the most romantic becomes sensible with age and there is the line to think of. He is the last of the Delaneys, right?"

"Yes. The estates would go to Charles Fenwick." replied Agnes with a small shudder.

"He can't want that."

"No. That fool would have them mortgaged to the hilt within the year." said Agnes with some sharpness, "None of the Fenwick's have an ounce of sense."

"My dear the more I think on this, the more I become convinced that some action is required. No doubt Alistair is content to drift through life a comfortable widower but he must be shaken out of it. We must find him a living bride."

"Yes, if only we could." said Agnes with another sigh.

"Now he has ignored all the regular beauties, and I'm sure it's not for lack of trying on their part. So he must need something else in a wife."

The Countess paused for a moment's reflection. Then settling her tea cup with the air of a decision made, she continued.

"I may know the very girl for him."

"Who?" asked Agnes perking up, "If you're thinking of Laura Rudderwick who came to town last month, I arranged for them to be introduced, but not a spark of interest."

"Not Laura Rudderwick"

"And as for the beautiful Macauley sisters, I set up a tea party with the Macauleys back in January. Alistair spent most of the time talking with their brother."

"No, not the beautiful Macauley sisters."

"Well then you can't mean the Berwick girl can you?. Or there's Susan Beauchamp, but I hear she's to be engaged--"

"The girl I am thinking of is my granddaughter." the Countess cut in.

"Elizabeth?!" Agnes asked in surprise. Elizabeth Montgomery, was the sole heiress to the extensive Glamis estates.

"No, those two would never get on. Elizabeth is too young and headstrong for Alistair. No, I meant Ruth, Flora's daughter. You recall my daughter Flora?"

"Of course."

"And how she married a priest?"

"I remember you were quite upset."

"Quite. Flora and the Reverend Carlyle now live lives of quiet respectability out in Galashiels. And they have a daughter called Ruth who is a most gentle and angelic girl - and of an age to be married."

"I have been meaning to do something about Ruth for a while," the Countess continued, "but I had not known what. Now I see that she and Alistair would make the perfect couple."

"My lady! You do me too much honour." Agnes protested. She had the uncomfortable feeling of being presented with a gift she wasn't sure she wanted, but didn't know how to refuse.

She was conscious of the honour of the proposal - a granddaughter of the Countess, even if she wouldn't inherit, was still a Lady of Note. It was a most generous suggestion. Yet Agnes had reservations. There was, perhaps, a reason why this Ruth girl was unattached. But Agnes took heart in her son's strength of character. She might not be able to stand up to her friend, but he certainly would.

"I'm not sure Alistair would approve of us interfering," she added.

"I have no intention of doing anything so vulgar as asking for his permission," the Countess countered.

Briefly, Agnes imagined the worst possible bride; a vulgar girl with an insipid look and a difficult manner. But she knew this was unjust to the Countess. Katherine was her friend, and thought fondly of Alistair. She would not try to force an unsatisfactory match upon him. No doubt this Ruth was a lovely girl.

"Well it can do no harm to introduce them. Perhaps at the Earl of Moray's Ball. But I don't see that we can do any more than that."

"You are ahead of me, my dear. We must start by getting them to the same city - and that may not be so easy. The first problem is to liberate Ruth from her parents."

"Oh?"

"You see, the Reverend Carlyle loves his daughter and doesn't want to expose her to the temptations of Edinburgh. When they do visit town, it is only ever for a few days - and then they are so protective, and won't allow Ruth to attend any of the evening parties."

"So what do you intend to do?"

"I am not sure," said the Countess, and with that the two ladies lapsed into a thoughtful silence, occasionally sipping their tea. Outside, a thrush chirped in the deepening light.

After a while, the Countess spoke up again. "I shall invite Ruth to be my companion for the season."

It was common for important people of the time to take in poorer relatives as companions. A companion fell somewhere between a family-member and a servant.

"Mabel will not be happy," Agnes observed.

Cousin Mabel was the Countess's usual companion. A staid solid woman, she acted as ballast to the Countess's hot air. Mabel was a woman who could be depended upon to remember the condiments when planning a picnic. The Countess had gone through several companions before settling on Mabel. Or one could say - as Agnes did in other company - that Mabel had settled on the Countess, and was too heavy to be thrown off.

"Dear Mabel," mused the Countess, "You know, I think I'll send her somewhere nice. Italy perhaps - such a gorgeous country. She'll like that."

Mabel did not like the idea of Italy. In fact she was not happy at all with it. She didn't say anything or complain, for she didn't like to complain or seem ungrateful, but for a week before her departure she bustled through the house in a pointedly frosty way.

The Countess was oblivious to this. She was too caught up in the heady details of organising Mabel's holiday and plotting out Ruth's season in town. Nor could she have conceived that travelling to Italy could fill Mabel's homely heart with dread.

"You will love Florence," she said for the hundredth time, "I was there when I was just married. Oh, such happy days!"

"But," Mabel managed, "But, perhaps I'm no sure as I want to go abroad."

“The food is exquisite.” the Countess continued, “Such intense flavours.”

“That’s fine for them as likes it. But I think I prefer a good solid Scots dinner to any foreign stuff.”

“And then,” continued the Countess unabated, “there is the sunshine!”

“I’m not keen on too much sunshine. I might come out in a rash.”

“And the materials - the silks they make there are the finest in the world.”

“Well now, I do like a nice bit of cloth.” Mabel allowed, “And I’ve never had any silk.”

“Yes - you must treat yourself to some new dresses.”

“No I couldn’t, Your Excellency” said Mabel, but her eyes spoke otherwise.

“Nonsense.” the Countess replied, and Mabel’s face lit up though she tried to hide her pleasure by looking away. Mabel did not think of herself as the kind of frivolous woman who would be excited about a dress.

The Countess spotted her discomfort. “And then there is the architecture. The old churches are most spectacular.”

“Oh I shall appreciate that very much.”

The Countess smiled, and sent Mabel to the library to fetch some books on Italy. The respected work “Architecture of Medieval Italy”, the Reverend Watkins’ “Travels in the Footsteps of St. Francis”, and Lady Hepworth’s “Florentine Passion: A Season in Italy”.

The letter to Ruth’s parents was a delicate affair and one the Countess took some time over. Meanwhile, a travelling companion had to be found for Mabel. Then ships to Italy had to be checked out to ensure that both boat and crew were suitable, and berths booked. The Earl of Moray was holding a grand dance at the Assembly Rooms in April. It would be

quite the social event of the season, and it would be good to get Ruth to town before then. She had better focus on the letter. After an afternoon of balled up pieces of paper, she felt that she had found the right nuances.

The letter did not instantly stand out amongst the vicarage's other mail. The Countess had carefully chosen a simple envelope without any ostentation. Flora did not mark it out when she sat down at the kitchen table to read the mail. She read the mail in turn. There was a note from her sister in law, a routine bill from the farm they got their milk from, and then - The Countess's letter may have looked plain, but the other mail did not cause Flora to drop her teacup.

"Richard! Richard!" Flora ran through the vicarage. The Reverend Carlyle was in his study, preparing his sermon for the Sunday. He rose from his desk at her entrance and took her hand, which was trembling. "What is it Dear?" he asked in soothing tones.

"It's Mother. She's unwell."

"Oh dear."

"Nothing life-threatening," Flora hastened to add, "But her limbs are plaguing her, and she cannot get about."

"How bad is it?"

"Well, she says it's not bad. But Mother never did like to complain."

There was a brief pause whilst the Reverend Carlyle tried to put this statement together with the loud outspoken mistress of Glamis Hall that he had known.

"Well - not about anything that was actually bothering her." amended Flora, and Richard had to admit that this was true. The Countess was a headstrong woman who would rather walk on a broken leg than admit any weakness. He nodded slowly, and looked at his wife with compassionate eyes.

“We should go there,” he said.

“She - well she hasn't asked us. She's asked for Ruth.”

“Our daughter?”

“Yes. You see, she wants a companion. Someone who can look after her for a bit. She says she's sorry to impose upon our Christian kindness. She's looking for someone more permanent, but could we spare Ruth for a few months?”

“Of course Ruth must go. We'll miss her. She's an angel, a real angel. The whole parish will miss her. But if her grandmother is in suffering then that is where her duty lies.”

Flora nodded, but slowly a doubt formed in her mind. Her mother, whilst a good woman in her own way, had very different views on how children should be raised. She had argued with Flora in the past over Ruth. Richard and Flora had raised Ruth to be a good godly child. As sweet and gentle a lass as ever there was. The Countess had always felt that the Carlyle's were too protective.

“What is it Dear?”

“Well, I'm concerned about Ruth. I'm not sure Mother will take the proper care of her. In fact, I suspect she may do quite the opposite.” carefully Flora arranged the table linen, “Mother - God save her - has a, well a *heathen* streak in her.”

Richard thought about this. “It's true. Your mother is not a particularly godly woman. A good woman at heart, but misguided.”

“And sadly she feels a compulsion to try and lead others astray. I wonder if she might - well, try to corrupt Ruth.”

Richard paced across the study and back. “That may be.” he said, “That may be. But Ruth has a duty, both as a Christian and as a family member. She shall go to Edinburgh. Besides, we have raised her in the ways of the Lord. She is a fine upstanding child, and neither the devil nor your mother will ever lead her astray.”

So a letter was sent back to Edinburgh full of condolences for the Countess and a promise that Ruth would join her at her convenience. Further exchanges followed, leading to the arrival of a carriage a few weeks later.

The carriage was magnificent; large and imposing with regal gold paintwork picked out on its jet black sides. The crest of the Count of Glamis was prominently displayed on each door panel. It was pulled by a quartet of splendid chestnut-brown stallions. Behind them rode two footmen, a driver and a guard in splendid maroon and gold livery. Following the coach were two outriders. With a loud clatter they swept up to the vicarage, scattering a few chickens that had been pecking in the yard.

A girl in a blue frock came running out. "Oh my!" she said. She was an uncommonly pretty girl, on the cusp of womanhood. Her deep blue eyes sparkled with energy. The driver stepped down, and was met by a warm smile that made him grin in return. With exaggerated ceremony he doffed his hat and declared, "Your carriage awaits, Miss Carlyle."

"Why thank you." she replied with a curtsey.

The carriage door opened, and a girl of about her age stepped out and curtsied. She was dressed as a maid, and must have been sent as a companion for Ruth on the journey. A young society lady did not travel across country on her own.

"I must fetch my parents." said Ruth. Leaving the coachman and the maid with another smile, she went into the house. A few minutes later she re-emerged with her mother clinging to her. Her father followed, lugging a trunk helped by the gardener.

"Now look after yourself Ruthie! Be careful in the city, it's not as safe as here. Think well of people, but don't trust them - especially men. Never go out alone with men."

“Yes mother.”

Flora continued warning and admonishing her daughter. There were a great many dangers to be found in the city, and she could not let Ruth go without properly preparing her. Indeed, she found it terribly hard to let Ruth go at all. Their farewells took a while. The chickens returned and started pecking around the coach wheels. The Reverend Carlyle stepped in; the carriage had better set off if they were to reach Edinburgh by dark.

Her mother wiped her eyes and hugged her daughter one last time “Oh, I’ll miss you terribly. You will remember to write to us?”

Her father said little, but he hugged her fondly before bidding her a safe journey, and perhaps there was a tear in his eye too.

The road to Edinburgh was hilly and convoluted. Up and down it snaked, running through woods and villages. It took most of the day to drive. Ruth watched transfixed as the countryside rolled by. The trees, the streams, the fields, the farmhouses and crofters huts. She had travelled but little, and never on her own before. Her companion was called Abigail, and was to be not just Ruth’s companion for the journey but also her maid at the Countess’s house in town. She was a quiet timid girl, though she relaxed a little in Ruth’s unaffectedly warm company.

They stopped for lunch at a country inn. The driver called the stop. He opened the door for the ladies. “Thought you might like a bit o’ lunch.” he said, standing to attention as Ruth stepped out. After several hours in the coach, it felt good to be outside in the spring air. Ruth stretched luxuriantly, noticing Abigail do the same. Then for a moment, they all stood there waiting. With a jolt, Ruth realised they were waiting on her. She took a deep breath and felt it flow through her body. With a strange sense of awareness, she assumed

command of the situation. Abigail and herself would take their lunch inside; food would be sent out for the men.

It was getting towards evening when they crested a final hill and saw the spires of Edinburgh. The hills on the southern approaches give a good view of the whole city. Its imposing granite buildings spread over a couple of hills. To the West, Edinburgh castle sits perched on its own small steep hilltop. From there, the city extends downhill to the Palace of Holyrood in the East, and the docks to the North where the sea showed a dark blue in the evening light. "Almost there now Miss." said Abigail, and Ruth felt a flush of excitement shoot through her. The sun was beginning to set over the hills inland. Across the city lights were being lit making it sparkle like a constellation.

* * *

A few hours later, and another girl began a quite different journey to the Countess's house. It was a little before dawn, and the street outside Miss Massingham's Seminary for Young Ladies was deserted. There was no-one to see as a small band box dropped over a wall. It was swiftly followed by a girl. Her face bore a strong resemblance to Ruth's, which was not surprising for they were cousins. This was Elizabeth Montgomery, daughter of the Dowager Countess's son, the Count of Glamis. She had the same large blue eyes as Ruth, the same fine cheekbones and delicate nose. Yet something in their arrangement made a striking difference in the effect. Whereas Ruth's face was gentle, there was an extra sharpness of line and a touch of cold fire about the eyes that gave Elizabeth a more imposing look. Ruth was undeniably pretty; but Elizabeth was beautiful.

Although the two girls were cousins, they had had very different lives. Ruth had grown up in the warm and loving - if somewhat cloistered - world of the vicarage. Elizabeth's parents were largely absent. Her father was ambassador to the Russian court, a position that kept him abroad for most of the year. From an early age, Elizabeth had been sent to a series of boarding schools. She saw her parents on their occasional visits to Britain, or on brief luxurious trips to Russia where she was pampered and paraded for a few weeks. By contrast, the boarding schools tended to be places of some hardship, in the belief that hardship was character-forming.

In Elizabeth it had formed a character that was tough and defiant. She had always been strong-willed, but as she grew up this had matured into a kind of wildness. On the surface, she was the model of refinement and sophistication, but this belied a turbulent nature. She cared little for rules, and even relished breaking them. Running away from school was a step further than she had ever gone, but it would not surprise her teachers.

Elizabeth drew her bonnet close to guard against the cold. Miss Massingham's was located in St. Andrews on the Scottish coast and there was a cold breeze blowing in off the sea. She stood for a moment, weighing up her options in the deserted street. She needed to find transport. Getting her bearings, she strode off determinedly in the direction of the main town square and the mail coach office.

