

An Unsuitable Arrangement

Welcome to *an Unsuitable Arrangement*, my Valentine's Day short story for 2023. As always, it's free so please share as much as you like.

The story is set in the city of Santander in 1813. Most of the ports in northern Spain were occupied by the French until 1812, when a Royal Navy squadron under the command of the inimitable Sir Home Popham was sent to co-operate with the Spanish irregular forces along the coast to distract the French while Lord Wellington advanced to Salamanca, Madrid and then on to Burgos. Popham managed to keep the French busy and liberated several of the coastal towns but he was recalled towards the end of 1812 as Wellington's army made their miserable retreat from Burgos back to the Portuguese border. The story of that retreat is told in *An Untrustworthy Army*, book 5 of the *Peninsular War Saga*.

Santander was briefly reoccupied by the French, but as Wellington marched to victory at Vitoria in 1813, the garrison was withdrawn again, leaving the Spanish inhabitants to cope with the burden of being a major supply depot for the army. Managing these difficulties was a major headache for the officers of the quartermaster's department and there is no evidence that Lord Wellington was sympathetic about it.

Some of the more eagle-eyed readers among you might recognise that I have borrowed from the true story of Lieutenant William Waldron Kelly who eloped with a high-born Portuguese girl and had to leave Portugal because of threats from her family. Regular readers will also recognise a number of characters from previous books or short stories.

Happy Valentine's Day everybody.

Santander, July, 1813

It was past noon when the *Lady Emma*, an English merchantman out of Southampton, dropped anchor off the Spanish port of Santander. Captain O'Halloran, an Irishman who had learned his trade the hard way as a pressed man in the Royal Navy, invited his passengers to drink a glass of wine in his day cabin while arrangements were being made for the cargo and the passengers to be unloaded. Elinor Spencer suspected that he was keen for the passengers to go first. It had not been an easy voyage.

Elinor had no experience of travel by sea, but she had heard horrendous tales from her uncle about sea-sickness and the danger of French privateers. She was relieved to discover that she was a surprisingly good traveller and the French made no appearance; but the rest of the voyage was a nightmare from start to finish.

There were five passengers aboard the *Lady Emma*. The two British officers were returning to duty from sick leave while Elinor was accompanied by her younger sister Juliet and their maidservant. Juliet and Eliza had been sick for the entire voyage and Elinor had found herself nursing both of them. She had seen nothing of the two gentlemen, but had been told by Captain O'Halloran that they had been similarly affected. Elinor thought it was rather a shame that most of her first voyage had been spent below decks dealing with the unpleasant results of other people's sea-sickness. The times she had managed to get away to dine with the Captain and take the air on deck had been very pleasant.

After a little persuasion Juliet had agreed to accompany her sister to the Captain's impromptu gathering. Elinor was not surprised when she brightened considerably at the sight of the two young officers. Within five minutes they were vying for her attention, leaving Elinor to sip her wine and talk to the Captain. She had struck up a firm friendship with him during the voyage and was aware that he was concerned about two young ladies travelling so far without a male escort.

"Your sister seems much better, ma'am."

"She will be fine once we are ashore although I imagine she'll be dreading the voyage home. She shouldn't have come. I would have managed perfectly well on my own and..."

"Neither of you should have made this journey, it's a disgrace," the Captain said. Elinor had not expected him to be quite so frank. She stared at him and he gave a little smile and bowed. "Your pardon, ma'am. I shouldn't have said that, but I'm a blunt-spoken man. Having met you, I perfectly understand why your fiancé didn't want to wait until the end of this war for the wedding. But he should have asked for leave and waited for it to be granted. I can make allowances for a man in love, but this is ridiculous. The towns along this coast have only recently been taken back from the French. The Spanish authorities are struggling to organise themselves and are sinking under the weight of demands for supplies and accommodation from both the British army and the Navy."

"You don't think there's a risk that the French will attack the town, Captain?"

O'Halloran shook his head. "No, ma'am, I think you're perfectly safe from that. Lord Wellington is very much in control now and I don't think Bonaparte has the men. But this is a difficult situation and I think you and your sister would be better

at home. However, it's not my decision. We'll get you ashore as soon as we can and I've asked Mr Beattie to escort you. I'm sure your fiancé has arrangements in place but if anything were to go wrong Beattie will know what to do. We're picking up a contingent of wounded men going back to England. We'll be here for at least a week and possibly longer given that we've a few repairs after that storm. Don't hesitate to send a message, ma'am, if you need to."

Elinor felt the prickle of tears at his kindness. "That's very good of you, Captain, but we haven't paid for passage home. And I'm sure Mr Beattie has other things to do. I understand he is acting as your clerk temporarily?"

"It's not his job, ma'am, he works for the owner. But I'll admit he's been useful. As for the passage home, I don't care. We've space and if you run into trouble, we can sort out the details later. I don't like the idea of two English ladies going ashore without a man to protect them. It's not right. But Beattie will look after you and hand you over to Major Welby, never fear."

O'Halloran finished his wine, then excused himself and went back to his duties. Elinor glanced over at her sister and decided that she would be very well entertained, so she made her way up onto deck and took up a position at the rail. She watched the bustle of activity on shore and on the water, as small boats rowed out to the ships with supplies, passengers and messages. Santander was an attractive town from this distance; a jumble of tiled roofs and white painted houses interspersed with church towers and spires. Above it all rose the rocky slopes of the Peñacastillo mountain. The sky was a clear blue and the sun reflected diamond sparks off the water. There was a fresh breeze which made Elinor shiver a little in her warm pelisse.

She had come here to be married. The thought was still strange to her. She had been betrothed for such a long time - almost two years now - and she had not seen her fiancé since his hasty departure for Portugal only a month after the match was arranged. Elinor barely knew Major Welby, who was fifteen years her senior. He served in the 9th Dragoon Guards, which was her uncle's old regiment, and the Colonel had arranged the match with very little reference to Elinor.

The ceremony was supposed to have taken place during the autumn of 1811 but the regiment was recalled to duty very suddenly and Elinor was faced with the daunting prospect of an immediate marriage. She had hoped for time to become accustomed to the idea and was immensely relieved when Major Welby wrote to inform her uncle that it would be impossible to delay his departure long enough to travel to Northamptonshire for the wedding and that, regrettably, the marriage must be postponed.

Life had gone on very much as before. There were times, living under Uncle Edward's bullying rule, when Elinor longed to escape, even into marriage with a stranger. At other times she hoped that one of Major Welby's infrequent letters would contain the news that he had thought better of the arranged marriage and wished to be released from his obligations. The more time that passed, the harder it was for Elinor to remember exactly what her fiancé even looked like.

She had been shocked during the previous winter when her Uncle informed her that Welby had written to suggest that Elinor might join him in Portugal to be married there. For a few weeks Elinor lived in a state of carefully concealed terror but a winter cold which had settled on Uncle Edward's chest made travel impossible.

Elinor breathed again and finally admitted to herself that her initial anxiety about the match had settled into cold dread. She did not wish to marry Major Welby and she needed to say so.

Uncle Edward was furious when she made the disclosure and as always, his anger took physical form. Elinor was locked in her room bruised and sore from six stripes from his riding whip, and Juliet joined her a day later after trying to speak up for her sister. The stripes healed and Juliet was released but Elinor remained there alone, forbidden to see or speak to either her aunt or her sister until she gave in. Whatever her doubts about marriage to a man she barely knew and did not particularly like, she realised that she could not continue to live under her uncle's roof. Anything would be better than this and at least she would be able to offer a home to Juliet.

By the time travel arrangements were made, Uncle Edward was ill again. This time he refused to cancel.

"You don't need me or your aunt to be there," he wheezed when Elinor obeyed his summons to his bedside. "You need to be married before I'm dead. That way, he can arrange a suitable match for your sister as well. Can't leave this to a pack of silly women. You'll need a man to take care of you. Welby's got a respectable fortune, he'll see to it. At least he still wants you. I was beginning to wonder."

"Sir, I don't want this marriage," Elinor said trying to keep her voice calm. "I don't know him, it will be like marrying a stranger. And if you are ill, it should not be left to my aunt to manage. Let me write to him. He will easily find another lady. I..."

"Enough!" her uncle roared with surprising energy. "Get yourself out of here and get yourself packed. You'll depart in that carriage when it arrives and you can take your sister along with the maid. Once you arrive in Spain he's to meet you in Santander and the wedding will take place almost immediately. It's settled, I want to hear no more of your whining."

