

An Unquiet Dream

Elvas, Portugal, 1812

The dreams were the worst.

They came relentlessly every night, so that after two months of waking trembling and bathed in sweat in the early hours of the morning, Sean O'Connor dreaded going to bed. He knew that he cried out in his sleep from the awkward enquiries of his room-mates, and Sean was embarrassed. He was immensely relieved when Dr Adam Norris, who was in charge of the general hospital, approached him as he was leaving the mess one afternoon and suggested a change of room.

"It's very small, Captain, one of the attic rooms. I've had Colonel Stephens in it, but he left us on Thursday. There's a convoy leaving for Lisbon, he's going home."

"Do I warrant a single room, Dr Norris? I thought you usually reserved those for more senior officers."

"We don't have any senior officers left, Captain O'Connor. And I thought you might prefer it."

Sean felt himself flush. "I think my poor room-mates might prefer it. Have they been complaining?"

"They're worried about you, Captain. As am I."

"Thank you, Doctor. There's no need, I'm doing very well."

"No, you're not."

"I'm fine. The infection has gone and I'm getting stronger..."

"Captain O'Connor, you spent eighteen hours lying under a pile of dead bodies with your abdomen slashed open, it's astonishing that you're still alive."

"Don't," Sean snarled, and Norris fell silent. After a long pause, he said:

"I'm sorry. I know you prefer not to talk about it, but..."

"I can't talk about it," Sean said. He could feel his muscles beginning to tense. There were beads of sweat on his brow and he longed to turn and run. It happened all the time. He could manage short, simple conversations about the weather or the quality of the food, but anything that touched on the long hours of his ordeal at Badajoz set off a collection of incomprehensible physical symptoms which terrified him.

"All right, Captain," Norris said soothingly. "Don't worry about it. I'll get one of the orderlies to move your kit to the new room..."

"I don't need help," Sean snapped. "I may not be capable of doing my job any more but I'm quite capable of shifting a few bags up a couple of flights of stairs. Thank you, Doctor. I appreciate your concern."

Sean had made it to the door of his current room before he remembered there would be no solitude there. Captain Hendy and Lieutenant Brooke were still downstairs in the mess room, but Captain Smith would probably be in their shared room as he could not yet make it downstairs without assistance. Sean changed direction and went down the back stairs and outside. He was sorry that he had snapped at Dr Norris because he liked the man and he knew that Norris was genuinely concerned for him, but it did not help Sean to talk any more than it helped him to be silent.

Sean had been moved from the general hospital on the edge of Badajoz to the attractive little town of Elvas. There was no accommodation for officers within any of the three hospitals there. It was one of the ironies of Wellington's army that the privilege of holding an officer's commission turned into a significant disadvantage when an officer was sick or wounded. It was considered unsuitable for them to be treated alongside the common soldiers, so they were billeted in individual houses and left to fend for themselves. Those officers with private servants, or who had the means to pay for help, might do well enough. Others, who had nobody to tend them, were left to the mercy of whichever householder they had been billeted on and Sean had heard of men dying alone and untended.

Sean was surprised and relieved on his arrival in Elvas, to be offered space in a tall house in a narrow street behind the cathedral. It was under the supervision of Dr Adam Norris who ran one of the hospitals and was also responsible for the care of a dozen sick or wounded officers billeted in the Casa Mendes. The house was plainly furnished but scrupulously clean and food and basic nursing care was provided by Señora Avila the stout housekeeper who spoke little English but ran an efficient household. The

officers combined their pay and rations, and Captain Hendy's servant ran errands and assisted with the heavier nursing tasks. The arrangement was very effective.

"Better than being in one of those hospitals, old boy," Hendy said to Sean at their first meal together. "They're hellish."

"I've never heard of an arrangement like this for officers."

"It's not common, although Norris and Guthrie and a few of the other surgeons have been writing to the medical board to ask for better provision for the officers. This was set up by the regimental surgeon from the 110th but most of their wounded have been moved out, so Dr Norris has taken it over."

"Thank God for the 110th," Sean said with real feeling.

For ten days after his arrival, Sean was confined to bed, still burning with fever. There was a small isolation room on the first floor and having established that Sean could pay, Norris found a skinny twelve year old to take care of him, ensuring that he was fed when he could eat and kept reasonably clean. Eventually he examined the appalling wound across Sean's midriff and gave an approving nod.

"It's doing well, Captain, and the fever has gone. I thought we might lose you, but it appears you'll live to fight another day."

Sean tried not to shudder at the thought. He could not explain to Norris or anybody else how that day haunted his dreams. Badajoz had not been his first battle and not even the first time he had been wounded but the long hours that he had lain trapped under dead and dying men in the breach had left him with wounds that could not be seen and could not be treated. Around him, his fellow officers moved on. Some were sent back to England to recuperate while others went back to join their regiments with real enthusiasm.

Sean could do neither. Physically he was becoming stronger every day and Norris continued to give positive reports on the healing of his horrific wound. Mentally, he was a broken man. He started at every sound, cried out in his sleep and awoke sweating and terrified after dreams of blood and death. He was morbidly anxious about his health, and that of his fellow officers, checking on them compulsively and asking Norris worried questions about anything that seemed unusual. Sean knew that his fellows regarded him with a mixture of compassion and embarrassment and had begun to avoid his company.

Outside in the narrow street, Sean walked quickly down to the cathedral. The doors were open, and he slipped inside and made his way to a pew. There were several other people around, all of them locals who were either praying or sitting in quiet contemplation. One or two shot Sean a curious glance but did not speak to him. The priest was at the lectern, flicking through a huge bound bible and he looked over and gave a faint smile. Sean nodded in response then sat back and closed his eyes. Father Nani had become accustomed to his daily visits during these past weeks. He spoke a little English, and had even discreetly heard Sean's confession when the cathedral was empty and there was no danger of an unexpected visit from a red-coated tourist. The religious preferences of Irish officers were never discussed in the mess. Sean kept silent on the matter and practised his childhood Catholicism in secret when he could.

He found the church both a comfort and a refuge in his current misery although so far his impassioned prayers had brought no answer. Sean knew that his continued, steady recovery was putting Dr Norris in a difficult position. Within a few weeks, he was going to have to declare Sean fit for duty again and that would place the onus of making a decision squarely upon Sean's shoulders. Sean knew that Norris was trying to avoid that for as long as possible. If Sean was physically fit, he needed either to return to his regiment, resign his commission and go home, or at the very least, request a spell on half-pay.

Sean could not decide. Theoretically, an officer could sell out at any time, but few did during wartime unless they were too sick or too badly wounded to carry on. Sean's wound had healed well, and he suspected that at least some of his fellow officers would think that fear, rather than necessity, had made him leave the army and despise him for it. He rather despised himself.

There was no comfort today in religion. Arriving back at the Casa Mendes Sean was both relieved and irritated to find that Norris had ignored his wishes and that Private Coulson was already arranging his possessions in his new room. He saluted as Sean arrived and Sean found a coin and handed it to him.

"I can unpack for you if you like, sir."

"No need. I'm not that helpless, Private. Go on, off you go."

The room was small and clean with a narrow bed, a wooden table and chair and a small wash stand with a ceramic bowl and jug. Sean had few possessions, and it did not take him long to arrange them, using one of his boxes as a table beside his bed and the other as storage for his clothes. He set out writing materials on the table alongside a bottle of brandy and a pewter cup. It had been two weeks since his last letter to his wife and he knew she would be frantic for news, but somehow he could not bring himself to write until he had a decision to give her. Janey would want him to come home. Were it not for the children, she would have been on a transport to nurse him herself. Sean ached to see her but was glad she was not here. At some point she would have to know how badly his ordeal had affected him, but he was happy to delay it until he had made his choice. He sat staring at the blank page and had written nothing when the call came for dinner.