The mail coach company proved to be unhelpful. She had hoped to travel on credit, but the clerk refused. Her name proved no use. Either he didn't believe her - which would be understandable given that the Massingham's uniform was a plain affair made of cheap material and Elizabeth had nothing to prove her identity - or he was wedded to the rule book. He was a mousy little man who fidgeted with his spectacles when she complained, but would not budge on the issue.

Standing outside again, she wondered if she would have to return shame-faced to the school. It was a horrible thought. Fortunately another prospect presented itself. The square bustled with the carts of farmers and traders. Some were unloading stock for the day's market, others were packing in order to head off for other towns. Edinburgh was only half a day's travel away; it stood to reason that some of the carts would be heading for the Scottish capital. Doing her best to look inconspicuous, she wandered through the square listening in on the conversations of the drovers.

Most of the men were still half-asleep and they paid little attention to her. Unnoticed, she drifted through them until she found a suitable vehicle. It was a large cart with a sheltered top to keep off the rain. Two men were loading crates onto it.

"Be a long trip to Edinburgh" said one.

"Aye, but what a place." said the other. "Why, they say the lassies there will do -"

"Stop lad. We've enough hours on the road with just you and me."

Elizabeth ambled past, checking it out. The pile of crates looked smaller than the cart. With a bit of luck, there would be space left to hide inside. She found a post to lean on, and waited.

After they finished loading, the men went off to relieve themselves before the journey. Quickly, she walked over to the cart and leapt up onto the back. By shifting a few crates, she made a neat hiding place. Within a minute she was invisible. It was neither warm, clean, nor comfortable - but it would do. A little while later the cart started to move off. Elizabeth felt the bumps of the road, and congratulated herself on her boldness and initiative. It would be several hours before she would regret not bringing any food.

This was not how Elizabeth had intended to leave school. She had been due to leave that day, but by the front door, and in a style more befitting the daughter of a Count. Her parents were returning to Britain, and Elizabeth was to rejoin them. Moreover, she would be one of the season's débutantes.

"Only one day left!" she had declared at dinner that day, "I'm finished with finishing school."

"Will you miss Massinghams?" asked one of her friends.

"No - but I will miss you Anthea dear."

Dinner at Miss Massingham's Seminary for Young Ladies was a strange sight. Row upon row of place settings were laid immaculately for a five course meal: the hor d'oeuvre, the fish course, the main course, dessert, and post-dessert. The girls sat prim and proper like ladies should. Backs upright and elbows off the table. Yet the crockery and cutlery were of a plain cast. And although the table was laid for five courses, invariably all five were the same food, and it was invariably poor. Today's dinner consisted of five courses of gruel - each course growing steadily colder.

Elizabeth and her friends spent dinner, as usual, in good humoured complaints.

"My dear! You're using the *wrong* knife to spread your gruel around the plate."

"Sorry; is this the *fish* gruel or the *main* gruel?"

"It all tastes the same to me."

"Quiet girls!" said one of the teachers. "You are here to learn how to be ladies, which includes being able to eat in public in the proper manner. It is the policy of Miss Massingham that you should also learn ascetic values and self-denial. Eating gruel teaches you that."

"It is the policy of Miss Massingham never to spend a penny on anyone but herself." Elizabeth mimicked once the teacher had moved on.

That evening her friends gathered in her dormitory for a small leaving party. There was quiet but gentle Anthea, fellow rebel Fion, the inseparable effervescent Isabelle and Frances, and studious Claire. The dorms were draughty rooms but with a half a dozen of them clustered round it felt quite cosy. There were no candles of course, so they opened the curtains to let in a little moonlight.

“Now,” declared Fion when they had all gathered, “We have a surprise for you!”

“How exciting.”

“We hid something nice in your bed.”

“What, the new dancing master?”

“Oh Elizabeth,” Susan giggled “You're *soo* naughty.”

Elizabeth drew back the covers on her bed to reveal not the attractive Mr Stuart, but something equally tempting: a large glorious cake box.

“Oh my.” exclaimed Claire, “Cake.”

“Where did you get this?” Elizabeth asked, opening the box to reveal a rich fruit cake.

“Oh well,” said Fion offhand, “You know old Miss McCourtney gets a little careless in the evening.”

“Ladies,” said Elizabeth speaking with the air of a grand hostess, “May I offer you... cake!”

It was the happiest little party. The girls gossiped and giggled, gleefully flicking crumbs of cake at each other. They had to keep the noise down, which only made them laugh more and harder, stuffing pillows over their mouths to smother the sound. All told, it was a splendid party right up until the knock at the door.

The knock was a hard imperative knock. It rang out across the room, sudden and shockingly loud compared to the whispered partying of but a moment before. It was the kind of knock that authority has made throughout the ages. Not a

polite knock asking permission to enter, but an order to those inside that they should drop what they were doing for the authorities who were about to enter expected and demanded their attention.

Instantly the noise dried up. A couple of the girls made a dive for their beds, but most of them just sat frozen. The knock came again - that was the regulation two knocks - and then the door opened and a teacher stepped in. She held a lantern and the sudden light blinded the girls. It shone out over their blinking faces, over their unauthorised gathering, and over the crumbs and empty cake box on the bed.

When their eyes adjusted they saw with trepidation that it was not just any teacher, but the fearsome Miss Massingham herself. Tall and thin, her angular features looked barely human in the lantern light. Miss Massingham let some uncomfortable seconds go by. Her formidable eyes travelled from face to face. When she spoke again, her voice was as hard and cold as a stone in winter. It made the girls shudder.

“What” she demanded “Is The Meaning Of This?”

The girls sat in petrified silence.

“You have stolen from the pantry.” Miss Massingham said. She delivered this statement like a judge pronouncing a man guilty, and she made it sound like a capital crime. She breathed in through her nose and sucked in her cheeks to present her sternest countenance. “This is vile behaviour. Vile. You will all be heavily Punished.”

“Now,” she continued, “Who is responsible for this Outrage?”

There was a terrible silence. Miss Massingham flexed her bony knuckles. Fion made a small movement with her foot, scraping a tiny circle on the floor. She took a deep breath, and then gasped as Elizabeth stood up.

“It was me, Miss.” Elizabeth declared. “It’s my fault.” She stood with her head bowed looking at her shoes. Her posture was the picture of guilty remorse. Yet there was something silently strong in the way her feet were planted, and those who knew her could see the defiance hidden in her stance.

“I see.” intoned Miss Massingham. She fixed Elizabeth with the full power of her stare. “Elizabeth.” she said, “You will report to my office at eight tomorrow, when I will decide on your punishment.”

“Yes Miss.”

Then Miss Massingham smiled and somehow that was worse. Her smile had a cruel edge to it. “And Elizabeth?” she said.

“Yes Miss.”

“I almost forgot the reason I came down here tonight. A letter arrived from your parents. They are detained abroad on business. They ask that, for the foreseeable future, we should continue to look after you here.”

Miss Massingham paused for this news to sink in.

“They still hope we can teach you some proper behaviour. And I suppose we may beat it into you yet.” Her smile widened on the word 'beat'.

Then she left. The girls clustered round Elizabeth and offered their support. Elizabeth sat staring straight in front. Then with a sharp movement roused herself and shrugged off her friends futile ministrations. “I am finished here.” she declared. “I’m leaving.

Anthea caught her hand in concern “But where will you go?”

“I’ll head to my grandmother’s place in town.” said Elizabeth decisively.

“Miss Massingham won’t let you go.”

Elizabeth smiled a rebellious grin. “By the time she finds out, I’ll be half-way to Edinburgh.”

It was dusk when she finally arrived in Edinburgh. After a long day’s travel, the cart pulled into the GrassMarket trading area. Elizabeth stretched her limbs, cramped from the long journey. Then she shifted aside the boxes that hid her, and jumped off the cart.

The traders had dismounted and were standing by the side of the cart. “Oi!” cried one of them in surprise. She turned to see their surprised faces, executed a perfect curtsy - then fled.

Fortunately her memories of Edinburgh served her well, and she found her way to her grandmother’s town house without difficulty. The butler opened the door at the third knock. He was a well trained servant, and did not question either her appearance or her appearance. Ushering her into the hallway, he went to announce her to the Countess.

“Your Excellency; Miss Elizabeth Montgomery is here.”

Weak from lack of food and covered in dirt and bits of hay from the cart, Elizabeth staggered through the sitting room door.

“Hello Dear Grandmother.” she said.

The Countess burst up from her seat, shouting and gesturing with considerable energy, but Elizabeth heard none if it for she had collapsed.

* * *

And then there was another traveller who set out for Edinburgh that day. He was a man with a heart full of anger and dark business on his mind. A quiet man, but with a steely purpose in his manner. He rode with a companion who was

equally reserved. They wore regimental uniforms, but it was not army business they were on.

On Hampstead Heath, the blood had quickly sunk into the ground. Lord Arthur Buckstead's body had been placed in the family mausoleum. But blood is not so easily laid to rest. "I want him dead." Lady Buckstead said, and her entreaty fell on willing ears.

The travellers hunted a man. So far they had found only rumours. The traces of the man's passage. And the trail pointed toward Scotland.

Chapter 2

In which Miss Carlyle and Miss Montgomery prepare to meet with Society.

Hamish McTavish Laird of Dounraey, paced stormily round the room he had taken at the Arbroath House gentleman's club. He was a great bear of a man and his footsteps made the floorboards tremble. Standing at the window, he raised his arms and eyes to the skies and let out a frustrated sigh. His butler, a tall and immaculate man called John Brown, watched with polite deference. Hamish returned from across the room to the dressing table. He contemplated once again the purple and green creation that lay spread out upon it.

"What is this Brown?" he demanded of his servant. His voice was deep and powerful to match his large frame. There were echoes.

"I believe it's called a waistcoat, Sir." Mr Brown replied unperturbed.

"Ye may call it a waistcoat. I call it an abomination!" Hamish thundered, though without any real anger, "Purple and green? What were ye thinking of man? And don't play innocent - I know ye're canny as a fox. This - this is Treachery! You do realise that the Earl of Moray's ball is the event of the season? And the only waistcoat you bothered to pack was this - *thing!*" Hamish pointed at the offending article of clothing; "Could you no of poisoned me food instead? It would have been kinder."

The butler maintained his perfect composure throughout this tirade. "It was a present from the Earl, Sir. I thought it might be politic."

Hamish collapsed into a chair. "Ah." he said.

"Yes."

"Moray never did have any taste."

"Not as far as is known Sir."

"Well, I suppose I shall make a striking figure."

He stood up and struck a pose in the mirror. "Call my carriage. I shall go pick up Delaney and then - to the dance!"

At this point Alistair Delaney was sitting in his library dressed in a smoking jacket, casual trousers and slippers. His mother wrung her hands in despair, "You can't seriously be going like that! Oh my, I never saw the like."

Alistair calmly put down the book he was reading. "I have decided not to go." he announced.

"Not to go? Not to go! Alistair, whatever do you mean?"

"I'm not going to the ball mother. I'm not sure I'm in the mood"

"But - but - the Lord and Lady Moray's ball is the event of the season. How can you not go?"

"I'm tired of these endless parties; they're all the same."

This was a calamity. The ball was where Alistair was due to meet Ruth, though neither realised it. Agnes and Katherine had spent some time plotting this meeting between their relatives. Now Alistair was threatening to ruin it all. Katherine would blame her, and might well take offence. Alistair simply had to go to the ball.

"Alistair you *have* to go." Agnes said.

"I am sure that the Earl of Moray can manage without me." he replied.

“But you see, well, there’s someone I want you to meet.” Agnes said.

Alistair looked at her searchingly.

“You see, Her Excellency the Dowager Countess of Glamis, you know Katherine of course, well she has a granddaughter who she, we think would be perfect for you.”

Alistair was not impressed.

“She’s a lovely girl.” Agnes trailed off weakly, intimidated by Alistair’s fierce gaze.

“So I am to be matched with some off-cast society girl who I’ll then be pressured to marry?” he said, “Then I will certainly not go.”

Then with an affectation of great calm, Alistair resumed his reading.

The Countess had no such difficulty convincing the girls to attend. Indeed the hard thing would have been to restrain Elizabeth. She had been talking about the ball non-stop since her surprise arrival the week before. She spent inordinate amounts of time rehearsing her arrivals, planning her conversations and conquests, and practising her dancing with Ruth. Now that the day had come she was a wreck.

There are in any season a handful of key events which define that season. They are the events that everyone talks about: the occasions where marriages are made, fortunes won and lost, and names made or broken. For the unmarried girls, such events are of supreme importance. A girl only has a few seasons. First she is a *débutante*. Then, assuming she ‘takes’ and did not commit some subtle but horrible *faux pas*, she is a part of the scene. This only lasts for a few brief years - and then she is either married or a maid. In all, she can expect to attend no more than a dozen balls as a prospective bride, and

often a good deal less. Each one is important and none more so than the girls' first.

This most important of events is always the grand opening ball that begins the season. To miss this would be unthinkable. The most influential people will be there, as will most of the eligible suitors. A girl's place in society is often determined by how she performs on that one occasion. Though no-one has said as much, the *débutantes* have been in training for years. They must be faultless on the night.

Elizabeth knew this of course. She knew it in her bones. The ball was at once both terribly exciting and quite frightening. It was perhaps like going into battle was for a dashing young officer. The week passed in a state of some turmoil. One moment she was full of excitement, the next throwing a fit of pique. The Countess handled her with patience. She was intrigued to recognise an unusual emotion behind these swings of temperament. Her fiery independent granddaughter was actually nervous.

The issue that caused Elizabeth the most distress was that of her *dress*. She had tried on a dozen combinations of dresses, petticoats, corsets, frocks. None of them quite hit the right note. The blue gauze gown was too plain, whilst the lace-sleeved primrose dress was too girlish, and the purple velvet was too much like something her grandmother would wear. It was now almost time to leave and she still hadn't found the right clothes.

Ruth had tried to help, assuring her that each outfit looked wonderful. Elizabeth was not to be placated. For a start, Ruth had lived all her life in a country vicarage and could not be expected to know what was necessary for an important Edinburgh ball.

Besides, wonderful was not good enough for Elizabeth. She was determined to be unforgettable, the belle of the ball.

Moreover - as Ruth soon worked out - when someone is nervous without reason, it is impossible to reassure them through reason.

As the day wore on, her ideas were becoming more extreme, bordering on the outrageous.

“Can I damp down my dress?” she asked her grandmother.

The girls would be wearing thick petticoats with a thin muslin dress over the top. A damped down dress meant wetting the petticoat, which would then cling to the body. The result was very alluring, if a little cold.

“Certainly not.” said the Countess.

“But all the young men will be there!” she protested.

“And so will the older women, and they are considerably more powerful.” the Countess replied, but then relented somewhat;

“Perhaps later in the season we will have a small soiree of our own. Then you may drench yourself in water to your heart’s content, and even go so far as to dance twice with the same gentleman.”