Elinor had complied because she could not think of anything else to do. She had no money and no other family that she could run to. She had often thought that it might be possible to find work as a governess or a companion but she had never found a way to apply for such a post. She could neither send nor receive letters without her uncle's supervision and she had no friend who might help her do so. It occurred to her that in novels, the heroine always managed to find a way out of such difficulties. In real life, a respectable woman with a younger sister to take care of needed to set impractical schemes to one side and make the best of her situation. She had tried to find a way out and had failed. Her only other option was to go to her wedding as cheerfully as she could manage and to try not to think about what might happen next.

Now that she was here and ashore, Elinor was thankful for the calm presence of Mr Beattie. She was a little confused about his position aboard the merchant ship, but he seemed willing to act as their escort and determined not to leave Elinor until she was safely inside her hotel. She was passionately grateful to him, given that neither she or Juliet spoke a word of Spanish, while Eliza was so overwhelmed by the noise and bustle of a foreign sea port that she seemed to be struggling even to speak English. The quayside was crowded as several ships seemed to be either

loading or unloading their goods. At least two of the ships at anchor in Santander Bay were Royal Navy and there was a collection of blue-coated officers going about their business on shore. There were also a large number of red coats in evidence. Elinor found that she was surreptitiously scanning faces for her betrothed and she felt a slight sense of panic in case she did not recognise him. It had been two years and all she could clearly remember was a bulky figure and a set of perfectly trimmed military whiskers. He had sent her a miniature during the first year of their engagement, but it was poorly executed and could have been anybody.

“I thought he was going to meet us,” Juliet said. She had been full of high spirits as they left the ship but had gone very quiet as Mr Beattie organised a hired cart and found a porter to load up their luggage. “Your...Major Welby. I thought he’d be here.”

“I’m sure he will meet us at the hotel. He may have been delayed by his military duties. Don’t worry, Juliet. It will be all right.”

She reached for her sister’s hand as the cart jolted forward. Juliet squeezed hard and gave a wan smile. Elinor returned it. She was not sure which of them was more terrified in this busy, noisy, alien place but she reflected that Juliet’s fear would be assuaged once Major Welby appeared to take charge. Elinor still had to get through her wedding night.

The hotel was reassuringly elegant, situated on a wide boulevard away from the noisy port district. Mr Beattie handed them down and ushered them into a tiled entrance where a portly Spanish gentleman came forward with an enquiring smile. Beattie appeared to speak fluent Spanish and Elinor stood back and watched him with awe. She did not think she would ever be able to speak that quickly in any language.

It was clear that the clerk was not happy with the hotelier’s response to his enquiries. The Spaniard spread his hands wide as if disclaiming any responsibility for the problem and Beattie rapped out a series of what sounded like questions. Eventually he turned to Elinor, who was beginning to feel very sick.

“Is there a problem, Mr Beattie?”

“A minor one, ma’am. I’ve asked this fool to order some refreshments and you can sit down while I sort this out. Let us go over to a table. Here, sit down. Your maid...I’m not sure...”

“Eliza, come and sit here,” Elinor said briskly. “This is not the time to worry about propriety. What has happened, sir? Is our room not reserved? And what of Major Welby?”

“I can discover nothing about the Major ma’am, but you can be sure I will do so. As to your accommodation, it probably was reserved, but the army has moved in and taken over this entire hotel. Transports arrived yesterday with a battalion of infantry along with two hundred cavalry reinforcements. They’ve billeted the men on a couple of local farms, poor souls and they’ve told Senor Talledo to cancel all reservations as they need the rooms for their officers for at least two weeks until they’re ready to march out to join Lord Wellington. The poor man is beside himself.”

“Can they do that?” Elinor asked, appalled.

“Oh yes, ma’am. They’ll have to recompense him of course, but given how the army manages its pay chest it could take him a year to get the money back and it won’t be the full amount. In the meantime, we’ll need to find accommodation for

you.”

“But this is dreadful,” Juliet said. Elinor could hear the panic in her voice. She felt panicked as well but forced herself to speak calmly.

“Mr Beattie, this is so kind of you. I’m sorry you have been put to so much trouble. I’m sure when Major Welby arrives it can be straightened out. You must have a hundred things to do without having to trouble yourself with our difficulties.”

“Can’t be helped, ma’am. I’m just glad the Captain suggested that I escort you. A rare pickle you’d have been in without a word of Spanish between you. Don’t you worry. Look, here comes the maid with some tea for you. And it looks like some bread and cheese as well. You have something to eat. I’ve asked Senor Talledo to find the officer in charge here. It’s a problem through the whole district now. They’re being asked to find accommodation and provide supplies and transport since the army started using this place as its main transit port. The locals aren’t set up for it. They’re doing their best, but they were struggling when I was last here earlier this year and it’s got worse since then.”

The bread was hard and baked with olives and the butter was made without salt and rather tasteless, but Elinor was surprised at how much she liked the soft cheese. They drank strong tea with what she suspected was goat’s milk and ate some beautifully juicy grapes. The hotel lobby was spotlessly clean and if she had not been so worried, Elinor would have rather enjoyed their vantage point, watching the coming and going of officers in red coats. A number of them looked curiously at the three women. One or two stared rather more rudely and Elinor touched Juliet’s arm to remind her to look away. She felt very conspicuous and wished she knew what was going on.

After what seemed a long time, Mr Beattie reappeared. He was accompanied by an officer who was definitely not Major Welby. Elinor was both relieved and confused. Her only way out of this embarrassing situation would be the arrival of her betrothed, but she was dreading it. The situation had all the elements of a Drury Lane comedy but she was not finding it funny.

She rose as the two men approached. Beattie gave a little bow and threw a malicious glance at his companion.

“Miss Spencer, allow me to introduce you to Lieutenant-Colonel Galloway. As far as I can work out he’s the Assistant Quartermaster General for this district and is the man responsible for cancelling your rooms and leaving you to sleep on the streets tonight. He’s here to explain why that’s considered acceptable by His Majesty’s army.”

Galloway shot the clerk a look of utter loathing. “It’s very good to see the merchant service is employing clowns as administrators. That probably explains the chaos of the supply system here.”

“I thought everything was the fault of the Royal Navy according to your boys, sir. Still, it’s good to know you’re extending the blame to merchant shipping as well. You might want to throw in a bit of a complaint about Neptune and the mythical sea-serpent. I’m sure they’re both Bonapartists.”

Elinor was not sure, but she thought she heard Colonel Galloway grind his teeth. While she appreciated Beattie’s wit, she was not sure that he was the man who could get her a hotel room. With an effort, she summoned a smile and held out her

hand.

“Colonel Galloway, thank you for seeing me. I’m sorry to be so much trouble.”

Galloway paused for a moment, looking uncertain. Then he took her hand and bowed over it.

“Miss Spencer. Forgive me, you have nothing to be sorry for. This must be very upsetting for you.”

Elinor studied him. He was probably around thirty or so with short dark brown hair and warm brown eyes, but he currently looked like a man driven to the limits of his patience. Elinor had been raised on stories of military glory but she had never thought for a moment about the men like Galloway who worked behind the scenes in difficult circumstances to make a campaign happen. Elinor was a woman accustomed to managing a household on a tight budget with difficult people and she felt unexpectedly sorry for him.

“Why don’t you sit down, Colonel Galloway and perhaps Mr Beattie could ask for some more tea? I’m afraid we are putting you to a great deal of trouble here.”

“Tea?” Galloway said hopefully. His eyes were suddenly riveted to the cups and plates on the table. Elinor looked at Beattie and saw that he was masking a grin. She wondered how often Colonel Galloway forgot to eat.

“And some more bread and cheese if you can manage it, Mr Beattie. I suspect Colonel Galloway missed breakfast. Sit down, Colonel and allow me to introduce you to my sister Juliet. Also our poor maid Eliza who has never been more confused in her life.”

Galloway bowed politely. “She has all my sympathy, ma’am,” he said.

Accommodation for the ladies was obtained by the simple expedient of bundling three junior officers into one room. They were cavalry officers which meant their complaints were loudly expressed, but Toby Galloway silenced them effectively by demanding to know which of them wished to explain to Major Welby when he returned that his fiancée had returned to England because no accommodation could be found for her.

With the two ladies established in a spacious room overlooking the square and the terrified maid wedged into a cubbyhole on the top floor which made her cry with relief, Galloway went in search of a senior cavalry officer who might have news of the missing Major Welby. On stating his errand he was shown into an untidy little parlour which was littered with paperwork and half-unpacked boxes, where a thin irritable captain of the 9th Dragoon Guards was glaring at the merchant shipping clerk. Galloway sympathised. Fifteen minutes of Mr Gareth Beattie’s sarcasm had made him want to shoot the man.

