Glitter and Gold

by Raziel

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
London's famed Zoological Society saw an influx of visitors on that November day. Prosperous farmers freed after their final harvest of the season to visit the City on holiday with wives and children in tow mixed with wealthy burghers, rollicking groups of students and hard-faced East Enders, the city's poor who may have lacked essential comforts but were able to partake of all the cultural attractions of a great city to while away the hours.

Occupying one of the many benches scattered about to simply watch the flow of foot traffic was a popular pastime for regular visitors. Any one of these might never have taken special notice of two visitors that sunny Tuesday. If they had, it might have been only because of the extraordinary good looks of a man in late middle age, attired in the first style of elegance in a simple, extremely well-cut black coat and narrow trousers. His head bare and silvering dark curls fluttered in the breeze. He carried a walking cane in his left hand, as most gentlemen of fashion affected, and his right held the hand of a child. The boy was likewise remarkably beautiful, and otherwise notable only for his quiet well-bred manner, so unlike unsupervised urchins who ran about in packs, tripping pedestrians and flinging projectiles into the pens. His head bare and silvering dark curls fluttered in the breeze. He carried a walking cane in his left hand, as most gentlemen of fashion affected, and his right held the hand of a child. The boy was likewise remarkably beautiful, and otherwise notable only for his quiet well-bred manner, so unlike unsupervised urchins who ran about in packs, tripping pedestrians and flinging projectiles into the pens. This child, upon closer examination, bore a startling resemblance to the man at his side – grandfather, it might be inaccurately assumed – and the two of them were so engrossed in each another and their palpable delight in the animals they came to view that they might have been the menagerie's only visitors.

This duo had been first greeted by the Superintendent himself, but in deference to the known wishes of these distinguished visitors, a young underling was left in his stead only to ensure they received entrée into whichever exhibit caught their fancy. The gentleman and the boy preferred the freedom to wander at will, without special attention, followed discreetly by a plain-clothed couple whose watchful eyes were at odds with a casual demeanor.

Sundays and Promenade days were reserved for Patrons and Fellows and their guests, while the public was admitted on Mondays and Tuesdays for only 6d, reduced from a shilling. Melbourne made it a habit to visit on one of these days with his son. The prince preferred the company of his
father above all others and was most comfortable amidst adults, so Melbourne took every opportunity to gently encourage any spontaneous interaction with children his own age. Prince William was not a timid child, but he was almost unnaturally self-possessed and mature for his years. Melbourne was pleased each time his son made chance acquaintance with other children and would hang back, exchanging modest disclaimers with the other parents, each clearly certain of the superiority of their own progeny. Few of these ever realized they had spoken to the husband of Her Majesty the Queen.

Mr. Thibaut’s giraffes were a favorite of visitors, and the Indian rhinoceros drew crowds but like most boys Liam was entranced by the residents of the Monkey House. He and a pair of country-bred children, judging from their broad plain faces and thick Northern accents, chatted to the primates and were answered in kind until a din filled the enclosure. Lord Melbourne chuckled along with the paterfamilias while his wife tried to restore her offspring to some sense of order. If only to remove them from the barrel-roofed building which acted as an echo chamber, Melbourne formed the happy suggestion of next visiting the newest pavilion, where a young lion and lioness from the Cape paced proudly before the spectators. Two tigers, some big cats known as pumas – Liam pronounced the designation carefully, reading from the bronze plaque introducing the inhabitants - African and Asiatic leopards, spotted hyena and striped hyenas, a Cape hunting dog, and various sub-species of bears.

Melbourne was well-pleased by the sight of his normally reserved son running back and forth, chattering excitedly with his new friends, climbing on the guard rail for a closer look – Liam, daring to break a rule!, he made mental note to tell Victoria - and becoming thoroughly dusty and disheveled in the process. Periodically some wonder was notable enough to entail an excited cry of Papa, Papa, come see, to which summons he promptly responded, but otherwise Melbourne was content to hang back like the proud father he was.

Only when the day began to darken, and he was reminded of the time did he regretfully call Liam back to his side. The country couple – up to London for a sister’s wedding, she confided, and staying in a hostel that came highly recommended, despite being situated some distance from the city center – exchanged handshakes while their youngsters talked over one another excitedly, vying to tell their new friend their location and all the wonders they had seen thus far during their sojourn to the capital. Only when the elder, a boy of nine or ten years, boasted of having seen, at a distance, the Queen herself that very morning, was mutual good feeling disrupted. Liam calmly corrected his new friend, explaining that it could not have been the Queen for she was at Windsor, some sixteen miles distant. Moreover, he explained kindly with only intent of correcting a misapprehension, she did not walk through Regent’s Park wearing her crown, a fact he delivered laughing at the very image of such a ludicrous occurrence.

This caused some contention between the children, with the older boy insisting he knew the Queen when he saw her and his siblings jumping in loyally, and Liam insisting for the sake of accuracy that he was much mistaking the matter.

"Never mind, Liam," Melbourne said agreeably, winking at the boy's father. "Every good subject should see the Queen when they visit London."

His son looked up at him beseechingly, sure he was in the right, but Melbourne only squeezed his shoulder and was much gratified when no more on the matter was said.

"How long are you in town?" he asked the man, and received the answer, until the following Saturday, when they would take the train back to Leeds.

"Does your schedule permit a day’s visit to Windsor?"
The woman answered for her husband, outlining a strict schedule of visiting and shopping for the upcoming nuptials.

"If you should find yourselves unoccupied and would like to bring the children to visit, here is my card." Melbourne took a visiting card from his case and handed it over. William Lamb, it read. Second Viscount Melbourne. She took it and examined it closely, turning it over in her hand, seemingly without recognition.

"You could get us into the castle then?" Her husband asked skeptically, in low tones clearly meant to avoid inspiring any unwarranted hope in his brood.

"I could indeed," Melbourne answered. "We live there, you see." He bowed to the farm wife and shook hands once more with her husband before clasping his son's hand to lead him away, followed by their protection officers.

It would not be until much later, when they returned to their inn, that it would be explained in tones of contempt for such rural ignoramuses, precisely who they had met in the 'zoo that day.

Daylight fled precipitously so late in the year and it was nearly dusk when their brougham turned into the long approach to Windsor Castle. A jacket shed earlier was hastily pulled on and Melbourne buttoned his son into it, as concerned for the outrage he would surely face from the boy's doting governess as he was for Liam's comfort.

The little prince had abandoned his own seat and climbed onto his father's lap for the duration of their ride. Nearly five already, such opportunities were becoming increasingly rare and Melbourne cherished the feel of the small body leaning so trustingly in his arms, the clean fresh smell of a curly head nestled under his chin.

"Tired, my boy?" he murmured unnecessarily. Of course, he was, worn out from playing and running about in the fresh air, a good sort of tired that Melbourne recalled from his own youth.

Baroness Lehzen, by means of the internal intelligence network which flourished below stairs, knew of their arrival and was waiting for them at the top of the broad stairway. She removed her young charge to the nursery and Melbourne turned in another direction, sure he would find Victoria still at work.

A small wood fire burned brightly in the hearth in the small snug space where the Queen preferred to work on her papers. Melbourne had made an underused drawing room into his refuge in the ancient vastness of Windsor Castle. Leather books lined all four walls, some historical volumes carefully chosen from the much larger formal library and others, well-thumbed, even dog-eared, relocated from Lord Melbourne's various abodes to mark this space his own.

Victoria preferred it here above the other nine-hundred-odd rooms at her command, finding the human-sized proportions and lack of grandeur, the haphazard collection of worn comfortable furniture and even the warmth of the amber glass lampshades conducive to both concentration and relaxation. She would receive her ministers in her own larger, more conventionally appointed study but Lord Melbourne's sitting room was where their working partnership flourished.

She had worked her way through a thick stack of documents requiring her attention, signing those which required no further attention – clergy appointments that had been previously vetted, a bill that was not contentious, and what seemed like hundreds of military commissions. The latter made her think of Billy Cameron, who must surely be in the Punjab by now, if he had gotten through the line of demarcation established to wall off and isolate the Sikh kingdom. They had not heard from
him, and that fact annoyed her unreasonably. Victoria reminded herself unnecessarily that he did not travel by royal mandate, nor was he in the British Army any longer. He traveled as a private citizen and as such had no obligation to communicate his whereabouts or activities, but surely as a friend he would have written by now?

The arrival of a footman to light the lamps caused Victoria to wonder when Melbourne would return. No sooner had that thought formed than she heard footsteps in the marble corridor which she unerringly knew to be his.

"You're back!" Victoria sprung up and hurried around the desk. She went directly into his arms, knowing they would open to receive her. He brought with him the smells of the outdoors mingling with the Eau de Cologne he habitually wore, sandalwood, citrus and something mysterious. Victoria pressed her face against his coat, sniffing appreciatively.

"Mmmm," she crooned. "You smell so good!"

"Eau de Monkey House, ma'am," Melbourne chuckled, his own arms wrapped completely around her.

"May I say you smell very inviting too?" he gently released her. "After he's been bathed to the Baroness's satisfaction, your son would like to tell you about the wonders he saw and the new friends he made."

"Did you two have an enjoyable day?"

"As always, ma'am. We ate a variety of truly atrocious foods, purchased for a few shillings from street carts, and made the acquaintance of a family from some rural county. I invited them to visit, but I think they suspected me of being an impostor or worse."

"This family is respectable?"

"Quite, ma'am. As respectable a Yorkshire farmer as any I've ever met."

"You've met many, then?" Victoria teased.

"Very many," Melbourne answered firmly.

Victoria sorted through the papers she had been in the process of locking away once more.

"There are a few matters on which I would like your advice. The appointment of a new Governor for the Canadian provinces. Lord Hardinge's intention to formally declare war on our behalf. And…something else. An idea, or rather, an appeal I wish to make to you."

"An appeal? That piques my interest. What on earth would you have to appeal? I am yours to command, both as your loyal subject and your very fortunate husband." Victoria was satisfied with the expression of open interest Melbourne displayed. She had given much thought to how best she could broach the idea she had, knowing that Lord M would resist anything which hinted at preferential advancement or the appearance of reaping rewards for his marriage.

"I must write something to Russell on the matter of Lord Stanley's letter. What do we say about Lord Metcalfe? He is a good man and an able minister." Victoria looked up from the letter she had been reading.

"No need to conceal the fact that you knew this was coming, I think. Surely it can come as no surprise that old friends keep in touch."
Melbourne had appointed Charles Metcalfe Governor of Jamaica in 1839, where the difficulties created by the Negro Emancipation Act had called for a high degree of tact and ability. His success in this delicate position eventually led to the Governorship of the Canadian Provinces. He and Metcalfe had known each other since the '90s and it was unsurprising if unfortunate that he had written Melbourne his intention to resign before notifying Downing Street.

"The Queen has read with great concern Lord Stanley's letter of the 1st November. From private information she had been led to expect that Lord Metcalfe would not be able to continue. The Queen hopes that there will not be too great a delay in making the new appointment, as experience has shown that nothing was more detrimental to the good government of Canada than the last interregnum after Sir Charles Bagot's death; it would certainly likewise be desirable that Lord Metcalfe should be able personally to make over his Government to his successor, whom he could verbally better put in possession of the peculiarities of his position than any instructions could do. It strikes the Queen to be of the greatest importance, that the judicious system pursued by Lord Metcalfe (and which, after a long continuation of toil and adversities, only now just begins to show its effect) should be followed up by his successor." Victoria paused in her recitation, glancing at Melbourne to gauge his reaction.

"Apt, ma'am, as far as it goes. Do you have that successor in mind? Will you name him?"

"Dare I? I don't know Lord Russell well and have no desire to put his back up unnecessarily, but I do think Elgin is the obvious choice."

"Then tell him so if you wish. Your Prime Minister is obligated to give serious consideration to your opinion, just as you are obliged to offer it."

Melbourne picked up the Times, folded to a front-page column. It was an old issue, dated the past August, and Victoria had set it aside without wondering why Whitehall should have sent an old newspaper.

"Is there anything in there I should see?" she asked curiously.

"That Times headline stating baldly that Your Majesty's cabinet unanimously agreed to repeal of the Corn Laws, which was entirely without foundation. You recall, I am sure, the uproar it caused? Probably the precise moment Peel's government was doomed to fall."

"I recall," Victoria said slowly. "An inopportune time for something like that to leak to the press, and it put Sir Robert at odds with his own ministers."

"Some attribute the unfounded rumor to Lord Aberdeen, without merit since he had nothing to gain and everything he and Guizot worked for to lose."

"Nonetheless, it did bring down Peel's government prematurely. I concede it probably would have lasted no more than a year but a change in government just when the Irish situation was growing severe was a real setback. I am not confident that Lord Russell, coming in at a time of crisis, can set in motion the necessary relief efforts before the onset of winter."

Just the day before, Russell assembled his Cabinet and presented them with the reports of the Irish Commissioners, Dr. Buckland, Dr. Playfair and Dr Lindley, on the condition of the potato crop, which was to the effect that the half of the potatoes were ruined by the rot, and that no one could guarantee the remainder. Belgium, Holland, Sweden, and Denmark, in which states the potato disease had likewise deprived the poorer class of its usual food, immediately took energetic measures to import food before winter, while in Britain the most energetic proponent of relief, Sir Robert Peel, had been turned out of office. Russell, with all good intentions and able ministers, still
faced the handicap of any new chief. He would need time to build the alliances which would enable him to accomplish anything. Most of the country now conceded that permitting the importation of food without the burden of heavy tariffs was not only a good thing, but inevitable.

"Yes?" Victoria looked up at Melbourne from under lowered lashes, her expression speculative. He in turn sighed, accepting that between them there could be no secrets. This one, at any rate, was not his to keep.

"Sidney Herbert," Melbourne said. "It's now said that he confided in Mrs. Norton and she sold the information to the Times."

He did not miss the look of distaste which passed over Victoria's lovely features.

"That woman," Victoria said, the two words expressing a world of contemptuous dislike. "He would not be the first man to say too much in the presence of a woman who hangs on his every word."

She put the newspaper aside with the topic it engendered, unwilling to grant Caroline Norton conversational space in her marriage.

Melbourne looked at her for permission before picking up a leather-bound folio. He scanned briefly, seeing painstakingly drawn regional maps marked to show the placement of fortifications along the Sutlej River which marked the frontier between British-ruled India and the Punjab.

"Hardinge gives them a month to make terms, but he doesn't explain what those terms should be. Punjab is the wealthiest kingdom in the subcontinent, and the last outside the Company's control. Broadfoot reports every incident of lewd and corrupt behavior, by his description, at the Sikh court and describes the maharini in the most salacious terms. They claim that the Sikh army, without strong leadership to restrain them, pose a serious threat to British territories."

Melbourne understood he was giving Victoria no new information, only restating the obvious. The East India Company had designs on the wealth of the Punjab and would manipulate the British government into position to claim it for them.

"Palmerston is too occupied intriguing in Europe to keep a firm hand on the situation there," Victoria said, rubbing the back of her neck. "And his first inclination is always to bluster in and use the threat of force to intimidate."

Melbourne moved to stand behind her and began kneading tight muscles. Victoria tilted her head to grant him greater access and purred with pleasure at his touch.

"I need you to keep an eye on him, William. I cannot manage him alone and he will go his own way. If I give him an ultimatum I have no way to enforce it and will only lose face. Lord John's government is too new and certainly I cannot repeat my Uncle's high-handed dismissal of a minister."

"I am at your service, ma'am, but there is not much I can do to handle Henry either. I have no standing to do more than challenge him on particulars."

"Then you must have standing, an official appointment. A proper role in the Privy Council, and a mandate to act in some real capacity on behalf of the Crown."

"Victoria, you know that is not possible. If there's one sure way to unite all factions it would be to insert myself as some sort of quasi-royal functionary. We'd have Cambridge aligned with the Whigs and your most ardent liberals in bed with the conservatives, not to mention every royal
house in Europe spouting off at a commoner playing at Kings. Or Queens, as the case may be."

Melbourne leaned forward over Victoria's shoulder and traced the outline of her elegant jawline, to soften the firmness of his response as well as to indulge his own craving for a taste of her sweet porcelain skin.

"Not a quasi-royal functionary, William, don't be absurd and don't denigrate either your wisdom and experience, or my intelligence." Victoria spoke sharply, while she tilted her head to give him greater access to the tender spot behind her ear. Melbourne huffed a laugh and obliged by nibbling the pink shell of her ear.

"The Duke of Wellington has been *Minister without Portfolio* in every cabinet since his own. I want you to have the same designation. And…it is time, my lord. I would very much like if you would accept a title befitting your station. The First Duke of Melbourne."
Her clear, calm surety took his breath away so that Melbourne had to turn, averting his face. Victoria knew him too well; she would read his thoughts before he knew them himself. It came as no surprise, the offer of a Dukedom. She had first proposed such elevation before they were wed, even before their relationship had subtly shifted along the path to what it would become. And not long after the first crisis which threatened to bring a change in ministries, when Peel had so briefly entertained the Queen's grudging request to form a government in 1839, Victoria had demanded to know why he, like the Iron Duke, could not continue to serve in some official capacity despite losing a vote of confidence. And she had persisted, each time a new Garter ceremony loomed, in offering him that highest of honors.

Yet each of these offers had been made by a lovesick girl only just learning the ways of government. Flattering as it was, Melbourne had not found it difficult to turn her offers down. Now he sensed something different, in Victoria's poised and reasoned delivery and the subtle but unmistakable aura of command which surrounded her. He was loathe to disappoint, knowing he would be obliged to be firm to put the matter to rest.

Sighing, he turned back and met her clear, steady gaze.

"Victoria," he began, lifting his hands, palms up. Beseeching her to understand what she suggested.
"I do understand, most surely," Victoria said, as though reading his thoughts. *Of course she did, he knew, just as I read hers.*

"I understand that you have just the skills, the experience and the gift of working across the aisle – across the Channel, across continents – that our nation needs. We have a new government, an untried Prime Minister and a brilliant but headstrong Foreign Secretary whose best work will be done when his blustering aggression can be the stick accompanying the carrot of your more reasoned and conciliatory approach. I also understand, from an audience I had with him earlier and the resignation I hold in my hand, that the Duke of Wellington seeks to be relieved of his position and will support you stepping into his role."

Victoria spoke in a cool, well-modulated voice, an impersonal tone Melbourne seldom heard directed at him. He appreciated how hard she worked to prepare for every audience and suspected that now he was seeing the result of that careful prework.

"Lord Melbourne, I told you once that when I required assistance I would ask for it. The Crown requires your service to the country once more. Will you accept appointment to the Privy Council as Minister without Portfolio? We will inform the First Lord of the Treasury of our desire that you join his cabinet in that capacity."

Melbourne was given a glimpse of this hereditary monarch who wore the mantle of royal authority so effortlessly and the opportunity to see her as others did. She appeared taller and more imposing, her lack of inches and diminutive physique irrelevant to the space she occupied so forcefully before him. *No wonder monarchies survive while governments fall, and little wonder that in the presence of such sheer force of will, modern men are recalled to the concept of a sovereign 'anointed by God.'*

Melbourne had known kings – the Georges and William, as well as the Kings of France and Belgium and Spain, the Holy Roman Emperor and German princes – but none had the innate dignity and sense of her own exalted place as Victoria. He did not think to tease during the long pause which followed her words; all awareness of the Queen as wife, mother and lover had fled.

"I am at Your Majesty's service," he said, genuflecting to bestow the formal kiss of fealty, his lips only hovering above the soft ivory skin of her fingers.

"Thank you, Lord Melbourne," Victoria responded, still speaking in the cool melodic voice of a sovereign to her subject. *Then,*

"William, darling, do get up. I do not wish to command, but it is the only way I think you will accept and I do need you – the country needs you."

Melbourne rose to his feet, still holding her hand. It would have been a faux pas from any other subject, no matter how exalted their rank, but now, it was only *her,* Victoria, his love, his life, his wife.

"I am flattered," he began in a more habitual teasing, caressing note voice.

"You should not be," Victoria retorted crisply. "I do not seek to flatter you. William, I adore you with everything I am, my mind, my heart, my body and my soul. You *know* that. But I do not flatter or prevaricate – *because* we know each other so completely, I could not if I wanted to."

She gently slid her hand out of his and stepped away, to pace back and forth on the rug before the hearth.
"You are not ambitious, nor have you ever sought worldly glory. I think you would be most at ease if you were able to lounge until three, then engage in those long pointless discussions on philosophy over dinner and four bottles of wine." Melbourne smirked but said nothing.

"You have read more and thought more than any person of your station and standing, certainly more than I or my predecessors ever thought of doing.

"Your mind is full of those writings which record the eloquence and wisdom of antiquity. There is no work of modern history and literature with which you are not well acquainted. You find of all things public acclaim and aristocratic pretension distasteful and for that reason you were reluctant to enter into this marriage."

Victoria paused in her pacing and looked directly at Melbourne. He wanted to step forward and reassure her, to erase the sting of knowing that he had not married her readily or without reservation. Yet her composure was complete and she did not appear in need of such consolation.

Melbourne realized that his precious girl was a determined, well-meaning novice no more and he had had the illimitable privilege of watching her become this confident, resolute woman. He sensed that this was not the moment to interject sentimentality. He had once said blithely that she would be a great queen; now he knew it with certainty. Victoria would be a great queen, ruling over a great empire spanning the globe in years to come, years which would be denied him. He had only now.

"You are too kind, ma'am, and your prejudice makes you overstate my virtues." Melbourne might have sounded abrupt except that his voice cracked, and he blinked rapidly to conceal any moisture in his eyes.

"If you want me to act on your behalf you need only ask. I do not need or want a title or designation to accomplish that."

Victoria, to his amusement, stamped her little foot impatiently.

"You may not have wanted to marry a queen, but you did. I do not demean you by suggesting you play consort, and I will not cheat my country of your service. I desire a true partnership and damn the opinions of my cousins in Europe. The House of Coburg, poor as church mice and about as prolific, can wail and gnash their teeth all they like, if they are so inclined. The thrones of the great powers, the Russian Grand Duke, my sister Queen and her advisers in Spain, Louis-Phillipe, all know and respect you and will breathe a sigh of relief knowing that British foreign policy will not be entirely subject to the winds of change each time an election is held. Nor that my blood ties to this or that cousin will sway our favor."