At this, Elizabeth gave a little yelp of excitement and skipped round the room, finishing by hugging the Countess.

“Note the word 'perhaps',” said the Countess, “and remember young lady that I am known for my capricious nature.” But she couldn't help smiling at her granddaughter’s enthusiasm.

“Tonight you must look and be respectable.” she admonished gently. Then with great solemnity she presented a small parcel to each of the girls. The parcels were made of purple velvet held together with silver thread. Although small they had a promising weight to them. The girls quickly opened them. Inside each was an elegant silver brooch with the crest of Glamis picked out in enamel.

“Now go get dressed.” said the Countess.

Ruth dressed very simply in a white dress, her only decoration a small pendant given her by her father. Earlier,

Elizabeth had been exasperated by what she had seen as naïve complacency from her country cousin. Now though she was glad for Ruth's relaxed company. It helped steady her. She finally decided on her blue dress and added a silver shawl.

"Your hair's such a beautiful colour." said Elizabeth "Here let me give you this."

She offered Ruth an elegant comb inlaid with mother of pearl "It would suit you so well."

Ruth's protests were in vain as Elizabeth laughingly inserted the comb in her hair. Ruth had to admit that it did look rather fetching.

"Girls." Katherine Montgomery, Dowager Countess of Glamis, stood framed in the doorway. She wore a billowing dress of aubergine taffeta and was decked out with a ransom in gold and pearls. She was majestic and imposing; a flag-ship leaving harbour under full sail.

"The carriage is ready." she announced.

Across town, Agnes was still having trouble. She had tried several tactics - including all the main varieties of emotional blackmail - but Alistair would not cooperate. Agnes stood fretting and dithering, as if stuck in the library doorway. Alistair pretended not to notice and tried to lose himself in his book. Out in the Hebrides Samuel Johnson was expounding to Boswell on the subject of salad. "A cucumber," said the good doctor, "should be well-sliced, dressed with pepper and vinegar, and then thrown out." Alistair tried to have an opinion on cucumbers, but it was hard with his mother's anxious gaze upon him.

The doorbell came to Agnes's rescue. They heard a servant answer the door and the guest's footsteps in the hall. Then a deep male voice with a rich Scottish accent bellowed out:

“Hello! Hamish here! Is my chaperone ready? Brown won't let me go out otherwise. I do declare he becomes more like my mother every day. He almost has the moustache for it now.”

A hearty laugh followed.

“Alistair! Where are you laddie? Come on - the party is waiting for us!”

One of the maids entered the library and announced, a little redundantly, “Lord McTavish is here.”

In the face of Hamish's bon homie, Alistair's reluctance stood little chance. Soon he was jollied into a dinner suit and within half an hour their carriage was pulling up outside the Assembly Rooms where the ball was in full swing.

* * *

The Assembly Rooms were an imposing building. Set on George Street, one street back from the high-class shops of Prince's Street, they were the social hub of Edinburgh. The cost of the building had been raised by subscription under the Earl of Moray's leadership with the intent of reflecting the elegance of the New Town. They were completed a few years before and opened with a glittering ball given by members of the Caledonian Hunt, which included almost three dozen noblemen and baronets. The Ballroom was 92 feet long, 42 feet broad and 30 feet high, making it the largest in Britain except for the Great Room at Bath, and it was said to exceed that in elegance and just proportion.

On arriving at this important place, one would be met by Arthur Patrick Forester, the Master of Ceremonies. Events such as tonight's were the highpoint of Mr Forester's job. The ball was, as everyone knew, a particularly important event, and as the presiding officer (of the Assembly Rooms), he was

responsible for its smooth running. He looked, he knew, very presentable in his neatly turned waistcoat. He cut a good figure, silhouetted in the doorway as guests arrived, and he had a fine announcers' voice, of which he was proud.

He sniffed (quietly) when Lord McTavish entered. The ball was an important affair and Mr Forrester could not help feeling that his Lordship's boisterous good humour spoiled the *tone* of the occasion. McTavish was followed by the noble Lord Delaney whose comportment was, Mr Forrester noticed, a little scruffier than usual.

"Hello, Andrew right?" boomed Hamish who prided himself on his ability to connect with people of all stations. Mr Forrester bristled invisibly for a moment. "Arthur sir." he replied.

The next party to arrive was a trio of ladies. They piled out of a grand coach bearing the crest of Glamis House, flanked by a pair of footmen. Mr Forrester straightened his posture like a soldier coming to attention. He recognised of course Katherine of Glamis. Her two companions would be her grand-daughters, both of whom were coming out this season. They were exceptionally pretty and immaculately attired. Mr Forrester wondered if he might venture a compliment. He said nothing though, merely smiled deferentially.

"Her Excellency Countess Katherine Montgomery of Glamis, Miss Elizabeth Montgomery and Miss Ruth Carlyle" one of the footmen informed him.

"Of course." he said, and proceeded to announce them in his deepest most imposing tones.

A throng of men stepped forward to greet the ladies. The most determined being bold Lord McTavish, who asserted himself to be at the front. Batting aside all interference, he engaged the ladies in conversation and attempted to ask for a

dance with *both* of the girls. His luck - as always! - was in and the band struck up Dashing White Sergeant. This is a lively folk dance that calls for triplets: two men and one woman or two women and one man. With a delighted smile, McTavish whisked the lovely young Glamis ladies out onto the dance floor. Mr Forrester did not wholly approve of dancing, but he did experience a strange feeling as he watched the girls dance off across the hall. He could not have named the feeling, but it was longing.

A rattle on the cobbles made Mr Forrester turn round. A simple black carriage had pulled up. One man got out and approached. He wore simple black clothes. Mr Forrester did not recognise him and was not at all sure that he belonged at the Assembly Rooms, and at such a grand event.

“And who are you Sir?” he asked in formal tones.

The man in black paused. Mr Forrester noticed that in spite of his plain clothes, he had a noble bearing.

“Say... that Mr Andrew Williams has arrived.”

Normally Mr Forrester would have turned such a person away. He was not expected, and of no rank. There were always a few petit-bourgeois social climbers who tried to gate crash the big events. Mr Forrester would turn them away with a sniff. Often they became indignant, but Mr Forrester could be quite stern when defending the Assembly Rooms.

Yet something in the other man’s manner made him look away and comply.

“Mr Andrew Williams.” he announced to the hall, who paid no attention to such an undistinguished name.

As the man passed him, he noted that Mr Williams did wear one piece of jewellery. A ring on his left hand. The face of the ring was turned inwards, towards the palm. It was as if the wearer did not really want it to be seen, but Mr Forrester

fancied that he *had* seen it, and that it was a signet ring bearing a crest of arms.

Chapter 3

In which we see some of the dangers of a dance.

Inside the main hall, Alistair watched as his friend danced with the two girls. He felt curiously removed from the festivity around him, as if he were not actually at the party but merely watching it. The music wound to a close. Alistair watched Hamish conclude the dance with a flourish and a bow to both his partners. Lady Agnes and the Countess of Glamis joined them. Then with a slow movement that carried a certain air of inevitability, the party wheeled round and bore down on Alistair.

Hamish introduced his dancing partners. “May I present the Beautiful Miss Ruth Carlyle and the Divine Miss Elizabeth Montgomery of Glamis. Or is it the Divine Miss Carlyle and the Beautiful Miss Montgomery?”

Miss Montgomery laughed coquettishly and Miss Carlyle smiled demurely. Alistair looked at Miss Montgomery. So this was the Glamis girl his mother wanted to set him up with. He had to admit she was rather pretty. However he was in a recalcitrant mood. He did not care to have this affairs arranged in such a manner. Giving Miss Montgomery a polite bow he turned to talk with Miss Carlyle.

“How do you like the ball?” he asked her.

“Oh I like it very much.”

Alistair liked the frank way she met his gaze

There was a simplicity about this girl that was refreshing. then she smiled and it was like sun breaking through clouds.

The great whirl of the dance continued. Bodies swayed to music and eager comrades exchanged bright eyed glances. Hamish loved it, but it made his head whirl. Some dances later found him in need of a rest and a drink. Dancing is thirsty work and the Scottish Ceilidh is no exception. Separating the dancer from the dance, he left the ball room and headed for the quieter excitements of the gaming room.

The gaming room was a male only preserve. Hamish took a glass of wine and surveyed the room. He looked for an interesting game to join - or a lively conversation. A small throng of the younger men had gathered around one of the tables. Some of them were focused intently on the cards. A considerable amount of money was on the table. Several of the others were talking about the latest London scandal.

“Did you hear about the Buckstead affair down in London?”

“Yes! Killed by his wife’s lover - the Duke of Wessex.”

“Now the latest is that Buckstead’s brother has sworn to hunt the Duke down.”

Hamish’s ears pricked up at the mention of the Duke of Wessex. “How did it happen?” he asked the talkers.

The group opened out to include him. A thin man with glasses hastened to tell Hamish the juicy details.

“They were surprised *in flagrante!*” he imparted in a loud whisper, “Lord Buckstead grabbed a gun. There was a struggle for it! Lord Buckstead ended up shot. And the Duke of Wessex - vanished out of the window.”

“You have it quite wrong.” said one of the card players. He sat with his back to the discussion, but his voice sounded familiar to Hamish.

“And who are you Sir?” asked the thin man.

The card player turned round, to the annoyance of his opponents at cards. “Mr Williams.” he said.

“I was in London not a week ago.” he continued. “It was a duel between Wessex and Buckstead. With swords not pistols.”

“Have you ever met with FitzWilliam of Wessex?” asked one of the group gathered behind him.

“They say he is quite a rogue.” added another.

“Will you *play*?” interrupted one of the card players.

“I raise fifty guineas.” the man who called himself Mr Williams replied without looking at the game. “Yes I have met the Duke, and he is a fearsome rogue indeed.” Mr Williams smiled wryly. “He looks more like a highwayman than a Duke.”

Hamish McTavish laughed heartily. “Indeed!” he agreed, “And with a scar across one eye. No-one knows how he got it. But he killed a man once just for asking.”

“It will be one hell of a fight when Buckstead’s brother finds him.” commented someone.

“Buckstead’s brother rants and fumes all day, and will talk of nothing but vengeance!” said the thin man.

“Is that so?” asked Mr Williams.

“Indeed. I have it from a reliable source.”

Hamish refrained from asking whether this was the same reliable source as had provided the lurid false account of Lord Buckstead’s death. “Where do you think the Duke is now?” he asked, looking at Mr Williams.

“They say he has fled to Saxony.” Mr Williams replied.

“Do they? Do they indeed Mr Williams. Your face is familiar. I swear we have met before, though I don't recollect where. Will you join me for a drink when you have finished this hand?”

“Certainly. I should be delighted.” Mr Williams replied, and turning to the other card players he placed his cards face down on the table. “I fold.”

“But Sir,” said one of the other players, “You've already won this hand.”

“Well Ranolph you rogue.” said Hamish once they'd found some privacy. “You're in it now and no mistake. What is the truth behind all this talk?”

“The truth is that the damn fool would call me out. I don't know why - a man who keeps two mistresses can hardly expect perfect behaviour from his wife. Then he got angry and ran himself through on my sword.”

“You're claiming to be the innocent party?”

“Well that's how the duel went at any rate.” Ranolph looked down and sighed. “I didn't mean to kill him Hamish - he charged me and it was him or me. ”

“And now ye've moved up here to hide out.”

“For now. My Mr Williams pose won't hold for long.”

“Not if you keep attending society balls.” Hamish interjected.

“I'll probably move on soon.” said Ranolph, “Maybe Italy or Greece.”

“Look, this business with Buckstead's brother isn't good if it's true. William Buckstead. Have you ever met him?”

“No, he wasn't in London” said Ranolph.

“That's because the man is an army officer. He was stationed up in Scotland a few years back. A nasty piece of work if you ask me. Cold, and he has the look of a killer.” Hamish spoke softly. “If he's out for revenge - well I'd take that very seriously.”

“I can handle myself.” Ranolph replied.

“Aye - with a sword. But how are ye with a pistol?”

Ranolph was silent.

“Aye. And William Buckstead is a crack shot. Try to stay low for now. If I hear anything of Buckstead I'll let you know.”

“My Lord Davenport, how dreadful!” Elizabeth smiled sweetly at her collection of besotted gallants. She was in her element like a dolphin in water. With her youthful beauty and noble bearing, she was the undisputed queen of the dance. She ruled with a flutter of her eyelashes or a delicate turn of her hand. Men jostled and fought to ask her for a dance or for the honour of fetching her a drink.

Occasionally she checked up on her cousin, or dutifully attended on her grandmother. Ruth was also enjoying herself, though in a quieter way. She spent much of the night talking with Lord Delaney. He had struck Elizabeth as a rather cold sort, but he seemed to have warmed up in Ruth’s company.

Mostly she rode the currents of the party. Lively dances and ardent men carried her this way and that. At one point she passed by Lord McTavish, a large boisterously good-natured man. He seemed more subdued now. He was deep in conversation with a man dressed in black. Hamish welcomed her with a broad smile, but his friend fixed her with a hard look that seemed to say ‘move along girl’.

Elizabeth took umbrage at this. It was a challenge to her authority. She determined to face this man. This was *her* night, and he too must pay homage to her. She met his stare head on. He was a handsome man with fine cheekbones and fierce blue eyes.

“Lord McTavish.” she said, curtsying her way into the conversation.

“Ah, the delightful Miss Montgomery!” cried Hamish with some of his former gusto.

“Who is your friend?” she enquired.

“Allow me to introduce Mr Williams.”

Mr Williams bent his glower into a sarcastic smile.

“Delighted.” he said, meaning “Go away.”

“Does your friend dance?” asked Elizabeth, for she refused to be snubbed by any man.

“I gave it up,” came the reply “It interfered with my whoring.” Elizabeth blushed at such language but stood her ground. She stared at this obstinate man. “Where are you from?” she asked. “Around.” he said.

“And how do you know Lord McTavish?”

“From around.”

Mr Williams had a fine voice but his conversation was lacking. Talking to this aloof man with his blank answers, Elizabeth suddenly felt the absurdity of standard conversation. Her pique melted into amusement. Her lips twitched as she asked “And what shape is a circle, Sir?”

“A round.” replied Mr Williams with as much solemnity as he could muster. He could not help a small twitch of a smile.

Hamish laughed heartily “Williams I believe she has the measure of you.”

Mr Williams bowed graciously. Then he smiled with a warmth and vitality that belied his original coldness. “Miss Montgomery, is your offer of a dance still open?” he asked.

It turned out that Mr Williams was an excellent dancer, nor was his conversation so lacking after all.

“The church has to take a stronger stance.” said the Countess in a voice that brooked no argument. The Countess had cornered the Reverend McFingle, Bishop of Edinburgh and was berating the worthy churchman on the subject of the recent troubles in France.