Meals, for those who were able to attend, were served in what must have been a parlour and which the officers had turned into an informal mess room. After dinner a few officers generally lingered on in the room playing cards, sharing wine and swapping battle stories. Sean rarely joined them. He desperately missed the camaraderie and banter of late nights playing whist for pennies and making bad jokes, but he could not risk making a fool of himself by flinching at a slammed door or getting a bout of the shakes at the mention of Badajoz. His mess mates were kind, but Sean did not expect them to understand.

Sean spoke little during dinner. He managed a conversation about the departure of Colonel Stephens and his new quarters and listened to a squabble between two subalterns about the best fishing spots on the Guadiana River. When the table was cleared and the cards were produced, Sean made his excuses and went up to his room. The others no longer tried to persuade him to linger.

Sean had recently received a parcel of books from Jane, and he sat on his bed under the sloping attic window and read until the light faded. He could hear the others going to bed, the opening and closing of doors and a muffled curse as Captain Gregg missed a step and stumbled, with his newly fitted wooden leg. Eventually it was quiet, and Sean got into bed and lay there, both longing for and dreading sleep.

It came eventually but when he awoke it was still dark. For a moment he was disoriented, expecting to see the shape of his room-mates on their narrow bunks and the litter of their possessions scattered around the room. Instead there were the few items of furniture and the closed ill-fitting door. Sean lay still for a few minutes with a sense of bewilderment, although he did not immediately know why. Finally it dawned on him that he was awake but perfectly calm. There was none of the usual panic and he could not recall dreaming.

The realisation almost sent him into panic and Sean unexpectedly wanted to laugh at how stupid that was. His usually lively sense of humour had been one of the first casualties of Badajoz and it was very good to see that it had not gone forever. Sean sat up, listening, and realised that he had been woken, not by his usual terrifying dreams, but by a sound.

Sean sat listening for a while. It sounded like footsteps, pacing backwards and forwards across a room. Occasionally it would stop, as though the person had paused in their restless movement, but then it would start up again.

Sean could not work out where the sounds were coming from. They could not be above him as his room was at the top of the house. There were other rooms on this floor, but as far as he knew they were not occupied by patients. Dr Norris definitely had the room next to his, and Sean had an idea that the other rooms belonged to the medical orderly and two or three officers' servants' as well as the Portuguese maid who was employed to clean the house and to help in the kitchen. Norris had not returned from the hospital by the time the other officers went to bed. Sean supposed it could be him, but somehow he could not reconcile this restless pacing with the doctor's calm demeanour. When he had told Norris about his sleep problems, the doctor had replied that his long hours of work left him so exhausted that he slept the moment he got into bed.

Sean got up and padded to the door, listening. After a moment, he opened it cautiously and stepped out onto the landing. Out here, the sounds were quieter. Sean tiptoed to the door to the next room and listened again. He could still hear them but not as distinctly. For a moment, he hesitated, then shrugged and went back into his room, closing the door. He was curious but he could hardly knock on the doctor's door in the early hours. Given the noise he frequently made in his own room during the night, he did not have the right to complain about anybody else. Sean got back into bed, closed his eyes, and resigned himself to a sleepless night, hearing the steady tramp of the footsteps.

It was light when he awoke, dawn coming early on these summer days, and he lay there for a while feeling very relaxed. The bed, although narrower than the wide bunk in his previous room, was very comfortable. It was covered by an old patchwork quilt which must have been part of the original furnishings of the house. It reminded Sean of home, where his mother and sisters had worked at quilting through the long winter evenings. This one was faded but very soft and Sean ran his fingers over it and wondered about the women who had made it and whether they had lived in this house.

Eventually there were signs of life below, and Sean got up. He had no servant with him so he had got into the habit of bringing up water each evening so that he could wash in the mornings. It was cold, but that hardly mattered at this time of year. Sean washed, shaved, and dressed. He was sitting down to pull on his boots before he realised what had brought on this unaccustomed sense of well-being.

He had not dreamed.

The realisation shocked him, and he remained seated on the wooden chair, gazing up at a blue sky through the high window without really seeing it. Sean could not remember the last night he had slept without the awful nightmares. Nothing had happened to bring about the startling change and Sean was almost afraid to hope that this was more than a temporary respite. All the same, it had cheered him up considerably and he arrived at the breakfast table and collected his portion of bread and spiced sausage in an excellent mood. The arrival of a supply convoy meant that there was sugar for his tea and Sean ate with a good appetite, listening to the usual conversations.

Letters had arrived from Wellington's army, marching towards Salamanca and Madrid to engage the French, and there was a lively discussion about his Lordship's probable plans which Sean found himself able to endure surprisingly well. There was also news of a convoy travelling to Lisbon within a fortnight to convey some of the sick and wounded either to convalescent hospitals in the capital or back to England. A hunting party had brought down several deer which promised a feast of venison that evening and Captain Hendy, who was almost fully recovered and expected to be able to rejoin his regiment in a week or so, offered to supply the wine for a celebration.

As the other officers left, Dr Norris appeared in search of a belated breakfast. Sean sat down again and poured more tea into two cups. Norris thanked him and began to eat.

"You seem better this morning, Captain O'Connor."

"I had a better night," Sean admitted. "At least, I didn't dream. I did wake up though. It was very odd, I thought I could hear somebody walking about in the early hours, but when I checked the corridor there was nobody there. Did you hear anything, Doctor?"

"I wasn't there," Norris said, around a mouthful of bread. "I was called out at about eleven and ended up having to perform an emergency operation on a German cavalry officer. I've only just come back. Once I'm at the hospital, there are always patients to see and I'm never back before morning. I was going to eat and go up to see if I can get a couple of hours sleep. God, I'd forgotten what tea with sugar in tasted like. Is there any more in the pot?"

"I'll get some," Sean said, getting up. He took the pot through into the kitchen, ignored Jenkins' rolled eyes at the request and went back to the table to find Norris regarding him with some amusement.

"You really are a lot better, Captain. Who knew that a night without dreaming could bring about this effect?"

"It probably seems stupid," Sean said. "It's just that I think I'd convinced myself it was never going to happen. That I'd be like this forever."

"The reassuring thing for me is that you're talking about it," Norris said. "You've been trying to hide from it."

"We don't discuss fear in the officer's mess, Doctor."

"No, because you're all too frightened to," Norris said without irony. "But that doesn't mean men don't talk about it at all, among friends. And it affects most soldiers at some point or another, even those who haven't been through such a horrific ordeal as you. I've a friend, a fairly senior officer these days, who freely admits that in the early days he used to throw up after every battle and that his hands shook for half a year after Assaye. You're not unique."

"I bet he doesn't talk about that in front of his junior officers, though."

"I've no idea, although knowing him, I wouldn't place a bet on it. But congratulations for taking the first step. Don't panic when it comes back – because it will – and don't run and hide again. Now that we've spoken, believe that I can be trusted. I'm not going to share your confidences with the rest of the army."

"I know you won't. Doctor – thank you. You've been the soul of patience and I know you've delayed signing off my sick leave for longer than you should."

"I have, and I'm going to extend it for longer. You shouldn't rush into a decision either way, just yet. In fact, I've a proposal for you. We've no commandant in charge since poor Major Clarke died of typhus. Eventually they'll assign somebody, but how do you feel about helping me out with the running of the place until they do? I'll write to Dr McGrigor, and he can speak to Lord Wellington and your commanding officer about it."

Sean was taken aback. "I know nothing about medicine, Doctor."

"That's why I'm here. The medical staff are my responsibility, but there should be a regimental officer as commandant, in charge of the orderlies and ward-masters and to take care of general discipline. It won't be a formal appointment, but it would be a big help, and it might give you more time to decide."

"All right," Sean said. "Doctor, I'm not sure I've ever said this, but I'd like...it was always my aim to get back into combat again."