Captain Cahill saluted punctiliously. Galloway thought he looked relieved at the sight of a senior officer who might take Beattie off his hands.

“Colonel Galloway, come in. I’ve just been explaining to this gentleman that I am unable to give out information about our officers.”

Galloway eyed Beattie and decided that he might just qualify as a

gentleman, though he suspected the honorific had been acquired along an interesting career path rather than having been his by birthright.

“Mr Beattie is trying to assist a lady, Captain. At least I think he is. He might just have been sent here to piss me off. Where can I find Major Welby?”

Captain Cahill did not actually clutch his head but he looked as though he wanted to do so. “Major Welby is not here, sir.”

“Clearly he isn’t, Captain, or I’d be able to see him. Where is he?”

“No, I mean he’s not in Santander. He has left.”

Galloway felt a cold sense of dread. He had been hoping to hand this problem over to the man who had caused it within the hour, but he could see that possibility slipping away from him.

“Where’s he gone?” Beattie asked. His tone was grim. Galloway looked at him with interest. He had been far too busy being irritated with the clerk to think much else about him but something in Beattie’s tone suggested that he was extremely unimpressed with Major Welby’s actions and was quite prepared to say so. This did not entirely fit with Beattie’s apparently humble position as captain’s clerk. Despite himself, Galloway was curious so he caught Cahill’s eye and nodded permission to answer.

“Several officers of the quartermaster’s department have ridden out towards Bilboa, sir. They’re trying to source supplies. We’re bringing as much as we can in from England, but...”

“Captain, I am an officer of the quartermaster’s department. I know the abysmal chaos that is military supplies in this place. These poor townspeople. I’ve only met the Mayor three times and I think he’s cried at two of the meetings. The town can’t possibly cope and it doesn’t help that some of your officers are already throwing their weight around demanding free provisions from whichever poor bastard they’re billeted on. And now I’ve got a young Englishwomen and her companions dumped in this town in search of a missing fiancé and you’re telling me the feckless bastard has gone off on escort duty?”

There was a long silence.

“Well, yes sir,” Cahill said apologetically. “I mean none of us knew she was coming. He didn’t say anything, sir.”

Galloway closed his eyes and counted very slowly to ten in his head. Eventually he opened them again and fixed Cahill with a glare.

“Who is his commanding officer, Captain?”

“That will be Colonel Fraser, sir,” Cahill said with palpable relief.

“Where will I find Colonel Fraser, Captain?”

“Well...he’s not here, sir.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake!” Galloway bellowed. Cahill visibly jumped. Beside him, Galloway heard a strange spluttering sound which he was fairly sure was the clerk of a merchantman trying not to laugh out loud.

When he could manage to ask questions without swearing, Galloway obtained the address of Lieutenant-Colonel Stratton who was the most senior officer

of the 9th Dragoon Guards actually currently in Santander. He left Cahill's office with a list of duties running through his head. Dismally he thought of how much catching up he would need to do once the matter of the Englishwomen had been settled, but he could hardly abandon them. It was obvious after half an hour's conversation that Elinor Spencer had never been out of England before, spoke no Spanish and could not be left to cope alone in a strange place.

"There's something off about this," a voice said in matter-of-fact tones. Galloway turned to find the clerk had caught up with him. Beattie was slightly shorter: sharp-featured with bright copper hair and intelligent blue-green eyes. Galloway was torn between curiosity at his remark and an overwhelming desire to tell the man to go back to his ship and mind his own business.

"Why do you care?" he asked finally, continuing his walk.

"Captain O'Halloran charged me with seeing the lady safely to her fiancé. I've been trying to do it."

"Don't you have duties at the ship? Supplies to unload, manifests to check? There must be something?"

"I've an assistant who's perfectly capable. Anyway I'm curious, aren't you?"

"No, just overworked."

"How long have you been here?"

"Too long."

"Seriously. You can't have been here with Popham, he didn't have the army did he? Though he managed to kick up enough of a dust with the Spanish and a few marines..."

Galloway stopped dead and turned to glare. "Beattie, who the hell are you? And don't give me this nonsense about being the captain's clerk aboard some merchant ship. You don't sound like one, you don't dress like one and you don't look like one. Stop pissing me about, I don't have time."

Beattie held up his hands laughing. "Stop yelling at me. It's not me you're angry with and I'm trying to help. I'm acting clerk aboard the *Lady Emma*. She's a merchantman under contract to the army. We sailed in with army supplies and a few passengers and we've a week or so to hang around to pick up a contingent of sick and wounded men going back to England."

"Acting clerk? What's your usual job?"

"Suspicious bastard. I am confidential secretary to a gentleman by the name of Van Daan. He owns the shipping company along with a lot of other business interests. Very big man in the City and married into the aristocracy. I started off as a ship's boy at the age of ten and worked my way up through the company. I don't go to sea much now, but Mr van Daan wanted me to assess the situation in Santander. If it's to be the main supply port for Wellington's army now, we'll be in and out of here all the time."

"I imagine there have been a fair few reports written on that subject," Galloway said mildly. "I've read a few of them myself. Sir Home Popham tended to generate a lot of paperwork."

"I read them too and could think of a practical use for some of them."

Galloway could not repress a splutter of laughter. "To be fair, the man's

clever. But I know the Van Daans aren't especially fond of Popham since he got involved with Paul van Daan's court martial."

Beattie's eyes widened in surprise. "You know him then? Old army friend?"

"Old school friend before he got himself kicked out, but we've stayed in touch. I have had the privilege of listening to Paul van Daan on the subject of Sir Home Riggs Popham. It tends to go on a bit."

"When that man has an opinion, it often tends to go on a bit. Punctuated with the worst language I've heard since I was a boy on an East Indiaman."

"That's probably where he learned it." Galloway surveyed the other man with a more tolerant eye. "All right, I'm willing to accept you're trying to help here rather than trying to dodge your duties aboard ship. You can come with me to see Colonel Stratton."

"Are you going to shout at him as well?"

"That depends on whether he can tell me where the hell Major Welby has gone off to and whether they can get him back quickly."

"I'd no idea that the officers of his Majesty's Army had the freedom to wander off whenever they felt like it. I thought there was a war on," Beattie said. "Let alone importing young women by the dozen. It makes joining up a lot more appealing, I can tell you."

Galloway tried not to grind his teeth. "If you're coming with me, Mr Beattie, I'd recommend you save your sense of humour for the voyage home. I've had a really long week."

Beattie gave him an irritatingly understanding smile. "Yes, Colonel. Lead the way."

A comfortable room and a good dinner made both Elinor and her sister feel much better. The evening was pleasantly mild after a short shower of rain and Elinor suggested a walk through the main part of the town. They attracted a good deal of attention from the British officers who strolled along the wide avenues and lounged outside taverns in the pretty squares but most of it was respectful. Elinor found herself wondering if her fiancé would object to her wandering about without a male escort but she decided that given his failure to arrive to meet her as agreed, she did not really care.

Arriving back at the hotel she found Colonel Galloway and Mr Beattie awaiting them with news, although there was still no sign of Major Welby. Beattie, who seemed very resourceful for a humble ship's clerk, had reserved a table in the courtyard garden at the back of the hotel and ceremoniously handed Elinor and Juliet onto a wooden bench and poured wine for them. Colonel Galloway made polite enquiries about their accommodation and their dinner. It was all very civilised and Elinor was torn between a desire to scream at the two men to get on with it and an illogical wish to prolong the pleasant sense of a social occasion. She was wholly unused to socialising and had never in her life sat on the terrace outside an elegant hotel. Exotic flowering shrubs perfumed the warm air and there were lanterns strung between the trees which gave the scene a fairy tale appearance. It was beautiful and

Elinor could not believe how much she was enjoying both the setting and the attentions of two gentlemen.

Fairy tales were not real though and Elinor sipped the chilled white wine, took her courage in her hands and asked:

“Have you discovered why Major Welby was unable to come to meet us, Colonel?”

Galloway looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Well, yes, ma’am. At least, I can tell you where he’s gone although not why he...I’m sure he must have mistaken the date. Ships can’t give the exact time of their arrival after all...”

“Messages are sent ahead. He’d have known roughly when we were expected to dock,” Beattie said. Elinor shot him a grateful glance. She had the sense that Galloway was trying to protect her feelings but at this point she just wanted information.

“Mr Beattie?”