"I still think what you desire can be accomplished subtly, without appointment and certainly without a Dukedom as reward for bedding the Queen. Wellington defeated Napoleon while I, ma'am, cannot even be publicly credited for conquering your maidenhead." Melbourne spoke without considering how his flippancy might affect her. Victoria's eyes widened and two red spots appeared high on her cheekbones. Then her hand flew up to cover her mouth and she laughed and he thought it the most beautiful, the most musical of sounds.

"Touché, my lord." Victoria picked up a page from the desk and held it toward the lamp. "I want to read you something. It best expresses why the country over which I reign will, must, see you publicly recognized for what you have done and will do on their behalf."

"The exploits of the soldier are performed in the light of the sun and in the face of day; they are performed before his own army, before the enemy; they are seen, they are known…and receive at
once the mead of praise which is so justly do. Not so the services of the minister. Those lie not so much in acting in great crisis, as in preventing those crises from arising. They are often obscure and unknown, subject to every species of misrepresentation and effected amidst obloquy, attack and condemnation while in reality entitled to the approbation and gratitude of the country. How frequently are such services lost in the tranquility which they have been the means of preserving, and amidst the prosperity which they themselves have created."

Melbourne had recognized from the first words, what passage she read from. He marveled at her comprehensive multi-pronged attack – *hoist upon his own petard*. He already knew that if it meant so very much to her he would accept the ministerial appointment she wanted him to have. The idea of being attended to once more, of having a role in government no matter how nebulous and ill-defined, was greatly appealing. Victoria's wish for a true partnership, no matter how impossibly misguided and quixotic, surely originated in the very sentimentality which should have no place in her decision-making, but he could hardly fault her for that. *My wife, the queen*, the very words replayed in his mind as though to reinforce this most unlikely of outcomes in his life.

"You have prevailed, ma'am. On the first matter, I concede, and I thank you. Perhaps it’s been false modesty on my part, and a strong dislike of public condemnation, to insist on entirely avoiding the appearance of playing any public role. Now, will you put down your rapier? Know when you have won and take pity on a vanquished opponent."

"'Opponent'? I only want you to understand that it is not some desire to dress you up as a faux prince consort and put you on a throne at my side? If I wanted to marry a prince, they were not in short supply. I want, on behalf of my country, the services of the best of all ministers, one with the instinct and ability to lay a steady hand on the reins when one or another party seeks to act rashly, representing my interests in the Cabinet and Council. If I had married the Prince of Orange or any other suitor, if Albert had lived, I would still be making this appeal to you."

Victoria stopped, breathless, and in her husband's eyes entirely ravishing, color heightened and dark blue eyes blazing with intensity. He threw up his hands in a gesture of capitulation.

"And you won't mind? Truly? I do not wish to make you unhappy or burden my husband, even though I very much want the country to have the services of Lord Melbourne." Once again, she was only a very young woman, very much in love, and her expression was suddenly doubtful, as though she feared she had gone too far. Melbourne went to her and wrapped his arms around her midsection. He bent to kiss the back of her neck, nibbling at the downy hairs which escaped their confining pins.

"I dare not hold you as I would like, or you will smell like a zoo." But his lips were pressed against her skin and the words came out muffled. This warm loving body in his arms, soft, pliant, welcoming his touch... girl and woman, wife and Queen, the juxtaposition was intoxicating and entirely his to hold and cherish.

Melbourne bathed and dressed for dinner, accepting an immaculately pressed white shirt and donning formal black satin knee breeches. Baines held out a dark velvet waistcoat with a pattern subtly worked in dark red silk thread that he didn't remember seeing it previously and raised his brows skeptically at the choice. The funereal mien of his valet did not change, except for the briefest of knowing nods, as he handed him a matching burgundy silk cravat.

Victoria was already in the drawing room when he entered, seated with her ladies and several of the younger maids-of-honor. The Duchess of Kent conversed with Lady Portman while the Duchess of Sutherland played a simple air on the piano. Melbourne was not unduly surprised to see the Duke of Wellington present. Clearly, he thought, Victoria had marshalled her resources in anticipation of
countering any refusal of her remarkable proposal. The sight of his indomitable little queen made him smile.

Arthur Wellesley stood with hands clasped behind his back, ramrod straight, watching the women. His own daughter-in-law was among them, one of the newly appointed ladies-in-waiting. She and her own husband did not get along, and the young Lord Douro's contentious relationship with his own father was legendary, but Lady Elizabeth was a great favorite of Wellington's.

"Do quit mooning over Lady Melbourne, will you," the old Duke growled, raising a glass to his lips.

"Your Grace," Melbourne returned his greeting, taking an apéritif from the tray proffered. "It is a pleasant surprise to see you."

"Yes, yes. You haven't been in town much this term. Not that I'd expect to encounter you at White's." Wellington snapped his fingers, summoning a footman. When he'd exchanged his own empty glass for a full one he lifted it as though in a toast.

"I understand there is to be a change in your circumstance. Retirement not all it's cracked up to be?" The sally expected no answer and Melbourne offered none.

"Your little Vicky has matured a great deal. She knows how to get what she wants, but then she always did, eh?"

Melbourne's lips tightened, and his expression grew cold.

"Oh come, don't poker up, man. I'm on your side. I've always been on your side. I think you will find the position of minister without portfolio to your satisfaction. The ability to influence without any need to lead the charge. She's quite right that your country needs you. Lord knows, your queen needs you."

Melbourne emptied his glass and set it on the tray which had materialized behind him, elevated by a well-trained footman.

"I endeavor to serve to the best of my ability. I am sure I will have frequent recourse to your advice in the execution of this most irregular office."

"I'll be around, Melbourne. You need only ask." They fell silent, both watching Victoria, smiling, talking to the women companions who surrounded her.

"We have much in common, William. Both of us no good at the business of marriage and looking outside of it for what we needed, only learning to understand our wives when they were on their deathbeds. Your Caro a spitfire and my Kitty a wallflower, yet they loved us, better than we deserved."

Melbourne's brow arched, the only sign he might be in sympathy with the other man's confidences. He himself scarcely remembered Catherine Wellesley, a sad woman who seldom went into society. That Wellington had been one of Caro's intimate friends was an old rumor and Melbourne found he cared no more now than he had at the time, whether there was truth in it.

"Two old soldiers, you and I. Oh, you fought your battles on the home front while I fought mine abroad but who's to say which field is the greater challenge? It wasn't until I came back the so-called Hero of Waterloo that I discovered just how treacherous the political minefields can be. Yes, two old soldiers."
"Neither of us have done so badly, Arthur. Each of us rose to head of government, although your term was considerably more successful than mine."

Wellington barked a short sharp laugh. "You are too modest, Melbourne, and so I told Her Majesty when she brought her idea to me. You kept us out of war, you grew the economy and gradually expanded the rights of our citizens without upending the ship of state on the shoals of too-rapid reform. Perhaps those aren't the achievements which are glorified, but those of us who know, know."

Melbourne inclined his head, his mouth quirking in a smile. "I must thank you for your generosity, sir."

"And that." Wellington jerked his grizzled head in Victoria's direction. "I must congratulate you once more, although I'm certain I've done so before. Your most notable achievement."

"I'm afraid I do not take your meaning, sir," Melbourne said, his tone clipped and a cold look overtaking his expression.

"I don't need to say I mean no disrespect. You found love when and where you least expected it. You married for love and have made a great success of it. In the process you've made a green girl into a great queen, and for that alone your name will live on far longer than mine."

"I did not shape or mold her, Arthur. She always knew her own mind and was never susceptible to influence. She was possessed of a great natural dignity and strength of will the day she ascended the throne and has only grown into her own woman in the years since."

"And you had everything to do with that, Melbourne. She knows her own mind, it's true, and to your great credit you never used your position to your advantage or that of your party. Everyone says so, even those who might otherwise have rejoiced in any evidence to the contrary. What you did was give her a safe space to learn and grow into the role, and your belief in her gave her the confidence another man might have sought to tear down."

"Enough, Arthur. You make me blush. Come, let us lead the ladies into dinner. As the highest-ranking of us, you will escort the Queen."

It was a small enough party at table that the Duke of Wellington, by precedent, took the seat opposite the Queen, freeing Melbourne to take the chair on her left. As the first course was served his gaze flickered over Victoria appreciatively. Her wine-colored gown bared both shoulders, the dark silk showing her smooth creamy skin to advantage. Garnets sparkled around her throat and in the tiara woven through her dark hair. When he realized what Baines had done, Melbourne smirked and after a moment Victoria followed suit.

"I will have a word with my man. This is a little too precious to bear. Do you think Baines is engaged in his own May-December romance?"

Victoria sipped wine and set the glass down carefully, intent on not giggling before the assembled company. "Skerrett?" she murmured, dimpling. "Do you think it is planned then?"

"I think it is more than coincidence. I can picture the two of them, collaborating beforehand. All that time spent alone in our apartments, your bed or mine at hand...frolicking amongst our wardrobes..."

Her restraint crumbling, Victoria ducked her head and held her napkin up to muffle the pealing laughter.
"Oh, Lord M, no, surely not…" but her protests fell flat as her own gaze went from her dark red gown to her husband's complimentary waistcoat and cravat. "Too precious by half."
The anticipation proved more troublesome than the reality. Wellington's decision to step down stole the thunder and any grumbling at the irregularity of someone in Melbourne's nebulous position – commoner by birth, peer by title and politician by trade, yet so unmistakably aligned with Crown and not government according to perception – was muted.

If the old Duke was accorded universal respect, Melbourne could lay claim to genuine affection. The story of the Queen marrying for love a man more than twice her age had some element that appealed to everyone. And an Englishman through and through, with nary a drop of foreign blood no matter how far back you looked, was regarded with relief after so many successive decades of German influence so pervasive it constituted a bloodless invasion.

The Queen had watched in silent approbation when her Prime Minister proclaimed the appointment, and Wellington was the first to stand and cheer when Melbourne was introduced into the Cabinet meeting.

The faces looking back at him around Russell's table were all familiar and none, Melbourne thought, revealed anything more than the mildest derision. They believe it's a sinecure. Very well, let them. It's what they would do in my place, catch any crumbs which fell from the royal table.

Wellington had briefed him on those matters in which he himself had been most closely concerned. Minister without portfolio had given the old man an unusual degree of freedom to interfere in whatever caught his attention. Military matters fell squarely within Wellington's self-defined
portfolio, and as might be supposed from his Conservatism, firm suppression of any sign of agitation that might burst into revolutionary fervor. Some might suppose it paradoxical for a Tory conservative, but full emancipation remained high on Wellington's list of priorities and it was this last he discussed first with Melbourne during the handover.

In '33, as Home Secretary, Melbourne had delivered one of his most persuasive speeches in favor of full emancipation of all His Majesty's subjects. Answering the objections of those who opposed such radical egalitarianism and scandalizing those who promoted it by espousing moral principles, Melbourne had come down firmly in favor of emancipation for the good of the State. He had grounded his support of the Bill on the Law and Constitution of England, and on common sense. The State was entitled to the services of every one of its natural-born subjects; and as Melbourne explained in his customary laconic manner, it appeared to him that in all the debates which had taken place on this subject, one fundamental error had pervaded them. It was not, he opined with a dismissive wave of his hand and the most charming of whimsical smiles, the privileges and advantages of individuals which they had to consider. He was little concerned with the deprivation of these and such considerations did not form the great ground of complaint.

Melbourne had declared to the surprise of all that, on the contrary, the privileges of the State, the welfare of the country, and the advantage of the community, were seriously injured by those restrictions. If any person should be excluded from an office in the appointment of the Crown, the prerogative of the Crown was so far curtailed, inasmuch as it could not select that person who of all men might perhaps be best fitted to perform the duties of that office. If the people were prevented from choosing certain individuals to fill those offices to which their voice would raise them, it was the power of the people which was circumscribed and restricted.

Such a novel argument, dismissing idealism and any appeal to religious or humanitarian sentiment, and couched entirely in self-interest on behalf of country and crown, stymied his opponents, prepared to filibuster at length on behalf of that same State to a different conclusion and perplexed those in favor on high moral grounds. Only Lord Melbourne, wits said, could make a virtue sound like the basest of vices – and prevail.

The final remaining impediment, unaddressed in the earlier bill, was a requirement that the Parliamentary oath must be sworn on a Christian bible. Wellington, a lifelong Tory, had conveyed to Melbourne his fervent hope that Russell's Liberal majority would remove that restriction, and Melbourne readily agreed to continue to follow through until the bill passed.

As he gradually re-entered the world of government Melbourne remembered, as if he'd ever really forgotten, just how far removed he had been these past few years from his former milieu. He had, without realizing, become completely subsumed by that newest and most unfamiliar of roles, husband and father. Not husband to the Queen – that was merely circumstance – but a husband genuinely committed, inward-focused on all the minutiae of building a family and a life that was centered on something other than his place in society. It was not the usual situation for a man of his age and station, to withdraw so completely, and the blame for that could be laid in large part on the privileged isolation of Court and Palace, but it had provided an uncommon freedom from external distraction and he would not have exchanged that for anything society offered.

Melbourne doubted whether Victoria had comprehended what she was asking. If he was to establish a credible role as minister in Wellington’s place he would have to immerse himself once more in the political life of the capital, which was based on relationships and time spent far more than on real legislative action.

The dinners were a good start. Everyone vied to host a dinner to honor Wellington, and the gentlemen's clubs were kept busy throughout the last months of 1845. Melbourne was accepted as
one by his old colleagues, the movers and shakers, the most influential of the ton and those new men who had come up in the past five years. These were men of no birth and substantial fortune, money made on the 'Change or in trade, and they brought both a refreshing vigor and slightly abrasive newness to the old Whig/Tory establishment. Disraeli was everywhere – Melbourne thought the man had never turned down an opportunity to see and be seen, or more accurately be heard, for he was an inveterate talker cursed by an excess of enthusiasm.

Brook's Club saw its share of celebratory dinners, hours' long affairs conducted in one of the private dining rooms reserved for the most senior patron members of that club. The Reform Club likewise saw the most famous Tory in the country cross its threshold for the first time, and White's was sent reeling by the influx of Whigs there to toast the Iron Duke into retirement.

On those nights when a fourth and fifth bottle were opened – as Victoria had so aptly remarked – the sixteen miles to Windsor in a cold late autumn wind may as well have been a hundred after midnight. Then Melbourne would retreat to his club, grateful at least for a fuzzy head that helped him find sleep quickly in a cold empty bed. Without Victoria at his side, her warmth his talisman against the grim dread of those recurring dreams, he might have been left vulnerable to the pull of that dark other world, but no dreams plagued him. Staying busy, he'd surmised, something to occupy the mind and a sense of purpose is the best medicine after all. Perhaps that's all they mean to say, that he needed to give back some measure of the happiness Victoria had given him.

One evening's dinner, put on by his own brother-in-law and attended by more than a dozen of Wellington's friends, was held at a different sort of gentleman's club. Heavy baroque furnishings, liberal gold-trimmed red velvet hangings and a creditable parody of some of the more famous Windsor portraiture earned the establishment its name of Queen Vee's. That the name was a double entendre escaped no one, and it was amply illustrated by a closer look at the subject matter of each of the massive gold-framed paintings hung on every wall.


"Hardly, Henry. You mistake me if you think so."

"Ah, then you do remember a time before marriage claimed and neutered you? I'm glad to hear it."

When they had all gathered in the parlor, the guests were shown into the bespoke dining room where an excess of gold-painted plate and shimmering crystal reflected the light from beeswax candles.

Wellington was escorted to the seat of honor at the head of the table and to his surprise, Melbourne was guided to the foot of the table opposite the great man. Disraeli scurried behind, determined to have the seat on his left and once again Melbourne felt vague irritation at the fellow's determination to cling to him like a limpet.

They were served an excellent dinner by a bevy of attentive, scantily clad females, each devoting herself entirely to one of the fourteen gentlemen at table. Melbourne genially accepted the service of his nymph, leaning back in his chair to avoid the unrestrained breast dangling over his arm while she assiduously applied herself to cutting his beefsteak and keeping his glass filled. Only when it appeared she might attempt to feed him did he laughingly protest.

"Lord Melbourne, will we see you at the House? I am to give a speech in favor of the privilege of printed papers, in the issuance of body warrants." Melbourne blinked twice, parsing the earnest words uttered by Benjamin Disraeli – little wonder his own wife calls him Dizzy – for some sense of their context.

"Indeed, I believe you give a great many speeches," he replied noncommittally.
"I am most passionately in favor of the issue before the House."

"I can easily believe that, sir. Your passion is evident." Melbourne had no fixed idea what issue the man referred to, but his passion on any subject calling for some expression of interest on his part was evident. Unfortunately, Melbourne reflected ruefully, the honorable gentleman had so very many passionate interests and insisted everyone be enlightened in excruciating detail.

"Will you stay for the culmination of this evening's entertainment, Lord Melbourne? I expect Lord Palmerston has something quite exceptional in mind." Disraeli wetted his full lower lip with the tip of his tongue in a gesture Melbourne found repugnant, and he leaned back in his chair, heartily wishing for a reprieve.

When the final covers had been removed, a cry went up of "Speech, speech," and soon all the gentlemen had joined in.

Wellington, flushed and gratified at the acclaim, his arms full of jiggling flesh and cascades of coppery hair, smiled at the assembly as one man after another stood to recite a litany of his accomplishments both public and private. The latter were accompanied by much bawdy laughter. His many mistresses were toasted with raised glasses and champagne flowed liberally.

This evening was no different than many others he had spent over the years, with friends and cronies as well as opponents with whom an accord might be reached in such an atmosphere of conviviality. Yet Melbourne became aware, as his eyes followed the hands of a timepiece, that much of the amusement had fled and he heartily wished he could be home – home, whether that be Windsor or Buckingham House, Brocket Hall or some snug lodge – with Victoria nearby. The dull tedium of the royal drawing rooms, Victoria's sweet melodic tones as she conversed with her ladies to the background sound of her mother's interminable cards being shuffled, often lulled him to sleep in his chair, a habit Victoria about which Victoria had long teased him.

The dining room fell silent as a cart was trundled in, bearing a great covered dish nearly three feet across. Two young ladies ceremoniously lifted the domed silver top to reveal a third, completely nude save for tassels affixed to her nipples, and the gentlemen roared with laughter at the tableau. Of all those present only Wellington himself glanced at Melbourne for his reaction. When he saw none the old man stood and extended his hand, handing the young lady down so that she could straddle his legs and commence a seated dance in his honor.

Melbourne, not lost to the significance of the mode of entry, found he cared little and instead raised his hand to conceal a yawn. To his right and left, his companions found themselves likewise treated to personal entertainments and he realized he was expected to welcome the girl who waited uncertainly, watching for some sign.

Resigned, he pushed back his chair so she could climb atop his lap and begin gyrating energetically against his groin. He was not unmoved but had no intention of being more than a passive spectator, and instead allowed a sleepy half-smile to drift across his face.

Two by two the others left the table and Melbourne resigned himself, settling more comfortably into his chair. It was no unpleasant thing to have the attentions of an uncomplicated young woman, and he enjoyed drifting along on the waves of gentle, undemanding arousal, but when she reached for him he gently took her hand and pulled it away. Uncomprehending, she tried again and he shook his head more firmly.

"I think…not tonight, my dear."

"But why, sir? I am clean, certified by the doctor who examines us –"
"No, but thank you all the same."

The girl was clearly troubled by his refusal, taking it as an affront to her personal and professional sensibilities.

"You want me, what else is this for?" the girl spluttered, finding him for a third time. "You're able, not like those elderly gentlemen who can't…"

Melbourne removed a handful of gold sovereigns from his waistcoat.

"For your time, my dear," he drawled. "Now…pour me some of that excellent brandy and we will sit together for a while, until we can part without ruining either of our reputations."

Even in his youth, his physical prime, Melbourne had derived the greatest part of his own arousal and satisfaction from seeing the effect he had on an amorous partner. Girls such as this would mime sexual ecstasy and probably do so convincingly, but he would know nonetheless and it would lessen his own pleasure. So much effort for so little reward. He found the notion of engaging in such intimacies with this stranger vaguely repellent and was privately embarrassed by his own reticence.

He could let her relieve him merely of the physical discomfort he currently felt but there would be little pleasure in the act, only release. And, he thought ruefully, at this stage of his life, well into his sixth decade, he would not squander the occasion on such an insignificant encounter.

"Now what?" the girl demanded truculently, handing him his brandy and defiantly pouring a second for herself, knowing full well the exorbitant markup the house would place on such consumables.

"You want me to talk? To tell you how I came to be in this place? So you can take pity on me and try to save my soul? Are you one of those?"

Melbourne laughed, a merry full-throated sound that seemed to discombobulate her.

"Not at all. In fact, I would prefer you not talk at all."

When Melbourne's plain black brougham arrived, the coachman accompanied by a second man who he knew to be well-armed under his caped overcoat, he gave a single direction.

"Windsor, please."

As he rested his head against the seat Melbourne gave in to a sense of great weariness. As much as he enjoyed dabbling once more, he had never been an ambitious man nor one greedy for power. He valued his leisure as much or more than he relished long evenings of intellectual discourse amongst his fellows, and now…well, now…everything had changed. He no longer felt the need to fill his days and nights with distraction from the loneliness which awaited him in his bachelor home.

Ironic, he reflected, that when Victoria first proposed the notion of his resuming an active role in government his pulse had secretly leapt with excitement and his only real hesitation stemmed from the resentment he had anticipated from his fellow Whigs, John Russell the avid reformer, even Palmerston, lately freed to operate without restraint in pursuing his own foreign policy ambitions. And yet when no such resistance was encountered, and just as he fell back into the old routine of afternoon meetings and evening political dinners stretching far into the night, it all seemed like so much work for so little added value.

Nonetheless, what his Queen had commissioned he would provide, a neutral voice and active
presence reminding the government that 'in Her Majesty's name' was no mere stylistic address. Melbourne sighed and shook off the weariness. For her, it was all bearable. For her, he would do his duty to crown and country.

Melbourne's footsteps were heavy when he mounted the first of the long staircases of the ancient stone fortress, passing sentries too drowsy to show surprise at such a late arrival, but when he'd turned the final corner leading to the Queen's private apartments he felt a quick flutter of eagerness.