“We are doing all we can, your Ladyship.” replied the beleaguered churchman.

The Countess paused to consider this. In her opinion, the Church should excommunicate the French. The Bishop had tried to explain that the Church of Scotland had no power to

do this, especially since it was Presbyterian and did not believe in excommunication. The Countess was having none of it. The Bishop quailed slightly in anticipation of a fresh harangue. Then - unexpectedly - the Countess smiled pleasantly and broke off the attack.

Throughout the ball she had kept half an eye on the two girls. She had noticed with satisfaction that Ruth was demure, delightful, and spent much of her time with Alistair Delaney. Elizabeth's progress through the party was harder to track. On the whole, the Countess was satisfied. Elizabeth had beguiled a good many it seemed, whilst offending no-one. More than one lady in her circle had stopped to praise her two fine granddaughters. However something about the man currently dancing with Elizabeth rang alarm bells.

She did not know him - which was cause for concern in itself. His manner toward Elizabeth was perhaps a shade too intense. He had not - she thought - danced with anyone else. Alistair was nearby, so the Countess turned to him. "Who is that my granddaughter Elizabeth is dancing with?" she asked. "I'll ask Hamish." said Alistair, "He was talking with him earlier."

Hamish was not hard to find. Alistair simply followed the sound of his rich deep laughter. When asked about Miss Glamis's partner, Hamish excused himself and led Alistair aside.

"Can you promise to keep a secret?"

"Certainly." Alistair said.

"Well he's 'Mr Williams' if anyone asks." said Hamish, then leaned close. "But between you and me, that's His Disgrace the Duke of Wessex." he confided.

"What, the one who killed Lord Buckstead in the London scandal!" Alistair whispered back excitedly.

“The very same.” Hamish replied, “But not a word now! He is a friend.”

Alistair returned to the Countess. “He’s a Mr Williams, from England.” he reported.

The Countess was shocked, “A commoner?”

“I guess so.” Alistair lied.

“You must separate them immediately!” she declared, “I do not like the way he looks at her. Nor the way Elizabeth looks at him.”

Alistair was not pleased. So the Countess and his mother were still trying to push along their little plot. He couldn't imagine what the Countess thought a dance with her granddaughter would achieve. He nodded his agreement though. Knowing who Elizabeth’s partner really was, Alistair felt a responsibility to intervene. The Duke of Wessex was a notorious rake, and bad company for any young lady. There was no avoiding it. It seemed he would be forced to dance with Miss Glamis after all.

Alistair threaded his way through the dance. In front of him, Elizabeth and Mr Williams glided effortlessly to the strains of the fiddle and the pipes. Alistair waited for a break in the music, then tapped ‘Mr Williams’ on the shoulder.

“Sir, I believe this dance is promised to me.” he said.

“I have no memory of speaking to you before and I have no wish to dance with you.” said the Duke without really looking at him.

“I was speaking of the young lady.”

“The answer is still no.” said the Duke.

“You should not be so rude Sir.” Alistair persisted, “*I know who you are.*”

The Duke looked at him then, and read in Alistair’s eyes the knowledge of his real identity. A frown crossed the Duke’s

face. It was a fleeting expression but showed such fierce turmoil that Alistair took a step back. Then the Duke turned from Alistair to Elizabeth. He bowed to her. He spun on his heel and left.

They watched him leave. Alistair turned to Elizabeth with a sigh and a wan smile. Elizabeth thanked him with a frown. She curtsied with icy formality and they started dancing. It was a cheerless dance.

Afterwards he led her back to the Countess. The Countess gently admonished Elizabeth for dancing with someone so far beneath her rank. "You must take a little care Dear about who you associate with. He was a most inappropriate companion." Elizabeth said nothing. She did not trust herself to speak. Nor could she look her grandmother in the eye, for her look would have been full of fire. "How kind of you to rescue me." she said to Alistair in a voice laced with sarcasm.

Alistair bowed to the pair and left them to it. He looked round for Miss Carlyle. She had been with the Countess earlier, but she was not there now. The evening was drawing to a close. The candles burned low in their lamps and the servants no longer replenished them. Alistair did not entertain any thoughts regarding Miss Ruth Carlyle - certainly not thoughts of a romantic nature. But he had hoped to have one last dance with her.

She was not one of the cluster of young ladies who stood nearby waiting to be asked to dance. Nor was she in the side-room where the ladies took refreshment.

He finally spotted her on the dance floor. She was dancing a waltz, her dainty figure seemed to float and shimmer from the other side of the room. Her companion was a tall well built man. He wore a captain's uniform, and had a swarthy complexion that betokened many years of military

service. He had good features, but Alistair felt that they were marred by the harsh set of his mouth. He moved precisely and perfectly. The man was, Alistair couldn't help but note, a better dancer than himself.

Collecting his coat, Alistair stepped out into the night. He summoned his coach and stood waiting for it to arrive. It was late now, and the lights of the city had mostly gone out. The wind blew in from the sea. The city of Edinburgh was dark and cold about him.

Part Two

Chapter 4

In which the course of love does not run smooth.

Chapter 5

In which the Countess takes a hand and the new Lord Buckstead considers his status.

Chapter 6

In which the Duke of Wessex is uncharacteristically open.

Chapter 7

In which Lord Delaney finds that past heartbreak is no defence against further heartbreak, while Miss Montgomery risks her reputation.

Chapter 4

In which the course of love does not run smooth.

The flowers were a rich deep-hearted red. They were pure and beautiful, still wet with scented dew.

“Oh,” said Elizabeth, “More roses.”

“And a card, Miss” said the maid, handing it over. Elizabeth glanced over the card. “Another would-be poet.” she said pretending to be glum, then passed it on to Ruth.

Ruth read the card and dissolved into a fit of giggles. “Oh Miss Elizabeth,” she read from the card in a mock-amorous fashion, “Your nose is delicate like a flower / I could gaze at it for hours.”

“My nose is like a flower?!” Elizabeth complained, “What kind of flower? Like these roses? Is he saying I have a red nose?”

It was shortly after lunch at Abercrombie House. The first flowers had arrived at 10 o’clock, and they had continued to arrive throughout the morning. The supply showed no sign of letting up. Most were for Elizabeth, gaudy bouquets of roses and camellias.

The next consignment of flowers was for Ruth though. It was a set of posies. The card read “To Miss Carlyle. I enjoyed meeting you at Lord Moray’s Ball. I hope you will accept these flowers as a token of my regard. Yours, Thomas Blimp.”

Elizabeth was curious. “Thomas Blimp... was he the soldier?”

“No.”

“The dreary man with the monocle?”

“I think so.” said Ruth, “I barely remember him. We only exchanged a few words.”

“Ah,” said Elizabeth, “Shy - but with a passionate heart.”

“Shy and inept, more like.” interrupted the Countess. “I think my dear Ruth,” she continued, “you would have received more flowers had you not been so, ah, *focused*, on Lord Delaney.

Ruth denied this energetically, her face colouring in a most attractive way. ‘Why has *he* not sent any flowers?’ thought the Countess, but she kept this to herself.

At two o’clock, just as the ladies were putting on their bonnets for a stroll, a final gift arrived. It was not a bouquet, but a single rose. It was for Elizabeth.

“Just the one?” said the Countess, “My what a cheap-skate.”

Elizabeth did not respond. She regarded the flower and its accompanying card with intense concentration.

“Let’s see the card.” said the Countess and took it from Elizabeth’s unresisting hand. She read it aloud.

“O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible Worm
That flies in the Night,
In the howling Storm,

Has found out thy Bed
Of crimson joy,
And his dark secret Love
Does thy Life destroy.

I shall not call.”

That was all it said. The card was unsigned.

Everyone was curious about this strange gift. The Countess declared that she had never seen such a thing before, and she had seen a good deal. Elizabeth was not pleased. She

kept looking from the card to the rose. "Insufferable." she said, but would not expand.

It was an intriguing mystery. Had the Countess given it her full attention she might have unravelled it, for she was a sharp lady. And then things might have turned out very differently. But at that point Lord Delaney arrived accompanied by Lady Agnes Delaney and the matter had to be put aside.

Alistair was soberly attired in a dark grey coat and breeches. Ruth thought he looked distinguished. Elizabeth thought he looked uncomfortable. He had not brought flowers, but he had brought a copy of Georgette Heyer's book "The Black Moth" which Ruth had expressed a desire to read during their conversations the night before. He was warmer to Elizabeth than he had been at the dance, but he made a point of treating her with all the civility due to a maiden aunt. The Countess was delighted. "It's very sweet." she remarked in an aside to Agnes, "He thinks he has free will."

The Countess suggested that she and Lady Delaney should retire to the blue salon and take tea whilst the younger people took a turn round the gardens. This plan suited everyone, and was readily agreed to with only token attempts at resistance. It was understood that Elizabeth would act as chaperone by everyone except Alistair.

Chaperone was not a role that Elizabeth was particularly suited to. As soon as the trio were out of sight from the salon, she excused herself and vanished down a side path. With a smile on her face at having done a good deed - by her lights at least - she settled on a stone bench. After a moment thinking on Alistair and her cousin, she turned her mind to a more personal matter. From her muff, she withdrew the mysterious card and contemplated it again.

Alistair and Ruth walked a little while in silence. The path wound past a small ornamental lake and towards a wooded dell.

Alistair cleared his throat. "Miss Carlyle, I hope you will not think me too forward." he began.

Ruth felt time slow down. Her heart beat faster. Everything else seemed to stop. She was excited and nervous at the same time.

"But there is something I feel I should tell you." Alistair continued.

Ruth looked at him. He had such a sad noble face. She wanted to take his head in her hands and tell him everything was alright. That everything was wonderful. She had been unsure of her feelings, but now she knew that she cared for him deeply. It was awfully sudden, but then that was how these things happened.

"My heart died five years ago." said Alistair.

That did not feel quite right. Ruth was not experienced in the ways of courtship, but she recognised that something was wrong here. Her head reeled with tumultuous emotions. Panic and desire wrestled with each other in her bosom.

"Oh." she said, non-committally.

"I was married." said Alistair, "Her name was Charlotte. We grew up together - our estates bordered each other." He paused to kick a stone. "She - she went walking and was caught in a storm. I found her in the field, drenched through and unconscious with fever. She got pneumonia, and..." His voice trailed off as the emotions came flooding back. They walked on a few paces in silence.

"It was a month after our wedding." he said, then was silent for some time.

They walked on through the small wood. Out of the sunlight, the air was now cold and thin. Finally he spoke again.

“Forgive me Miss Carlyle; it must seem odd to burden you with such a confidence.” he said. His voice was now even and emotionless. A mask of politeness had descended.

“I was perhaps too warm last night. I may have given the wrong impression - that I intended something beyond friendship. Indeed perhaps I allowed myself to think about such things. But it would be wrong to deceive myself.” he continued, “I am - how can I put it? - *broken goods*.”

At this point Alistair risked a look at Ruth. She was perhaps even prettier than he had thought the previous night. Her head was held up proud but the colour in her cheeks gave her feelings away. He felt awful. It was well that he was setting things straight now.

“Who ever recovers from love? I do not think it is possible.” Alistair looked down sadly. “I do not think I could marry again.” he concluded.

Ruth gave no reply but merely nodded her understanding. By an unspoken consensus they turned back towards the house. They walked on in silence, not daring to look at each other. Elizabeth was waiting where she had left them. She approached with a smile, but reading their faces she quickly assumed a more sober expression.

Approaching the house, they saw that there was a man in the room talking with the Countess and Lady Delaney. He wore a captain’s uniform and had a strong profile. Ruth recognised him from the previous night. He had been her partner for a dance - about the time that Alistair had left. She wondered disconsolately whether she had somehow put a foot wrong there.

The man turned round when they entered.

“Ah Miss Carlyle, how pleasant to see you again.” he said.

“You know my granddaughter?” asked the Countess, a little surprised.

“Yes. We met at last night’s frivolities. I’m afraid I come on less cheerful business today.”

He paused dramatically. When he spoke again it was in a slow and deliberate manner, turning to look each one of them in the eye.

“My name is Lord William Buckstead. A month ago, my brother was murdered.”

Chapter 5

In which the Countess takes a hand and the new Lord Buckstead considers his status.

That evening went by like a bad dream. Looking back on it, Ruth was only able to remember snatches. These stood in her memory like sketches painted in garish hues.

Having said what he had set out to say, Alistair was clearly uncomfortable at remaining any length of time in Abercrombie house. He interrupted Lord Buckstead's tale to excuse himself. It was an awkward farewell. The Countess and Lady Delaney pressured him to stay. Alistair insisted that he must go, citing a prior engagement. Lady Delaney expressed surprise at this. The Countess pushed him to stay, saying that it was quite inexcusable to leave the girls with only such elderly ladies for company. The girls said nothing and studiously looked at their feet or out of the window.

Only at this point did the older women realise that something was amiss. There was an embarrassing pause, painful for all, and then Alistair was allowed to make his farewells and take his leave. Ruth spoke as little as possible during this and avoided eye contact with anyone. A polite "Goodbye Lord Delaney." cost her a good deal. She felt somewhat foolish to have got carried away by daydreams. Now she felt terribly exposed, like her most private emotions were written plain for all to see in her every expression and movement.

There was an uncomfortable pause after Delaney left. Ruth could feel everyone's eyes on her. They wanted to know what had gone wrong, but no-one spoke.

Fortunately Buckstead, who was oblivious to anything beyond some ill-defined tension in the air, broke the silence. He continued where he had left off, with the story of his brother's death. He gave a brief account of the duel and the scandal that led to it, concluding: "Now both justice and what's more important, family honour demand that I must track down the villain."

"This is a gripping tale," said the Countess, "but why have you called here? We have no connection with either his family or yours."

"I understand your confusion, your Excellency. I hope you will forgive this intrusion. The villain fled London. I thought at first he had gone to Saxony or the low countries - but that was a false trail that he laid to thwart me. There was no sign of him at the cinq ports."

"Instead, I believe he came North across the Scottish border. I found traces of his passage up the Great North Road. I suspect he is in Edinburgh. That is why I am here. If he came here, he will be known." Lord Buckstead paused, then asked "Have you met any newcomers in the last fortnight?"

"Yes of course, but I did not think to note down their names." replied the Countess.

"I doubt he is using his real name." Lord Buckstead was oblivious to sarcasm. "But if you look here, I have procured a sketch of the rogue. He is said to be a handsome fellow though for myself I do not see it."

He brought out a folded square of paper and unfolded it to reveal a sketch in semi-profile. A handsome if somewhat rakish man looked out of the page. Even from a sketch one could see the devil-may-care glint in the man's eyes, complimented by an insouciant curl of the lips.

The picture caused a sharp intake of breath from Elizabeth. Lord Buckstead leaned forward eagerly. "Do you know him? Have you seen him?" he asked.