“He’s gone off on escort duty, ma’am. A party from the quartermaster’s department wanted to do a bit of a tour of the countryside, working out where they might be able to buy supplies. Major Welby was placed in charge of the escort.”

“I see. I suppose he could not help that.”

“He could have written you a letter,” Juliet said. “Or arranged for somebody else to meet you. I wouldn’t expect that man to be attentive, but there’s such a thing as basic good manners.”

“Juliet, please.”

Beattie looked amused. “You don’t approve of your sister’s fiancé, Miss Juliet?”

“No,” Juliet said bluntly and Elinor blushed.

“Juliet, this is not appropriate.”

Juliet turned angelic blue eyes onto her. “I have been listening all my life to people telling me what is appropriate, dear sister, and I am tired of it. These gentlemen have wasted an entire day chasing around looking for Major Welby. It is very good of them, but I think they have a right to know that I am hardly shocked at all. You were bullied into this betrothal by our uncle and then bullied again into this badly organised journey, without even our aunt to support you, just because my uncle fancied himself ill again. Which he always does when there is something he does not wish to do. And Major Welby knows all this and does not care one whit about you or your comfort or safety. I do not think we should have come and I do not think you should go through with this marriage. He will not be a good husband.”

Elinor could feel her face burning and she was close to tears. “Juliet, stop it at once. You are embarrassing me and making these gentlemen feel uncomfortable. I do not...”

“I don’t feel in the least bit uncomfortable,” Beattie said briskly. He was looking at Juliet. “Thank you, Miss Juliet, that was extremely brave of you. You’re a good sister.”

Colonel Galloway was studying Elinor. “Is all of that true?” he asked quietly.

Elinor rose. “No, of course not. At least...it is much exaggerated. Will you please excuse me, I’m tired and I wish...”

The tears had forced their way through. She put her hands to her hot cheeks, thankful that the lantern light would probably hide the state of her face and turned towards the door of the hotel. Halfway there she realised she could not possibly leave her younger sister unchaperoned with two strangers and stopped, trying hard to compose herself. A hand took her by the arm.

“Walk with me,” Galloway said quietly. “There’s a path down to the river from here. It’s well lit and public enough but there won’t be many people about tonight. Don’t worry about your sister, Beattie will take care of her. Come on.”

Elinor obeyed because she could not think of anything else to do. He placed her hand on his arm and guided her down a narrow path which led out onto a broad gravelled promenade which overlooked the river. Lights twinkled on the opposite bank and there were several boats with lanterns making flickering patterns on the dark surface of the water. Elinor could hear music and laughter. Further along the bank she could hear the whispered voices of a man and a woman, their arms wrapped about each other. She wondered with immense sadness how it might feel to walk by the riverside with a man she loved and who loved her.

There was a small wooden jetty with lanterns hung on long poles to guide the boats back in. Galloway paused beside it and turned to look at her. Elinor looked down at the ground.

“Forgive me, I can see how upset you are,” the Colonel said gently. “Your sister was tactless, but Beattie is right. She clearly cares about you. How much truth was there in all of that?”

“I’m ashamed to tell you.”

“Why, for God’s sake? If that tale was true, there’s no fault to you in any of it. And it had already occurred to me that you should never have travelled all that way without a male relative to support you. I cannot believe your uncle allowed it and your fiancé acquiesced to it. Anything might have happened.”

Elinor looked up, slightly warmed by the indignation in his voice. “Well yes, I suppose so. Although as a matter of fact, these terrible things that they warn us about seldom do happen, you know. I am aware that your impression of me so far must be very poor, Colonel. I was rather bewildered on my arrival. But generally I am perfectly sensible and more than competent. I haven’t travelled abroad before, it’s true, and I don’t speak any Spanish but my French is quite good and I’ve taken care of my aunt and uncle’s household for years. I think that was why Major Welby allowed my uncle to make this match for him. He told me he wanted a sensible woman to look after his house and give him children and not enact him a Cheltenham tragedy because he was seldom there.”

“Was that his proposal?” Galloway asked. Elinor peered at him suspiciously. It was difficult to tell in the dim light but it almost sounded as if he was laughing at her.

“He said he wanted to be honest with me.”

“I can almost hear him saying it. That man has neither charm nor wit.”

“You know him?”

Galloway gave a faint smile. “Yes. I knew him at Eton though he was a few years older than me. And since we both ended up in the army we’ve run into each other occasionally over the years. I’ve not seen him for a long time though. I will be

honest with you, ma'am. I don't like him. All the same, I wouldn't allow that to colour my opinion of this marriage. If you showed the least desire to see the man I wouldn't be having this conversation with you. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but it seems to me that after the first shock, you weren't upset that he wasn't here. In fact, you seemed rather relieved."

Elinor turned away to hide her tears. "You cannot possibly know that, sir. You know nothing about me."

"I know that you're a brave young woman trying to make the best of an appalling situation," Galloway said. He took Elinor's hand and placed a neatly folded handkerchief in it. Elinor, who had only just realised she had left hers in her reticule on the table, took it gratefully and mopped her streaming eyes.

Neither of them spoke for a while. Elinor thought how peaceful it was, with just the faint sounds of merriment coming from the hotel terrace and from the boats on the river. She stirred reluctantly.

"I must go back. I shouldn't have left Juliet."

"I wouldn't worry about her, ma'am. Beattie will take care of her."

Elinor lifted her eyes to his face. "Does nobody out here have a sense of propriety? She's nineteen and he's...I'm not actually sure what he is, but he's a man she doesn't know and..."

"He's thirty two, unmarried and works for an extremely wealthy London businessman as his confidential secretary. He's out here on business for his employer and given that I know the family, I'd be astonished if they'd employ a man they weren't very sure of. More to the point, he's so angry about what's happened here that if left to himself I think he'd take you both back to the ship and back to England on the next tide, leaving your fiancé to go to the devil. My apologies for my language."

Elinor could not help smiling. "You seem to have done a very thorough job of investigating him, Colonel."

"It wasn't hard, ma'am; the man likes to talk and I checked his story with the Captain. I've complete faith in his good intentions. And if you want to go, I'll happily convey the news to your fiancé when he takes the trouble to reappear."

"It may be that he genuinely had no choice but to leave, Colonel."

"Oh I accept that he had to do his duty. But as your sister said, he could have left a letter for you. And made perfectly sure that I'd not requisitioned your rooms. He must know how chaotic it is here at the moment. And also..."

Elinor studied him. Galloway had a nice face, not exactly handsome, but reassuringly kind. His eyes were his best feature, a mellow brown. Despite his harassed expression since he had first laid eyes on her, she thought it was a face used to smiling a lot. She wondered if he was married.

"Also?"

He hesitated and Elinor touched his arm. "Colonel, if you have anything to say I'd rather you said it to me in private. You've seen what Juliet is like. Until I know exactly where I stand I would rather not give her any more ammunition."

Galloway laughed unexpectedly. "Yes, she does seem to have a tendency to go off like Congreve's rocket when she's annoyed. I'm glad she did though. You might not have spoken to me properly if she hadn't blurted it out and I needed to

know. Very well. It bothers me a little that neither of the officers I've spoken to about him seemed to know anything about a betrothal, let alone a prospective wedding. He probably was called away suddenly. And a letter could have gone astray. The postal service isn't reliable here yet; I lose at least two letters a week. But I don't understand why they didn't all know you were coming. A man about to take a wife usually mentions it to his friends. And he'd have to make arrangements. I don't even know if there is an English chaplain in Santander at the moment. There are usually one or two with Wellington's army, but he's about a hundred and fifty miles away and although you wouldn't think it standing here listening to guitar music, there is a war on. Unless...I didn't think to ask but you're not Roman Catholic, are you?"

"Heavens no. My uncle is a stalwart of the most English kind of Anglicanism. I think he would die of shock if I married in a Catholic church. I'm not even sure if it's possible." Elinor studied him for a long time. "Colonel...are you saying that you believe Major Welby might have changed his mind? Or might not have ever intended to marry me?"

Galloway said nothing. He looked away from her, his eyes on the lights flickering across the water. It was growing colder with a sharp breeze picking up. Elinor was suddenly chilled and a little frightened.

"You haven't answered me."

"You don't need to worry about it, ma'am. You're not alone here, there are two of us looking out for you and between..."

"That is not good enough!" Elinor snapped. "I asked what you think. Treat me like an adult."

Galloway visibly jumped. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry. I don't know what I should tell you. It's only a suspicion and you're a young girl a long way from home. I don't want to say something that..."

"What do you suspect, Colonel?"