When he gingerly slid under the heavy duvet, unwilling to disturb her, Victoria nonetheless instantly awoke. Hair tousled and a pink blotch on one cheek where it had pressed against the pillow, her pretty face softened and Melbourne's hand reached for her. She pressed her face into his palm, rubbing her chin against him, and then squirmed across the sheets until her body pressed against his, her legs scissoring around his own.

"You're late," she murmured groggily. "I thought you would stay in town."

"It's always a gamble, surprising one's beautiful young wife by appearing unexpectedly," Melbourne teased. "Must I check under the bed?"

Victoria wrinkled her nose and pursed her lips. "William! Don't be silly." But she burrowed her little nose against the soft billowing fabric of his nightshirt as he held her close.

"I think we've celebrated Wellington at every address in London. There should be no more very late nights for a while. I find I very much miss this bed and all the comforts it offers. I even miss your mother's endless games of Whist and the silly prattle of those new maids-of-honor."

"Are you enjoying it, Lord M?" Victoria lowered her voice, becoming serious.

Melbourne hesitated, uncertain how he wanted to respond. Then, "I am pleased if I can serve some useful function. I think we have made some progress. Disraeli has agreed to overcome his scruples and put his considerable loquaciousness to work arguing the need to find some alternate means of swearing in our new Members. I suppose I understand his reluctance to associate himself with a bill that can only remind them of his own origins, but dammit, that defeats the purpose entirely, if he can't stand up and say, look, I've been among you for a decade and more and the sky hasn't fallen."

He offered a desultory description of some of the committee meetings he sat in on and connections he'd made or renewed. As he talked Victoria settled herself more comfortably, leaning her back against him for support, and Melbourne squeezed her tightly, enjoying the feel of her warm pliant form.

As tired as he was it felt good to decompress, and he couldn't imagine a more congenial circumstance in which to have audience, than with her bare feet tucked firmly between his calves and her long hair flowing across his arm. Certainly Peel had never found such a warm welcome and likewise Russell would be denied this warm a welcome. He chuckled at his own folly and yawned again. Victoria yawned in unison and closed her eyes.

"Oh…I nearly forgot. Billy Cameron finally wrote to you. I left the letter on the bureau."

"Eh, what's he have to say? Has he breached the Punjab fortifications yet?"

"I don't know. It's addressed to you. But please, darling, leave it until morning."

Melbourne considered going to retrieve it. He was genuinely curious what the situation was on the ground and how Cameron had fared thus far in his determination to make contact before any formal declaration of war made that, if not impossible, certainly more difficult. He weighed his
interest against the sensation of holding his wife in his arms and decided that the letter could wait until morning.

"Good night then, Lady Melbourne," he said in a hoarse gravelly voice already thick with sleep.

"Good night, Lord M," Victoria responded in kind as she exhaled a contented sigh.

Beside him, held safely in his arms, Victoria concentrated on keeping her breath even. She wanted to wrinkle her nose and feared she might sneeze from the overwhelming fragrance of cheap perfume. She thought she would extract explanation and some measure of contrition, if he didn't voluntarily confess whatever peccadillo left him reeking of a whorehouse. But it would wait. He was here now and he was hers and she, no other, had the right and the privilege of sleeping in his arms.
Chapter 4

Victoria smiled her thanks and nodded dismissal to the footman who set down his burden and backed away, bowing. A very young man, really, a boy still, she thought, touched by his excess servility. Freshly trained by the chief steward, his bright eyes darted left and right as though to memorize every detail.

Past two o'clock and William slept on. She looked at her husband, overcome by tenderness and an unaccustomed urge to protect and nurture. His posture was that of a boy, arms flung out and legs akimbo. Slumber smoothed all traces of care from his fine features so that she could glimpse the very young man she had never known. Not that Lord M could ever be old, she mused, the old nickname coming readily to mind. He simply was, timeless, ageless, outside the bounds of reckoning that applied to lesser men.

Victoria whispered his name softly, drawing close so he might feel her breath on his cheek. She impulsively laid her lips against those few fine lines which creased the paper-thin skin around his eyes and then sat up, watching as he came slowly to consciousness, his form once more full of self.

"Hello," he croaked hoarsely, licking his lips. Victoria poured fresh cool water from the jug on the tray and held it for him as though he were an invalid. Melbourne allowed her, only laying his hand over hers to steady it. Then he looked about, frowning. "What time is it? Have I slept the day away?"

"Very nearly," Victoria agreed companionably. "Too late for luncheon and hours until dinner. I had something brought up. Let me fetch it."

Her satin slippers made no sound when she crossed the floor, bringing back the light repast she had ordered from the kitchen.
"Coffee?" Melbourne asked hopefully, making Victoria laugh.

"Yes, coffee, of course. Although how you can drink that noxious brew at this time of day I don't know."

Melbourne pushed himself up to a sitting position and stretched, twisting to and fro while Victoria watched. Her eyes fell on the dark thatch of hair revealed by the open neck of his nightshirt, on his lightly furred forearms and the large capable hands she adored.

"Baines will have hot water ready for your bath. But first eat something. You know your stomach bothers you if you go too long between meals."

Melbourne chuckled. "You sound like a wife, Mrs. Melbourne."

"That's because I am a wife, Lord M, and it is my job to care for you."

Encumbered by her full skirt and layered petticoats, Victoria sat on the very edge of the bed, nudging his hip with her own to make room and began peeling an orange while Lord Melbourne availed himself of the bread-and-butter.

"Do you go into town again later?" she asked, studying the sharp blade of a small paring knife as it made a long spiral of the mottled peel of the Portuguese blood orange.

"I do not. We've seen the last of the dinners and Arthur is more than anxious to retreat to the country. Hunt season commences, you know."

Melbourne took the first sip of strong black coffee, brewed in the finnicky French fashion he insisted upon, and made a small sound of satisfaction. If he glanced at Victoria expectantly, she gave no sign of noticing.

"Edward Ellice invited me to hunt the Quorn, and Beresford to Melton Mowbray," Melbourne said finally, to break the silence.

"And will you go? I never knew you to be a huntsman."

"There was a time when everyone went, myself included, to see and be seen. I rarely took the field past the first turn. Far too much excitement in the jumping of hedges when a sensible man would simply use the gate."

Victoria laughed, able to perfectly visualize her dapper husband at his ease in one great house or another while more competitive sorts risked life and limb chasing the hounds in the cold over frozen ground.

"You wish to bathe before coming down, I'm sure," she said then, in an artificially unconcerned voice that made Melbourne laugh in turn.

"Indubitably. I still reek of the house we were in and I fear the bedclothes will need to be changed so I don't mistake my whereabouts in the dark." Victoria darted a look at him, determined to maintain a cheerfully unconcerned aspect, and was rewarded by her husband's easy laughter.

"Of course, Wellington's final sendoff wouldn't have been complete without entertainment provided by the fair sex. It was quite a tedious evening, with precious little good conversation once the pièce de résistance was presented. I think Arthur and I were the only ones present to recognize the re-enactment."
Melbourne easily described to her the evening's revelries, careful to include his own part in the proceedings. He won a wry smile when he described the accusation he might be an evangelical zealot intent on preaching morality.

"You didn't – partake -?" Victoria asked hesitantly. "I understand that such evenings are what gentlemen do. I do want to believe you wouldn't keep anything from me out of fear I might have the vapors."

She saw the small smile tugging at his lips

"I keep nothing from you," he said simply. "I was and remain chaste. I risked my reputation in the process, but in the end my famed laziness won out over any less flattering supposition."

Melbourne took orange and knife from her hand and expertly finished the task she had begun, then discarded the peel and began dividing the fruit into segments.

"Open," he said, feeding her a crescent. When Victoria bit down juice squirted and ran down her chin and Melbourne caught it with a fingertip. She separated a second piece and put it between his lips, giggling when he caught her finger in his mouth and sucked on it gently.

"My turn," Melbourne said, choosing a plump section of orange and holding it out. He quite deliberately squeezed so the juice ran down the slope of her breasts, making a sticky trail. When Victoria yelped he twisted the fruit to expel more liquid, grinning as it made its way into the crevice between breasts propelled forward by her stays.

"William! I bathed this morning, and now I'll have to wash before I go back to the drawing room." Victoria pretended annoyance, but he only began lapping at the sweet liquid trickling down the slope of her breasts. When Melbourne tumbled her over she giggled softly, her fingers tangled in his thick hair. They managed with much laughter and tender playfulness.

That evening was spent in the closest approximation to bourgeois family life as could be found in a great Court. There were no guests invited to dine and the household attendants were free to amuse themselves.

Melbourne, freed of the need to be anywhere but home, realized it was the first evening he had spent with his wife in some days, the first evening they'd spent entirely alone since their weekend adventure on the Brocket Hall estate. They dined privately in their apartment, comfortably at ease, warm silence broken only by the most inconsequential of remarks. The incomparable sweetness of their domestic harmony was perfection itself and Melbourne reflected that this period of contentment, rather than the giddy narcotic of new love, was true happiness. As he swirled the dregs of an excellent port he found Victoria regarding him quizzically.

"You were smiling," she offered by way of explanation, her own mouth curving tenderly.

"I was? It must be because I am happy."

She tilted her head and he could not help but smiling again, even as he felt his eyes moisten.

"You make me happy. This makes me happy, in a way I long feared it was unrealistic to hope for."

Melbourne gestured with his empty glass, as though toasting Victoria. She, in turn, listened raptly as she always did to anything he said, that look of fully-absorbed adoration that fed his hungry soul. She looked absurdly young, head tilted to the side, hanging on his words.
"Thank you," he whispered. "For loving me and for giving me this peaceful space. The tranquility of our life. You accept me as I am." Then he cleared his throat, suddenly aware he might have grown too maudlin in contemplation and pushed back his chair.

Victoria instantly rose and came to him, twining her arms about his neck and leaning over his shoulder.

"I have never met a man more worthy of admiration and friendship and love."

Melbourne laid his hand over hers, where it rested at his neck.

"I used to believe marriage was an impossible arrangement, doomed to fail if one went into it with any expectation of finding happiness therein. A necessary arrangement for the orderly transfer of properties and inheritance. And for many, most perhaps, it is so. But I was so very young then."

This last, he said in a wondering tone, looking back over the decades at that brash young man, his character already formed but as intrinsically selfish as any green youth.

"We both were. And so wrong for each other. I would never have been the husband she needed, for it is not in my nature to seek to dominate and I strive for moderation. Love isn't always enough, when two personalities are so at odds."

Victoria laid her cheek against his and Melbourne felt a lump rise in his throat. She listened because she genuinely wanted to know, to understand as much of him as he was willing to share and that was yet another reason to cherish her and their union.

"Even as a young man, I craved serenity and the peace to be myself. Lazy, I'm afraid – but you know that – and never particularly hot-blooded, while Caro wanted a pirate." Melbourne heard the melancholy note of reflection in his own voice and looked up suddenly, to reassure himself that Victoria was not affected. Her arched brows were puckered with concentration and he knew she was processing the insights he shared, all part of the past which had formed his character and brought him to this place.

He swiveled suddenly, surprising her, and lifted her bodily onto his lap. Trim as a girl after bearing two children, her slender shape beautifully defined under the tight bodice of her gown, she fit perfectly in his embrace. He rested his chin on her head, inhaling the fresh floral scent rising from dark hair.

"Well, I have no interest in pirates, Lord M. What on earth would one do with one anyway? And speaking of pirates – or adventurers, at least – we must answer Billy's letter. War is not far off and he must not be caught in the Punjab, in the enemy camp."

He was still holding the Queen on his lap when two footmen came in to clear away the remains of dinner.

Victoria brought a leather portfolio with her to the small sitting room where they adjourned.

"Work?" Melbourne asked needlessly, raising an eyebrow.

"I asked for biographies of each of our new ministers." Melbourne was not surprised. Victoria worked diligently at the business of statecraft and had never, to his knowledge, gone into an audience or council meeting unprepared. She took laborious notes, made detailed entries in her journals and studied small cards on which she outlined pertinent facts to be committed to memory. He also noted her use of the plural pronoun, a habit becoming more pronounced, and no longer doubted her deliberate, reasoned intention. This was no green girl caught up in the throes of first
love; she was an intelligent, informed young woman who made up her own mind and he no longer
had the will to resist. Nor did he want to; he had, as she had so succinctly put it, been less than
willing to marry her because of her rank and station, but this was his lot and it was not right to hide
from the responsibilities of the role he assumed.

"May I?" He looked to her for permission.

"You don't have to," Victoria answered doubtfully. "I don't want to plague you. You have been so
busy of late, I am happy to have you home if you just keep me company."

"Silly girl. You minister to my vanity when you permit me to go on. You know I become quite
caught up in the sound of my own voice." Victoria put her hand up in front of her mouth as she
snickered in amusement at his self-mocking flippancy. Then she scanned the first sheet of paper
and looked to him.

"What can you tell me that isn't written down?" Victoria murmured without looking up.

"Oh, much, my dear. Of course, you must take what I say with a grain of salt, because my
impressions are necessarily colored by my own prejudices." He knew it was no longer strictly
necessary to caution her, out of fear he might influence her unduly. With Victoria he could speak
uncensored, confident she could parse his words for what might be useful in forming her own
opinion.

He could not resist bending his head to kiss her pretty mouth with its short, tender upper lip and
full, sensual lower. Then he put on his spectacles and read over the single-page vitae.

"Palmerston. Henry, ah, Henry. I like him well enough personally, and I don't deny his patriotism.
He even serves a purpose of sorts, when his blustering offense and rough tongue acts as a foil to a
more cautious reasoned approach. What I can't like is his damnable insistence on clinging to the
most active degree of interventionism in the interest of supporting a Liberal cause. Henry has
always been a man of adventurous and domineering temperament and his instinct is always to
intervene in other people's disputes. I believe that is partly because he thinks Liberalism, and the
middle classes, are most likely to produce a government that is stable and friendly to England and
English trade. It's never worked out in practice, not once. The world was quite full enough of
trouble as it was; why stir up more?"

Melbourne stopped himself then, and smiled into the upturned face, as spellbound and openly
adoring as it had ever been.

"Is he – are he and Emily happy together, do you think?" Victoria asked, seemingly apropos of
nothing. Melbourne considered the question.

"Why, I believe so, don't you? They certainly show it, and have had many years to perfect their
bond."

"Do you think she minds, that he is not – is not faithful?" Victoria whispered the question almost
dhly. This was a different time, with different morals than those prevalent in the drawing rooms of
his youth, his mother's fashionable friends and their lovers and mistresses, husbands and wives, all
intermingling, the best of friends.

"Mind?" Melbourne thought about the matter. "In our youth, Emily's and mine and those of our
contemporaries, we saw all around us the accommodations of marriage, so our expectations were
not those which someone raised in a more sheltered environment might form."
He meant her, of course, and they both understood.

"I do most firmly believe that if there is true, deep love, then each will respect the other's feelings and seek to do no harm to those feelings. If what matters very little to one, matters a great deal to the other, why then, the solution is simple."

"Tell me about John Russell. What sort of premier will he be? He is a Liberal, I understand, but such a mild and conciliatory man, so eager to please. Will I like him?"

"You've had several audiences already. What is your opinion?"

Victoria reflected. "He gives no offense. He does not seem to precisely attend to me, at least, I don't get the impression that he is much interested in what I think, only whether I will give my approval to this or that course of action. But I get little sense of him as a person, as an individual, so I cannot say whether I will like or dislike him."

"Perhaps neither, then. Of course, when men are suddenly raised to high position and put into circumstances which are unfamiliar and intimidating, you won't see the best of them. I would anticipate that those of your new ministry who have not previously frequented Court functions, who do not already know how to go on in the presence of royalty, might be stiff, or silly, or gauche. You must not let their discomfort affect you."

Melbourne enjoyed talking to Victoria, and his impulse was to speak all his thoughts aloud. She devoured his words, and his confidence in her ability to form her own ultimate conclusions freed him from the necessity to censor or self-monitor.

"But in the end, it does not matter who you like or dislike, only whether you can establish a tolerable working relationship. Because you are the Queen that responsibility will always rest with you."

"I wish I had your ease of manner, William. Even now, I stiffen when others are anxious. Their nervousness affects me. Anger or disapproval I can deal with, but to simply be at ease and by doing so put others at their ease, is not a talent I possess."

"It no longer shows, if that is so. I remember when you looked to me for reassurance –"

"I still do! I always will!" Victoria protested vigorously, too vigorously, he thought.

"Thank you, my love, but when I see you in command of yourself before the Council or receiving some firebrand who reverts to bowing and trembling before you, it is clear you have eclipsed me completely. I was never a public speaker, never eloquent. I do my best talking in drawing rooms."

"Or boudoirs?" Victoria said in a low voice, her blue eyes twinkling with shared merriment.

"Or in boudoirs," he agreed.

"So…John Russell…?"

"A firebrand, at least he was. I think he may have calmed down somewhat but he will still bear watching. If you remember, in '38 my government was nearly brought down by a schism in cabinet. I lay that at Howick's feet – a more contentious old fool I cannot imagine – but I counted on Russell to keep the peace. I am always wary of men who are sure they must drive home a point merely because it appears right. And it was Russell's scheme to give O'Connell an appointment only to drive a wedge between him and his followers. It was a hare-brained idea, and sure to have set your uncle in a fury. When Peel and I worked together to convince our parties to compromise in
order to hold the government together, it was the radicals like Russell in the background stirring up
trouble. Perhaps it was a chimerical fear, but always such strong partisan divides caused me to fear
the specter of revolution and civil war. It's what drove me, above all, to seek compromise. But we
know, don't we, how my natural urging is toward tranquility at any price? And after you came to
the Throne it was my only driving imperative, to keep things on an even keel so you would not face
any premature challenges."

Melbourne's tone was dry and full of self-mockery and caused Victoria to frown.

"William, that is your gift, one of the things which made you the finest leader we had and the
reason I asked you to return to keep an eye on the new government. Tranquility is what allows
England to be strong, and our people free of the urge to revolt."

“All in all, a good man – but you'll find most of them are, at heart – but intentions mean little, if
their actions do not further a common goal. And, to his supreme credit, he is an ardent Royalist
through and through who greatly admires you, ma'am."

"Do you think there will ever be a female minister? I am Queen and entirely capable of
understanding our constitution and government. Why could a female not stand for one of the
boroughs and join Parliament? Fifty, a hundred years ago, it would have been unheard-of for a
Catholic or a Jew to take office and now Lionel de Rothschild will be sworn on a Hebrew text."

Melbourne's first inclination was to laugh at the absurdity of such a thought, but he stifled it and
studied her piquant heart-shaped face, thinking of the strong, highly intelligent women he had
known – most notably his mother, although there had been others, even she-whose-name-must-not-
be-mentioned, Mrs. Norton. What, other than societal prejudice and custom, would prevent them
from exercising the same powers of office as any man, no matter how big a dolt?

"Why not indeed? Probably not yet, most probably not in my lifetime, but you will have a long
reign as the greatest monarch England has ever seen, and who knows what changes will come
about in fifty or a hundred years?"

One after another, Victoria pulled out the name of a minister in Russell's government and
Melbourne filled in the bare factual outline provided with anecdotes, humorous on dits that amused
while they provided a vivid image of the man.

The fire burned low in the hearth, logs lit for their cheery aspect more than real warmth provided
by the more modern stoves installed in each chamber. Outside, the night was dark with few stars to
be seen, but something caught Victoria's eye.

"William, look! Snow!" She leapt up as eagerly as the child she had so recently been and went to
the French doors. Fine white flakes were falling from a velvet-dark sky.

"It is too early to expect it to stay, but the hunts will be glad of some frost on the ground,"
Melbourne observed, going to stand closely behind her. Together they looked out at the night and
the expanse of lawn now lightly frosted with white. He ran his hands up and down her arms and
felt the goosebumps forming.

"What day is this, William?" She asked with sudden urgency.

"It is not even midnight so it is still November the 24th," he answered her question and felt her
shiver. "Are you cold, my love? May I get your shawl?"

"No. Take me to bed, Lord M. Hold me, read to me. We will get warm together."
From the warm golden glow of their candlelit bedroom he was transported to another, equally recognizable but not right, not where he wanted to be. No disbelief attended his awakening, only resignation and the old familiar despair. He knew now, knew that it was a dream and if only he could bide his time he would awake where he belonged, yet the fearful thought that this was real, this was the place he was meant to occupy dragged at him with such ferocious strength that it became difficult to draw breath. A weight descended on his chest, this one external, not stemming from emotional torment alone and an existential terror took away the power of thought. He wanted to move, to call for help – call whom? – but his limbs were leaden and refused to respond. Cold, so cold. And then a bright flash of memory, as if only minutes old. Holding her in his arms, bundled into bed under the weight of a fine heavy duvet. That was the place he belonged, not here in this dreary bachelor bed. With what remained of conscious thought, he willed himself to awaken from this nightmare, to awaken in that other place, full of warmth and laughter and love.

Another image came to him then, a glimpse of the future not so far off, the image of her finding him lifeless at her side, a frail elderly husband expiring beside that young vibrant creature. And he knew there was something worse and more unforgivably selfish than dying alone.

Victoria woke suddenly with a jerk, all her muscles tensing. She held her breath, thinking an intruder? and then understood. Beside her, Melbourne was rigid, trembling violently and heaving great ragged breaths. She turned onto her side and laid a hand on his chest.

"Darling, wake up. You are having a bad dream."
The soft *snick* of billiard balls made pleasant counterpoint to the crackling of charring wood in the hearth. A bright sun shone through floor to ceiling windows which looked out on a street busy with pedestrian traffic. At mid-afternoon Brooks' Gentleman's Club was unsurprisingly sparse of patronage. Parliament held no active sessions that week, and the sportsmen among its Members had adjourned to the countryside for the start of prime hunt season.

There was a time when no decent female would dare venture down St. James past the bowed windows of famed clubs, Brooks' and White's. A generation before Letty Lade had cemented her reputation as the fastest woman in Prinny's circle by promenading down St. James.

By 1845 such stricures were no longer regarded and even seemed quaint by comparison with the far greater transgressions of disreputable women ostracized by the high sticklers of polite society.