"No." said Elizabeth with a shake of her pretty head. "I was merely alarmed by the thought of having such a rogue amongst us. And seeing a picture of him, well it makes it more real."

It was a convincing performance, but Ruth did not quite believe her. She had not known her cousin long, but she suspected that Elizabeth was not the type to be shocked by a picture.

Everyone agreed that they had not seen the fugitive. Lord Buckstead would have taken his leave then, but the Countess politely pressed him to stay awhile. He was still there when dinner was called.

Lord Buckstead proved to be a poor dinner guest. Ruth felt he was quite the most boring man she had ever met, though she allowed that her experience was slight. Moreover whilst he was perfectly polite, there was something unpleasant in his manner. Beneath the veneer of gentlemanly conduct swirled darker undercurrents of pride and malice.

He monopolised the conversation in a determined manner. His approach to conversation owed much to the doctrine of war through attrition. He was, it turned out, a Major in the 29th Cavalry, or had been before his brother's death left him in charge of the family estates. Unfortunately this topic turned out to be less interesting than one might suppose.

Had he seen battle? He had, but declined to talk about it as that was not a fit subject for ladies. Instead he talked on the order of marching, in great detail. He had been abroad, but he did not care for it much, and he treated them to a lecture on the way to deal with foreigners. He told tedious stories about the

petty squabbles of army life, in which he was always both put-upon and (eventually) triumphant. He had an eye for the little detail which was of no interest to anyone.

To make things worse, he focused his attentions quite markedly on Ruth. She felt most uncomfortable. She was still reeling from her encounter with Alistair. She desperately wanted to get to her room where she could curl up alone. Lord Buckstead seemed not to notice. She smiled wanly when he looked at her and said little.

Finally dinner wound to a close. Ruth had tried to look on the evening as a lesson in Christian patience. She had to admit, though, to feeling a palpable sense of relief as dessert was cleared away. The Countess expressed their gratitude that Lord Buckstead had enlivened their meal. She seemed to have borne up better than the girls. Lord Buckstead left promising to return soon. Ruth and Elizabeth both smiled wanly and said little.

The next day the Countess declared they would all take a walk. It was a nice day, and it seemed that half of Edinburgh was out in Prince's Street Gardens. It was therefore a most leisurely stroll. Every few paces someone new would approach to engage the Countess in conversation or simply to compliment the ladies on their attire. Elizabeth, who took compliments well, found it most enjoyable. Ruth was on tenterhooks though lest they encounter either Lord Delaney or Lord Buckstead. She had not been long in the city and already there were two men she dare not meet.

Her fears were not unfounded. They spotted Lord Buckstead half-way along the main walk. He was out interrogating passers-by with his sketch of the Duke of Wessex.

“Oh do let’s turn around.” said Elizabeth, and Ruth had to restrain herself from crying out her agreement.

“Nonsense.” said the Countess.

A moment later he saw them and came over.

“Ladies, this is indeed a pleasure. Your excellency looks excellent.” he declared bowing to the Countess. “And the young ladies look very presentable.” he added leering slightly at Ruth. “I was saying to my man this morning that it would be a good day. And so it is, for I find myself in the company of two such attractive and eligible girls.”

Ruth did not know what to say so she practised her wan smile. Elizabeth pulled a face like she’d swallowed a frog. The Countess alone kept her composure. She and Lord Buckstead exchanged pleasantries and banalities for a few minutes which felt longer. Finally even the Countess flagged. Bidding Lord Buckstead a good day she moved along. Ruth and Elizabeth followed her with a most dutiful haste.

Ruth breathed a sigh of relief. She looked up and found it was a lovely day. The Princes Street gardens were quite exquisite. Daffodils dominated the wide flowerbeds, interspersed with lilac bushes and copper beech trees. Here and there, delicate crocuses poked out from the fresh spring soil. All around were people attired in fine clothes. It was a pleasing scene, sophisticated yet peaceful. Then she spotted Lord Delaney and almost fell over.

Fortunately he had not seen them. He was strolling alone on a different path. Soon he would be lost among the crowd. Ruth controlled her stumble and hid the faint blush that she felt upon her cheeks behind her hand.

“Delaney!” cried the Countess, then when he did not notice them she called again in a louder voice. She apparently did not notice how Ruth flinched.

Lord Delaney looked round and came over. He smiled with genuine warmth but more than a little awkwardness. The Countess was of course unperturbed. She reproached him for his speedy departure the other night. Would he walk with them? She left him little choice; this was common with the Countess's questions.

Ruth felt her heart racing. She noticed that Lord Delaney kept looking at her. He was on the other side of the Countess but was also a good foot taller than her. They both smiled, but Ruth looked away. She did not want her eyes to betray her feelings.

These tender cruelties did not go unnoticed. Apropos of nothing, the Countess said "Lord Buckstead is extremely interested in my granddaughter, Miss Carlyle"

"Really?" said Lord Delaney.

"Yes, I expect him to make a proposal soon."

"Oh." said Lord Delaney. He was silent for a while. "If that is what Miss Carlyle wants then I am very happy for her." he said. Then with a quick bow to the party, he took his leave.

Ruth was aghast. "Why did you say that Grandmother!" she exclaimed, "Lord Buckstead has not said anything about marriage and I would not wish to hear it if he did."

"Believe me, Lord Buckstead will say something. What do you think he meant earlier? I expect he will make a proposal any day."

"But-" words failed Ruth.

"But what?" said the Countess, "Lord Buckstead is a respectable man with a valuable estate. You are most fortunate to have met him at this time. Soon every eligible girl will be setting her cap at him. I shall write to your parents advising that it is an excellent match."

Back in the rooms he had taken at the Sheep's Heid Inn, Lord William Buckstead leaned back in his chair and permitted himself to smile.

"You have made progress?" a voice drawled. The speaker was a thin man with a mean look. This was Lieutenant Morcroft, Lord Buckstead's adjutant from the army and in many ways his right hand. He had an angular face. His dark brown eyes were overhung by thick eyebrows. They had a predatory glint, like the eyes of a snake in waiting.

"Perhaps," replied Buckstead, "I have some suspicions regarding Miss Montgomery."

His mind moved on and dwelt with satisfaction on her cousin. A slow smile spread across his face.

"But I am more interested in her cousin Miss Carlyle." He licked his lips. "She is a comely wench. Well bred and well connected. A meek girl who'd know her place."

"A meek girl Sir?" said Morcroft with a sneer.

"Meek and becoming. I must think about the family estate."

"She is in the family state already? My sir! Congratulations." Morcroft drawled sarcastically.

"Do not mock me Lieutenant!" Buckstead replied. "Now that I am the head of the family, I should have a wife. Ruth Carlyle would make a fine bride."

Morcroft gave a dry laugh. Then he sat up with a businesslike air. "Whilst you were a-courting, I have been at work" he said.

"And?" asked Buckstead, "What news?"

"Some leads." said Morcroft "It is a man's desires that give him away. I checked the main bars and brothels."

"I'm sure you did" said Buckstead.

Morcroft grinned. "A man should take pleasure in his work." he said, "Besides, its only when you get a whore alone and give her a few lashes of the belt that you can expect to get any truth from her."

"What did you find?" asked Buckstead.

"Little. An English gentleman in Edinburgh is hardly unusual. Nevertheless, some leads. a few of the innkeepers remember his face. A couple of them might even be reliable." Morcroft leaned back in his chair. "I shall go a-stalking later tonight. Keep your gun and sword ready Sir."

Chapter 6

In which the Duke of Wessex is uncharacteristically open.

Sunday found ‘Mr Williams’ calling on his friend Lord McTavish at his club. The Arbroath House Gentleman’s Club had prestigious premises on Princes Street which included a dining room, reading room, well-appointed lodgings for out of town members, as well as less luxurious quarters for their servants. They made Mr Williams wait in the lobby whilst his card was sent up to Lord McTavish. If Ranolph felt the insult he did not show it. A couple of elderly lawyers entered, talking of legal minutiae. Finally Hamish appeared.

“What time of the afternoon do you call this?” he protested whilst wrapping Ranolph in a big bear hug. “Don’t you realise that some of us have hangovers to sleep through?” At Hamish’s request they went to the dining room. The room was largely empty and they took a table by the window. Hamish ordered a late breakfast of kippers, sausages, hash-browns and fried tomatoes with a flagon of ale plus a cup of tea “because I do feel a little delicate first thing in the day.” Ranolph asked for a glass of good claret.

“They kept *you* waiting in the lobby? Wonderful!” cried Hamish with a laugh once the waiter had left, “But what are you doing here? I’d have thought you’d be laying low.”

“I try to avoid my enemies, but I will not hide in fear.” replied Ranolph.

They sat and talked whilst Hamish breakfasted. Hamish felt again what he had felt at the ball. His friend had changed. He had become more sombre. Hamish made a comment to this

effect, and Ranolph gave a wan smile. He had learnt something from recent events, he said. That all of life was paper thin. and how quickly it could be swept away. That was what the late Lord Buckstead had taught him.

“Until this tragedy I did not know that I had a conscience.” he said, “Now - too late - it speaks to me. I have killed a man, and I suffer for it”

Hamish digested this. He did not know what to say.

Outside the window the great and good of Edinburgh society passed by. Ranolph watched without fear of being recognised. It was a sunny day and he knew that the window would act as a mirror to the people outside. He and Hamish were practically invisible. Suddenly he stiffened.

A party of women had swung into view. The party was led by a stout older woman dressed according to the latest fashions in a disturbingly low cut neckline, flamboyant ostrich feathers in her bonnet.

“What is it?” asked Hamish as Ranolph sat transfixed. Hamish followed his gaze. “Ah,” he said, “The divine Miss Elizabeth Montgomery of Glamis. Or is it the Countess of Glamis’ ample figure which has bewitched your eye?”

“Divine, yes she is.” said Ranolph, his eyes still on Miss Montgomery.

“You left the ball rather abruptly. What happened?”

“I left the ball in a thundercloud, my thoughts in turmoil. We were dancing. But someone interrupted us - I think he was a friend of yours.”

“Ah that would be Alistair - Lord Delaney - He’s a grand man, but, aye, I can see how he’d step in to protect a girl...”

“From the likes of me?” Ranolph finished the sentence for him. “Oh don’t look so embarrassed. I am drenched in scandal and I know it. But Hamish who was there to protect me from her?”

Outside, the Glamis party walked by oblivious to the gentlemen's attentions. A man in a military suit joined them and the group drifted out of view.

"I have seen her since." Ranolph confessed.

"What?!" Hamish was taken aback. Indeed for the next quarter of an hour he quite forgot his breakfast.

"That dance kindled something in me." Ranolph said with a shake of his head, "I delivered a flower to her door."

"Oh I know full well that I cannot go a courting." he added with bitterness, "It was a goodbye. The card said goodbye. But I could not quite leave."

Ranolph had stood outside Abercrombie House for some time. His head felt troubled with conflicting thoughts and strange emotions. He resolved to leave, but then found himself climbing over the wall.

He dropped over into the gardens behind the cover of a screen of trees. He advanced carefully to the edge of the trees. Lush green gardens spread out before him. A party of three people were walking along one of the paths. They were too far away to identify, but were headed in his direction and must soon pass close by his hiding place.

The party divided at a turning. One of the girls split off down a side path. The man and the other girl continued towards the wooded dell where Ranolph crouched. He froze. They passed within a few yards of Ranolph, but did not spot him. He recognised the man who had interrupted him at the ball. The girl was not Elizabeth, though she bore a strong resemblance to her. He surmised that she must be a sister or a cousin.

The man cleared his throat. "Miss Carlyle, I hope you will not think me too forward." he began.

Ranolph did not think this was meant for him. He slipped away quietly in the direction that the other girl had taken. His feet were silent on the dew drenched grass.

He spied her resting on a bench. A row of shrubs shielded him and allowed him to approach closer. The girl was young and pretty. She had long hair of rich dark brown tied up in a silk bonnet. Ranolph took in the beautiful features of her profile and the exquisite curve of her neck. His breath caught short. It was Elizabeth Montgomery.

He realised he had no idea what he was doing, skulking around her garden like this. He considered stepping out and speaking to Elizabeth. She would be startled naturally, but he would explain. He played and replayed the scene in his mind but he did not move. Elizabeth sat only a yard or two away. She was contemplating a letter and was quite oblivious to his presence.

Finally he wrenched himself away. He slipped away without a sound like dew melting in the sun. He scaled the wall and was gone.

“This is not like you” said Hamish after Ranolph had finished relating his tale.

“No I feel...” words failed the Duke, but there was a fervent look in his eyes that spoke loudly of longing and regret.

Hamish sighed understandingly and patted Ranolph on the shoulder. The two friends lapsed into a companionable silence. Society passed by outside the window without disturbing them again. Somewhere in the room one of more elderly club members had fallen asleep, and his thin snores drifted through the room. A waiter came to clear away Hamish’s breakfast and refresh their cups. Finally Ranolph spoke.

“There is one thing more. I’ve decided to leave.” he said, “Leave Britain that is. I have booked passage on a ship. She sails tomorrow night from Glasgow, bound for the Americas.”

* * *

Lieutenant Morcroft pulled his coat close. The light was beginning to drain from the day and the city grew cold. His investigations had produced a half dozen possible addresses. Questioning the neighbours had eliminated several of these. In one case he had resorted to breaking in. Forcing the lock with an experienced touch, he had found himself in an apartment messy with clothes and dirty plates. A large ornate water pipe sat by the bedside and the sickly sweet smell of laudanum lingered in the air. A letter identified the resident as a Mr Thorndike.

Only one lead remained, but it was the most promising. A set of rooms in Blackfriar’s Close, a cramped square in the old town, next to the cattle market in the Cowgate street. It was not a fashionable area. A complex bouquet of dung, manure and rotten cabbage hung in the air. A barkeep in the Cowgate staging post had directed Morcroft here.

A neighbour reported that the rooms had been let to an English gentleman and his page a week ago. The timing and description fitted the missing Duke. Lamp light shone through the window; someone was in. Morcroft knocked loudly, one hand on his sword hilt.

There were footsteps, then the door opened a crack. A young man gave Morcroft a guarded look. He was dressed in a servant’s livery. Evidently this was the page. Morcroft tried to question him, but his queries were met with terse rebuttals. The gentleman was not in and did not care to give out his

details to strangers. Morcroft did not want to arouse suspicion so he apologised and left. Outside again, he surveyed the building and its environs. A stone archway separated the close from the main road. There was an alcove just on the inside where a man might wait and watch. He considered the options, then quietly took up a post. Dusk was approaching, and in the darkness he would be well nigh invisible.

Chapter 7

In which Lord Delaney finds that past heartbreak is no defence against further heartbreak, while Miss Montgomery risks her reputation.