The crisp tone of her voice seemed to reach him. He studied her face for a moment from worried brown eyes, then said abruptly:

"Ma'am, Cecil Welby doesn't have the best reputation with women. There was a scandal a few years ago in Ireland and then when he first came out to Portugal there was a Portuguese lady. Very high born. Her family were furious and threatened to murder him. It's the reason he was sent back to England; his father got him a post at Horse Guards until it all blew over. I didn't even know he was back with the regiment until now."

"How do you know all this?" Elinor whispered. She felt suddenly very sick and a little light-headed.

"Army gossip is ruthless and I've been out here from the start. I was with the guards for a while and fought at Rolica and Vimeiro. I came back out with Wellesley but I was badly wounded at Talavera. It took me a long time to recover. I took an administrative posting in the meantime and it turned out I was very good at it and quite enjoyed it. So I stayed. I also got promoted a lot faster. But I have a lot of friends in other regiments and they all share gossip about Welby because I knew him as a boy at school. He was universally disliked there as well. I'm sorry. I could be wrong about this. For all I know his intentions might be completely honourable."

"But this is insane," Elinor said. Her face was burning and she put her hands

on her cheeks to try to cool them down. "My uncle is a retired colonel. My cousin is an officer in the Light Division although I've not heard from him for several years. I'm not some unprotected girl who..."

"Do you have the money to pay for a passage home, ma'am?"

Elinor did not speak immediately. "No," she said finally. "I have very little money. It's why I... Major Welby agreed to take me without a dowry. He also said Juliet could come to live with us. Of course I thought we would not marry until the end of the war."

"Was it his idea or your uncle's to bring the wedding forward and for you to travel out here?"

"I don't know."

"Did Welby know your uncle and aunt couldn't accompany you?"

"I think so. I'm not sure."

"Did he know your sister would be with you or did he think you'd be alone with your maid?"

"I don't know." Elinor's voice was a whisper. "He can't have intended... his reputation would have been ruined."

"Not as quickly as yours would," Galloway said bluntly. "I've no idea why that bastard agreed to marry you in the first place, ma'am. We all thought he'd be after an heiress or at least a fashionable marriage to add a bit of a shine to his very tarnished character. It's been well discussed in army circles. I don't know what he intended. I'll admit I tend to think the worst of Cecil Welby. For all I know there might be a letter winging its way back to Northamptonshire telling you that the wedding is off and to stay right there. He might have no idea you hadn't received it. But I doubt it."

"Why?"

"Because he hadn't cancelled your room at the hotel. I did that when I requisitioned it for the officers. I checked."

Elinor closed her eyes. Unexpectedly his voice sounded a long way off. "I'm sorry," she said and was surprised at the spinning blackness in her head.

"Oh bloody hell," Galloway said and she felt his arms go about her. "It's all right, I've got you. Take a few deep breaths. I'm so sorry, I'm an imbecile to blurt all that out without warning. Just breathe. I'd rather not have to carry you dramatically across the terrace unless I have to."

Elinor obeyed and was relieved when after a few minutes the dizziness passed. She realised that he was still holding her and that her head was resting against his chest. It felt wonderfully comforting and she moved reluctantly.

"I'm sorry, Colonel. I'm not usually that missish. Please don't say anything to Juliet about this."

"I wouldn't dream of it. I might be wrong. But forgive me, I am going to talk to Beattie. I want to make very sure that ship doesn't sail without you if it turns out you need to go home."

"Home," Elinor said. The word sounded hollow. "If I go home unmarried, Colonel, I don't know if my uncle would take me back."

"Isn't that an interesting thought, ma'am? I wonder if Major Welby realises that."

Elinor stared at him for a long time. "What am I going to do?" she whispered.

"You're coming back to the terrace and you're going to drink a glass of wine to put some colour back into your cheeks. You look like a ghost. A remarkably pretty ghost, but definitely spectral. After that you're going to bed, you need to rest. Tell your sister as much or as little as you like. Don't make any attempt to find out about Welby. If anybody asks, tell them your cousin's name and make something up about visiting him. You're a clever girl, you'll come up with something."

Elinor took his proffered arm. "I can't even pay my shot," she said.

"Well at present the army can take care of it. Officially, your room is being occupied by Lieutenants Swann and Betteridge. I kicked them out to make space for you. If we run into trouble later on, I'll pay your bill myself."

"I couldn't allow that."

"I can't see how you can stop me. Stop worrying. You're not alone and you're not going to be."

Elinor looked up at him. "I'm never going to be able to repay you for what you're doing for us, Colonel. And I'm not talking about money."

He smiled. "I'm just glad I was here."

"What if...what if Major Welby turns up at the hotel? What should I say to him?"

"He's unlikely to do so, ma'am. I'm going to speak to his senior officer. He'll have to report in on his return. My intention is that unless you want to, you'll never have to speak to him again."

They were approaching the terrace. Elinor thought about his words and recognised the enormous sense of relief that had nothing to do with Galloway's startling revelations of this evening.

"I must have been mad," she said softly. "Even to consider this, when I disliked him so much. I should have remained locked in my room. After all, my uncle would have had to let me out eventually."

Galloway stopped and looked at her. Then he continued walking. "I'd like to meet your uncle one day, ma'am," he said. "Now that's enough for tonight. I want to hear nothing apart from social chit chat, is that clear?"

"Yes, Colonel. Good gracious. Is that Mr Beattie playing chess with my sister?"

Galloway stared. "Yes. How odd. I wonder where he got the board."

"I wonder who's winning," Elinor said. "She's very good at chess."

The Colonel chuckled. "Is she? Let's join them then; I've a feeling Beattie doesn't like to lose. I might enjoy this."

After a restless night considering what to do, Galloway decided to be frank with Beattie. He had made enquiries from Captain O'Halloran on the previous day and had confirmed Beattie's credentials. Galloway asked the Captain how long he would remain in port and whether he could find space for the ladies on the return if it became necessary and the Irishman shrugged.

“That’s up to Beattie, Colonel. I might captain this ship but Beattie has the trust of the man who owns it. If he says we wait, we wait.”

Reassured, Galloway spent the morning catching up on paperwork, then attended a painfully difficult meeting with members of the Council of Santander who had a list of questions about requisitioning which he could not really answer. After that he took himself off to the inn where Beattie had managed to find a room. It was a simple establishment, reminding Galloway of the little roadside posadas he had stayed in throughout Spain, but it looked surprisingly clean. He found Beattie writing letters in the single bar room, a tankard of ale beside him.

“Have you had dinner?” Beattie asked. “I was going to order something here. I think the choice is mutton stew or mutton stew.”

Galloway grinned. “I’ve bespoken dinner at the hotel with Miss Spencer and Miss Juliet. I was hoping you’d join us.”

“Willingly. I’ve demanded a return match. I’ve never been that humiliated by a slip of a girl in my life. Apparently her cousin is an army man and taught her to play chess. I wonder if his military strategy is as good?”

“I want to talk to you before we walk over there. I had a long conversation with Miss Spencer last night and I’ve had several conversations with Welby’s fellow officers. I’m not happy about the story of this betrothal.”

Beattie put down his pen and neatly capped the ink pot. He shuffled his papers together into a neat stack. Galloway thought it was the first time he had seen Beattie look even remotely like a clerk. He fixed his gaze onto Galloway with ominous concentration.

“Tell me. And don’t leave anything out. I told you yesterday I could smell something off about this and I always trust my nose.”

“I can’t prove any of it but I can tell you what I think.”

“Thoughts will do for now. Carry on.”

Galloway told his story. He had a strong suspicion that a good deal of it was not new to Beattie who had clearly made good use of his time alone with the younger Miss Spencer. He did not react at all when Galloway spoke of how Elinor had been bullied into accepting Welby’s proposal and then into making the journey to Spain unescorted.

“That’s the most unlikely thing about all of this,” he said when he had finished the story. “Why in God’s name did her aunt and uncle let those girls travel out here alone? No guardian who gave a damn would do that.”

“That’s not what’s puzzling me,” Beattie said. “The old man was desperate to get her married off. Clearly he didn’t care how. What I don’t understand is why Welby offered for her in the first place. If he’s all that you say he is...”

“I think I’ve solved that. I spent a tedious hour in the 9th Dragoon Guards’ mess room earlier. Thank God my father would never let me join the cavalry. He could have afforded it, he just said he was fond of me and didn’t want to lose me to sheer stupidity. I begin to understand now.”

“Stop talking nonsense and get on with it.”