Two modishly dressed females walking down St. James Street paused to stare through the windows of Brooks' Club. One of these was a strawberry blond with a peaches-and-cream complexion and buxom figure, classically pretty, while the second was taller and leaner with raven black hair and angular dark eyes that had an almost Asian slant. This woman was, if not traditionally beautiful, was striking to behold, with a lively intelligence apparent in her sharp features and a bold, almost taunting forthrightness of manner shown to all who approached.

She appeared transfixed, her gaze locked on a gentleman within. The room on display was one of the private parlors adjacent the reading room, furnished with several tufted leather couches and wing chairs. As she stared avidly he stretched and then adjusted his shirt collar before running one
hand through a head of thick graying curls. Seen through the glass it was impossible to see the regular features, strong Roman nose, generous mouth always curved into a bemused half-smile or large heavy-lidded eyes but there was no need, for Caroline Norton knew every curve and plain of that face, saw its masculine beauty enlivened by wit and keen intelligence in her dreams. She knew every inch of that sturdy six-foot frame, perfectly formed for the comfort and shelter to be found in his arms, languid and perfectly elegant in all his movements.

Under unseen scrutiny, he threw back his head and laughed with hearty abandon, that laugh she knew so well, then began idly spinning balls on the green felt, disrupting a shot here, surreptitiously sinking a ball there.

She hated him, and she loved him; he maddened her by his distance and could melt her proud heart with a single glance. He had once loved her best, a belief she clung to with all she was, and his subsequent denials were no more than subterfuge, enacted for her sake.

Caroline Norton was no fool. He had never told her, it was true; had never spoken of love, never said more, even at their most intimate moments, than that he found her the most amusing of women and sorely missed her companionship when time and distance separated them. But she knew, that he felt so much more than he ever dared say aloud. Theirs had been a perfect meeting of the minds once, two unnaturally sharp intellects, equally critical of the superficial proprieties, delighting in thwarting convention.

When hate burned stronger than love she despised him for taking the coward's way out, when he proclaimed it in her best interest that they no longer see each other. It still burned, the memory of him standing, frozen in shock, mortified, when she threw herself at his feet in the very entrance to 10 Downing Street, begging him to return to her, vowing that nothing in the world mattered so long as she had his love.

Caroline never doubted that they would have rekindled their romance. Nothing which burned that hot could simply die out and fade away. And he had returned, not once, not twice, but over and over. When she, the royal girl, wed the German boy he had spent their wedding night in her bed. When she, the damned spoiled whey-faced princess, was stupidly self-centered enough to discount Caroline as a rival, he had weakened and renewed their friendship yet again.

Caroline had never really considered his infatuation with the little Queen ambition-based. She knew William Lamb too well for that. No, she'd acknowledged long since, it was an entirely predictable cliché. What world-weary man of middle age would not have succumbed to the allure of a cow-eyed chit of eighteen, if that girl looked at him as though he were her entire salvation? No, Caroline understood even before he had, how inevitable that May-December romance was. What she had not counted on was the girl's cunning, and the way she overcame his instinct toward self-protection, manipulating him to bed and then altar.

It would be unthinkable to venture inside those hallowed walls, a fact of which she needed no reminder, yet her younger sister Georgiana hissed a warning. Caroline, as much as she felt drawn to him physically, like steel filings to a magnet, had learned one hard lesson, that above all things Lord Melbourne abhorred public spectacle. Instead she stood still, hoping against hope he would see her and come out, memorizing every detail – the fine cut of his green velvet coat, the snowy white peaks of his starched collar, the silky soft tendrils laying against his face – and then turned away from Brooks' Club and continued on her way.

Melbourne had ridden into town, rather than settling into a more dignified means of transportation, too energized and exuberant to settle for sedate travel. He set out soon after breakfast, as soon as a messenger from Whitehall brought the first of the day's dispatches.
The British navy had joined forces with the French, with the intention of blockading the Rio de la Plata. Such an alliance was unprecedented, and far from universally popular. Palmerston, as much as he might have liked, had not yet consolidated his own power to such an extent that he could completely undo the accord Aberdeen and Monsieur Guizot established. Although word had not yet reached England, the outcome of any confrontation with the Argentine Confederation was far from certain and Melbourne anticipated any English blood spilled in what was essentially a French cause would derail the détente. That was only one matter he intended to discuss with Johnny Russell. The other was half a world away, looming war in the Punjab.

He had awakened feeling uncommonly fine, any lingering recollection of the dreams which plagued him nearly faded with the light. The sensation of Victoria's velvet-soft skin pressed against his own, night clothes tangled somewhere in the sheets, reminded him of what passed in the night. Whatever torment had been inflicted by a sleep-addled mind – in the words of Mr. Dickens "...an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese..." fled at Victoria's soft voice, her soothing attentions and his own embarrassingly intense, almost frantic state of hyperarousal. Blood pounded through his veins, a euphoric awareness of being alive that manifested in such an obvious condition she had wordlessly set about relieving him. He dimly remembered his own murmured protests and her resolute loving attention. Life, the single word formed in his mind. It's good to be alive.

Having occupation again, being attended to and in some minor way being engaged once more in the career to which he'd devoted his life was the final missing piece. A wife he adored, who loved him in return, and a second chance at fatherhood, everything he ever longed for was everything, but it could not compensate a man for idleness. He decided that was the message of those nightmares, latent puritanical guilt, a sense he had too many undeserved blessings, and put the matter out of his mind.

_Little Johnny Russell_, he saluted the new premier, not so long ago a young firebrand reformer who was only bridled with great difficulty. _Finality Jack_. But there was no malice in his lazy teasing smile and no offense was taken. They knew each other too well.

Just as Peel had once done, Russell seemed more grateful than the alternative for Lord Melbourne's attention. While he himself did not entirely understand, Melbourne knew that like so many of their fellows Russell was both intimidated by royalty and deeply mistrustful. However much his marriage might place him in a curious position, one foot in each camp, Russell came down firmly on the side of taking advantage of the natural ease he felt in speaking plainly to one who had been in his shoes not so long ago.

Robert Peel, in the House a far better orator than Melbourne knew he himself had ever been, had stood stiff and uncomfortable before the Queen, tongue-tied and gauche in a way that only increased her own hauteur. Dismissive of any ideological differences – which in fact were minimal, considering Peel and Melbourne had been moderates working together more often than not – that First Lord, like this one, spoke freely with the Queen's husband, instinctively trusting him to play neutral intermediary in restating their more complex arguments in the palatable manner which eluded them.

Russell grew increasingly loquacious as he expounded on Hardinge's progress in the east, until Melbourne interrupted with the gentle observation that his speech was suspiciously reminiscent of another, more aggressive, interventionist minister.

"I make up my own mind, Melbourne. They gave me the Government," had come the quick response.
"Of course, Johnny, of course. As did I. But Henry has an unfortunate knack of insinuating himself into one's mind. It's so much more peaceful to agree and ride with the current of his ambition, isn't it?" Melbourne's tone was unctuously sympathetic and understanding. Only a twitch at the corner of his mouth gave him away.

"Dammit, if it's Palmerston's policy, he is still working for me," Russell's near-concession was made in good enough humor that Melbourne knew his point was well-taken. He waited as the table was laid with thick beefsteaks and an array of puddings and sauces.

"Bordeaux?" He peered at the markings on a dusty bottle, finally extending his glass.

They ate and drank in a spirit of congeniality, policy put aside. Melbourne inquired politely after the second Lady Russell, for whom Victoria had a fondness, and they discussed wives and children as though one of those were not the Queen of England. Lady Frances Russell, the daughter of Melbourne's old friend the Earl of Minto, had presented her husband with an heir some three years ago, a boy joining two girls already in the nursery at Pembroke Lodge. It was the sort of talk Melbourne had previously avoided and now fell into easily, comparing milestones, two boastful fathers far more engaged in the lives of their children than men to whom paternity came earlier in life.

When the covers were cleared, and an excellent port set out Melbourne leaned back in his chair, loosening a button on his waistcoat.

"The Punjab," he said simply.

Russell looked pained but resolute.

"It's the richest region left unconquered, Melbourne. You know the Company will not fall back now, with the prize in their reach."

"Then let the Company send in their own forces. They maintain a standing army, better funded than ours. You realize that for Hardinge to declare war in Her Majesty's name, she must be persuaded that it's a just cause."

Where it had been Victoria earlier in their conversation, reverting to the more formal usage signaled a change in his role, from doting husband to more careful minister, representing the Crown.

"Hardinge is raring to go, and Ellenborough and Auckland before him all agreed that we can't hold India with a single rebellious province."

"Province, John? I thought the Punjab was an independent state." Melbourne knew he had gone as far as he dared, playing Devil's Advocate without causing a clear rift. It was his duty to make matters plain, so that Victoria's views were carefully informed, while respecting the clear demarcation between her duty and that of the lawfully seated government.

Melbourne offered a few of the less heated observations contained in Billy Cameron's letter, grateful that he knew nothing which would give either side a strategic advantage in battle and Russell addressed a few other bills which would be presented at the first session, along with brief discussion of the Queen's Speech he would soon prepare, for the State Opening of Parliament. Melbourne was pleased overall with the tone of their meeting – Victoria's concerns aired, and her ministers' intention clearly stated – and relieved at the early termination. Time well spent, he considered, but now I want to be home.
As dusk drew near the temperature dropped sharply and Melbourne briefly regretted having disdained the comfort of a closed carriage. His groom and the protection officer trotting beside him provided amusing enough companionship that the miles passed quickly, and soon enough the stark outline of the ancient castle was visible over treetops in the distance.

Anticipation quickened his pulse, reawakening the almost-boyish delight with which he contemplated seeing her once more, but Melbourne was unprepared for the cacophony which greeted him as he climbed the final flight of broad marble stairs.

Those storied walls had seen much in seven hundred years, but he briefly doubted whether there had been many sights such as the one which greeted him. A monkey — *a monkey*, he thought incredulously, with no little humor — scampered down the corridor leading to the lavish State apartments, fleeting the private realm. The little creature was nattily attired in a bright blue jacket and striped trousers and was chattering vociferously at a pack of little dogs in hot pursuit. Several — no, more than several, Melbourne thought — children cheered on the small ape, his own amongst them. No caretakers were in sight, and so Melbourne, thinking quickly, spread his arms wide before they all reached the wide winding stairway. He reached for one tiny figure attempting to circumvent him.

His daughter, long hair streaming unencumbered, one stocking fallen and what had once been a white lacy frock, at once took notice of her father's presence and squealed with pleasure. Her brother, normally a quiet well-behaved child, was flushed with exertion, his own attire askew and his curly hair damply clinging to his forehead.

Melbourne ventured no guess as to the identity of the others, almost certain they were no part of his extended family or Victoria's, even as upwards of a dozen broad freckled faces all stared up at him expectantly. *Sturdy children*, he thought, *from some village or other*.

"Who on earth is in charge of this troop?" he said aloud, expecting no response.

"Lord Melbourne!"

Baroness Lehzen appeared, looking as close to disheveled as he had ever seen her, errant locks of iron gray hair escaping her normally neat braided chignon, pale face as flushed as little Lily's, breathing heavily. She remembered herself and sketched a quick curtsy, stopping short just before they collided.

Melbourne already felt himself lost to the humor of the spectacle before him but considered he did a creditable job of maintaining a dignified demeanor. When they were joined by Victoria, resplendent in a cloth-of-gold cloak and large pasteboard crown, all hope of sobriety fled, and he bent over laughing.

"…your guests…" were the words he caught.

"Lehzen, please take the children away. They were about to have tea." Victoria spoke calmly, in measured tones. "Lily, Mama needs to talk to Papa. Please help Lehzen guide our visitors."

Melbourne half-expected resistance but he felt the little fingers gripping his hand release their grasp. With uncharacteristic docility Lily took her place at the head of the group and led them toward the nursery with all the dignity of a little queen. He followed Victoria into a seldom-used small chamber. Looking down, he was better able to appreciate her attire without distraction. Beneath an unlikely sparkling cape, emblazoned with the insignia of some medieval chivalric order, she wore what appeared to be a chainmail bodice – wrought of thick gold-painted yarn –
over a bright green gown with improbably wide batwing sleeves and a skirt so scandalously short it showed her trim calves.

"Guinevere?" he asked, his lips quirking in an appreciative smile.

"I think. Or perhaps Dulcinea," she replied. Her own smile was somewhat crooked and pained but it soon melted into an expression of reciprocal amusement.

"It was quite unfortunate that your party arrived in your absence, but I did my best to provide hospitality and a warm welcome."

"My party, ma'am?" No matter what the explanation Melbourne felt sure he would not be disappointed. Nothing could spoil his good mood and the appearance of his restrained, dignified little wife in the disguise of a Drury Lane actress only increased his merriment.

"Your party, sir. If you had given us time to prepare I'm sure we could have put on a better show. As it is, I fear I have not been entirely successful in convincing them I am the Queen. They – the adults, at least some of them – as well as the children suspect I am an impostor."

Understanding dawned as Victoria explained that a large extended family of Yorkshire farmers, accompanied by their city cousins and several indeterminate individuals introduced vaguely by their Christian names, had appeared at the gate to the Middle Ward bearing a calling card with Lord Melbourne's name.

"The zoo family!" Melbourne exclaimed, relieved to have finally guessed the provenance of such a lively group within the staid confines of an impregnable fortress. "And they brought you a monkey?"

"Oh, no, that was merely fortunate coincidence. Billy sent the monkey as a gift for the children."

When he was able to stop laughing Victoria started, clinging to him for support and wiping her eyes with the hem of her sleeve. Between whoops she explained the absurd costume – all her State gowns were carefully stored and so Skerrett had assembled what was most likely to convince a family of bumpkins they were in the presence of Royalty. The Crown jewels were, of course, locked away in the Tower and so a pasteboard facsimile was found, remnant of some masquerade or costume ball. She warned him solemnly that a similar costume awaited him in his chamber.

Breathless from unrestrained laughter, Melbourne grasped her elbows and roughly pulled her against him. He lifted her chin and stared into the sparkling blue eyes which met his.

"By God, Mrs. Melbourne, I do love you," he growled, and pressed his mouth over hers, tasting the sweetness of their happiness.
Chapter 6

Two coins spun in unison on the heavily varnished oak table. It was uncertain which would wobble and finally fall first. With near-perfect timing aligned to his prognostication the right one veered and tilted precariously, but at the last moment the coin on the left toppled flat. Melbourne sighed and slid both coins aside, winner take all. Then he chose two new coins from a neatly arranged stack and set them to spinning.

The Cabinet was still in fledgling stage. Russell and his ministers were engaged in nattering over minor points while attempting to set their first agenda, which would be presented to Her Majesty as the Queen's Speech. Lord Palmerston had been going on and on – far too long, Melbourne opined – for such a prosy matter.

"Greece is not sufficiently important to form an essential element in the general balance of European power." Henry Temple's rich baritone was overly loud for the small, poorly ventilated and overheated chamber and Melbourne felt his temples throb.

*Tarnation, man,* he thought harshly, *if it's insufficiently important then why have we devoted four solid hours to discussion of their affairs?*

"We have no peculiar political interest with respect to the kingdom of Greece. The commerce of Greece cannot by any possibility be very extensive, and, therefore, we can have no commercial or selfish interests there to maintain. We are now paying a portion of the interest upon the Greek loan which was guaranteed by the three protecting Powers…"

Both from duty and inclination Melbourne had accepted the commission laid upon him. It was salve to his ego, he freely admitted, an opportunity to feel useful and engaged once more. Much of it was worthwhile and even intellectually stimulating – listening judiciously to the sort of informal sausage-making which went on long before finished policy recommendations were laid before the Queen. As he had always done, Melbourne maintained a nonchalant, even disinterested demeanour, asking astute questions in a deceptively mild tone. His goal was to render his queen an exact accounting of how matters stood in the country these men ruled in her name. If he was to guide, it would be only with a gentle nudge, toward the moderate middle ground and avoid the rocky shoals of extremism on either end. He had forgotten how much of governing was purely tedium. *And how very much every man loves the sound of his own voice.*

Palmerston's own voice was still droning on when the second set of coins finished their competition - time, he had bet on the left and prevailed against himself – and Melbourne permitted his mind to wander.

Russell wanted a unified agenda in place before Parliament opened and to accomplish that he had to wrangle his own headstrong ministers, coercing compromise to present a united front. The Opposition would exploit every chink in the new Prime Minister's armor. Melbourne remembered
how much trouble one's own allies could be to a chief minister trying to form and hold a
government. Johnny Russell was a firebrand, headstrong and full of zeal to implement the ideals he
had long held as reformer and then opposition leader. He would have to learn on his own the
power of compromise, the strength to be had in flexibility, the forward momentum only possible
when a team pulled in tandem. Or perhaps not. That had been Melbourne's way, to seek
compromise and follow a moderate course but he conceded that history would be his judge.

At present, he cared more about his prolonged absence from court—no, from Victoria and the
children—than his place in history. He had been in town for five consecutive days and nights and
fully recognized he had outgrown a capacity for self-reliance. Melbourne knew himself not well
suited to the absence of society, no matter how much he might imagine he craved the solace of
study and contemplation. Beyond the mere consolation of scintillating conversation and social
dalliance, he had never known the sort of domestic contentment he found in the past five years.
Even their first years, when their unorthodox arrangement included the Prince Consort and his
companions, had been a haven of warmth and family feeling he had not known since childhood.

Watching the coins continue their hypnotic dance, Melbourne's mouth softened in reverie,
remembering the last night he had spent at home. Home, Windsor Castle. Or home, Buckingham
Palace. Home was wherever she was.

The spectacle which greeted him upon his return had been as outlandish as it was amusing.
The zoo family, mother, father and three children, along with those relations they had seen fit to
include, had presented the visiting card he had so thoughtlessly given them and gained access to
the Queen and her attendants. What would Cameron say? The security measures he had put in
place were neatly circumvented by plainspoken countryfolk and neither the plainclothes personal
protection officers nor the entire Household Cavalry had barred their access. If that wasn't enough
to commend them, the yeoman farmer and his spouse had impressed with their calm, forthright
manner, courteous without being servile, and the children fast friendship, with three-year-old Lily
taking the lead as hostess-in-chief and Prince William gleefully showing off his soldiers and
mechanical toy trains. Billy Cameron's monkey, having survived its journey from the Indian
subcontinent in fine fettle, had contributed its own mite to the general holiday feeling.

Lady Portman had risen admirably to the occasion, relying on Lord Portman's interest in agriculture
to converse most knowledgably with the adults in the party, and Melbourne found himself
fascinated and impressed by the well-informed intelligence of Daniel Murton.

Victoria showed herself to great advantage. Her mother and John Conroy, to their credit and the
late King's chagrin, had sought out occasions to introduce Princess Alexandrina to the common
people and as a result she was more at ease on such public occasions than she was with the
aristocracy who tended to look down on their gauche Germanic sovereigns. With the Murton
family the Queen was warm, gracious and unaffected. Hand-in-hand, they followed the group on a
hastily-assembled tour of the State Rooms and other points of interest.

The chief usher, a punctilious fellow who made clear his disapproval of the social standing of their
guests, was quickly overtaken by a personable young equerry. Spencer Ponsonby was serving his
first honor appointment but was familiar with Windsor Castle from his father's past tenure as Chief
Custodian and Commissioner of Woods and Forests. Only just past his own boyhood, the young
man enthusiastically took over after they had passed through the Portrait Gallery and Throne
Room, the Reception Room and Blue and Yellow Drawing Rooms. He led them to the Armory, a
medieval wonderland which instantly evoked gasps of sheer wonder. The children pushed forward
to study suits of armour from Henry VIII while Ponsonby explained at length what all the parts were called, gorget, breastplate and fauld. He showed them how the shield-shaped tassets each were comprised of three overlapping lames which accommodated the suspension straps of the fauld. The older boys, Prince William among them, eagerly studied the form, inner edge cut away in a concave curve to clear the crotch, each undoubtedly imagining themselves on the back of a great warhorse leading the charge.

Lily, not to be outdone, attempted to grasp the gauntlet as though it were a hand to be held and ended up tugging the heavy metal piece loose, so it clattered to the stone floor with a loud ringing clang. Melbourne had stepped forward then and scooped her neatly off her feet, holding her throughout the rest of their tour through generally unseen towers, finding and opening cunningly concealed doorways and hidden staircases.

Melbourne found it extremely pleasurable to walk through the venerable corridors, vaguely dank-smelling, redolent with the sheer weight of centuries, holding the small soft hand of his son, heir to all this historic splendor, successor to the great kings – and queens – who had reigned over their small island nation since William the Conqueror. Not for the first time, he felt the breaching of his carefully cultivated cynicism.

Melbourne was a monarchist to the bone, but his allegiance to the institution was strictly practical. Monarchy was the glue that held their national identity together, an unchanging constant, counterbalance to constitutional government, a necessary if faintly ridiculous symbolic edifice. Neither his admiration for Victoria as a capable, intelligent and extremely hard-working modern sovereign, nor his desperate personal attachment to the girl under ermine-lined robes, shook that essentially pragmatic view.

Rare glimpses of the heritage she embodied, the archaic rite of Coronation, the near-religious awe inspired by a thousand years of history, stirred him more deeply than was comfortable. Melbourne preferred to consider himself a career politician, devoted to rationalism and the principles of the Enlightenment, but those moments which touched his spirit had the power to reawaken devotion to the monarchy itself. He was aware of an elusive thought which would bear closer study, that if the monarchy was to survive another century in a changing world, it must take care to show itself often enough to stir sentimental dedication in the population at large. People liked to think that strong opinions were formed intellectually, but in fact the most extreme prejudices were emotional, stored deep within one's heart. Something which the French had lost sight of, and those nations which chose their own sovereigns never considered. To be believed, a sovereign must not only be seen but felt, the closest glimpse on earth to the Divine. Something we can use to ward off the spread of revolutionary republican fervor, he thought, forming the intention to construct public ritual and pageantry as Victoria's predecessor Elizabeth had done so successfully in an equally tumultuous time.