Norris smiled and poured tea from the replenished pot. "I know, Captain. If it hadn't been, you'd have allowed me to send you home on those first transports. Let's give it some time, shall we? Now what was this about footsteps in the night?"

"I thought it was you, at first," Sean admitted. "They sounded so close, like a man pacing up and down the room."

"Not me. By the time I get to my bed, I've no energy to pace the floor. I wonder if it could have been in the room below? Sounds can carry in an odd way in these old houses."

"Who has the room under mine?"

"Ashby and Newton. It won't be Newton, though, I've had to move him out, he's down at the fever ward."

"God, I'm sorry, I didn't realise that."

"I must say I've never heard Ashby moving about in the night, but that doesn't mean much, I sleep like the dead and besides, my room isn't above his."

"I wish I knew," Sean said. "If it is him, then there's a reason behind it. I don't know Ashby well. I don't know any of them that well, but perhaps something's troubling him."

"He never seems that troubled to me," Norris said frankly. "But in any case, he's got a clean bill of health and he's off back to his regiment."

"I'll be the only one left soon," Sean said.

"Not for long, Captain. There'll be another battle and another wave of wounded men coming in by wagon and it will all start up again. That's why I need your help."

Sean was doubtful about his new role as temporary hospital commandant, but he quickly found that his new responsibilities kept him very busy and kept his mind occupied. Over the following week he met with the commandants of the other two hospitals in Elvas and began to familiarise himself with his new duties. There was a lot to learn but Norris was a patient and informative teacher.

There were no more dreams. Most nights, Sean slept through, tired out after a long and busy day. Twice he awoke in the night to the sound of pacing footsteps, and lay listening to them in growing bewilderment. He broached the matter with Lieutenant Ashby just before his departure and Ashby stared at him so blankly that it was clear that he knew nothing about the matter. It was a mystery, but Sean had no time to dwell on it.

The dream came after ten days and was so unexpected that it shook Sean, who had begun to think that his troubles were over. He awoke after hours of peaceful sleep into a room bathed in silvery moonlight. He had left the window slightly open against the stuffy heat of the summer night and a breeze had sprung up, wafting cool air into the room. At the foot of his bed, a woman stood immobile.

The moon made it possible to see her clearly. She was dressed in a shapeless white garment, her long dark hair loose around her shoulders. Sean thought that she looked very young but also very unwell. She was thin and gaunt, her arms almost skeletal and the bones of what should have been a very lovely face standing out in sharp relief. Her eyes were pools of darkness.

The shock made Sean yell. He closed his eyes tightly and pulled the quilt up over his head. There was no sound in the room. Sean lay curled up for some time, sweating in fear, with his heart pounding. Eventually, reluctantly, he forced himself to move. Peering over the top of the quilt, he saw the room,

neat and unremarkable as it had been when he went to bed. The girl was not there, and Sean decided that she never had been.

Sean got up and went for the brandy. Pouring a generous measure, he went back to bed and sat sipping it, waiting for his heart to slow down. He realised it must have been another dream and that his first waking had been part of the illusion. It was disheartening, but Sean sternly forbade himself to overreact. He had gone for almost two weeks without dreaming and this dream, although terrifying, was nothing like the repetitive nightmares of Badajoz. At the very least, that cycle had been broken.

Sean mentioned it to Norris when they were going over some supply requisitions the following day. His instinct had been to keep quiet about his relapse, but he remembered what Norris had said and decided that talking about it might be a good idea. Norris heard him out without interruption.

“Well done for talking to me,” he said, when Sean had finished. “And it’s certainly different from your previous nightmares. I wonder why this woman? You didn’t recognise her, did you?”

“No. She looked ill...half-dead to be honest. I did wonder...”

“Go on.”

Sean took a deep breath. “I could hear them screaming,” he said abruptly. “When I was lying there all those hours, thinking I was about to die. I could hear the people screaming when the soldiers sacked the town. Especially the women. I heard afterwards what they did to them. How many of them were raped. And I felt guilty that I was lying there listening to it happening and I couldn’t get up to help.”

“Dear God, I didn’t realise that,” Norris said softly. “No wonder you have nightmares, Captain. Look, try not to worry about it too much. You’ve come so far in the past few weeks. Do you want me to give you a sleeping draught?”

“No. I tried that at the beginning, and it made me feel terrible. I’ll be all right.”

“Well let me know how it goes over the next few days,” Norris said. “Are you still hearing the footsteps?”

Sean laughed. “Yes. Although not last night, oddly enough. They don’t bother me, I think it’s just the house falling down around us. They don’t even keep me awake for long, although I always wake up. I do wonder what it is, though.”

“Rats scampering around and chewing on the plasterwork, probably. We’ll know when a section of the roof caves in,” Norris said philosophically. “I’m glad that you’re taking a more light-hearted attitude Captain, it’ll do you good.”

Sean agreed with him. While he was unable to deny his disappointment at the return of his nightmares, he was pleased that his mood remained optimistic. He was enjoying having a job to do and he realised it was improving his confidence. As many of the convalescents left and others arrived, he had no need to explain his continuing presence at the hospital. Norris merely introduced him as the temporary hospital commandant and his new mess mates did not hesitate to come to him with questions and complaints. While it was not the same as being in command of a company of the line, it made Sean feel useful and for the most part it kept the nightmares at bay.

He saw the woman again a few nights later. This time, the dream caught him just on the edge of wakefulness and he made himself lie still, his heart pounding with the shock, staring at the slender form. Without the panic he had felt at his first sight of her, he was able to observe details that he had not noticed before. She was definitely wearing some kind of nightgown, stained in places and with a ragged hem. Her hair looked dishevelled and the sunken misery of the dark eyes unexpectedly wrung Sean’s heart. His eyes hurt as he forced himself to stare at her, trying hard not to blink. He could not help himself, and in that flicker of an eyelid, she was gone.

Sean sat up. The dream puzzled him because he had no sense of when he had slipped between sleep and wakefulness. The first time he had seen her, it might have happened at any point when he was huddling under the bedclothes, but tonight he would have sworn that he had been awake the whole time. It was clear that he could not have been. If he had, then his illness had taken an unexpectedly sinister turn. Sean settled down, then lay awake for several hours worrying about brain injury.

He took his concerns to Norris the following day. Norris had asked Sean to join him on an expedition to inspect a building which might be suitable for a new fever hospital. Fever patients were currently lodged in one of the convent buildings, but it was not large enough. Sickness was rife in Wellington’s army and far more men died of fever or dysentery than in battle. Norris had been searching for a new location for his fever patients for some time and walking through the dusty sheds of an abandoned winery, Sean thought he might have found it.

They were at the site for several hours, making lists and notes and talking to the owner, an elderly farmer who had lost his son to war and clearly had very little interest in what became of the unused farm buildings. Repairs would be needed and a thorough cleaning before bunks could be installed, but Sean thought that there were probably enough walking wounded to do much of the work. His new position had quickly introduced him to the idlers and malingers who haunted every army hospital and he suspected that giving them an honest day's work would convince many of them that it was time to return to their regiments.

It was evening before they rode back towards the hospital, and Norris suggested that they stop at one of the taverns in the square for a meal and a drink. It was the first time since Badajoz that Sean had done anything like this, and he enjoyed it enormously. They sat outside on wooden benches after they had eaten, sharing a jug of wine and swapping stories.

"How are your nightmares?" Norris asked finally, as they poured the last of the wine.

"I'm not sure. Yesterday, I started to wonder if it's a dream at all or if I'm going a bit mad. I saw that girl again, but it felt as though I was wide awake. Is it possible that I'm seeing things?"

"Hallucinations?"

"Are they real? I've heard of them, but I've no idea."

"Oh yes. It's not unusual with a brain injury, I've known men who have seen the oddest things. I suppose it's possible, but if you hurt your head in that mess I'd have expected to see signs of it weeks ago. If you want my honest opinion, I think it's another of your dreams and you just didn't realise it. But this one doesn't seem to be upsetting you as much, and you're definitely less jumpy now."