“None of the young idiots know anything about Miss Spencer but they were happy to discuss Welby’s exploits with the ladies over a bottle or two. It seems that at the time of his engagement, Welby was in trouble over a young woman he’d taken

up with in London. Her family were making noises about breach of promise and Welby paid them off with a hefty bribe and took himself off to the country. The timing is right. I think he provided himself with a respectable fiancée to dissuade them from taking it any further. No point in pushing a man to marry your daughter if he's already wed."

"But he didn't marry her. Why didn't he end the engagement?"

"God knows. Perhaps he just couldn't be bothered. Perhaps her uncle threatened to spread the word that he'd jilted his niece. It's not the done thing after all and Welby's reputation didn't need more of a battering."

"I wasn't raised in quite the same social circles as you, Colonel, but I'll take your word for it. So why did he send for her?"

"I don't think he did. I think the uncle was beginning to smell a rat with the engagement that never ended. Or perhaps Miss Spencer gathered her courage and told him she wanted none of the Honourable Cecil. Whatever the reason, he pushes Welby into naming the day. Welby responds by saying she'll have to come out here. He probably thought that would stop it dead, but he reckoned without that old bastard Manson. Welby was probably on the verge of writing to tell him it was all off and be damned to the scandal. Now that he's back with the army, he could just wait for it to die down, which it would eventually. At that point, he receives the interesting news that Colonel Manson isn't well enough to travel and his wife is staying to take care of him. All of a sudden, the arrival of Miss Spencer, accompanied by a maid and with nobody to see to her interests takes on a whole new look to Welby."

"He wouldn't have."

"I think he bloody would. What's to stop him? Maybe she'd have worked out that he didn't have marriage in mind fast enough to appeal to his senior officers. Maybe they'd have listened and helped her. Or maybe he'd have persuaded her into a carriage to visit an imaginary parson, dumped the maid at the first stop and found a nice isolated farmhouse. Whatever happened next is almost irrelevant. She'd be ruined and very publicly, in the middle of an army camp. She would need a protector. And Welby would be willing to volunteer until he got bored with her. After that, God knows what would have happened to her. Don't tell me you've never heard a version of that story before, Beattie. It happens in London all the time."

"You really don't like him, do you?"

"I know him. He was a little shit at school. Most of them grow out of it. He never did. I've been hearing stories about Cecil Welby for years and all I ever wonder is why anybody is surprised."

Beattie was silent for a long time. "What about Miss Juliet?" he said finally.

"She was a complication he didn't expect. I checked the hotel records and he'd arranged a room for Miss Spencer and her maid. He knew Manson and his wife weren't coming but he didn't know they'd sent her sister as her companion instead. That might have stopped him, I don't know. Or she might have been dumped at the first stop with the maid and God knows what would have happened to her then."

"With my experience of one evening's acquaintance with Miss Juliet Spencer, Galloway, I don't think he'd have got either of them into that carriage if she'd been there. I think she'd have screamed the place down. That girl has literally no notion of how a delicate young lady should conduct herself. Or if she does, she

doesn't care."

"How do you know?" Galloway said, appalled. His companion leaned back, laughing.

"Instinct," he said. "Don't look so furious, I've no intention of making a push to find out if I'm right. Though I am going to play chess with her again after dinner, so if you wish to take the delectable Miss Spencer for a riverside stroll again, don't let me stop you."

"You believe me, don't you?"

"About Welby? Oh God, yes. Not that we'll ever be able to prove a damned thing, but you're not an idiot. If you say he's a tick and an excrescence, I'm taking your word for it. How long do you think he'll be away?"

"At least a week, possibly more according to Stratton. I don't want him near those girls when he gets back, but I'm not worried about that. The minute he knows that I know, he'll bluster himself purple in the face and then he'll run a mile. He might have money and be heir to a minor title, but I can cap that very easily in terms of the army. I have very influential friends."

"Do you? You don't look as though you do, I must say. Who are they?"

Galloway laughed. "The same ones you do, Beattie. It's just that in the context of this army, I'm better placed to use them. Right, let's take the ladies to dinner. A shocking thing to do in a public dining room but nobody who matters is going to know and they can chaperone each other."

Beattie got up. "Let me take these upstairs and change quickly and I'll be with you. Are they going to be all right staying there?"

"Yes. I'm staying there myself, I can keep an eye on them."

"If it's a matter of money, my employer is generous with my expenses."

"I'll just bet he is. I'd love to know what you really do for him."

"A surprising amount of it genuinely involves managing his diary and his correspondence. But you're right, there are other duties occasionally. You know the Van Daans, Galloway. None of them would hesitate to step in and help these girls if they were here."

"Thank God Paul isn't here. He's been looking for an opportunity to kick Welby into a dung heap for eighteen years. They're fine at the hotel, but I'm hoping you can hold that ship for a while. I want to make very sure my letter to their bloody uncle reaches him before they get home."

Beattie's face lit up with laughter. "You're going to write to Colonel Manson?"

"Yes. I'm going to make sure he knows what might have happened and I'm going to assure him that his nieces are no longer without friends to take an interest in their welfare. And then I'm going to list them, starting with my mother. I'd like to see her face if she heard he'd been locking those girls in a room and hitting them with a riding crop. She'd tear his head off."

"Your mother?"

Galloway heard faint amusement behind the question and felt himself flush a little. "I wrote to her today," he said defensively. "Told her about the girls and what's happened. I'm going to make enquiries about this cousin of theirs as well. I'm not allowing them to go back to their blasted uncle without somebody they can turn

to if he starts bullying them. I want them to know they're not alone any more."

Beattie picked up his tankard and drained it then set it down with unnecessary force. "Oh they won't be, I promise you. Your mother sounds like a woman I would love to meet. Get yourself a drink, I won't be long."

Elinor spent the first few days in Santander constantly looking over her shoulder. Colonel Galloway's speculation about Major Welby's motives had shocked her to the core and once she had time to think about it, she was genuinely frightened. She lay awake at night listening to Juliet's peaceful breathing, trying to imagine ways that she could have avoided walking into the trap, but she had a suspicion that she would have acceded to whatever Welby had suggested with regard to her wedding. She was appalled at her own naivety and angry to realise that she had become so cowed by her uncle's relentless bullying that she had almost forgotten how to say no and genuinely mean it.

During the daytime though, it was becoming difficult to be unhappy when she was being so well looked-after. The weather was fine with only the occasional shower or cloudy day and Juliet's bubbling high spirits were infectious. Her sister behaved as though this whole disastrous expedition was nothing more than a glorious holiday away from the dull routine of life in their uncle's house and after a few days, Elinor realised she was beginning to feel the same way. It was hard to hold on to her anxiety when there was so much to see and do and all of it was completely new.

They had very little money, but sightseeing cost nothing. Beattie had found them a roughly drawn plan of the town and they explored the winding streets and visited the cathedral with its glorious nave and peaceful cloisters. For two happy weeks they wandered in and out of churches and even visited a convent with Galloway to listen to the most beautiful choir music Elinor had ever heard. They rummaged through small dark shops where she could not resist spending a little of their precious supply of money on a lace fan for each of them. It was the prettiest thing she had ever owned and she would treasure it as a souvenir of this unexpected adventure.

By the end of two weeks, Elinor's fears had settled. She had stopped expecting to be challenged about payment of their bill and no longer imagined running into Welby around every corner. They dined each day at the hotel, usually with both gentlemen although occasionally Galloway's duties called him to dine in the mess. On one occasion Captain O'Halloran invited them to dine aboard the *Lady Emma*. Elinor dreaded his enquiries about her missing fiancé but she quickly realised that Gareth Beattie must have given him some explanation because he asked no awkward questions. Colonel Galloway was also a guest.

After dinner they took wine up onto the deck and stood watching some of the men dancing hornpipes by the golden light of the ship's lanterns. Juliet was laughing, teasing Mr Beattie to attempt the dance.

"You must have danced it at one time, Mr Beattie. You told me you were at sea when you were a boy."

"If I did, I don't remember it, Miss Juliet. I remember a lot of sea-sickness,

some terrible food and a few whacks with the cane from the bosun's mates. Not so much dancing."

"I don't believe a word of it. What if I agreed to dance it with you?"

Beattie was looking at her, shaking his head and laughing. "Oh no, you're not catching me out like that."

Juliet studied him for a moment then held out her hand. "Please?" she asked.

Elinor could feel herself stiffening. There was an unmistakable invitation in both Juliet's tone and expression. She could sense Beattie struggling with his better self and then she saw his taut hesitation soften and he took her sister's hand.

"Come on then. If we both slip over on this deck, I'm not taking the blame."