"...The circumstances which led to the establishment of the kingdom of Greece are well known. Everyone must remember that there broke out in Greece in 1820 a general resistance to the Turkish authority. That resistance continued from 1820 till 1827, during which time a sanguinary and exterminating war was carried on between the Turkish troops and the Greek nation. In 1827, England, Russia, and France, concurred in the determination to put a stop to those hostilities, and to erect Greece into a separate and independent State; and the result was, that the kingdom of Greece was so constituted, and England and the other two Powers guaranteed by Treaty the independence and integrity of that kingdom."
Good God, are we only at 1827? Melbourne stifled a groan and pretended attention to the Foreign Secretary.

Each day's cabinet and subcommittee meetings went on interminably, breaking for dinner at a nearby chophouse which catered to the higher echelons of government and then resuming until eight or nine. By then it was far too late to contemplate covering the distance to Windsor. A rider would carry Melbourne's scrawled note to the Queen, excusing himself for another evening, and when they were finally recessed for the night he would accept the most interesting late supper invitation and empty a few bottles over conversation that stretched late into the night. It amused him, in a bleak, essentially humorless way, that so many of his fellows relished their time in London with a ready excuse, should they need one, to escape the expectations of their wives, when all he wanted was to collapse into a warm bed beside his own.

"I say, therefore, that anything which threatens the independence which we have guaranteed—anything which threatens the prosperity of that kingdom which we were parties to create, affects directly the honour of the British Crown."

Palmerston concluded triumphantly, and Melbourne's sigh was audible. The men around the table, scribbling furiously, looked up at the sudden cessation of sound.

"Good God, man, come to the point. What exactly is it you want?" he drawled, blinking.

Unfortunately, there was no clear answer to Melbourne's question. His brother-in-law appeared nonplussed by the question, stammering only that he had thought his point to be perfectly clear. When he looked around the table, nobody seemed inclined to press the point and Melbourne found he did not particularly care.

"All that was only to state your view that we have a vested interest in a conflict which only exists in your mind? Was there ever a nation you didn't feel you could build more ably than those who must live there? Henry, Henry…" Melbourne shook his head and sat back, shrugging.

"Very well, have it as your own opening address but spare Her Majesty's Speech any mention of the Greek debt. It does not rise to the importance of inclusion in your first-year agenda, John."

Victoria folded the note in half, distractedly picking at a fleck of sealing wax with her nail. Another night in town – it was unacceptable. Naturally she was pleased that he had taken up her challenge—no, not challenge, her request—to occupy a seat in the new cabinet, replacing Arthur Wellesley as Minister without Portfolio, and it was good to see him display a renewed vigor and absorption with the business of watching and guiding the formation of a new government. But she was not as well pleased that it necessitated his absence.

"William stays in town again?" Victoria looked up and saw Lady Portman gazing at the note with an understanding expression. "It is no small thing to form a new government, to draft the agenda for their first year, identify the key issues which will be taken up in the House. And it gets dark so early, he cannot travel all this way after a long day in chambers."

"I know that, Emma. You need not remind me." Victoria saw her most senior attendant, with her since the beginning and more friend than courtier, flush at the sharp rebuke.

"It is a long way from Whitehall to this castle." They both looked at the Duchess of Kent. She was wrapped in a thick cashmere shawl the same cerulean blue as her eyes.

"Yes, Mama, it is. That is why William must stay in town. I would not have him on the frozen roads after dark, only to rise at dawn and return the next day."
"Then," the Duchess hunched her thin shoulders, shivering dramatically. "Why must we remain in this damp, remote place when you have a perfectly lovely London home only a short distance from Whitehall? My dear Drina, you need only to give the order and we will sleep in town tonight. You, with your husband."

Victoria opened her mouth, then closed it again, thinking.

"Ma'am, the Court has always repaired to Windsor Castle after the Diplomatic Ball. Christmas is celebrated here. We return in spring, or February at the earliest." Lady Portman supplied the rationale applied ad nauseum to every dictate governing the royal household. "In another few days we will begin decorating for Christmas."

Victoria pondered the notion, contemplating the inevitable uproar which would sweep through every echelon of her Household, from the Master of the Horse to unseen scullery maids. Once, when she had decided to relocate from Kensington to Buckingham House, she had glimpsed the massive undertaking which spontaneous changes wrought. Nonetheless…

"Lady Portman, please advise our Chief Steward and – oh, whomever handles such things – that we will immediately move to Buckingham House. I will expect my chambers, and yours and Mama's and the children's, to be readied for us tonight. The rest can be undertaken at a more seemly pace."

"Ma'am!" Lady Portman exhaled sharply. "You realize that Buckingham House will be in Holland cloth, the chandeliers bagged, the rooms unaired? Why, the beds will have been stripped and –"

"Oh, Emma, please! I think it's not an abandoned property? We must have servants there, and they do not huddle in the dark and cold. Please, make it happen. And ask for a footman, please. I will send a note to William, telling him we will be there by dinner time."

Once the day's session was finally ended they were only Henry and William again. With a familiar wolfish smile creasing his handsome face, Palmerston attempted to cajole Melbourne into accompanying him to look in at a new salon, of which he had heard many enticing rumors.

"Oh, Henry, spare me. I'm not up to the sort of carousing you have in mind. Where the devil do you get your stamina?"

_In truth_, Melbourne thought, _if I had any hope of repairing to my own bed, I would have adequate stamina._

"William, please – it's not that sort of place. A literary salon, right up your alley. 'Salon' might be too grand a word – Sidney Herbert hosts dinners a few times a month, gathering some up-and-comers, but not politicians only. He captures an author or two, even some of those scientist types who used to frequent your boy Albert's salons. Intellectualists, Sidney calls them."

Melbourne threw up his hands in resignation. It was too early to retire to his club and he did not feel like drinking alone or striking up an entirely new conversation with some fellow he had not seen in ages.

"Very well," he agreed. _What is Victoria doing right now? Playing at cards with her mother or some of her young attendants? A musicale perhaps?_ The tedium of the drawing room would be soothing balm, and he would be able to stretch out his legs and doze to the music of his wife's sweet dulcet tones, a whiff of the fragrance she wore, the pleasing stimulation of her hand resting on his shoulder, her breath on his neck when she leaned over to tease him awake.
Sidney Herbert, youngest son of the Earl of Pembroke and a Russian countess, Peel's recent Secretary of War. Melbourne knew him, of course, but not well, and thought it might not be an unfruitful evening if he were to strike up a closer acquaintance. Surely some useful insights could be gained regarding the situation in India, most particularly the Punjab, and Hardinge's imminent declaration of war. Melbourne knew the other connection of course, but it was unthinkable that any Pembroke heir would be so gauche as to include a female not his wife in an evening salon at his London townhome.

"Very well, then. Let's be off, and for God's sake summon a closed carriage. No hack tonight, it's too damned cold." Melbourne accepted his many-caped greatcoat and shrugged it on, carelessly brushing back his hair with one hand, taking his hat and cane.

Their hansom cab had only just turned the corner, than a rider in royal livery rode up and dismounted.

Victoria tightened her lips and nodded dismissal to the page she had sent to find William. When she was alone, or nearly so, she smacked her hand palm-down on the nearest table, seething with frustration. Here they were, confined to one drawing room and a makeshift dining area, while the rest of the apartments were readied. Even working at fever pitch, this small space and her own bedchamber were all that were habitable in hours' notice. To their dismay, Lady Portman and the Duchess of Kent would be forced to share a chamber, Lehzen, two lady's maids and the children another. All this, and they couldn't find Lord M?

The ridiculousness of her rush to London made Victoria laugh unwillingly. The message had ultimately been left at his club, where he had bespoken a member's chamber, and where even his valet was nowhere to be found. A concierge had undertaken to remain on duty until the honorable Lord returned, and place the Queen's message into his hands, but by then it would undoubtedly be far too late for him to turn around and return to Buckingham. Regardless of the unlikelihood, Victoria sent orders to the external sentries that her husband might be expected at any hour and was to be brought to her temporary quarters forthwith.

They were all out of sorts, a state for which Victoria knew she had only herself and her own impulsiveness to blame. She tucked the children into their shared bed, grateful that they at least viewed such unorthodox arrangements as an adventure to be enjoyed and went into her own chamber. Lady Portman had been correct when she had predicted it would be cold – palace or not, it took more than a few hours to banish a late November chill with newly laid fires and freshly burning coal stoves struggling to heat the high-ceiling, cavernous rooms. Victoria sat stiffly while her hair was brushed, and she was given a long-sleeved flannel gown. Then she took her journal and got under the covers, thankful that at least her bed had been warmed and made up with the heaviest of down quilts.

Victoria, while knowing how foolish it was, nearly ached with longing for her husband. She craved his solid warmth when he stood in his accustomed place at her back, his own hands clasped behind him. She missed his endlessly fascinating, amusing conversation and comfortable silences, the humorous asides he would murmur in her ear at inopportune moments so she had to resist the urge to giggle. She wanted the warmth of his long body beside hers in their bed at night, felt hollowed without the touch of his big hands on her, his beautiful mouth to kiss before sleep and again when they awoke and at stolen moments throughout the day.

William Lamb was hers, all hers, an endless treasure to explore and cherish and she wanted him at her side always, stubbornly, selfishly wanted him present. It was not right or fair, Victoria knew – he was so much more than merely a possession, no matter how well-loved. He had a brilliant, subtle mind and a vast store of knowledge, experience and understanding that must not be wasted.
He had a genius for building consensus and maintaining stability during turbulent times while appearing unconcerned and undemanding, thus unthreatening to men more ambitious for glory and power.

*But*, the spoiled selfish lovelorn part of her whined, sounding much like her own daughter, *above all, he's mine.*

The little monkey, Billy Cameron's gift, had arrived with letters for the Queen and Lord Melbourne, several written days apart. Those had recounted what he saw and heard, even what he ate and the conditions in which he found himself as he crossed over the natural barrier between British-held India and the independent, fertile region of the Punjab held by Maharini Jind Kaur and those Sikh warriors loyal to her son, the eight-year-old Maharaja, or King. Victoria found his letters most enlightening, informative in a way the dry official dispatches were not. He was like Lord M in that, able to transform mere recitation of dry facts into a colorful word picture.

There had been one more letter, slimmer than the others and sealed with the imprint of a signet ring she had noticed on Cameron's hand. This, unlike the others, had not been in a separate document folio but instead, improbably, slid into the pocket of the little monkey's blue jacket. *An accident,* had been Victoria's first thought. Perhaps it had fallen from the leather folder bound in a thong tie and some careless hand had tucked it into the monkey's apparel rather than replace it more carefully. However, when she turned it over to examine the address, it bore the name of her personal maid, from whose hands she had received it wordlessly. When she broke the seal, she understood.

It was past three when the wheels of the carriage clattered to a stop on St. James Street. A thick scrim of frost coated the cobblestones, making pedestrian travel hazardous, but Lord Melbourne stepped down heedless of the risk and shook his head to clear it. His protection officer, muffled in a thick wool coat against the cold, went ahead and banged the brass knocker sharply. After a few long minutes, during which it appeared no one would respond, a groggy porter opened the door and stood back, bowing their illustrious member inside.

Baines clearly had only just returned from his own evening, and Melbourne was vaguely grateful that at least the man was awake and alert. He nodded his thanks at the night clothes laid out and winked understandingly, dismissing him.

The bed was neatly made up but damnably cold and he cursed when he slid his bare feet over the sheets. Sleeping alone – there was a habit difficult to form and easily broken, he mused, wishing whole-heartedly he had his soft, warm girl curled up against his side. Warm, except for her feet, which were always icy. That thought made him smile, as he was sliding down into a comfortable sleeping position. The evening had been surprisingly satisfactory, lively conversation – renewed debate among fire-eating youngsters vying to challenge the old Whig lions. He had been confronted with what they viewed as his own hesitancy in pushing forward on the apprenticeship bill, the piecemeal solution to the whole vexing issue of slavery in Jamaica.

"It's easy enough to state an incontrovertible fact – slavery is evil and must be abolished. And so, we did. But to do so precipitously and without carefully laid plans would have resulted in an even greater evil. What do you imagine would have happened, had we simply waved a wand and declared all island slaves freed? What would they have done? Where would they go?"

Melbourne had defended the only logical approach so many times over so many years, in as many parlors as House sessions, that the words were spoken almost by rote. It no longer surprised or annoyed him, merely aroused a patient sort of humoring, when this or that young person renewed their attack on what they perceived as his equivocation.
"Anywhere they wanted," was the instant retort. "That's what freedom means."

Melbourne would attempt to subdue his own instinct to scoff at the idiotic simplicity of such a statement. Jamaica was an island, half a world away from the land their ancestors had been torn from, and they would be no more able to care for themselves there than he or any transplanted Englishman.

"How would they eat? Who would provide transportation, and to which destination? It was perhaps the greatest experiment that ever was tried by any nation on the face of the globe, emancipation of an entire population. If we achieve it successfully it will be one of the greatest exploits that ever was achieved by any nation. We could not, for God's sake, mar the great work by our own precipitancy and haste."

She had chimed in then, as perfectly on cue as ever she had been when they spoke in unison on any one of a dozen issues.

"A Parliamentary Committee—that Committee consisting of those who had been the most anxious friends of the indentured population, determined it would not only be hard upon the planters themselves, but dangerous to the peace of the colonies, and injurious to the great measure of the Legislature, to cast, as it were, these emancipated servants so hastily and prematurely upon the West-India islands, without having made any preparation. That is why the Apprenticeship Bill was established. It is now very nearly reaching its successful conclusion, with neither bloodshed nor undue hardship, yet you persist in claiming Lord Melbourne should have been more enthusiastic a proponent when it was his cautious wisdom that saw the thing done in a way that benefited all. Young fools, do you think fiery speeches accomplish great works? No, it's the hard, quiet work done behind the scenes that has turned an entire enslaved population into good English citizens with as much a right as any to stake a claim to the title."

Melbourne had met her eyes, allowing his own appreciation for her support to be conveyed, and for just a moment felt some twinge of regret for the loss of their friendship. How well they had understood one another. Then he recollected himself and shuttered his gaze once more, looking pointedly away from her own gleaming black eyes. Nothing untoward had occurred, merely lively political discourse, with shared beliefs as much as shared history forging a temporary alliance in Herbert's drawing room.

Still, he decided, as he pulled the bed covers over his shoulder, out of an abundance of caution it must not happen again. Caroline Norton and he simply could not be friends. He could feel a certain nostalgia for their old camaraderie and even remember with admiration her startling, strongly defined personality, the sheer dynamic magnetism of her presence, her dark handsomeness. But Victoria, her straightforward guilelessness and open, uncomplicated devotion, the inexpressible sweetness of the love they shared, was everything. Not that there was any competition, or any basis for comparison. One was glitter and the other, gold.
Cold. Melbourne opened his eyes, blinking furiously, aware of cold. When he exhaled he could see
the faint cloud of his breath. For the long, dizzying moment it took to orient himself he felt
paralyzed. Then he remembered, he was in one of the reserved sleeping chambers at Brooks’ Club
on St. James Street in London, mere blocks from the temporary offices occupied by the new
government. And of course, he was alone because Victoria would not be here, and he had not
ridden the miles to distant Windsor Castle after yesterday’s work was done. *But why is it so
dannably cold?*

He pulled a dressing gown around him and tied the belt securely, shoving his feet into slippers left
where he had kicked them off only hours before. The stove was cold when he laid his hand on it – no coal laid in? – and in the old hearth, only a few embers buried deep in the ash of what had been a low-burning fire when he returned.

Pulling back one of the heavy draperies, its nap sending particles of dust into the air when disturbed, he saw that somewhere the sun had risen, undoubtedly, but London at the end of November was not privileged to see it. Instead the sky was a milky white, the air heavy with low-hanging fog and the pollution of air which became almost overpowering when trapped, as it was now, by low clouds and lack of a cleansing breeze.

One of the luxuries of the Queen's household, a sentry or footman in Household livery never out of calling range, did not prevail here. Melbourne knew from experience there would be a concierge on duty whose job it was to answer the needs of any of the venerable members in residence but calculated the low odds of that fellow being able or inclined to find the strong black coffee he required. And Baines – did the fellow have a light'o'love tucked away somewhere in the City? For he had surely been out and about last evening, and his attire had been slightly less than immaculate when greeting his master.

Melbourne sighed and determined to dress in yesterday's clothing, only to venture forth in search of one of the street-side coffee vendors sure to be out in force catching the business of that day's workmen heading to their foundries and manufactories at this ungodly hour. A square of folded notepaper caught his eye and he bent to pick it up. His heart beat a rapid tattoo when he saw the royal crest imprinted in rich creamy vellum, his own name inscribed in a familiar neat script.

What he read made him smile, then grin and finally huff a small laugh. *What a redoubtable, very resourceful girl!* Moved the entire damn Court back to Buckingham out of season, at a few hours' notice, and only because she wanted *him.* Awareness of the sheer monumental *unlikeliness* of the whole thing never entirely left him, and moments like this only reinforced his sense of almost superstitious wonder. A man of more than sixty, so loved and desired by a young wife most would consider to be no more than gritting her teeth in anticipation of an elderly spouse's demise – Melbourne shook his head and grinned, speaking aloud with no one to hear him. *To hell with that – I'll take it, and gratefully.* If life had taught him nothing else, it had taught him to accept the few rare moments of pure happiness which were offered, and this *moment* had lasted for nearly a decade.

**

Victoria stirred restlessly throughout the night, only surrendering to the lightest sleep. She was up at dawn, sitting in the window seat with her knees drawn up, staring out over the frost-whitened rooftops of the great city beyond. She held the note Cameron had sent by his simian messenger – how clever!

Written in his hand, the message had been dictated by his mysterious maharini, that rebel queen who boldly defied the entire British presence. Victoria wondered how much of her message had been modified by Cameron, out of concern for the proprieties, and decided the answer was none. Billy cared little for protocol and social niceties; he acted from the heart and not the head, although she conceded he was far more intelligent than he allowed most people to believe.

*Victoria-

*I write to you not only as queen to queen, but mother to mother, woman to woman, widow to wife. Your great army stands outside our gates. My husband is dead, and my brother, and I stand alone between my son and his enemies. I do not understand why you, so far away, send your army to demand we bow to you, to steal our ancestral lands and my son's birthright. Billy tells me this is*
all to steal our wealth. Our farmers in the Punjab grow food to feed all, and with more to spare, but your nation will grow poppies to make into opium and cotton, so our Sikh nation will be forced to beg for crumbs from your table. Your son is five years old and named William. My son is seven and named Duleep Singh. Can we not become friends and sister queens, our sons grow together and someday meet as equals?

Jind

Below those lines, one more.

V – there it is. I’ve gotten here and met her and she’s a smart, strong little woman, just like you, with a little boy, just like you. She won't give in, any more than you would. Stop this madness if you can. – Love, Billy

Victoria had mulled over the issue at great length, wanting, needing to discuss it with Lord M and aware, even so, she would have to make up her own mind. William was all wise, but she knew their inclinations diverged where her instinct was to act, to demand compliance and fight for what felt right while his was to let events play out as they would, considering action something to be avoided at all costs, lest unforeseen factors result in unintended consequences. Leave it be, he had said more than once, and things can always get worse. He spoke freely and surely but always with the proviso that she should not, must not, allow his uncensored opinions to color her own. Always, she must be true to herself. And that, she knew, was one of the very first things which gave her an inkling of what a remarkable man he was.

Unlike everyone else in her life, William Lamb sought only to inform, completely and impartially, and then support her in whatever action she chose. He would warn, and then stand at her back, utterly devoted. His confidence in her increased her own. William was the only person she had ever met – certainly not her uncles, even doting, fond Leopold, or her mother, or even the servants who perpetually surrounded her – who wanted nothing for himself, who sought only to give from the bottomless reservoir of love he had for her.

Victoria heard footsteps in the uncarpeted marble corridor and took a deep breath, ready to deal with whatever difficulty was about to present itself. Perhaps it was a bit unexpected to move the Court, but really, what did she employ nearly a thousand servants in two palaces for, if not to maintain them as habitable when she chose to relocate? And where was William?

When the door opened without a preceding knock, Victoria turned quickly, irate, and instead heard herself squeal.

She flung herself at him. In bare feet she could not reach his mouth to kiss, so she hung on his shoulders and pressed her body against him. Melbourne laughed and pulled her even closer, wrapping his own open coat around her. When he lowered his head to kiss her she felt the bristle of unshaven cheeks.

"Lord M! You look quite disreputable. Not shaven? Neck bare? Is this how you present yourself to your queen?" Victoria teased, mumbling the words against his lips, not willing to relinquish their contact.

"I could ask in return, is this how you receive visitors at all your audiences?" Melbourne asked in return, almost laughing at the frenzy of her greeting. Victoria almost moaned aloud with the sheer pleasure of it when he ran flat palms up and down her sides. His hands, still encased in leather gloves, felt deliciously foreign against her flesh, bare under her night dress.

"You are up very early, Lord M."
"I am indeed," Melbourne agreed, clasping both hands under her buttocks to lift her feet off the floor. Victoria instantly wrapped her legs around him and doing so, opened herself quite provocatively. When the cool room air reached those tender warm places, she pressed herself against his body.

"Oh, why did you not come last night?"

"I had no idea you had moved the entire court, ma'am. I only found your note when I awoke and then I came at once." He sounded slightly breathless and Victoria moved to spare him the weight of her, but instead of relinquishing his grip he only walked with her to the bed and positioned her back against the massive carved post. Then he found her mouth once more, all the while gently rocking her against the bedpost. She found and matched his rhythm, grinding herself against his placket, doing her own work to stimulate herself.

All at once he released her, huffing a small husky laugh. "I should remain absent more often, for such a welcome. However, it might be beneficial if I remove my coat and gloves."

Victoria curled her toes into the bedside rug, her body humming with the giddiness of overstimulated senses, and looked up at him coyly. Her long dark hair framed her face and tumbled in a dark mass of waves over breasts and arms.

Melbourne looked different in disarray, that wonderful curly silver hair mussed and face unshaven. No immaculate, elegant Lord M this, she thought he looked vaguely piratical with dark-shadowed eyes, the white collar of a wrinkled shirt spread open to reveal a tantalizing glimpse of dark hair on his chest. The many-caped wool driving coat gave him a dashing air, made his shoulders appear wider. His overall appearance, while still her so very handsome William Lamb, was quite prepossessing and the difference titillated her further.

"Has Lord Russell…adjourned…his deliberations?" Victoria asked absently, in an attempt to collect herself and restore some semblance of dignity. He grinned at her crookedly.