"That's the wine," Sean said, lifting his cup. Norris laughed and raised his in a toast.

Sean felt pleasantly mellow as they went back to the house and up the stairs to their rooms.

"If they need me in the middle of the night you'll have to shake me awake, Captain, or I'll never hear them," Norris said. "I'd invite you in for a last brandy, but I've run out."

"I've got some," Sean said. "Come in. It'll help you sleep."

They laughed together as Sean poured the drink, slightly tipsy and shushing each other loudly. Sean sat on the bed, giving Norris the chair. It was a bright clear night, a sliver of moon and a canvas of brilliant stars shining through the window. Sean lit two candles and sat back, sipping the brandy and enjoying the companionable silence. He realised he was becoming sleepy and closed his eyes. Norris had fallen silent as well and Sean wondered suddenly if he had dozed off on the hard wooden chair and opened his eyes to look.

She was there, as on the previous occasion, wholly immobile, with the dark eyes staring sightlessly towards him. She was so close to where Norris sat that he could have reached out and touched her. The shock of it drew a squawk of alarm from Sean. He scuttled backwards on the bed into the corner by the wall, spilling the dregs of his brandy onto the quilt, and closed his eyes tight.

"Captain! Captain! Are you all right?"

"No," Sean said, shaking his head violently. "No. Oh no, no, no, no, no. I can't stand it. I'm going bloody mad. Bad enough with the dreams, but now I'm seeing things when I'm wide awake and I can't take it."

A hand grasped his arm. "Up," Norris said in peremptory tones. "Come on, into my room. Don't argue with me, move."

He bundled Sean into the next room and pushed him into a folding camp chair. Sean realised Norris had brought the brandy with him and watched, silent and trembling, as the doctor poured two cups. He carefully put one into Sean's shaking hand and made sure that he drank some before sitting in an identical chair opposite him and drinking a large gulp from his own cup.

"Better?"

Sean nodded and drank more. "I'm sorry. Look, I know you've tried, but I need to resign my commission. I'm never going to..."

"Sean, will you shut up for five minutes and let me speak. Don't say anything at all."

Sean was surprised into obedience. He suddenly realised that there were beads of sweat on Norris's forehead and his hand holding the cup was not entirely steady either.

"You're not going mad and you're not seeing things," Norris said quietly. "Or at least if you are, it's contagious. I saw her too."

Sean stared at him. It was at least a minute before he really understood the words and when he did, he could not say anything, frozen with shock and sudden terror. His voice when he finally spoke was a croak.

“You saw her. You mean...”

“No, don’t say anything,” Norris said quickly. He was on his feet, rummaging around on his desk. His room was considerably larger than Sean’s with a wide old fashioned bed and a collection of battered furniture. Norris came back to him with paper and a pencil. He handed Sean a large book to lean on.

“Write, he said briefly. “It doesn’t have to be neat. That’s why I wanted you to keep quiet. I want to compare what we saw. You’ve seen her several times, so yours should be a lot more detailed than mine. Get on with it.”

Sean put down his glass on the floor and took the pencil while Norris went to the desk. Having something to do helped to calm his fear and he found that after a moment he was able to write fluently. As he wrote, Sean reflected that it was an advantage to have a scientific mind. It would not have occurred to him to compare notes in this way.

Eventually, Sean ran out of things to write. He read what he had written and put down his pencil. He got up and handed Norris the paper and Norris scanned it, his lips quirking into a smile.

“Yours is a lot neater than mine. I suppose you’ve had time to get used to her.”

Sean looked over his shoulder. “Or it could be because you’re a doctor. I’ve never yet met one who could write legibly.”

Adam gave him a look. “Perhaps I should hand over more of my paperwork to you, Captain O’Connor, as you’re so proud of your penmanship. As I thought, yours is a lot more detailed. I didn’t notice the embroidery on the shift although I did see the stain, mainly because I thought it might be blood. I didn’t see as much of her face as you did, and I didn’t notice that her feet were bare. But I wrote a lot about her physical condition because she looked as though she was half starved.”

“That may also be because you’re a doctor. It makes sense that we noticed different things.”

“But generally, the accounts tally remarkably well. I’d say we saw the same thing.”

“I can’t believe it,” Sean said. “I thought I was going mad. But Doctor...”

“My name is Adam. I think we’ve gone beyond formality.”

Sean smiled faintly. He was beginning to feel a lot better. There was something very reassuring in Norris’s practical approach to the vision. “Adam, how did she appear? Every time I’ve seen her, I’ve had my eyes closed and I’ve just opened them and she’s there.”

“It’s difficult to say. I was looking at you, laughing to myself, thinking you were going to fall asleep in front of me. And then I saw something to my left, like a flutter of movement, so I turned my head, and she was right there. I nearly died of fright.”

Sean could not help laughing at his frank admission. “It probably sounds rude to say that I’m glad, but I bloody am. Look, Adam...have you ever come across anything like this before? I mean what is it? What is she? Is she...have we seen...?”

“A ghost? How the hell would I know? No, I’ve never seen anything like it before, although I’ve met men who say they have. To be honest I’ve generally put it down to too much drink and a dark night on sentry duty.”

“We’ve been drinking.”

“That’s why I wanted to write it down,” Norris said. “I think it’s entirely possible for two men in drink to egg each other on to the point that they’re convinced they’ve seen a ghost. But I don’t think they’d be capable of the kind of detail we just produced independently. Admittedly you did tell me previously that you’d seen a woman, but you gave me no details at all.”

Sean regarded him for a moment. He felt very sober, with the beginnings of a headache. “So who the hell is she? Or was she?”

“I’ve no idea. Look, why don’t you sleep in here tonight, Sean, I’ve...”

“No, it’s all right. I’m not afraid of her, Adam, it’s just a shock when I see her. But she never appears more than once a night. I wonder if it’s always the same time, I’ve never looked.”

“Well it was around midnight when she turned up this evening because I’d just taken out my watch. I was going to wake you up to say goodnight.”

“I’ll add that to the notes,” Sean said, and his companion grinned.

“We’ll make a scientist of you yet. Get some sleep, Sean. I need to do my early rounds tomorrow, but we’ll meet up during the afternoon and talk about it. If you want to.”

“I do. There must be some explanation for this.”

Adam Norris slept late the following morning and dragged himself through his rounds with an effort. He was usually a moderate drinker, and it was not until midday that his headache subsided, and he began to feel better. The evening was one of the strangest he had ever experienced, but Adam found himself thinking about the early part as much as its dramatic conclusion. He had enjoyed spending time with Sean O’Connor, and it reminded him how much he missed his friends who were up at the lines. It had been a promotion to be placed in charge of a general hospital, but there were some disadvantages of being away from the main army and isolation was one of them.

Sean’s ghost was entirely another matter. Adam considered himself a rational man and had made it a principle during his medical career to weigh the evidence as far as he could before making a decision about diagnosis or treatment. In the heat of battle, there was no time to do anything other than react to every emergency and Adam knew that he sometimes made mistakes, but it was part of the job to accept that many patients could not be saved and live with it. Generally, however, he took his job seriously, studied whenever he could to keep up to date and was willing to accept new ideas.

Adam had never expected his open-mindedness to be tested by the appearance of a ghost, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not come up with any rational explanation for the figure he had seen the previous evening. There was no possible way the girl could have entered the room without him seeing her do so, or indeed hearing her as Sean’s door creaked horrendously. She had looked, for those few moments, as real and solid as Sean, but then she had vanished as Adam blinked and left no trace behind.

The apparition had alarmed Adam at the time, but there had been no sense of menace about the woman. She seemed sad and possibly desperate, but not threatening. Making his way through the hot, stinking wards of the hospital, Adam found himself wondering about her. Having never believed in ghosts, he knew nothing about them apart from stories around the fireside during his boyhood, but all the tales of hauntings he had ever come across involved a person once living.