Lady Agnes Delaney was worried about her son. He had not been himself since the dance. At the dance itself he had been most happy, a boyish grin on his usually reserved features. Indeed she had not seen him so happy in years. Unfortunately it had not lasted. The next morning he was taciturn, especially when she raised the subject of Miss Ruth Carlyle. They had got on so well at the dance. Clearly something had gone amiss. Alistair was quite uncomfortable about it. He avoided the topic for a while then declared solemnly that he would go call on the Glamis family. After that visit - of which he had not spoken a word - his mood had darkened still further.

Today she had persuaded him to take a walk. She thought some fresh air might do him good. She did not know what had happened, but it had not helped. He had returned even more withdrawn and was even now brooding in the library. She tried to engage him in conversation and find out what was wrong. He insisted nothing was wrong. With great delicacy, she felt, she broached the subject of Miss Carlyle. Alistair glowered.

"There is nothing between me and Miss Carlyle!" he snapped. She had not dared say any more. It was all terribly vexing.

Alistair paced back and forth across the library. His head boiled with thoughts and feelings. They churned round and round and would not give him any rest. It was like a form of

fever. He felt a twinge of guilt at having sent his mother away. He knew she only wanted to help, but there are times when a mother's sympathy is just salt in the wound.

The lodestone of his troubled thoughts was Miss Ruth Carlyle. It was remarkable that someone he had known so briefly could disturb him so. He was sure he had done the right thing in renouncing any interest. Yet he could find no peace. He should just forget about her.

He could not believe that she was to marry Lord Buckstead. Miss Carlyle was such a warm and generous spirit whilst Lord Buckstead has seemed a cold and dislikeable man. He was quite handsome, Alistair conceded, but he felt sure Miss Carlyle would see beyond such superficial things. Besides, Alistair was not so bad looking himself. Yet she was planning to marry Lord Buckstead! The Countess had said so, and Miss Carlyle had not contradicted her.

Perhaps she had never been interested in him at all. In which case he must have seemed a strange conceited prig to tell her he was unavailable. Had he made a fool of himself? Was he now tormenting himself over a delusion, something which had never been there? He should just forget about her.

He replayed his meetings with Ruth, questioning every comment and nuance. He tortured himself first one way then the other.

He looked back on his time with Catherine. Looked back through the shroud of sadness that enveloped her memory to the memory of her itself. She had also been a warm true-hearted girl. He had been different then too. Much more light-hearted and ready to enjoy what life had to offer. He feared that the years since Catherine's death had turned him into something of a recluse. Dancing with Ruth he had felt properly alive again. There had been a connection there, he was sure of it. He felt it in his heart.

Alistair sighed and looked out of the window. A yellow fog was curled about the house rubbing its muzzle on the window-panes. A soft rain of soot fell, the scattered tears of countless chimneys. I have been an idiot, he thought, a complete idiot. He had driven Ruth away. Life had given him a second chance - and he had blown it. His reasons had seemed solid at the time, but now he saw that they were a jumble of principles, pride and fear, and not worth a damn.

He had loved Catherine, loved her deeply. Clinging to her memory was not love. His actions these days were not done out of love but habit and the security there is in rejecting life. He had thought he was being noble, but it was really cowardice in disguise. Cowardice dressed in noble clothes. He clenched his fists in frustration, wise too late.

* * *

Night time on the Cowgate. Light and noise spilled out from the White Hart public house. The noise was largely due to an impromptu dance. At its whirling rambunctious centre was the honourable Lord McTavish. He twirled one of the barmaids who laughed gaily, whilst belting out a lusty tune. "We two have run about the braes, and pulled the gowans fine! But we've wandered many a weary foot, since auld lang syne!"

The dance had begun when Hamish - cheerfully inebriated by this point - had chanced upon an old friend who played the fiddle. They immediately determined to find an instrument and recreate past times. Fortune had smiled upon their quest. Several fellow patrons agreed that what the evening lacked was some good music, and the landlord owned to having such an instrument on the premises for just such

occasions. Another man produced a bodhrán drum and volunteered to provide the rhythm. With a joyous shout the band launched into a lively jig.

The landlord pulled a face. He was not sure whether the singing or the fiddle were worse. Neither was in time with the drumming.

Ranolph watched from a reclined position. Levering himself up, he reached for his drink. This was an arduous task and not without its risks. First he attempted to focus on the table. It kept shifting and shimmering as if it were not made of solid British oak but was instead a fey faerie artefact. Then having got a fix on the table, he must pin down his similarly charmed cup. The operation then entered the dangerous phase, as he reached out to clasp the cup. His hand lurched left and right like a skittish horse. He had to steer it carefully or he would knock over the cup. A bead of perspiration stood out on his noble brow. He called upon a core of discipline that lay beneath his debonair exterior and summoned up his swordsman's sense of focus. The noise and clamour of the pub dropped away. There was only the cup - so precarious - and his hand. With great concentration his hand reached its goal. His labours successful, he raised the cup in triumph, poured the ale down his shirt, and collapsed back into his seat.

The White Hart was the last in a chain of pubs and inns that Hamish had taken him to. Hamish had agreed that Ranolph's decision to leave Britain was wise. He had insisted that Ranolph have a proper send off though. Since the boat did not leave until the following night, Ranolph agreed. He was initially reserved and melancholy, but Hamish's boisterous good spirits did much to lift his mood. They had embarked on a tour of the local pubs, gradually winding and wending their way towards Ranolph's lodgings. Ranolph looked over towards the close where his rooms waited, cold and lonely.

A shadow shifted in the darkness and drew his eye. He thought he saw a shape in the archway. If you squinted, it looked like there was a man there. He shook his head to dismiss the fancy.

The pub song reached its climax. The drummer banged away with redoubled vigour. The fiddle player leapt in the air as his bow screeched out the final chorus. A ragged chorus of happy drinkers belted out the words. Hamish attempted a pirouette. His footing slipped. A comical look of confusion crossed his face and he crashed backwards, unleashing a tablequake of flying beer tankards.

There was a moment of pure pandemonium, a chaos of people shouting and arguing whilst others kept on dancing and singing. The landlord banged the bar for order. Ranolph stepped in to help Hamish up. Hamish wiped a mess of spilt ale and floor-dirt from his brow. He was woozy and leant on Ranolph for support. He waved his arms for calm and smiled at everyone. His imposing physical bulk combined with the offer of a fresh round of drinks helped restore order.

The argument settled, the two friends stepped outside for some air. The cold night air sloshed over them, cutting through the haze of alcohol. Ranolph took deep drafts of it, feeling his lungs burn with the cold. He looked over to the archway that led to his lodgings. There *was* a man there. He stood in the shadows and was hard to spot. He must have been lurking there for some time, an hour at least. No doubt he was on some dark business. A suspicion surfaced in Ranolph's mind.

"I think we may have a problem." he said softly, "Do you see that man?"

"Where?"

"Over there by the archway - no don't point. He hasn't moved this past hour. I think he is watching my house."

At Abercrombie house, dinner that night was a frosty affair. Talk was sparse. It was even worse than the previous night's where Lord Buckstead's presence has made it a dull ordeal. Up till now the Glamis family had been getting on very well, and the combination of the Countess and Elizabeth ensured that the conversation was lively. However that night, Abercrombie was a house divided.

The Countess was adamant that should Lord Buckstead propose - and she suspected he would - then it would make an excellent match. She would not let Ruth refuse him. She promised that Ruth's parents would agree.

Ruth was furious with the Countess. She could not marry a man she did not like, let alone love. Also - though she would not admit this - she was angry that the Countess's comments regarding Lord Buckstead had driven away Lord Delaney. It was not in her nature to argue, but she could not contain her anger.

There were a couple of heated exchanges. Elizabeth took Ruth's side of course. Ruth then refused to speak except in the politest and driest of terms. The Countess was unapologetic. Dinner was conducted under a charged silence in which each clink of the cutlery rang out loudly. It was not a peace; merely a ceasefire. After dinner, the girls pointedly went to one of the smaller less comfortable rooms. The Countess affected not to care.

Elizabeth consoled Ruth. She could not stand Lord Buckstead either. The idea that Ruth might be forced to accept him as a husband was monstrous. Elizabeth then talked about

the handsome stranger she'd met at the ball. A man who was as difficult as he was charming, who danced divinely, and who it now seemed was wanted for murder.

"The Duke of Wessex...!" Ruth was aghast, though she had suspected something.

Elizabeth was torn. The Duke of Wessex was a notorious rake. It was said that he had cruelly seduced Lady Buckstead, defiled her honour and then killed her husband. Yet she could not reconcile the reports of his wickedness with the man she had met. She had detected no malice in him. She felt that the rakish pose was just that, and underneath he was a sincere man.

More to the point, she was not sure that it mattered whether he was good or bad. She was drawn to him regardless. The way he moved, the way he danced, his smile - these memories tormented her. If he were the worst scoundrel in the kingdom, she would still follow him.

Ruth understood her feelings. A part of her wanted to tell Elizabeth that her heart was breaking too, but she kept her silence. Her feelings towards Lord Delaney were a private pain. She sensed that speaking about it would only make things worse. She might not be as daring as her cousin, but in a quieter way, Ruth was every bit as passionate. She refused to give in to the turmoil raging inside her heart though. She would stopper up her feelings. Talking would only pull out the plug and she did not know that she could bear it. The world would believe that she had never cared for Lord Delaney.

Elizabeth had a restless night. She rose early with the dawn. She read letter for the hundredth time. Then screwing up the paper in frustration, she hurled it into a corner. "It's intolerable!" she exclaimed, pacing the room. She decided to go for a walk. It was not much of a distraction, but it was too

early to disturb Ruth and her mind was too troubled to focus on a book. "I shall scowl at the owls." she thought donning a light coat "Or perhaps I shall drown myself in the ornamental fish pond."

It was still early. The sun was just coming up. The air had a crisp edge and the ground underfoot was wet with dew. She drifted silently along the paths like a lonesome ghost. Nothing else moved in the gardens. It felt very still and private.

She thought about the Duke of Wessex, and of Lord Buckstead intent on hunting him down. It was quite horrible. It was a horrible thing that a young man should be killed in the full of his life, and that another man might calmly set about planning and executing such a crime. No-one even spoke against it! Her grandmother was even considering inviting the would-be assassin into the family.

She knew she would never see the handsome Duke of Wessex again. He had not said where he was staying, and he was unlikely to attend any more balls, not now that Lord Buckstead was in town. The only thing she knew about him was that he was a friend of Lord McTavish's.

She thought about visiting Lord McTavish and questioning him. It was a foolish thought. A young lady could not call upon a gentleman without a chaperone. It was the kind of indiscretion that could ruin a girl's reputation. A young lady should not fall for a wanted fugitive, and certainly could not run off across the city trying to track one down. That was beyond indiscretion. Besides, there was no saying that Lord McTavish knew where the Duke was, or would tell her if he did. It was a daydream.

She slipped quietly back into the house. The main hallway was empty. This would not last. The clock showed 8 o'clock and breakfast would soon be called. She paused for a moment and listened intently. All clear. The front door was

heavy and did not move easily. She was afraid it would squeak and indeed it did. For a moment she froze. Then, moving quickly, she slipped out. She pulled the door closed with another squeak which tested her nerves. Then she was gone, running down the path towards the house's gate.

Ruth was busy writing an earnest letter home when a noise disturbed her. It sounded like the front door, though she couldn't be sure. She checked the door. It was shut and the main hall was empty. Stephenson the butler entered and stood to attention. "Did you just come in Miss?" he asked.

"No"

"Sorry Miss, I thought I heard something." he said, shaking his head in a slightly puzzled fashion.

Elizabeth! thought Ruth.

Elizabeth was not in her room. Ruth searched the house. Elizabeth was not in. She searched the garden, and then both again. She moved quietly and calmly for she did not want to alarm the servants in case they alerted the Countess. Inside she was terribly worried, almost panicking. There was no sign of her cousin. She did not know what to do. Should she summon the Countess? The Countess would be furious and Elizabeth would feel betrayed. She needed help though. She did not know Edinburgh well and could hardly search the city for Elizabeth herself.

She went to the main hall and rang the bell, not loudly but firmly. Stephenson the butler and one of the maids came running.

"Ready a horse and get a boy who can ride." she said, "I have an urgent message that must be delivered across town."

Stephenson looked doubtful. She thought he might send for the Countess. She looked him squarely in the eye until he nodded.

“Tell young Sam to saddle up a horse.” he told the maid.
“Where is the message to be sent Miss?”
“To Lord Delaney.” Ruth replied.

Elizabeth made it to Lord McTavish’s town rooms without incident. She paused outside the door. She breathed deeply and took a moment to appreciate the madness of her mission. Then she knocked. Lord McTavish’s manservant let her in and showed her to the sitting room.

“I want to know about your mysterious friend from the other night” she said as soon as Lord McTavish appeared. He rubbed his eyes - which were bloodshot - and looked at her for a moment, obviously considering his reply. “I haven’t seen him.” he said.

There were footsteps in the corridor. A voice called out “Thank you so much for the loan. You are a fine friend. If I can ask one more favour of you, Go to my lodgings tomorrow and deliver this letter to my man. It explains what happened and gives him instructions on how to find me again...” The voice trailed off. Ranolph FitzWilliam, Duke of Wessex, stood frozen in the doorway. He was dressed for outdoors and in one hand he held a leather travelling case. He looked at Elizabeth in bewilderment. The bag slipped from his hand. Then he was striding across the room and Elizabeth was swept up in his arms and he kissed her with such passion and tenderness she thought she would faint for the wonder of it.

He released her quickly and stepped back. “I’m so sorry.” he said. He looked away. “There is something I must tell you.” “You are not really called Mr Williams.” Elizabeth said, “I know. I saw your picture. Lord Buckstead is in Edinburgh looking for you. Oh he is a dreadful man! He means to kill you.”

Ranolph nodded. His head sank as if under a great weight. "I killed his brother. I did not mean to, but nevertheless he is dead." He shook his head miserably. "I am a pariah Elizabeth. I cannot stay here." he said.

He looked her in the eye. His face was exquisite, his blue eyes radiant like ocean depths. The former devil-may-care insouciance was gone. In its place shone compassion and love. She wanted to take his face in her hands, to kiss him passionately, to stay with him for evermore.

He clasped her hands. "Sweet Elizabeth, I would not drag you into this mess for the world." Sadly, tenderly, he kissed her hand.

"I must say goodbye. My carriage is ready. I leave now."

Part Three

Chapter 8

In which Miss Montgomery goes missing and two searches ensue.

Chapter 9

In which Lord Buckstead proves that he is not to be trifled with.

Chapter 10

In which a violent meeting brings matters to a conclusion.

Epilogue

Being an account of a society marriage and the events leading up to it.

Chapter 8

In which Miss Montgomery goes missing and two searches ensue.