"Deliberations continue today. Would you like me to apprise you on the progress he's made so far?"

Victoria stood very straight, pulling her shoulders back, lifting her chin. Then, as he tossed his coat over the back of a chair, she permitted her eyes to travel downward.

"If you wish…Lord M…" she said, clearing her throat to relieve the huskiness she heard in her own voice.

"What do you wish, ma'am? I am at your service."

Melbourne permitted Victoria to work the buttons on his shirt at her own pace. She was not accustomed to the manual effort of dressing and undressing. Her slight clumsiness was endearing and the slow progress maddening, but Melbourne only waited, arms at his sides, compliant. When she triumphantly completed her self-assigned task and his shirtfront fell open Victoria stood back to admire her handiwork, then almost delicately ran her fingertips across the expanse of skin. Her expression was serious and intent as she explored his sharply erect nipples, lightly tweaking them, then the gentle rounding of his stomach, and a line of still-dark hairs which disappeared into the waistband of his trousers.

Victoria laid her palms flat on his chest once more and gently pushed, guiding him to a wide comfortable armchair where he would sometimes read while she slept. She dropped to her knees, the movement graceful as though kneeling came naturally to a queen, and removed his shoes and
stockings, then sat back on her haunches and looked up questioningly.

Boldness in such matters did not come readily to Victoria. On some level she was still deeply insecure about her own appearance, dreading the Teutonic tendency to excess weight which might someday appear, considering herself inferior in feminine appeal to the beautiful creatures who filled her court. William had given her what confidence she had and awakened her so thoroughly to the pleasures of the bedchamber that with him, she could overcome natural reticence and dissipate insecurity. His body thrilled her in every way, for how it appeared and what it could do, and she derived as much physical satisfaction from his responses as he did from hers, as though in that too they were symbiotically linked.

When she met his eyes, Victoria found what she needed to continue – his gaze was hot and dark and full of adoration and purely physical hunger in equal measure – and rose once more, reaching across his lap to unbutton his placket. He lifted his hips at her urging, so she could remove the obstructing garments. Then Victoria saw his head lolled back, those perfect lips just slightly apart to drag in gasps of air, as she straddled his thighs with her knees and slid herself down on the magnificent part he held ready.

**

"At least it's warm in here. I hope you'll be glad to know when I awoke in my room I was damned near to freezing."

"Poor lamb," Victoria cooed, her head nestled comfortably against his shoulder. "Now you will be able to return home nightly."

Melbourne laughed, the movement jostling Victoria pleasantly. "You moved the entire damned court for me?"

"Yes. Does that gratify you?"

"It flatters me, ma'am, but then you do that far more often than I deserve. Do you realize what a job you've made for your Chancellor? Every audience, every meeting, the Council – he has his work cut out for him. I suppose the good news is, we have the day to ourselves. He can't possibly do more than cancel what was on your calendar at such short notice."

Victoria only just managed to tuck her bare leg, extended beyond the reach of rumpled bedclothes, back under the comforter, when the children came in, followed by Lehzen and Lady Portman.

"Oh!" the Baroness flushed a deep brick red and her hand flew up to cover her mouth. "Ma'am, sir – there is no proper nursery and the children were uncontainable in our shared chamber – I'll remove them –"

Melbourne had already succumbed to the joint efforts of two small children who had him firmly pinned to the mattress in their determination to smother him with hugs.

"Baroness, it is fine," he said calmly. "If these two little monkeys – and I assume we will soon be joined by the third? – will assist you in finding the kitchen and bringing back something hot and you, Emma, would oversee the preparation of coffee, we can picnic together here. The Queen's bed is big enough for all."
I leave them lying together, their nakedness almost visible. A bare shoulder on her, that mat of dark hair on his chest in plain sight, obvious to all the world what they had been doing, what we had so nearly interrupted.

Of course, I maintain discipline and decorum. Children must be lavished with love, certainly, but they must also learn restraint. If I do not teach them the strength to be found in self-discipline the world will do so instead, and life is a hard taskmaster, as my father always said. But our night was passed in most unorthodox surroundings, a tent constructed of blankets over the bed the children shared lending the necessary air of adventure to what otherwise be unaccustomed privation. The spirit of adventure carried over into morning, when they insisted on running to find their mother
and no maids to chase them.

I want to be scandalized, outraged, disapproving, but what is there for anyone, even a pastor's daughter such as I, imbued with the strictest of moral principles, to disapprove? A husband and wife sharing their marriage bed? I was mortified, my face burning with embarrassment and the bile churning in my stomach, threatening to rise past my throat.

It was so much easier once, to reconcile myself to a solitary state. Youngest of nine, destined for a life of service, forced to work for a wage, understanding I would never marry and have a family of my own, I threw myself into my fate with eyes wide open. When I first went into service, it was with the von Marenholtzes. I remember little of that time, except that my work must have been satisfactory, for it was their vouchsafing which brought me into the household of the Duke of Kent.

Such dreams I had for the Princess Alexandrina! I recognized in her spirit, her determination, that strong will and refusal to yield even to her mother's incessant saccharine pleading and that man's loud booming voice, the great and glorious Queen she would become. Her mind was always eager, quick and hungry for knowledge and I taught her to the best of my poor ability. She surrendered her will out of love only – threats and storms would never move her, would only cause her to dig in her heels and return anger with ungovernable rage. And oh! How I loved her, love her still. It was she and I, all those years at Kensington. She turned to me for a mother's nurturing and father's protection, and I lavished her with all the love I had had to give.

My Liebchen, my little Drina, would never be one such as her mother, in thrall to a man. She would reign alone, a proud independent woman who would need no man to rule. So I had long hoped and prayed, on my knees long into the lonely night. And then, when the prize was in our grasp, he came.

I warned her, of course. It was my duty to protect her, act the duenna, provide the upright example of chastity and rectitude her flighty, frivolous mother could not. But somehow, I knew, knew from the very instant he greeted me with a little bow before turning to her. I knew this man would change everything.

I hated the idea of him, his very existence. Why? Because of his reputation, that of a womanizer, a man with loose morals? That should have been the reason. No. I will be honest with myself. I hated him because he came between us and stole her away, won the devotion which had been mine alone. I had not allowed the woman who give birth to her to come between us; yet I must stand by and see this disreputable politician, little better than a tradesman, a single generation removed from toil in the law courts, do that very thing.

My feelings were unworthy of a Christian woman, and unworthy of one who had a mother's love in her heart. He had not wronged me, even when they flaunted their adultery under the nose of the German boy, whose own unnatural desires would have scandalized Europe and threatened the English throne. And yet, despite his unfailing courtesy and consideration, that gentle smile and those kind, sleepy eyes, I could not be easy when I saw them together because I imagined how it could have been, if she had remained as I was, content with the single state and dependent on no man.

He was clothed when we returned, Gott sei Dank, wearing breeches and that old tattered dressing gown the Queen had packed with her own hands before our flight from Windsor. The State bed was nearly as large as a modest room, four stout carved bedposts suspending a brocade canopy and curtains which delighted the children, in their imagination a sheik's desert tent, a fort, a hiding place. He waved us in and the Viscountess stepped smartly forward, promenading up to the very edge of the bed to set down her carafe of that foul black brew. That one had been with us nearly as
long as he and would not surrender her position anytime soon. Even the Tory Prime Minister had not succeeded in supplanting her. She and I got along well enough, but her first loyalty would always be to him and she no longer troubled to hide the light in her eyes and the slightly proprietary air she affected towards our Lord Melbourne.

*Ach, mein Gott*, why do I persist in considering him an adversary in my mind? No, that is not correct; not my mind, my heart. In my mind I know that another man would have banished me at first opportunity, would have repaid my early hostility and later reserve, would have used his influence with the Queen to demand she send me away. Instead he was unfailingly kind, permitted *– requested –* I stay, gave me charge of the nursery and the authority to manage their household as I see fit. Even that, I would prefer to believe came about because he would not cause Her Majesty any discomfort, and of course that is true, but he is also a kind man. Disreputable, careless, and takes nothing seriously, apostate or at least disbelieving, yet kind and, I concede, a good man. I had long since given up reconciling those impossibilities; he was a contradiction in everything, a conundrum I would never solve with reason.

But in my heart, ah, that was another matter. In my heart he would always be an adversary, a rival for the affections of this young woman I had raised and now the *kinder* he had given her, my little ones. And he was the source of my discontent. Seeing them together – no, not in the carnal sense, we are not so depraved as that – but watching him watch her, his eyes never leaving her for long, the small touches between them, his hand on her arm, hers on his shoulder when she passed behind him, the way in which he gently touched the small of her back when he stepped aside, allowing her to precede him through a doorway, was all too hard to bear, for one who had accepted her unmarried state. It was a hard thing, to witness such great love, and not only for me. I know others felt the same, although they would never acknowledge it, certainly not to me. The Duchess of Kent, Viscountess Portman, the other ladies-in-waiting, maids-of-honor, even the German boy and his *schwul* in those early years, all had the same fleeting melancholy betray them to one degree or another. I know; I watch, it is what I do. It is a hard thing, the aloneness one feels when seeing two people who live so completely in one another's heart.

I stood in the doorway, composed, my features serene – this I know, because I have perfected a pleasantly detached expression – but he would not have it. Instead, even while the children climbed over him where he lounged on the great bed, he called me over and coaxed me to sit and join this unseemly gathering. I made a little curtsy and perched on the very edge of a big leather armchair. Soon enough the Duchess of Kent found us, drawn by the chattering of William and Elizabeth, and their father's laughter. She, like I, lacked the comfortable informality of Lady Portman but she was determined to never again forfeit her place in her daughter's family life and so she put on a bright smile and swept in, sitting at the end of the great bed.

Drina did not drink the bitter coffee and so she insisted on pouring some of her own hot chocolate into a second cup and fussed over which of the poor selection of pastries I would take. To her, I could not say no, nor could I remain as stern and removed as I might wish for the sake of my dignity. And Elizabeth! Such a one she is, my poor little bird with the heart of a lioness! She would not rest except that I must elaborate on her description of the little monkey's misadventures, the unsanitary messes he had left all around the nursery at Windsor. *That* at least I was not sorry to leave behind, and I could not remain mute in the face of her excited recitation. So, in the end I too joined this foolish party in the Queen's bedchamber. It was, after all, my home too, the only one I had in the world.
the children off to supervise setting up the nursery, Emma to see the younger attendants settled into their apartments and the Duchess to find her own dresser amidst the new arrivals.

"Miss Skerrett will find me soon enough and then I must dress. With no hope of carrying on business as usual at least for today, I will have hours to myself," Victoria said almost wonderingly.

Her days were strictly regimented to accommodate her duties and the many who had a right to audience with their Queen, her evenings with those who must be entertained at a dinner or drawing room. Melbourne recalled his own youth, the long lazy days he and Caro had spent reading to one another, Caro sketching while he lolled at her feet, the evenings filled with entertainments whose sole purpose was pleasure. Victoria, at twenty-five, had never known that sort of idle existence and, Melbourne thought, would not be comfortable for long without work to do. Still, for a change…

"To yourself?" he teased. "Does that mean I should shave and repair to Whitehall once more, so as not to disrupt your solitude?"

"No!" She crawled onto the high bed and knee-walked to him, then sat back on her haunches. She still wore her loose, very modest white night dress with the high lace collar and her dark hair still flowed loosely over her shoulders. The look, he decided, was that of a convent school girl in a middle-aged man's fantasy, rosy skin and full kissable lips, chastity juxtaposed with sensuality.

"I have something to show you – to discuss with you – but first let's ride out in the park. We need no guards, it's still only morning and few will be riding there."

Melbourne briefly considered the tantalizing image before him, then regretfully decided that he would not dissuade her from the outing she proposed. Night would come soon enough, and not be spent in a single man's chamber above the Subscription Room. Still, he slid his hands under the hem of her gown and stroked her thighs, his fingers relishing the feel of firm muscle under silky-soft skin.

Rotten Row was nearly barren of traffic. If a bright sun had been out, there would have been at least a few open carriages filled with ladies showing off their winter finery. No one wished to expose fur capes and new wool cloaks to the possibility of a cold rain, and so Melbourne and Victoria had the park nearly to themselves. Melbourne had put on his caped driving coat, and leather boots encased his legs. Victoria looked very pretty, he thought, with rosy cheeks and bright eyes, her own winter habit a close-fitting military style that showed her slender figure to great advantage.

The horses were fresh and for some minutes they cantered in silence, each concentrating on handling their reins. With the first burst of energy dissipated, they slowed to a walk. Melbourne shared a few anecdotes, bits of color from the cabinet sessions he had attended, humorous observations that elicited Victoria's lovely silvery laughter. They fell so easily into the sort of conversation that was only possible between two people who knew each other utterly and understood shorthand references which would only confuse a casual listener, and both were surprised to find they had completed the entire circular route without taking note of their surroundings. A young equerry rode behind them, for which Melbourne was grateful, since they might have easily gone astray, so involved were they in their talk.

He pulled up on his reins and stopped before they re-entered the palace grounds, then dismounted smartly and reached up for Victoria. She slid down from her tall gray mare, trusting him to deliver her safely to the ground. He tossed the reins of both animals to the equerry.

"Let's walk the rest of the way," he murmured, tucking her little gloved hand in his arm.
The ground was carpeted in fallen leaves, and the air bore the unique scent of late autumn, decomposing foliage, cold dank earth and wood smoke. A fortunate wind banished the ever-present smell of the city, coal fires, foundries and smelters, and the effluviant of several million people confined in a few square miles.

"Have you been to the new Houses of Parliament? Are they nearly habitable?"

"Over budget and behind schedule, as anyone might predict. We still huddle in temporary quarters, a dozen or more men with as many clerks and assistants milling about. None of whom smell as delicious as you," Melbourne said, and Victoria giggled.

"Poor Lamb," she teased back. "Long hours in a small space and having to listen as everyone argues? Then a lonely supper and cold bed? I wish we had returned sooner. There is no reason why we must be at Windsor in this month, Buckingham in that."

Victoria glanced up curiously when he failed to respond at once, disrupting the easy back-and-forth cadence of their light repartee.

"It is possible to be lonely even in company, when one longs for someone who is absent. As I did you, my love. And my bed was indeed cold and lonely."

He was parsing words, he knew, and anticipated that she would as well, so closely did she attend to everything he said.

"Some of us gathered at Sidney Herbert's last night. Herbert was Peel's Minister of War, and it occurred to me some chance to pick his brains informally might be beneficial, given our concern about Hardinge's intention to declare war if the Sikhs do not lay down their arms and swear allegiance."

"Dammit, man, just say it, Melbourne chastised himself impatiently, fueled by his own dread of unpleasantness.

Victoria stopped walking and withdrew her hand from his arm. "William?" she prodded.

"Sidney has been involved with Caroline Norton for some time now. I thought the thing had run its course, but as it turns out she was present. He is quite infatuated with her and never takes his eyes off her. Poor fellow, she will eat him alive."

Melbourne watched the play of emotions on Victoria's open, honest face, able to read her thoughts—or at least her feelings—clearly.

"I would not have gone, if I had known she would be present. Generally, a gentleman does not invite a female to such male-only gatherings."

"But then Mrs. Norton has never been an ordinary female," Victoria responded tartly. Melbourne was almost relieved. If annoyance, even anger, was uppermost then at least her latent insecurity would be held at bay. He understood it was no easy thing for her to accept how very much living he had done before they met. Necessary, but not easy.

He did not answer her; what answer could he give, that would not be open to misinterpretation? Instead he picked up the hand she had withdrawn and pressed it to his lips, then held it tightly so she could not pull away.

"And...how was it, to see her again? Did you speak? Of course you did, it was not a large gathering, I suppose."

Melbourne shrugged, and made sure she saw his nonchalant gesture. "We were friends once, and
now we are estranged. The talk was of politics, naturally, and when we discussed the old Apprenticeship Bill she came down forcefully on the side of our policy. I still consider my course the only possible one, but a few youngsters disagreed, as they always do, imagining a hundred years could be undone with the stroke of a pen."

He felt the moment she yielded, returning the pressure of his fingers, that slight movement signifying no storm would break. It was a relief; he did not wish to re-fight the old battle, protesting his devotion and denying once again the presence of any strong emotional tie past or present to a woman who had been friend and mistress but never more.

"Billy wrote to me," she said suddenly, seemingly changing the subject.

Melbourne knew better; he could hardly claim to understand any woman, much less the love of his life, had he not recognized her motivation in introducing Cameron's name at this exact moment.

"Indeed? In addition to the letters he addressed to both of us?" He was mildly surprised, no more. Victoria was incapable of dissimulation, and her guilelessness reassured him.

"Yes. His letter was hidden in a most ridiculous place. The little monkey – his name is Ranjiv, by the way – bore it in the pocket of that little blue coat all the way from India. Wasn't that clever of him?"

"Of whom? Cameron or the monkey?" Melbourne heard the tremor in his own voice, warning of an urge to chuckle, and Victoria responded with a smile in return.

"Both of them, silly. He wrote out a message from Jind Kaur. She wished to write to me directly, without Gough's men intercepting any more conventional form of communication."

"Very resourceful of her, then, to make use of Cameron's close ties to the Crown. Might it have been wiser for him to advise her that in Britain your ability to influence foreign policy is limited, I wonder?"

"I am a queen, and she calls herself a queen. We are both mothers and nearly the same age. She appealed to me woman to woman, to stop the invasion of her country."

"Sweetheart, at this particular moment in time, I only fear that it might cause some difficulty if you are known to have corresponded with what some might call an enemy of our state."

"Lord M, that is ridiculous. Sovereigns always maintain ties separate from those of their governments. Russian interests and England's have long been at odds, yet I correspond frequently with the Grand Duke."

"Ah, yes, you have a longstanding friendship with that young man, I believe."

"And Louis-Phillippe, and –"

"Yes, yes, my love, I am aware of your personal relationships with your very prolific extended family." Melbourne kept his tone light and teasing, knowing that nothing would be gained if he allowed himself to sound dictatorial. She was right, of course; sovereigns maintained relationships with their fellow sovereigns independent of their ministers. It did no harm and had frequently prevented conflict from escalating. And yet…

"India is different, Victoria. The Company – your own Treasury – views India as a dominion already conquered, part of Great Britain much as Canada is. Thus, they view Jind Kaur as a dangerous insurrectionist, an insurgent, a rebel, and not the monarch of an independent nation."
They had reached the rear portico, and a sentry saluted, maintaining his rigid stance, rifle over his shoulder.

No more was said as they made their way down the corridors and climbed the Grand Staircase. Footmen rushed forward to assist, but Melbourne insisted on asserting his prerogative in helping Victoria remove her short cloak. He followed her into the private drawing room which led to their chambers.

"May I see the letter? Or do you wish to keep it private?" he asked mildly. Victoria's blue eyes opened wide in such a look of surprise he had to bite back a smile. His precious girl would never attempt to deceive; it was anathema to her very nature.

"Why would I wish to keep it private? You are my husband before you are a minister." He did not explain, merely accepted the folded paper she placed in his hand and read it over quickly.

"Very touching," he said, watching her closely. "You realize there is nothing you can do, if Russell agrees to allow Hardinge to issue his declaration of war?"

"There is nothing I can do to prevent war from being declared in my name? Victoria's voice rose sharply. Then she collected herself and reached for his hand. "I'm sorry; I realize you are only stating the facts as you know them. Surely you can help me think of some means by which we can at least postpone the inevitable. Why do we consider ourselves in the right to occupy another country and usurp the rightful ruler?"

Melbourne sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, hoping to ward off one of his headaches.

"That is a rhetorical question," he stated, keeping his own voice level. "May I ask why you are taking such a personal interest in the matter? We have had troops in India for a long time and have subjugated every province except the Punjab. It is the richest and there is no way your government will permit them to stir unrest in the others by defying us."

"You say 'us' as though you agree with this course of action, Lord M. And yet, don't you always say we should leave people alone to do as they wish and not seek to control them?"

"I say quite a lot, ma'am, but I follow the tide of history and do not imagine I can alter its path."

"Of course we can. I can. I am the Queen. If not me, then whom?"

"You are the queen of a constitutional monarchy, Victoria. You have nothing to say in the making of policy. You can advise, you can even warn, but you cannot decree. If you feel so very strongly about the welfare of this rebel queen, then don't squander the influence you have by advocating a cessation of the entire British policy in the subcontinent only because Billy Cameron asks you to."

Melbourne met her eyes levelly, uncomfortably aware he had allowed his own transient suspicion of her motivation to dismiss her genuine concern. Victoria had strong moral principles, far stronger than his own, and that was as it should be.

"I do sympathize with her and imagine myself in her place. What would I do if an invading army stood on our shores? Would I give in and allow our history, my throne, Liam's legacy, to be subsumed? Or would I fight? Would I lead our soldiers into battle, riding at the head of a division? I think the latter."

Melbourne saw the martial light in her eyes and his heart clenched painfully. She was so very young and idealistic, so courageous and certain, that it hurt him physically to have to show her how to moderate idealism and accept practical reality.
"Are we fighting?" she asked suddenly, her lower lip trembling.

"No, sweetheart, no! Do not concede. Allow me to persuade you of what is necessary, if I can, but do not concede for love of me. I will not have it." He stepped toward her and tipped her chin up, so he could look into her face. "I adore you, all of you, your courage and your spirit, my queen. There is nothing to be risked in arguing with me most forcefully. I would never have you be less than you are."

Victoria sat, choosing one corner of the long sofa, and looked to him to join her. Melbourne did so, pausing only to stir the low fire left burning in the hearth. It was cozy in here, the warmth welcome after their exercise in the cold. Candles had been lit, dispelling what might have been gloom and lending a warm golden glow to the space.

He raised his arm in invitation and Victoria nestled against him, drawing her legs up under her and sighing her comfort in his embrace. Melbourne kissed the top of her head and began to speak.

"Now, my love, let me tell you what I know of our history in the subcontinent and why I believe the Punjab is bound to fall."
Chapter 9
Victoria remained seated, perched on the arm of the sofa. Melbourne had abandoned his place beside her. He paced back and forth, leaning over the surface of a writing desk to jab his finger at some key spot on one of the maps he had rolled out, then gesturing with one long, elegant hand to emphasize his point. Victoria watched, electrified, accustomed as she was to his gentle, nonchalant manner. This Lord Melbourne, the one she had rarely glimpsed and never on those few occasions he was moved to speak at length in the House, was another facet of the man she adored. He was always wise, always able to amuse and inform with the aphorisms he employed in conversation, always witty and the most charming of men, but this Melbourne veritably radiated energy and assurance. It was quite exciting to see, and she could not take her eyes from him.