He mentioned this to Sean when he joined him in the commandant’s office that afternoon before dinner. Sean looked surprisingly well and grinned when Adam said so.

“Ten years of army life will give you an awfully hard head for the drink, Adam. Sit down. I’ve a very nice madeira or I can send Private Edwards for some tea if you’d prefer.”

Adam laughed. “Let’s try the madeira, although if this goes on I’ll be dead of the drink before the end of this war. I’ve been thinking about your ghost all day.”

“My ghost, is it now? I did wonder about that, you know, because I’m assuming that Colonel Stephens never mentioned seeing anything. So is it the room she’s haunting, or is it me?”

“I don’t know,” Adam admitted. “To be fair, Stephens was in a lot of pain. He’d lost his right arm and I had him dosed on as much laudanum as I could. Which he later supplemented with wine. He’d have slept through an army of ghosts marching through that room, and this one was fairly silent.”

“Was she though? I admit she’s never made a sound when I’ve seen her, but I’ve heard those footsteps pacing many times.”

Adam was startled. “Good God, I’d forgotten about that. So you never found out who it was?”

“No. I’ve asked around, but they all looked at me as if I was mad. As you know, I put it down to rodents of some kind but I’m not so sure now. It didn’t sound much like rats or mice, it’s too regular and too loud. And honestly, it didn’t sound as if it came from below me. I’d have said either next door or above, but there’s nothing up there that I’m aware of.”

“Or in the same room,” Adam said quietly.

“Now isn’t that a delightful thought.”

“Well it’s one you don’t need to dwell upon. I’ve had them clearing out Major Clarke’s room for you, I wanted it well scrubbed because of his illness, but it’s ready now. It’s on the floor below mine and it’s a lot more comfortable than the room you’re in. You could move your kit before we go into dinner. I’ll help you if you like.”

“I’m not arguing with you,” Sean said. “It’s not that it’s frightening exactly, but it’s a little unnerving now that I know she’s not just in my head, not knowing when she’ll make an appearance. And we can treat it as a piece of research. At least that way, we’ll find out if it’s me or the room.”

Adam laughed aloud. "Whatever the cause of this, Captain O'Connor, it's been the making of you. You're a changed man, between ghosts and your new responsibilities."

"And a man I can call a friend," Sean said, echoing closely what Adam had been thinking earlier.

"That as well."

"About those dreams, though. I actually think she did help me out with that infernal pacing. It woke me up so many nights, that I think it interrupted the dreaming. By the time I went back to sleep, I was thinking of something else and once I stopped worrying about the dreams, they stopped coming so much. Although I still jump like a nervous colt if a door slams close by."

"One thing at a time, Sean, you're doing very well. Have you written to your poor wife yet?"

"I have, so. I told her I'm staying out here for the present, in a temporary posting and that I'll make my decision when they find a replacement for me."

"Good for you." Adam paused. He had a question, but he was not entirely sure how to phrase it. "Look, Sean, we can leave it here if you like. If you move into another room and the whole thing stops. I'll close that room down, use it for storage."

He could see the Irishman considering it. "We could do that," he said. "But I rather like the notion of a hospital for officers, I think we should have more of it not less. And besides, now that I've seen her, I want to know."

"Know what?"

"Who she was. What happened to her. Why in God's name she's wandering the rooms of this house."

"And how are you going to find that out?" Adam asked with genuine curiosity. Sean grinned and raised his glass.

"Research, laddie. I learned the value of it quite recently from a scientific mind that I very much respect. Your good health."

Sean slept well and dreamlessly in his new room. He was kept busy for a few days because of a selection of disciplinary matters among the convalescing soldiers. It was well known that idle soldiers were the most troublesome to manage and Sean was finding that discipline was the biggest challenge of his new post. He had been trying to steer a course between firmness and compassion, but a report from the Portuguese authorities in Elvas about a raid on a local farmhouse pushed him beyond his limit. The owners of the house had been robbed and beaten, but what infuriated Sean was the tearful aspect and bruised face of the farmer's daughter. No complaint of sexual assault was made, and Sean was not surprised, since the farmer would not wish to broadcast his daughter's shame, but he was determined to make an example. Too many of the more active convalescents assumed that their status on the sick roll made them immune from punishment and Sean summoned a court martial, determined to prove them wrong. He could not flog them for rape, but their other crimes were well documented and although the punishment was relatively light, Sean could sense their shock that he had administered it at all, and in front of every man fit to witness it in the entire hospital.

When it was over, Sean informed Dr Norris that the men involved had effectively proved their fitness for duty and would be sent back to the lines with the next convoy, along with a letter to their commanding officer about their crimes. Adam made no attempt to argue, and with the matter concluded, Sean had time to turn his attention to the matter of spectres. He knew nothing about how the Casa Mendes came to be part of the general hospital and took his initial queries to Adam, who shook his head regretfully.

"I wish I could tell you, but I had nothing to do with it. We were struggling with the wounded after Badajoz and the officers were billeted all over the place and then Mrs van Daan informed me that she had found this place and that we could have the use of it. Señora Avila and her staff came with the house, but I know nothing of the owners."

"Mrs van Daan?" Sean said blankly.

"The wife of Colonel van Daan of the 110th. He commands the third brigade of the light division. She helps out with the wounded, and..."

"I've heard of Mrs van Daan," Sean said, and then saw the expression on Adam's face and hastily revised a large amount of gossip he had been about to repeat. "I mean...isn't she the lady who has worked with the surgeons and who does rather more than nursing?"

Adam Norris studied him for a long moment then gave a faint smile. "Anne van Daan and her husband are two of my closest friends, Sean. She came to work with me as a volunteer in Lisbon three years ago and I trained her, against enormous opposition from my fellow surgeons. She's extraordinary. She's also a very good organiser and she found this place. I'll write to her to see what she knows. In the meantime, I've had another idea. We need an excellent source of local gossip and I know just the place to find it."

"Where?"

Norris grinned. "At the local brothel, of course."

Sean stared at him. He realised his mouth was hanging open like a callow boy who had never heard of a brothel and closed it quickly. "I wonder why I didn't think of that."

Norris laughed aloud. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. There's a young woman by the name of Pereira who runs a very pleasant tavern on the edge of town. I have been there, but not as a customer. One of the girls was very unwell during the time we were here, and Senorita Pereira had no faith in the local apothecary so I was asked as a personal favour if I would attend."

"A personal favour for whom?" Sean asked.

"A young officer who is a particular friend of the lovely lady. I'm not giving you his name, it wouldn't be right. We can walk over tomorrow if you wish. It's not far, just near the Santa Luzia Fort."

"Convenient for the garrison, then. If my wife knew I was planning a visit to a brothel, she'd never speak to me again. I'm assuming you aren't intending to tell yours either?"

"Oh, I'm not married. I can't imagine how your wife would find out, but I promise to bear witness to your good behaviour if ever I'm asked. You'll like Diana Pereira, she's not at all what you'd expect."

It was less than two miles to the tavern, and they walked through quiet streets as the people of Elvas generally took a siesta during hot summer afternoons. Sean wondered if they would be admitted but the tavern door was wide open. They went in and found the tap room almost empty apart from two elderly men seated on a bench with a jug of wine and a chess board between them. A stocky dark-haired man was seated on a high wooden stool behind the bar with what looked like an account book in front of him, but he stood up as they entered and gave a little bow.

"It's Emilio, isn't it?" Adam asked pleasantly. "Dr Norris, I was here last year, to tend Lotta, I'm not sure if you remember me?"

The man nodded but did not speak. Adam ordered wine. As he was paying, a door at the back opened and a woman came into the room. She was dressed in yellow muslin, and she wore her hair pulled back at the sides with decorated combs but otherwise loose down her back. Sean thought she was probably in her twenties and was very attractive and very self-assured.