The horse and rider clattered up the street and pulled to a halt outside the Delaney residence. The rider dropped down and holding the reins in one hand, pounded on the door. A maid answered the knocking and the rider doffed his cap to her. He was out of breath from riding and it was a moment before he could speak. "Urgent note for Lord Delaney Miss" he said, handing over a letter. The maid gestured for him to wait inside for the reply, then vanished to deliver the letter.

Barely a minute later, Alistair Delaney came charging down the stairs. "No need to take a reply." he said to the rider. Alistair fretted outside while his horse was saddled and brought round. As soon as it was ready, he leapt up into the saddle. He kicked his heels in twice and shot away.

He raced through Edinburgh the wind cold in his face. First the narrow winding alleys of the old town, then over the new bridge into the wide avenues of the New Town. The gates of Abercrombie House loomed ahead and he cantered through.

A figure stood waiting outside the door. A girl with long brown hair. Miss Carlyle. She looked as sweet as ever. He pulled to a stop and dropped down from his horse. Whilst he had been riding, he had been able to lose himself in the movement and focus of the act. Now the thoughts he had held at bay - a confused mix of hopes and fears - they came flooding back. Why had she sent for him? She had said it was urgent.

“Lord Delaney.” she said. She spoke seriously. “Thank you for coming. I hate to trouble you - it is most presumptuous of me I know - but I did not know who else to call.”

Lord Delaney waved away her apology. He noticed there was an edge of panic in her voice. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s my cousin Elizabeth Montgomery. She’s gone missing.”

“What happened?” Alistair asked.

“I don’t know - but she’s not in the house.” Miss Carlyle said.

Alistair nodded, although he didn’t see where he fitted in to this. “Do you know where she’s gone?”

“Well, We were talking about -” Miss Carlyle looked embarrassed. “We were talking about men.” she said, colouring prettily. “There was a man she met at the dance.”

“The Duke of Wessex!” Alistair was ahead of her. Miss Carlyle nodded. “Where is he?” asked Alistair.

“I don’t know. I don’t think she knows.”

“So how can we find her?” Saying ‘we’, he felt a slight thrill.

“I don’t know.” Miss Carlyle bit her lip. “All I know is that the Duke of Wessex is a friend of Lord McTavish’s.”

“Lord McTavish is a friend of mine.” Alistair said.

It was soon agreed that Lord Delaney would find Lord McTavish and question him. He would set out immediately, as time was of the essence. He was about to climb back on his horse when he paused.

“Miss Carlyle” he said.

She looked at him. He ventured out into the void.

“You recall our earlier conversation where I spoke of how I could not love again.”

She nodded. Alistair felt the empty space beneath him that his words had created, and willed himself to keep going.

“Miss Carlyle, I was being a fool. Worse – a coward. I was afraid of loving again. I was wrong. I tried to shut myself off from the world, but I failed. The world found me regardless.

You found me - and now I'm more afraid of losing you, and never feeling this way again."

He did not dare look at her yet. "No doubt I am making a terrible fool of myself now. But I wonder... if you might give me another chance... then..." He trailed off and stared at his shoes abjectly. She had not said anything, no doubt embarrassed at such an outburst. Finally he looked up. She was smiling.

"Lord Delaney," she said, looking him square in the face, "I must consider this matter carefully." She spoke soberly, but her smile was as wide as a rainbow. "You made me quite wretched, you know."

"You said before that you were broken, and now you insist that you are a coward. But I do not think I have ever met a finer man. Gladly would I give you a second chance, and a third if need be. For I fear I love you."

Alistair could have cried with happiness at that moment. She offered him her hand, and he kissed it tenderly.

"Now go find my cousin." she said.

* * *

Ranolph did not fully understand how he came to be kissing Miss Montgomery. The kiss came from the purest and deepest wellsprings of his soul. He had acted without thought, his normal control lost in the passion of the moment. He understood only that it had happened. Recovering his senses, he released Miss Montgomery in some confusion. It was not his first kiss but nevertheless his world reeled. He looked at the girl and drank her in. A maidenly blush coloured her cheeks. Though she looked away demurely, her eyes sparkled

with passion. She was life itself. He longed to stay with her, but he knew he must go.

He took a deep breath to steady himself, then clasped her hands.

“Sweet Elizabeth” he said, “I would not drag you into this mess for the world.” Sadly, tenderly, he kissed her hand.

“I must say goodbye. My carriage is ready. I leave now.” he said.

It hurt to leave, and he sensed the wound ran deep. Yet he took some pride in doing the right thing.

“You're leaving?” said Miss Montgomery, the colour draining from her face. She held her head in her hand and took a few weak steps back. Then she seemed to recover her strength.

“Do I not get a say in this?” she said with feeling, “You cannot change my life like this and just walk away.”

Ranolph was caught off guard by her protest. “If I stay, it will end in bloodshed.” he said.

“I would love to ask for your hand, but it is not possible. I am outlawed from England and in disgrace. Your family would never allow it.”

She seemed to accept this fact. There was a moment of silence, as when fate hangs in the balance.

“Then,” she said looking him in the eye, “I shall go with you.”

Ranolph blinked. From the sidelines, Hamish spluttered in surprise. They were completely taken aback.

“You jest!” said Ranolph, but he knew she was serious.

Elopement. His heart leapt at the idea. Yet the voice of his conscience cut in. He must not think of his own happiness, but of what was right for Miss Montgomery. He tried to persuade her of the folly of joining him. She was adamant. He was more lost than ever. He wondered if in her place, would he have her boldness and courage? Yes - he knew he would. If

the situation were reversed, he would follow her to the ends of the Earth. He gave up arguing with her.

"You know there's no going back?" he said.

"I know." said Miss Montgomery.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes," she said, "I've never been more sure of anything."

Ranolph laughed. Never had a man been so happy to lose an argument. "I was trying to do the right thing for once." he said. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her forehead gently.

"This is beyond me. All I know is that I love you" he said.

* * *

Heading up Prince's Street on horseback and in dress uniform, Lord Buckstead knew he cut a fine figure. He noticed but did not acknowledge a number of admiring looks cast his way. He felt a smug sense of superiority towards these unknown women. He was not for them. He had decided that Miss Carlyle would indeed make a fine bride. She would make a most presentable wife. She had little money herself, but her family's connections were excellent. Her lack of money could even be considered fortunate. Her family would surely see the desirability of the match. It should not be a difficult matter to arrange. Being a man of action, he had resolved to clinch the deal there and then.

Approaching Abercrombie House, he was surprised to see a man on horseback tear past at full gallop. Acting on a hunch, he tethered his horse and continued on foot. Slipping up the drive, he spied two people ahead. One held a horse by its lead and must be the rider who had just passed. This man stood facing the house with his back to Lord Buckstead. The

other was Miss Carlyle. Curiosity took hold of Lord Buckstead - curiosity tinged with jealousy and anger.

Forgetting the rules of proper behaviour, he dropped into a crouch and approached closer. Using a large bush to cloak himself, he was able to get quite close. He could make out most of what was said. Miss Montgomery had gone missing, and Miss Carlyle was alarmed. "There was a man she met at the dance." said Miss Carlyle.

"The Duke of Wessex!" exclaimed her companion.

Lord Buckstead gave a start at the mention of his enemy. So his suspicions about Miss Montgomery had been right. And the Duke of Wessex had been at the Earl of Moray's ball - right under Buckstead's nose.

"Where is he?" asked Miss Carlyle's companion.

Lord Buckstead rocked forward on his heels, listening intently for the answer.

"I don't know." said Miss Carlyle.

Damn, he thought. Would his enemy slip away again? Then he listened further. The man was Lord Delaney; he knew a friend of the Duke's and would question him. The man turned to leave. Lord Buckstead drew himself deeper into the bush to hide.

There was a pause then Lord Delaney spoke, now in a voice strained with emotion.

"Miss Carlyle" he said, "You recall our earlier conversation where I spoke of how I could not love again."

He went on to declare his love for Miss Carlyle. Lord Buckstead's temper rose. How dare this man interfere in his affairs? The two men waited with baited breath for Miss Carlyle's response.

"Lord Delaney," Lord Buckstead heard her say, "I must consider this matter carefully. You made me quite wretched, you know." The words that followed cut Lord Buckstead to

the quick. It was not his heart which she hurt - for he had never felt any great affection towards the girl. But she had had the gall to upset his plans, and his pride was sorely stung.

So that is how things stand, he thought. My enemies are laid plain to me. But I have been most fortunate today. Miss Carlyle is revealed for the hussy that she is, but she has given me the Duke of Wessex's trail. He might have slipped away, but he will not escape me now. I shall fetch Morcroft, and then we will track this Lord Delaney, and he will lead me to Wessex.

Chapter 9

In which Lord Buckstead proves that he is not to be trifled with.

From Abercrombie House, Alistair rode as fast as he could to Hamish's rooms.

Hamish's longtime manservant Brown let him in.

"Please take a seat Lord Delaney. I shall see whether the master is at home."

He left with a bow. There followed a series oaths, after which Hamish emerged rumpled and bleary eyed.

"Delaney! What are you doing here at this ungodly hour?" he demanded, "I had only just got back to sleep."

Back to sleep from what? thought Alistair. He cut straight to the point. "Have you seen Miss Montgomery?" he asked.

It was instantly apparent from Hamish's reaction that he had seen Miss Montgomery. However he denied it strenuously. Alistair persisted. Hamish was clearly suffering from a bad hangover, but Alistair showed no mercy. Eventually Hamish cracked.

"I haven't seen Miss Montgomery, I haven't seen that damn FitzWilliam and I don't know where they've gone!" he bellowed.

In the background, Brown sighed.

"*They've gone?*" said Alistair slowly.

Hamish groaned.

"Perhaps I might intervene, Sir." said Brown. Hamish waved him on, collapsing into a chair which creaked but held.

"Lord Delaney, I trust your motives in seeking Miss Montgomery are noble?" Brown asked.

Alistair assured him that they were. "I am acting on behalf of her cousin Miss Carlyle, who cares for her deeply. She is very worried by Miss Montgomery's disappearance."

"Most noble of you indeed Sir. And what would you do if you found Miss Montgomery?"

"I don't know." said Alistair, "It would be my duty to return her to the protection of her family."

"Would you use force?" asked Brown.

"Why yes!" declared Alistair "I could not allow any man to stop me when a woman's honour is at stake."

"Sorry Sir, I meant would you use force against Miss Montgomery?"

"Against a lady? Of course not."

"Then my Lord McTavish, I think it would be quite safe to tell him what you know. After all, the lady's family should be assured of her safety and happiness."

Having settled the matter to his satisfaction, Brown bowed to them both and retired deferentially to a position by the wall.

Hamish quickly furnished Alistair with the extraordinary details of Miss Montgomery's departure from the city. He was at pains to convince his listener that the elopement was for the best. Alistair was not persuaded. He resolved to find the errant couple and make his own judgement as to the most fitting course of action. Leaving Hamish to return to his bed, Alistair set out heading west along the Glasgow road. He did not notice the two men who watched his departure from a narrow archway. Nor did he notice when they emerged, now on horseback, and set off after him.

Past the city walls, the houses soon thinned out into countryside. The road was quiet and he passed few travellers. The road wound through brown fields of ploughed earth and green pastures given over to sheep. Alistair paid it little heed, his mind on other matters. An hour out of Edinburgh his horse

began to tire. Alistair realised with a guilty start that the poor beast had worked flat out all morning with little respite. It was clear that the animal could not keep going flat out like this, and he was forced to slacken his pace. Not long after doing so, he heard horses hooves approaching from behind.

Two riders pulled up alongside him, one on either side. They wore army uniforms and were both officers.

“Hello!” called one. He wore a Major’s stripes.

Alistair’s reply was cold. He had no time for chat and could not have any company with him when he caught up with Miss Montgomery and the Duke of Wessex. The Major did not appear to notice his coldness. He continued speaking and there followed some uneasy conversation.

A stray remark by the army man caught Alistair’s attention. The man had said “I suppose this road leads to Glasgow.” It seemed odd that he should be so far from the city without knowing what road he was on. Alistair looked at him more closely. There was something familiar there. Belatedly he recognised that the Major was none other than Lord Buckstead. He gave a start. Something was amiss. This could not be a coincidence. He turned to look at the other rider. He was just in time to see the man raising his sword.

* * *

Whilst his master distracted Lord Delaney, Lieutenant Morcroft sidled his horse closer. He checked that there were no witnesses, then drew his sword. Something must have alerted Lord Delaney, for at the last moment he turned round. It was too late to save himself though. Morcroft swung hard, hitting Delaney with the flat of the blade. Delaney went out like a light, tumbling from his horse. The horse snorted and

pulled to a halt. Lord Delaney's body lay motionless on the road.

Morcroft and Buckstead dismounted. Buckstead inspected the body.

"Good. He's out cold." he said.

They dragged his body to the side of the road. The horse snuffled at his body but there was no response. Lord Buckstead watched for a moment. Then he nodded to Morcroft with satisfaction. They mounted up and set off down the road in pursuit of their main prey.

From long habit Morcroft tracked the time from the sun. Noon came and went without event. Their horses, bred for army life, kept going strong. Lord Buckstead had the better horse and he covered the ground more quickly. Soon he was a few hundred yards ahead. He topped a rise in the road, then reined his horse in. When Morcroft caught up there was a thin-lipped smile on his face.

The view spread out before them had a tranquil and picturesque aspect. Green fields merged into hills brown with heather. Above them, a handful of wispy clouds drifted through the sky and a hawk wheeled in search of prey. To the North the first peaks of the highlands were tipped with snow. Down in the glen, not more than a few miles away, a black shape moved along the road. It was a gentleman's carriage.

Chapter 10

In which a violent meeting brings matters to a conclusion.

In a single moment, everything can change.

It had been an idyllic journey. Ranolph delighted in Miss Elizabeth's company. She was so full of life. The sun seemed to shine just for her. The country rolled past green and full of promise. Spring's touch had painted over the winter hues of brown with green grass and the purple of heather. Ahead of them a river sparkled and skipped down into the glen cutting through the road. A small stone bridge carried the road onward.

Fortune is fleeting. In a single moment everything can change.

From behind there came a clatter of horses' hooves. Two riders raced past the carriage. They pulled to an abrupt halt just in front of the bridge, their horses rearing and whinnying. The carriage horses shied and swerved to avoid a collision. Ranolph started to pull on the brake lever. The riders had turned to face them. They wore army uniforms and carried guns. He would have sped past them but they blocked the road and already the carriage was slowing. There was nowhere to go.

One of the riders trained his gun on Miss Montgomery. The other approached the carriage, his pistol levelled at Ranolph. Miss Montgomery gave a gasp as she saw his face clearly. "Buckstead!" she said in a shocked whisper.