"I rely upon you to hold me up," Juliet teased and he laughed and drew her to stand alongside him. Around them, the crew roared their approval and O'Halloran began to clap along to the fiddler as Beattie demonstrated a simple step. He was surprisingly agile and light on his feet and Juliet watched in delight, then tried to copy the step. Her muslin skirts hampered her and she lifted them a little higher.

"It isn't fair, you can't dance this in skirts. Show me again."

He did so and Juliet followed. Elinor could feel her heart beating faster. She knew that she should intervene. Her aunt and uncle would be appalled at the sight of their niece dancing before a crew of common seamen with a man she barely knew and whom Elinor suspected had not been born a gentleman, for all his good manners.

"Breathe," Galloway said beside her. She looked up, realising that he had been watching her face rather than the dancing. Some of the men had joined in again and Juliet was moving among them, her face alight with happiness. Elinor thought she had never seen her sister look so carefree and so beautiful.

"I should stop her, this isn't right," she whispered.

"If you're looking at a young woman enjoying a dance and thinking there's something wrong in it, Miss Spencer, then you're not the girl I thought you were."

Elinor looked up at him, unexpectedly upset. "I'm not that much of a prude, sir. I know she's been too much controlled and confined. We both have. No wonder she's...but if people could see her like this..."

"The people who matter would smile. As you can, if you let yourself. None of your family are here and nobody is going home to tattle to them. She looks like a happy child. Take my hand. I can't engage to manage a hornpipe, I don't have Beattie's early training, but we can achieve something."

Elinor looked up at him wide-eyed. "I've never had a dancing lesson in my life," she said. "I don't know how."

"Then you'll learn. Try this, it's a country dance; a simple step but it will fit to this music. Watch my feet."

She was lost in minutes, her body caught up in the music and the joy of movement. The music changed to a faster beat and then to something slower and more stately. Elinor had no idea what she was dancing but it did not seem to matter. She was laughing and he laughed with her, catching her hand and passing it over to Beattie, then spinning Juliet around instead.

Elinor was silent as the small boat slipped through the water back to the jetty. Juliet was talking to the two men, teasing them about their dancing, asking Galloway questions about balls he had attended as though she had known him all her

life. Elinor listened. Her disapproval had vanished and in its place she felt a dreamy content, as though some kind of weight had been lifted from her shoulders. The swish of the oars was soothing and Elinor leaned over and trailed her fingers through the water. It was very cold. She wondered how it would feel to be immersed in it and wished she could experience it one day.

“You’re shivering. Here.”

Galloway’s red coat was warm and rough about her shoulders. Elinor looked around at him, smiling her thanks.

“Will you not be cold?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you for dancing with me, Miss Spencer. I enjoyed it very much.”

“So did I. I’m sorry I was such an idiot earlier. I think I’ve grown up with my uncle’s voice in my ear.”

“Ignore him. The man has nothing useful to say.”

She gave a little laugh. “You’ve not even met him.”

“I’ve been in the army since I was seventeen, Miss Spencer. I’ve met the likes of him more than once. The key is to recognise what you’re dealing with and don’t let it upset you.”

“I don’t think you’d get on with him.”

He gave her a smile which made her heart skip a beat. “Just now I’d like to kick him down a flight of stairs, ma’am, but I’d never do it. He’s an old man and your uncle. Which doesn’t mean I wouldn’t have something to say to him.”

“It’s probably just as well you’ll never meet.”

He did not reply but to her surprise he reached out, took her hand and raised it to his lips. “You’re going to be all right, ma’am. I promise you. Just wait a little while longer.”

Elinor looked down at her hands. “I’m glad I don’t have a betrothal ring,” she said. “I wouldn’t know what to do with it.”

“If he’d given you a ring I’d have thrown it in the Bay of Santander by now. Here’s the quay. Wait until they’ve tied up and I’ll help you over, it’s a bit choppy.”

Galloway was changing for dinner when the note came for him. He read it twice then went to find Beattie, who was already waiting at what had become their usual table on the terrace.

“I’m going to be late tonight. Will you take the ladies in? I’ll join you later if I can.”

Beattie set down the book he had been reading. “What’s happened?”

“Welby is back. The party rode in about an hour ago.”

Beattie stood up. “Is he likely to make his way down here to visit his fiancée?”

Galloway smiled grimly at his tone. “No. Colonel Stratton is keeping him there until I’ve spoken to him. After that, I doubt he’ll want to come near her.”

Beattie’s reflected smile reminded Galloway of a particularly predatory wolf. “If he wants to, I’m happy to have a word myself.”

Galloway found Major Welby in an elegant room in one of the public buildings which the 9th Dragoon Guards had requisitioned as their battalion headquarters. There was a fire blazing in the grate which made Galloway blink in surprise as it was a warm afternoon. Colonel Stratton greeted him politely.

“Colonel Galloway, I have already spoken to Major Welby about this betrothal. He has admitted that he should not have invited the young woman out here without first speaking to me and asking my permission to marry. He has also confessed that he did so under pressure from her relations and that he has been having doubts about the connection for some time. It was a stupid and thoughtless thing to do, but no real harm has been done.”

Galloway did not speak. His eyes were on Welby’s face. There was the hint of a smirk on the good looking features which made Galloway think longingly about punching him.

“That’s very interesting,” he said politely. “As a matter of interest, what are Welby’s intentions now?”

“I have refused permission. The girl can’t stay out here, we’ve orders to join Lord Wellington as soon as possible. This is not the time for my officers to allow their personal lives to distract them; we are marching towards France. Under the circumstances, the Major is willing to pay for a passage home for her and I have suggested that he visits her to ask to be released from his obligation. No harm done.”

The smirk widened a little. Galloway fixed his eyes onto Welby. “There’s no need for any of that, Stratton. Miss Spencer has made it abundantly clear that she wouldn’t choose to be in a room with this reeking pile of dog shit for five minutes, let alone marry him. Her accommodation and passage home are being managed by Mr Gareth Beattie, who was fortunately aboard the merchant ship she arrived on. He’s confidential secretary to Mr Franz van Daan who owns the shipping line and has the full approval of his employer to provide every assistance to Miss Spencer and her sister until they are safely home, including an escort.”

“Her sister?” Welby blurted out. Galloway was pleased to see that the smirk had slipped.

“Yes, didn’t you know? She is fully chaperoned by her sister and their personal maid. No need to worry at all that you’ve damaged her reputation, Welby. I know that must be keeping you awake at night. I understand you gave her no betrothal ring or any other kind of token and she has assured me that she has already burned every one of your letters.”

“I find your attitude offensive, Galloway.”

“That will be Lieutenant-Colonel Galloway to you, Welby. Remember to salute me on the way out. I know you sometimes forget.”

Colonel Stratton shifted uncomfortably. “Well, well, it’s clear that tempers are a little frayed here. And I do agree Galloway that he’s not behaved well. I’ve spoken to him in the strongest terms about his conduct. Were it not for the impending campaign I might even be inclined to take it further, but this is war after all and I need all my officers.”

“That’s all right, Stratton,” Galloway said cordially. He was still looking at Welby who looked fuming rather than smug now. “If you tried to put together a charge for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman with this one, we’d be in

France before they'd finished listing the evidence. As long as he makes no attempt to contact that girl he can go and get his head blown off in a cavalry charge with my blessing. And he's going to. He's too stupid to stay alive."

Welby made a curious snorting sound. "You're insulting, sir! You'll meet me for that."

"Welby, don't be an idiot," Stratton said sharply. Galloway gave a broad smile.

"Is that a challenge, Welby?"

"That depends on whether or not you apologise."

"Well I'm not going to, but I'm happy to pretend I didn't hear you. Just remember it's my choice of weapons and I'll choose swords. I enjoyed fencing at school and when I was growing up I used to practice a lot when I visited the Van Daans at Southwinds. He was a good swordsman even then, Major-General van Daan. I learned a lot from him."

There was a long painful pause and then Welby shrugged. "Duelling is illegal."

"So it is and with very good reason. Excellent decision, Welby. Thank you for your help, Colonel Stratton. May I trust you to keep him busy and out of my way until you leave?"

"Of course, Colonel. I'm grateful for your discretion in this matter. Is she...will she be all right? Miss Spencer?"

"Yes, she'll do very well, Colonel. Good afternoon."

He had reached the door when Welby said:

"Are you still hiding behind him?"