"Welcome, gentlemen. A pleasant change to see a red coat, we don't see so many of them these days. Have you just arrived...?"

She stopped, her eyes on Adam's face, and then she smiled again and there was warmth in it. "I'm sorry, Doctor, I didn't recognise you immediately. You're even more welcome as an old friend. Please, put your purse away. You wouldn't take a penny for your services to Lotta, the least you can do is allow me to buy you a drink."

Adam took her outstretched hand and raised it to his lips. "Miss Pereira. May I introduce the acting Commandant of my hospital and my good friend, Captain Sean O'Connor."

"My pleasure, ma'am."

"Mine too, Captain. Are you just here for a drink, Doctor, because I'll willingly leave you in peace?"

"I was hoping to speak to you, ma'am. We're in search of some information about the Casa Mendes and the family who lived there before the army medical service took it over. An administrative matter."

Bright brown eyes surveyed them with amusement. "Well I can't help much with that, Doctor, because I understand the place is rented through an agent. Although I imagine you knew that."

Adam grinned. "I do, ma'am, and you have caught me out. I'm in search of gossip."

The woman gave a broad smile. "Ordinarily, I would tell you that you have come to the wrong place, Doctor. Discretion is, after all, my business. In this case, however, there is no need for discretion since none of the Mendes family have ever patronised my establishment. Come through to my sitting room and I will give you a rather better wine."

The sitting room was a comfortably cluttered room at the back of the house. Diana offered chairs and wine then seated herself in a comfortable armchair. Sean tried hard not to stare. It was many years since he had last visited a brothel as a very young officer but he was sure that it had been nothing like

this. He looked around the room curiously and looked back to see that his hostess had caught him staring. She smiled.

"It is my place of work, Captain, but it is also my home. And since you are probably wondering, my English is so good because my father was English."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I was being rude."

"No, just curious. What do you want to know?"

"Did you ever meet the Mendes family, ma'am?"

"Heavens, no. Dom Alfonso was a gentleman in his fifties, a widower for several years. There is a son, who serves at court in some capacity or other, so he went to Brazil when the royal family fled Lisbon. I believe the house is rented out through an agent."

"You said 'was', ma'am."

"Yes. Dom Alfonso died several years ago which means the house belongs to his son. I must tell you that I was not in Elvas at the time of these events, by the way, so I am repeating gossip. But I have heard the story often enough from a variety of local gentlemen, and I think it is largely true."

"Go on."

"When the French invaded in 1808, the house was occupied by Dom Alfonso and his sixteen year old daughter Juana. She was convent educated and I am told she had only recently been brought home because a marriage was being arranged for her. Her mother was already dead.

"Dom Alfonso could have fled south to Lisbon and joined his son, but he did not wish to leave his various properties to the mercy of the French, so he remained. He was apparently furious when they took the town, and very quickly commandeered his house as billets for French officers. He loathed the invaders and made no secret of it.

"They were here for six months and when they marched out after Lord Wellington's victory at Vimeiro and the peace treaty, Dom Alfonso was left in the house again, without the invading officers but also without his daughter."

"You mean she left? Or did she die?"

"Well that, of course, is the question. Here, I am afraid, there are several different versions, and I cannot tell you which is true. Dom Alfonso gave out the story that his daughter had been abducted and murdered by a French officer. He behaved from that day on as though she was dead, and very soon made arrangements to leave for Brazil to join his son. He never arrived, however, but died of some illness aboard ship."

"But was the murder never investigated?" Sean asked. He had forgotten his awkwardness in her presence in his interest in her story. "Surely if he reported this to the local French commander, there would have been a court martial?"

"One would think so, but the French had gone before he ever told the tale," Diana said. "This of course, led to a number of different theories which quickly spread through the town and probably contributed to his sudden decision to go to Brazil. Some people suggested that Juana's father found her dead and killed the officer then hid his body. Another story was that the girl fell in love with the officer and left with him, either married or in disgrace. Either way, Mendes would never have forgiven an alliance with the enemy, so he cut her off entirely. I would like to believe that one."

"Any others?"

"Many people seem to think that Mendes found out about the affair and killed the girl himself. I do not think he could possibly have killed her lover, since the French would have arrested him and the whole story would have come out. But his daughter? From what I've heard of him, I think he might have done it."

"Do you think anybody suspected?" Adam asked.

"As I said, I wasn't here then, but Elvas is a small place and Mendes had boasted about the grand Court marriage he planned for the girl. I think he might have considered she had dishonoured him. He was a minor member of the nobility and he had high hopes for the alliance."

"What of her brother?"

"Still in Brazil as far as I am aware. When Dom Alfonso packed up and left for Brazil to join the royal family he employed Señora Avila with a small staff to take care of the house until a tenant could be found. I believe it was briefly used to billet some of the light division officers last year and then Mrs van Daan took it over for the 110th regimental hospital."

"That poor girl," Sean said softly. The woman studied him thoughtfully for a long moment.

“Yes, I’ve always thought it a very tragic story. As I said, I would love to believe she managed to leave with her French lover, but I am rather afraid she did not. I am longing to know why two English officers have such an interest in a long-buried local scandal.”

Sean could think of no answer that would not leave Miss Pereira thinking them mad, but Adam was better prepared. “There is a question over the lease,” he said. “If we are to make further improvements to the hospital, we would like to know that the family are not about to return, demanding their house back. The agent was odd about it, but it sounds as though he was concealing a scandal rather than avoiding a business arrangement. Thank you, Miss Pereira, you’ve been very helpful.”

Sean drank deeply. He was vaguely aware that the wine was excellent, but he found it hard to think of anything other than the thin, tragic figure of the girl in his room. He endured the rest of the visit as best he could and waited until they were well away from the tavern before he said:

“It has to be her.”

Adam glanced at him. “Our ghost?”

“Yes. It must be Juana Mendes. He killed her.”

“Her father or her lover?”

“Either of them. Or both of them, one way or another. She was just a child, straight out of the convent. Whatever they did to her between them, somebody should have been there to look after her.”

“Well if they didn’t, there’s nothing you can do about it now, Sean. She’s dead. She died four years ago.”

“Is that what you think? You don’t think she went off with her French lover?”

Adam glanced at him. “We’re probably never going to know for sure,” he said gently. “Honestly, we’ve found out more than I thought we would. I still don’t really know what it was that I saw that night in your room, but it’s clear we saw the same thing and if you add that to the story we’ve just heard, then I think it was some kind of ghost or spirit – the spirit of Juana Mendes. I wish there were something more we could do, but there isn’t. Unless you feel like talking to the local priest about an exorcism, and I must say...”

“No. Oh God, no,” Sean said, revolted. “You’re right, I need to let it go. I’m glad we found out what we did, though. Adam, thank you for this. For all of it. Wherever I end up, I’ll always be glad I had this opportunity to get to know you.”

High summer brought news from the front, of a spectacular victory at Salamanca and a march further into Spain. Wagons full of wounded and convalescent men made their way back to the general hospitals in Portugal and Adam Norris was so busy that he had no time to ponder the sad little story of Juana Mendes. The usual autumn sickness arrived early that year and Adam was grateful for Sean O’Connor’s capable presence as the hospitals were overrun and new premises became essential.

In November, they received word that Lord Wellington’s glorious campaign had come to an abrupt halt against the implacable walls of the citadel of Burgos and his Lordship’s army was retreating through appalling weather back to the safety of the Portuguese border, with the French snapping at their heels. Adam was supervising the unloading of a convoy of medical supplies outside the hospital when Sean joined him.

“The post is in. Endless letters telling us to expect a flood of sick and wounded. It sounds as though they’ve had another Corunna, poor bastards.”