“Yes!” he said “My name is Lord William Buckstead.” His voice was cold and deadly as a glacier. “FitzWilliam you cur, you killed my brother. Now prepare to meet with justice!”

“I am sorry about your brother’s death.” Ranolph said, “You must believe me that I did not mean to kill him.”

Buckstead only smiled cruelly. “Get out of the carriage or my companion will shoot the lady.” he said. The ultimatum was backed up by his accomplice cocking his gun.

“No!” cried Ranolph. Moving slowly he climbed down from the carriage.

Buckstead holstered his gun and dropped down to face him. “Draw your sword.” he commanded.

“I am sorry about your brother.” Ranolph repeated, “I do not wish to fight you.”

“Then I shall run you through as a cur and a coward!”

So saying, Buckstead leapt forward with a deadly lunge.

Ranolph jumped back, parrying with his sword still half in the scabbard. He deflected the attack from his body but it caught his left arm. Blood ran out, a spreading red stain on his sleeve.

* * *

Alistair came to, his head reeling. Something wet and warm slapped across his face. He opened his eyes. The world swam before them. The world was a blur of green and blue. Thunderbolts of pain coursed through his mind. Something pink and wet slapped at his face. He was being licked by his horse. Groggily he sat up. The sun was up, it must be almost midday. He was lying by a roadside. There was a throbbing spot at the side of his head as well as bruises all over his body.

He staggered to his feet and surveyed the countryside. Where was he and how had he got here?

* * *

Lord Buckstead pressed home the attack. His sword stabbed forward again. Ranolph parried but he was driven back against the side of the carriage. Buckstead sensed his advantage. He unleashed a flurry of attacks. Ranolph managed to fend off the first few. Buckstead snarled, eager for the kill. Too eager; Ranolph sensed a space. In one fluid motion he blocked Buckstead's next strike whilst turning and slipping past him. Perhaps he could have finished the fight then, but this was a fight he could not win. If he disabled Buckstead, the man's accomplice would no doubt shoot him. He had looked far too comfortable pointing the gun at Elizabeth to be a man of honour. Ranolph backed away a pace, and the moment, if there had been one, was gone.

Now that both fighters were in clear space and on equal terms, Buckstead became cautious. The fighters eyed each other warily, circling slowly. Then Buckstead snarled. Ranolph readied himself for a fresh attack.

They started tentatively and at a distance, each sounding the other out. Their blades touched, clashed with a noise like the tinkling of silver cutlery, then danced apart. The pace quickened. Buckstead was a skilled and aggressive fighter. An army man, his moves had been practised well and honed on the battlefield. Ranolph fought with a more unorthodox style. He had less battle experience, but his agile reflexes and intuitive footwork kept his opponent at bay.

Elizabeth was still in the carriage. She had unconsciously curled up, vainly seeking some shelter from the carriage sides. She watched aghast, her hand in her mouth.

Lieutenant Morcroft moved his aim from her to the Duke. He watched the fight with a calm air. It would not be an easy shot with Buckstead in the way, but he was a practised marksman.

Suddenly he felt something cold touch the side of his neck. It was the sharp tip of a rapier. Slowly, carefully, he looked round. Alistair was stood behind him. Blood matted his hair but his eyes were alert.

“Give me your gun.” he commanded. Morcroft obeyed.

“Let them fight if they must, but let it be a fair battle.”

The fighters did not notice Alistair’s arrival. They were focused on the struggle. Their swords twirled and flashed in the sunlight. The glen rang with the sound of metal on metal. Both were superb fencers. Ranolph was perhaps the better swordsman but he held back slightly in his attacks. Buckstead knew no such restraint. Moreover the wound in Ranolph’s arm was beginning to take its toll. He was visibly tiring as the fight went on.

Alistair watched the battle dispassionately. He thought duelling a brutal custom, but he could not deny Lord Buckstead’s right as a gentleman to seek redress in this way. Fitzwilliam parried each thrust, each time just a slip away from death. Yet Alistair perceived that the Duke’s own strikes were aimed merely to wound, even as he tired and his situation became more desperate. Alistair began to admire the man. He thought that it is when a man’s strength wanes that you see his true colour, for strength can hide much.

The end was not long in coming. Ranolph’s foot caught on a divot and he stumbled. Buckstead lunged for the kill.

Ranolph's instincts and reflexes did not desert him. Instead of trying to right himself, he dropped to one knee. He was almost skewered. Buckstead's sabre sliced through the air barely an inch over his head. Now it was Buckstead's turn to be off-balance and vulnerable. Ranolph struck up, cutting the man's sword arm. With a cry of pain Buckstead stepped away. Ranolph's blade flicked back across, and Buckstead's sword was knocked from his hand. The fight was over.

Buckstead looked at his lost sword and then up at Ranolph. His eyes were full of rage and fear.

"I will not kill you." said Ranolph, "I have already done your family enough harm."

Buckstead's face contorted further, but he turned and walked woodenly towards his horse. Then he stopped and turned back to face his enemy. "I do not need your mercy." he spat, "And I do not surrender!"

Several things happened at once then. Buckstead drew his gun. Alistair pushed Morcroft aside and dived forward to stop him. The gun fired as Alistair crashed into Buckstead. The bang echoed in his ears. Buckstead was knocked to the ground and Alistair fell beside him, his large frame partially pinning the other man down. The smell of cordite hung in the air.

Alistair looked up. Ranolph was still standing. He looked faint though. Beads of sweat stood out on his ashen face.

His shirt front blossomed red. In his left shoulder, a small dark hole where the bullet had found its mark.

He still stood. Still gripped his sword. He advanced to where Buckstead lay sprawled on the ground. He extended his sword until the point pricked the other man's chest. Buckstead froze and faced his opponent.

"You have disgraced yourself." Ranolph said.

"Then run me through." snarled Buckstead.

"No." Ranolph said, "Go, and let this be an end of it."

Slowly, Buckstead nodded his acceptance.

Alistair stood and drew the gun he had taken from Morcroft. He cocked the hammer. He was taking no more chances on the defeated men's honour. Buckstead and Morcroft left in silence. The Duke stood proudly watching him go. Then his wounds overcame him. He collapsed against the the carriage wheel.

Elizabeth leapt out and dropped to his side. She helped lift his head up so that he was leaning against her.

"You are wounded."

The Duke smiled ruefully. "What gave it away?" he asked. "Tis not as wide as a door, nor as deep as a well, but it may suffice."

He coughed, and some of the strength went from his posture. Elizabeth supported him.

"Sweet Elizabeth!" he said. Then his eyes closed and he slipped into oblivion.

Alistair rushed up to him. Tearing a strip from the man's shirt, he busied himself fixing a bandage. "He needs a doctor." he said, "We must get him back to Edinburgh immediately."

"Ranolph." Elizabeth cradled his head and spoke her lover's name. She spoke softly, then louder and louder until she was shouting whilst the tears ran down her face. But no answer came.

Epilogue

Being an account of a society marriage and the events leading up to it.

They carried Ranolph back to Edinburgh with all haste. Alistair drove. He took them to his house. Calling for two servants to carry Ranolph to a bedroom, he sent another with the carriage to fetch a doctor. Their arrival threw the house into an uproar. Not only was Ranolph wounded and unconscious but both Alistair and Elizabeth were stained in blood. The doctor came within minutes, though it felt like hours. He removed the bullet but Ranolph did not regain consciousness.

Elizabeth visited the house every day, usually accompanied by Ruth. They would sit in the drawing room and take tea with Lady Agnes and Lord Delaney. Elizabeth would have liked to sit by Ranolph's bedside but it was deemed inappropriate since they were not formally engaged. So she sat and drank her tea, asking anxious questions on the patient's health. The duke remained unconscious, and had moreover developed a fever. As to whether or not he would recover, the doctor refused to be drawn. It was, he said, in the hands of fate.

These meetings, though overclouded by Elizabeth's sorrow, provided Ruth and Alistair with the opportunity to further their love affair. It came as no surprise when he announced one afternoon that he must go out of town for a few days to speak with Miss Carlyle's father. Everyone was quite delighted. Even Elizabeth managed to regain her spirits on this occasion.

At first the pain was overpowering. He tried to focus, but again and again sank backward into the comforting blanket of unconsciousness. Gradually the pain ebbed, and he was able to take in his surroundings. He was in bed, an invalid in an unfamiliar room. People came and went, though never the one he longed to see.

There was a sour faced doctor who took his temperature and informed him regularly that he was lucky to be alive. There was Lord Delaney, in whose house he gathered he was now a guest. His friend Hamish came by several times and regaled him with the latest gossip. "Of course the chief news is you old boy," he said, "You, Miss Montgomery and Lord Buckstead - it's quite the sensation of the season."

Gradually the periods of clarity became longer. Until one day he awoke from a natural sleep to a new visitor. He did not recognise the lady. She was a woman of advancing years yet fashionably attired and with an imposing bearing. She sat in silence for some time, regarding him with a cool eye.

"Madam," he said once he had collected his thoughts, "To whom do I owe this pleasure?"

"My name is Katherine Montgomery, and I am the Dowager Countess of Glamis," she replied.

She allowed a silence for him to digest this.

"I understand you would like to marry my granddaughter," she said, "In spite of your status as a pariah."

Ever since finding himself back in Edinburgh, Ranolph had known that the dream was over. Elizabeth could not marry him, she would never be allowed to. He was too realistic to indulge in any hope of a second elopement. "Yes," he said

with a sad nod. He did not look her in the eye for he did not wish to see her disdain. He knew full well what he had lost.

There was another silence. The Countess waited until he looked at her. She held his gaze.

“It will have to be a grand wedding.” she said.

Ranolph blinked in surprise. He was unable to respond. His face must have been a picture.

“A quiet wedding would be an admission of your disgrace.” the Countess explained, “But if one does an improper thing on a grand enough scale, it acquires the air of propriety.”

Ranolph continued blinking. It seemed to be all he could do. Fortunately it appeared no other response was required.

“Oh you are not quite as infamous as you think.” she continued. “Lord Delaney gave a favourable account of your fight with William Buckstead. It has caused no little sensation.”

“Lord Buckstead is universally considered to be a villian. He has left Scotland with his tail between his legs. And your reputation has been correspondingly improved.”

This was true. Lord Buckstead had returned to Edinburgh but found he was no longer welcome. No-one would defend his conduct. He had not stayed long. He and Lieutenant Morcroft had returned to their regiment in -shire. His stay there was to be short lived however. News of his conduct travelled swiftly. Within the week, he was called in for an interview with his commanding officer. The Brigadier was apologetic, in an unforgiving fashion. He explained that shooting a fellow gentleman was not the action of a soldier. It would be best if Lord Buckstead left the regiment, and it was arranged that he would transfer to the East India Company.

The Countess frowned; she was making things too easy. She fixed Ranolph with a stern look.

“Of course you are still considered a deplorable rake, and no self-respecting woman should accept you.” she said.

“But Elizabeth is fond of you, which I suppose should be taken into account.”

* * *

The Count of Glamis’ ball on the occasion of his daughter’s marriage was the subject of much conversation, both before and after. The story of the Duke of Wessex’s fight with Lord Buckstead had been repeated with variations in every drawing room and coffee house in Edinburgh. Everyone had an opinion on the affair. The merits and failings of Ranolph were debated ad nauseum in the run up to wedding.

There were many who said that the leopard does not learn new tricks. The more romantic held that love can change anyone. Stern puritans sniffed, and said it should not be tolerated, whilst the open-minded insisted that everyone deserves a second chance. It helped considerably that Ranolph was at death’s door. His tragic absence argued his case far better than he could ever have done in person.

A fortnight before the the wedding, cousin Mabel returned. She had enjoyed her trip to Italy but she was also glad to be back in Scotland. “It is a lovely country, but it isn’t home, and there isn’t anything as comfortable as being in your own country.” She had been shocked at what had happened in her absence. “Elopements and swordfights! Well I declare!” she said. “This kind of thing would no have gone on if I were here.” She was even more shocked by the sorry state of the wedding arrangements. It was fortunate she had returned, she thought, throwing herself wholeheartedly into organising things.

The day of the wedding arrived, and a river of carriages carried the cream of British aristocracy to Abercrombie house. No-one wanted to miss out on what was the talking point of the season. There had been some who declared that they would not attend such a scandalous event, but they were not held to their word.

Whatever doubts some of the guests might have had, they were laid to rest on seeing the bride and groom. They were clearly very much in love - one could see it in the tender looks they exchanged. The new Duchess of Wessex was ravishing in a simple white gown of shot silk. Her hair was dressed with pearls and she carried lilies. Her youthful beauty required no further adornment. Both she and her lord, his arm still in a sling, looked deliriously happy.

The ceremony itself was a simple exchange of vows in the local church, but the ball afterwards was - as the Dowager Countess had promised - indeed a grand affair. The day was sunny, the air still crisp but warm enough to open up the gardens. This was fortunate given the number of guests. In the dining room, tables groaned under the weight of food and the air was thick with tempting aromas. Fine hams and sumptuous pies jostled with cuts of roast highland beef and steaming vats of soup. For dessert there were fruit-flavoured ices and steamed puddings drenched in treacle. Barrels of ale, crates of fine French wine and bottles of good Scottish whisky were brought up from the Abercrombie House cellars, enough to satisfy even the thirstiest of guests.

In the ball room, a band of fiddles, pipes and drums filled the air with music. The dancing was lively, and liveliest of all around the figure of Lord Hamish McTavish.

“A magnificent wedding!” he declared to his companion, an attractive blonde lass, during a lull in the music. “You know I introduced them?”

Lord and Lady Delaney were there, themselves less than a month married and only just back from their honeymoon. Marriage had transformed Alistair, and for the better. He smiled a lot more, and he had lost some of the reserve from his manner. Ruth looked simply radiant, a sunburst of good-natured loveliness in an elegant green dress.

The Dowager Countess - she reluctantly had to accept the qualified title when her daughter in law was in town - dabbed a tear from her eye.

"Things have worked out well." she said to Lady Delaney.

"Yes, Elizabeth and Ranolph look lovely together." Lady Delaney agreed, "And Alistair and Ruth too."

"Both my granddaughters married, why I'm quite overcome."

"I really thought it was all over when I heard that you proposed to marry Ruth to that horrible Lord Buckstead."

The Dowager Countess laughed. "A necessary expedient Agnes. I didn't enjoy making Ruth suffer, but Alistair needed a good sharp shock."

"Well it worked." said Lady Delaney.

"Of course it worked! Why we had schemes within schemes. The poor dears never stood a chance." She paused a moment to dab at her eyes again. "It is a shame that we ladies do not play chess, for I fancy we would be very good at it."

Lady Delaney nodded in agreement.

"Now if only I could find someone for my daughter." she said.

T H E E N D

By Daniel Winterstein & Rebecca Smith, Edinburgh 2007