"Rangit Singh expanded his kingdom substantially in the first years of this century, at about the same time we advanced our territorial borders by conquest or annexation to the very borders of the Punjab. He maintained a cautious friendship with us, ceding some territory south of the Sutlej River, while at the same time building up his military forces both to deter aggression by the British and to wage war against the Afghans. He hired American and European mercenaries, and contingents of Hindus and Muslims into his army." Melbourne paused to rake a hand through his thick curling hair, and caught Victoria staring at him fixedly. He appeared momentarily abashed, as though embarrassed by his own excess of enthusiasm.

"It's been a long time since all this history was made. I find it comes back to me easily," he offered by way of sheepish explanation. "And like all men, I like the sound of my own voice, especially before a sympathetic audience of one."

"Please, go on, William," Victoria encouraged, her eyes shining. "Wasn't Miss Eden excessively fond of this Rangit Singh? I do remember reading in her letters, that they had established a great friendship."
"She and Auckland both were besotted by the man, the exoticism of his court and their customs. His wives became great friends with Emily. I would like to hear from her, what impression this youngest of the Maharaja's wives made."

"This is during my Uncle William's reign?" Victoria prompted, folding her hands in her lap so as not to reach for him as her inclination dictated.

"His, yes, and the earliest years of yours also. The Sikhs conquered Peshawar and Multan in Afghanistan, and incorporated the states of Jammu and Kashmir into their empire. Some of us – namely Auckland and his supporters - became obsessed with the idea that Emir Dost Mohammed Khan of Afghanistan was conspiring with Imperial Russia and launched into that ill-fated war in which our Billy saw action to replace him with a more compliant candidate of our choosing. I don't have to remind you of the massacre of Elphinstone's Army, which lowered the prestige of the British, and the Bengal Army of the British East India Company in particular. We finally withdrew from Afghanistan, in 1842."

Victoria wondered how this would lead to the present state of affairs but had no desire to interrupt her husband by asking. She thought she could happily listen to him and only him for as many hours as he was willing to talk, to hear that delicious voice, infinitely sweet despite its familiar hoarseness, and to watch the play of expressions animating his beloved handsome face.

"I am covering all this old history only to make the point that Billy's embattled maharini is not defending an ancestral homeland for some noble purpose only; most of the land she now holds was not part of the Punjab kingdom before 1830. That is the first thing to take away from all my rambling."

Victoria stood and went to him, twining her arms around his waist and laying her cheek against the rough velvet nap of his wine-colored coat.

"Have I told you lately, that knowing you is the best and most important thing that will ever happen to me?" she whispered, her own breath coming back in a warm puff of air where her lips pressed against him. Then she released him and backed way to retake her seat on the rolled arm of the Chesterfield sofa.

A small smile flickered about his mouth, and Melbourne shook his head slightly as though to clear it of thoughts unsuited to a discourse on military history.

"Another key point is that the Sikh kingdom is very rich, so rich that they employ gold to enlist allies. While the Sikhs have a long tradition of producing fierce fighters, wealth, idleness and what some have called depravity have diminished their will and capacity to take the field in their own interest. Remember that, ma'am. Maharajah Sher Singh was unable to pay his hired army, although he was rumored to lavish funds on a degenerate court and most particularly on the youngest of his wives, a captivating young woman only a few years older than you. In September 1843 he was murdered by his cousin, an officer of the army."

Melbourne unrolled yet another map and employed several inkwells to hold the four corners flat. He moved the glass-domed lamp closer.

"Jind Kaur, a very young widow, became Regent for her son. Her brother, who was her adviser and protector, was slaughtered in front of Jind and the boy, Jaleep, by an army tribunal. These rulers were originally high caste Hindus from outside the Punjab, with no historical claim to the loyalty of the tribes they attempted to rule. A dangerous sort of military democracy emerged on the one side, and your sister queen Jind Kaur and her loyal Dogra faction on the other."
His voice had grown raspy and Victoria rose once more, this time to pour him a drink from a decanter on the sideboard. She held the goblet out as a serving girl might, with an air of humility at odds with her station, and Melbourne smirked a little before he drank.

"Thank you, my love. Nature's way of telling me I do go on too long but if you bear with me, I will come to a point you might find interesting."

"William! I find everything you are saying interesting. I think sometimes I see you at close range and lose sight of who you were and what you did before you were mine. You, not I, ruled the greatest nation on earth."

Victoria stepped back so she could see him clearly, in fact as well as metaphor. Narrow black trousers outlined shapely legs with strong well-formed calves, and the white of his shirt was broken only by a black silk band around his neck. His velvet coat was just the shade of Burgundy wine, and made the silver in his air gleam like jeweled strands. Such a beautiful man! she thought, flushing with pride that he had chosen her, of all the women he might have had.

He followed Brummel's example of gentlemanly fashion, avoiding excess and striving only for simple, exquisite tailoring that showed his physique to advantage. He wore no chains and gewgaws, not even a signet ring, and never carried a watch. A simple gold band on his left hand was the only jewelry he affected, and that a symbol known only to the two of them. When they had wed so precipitously on Christmas Eve, scarcely a month after Albert's death, he had told her he would wear a wedding band like the one he placed on her finger. Men did not wear wedding rings, of course, but he would always set his own fashion, and Victoria thrilled each time she caught a glimpse of that visible reminder he belonged to her, as she did to him.

"So…surrounded by an army of her own countrymen hostile to her regime, reliant on hired allies to fight for her…your maharini is destined to fall, whether to the armies of the British and the East India Company or to those Sikhs who would seize her throne."

Melbourne extended his hand, reaching for her, and Victoria laid her own hand in his grasp.

"See," he pointed to an area on the map. "She is surrounded by hostile forces. While the notion of an imperiled, noble queen besieged by our greedy imperialist forces makes for a romantic ballad, the truth is far more complex."

"The Sikh Army is led by General Raja Lal Singh who, with Tej Singh. Lal Singh is indebted to us and is regularly supplying information and even receiving instructions from British officers. Of course, Jind does not know this, but it will be the cause of her downfall. If she persists in her current course, she will exhort her armies to fight – and fight they will, and die for a beautiful young queen, just as your soldiers fight and die for you, your image, your name on their lips – but it will result in needless slaughter. She cannot win, and if by some miracle she prevailed against us, the tenuous alliance amongst her own army, united only in opposition to our troops, will fracture and she will be at their mercy. She stands a better chance surrendering now and making terms to remain in power, with the might of our troops behind her."

"How can you, here, half a world away, know that General Lal Singh is a traitor to his queen?" Victoria tilted her head sideways, a gesture which always indicted she was mulling over something and working her way towards resolution.

"You underestimate me, ma'am," Melbourne smiled gently, the tender look in his eyes at odds with his still-energized demeanor.

"You like being immersed in affairs. You only pretend indifference and ennui," Victoria exclaimed,
her voice pregnant with discovery. She did not know it but her wide-eyed admiring expression reflected his own sense of exhilaration.

"I admit it, I do. And perhaps, after all this time, I have something of a knack for it. We do have an agent of our own in the field. Do you forget Lord Cameron?"

"Our agent?" Victoria's surprise was evident.

"Our agent," Melbourne affirmed. "He is in communication with both sides. He wants to protect Jind Kaur if he can, and even preserve her throne, and in that he does not act alone. We want to keep her son on the throne and retain her as regent. If she is as smart as Cameron thinks she will understand that in the end, it is her only hope. A military junta will tear the Punjab apart and light a fire of unrest that spreads throughout India. No one wants that. If only Cameron can make her see reason, we are all on the same side."

Victoria thought about what he said.

"So the armies moving toward the river – the Sikh army and Broadfoot's – it is all posturing? There will be no war?"

Melbourne shook his head ruefully. "I wish I could assure you of that, but blood will be spilled. On both sides. If Jind Kaur plays her part wisely she will survive. She cannot stop the Sikh army just as you cannot stop the Bengal Army Gough is putting into position, but she will be protected if she allows it, and if she trusts us. The military command on her side of the river is more of a threat to her future and her son's than that on our side. She is surrounded by enemies and her only choice is to trust us. That is Cameron's job, and the small force of loyal men he commands, who have secreted themselves in key positions to spirit her out of harm's way when fighting commences."

"Did you work all this out with Billy even before he left?" Victoria's eyes narrowed with suspicion. Melbourne only shrugged.

"Contingencies, ma'am. There is no way to stop the winds of war, but it is sometimes possible to minimize the resulting damage. I did nothing except make a few suggestions where they would be most useful."

They spent some time studying the maps, Melbourne tracing the path of Sutlej River which marked the frontier between British-ruled India and the Punjab, marking Ferozepur, where a division of Gough's army was already stationed, Aliwai, where General Smith would be headed soon, if he was not already. Victoria asked increasingly astute questions as she began to grasp the strategy he outlined. She could not help but feel the contrast between their circumstances, the embattled maharini, trapped between two hostile armies, with no one to trust but an outspoken, charismatic Irishman, and her own position of safety and strength, here in the heart of an impregnable island nation.

She felt Melbourne's warm breath on her neck, his hand resting carelessly at her waist while he leaned over her shoulder to show her the geography of India, and felt a vague sense of guilt at her own happy, secure life. She turned so suddenly that he was not prepared for the movement and threw her arms around him.

"Oh, William," she sighed. "I hope it all works out well. I am so very sorry men have to go into war, and die, and for what?" Victoria understood the question had no answer, and expected none.

"' Lechery, lechery, still wars and lechery! Nothing else holds fashion.'"
Melbourne straightened in time to catch and hold her and spoke with his mouth pressed against her hair. "I have never understood either. I prefer the comforts of home and was never tempted to buy a set of colors. None of us were, even when it was quite the fashion. I suppose I preferred lechery."

The rest of their day was spent in unaccustomed idleness, or as close an approximation as Victoria could bear. They adjourned to the drawing room where she looked at the household books with Lehzen, making some few adjustments to the menus the chef had sent up for approval, listening with interest as some proposed economy was explained. She sent for a footman and asked that the dogs be bathed and groomed, read and responded to the correspondence from myriad relations scattered throughout the German states of which the Duchess normally took charge. Her Mistress of the Robes offered some fabric swatches and Parisian fashion plates and their two dark heads bent together over the choices for spring gowns.

Melbourne stretched out full length on a chintz sofa, lulled by Victoria's sweet voice, the rustle of her skirts as she moved about, intending only to rest and falling instead into a deep sleep.

"I knew this play would be bad, but I didn't know it would be so damned bad." The sound of his own voice, louder than normal, startled him awake. Talking in my sleep? he speculated, refusing to be embarrassed.

Beside him, his companion shushed him, but her dark eyes were dancing in a handsome narrow face. They were in a playhouse, occupying a private box suspended over the stage, and their nearest neighbors were far enough distant to remain undisturbed.

He had journeyed to London, leaving the self-imposed isolation of Brocket Hall, to dine with Caroline and take her to the theatre. These jaunts to the city were few and far between by choice, and occasions of merriment were rare. Beside him, Caroline Norton was outfitted in a striking black taffeta gown. She wore no jewels – she had none to speak of and he thought perhaps he might gift her some small piece, it was the least he could do. She patted his leg with one lace-gloved hand, and the gesture set his teeth on edge, for it was both proprietary and insufferably condescending. He bit back a rough response, grateful enough for her steadfast affection that he would stifle the momentary irritation of nerves.

She had taken charge and made the plans for this outing. He went along, glad of the diversion, oddly excited by the notion that he was in the city center once more. Once, this had been his stomping ground, and the city, the nation, his to command. But those days were long behind him now, and he had only remembered glory to sustain him. That, and the memory of what it was like to love and be loved, to see blue eyes looking at him wide-eyed with girlish adoration.

Those memories were best left locked away, and he pushed them back with vigor.

"Shall we, my dear?" he stood and extended his arm. Caroline took it proudly, laying her hand over his, but when they moved to leave the box he stumbled and at once she caught him, letting him lean on her for support. When did I get so old, so damned old and frail? How did it all slip by so quickly?

The street was congested, busy with foot traffic and wheeled conveyances. A line of carriages backed up nearly to the cross-roads was the subject of much cursing from the hansom cab drivers. Melbourne caught a few words here and there, enough to understand the gist of what they were saying, and his stomach turned over so suddenly he thought he would double over from the pain.

Queen's carriage…traffic at a standstill…nothing moving until she and the Prince Consort have passed…
And there she was. Seen at a distance of no more than thirty feet, in profile in the window of a carriage, he still felt a pull so strong it would not have surprised him had he run out into the path of the horses and demanded they stop. But the carriage moved on, and soon she was out of sight.

"Darling, wake up." Melbourne opened his eyes, rubbing them furiously to bring the room into focus. "I would let you sleep but Aunt Adelaide and the Duchess of Lancaster have arrived unannounced."

Victoria sat on the very edge of the sofa, and he examined her closely. Dark hair smoothed back from her pretty heart-shaped face and caught up in a cluster of curls at the back of her head. Green plaid day gown, with a wide lace collar showing off her smooth throat. Her hands, those soft small hands, laying palms up in her lap, with the gold of her wedding band – the wedding band he had placed there, on Christmas Eve of 1843 in Brocket hall – glinting in the candlelight.

"I slept harder than I intended, ma'am. Late nights catching up to me." Melbourne forced a small laugh. "I was dreaming."

"A good dream?" Victoria teased, her lips in a pout. Heedless of her mother's presence at the other end of the drawing room, of the Duchess of Sutherland seated at a table nearby, Melbourne cupped her head in his hand and pulled her down so he could kiss her. His mouth took hers hungrily, almost desperate with urgency.
Chapter 10

For all the fuss and tuttering below stairs it had not taken long for the Household to settle comfortably into Buckingham House. Few of us objected to leaving Windsor, no matter how scandalized the servants pretended to be. It was a convenience to her new ministers, as well as Lord Melbourne, and a relief to those of us who served for weeks on end to have the prospect of shopping excursions within easy reach. I say 'served' and of course, as senior Lady of the Bedchamber my service was well-compensated, but I considered the court of Her Majesty Queen Victoria my home. My children were grown and established, and my Edward absorbed with his agricultural experiments and cattle breeding programme. My visits home, while agreeable enough, chafed us both after a few days. I began to long for the routines of the court once more, and Edward pined for his bachelorhood.

Close enough for an easy return, Lord Melbourne dined with us every evening and lingered with Her Majesty in the drawing room every evening. Some nights we entertained, nothing too formal, although informal was a relative term at Buckingham House. When we were without company we still made a lively enough group, two or three ladies-in-waiting and the gentlemen of the Queen's household, the Duchess of Kent, myself and Baroness Lehzen when Her Majesty coaxed her into joining a game of piquet.

I despised needlepoint but had been raised with the dictum that no lady of quality would sit idle in her own drawing room and so I occupied myself in turning the pages of one of the journals, as though searching for some article of interest to the Queen. Her mother played at whist with her own lady attendants at the card table while Her Majesty laughed at the latest issue of Punch, her smooth dark head bowed over the caricatures which so scandalized the society that could not buy them fast enough. Nobody wanted to recognize themselves in the satirical content, but everyone hoped to see a peer therein.
"Oh, look, Emma! Do see this very droll drawing. Surely that's meant to be Lord –" I slid closer and smirked at the familiar pear-shaped figure depicted, grossly extended belly spilling over tight white pantaloons.

"I couldn't say, ma'am," was the only response I dared utter, but our eyes met and we both held hands over our mouths to stifle indecorous giggles.

She really was a likeable young woman, far more so than I'd originally feared. Nobody can bear a milksop miss of eighteen, far less one gowned, robed and at least fictionally omnipotent, and her naivete was not an endearing trait. At twenty-five little Vicky had matured and if she still had a tendency to stiffen and poker up, drawing dignity around her like a robe, I knew enough now to recognize simple shyness underneath the mask of hauteur. Of course, simple familiarity dispensed with her need to show me that icy reserve, that and the fact I had shared all her secrets – their secrets – for more than seven years.

Seated across from her, William's long legs were stretched out and he sat at ease, sipping French brandy judiciously and conversing with those around him. He'd been different in the past few days, although the difference was so slight I doubt anyone else noticed. When I puzzled over precisely what might have altered, I could only decide it was my own imagination that he was more alive, more energized, even younger somehow. None of that made any sense whatsoever; William Lamb could never be old, and he had hardly moped, so happy was he in his marriage, so suffused in a constant palpable glow of contentment.

As I did so often I watched him watching her. He did not gawk, or moon like a lovestruck youth, nor did he watch her jealously, as some older husbands might their young pretty wives. Perhaps I was the only one who marked his constant attentions. Her gaze would flicker to him as well, and no matter what else each might be doing, their eyes would meet, so attuned were they to one another.

"Emma, you think it's a good idea, don't you? You could be close to home and go back and forth. Of course, Lord Portman would join us in celebrating, and you could spend your nights with him."

I had missed something, clearly, caught up in my study of her husband. The Queen's face was bright with pleasure at whatever she was proposing, and I cautiously nodded agreement.

"Mama?" she called over her shoulder to the Duchess of Kent, who looked up with an expression of alarm.

The Duchess was a thin, nervous woman who reminded me of a rabbit, nose twitching to sniff out whatever trouble might be coming her way. I could not fault her that; our Queen had been distinctly hostile towards her mother for years, barely tolerating her presence, and only William's determination had thawed Victoria's animosity.

"Of course, whatever you decide it will be well," the Duchess answered quickly, clearly wanting to placate her tempestuous daughter.

"William," Her Majesty trilled then. She hadn't needed to address him by name for of course he had been attending to whatever she said, despite being engaged in light talk with the lady on his left. "Everyone agrees, so I do hope you will. We will have Christmas at Brocket Hall."

**

Melbourne had been listening, as he always did, peripherally aware of everything she said and did. He was torn, pleased that she considered his home hers and dreading the derogatory comments he
already anticipated from those eager to squash any sign of pretention from the Queen's commoner husband. He reached for a nutcracker and busied himself picking out the meat.

"If you wish, ma'am," he answered smoothly. "I do remind you that your uncle King Leopold will be coming with his family. I believe we were quite overrun with little Belgians the last time he visited. And you cannot slight your cousins."

When the Queen spoke, all other conversation ceased, and Melbourne had no wish to carry on a private conversation before this roomful of people.

"Yes, of course, my family will spend Christmas with us, as will yours. Emily's children and grandchildren, Fred and Alina…"

"Why, look, ma'am – I do believe those are snowflakes falling." Melbourne was not disappointed in Victoria's ready response. She rose and went to the balcony door and he followed.

Her gown had three-quarter length sleeves but bared her neck and shoulders. Heedless of the cold she stepped outside and turned up her face. When she caught a snowflake on her tongue Melbourne laughed and could not resist bending to kiss the hollow of her collarbone, his lips caressing smooth ivory skin. Then he ran his palms down the length of her arms to warm them.

"Isn't it pretty?" she asked, looking over her shoulder for his agreement.

"Very pretty," Melbourne crooned, but he looked at her, not the whitening lawns spread out beneath the balustrade.

Melbourne had never not been grateful for every moment of every day he spent in the company of this wonderful young woman, never remained untouched by her love and devotion, never failed to appreciate this inexplicable twist of fate. And yet, one grew as accustomed happiness as to its lack. One accommodated and adapted to whatever normal was.

When he awakened from that quite commonplace dream – hardly a nightmare by any measure – he finally understood what could have been, and his feelings had been scraped raw, every nerve firing erratically. Since then he had struggled to contain the sense of urgency he felt, to grasp and hold every moment, memorize each gesture, study her elegant jawline, the tilt of her head under its crown of heavy chestnut hair, the line of that delectable swan-like neck. To taste, to touch, to see and hear and hold.

"So – Christmas at Brocket Hall, Lord M? Please?" She turned her face up to his, her expression imploring him. When she used that old nickname, it was always with a coquettish air, and it never failed to touch him, awash with the recollection of that very first time this child put all her trust in him.

"If you wish, ma'am, Brocket Hall will be honored. But it is no royal residence and there will be those who remind you of that fact."

"It is a royal residence!" Victoria protested. "I am the Queen and it is my home."

**

The party broke up just past ten o'clock, an early evening but those present were not unwilling to go to their separate quarters. Melbourne walked with Victoria's hand on his arm to their private domain, two small sitting rooms never seen by any except their most intimate friends and attendants, two bedchambers, one the massive State bedchamber and the other a more modest space allotted the consort. Their dressing rooms adjoined, and as Melbourne disrobed, handing off
clothing to his long-time valet, he and Victoria kept up a patter of conversation.

Her own dresser would be removing her gown, he knew, unlacing her stays, unclasping her necklace and pouring hot water into a basin. From long experience he timed his entry well, taking the hairbrush from her dresser's hand.

The maid was a quiet, sober young woman, sensible and unencumbered by undue servility. She surrendered the implement into his hands and went about the business of brushing and hanging Victoria's gown and putting her jewels into their leather cases. Melbourne spread Victoria's long hair out over her shoulders like a cape and ran the brush gently down its length.

"You realize there will be trouble from Leopold, and probably your cousins as well. Nothing can unite them as quickly as common cause."

"If my uncle doesn't wish to join us they can remain home or celebrate with each other for all I care."

"We can't house everyone, you know. The Hall is not large enough."

"You – we -have a magnificent dining room, which can hold eighty at table. It must be shown off more. These belong to the State – Brocket Hall is my husband's home."

"Very well," Melbourne conceded mildly, determined to make the best of it. He intensely disliked the prospect of Leopold's sneering condescension nearly as much as the certain ridicule of the senior aristocracy who called themselves his friends. Not Ponsonby or Devonshire, nor Lansdowne or Uxbridge but there were plenty of others sure to remind each other of his second-generation title.

It mattered little, he decided, except when the mockery reached Victoria's ears. She was quick, too quick, to rush to his defense, something he hoped to spare her for the sake of his own pride. Melbourne cared not at all how others saw him; how Victoria saw him was everything, and he did not want her sympathetic support if he could help it. It was his job to protect her, and not the other way around.