“I know, I had a couple of letters from friends. Something went badly wrong with the supply chain.” Adam noticed that Sean was holding a letter. “What’s that?”

“A job offer,” Sean said. “Did you know about this?”

“Yes,” Adam said. “They wrote to ask if I would recommend you for the job. I said I would.”

“It comes with a promotion to major.”

“I also told them that I thought you were fully recovered and ready to return to combat if you should wish to do so, Sean.”

“I know. It’s my choice.” Sean looked around him. “It didn’t occur to me that I’d end up doing this permanently.”

Adam eyed him hopefully. “That sounds promising.”

“I ought to make you sweat, you underhanded bastard, you’ve been working at this, haven’t you?”

“Sean, it’s my job to make sure this place is well run. The improvement since you took over is astonishing, I’d have been mad not to ask them to make you permanent. But you can go if you want to. We’ll still be friends.”

“I’m staying. There’s so much to do here. In addition to running this place, they’ve made me district superintendent, which means I can inspect and make recommendations about the other hospitals.”

“Thank God for that,” Adam said. “The large convent is a bloody disgrace, I wouldn’t send an animal to stay there.”

They dined together in celebration and Adam felt pleasantly mellow as he settled to sleep. It had rained for almost a week and many of the town streets had turned to quagmires, the mud churned up by wagons and carts bringing in supplies and the first sick men from the retreat. Adam fell asleep thinking of the men currently marching into Ciudad Rodrigo with empty stomachs, camp fever and unhealed battle wounds and felt very fortunate.

He woke in darkness to an unfamiliar sound and sat up in bed. For a moment, disoriented, his mind flew to the apparition of the young girl and he wondered if this was some new manifestation of the ghost, but a moment later, he realised that what he was hearing was very much of this world. The rain was still falling, a strong wind driving it against the wooden shutters but there were sounds in the corridor outside, loud voices and footsteps and an alarming crashing sound.

Adam scrambled out of bed and into his clothing, then opened the door. Every occupant of the top floor of the Casa Mendes was there, the housekeeper and maids with cloaks and shawls over their nightclothes, and the clamour of voices was deafening.

“Sean, is that you? What the bloody hell is going on?” Adam called, and a voice floated up the stairs.

“The roof has caved in. Must have been a leak and the plaster has rotted. Thank God it’s above the empty room. Don’t go in there, Adam, it’s not safe. The rooms below are flooded though. Can you get everyone downstairs? I’m helping Fellowes down, he can’t make it on his own. The ground floor is dry, they’ll have to camp out down there until the morning, then we can get somebody to take a look.”

Adam groaned inwardly and turned his attention to the staff. Fortunately, after her initial panic, Señora Avila had regained her usual calm and was shepherding them downstairs with armfuls of bedclothes to find refuge in the dry part of the house. Adam made his way to the next floor down, where eight sick or wounded officers had their quarters. Sean had managed to light two oil lamps and was guiding the men, wrapped in blankets, down the narrow stairs, their feet splashing through water on the bare boards.

It was dawn before they were finally settled. The kitchen was in the basement and thankfully unaffected and as a grey light began to filter between the shutters, Señora Avila roused her staff and chased them upstairs to dress properly then down to the kitchen to begin preparing hot drinks and food for the exhausted invalids. Adam drank coffee with Sean in the mess room then rose with a sigh.

“Shall we have a look?”

“Might as well get it over with. The rain seems to have stopped, so I’d like to get someone out as soon as possible to start clearing up this mess so that Da Costa can have a proper look at it. I don’t want to have to give this place up if I can help it, Adam, not now. We’ll be back to having sick and injured officers scattered all over the damned place and with so many men coming in from this bloody retreat, we don’t need that. I want that roof repaired. We can round up enough convalescent men to do the clear up and if that’s not enough, I’ll write to Lord Wellington asking for a work party. There must be some men still on their feet in his army.”

“If it comes to that, I’ll write to Colonel van Daan. It will avoid a lot of unnecessary argument, he’ll just march them down here and claim it’s a training exercise,” Adam said with a tired grin. “But let’s see what we’ve got first.”

They made their way up the stairs, inspecting the damage. The south facing wall of the house was drenched, but not damaged and Adam thought that it could be dried out, as could the floorboards. They sounded walls and moved furniture and tested floorboards.

“I think we’ll have to keep an eye on that corner of the ceiling, but this is not as bad as I thought,” Sean said. “I wonder why it came down in such a deluge?”

“At a guess, I’d say the water has been pooling somewhere, it’s been raining for weeks. We’d better have a look in that empty room. Are you all right about that?”

“I’m fine, Adam. Come on.”

It was the first time Adam had been in the corner room since he had helped Sean move his possessions to his new quarters. The room was empty apart from some crates of medical supplies, the meagre furniture having been put to good use elsewhere. Fortunately, the equipment had been piled against the internal wall because the ceiling against the outside wall had completely collapsed. A pile of soaking, unpleasant smelling rubble was piled beneath a gaping hole and the room was covered in sticky plaster dust.

“What a mess.”

“It is. We’ll need to get this room cleared out as soon as possible and get the builder over to have a look. The first priority is to fix the roof, since it’s clear that’s how the water has been coming in. I’d guess it’s been collecting in the roof space above this room and soaking the plaster until it just gave.”

“Yes, the roof comes first. We could just board this up since nobody is using the room.”

Sean walked over to the pile of rubble and peered upwards into the dark hole. “I can see daylight up there,” he said. “I think a couple of tiles are missing.”

He paused and stood staring. Adam waited but his friend said nothing. After a while, Adam said:

“Sean? Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Sean turned. “Adam, this doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“This house. The roof of this house. Come with me.”

Adam followed him downstairs and out into the street. Although it was still early, there was a good deal of activity as the people of Elvas emerged after the storm. A few doors down, an elderly man stood on a ladder wielding a hammer, the nails held between yellow teeth as he repaired a broken shutter. Sean looked up at the house and Adam followed his gaze.

“Look at the slope of that roof. That’s the window of the small room. If you move this way a bit, you can see the missing tiles. That’s where the rain came in, it’s probably been collecting there for months.”

“Very likely, it will have rotted the boards through.”

“But what’s above there? It must be an enormous space.”

“You mean under the eaves? Attic space, I presume. There’s nothing odd in that, Sean, loads of houses have a decent amount of space under the eaves, most people use it for storage.”

“How do they get up there?”

“A loft hatch, usually. I’ve seen them with wooden pull down ladders in some old houses, or they just keep a ladder nearby to be used when they need it.”

“So why is there no hatch in this house?”

Adam stared at him blankly. “I don’t know. Isn’t there?”

“No. I’ve been in and out of all the rooms on the top floor since I took over as commandant and none of them has a hatch. In most of the houses I know, it’s above the corridor but there’s nothing there. Why wouldn’t there be? Everybody needs storage space. Even if the house was built without a hatch, it’s an old building. You’d think one of the owners at some point would have seen the need for it and put one in.”

Adam stared at him. Sean was right and for some reason the thought made him uneasy, although he was not sure why. “I can see your point,” he said slowly. “It is unusual. But why does it matter?”

Sean’s eyes were troubled. “Because I think there was a hatch,” he said softly. “Looking up where the ceiling came through, I can see the remains of a wooden square hanging down. I think there was a loft space and it’s been boarded up. That’s why the rain pooled so specifically in that area.”

“You mean...in that room?”

“Yes,” Sean said. “Is there a ladder about the place somewhere?”

“I think there’s one in the wood shed although I don’t know its condition. Sean are you sure?”

Sean turned back. “I have to,” he said, almost apologetically. “I have to know.”

They found the ladder attached to the wall in the wood shed. It looked in good condition and as they carried it up the stairs between them under the curious eyes of a number of the other occupants, Sean reflected that the last time he had climbed a ladder had been at Badajoz. He did not mention the fact to Adam, however, as he wanted to be the one to go up into the roof space and he did not want Adam

fussing over his emotional state. Sean did feel emotional and a little shaky but that had nothing to do with his experience at Badajoz.