Galloway turned and surveyed him. "No. But if I were you, I'd give some thought to the fact that he's with Wellington commanding a brigade of the Light Division and that's where you're going next, Cecil. I might mention that I ran into you here, but I've no need to give him a lengthy report on your antics. I'm sure his father will do that once he's heard from Gareth Beattie, who you'll remember is his secretary. And I'll see that salute. I'm your senior officer now. Try to bear that in mind."

The wind was brisk on the quayside and Elinor was wrapped in her cloak as she stood watching the barge rowing in from the *Lady Emma*. It was struggling a little in the white capped waves but it still seemed to her to be coming too quickly. Beattie had arranged for the removal of their luggage earlier in the day and had assured them that he would make sure their accommodation was ready for them before returning to escort them aboard. Elinor glanced at her sister. Juliet's eyes were on the boat where Beattie's bright copper head was clearly visible even through the spray. She could not help smiling but she was also very envious. Juliet had all the time in the world. Elinor felt that her time was coming to an end.

"Miss Spencer, may I have a word with you in private before you board? Eliza can stay with your sister."

Galloway led her to a little shack which looked as though it was used for

some kind of shipping office, with a smooth oak desk and wooden shelving containing dozens of ledgers. There was only one chair and Galloway did not suggest she take it. He looked tired and a little out of sorts.

“I wanted to speak to you about the arrangements for your journey. There’s no need to worry about anything. Beattie will be with you the entire way; he’s organised all the transport and any necessary halts. Place yourself in his hands, he’ll take good care of you.”

“I know he will. I’ll always be so grateful to him. And to you, sir, for your care of us. Thank you. I wish I could...”

“I wish I was coming with you. These weeks have felt very leisurely in places and now it feels rushed. I thought I’d have time to speak to you properly, but time has got away from me at the last minute and now you’re going.”

Elinor gave a painful smile. “I wish I could tell you I would write to you, sir, but my uncle won’t even allow us to receive letters from my cousin. I’ve found out all about him though, thanks to Mr Beattie, and he is going to try to arrange for letters to reach us. I wonder if...should you wish to write?”

Galloway smiled for the first time. “I am not going to give that smart-mouthed clerk control of my personal correspondence. God knows what would happen. He came to see me last night after dinner and gave me a huge talking to about my inability to get to the point. I couldn’t decide if it was for my benefit or for his, since he’s hoping if you’re not residing with your uncle the entire time it will make it easier for him to visit.”

Elinor stared at him, bewildered. “I don’t understand. Not reside with my uncle?”

“You’ll have to go back there at first of course. Don’t worry about him though. I’ve written to him in terms that I think will ensure there will be no more beatings or confinement. But you’re not happy there, either of you. I was wondering if you might like to make an extended visit to some friends.”

“Friends?” Elinor said, even more confused. “What friends?”

“My mother would like to meet you. I’ve written to her and told her all about you. You’d love it there. They’re good sorts, my family, and the place is full of horses and dogs. Do you like dogs?”

“Yes,” Elinor said. She was beginning to realise that this conversation had nothing to do with travel arrangements and her heart lifted. The Colonel was beginning to describe his favourite spaniel cross-breed and Elinor recognised nervousness. She allowed him to go on for a while because she was enjoying the sound of his voice and the opportunity to study his pleasant face and kind brown eyes. It might be a long time before she saw him again and she wanted to commit them to memory.

She would have been happy for the conversation to continue but the door opened and Beattie’s copper head poked around it, damp with spray.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well what?”

“Have you not done it yet?”

Galloway flushed slightly. “I was just telling Miss Spencer that...”

“Stop telling her things and try asking her something. The boat’s waiting

and we can't miss the tide. My employer has been remarkably patient about all this but he'll be getting to the stage of pacing the room and remembering why he thought about dismissing me two years ago."

"Why did he...?"

"Get on with it!" Beattie yelled and closed the door.

Elinor could feel laughter bubbling up, filling her with joy. Galloway looked down at her and seemed to catch both her happiness and her understanding. He reached out and took her hand.

"I always knew if I ever reached the moment of wanting to do this that I'd make an absolute mess of it."

"You're not, Tobias."

"I am. But I don't have time to tell you the history of every dog I ever owned. I'll let my mother do that. She's going to write to your uncle and I promise you he'll make no objection to you going to stay with her. With Juliet as well, of course. And will you call me Toby? All my friends and family do."

"Only if you will stop calling me Miss Spencer."

"Elinor, I love you. Meeting you, despite the appalling circumstances, has been the best thing ever to happen to me. Will you marry me, sweetheart?"

"Of course I will, you silly man. Why on earth did you leave it so long? No wonder Gareth is shouting at you."

He bent to kiss her. She could feel his quiver of laughter against her lips. "He told you to call him that, didn't he?"

"Well he had to, because of course he wants Juliet to do so and it wouldn't be proper. I mean it still isn't proper, but so much has happened that I have decided to abandon my notions of propriety and just see what happens next."

He kissed her again and there was a long and satisfying silence. It was broken as the door flew open again. Elinor jumped and turned. Galloway kept his arm firmly about her.

"Thank God for that. I thought I was going to have to do it for you. Thanks old man. This is going to make my situation so much easier."

"That wasn't my first consideration, Beattie. Get out of here."

"Of course. I'll leave you to say goodbye, but I want a quick word with you before we board. Congratulations, ma'am. I'm glad that arsehole Welby didn't put you off marrying into the army. You made a much better choice this time."

He vanished and Elinor moved back into Galloway's open arms. He kissed her again. "I'll write as often as possible. I'm going to try and get leave, although it won't be possible immediately. But I've not been home since just after Talavera, I might be able to manage something. If not, I'm afraid you're going to have another long engagement, my love."

"Do not dare to compare the two," Elinor scolded lightly. "I love you, Toby. Please keep safe."

"I will. I've already written the letters to your uncle and to my mother. I'm glad you said yes or they'd have been wasted. I'll send them off by the packet, they should get there well before you do. Goodbye, love. No, don't cry or you'll set me off. Come on, let's get you into the boat. Then I can go back to my quarters and howl."

Galloway watched his love being handed carefully into the boat then turned to Beattie who was waiting to speak to him. The other man was smiling.

“I’ll take care of her for you, I promise.”

“You’d better, if you want my support for your own future plans.”

“That’s going to take a bit longer. I’m not really in a position to marry just now and she’s not yet of age. But I was hoping I wasn’t wrong about your intentions towards Elinor. Partly because she’s a darling and will suit you very well and partly because it is going to ease our way considerably.”

“Have you actually spoken to Juliet?”

Beattie grinned. “I was going to,” he said. “She didn’t choose to wait, just in case I had an attack of nerves.”

“She’s a formidable young woman.”

“Yes, she is. I need to get going. But there’s something you should know. Welby’s departure with his regiment will be delayed. He’s had an accident. Stupid fool got drunk, celebrating his release from his unwanted engagement so I’m told. Went the wrong way down a dark alley in the port area of Santander and got himself beaten and robbed. Apparently they broke both his nose and his arm. He’ll have to convalesce for a couple of weeks before he can join his squadron.”

Galloway stared at him in complete silence. “Robbed?” he said finally.

Beattie grinned. “He hadn’t much on him. I had to make it look convincing. I gave it to Miss Spencer. Pin money for the journey home. She’d no idea where it came from, of course. I thought it was fitting.”

“And where was I when this sad accident occurred?”

“By a lucky coincidence it was the day you were invited to dine with the Mayor and the Council. About fifty people at that dinner, weren’t there?”

“I imagine that’s why nobody has questioned me about it.”

“I imagine so.”

Galloway could not decide how he felt about the admission and then realised it did not matter. Beattie would always make his own decisions and he suspected that some of those decisions would always be affected by where he began in life.

“Is that what your extra duties consist of, Beattie? When you’re not writing his letters and managing his diary?”

“No. Franz van Daan is well beyond needing any kind of hired muscle. I’m told he’s coming up for a knighthood. And I’m not that man, Galloway. Welby had it coming and you couldn’t do it, you’ve a career to think of. You’re welcome, by the way.”

Galloway felt himself smile. “Look after yourself. And them. I’ll write.”

“So will I. Come and wave to your girl, she’s trying not to cry.”

“So am I,” Galloway said. He made his way to the quay and watched as his friend jumped nimbly into the boat. Both girls waved until they were well out across the water. Galloway continued to do so until the boat was close to the merchantman and he could not make out the faces of the passengers. He could still see the movement of Elinor’s hand though and he thought she blew him a kiss. He blew one

back just in case and remained there until the boat tied up and the passengers were aboard. Finally he wiped his eyes surreptitiously, squared his shoulders and turned back to the streets of Santander and an appointment with a furious grain merchant.