It took several minutes to work out the safest place to set the ladder. Adam looked at him, but Sean shook his head firmly. He could not have said why it was so important to him, but he needed to be the first to enter the roof space. Adam nodded and took firm hold of the ladder and Sean climbed up.

As his head and shoulders emerged above the ragged hole in the ceiling, he could see immediately that he had been right. Part of the wood had rotted away and been pulled down when the ceiling fell, but the remains of the square loft hatch were unmistakable. There had been no sign of it from below, Sean was sure. He had spent plenty of time looking up at that ceiling when he could not sleep, and he would have seen the outline. Somebody had not only boarded up the loft but plastered over it.

The space was enormous. It must stretch the full length of the top floor of the house and had clearly been used for storage at some point, since it was fully boarded with wooden planks laid over the rafters. A variety of objects were scattered about the room, all covered in a thick blanket of dust. The light was good, owing to the missing roof tiles, and Sean could see several chests, a pile of mouldy fabric which may have been curtains, a broken mirror and a battered table with miscellaneous objects piled on top of it. Further down the space were two stacked wooden chairs, a wicker basket and a sturdy box of the kind Sean had seen used to store letters and paperwork. At the far end was an old mattress with straw poking out from its torn cover. There was something lying on top of it which looked very much like another hand stitched quilt although this one was covered, like everything else, with a thick layer of dust.

Sean stepped off the ladder. The roof was steeply sloped and at its highest point down the middle of the attic, he could stand upright. He took two or three steps forward then stopped. After a moment he set off again. The sound of his steps was unmistakeable. Sean felt that it should have been obvious that the footsteps could have been from a room above his head, but then he had not known this space existed.

He stopped before he reached the mattress and stood looking down. Nothing could be seen other than the quilt, but Sean had absolutely no doubt that she was there. He waited for a moment, steeling himself, then bent and lifted the edge of the quilt very gently, coughing in the cloud of dust that arose.

Sean had been dreading some horror, some sign of the agony of her last days, but he supposed at the end, after long hours of pacing the room, probably of crying out for help, she had grown progressively weaker and had just lain down. The bones were white, resting within the tattered fabric of her shift. The most upsetting thing was her hair, which had not yet rotted away and lay dark against the white of her skull. Sean felt tears start to his eyes and he settled the quilt back over her as she had been before and turned away.

As he turned, he thought Adam had followed him up the ladder, but he quickly realised his mistake. The girl stood before him and in the bright daylight spilling through the broken roof, Sean saw her more clearly than ever before. Her eyes were a deep brown and must have been lovely before dehydration and starvation had hollowed out the sockets. There were the tragic remnants of beauty in the bone structure of her face.

Something was different though, and Sean felt a sudden chill as he realised what it was. For the first time, the girl was looking at him. Before, in the room below, she had been an image, like a portrait with eyes staring into nothing. Now the eyes were on his face and he was sure that she could see him. For a moment, he was terrified, and then the fear receded and instead he felt a deep and abiding sorrow.

“He left then, did he?” he said very softly. “Your lover? He probably had no idea what that evil bastard did to you. I don’t know what happened on that ship, but however he died I hope it was long and painful. I’m sorry, Juana. All I can do is see you properly buried, but that I’ll gladly do. Then you can rest, I hope.”

She said nothing, but Sean had an odd sense that she could hear him although he did not know if she would have understood since he had no idea if the living Juana understood any English. He could feel tears on his cheeks and as he blinked and then wiped them away, she was gone and there was no mark in the dust where she had stood.

The burial service was private, with only the priest, Sean, and Adam present. Sean used bribery, when persuasion had failed, to pay for a simple stone with Juana’s name and the dates of her birth and

probable death. Adam listened in shocked silence to his friend's account of his experience in the loft and did not question his insistence that Juana have a memorial. She was buried in an army coffin, wrapped in the dusty quilt from the attic and afterwards, Adam arranged for dinner to be served in his room and opened a bottle of wine.

"Are you ready to hear the rest?" he asked.

"The rest of what?"

"We've been clearing out the loft ready for the repairs. The carpenter is going to restore the hatch and put a proper ladder in so that it can be used for storage again."

"Not while we're here."

"No, but in the future. The point is that they found some papers in a box and brought them to me as they'd no idea what else to do with them. They should go to the family agent but given how that girl was murdered by her own father, I felt no scruples about going through them, and I'm glad I did."

"What did you find?"

"Letters. Her lover wrote several of them in the weeks after his immediate departure, asking her why she didn't keep their appointment and begging her to join him. That bastard Mendes must have put them up there with her deliberately before he walled her up and left her to die. He probably thought it was fitting. I hope she found comfort in them."

"Oh God, Adam. You mean there really was a French lover?"

"More like a French suitor, as far as I can see. He wanted to marry her and when the old man refused, they planned to elope. When the French marched out after Cintra she should have been with him as his wife."

"I wonder if he's still alive?"

"I don't know, Sean, but I'm going to write to him to tell him that she died and where she's buried. Not the details of how, he doesn't need to know that. But if he's still alive and still out there, I'd like him to know that she didn't mean to let him down."

"Can we do that?"

"Oh yes. There are regular channels of communication regarding prisoners and if we enclose a note explaining it's about a family matter, they'll see he gets it. It's surprisingly reliable, I was a prisoner myself for eight months."

"Do you mind if I do it?"

"Not at all. I have the letters here, you can read them. It gives his regiment four years ago, but if he's moved on for promotion they'll know how to find him."

They finished dinner in companionable silence, then Adam produced the letters and finished his wine as Sean sat reading them. Afterwards, Adam was called to a patient in the main hospital. Sean walked part of the way with him then made his way through the town to the churchyard and stood in the gathering dusk before the fresh grave in the churchyard.

Sean could give no reason for his certainty that Juana Mendes was finally at peace. He thought about the young Frenchman who had fallen in love with her during those months at the Casa Mendes. The man's letters had upset him with their increasing desperation at receiving no word from Juana. It was clear that he had loved her very much and Sean wondered if there were other letters, written after her death and destroyed by her vengeful father. Adam was right, the man deserved to know at least part of the truth.

It was full dark now, and Sean could barely see the grave. He bent his head and spoke a short prayer for Juana and for the young man she had loved, then he crossed himself and turned to walk back up to the hospital. He had paperwork to do, then he would open another bottle of wine in case Adam was back early enough to share a drink. While he was waiting, he would write a letter to his wife to remind her of how much he loved her, and another to a young French officer called Louis Bernard, to tell him that he too had been loved.

Author's Note

The idea for this ghost story came from somebody I met locally who was reading my Peninsular War Saga and told me the story of his ancestor. Lieutenant Waldron Kelly, an Irish officer who served in Wellington's army eloped with a well-born Portuguese girl and married her against furious opposition from her family. Mrs Kelly went back to Ireland, partly because her family threatened to kill her for

disgracing them. The story is told in some detail in Charles Esdaile's *Women in the Peninsular War* and is one of a number of tales of local women becoming involved with British soldiers. It occurred to me that this probably also happened during the French occupation, and that a Portuguese or Spanish family might have been even more angry if their daughter became involved with a hated invader.

While both Adam Norris and Sean O'Connor are fictional characters, there really were several general hospitals in Elvas and they would have been jointly run by a senior doctor and an officer commandant. Hospitals for officers were rare, although in 1813 the voluntary provision of a separate hospital for sick and wounded officers was finally included in regulations. It was hugely inconvenient for medical staff to have to travel to wherever a sick or wounded officer happened to be billeted, and there are several accounts of what appear to be informal hospitals for officers throughout the war. It seems madness to us today that considerations of rank were placed above good medical care, but Wellington's army existed in a very different world.