His tender application of the brush was one of Victoria's greatest pleasures, and she was soon rolling her shoulders and making a small mewling sound which was almost a purr.

"Ready, my love? Let us get comfortable then." Melbourne shucked off his dressing gown before getting into bed. Victoria positioned herself between his legs so he could continue to toy with her hair, brushing it to a glossy sheen, idly twisting the ends into loose braids before releasing them once more. She crooned blissfully and melted against his chest, so his arms could contain her. Then he laid the boar's bristle brush aside and rotated his hands in lazy circles on her flat stomach, her narrow hips, over the thin fabric of her silky night dress.

Her hair smelled like midsummer, he decided, inhaling deeply before pushing it aside to nibble on the soft furred lobe of her ear, flicking his tongue in and out, tickling, teasing. Victoria laid her head against his chest and raised her hand to stroke his cheek. He watched her carefully, looking over her shoulder to watch the path of his own hands, feeling every inch of her, the yielding firmness of supple flesh, silkiness of soft skin, even the tickling of fine hairs under his hands. He left a candle burning bedside, not wanting to extinguish the warm golden light, determined to experience her with all his senses.

Melbourne understood that Victoria was still inclined to be greedy and precipitous, as young as she was, and so he began murmuring in her ear, his voice low and intimate, speaking of random things to distract her.
There is a fine stand of fir trees at the end of the south pasture. We will continue Albert's tradition of bringing them inside and covering them with ornamentation, of course. The Grand Ballroom can hold a twenty-footer with ease, and we can place smaller ones in the drawing rooms and library. Perhaps one the children can decorate as well.

So attuned was she, Victoria responded in kind, and if she sounded distracted, still she followed his lead in speaking of such things, all the mundane considerations incumbent upon householders intending to host a family gathering. All the while his fingers continued their hypnotic course, tugging ever so gently at the taut flesh of her abdomen, then gliding down to her thighs and back up to explore her full, firm breasts.

Her own fingers, left hand and right, drew delicate lines on his thighs through the blanket spread across his legs and he almost groaned aloud with frustration, so adept was she at this delicious duel. Each would be determined to outlast the other, introducing the most quelling topics of conversation into the game they played to prolong the suspense until they danced on the razor's edge of desire.

"Uncle Leopold will have his own wing. I cannot bear those children of his, although of course I am quite fond of my Aunt Louise. Do you think he will wear that atrocious toupee?"

Victoria used her nails to scrape ever so lightly against the tender flesh at the inside of his thighs and it required all his resolution to remain still, pretending to consider the matter of Leopold's improbable thatch of nut brown hair.

"I feel sure he will, and that creaking corset as well. Do you think his valet ties his stays, or does he depend upon his wife for that service?"

Simultaneously to his speculation, Melbourne's index finger pressed firmly over the V of silky brown hair and pulled back, so that her own skin tugged on that very sensitive spot just below. It would be a violation of their unspoken rules to make direct contact before she demanded it, thus yielding first, and so he relied upon teasing instead.

"Sauerkraut," Victoria gasped, and for a moment he thought he'd misheard her. "We shall have to serve sauerkraut with caraway. And herring, of course."

Melbourne smirked, unseen, delighting in the near-breathlessness evidenced in her gasping non-sequitur. If they were to herring…

He started when he felt a hand slide between his legs, bypassing the throbbing heat there and traveling instead down the curve of his buttocks so that he could feel the heat of her palm hovering over him, but she did not touch.

"Why on earth sauerkraut? Does Leopold require it to sustain his manhood? Is that the secret of Coburg fecundity?" Melbourne allowed the edge of his nail to just graze her cleft and was rewarded by a quivering which culminated in her pressing her backside into his groin.

"No, silly, he loathes it. Oh, but the smell will fill Brocket Hall for weeks. We must have herring on Christmas Eve…."
He tasted her salty sweetness, flicked the very tip of his curled tongue, felt her fingers coiled in his hair. He wanted to touch himself to relieve the worst of the agonizing ache but resisted and concentrated all his attention on her until neither could wait any longer. When he entered her welcoming warmth, he heard himself growl almost inaudibly nowhere but here.
Melbourne inhaled deeply, savoring the cool damp air, fresh or what passed for fresh in London. Ignoring the ever-present effluviant miasma, it was a vast improvement on stale indoor air pregnant with the overripe odor of men confined in close proximity and after only a moment’s indecision determined he would walk.

Wellington matched his pace and the two men walked briskly along. The old soldier had been showing subtle indicators of advancing infirmity, hence his decision to retire from political life, but still maintained a soldier's straight bearing and stepped with determination.

"Air in there can be a bit thick. Not as pleasant as what you're accustomed to, old fellow?"

Melbourne merely smirked at the old Duke's witticism.

"You're putting in a great deal of time. Must let them have some privacy to talk about you, you know. It's a part of the game."
"You think they talk about you in your absence, Arthur?" Melbourne asked.

"Possibly so; probably not, but then I'm a damned edifice, a monument to our glory days. You're a mere mortal. Yet. You'll have to age considerably more, until they forget you were ever a man like them, or better yet die and then you too will be above reproach, all your foibles forgotten."

Melbourne laughed outright at Arthur Wellesley's words. Wellington was a man before he was a general and there was a time – long before this new, censorious age – when his romantic exploits were as much or more envied and admired than those on the battlefield. Waterloo had cemented his reputation as Hero of the Nation but had not dimmed his appeal to the ladies. His marriage had not been a happy one, his wife timid and long-suffering, as she was so fond of proclaiming. Martyrdom had not been Caro's style but like the Duke, Melbourne had not been a model husband.

"I think in that case I'll cling to these mortal coils a while longer. Marble will not suit me."

They walked along in companionable silence for a while, their footfalls making a pleasing sound on the damp cobblestones. Few were out, despite the unseasonably warm December night, in this part of London, too well-policied by the Peelers to be attractive to pickpockets and thugs and devoid of the drinking houses which would attract both patrons and prostitutes. Rows of well-maintained town homes could be recognized by their slate roofs beyond hedges and garden walls. Behind them another pair of footsteps might be heard, and under the light of streetlamps Melbourne could discern the shadow of a man following close behind. His protection officer, unobtrusive but ubiquitous. It was neither reassuring nor an annoyance, merely another reminder of his unique status in the life of the nation, married to England's Queen Regnant.

As they advanced farther the park could be perceived through the mist, and Melbourne recognized the neighborhood through which they passed. Once, it had been his destination more days than not, on evenings such as this when the work of government ceased for the night and a new Prime Minister sought a few hours' respite in the gratifyingly warm welcome which would await him.

"Should we ask this man for a cab?" Melbourne was reluctant to call attention to the older man's stentorian breathing, for fear of embarrassing him. "I confess I'm not as spry as I used to be," he added, to alleviate any discomfort Wellesley might feel.

"I'm fine, dammit. Just a twinge. Be a good fellow, William, and slow your pace." Melbourne saw the briefest wince crease Wellington's eyes before a stoic mask fell once more. They slowed their pace but even so, when they came to a low wall set before a familiar red brick town home only a few yards from the road, Wellington jabbed Melbourne's arm and indicated his wish to rest.

Melbourne acceded – he could with good conscience do no less – but glanced up speculatively under his brows, weighing the Duke's possible culpability.

"You're to have a houseful for Christmas this year, eh? Hosting the whole damn Coburg clan?" Melbourne suspected a note of jibing humor under the gruff tone. He merely smiled sweetly in return.

"Hasn't the man a damned country that needs him? No, I suppose not, damned store-bought King."

"His Majesty King Leopold honors us with a visit. He places a great store on family ties," Melbourne responded smoothly, and if a friend of as long standing as Arthur Wellesley detected the irony underneath, it was not remarked upon.

"You need to get you an heir, man. I don't doubt you have plenty of opportunity to do so."
"Her Majesty has an heir. And a spare, as they say." It was no longer a saying of which he could approve when the very phrase conjured unthinkable possibilities and spoke of his own dearly-loved children.

"Yes, yes, our Prince of Wales and his sister, both born during the Queen's marriage to her cousin. I'm saying you need to get a child on the Queen you can claim. The best possible counter to Leopold's meddling and any family claim he can assert to a say in the Coburg boy's get."

Melbourne met the eyes looking up at him from under shaggy intimidating brows. That fierce stare missed nothing and did not allow dissembling. Neither of them would state what they both knew, that the Queen's children were Melbourne's own natural offspring, because they had been born during their mother's lawful marriage to a husband who asserted paternity.

"The King of the Belgians has his own set of problems, not the least of which is his entire dependence on handouts from our government and the Rothschilds' subsidies. Without either he would be forced to work for his supper, and have little time left for meddling."

"He has far greater ambitions than little Belgium can contain. His goal was to put a Coburg on every throne in Europe, unite the German principalities under one central government and govern England at one remove, with his puppet nephew and a compliant little Vicky at his beck and call. He envisioned them producing one child after another, keeping the cradle full, and instead he is stymied at having only two."

"Then wouldn't having another child only gratify his desires? Victoria is still his niece." Melbourne noticed that the air, although unusually warm for the season, was still cool enough to cause a chill to set in, when their exertions ceased.

"Shall we?" Melbourne gestured toward the path ahead. The protection officer struck a match against the sole of his boot and lit one of the little Spanish cigarillos they had all taken up, emulating their commanding officer, and Melbourne sniffed the tobacco smoke, not unpleasant when diffused in the late-autumn air.

A gas lamp burned on the front façade of the house behind them, and it served to outline the woman who had stepped out of the door in a golden aura. Melbourne found he wasn't surprised, merely annoyed at having been manipulated and embarrassed on the Duke's behalf that he had stooped to being used in such a ploy.

"William, you must not be angry at Arthur. I implored him to find some opportunity for us to exchange a few words. You are not an easy man to approach, now that you are so well protected by castle walls."

Caroline Norton's familiar voice was nearly as low as a man's but with a laughing inflection that could never be anything but the very essence of femininity, a woman who found men utterly delightful and amusing in equal measure. She walked, Melbourne thought, much like a cat, a sinuous slinking gait, as though she moved to music only she heard. She wore only a light shawl over her gown and her hair was done up in an artful arrangement, her coloring artificially highlighted with a subtle artist's hand.

"I am not angry at Arthur," Melbourne said, and it was almost the truth. He glanced over his shoulder at the protection officer.

"It is I who might be concerned, at two men lurking outside my gait. Three men," she added the last with a long measuring look at the man whose job it was to protect the life of the Queen's husband.
"I only wanted to wish you a happy Christmas, William." Caroline laid one hand on Wellington's shoulder, standing beside him where he sat on her wall, and the other on the back of Melbourne's gloved hand.

"So early, Mrs. Norton? Very well, I thank you and return the wishes in kind."

"I might have thought it early also, but I had a Christmas caller already. At least, a caller who is in town for the holidays and paid me a visit. A friend of very long acquaintance, nearly as long as ours. Your uncle-in-law, Leopold, has arrived in London and I was his very first call. Isn't that special?"

Damn! A month in advance, a whole month to endure that man, not to mention his insufferable brats! Melbourne swore under his breath, then remembered to arrange his features into a pleasant unreadable expression.

"Indeed, family feeling runs deep," he said only.

"He told me he intends to bring the Queen and her children to Coburg, to see their father's home. They will leave with him after the holidays, leaving you behind." Caroline said this in a rush, in a husky near-whisper meant to sound confiding.

"We will say good night now, Mrs. Norton. Arthur, will you join me? I will cut through the park and find a carriage at South Street."

39 South Street, for so long his primary residence and for the past few years occupied by the special secret service who devoted itself to intelligence gathering and personal protection of the sovereign. At the mention of South Street, a spark was ignited in Caroline's eyes and Melbourne saw love and longing which caused him a pang of guilt. He had never meant to lead her on, and she put on such a good show he had not realized she was truly attached until it was too late.

"Good night, Caroline," he said gently, willing her to take what comfort she could and move on.

"Will you come for a Christmas visit? I will have the boys. Brin will remember you fondly, if only you come. I have told him much about you. When we lost William –"

"We will open Buckingham House for a public day during the holiday season. Perhaps our Lord Chamberlain will send you a card for that and you may bring your sons to see the Palace."

"Will you see to it, William? I should like to show Brin where – where you live."

Such a small favor, Melbourne mused, one which is granted to thousands each year. But how would Victoria take the suggestion? She was not unaware of the persistent rumor attributing to him paternity of Caroline's middle and deceased youngest son, and that as much or more than the mere fact of his old public liaison fueled her jealous loathing. Not unreasonable jealousy, he conceded, and Victoria's feelings were paramount. Added to that the perversity of her uncle's connection to the same woman and it was a sticky situation best avoided.

"We will see." He tipped his hat and set off, not looking to see whether Wellington kept up or not. The Duke had his own history with Caroline and still visited her frequently, alone as well as in the company of young Sidney Herbert, her current paramour.

The household was assembled in the larger of the private drawing rooms, a full complement of ladies and gentlemen in waiting as well as the Queen and her mother. Had he not been warned, Melbourne's dismay at seeing the pompous Belgian King and his French Queen might have been
evident. Instead he was able to bow gracefully and greet Leopold with the proper degree of respect due a reigning sovereign. Melbourne's bow was precise to a degree and without the servility Leopold considered his due. His French wife, daughter of Louis-Phillipe, was a pleasant little woman of whom Victoria was fond and so his greeting to her contained genuine warmth. He bowed over the hand of the Duchess of Kent and then, duty done, took his accustomed place beside the Queen.

Her large eyes were soft and sympathetic when they met his and Melbourne's lips quirked in a small smile to reassure her.

"We were quite surprised by Leopold's arrival, William. He stopped in Paris and then determined to come here rather than go back to Belgium." The Duchess of Kent spoke in an artificially cheerful voice, determined, Melbourne surmised, to allay any tension.

"Indeed," Melbourne said smoothly in response. "How fortunate we are! Was your crossing satisfactory, Your Majesty? The Channel can be so tumultuous this time of year."

"Quite satisfactory, Lord Melbourne," Leopold responded promptly. "I so longed to see my niece once more. And my children, to see their cousins."

Leopold's heirs were full of themselves, imbued with their father's peculiar brand of overweening pride in a nondescript third-rate lineage, and manifested no awareness of even basic social skills. Even Baroness Lehzen, herself fanatically proud of her German heritage, conceded defeat in past attempts to maintain discipline when Leopold's brats were ensconced in her nursery.

"Leopold and dear Aunt Louise have taken over the North wing. They will have privacy there, and enough space to set up a household as they see fit, since they will be here until after Christmas."

Victoria laced her fingers through Melbourne's in plain view of her uncle, who looked down his substantial nose at their linked hands.

One of Victoria's younger maids of honor was persuaded to play an air on the piano and so fill the uncomfortable silence which descended between abortive attempts at conversation. Leopold was most anxious to discuss the direction John Russell's new government would take and Melbourne equally determined to share nothing he had heard in confidential discussions.

He thought Leopold's technique for eliciting such confidences uniquely unsuited to the purpose, baiting him with clumsy jibes suggesting he doubtless knew nothing of import because he was merely a figurehead appointee and as such not trusted by the real ministers. Melbourne's opinion was, although that might well be true, it was a damned stupid way in which to persuade him to loosen his tongue and only confirmed his low opinion of the intellect Leopold hid behind his sense of self-importance.

He was mentally devising strategies by which the evening might be terminated when Leopold surprised them all by claiming weariness from his journey and begged the Queen's leave to retire. Melbourne had to restrain himself from leaping to his feet in order to hasten the departure and sighed audibly when Queen Louise-Marie nodded her elegant little head and took her husband's arm.

"I bid you good night, my dear niece," Leopold bowed over the Queen's hand and then kissed her cheek with a loud smacking sound. "And my sister, of course." The Duchess of Kent turned her head, so he might peck her check and sat with fixed smile until they were gone.

"Well, that is my brother all over," she said when they had gone. "We will have no peace while he is here. And we have not yet told him Christmas will be at Brocket Hall."
"That was the perfectly awful ending to an unpleasant day," Victoria pronounced as soon as the door of their private apartment had closed. Melbourne loosened his cravat and began unfastening the buttons of his waistcoat.

"You really had no idea he intended to arrive a month early?"

"No! How can you ask such a thing? Do you think I wouldn't tell you?" Victoria frowned.

"Perhaps you hoped to spare me," Melbourne said drily, catching her hand in his as they walked toward the inner chambers.

"Palmerston's secretary brought the declaration of war today. I signed it and a courier set forth at once. It will be carried in relays to Hardinge."

"They won't need the actual document in hand. It's a mere formality, sweetheart, and if it's any consolation at all the Army will do what the Army decides is necessary, with or without your signature."

"It's no consolation whatsoever, William, and only tells me what a useless figurehead I am."

"No, ma'am, a lovely figurehead and not at all useless. Your person is the flag they all rally round, your name the one they use as a battle cry."

"A figurehead." Victoria put her arms around his waist and laid her head on his chest, rubbing her cheek against the rough knap of his waistcoat.

"The ship arrived from the Americas, with the grain and foodstuffs procured for Ireland. Distribution is chaotic, because the counties are each laws onto themselves with no one in charge capable of maintaining order. The Irish are a lawless people in general and hungry people are – understandably – quite desperate. But at least the thing is done and seen to be done under the flag of the Queen."

"It's not about being seen, William. It's about preventing starvation. Children dying in the lanes and going unburied, and now the cold makes it all worse."

"I know, my darling, but you can only do so much. On to happier topics – well, perhaps not but at least a change in topic – has Leopold broached the subject of taking the children to Germany?"

Victoria stepped back in order to look up at him, and Melbourne saw her surprise. He was relieved. So she doesn't know. Yet.

"The children?" she repeated. "His children?"

"Our children. And you."

"I am the Queen. I cannot journey so far, and certainly the children do not go without me. Unlike my uncle, I want to at least believe I have a nation to govern. Why do you ask such an extraordinary thing?"

Melbourne kissed the top of her head and excused himself, going into his dressing room to disrobe and allow his clothing to be put away. Baines worked with quiet efficiency, but Melbourne did not mistake the flush on that gentleman's hollow cheeks and thought not for the first time his valet might have a romance in the works.
When he returned Victoria had been rid of her gown, washed and undressed, and was waiting in bed, prettily attired in a pale pink night dress with lacy bodice. He pulled back the bed covers and playfully tickled her small feet before putting one on his lap and massaging her instep.

"Oh, that's so good," she groaned, placing her other foot on his lap and nudging him expectantly. He complied, using his thumbs to knead the most sensitive spots.

"What will you say if he does propose such a trip? He might say it is a good thing to show the children their father's homeland. Rosenau was Albert's home and now is Ernest's." Melbourne concentrated on keeping his voice reasonable, even encouraging, so as not to encourage her to refuse the idea for his sake alone. He wanted to know what she felt.

"I will say it's utter nonsense. I am a Queen Regnant and cannot make an extended trip to some primitive crumbling castle. Yes, it was Albert's childhood home, and a crumbling ruin then. Neither he nor Ernest had any fondness for the place, and if Albert was alive he would be the first to refuse such a proposed trip." Victoria stopped and looked directly at Melbourne. "He was never happy there so Leopold cannot claim such a trip is for his sake. And our children have no reason to see Coburg."

"It might be a good thing for Liam to travel someday and see other parts of the world."

"Someday, William, is not today. Liam is a little boy. The only world he needs to see is here." Melbourne set her feet down and slid back so he could lean against the headboard, drawing her to him.

"Why do you ask? Are you trying to be rid of us?" Victoria asked, laying her hand on his waist and nestling her head more comfortably in the crook of his shoulder, preparing to sleep.

"No, my love, I only want you to know your own mind on the subject of such a trip. Whatever you want to do, I will support it, but I most definitely have no interest in going. Paris, now – I would very much like to take you to Paris. A State trip, if it must be, but with time to take you to the Paris Opera House. Or Italy – I think you would like Venice. There are many places I would like to visit with you, but Rosenau Castle is not one of them."

While Victoria toyed with his hand, measuring her own against it, rotating the wedding band he wore, raising it to nibble on a finger playfully, he told her a few highlights of his day with the cabinet, the progress of the new Parliament. As a near-afterthought, making it more humorous than it had been in fact, he told her about his walk with Wellington and which direction it had led them. As he spoke he kept careful contact with her, his hand in her grip, her head on his shoulder and one little leg slung across his, attuned for any minute sign of tension.

"You told her we would send an invitation to visit the palace?" Victoria's voice was soft and neutral in tone, with no particular inflection.

"I said that perhaps the Lord Chamberlain would send her a card, for a public day when others visit the State rooms in droves. Certainly, I did not suggest you would personally invite her."

"You asked me what I truly felt about the idea of Leopold taking us to Germany. Now it's my turn to do the same. What do you feel? Do you want me to invite that woman to Court? Tell me truthfully, William."

She tilted her head back to see his face more clearly and even tugged at him with one small hand, demanding he meet her eyes.
Melbourne shrugged. "Ma'am, what I feel is compassion, I suppose. I did not deal with her fairly, I know that now. My heart was never engaged and although I did not know it at the time, hers was. So, I suppose I feel some guilt too."

"For not loving her?" Victoria's own sweet voice was tender but strident, tense with sudden emotion. Melbourne struggled to discern what emotion that might be.

"For not loving her, I suppose, yes. I thought – because it's what she told me, what she proclaimed to the heavens – that she sought only a casual liaison, of mutual advantage. For…” he cleared his throat, acutely uncomfortable. "…for mutual pleasure. Else I would not have interfered with her. I did not wish for emotional entanglement then."

"What changed?" Victoria sounded genuinely curious, but coy too, and Melbourne was touched and amused at her youthful quest for reassurance, for affirmation of her victory over a vanquished rival.

"You, of course. I saw you and I loved you. And then everything changed."
Rain hit the windows with such force it sounded like tiny pellets. Melbourne looked out at the treetops bowing under the strength of gale-force winds and reflected that, had Leopold delayed only one more day, he would still be in Calais. Few captains would risk the crossing in such weather.

Victoria was at her desk in the larger, working royal office where she received ministers and foreign dignitaries, methodically reading each document extracted from the red box. It had been delivered by a messenger chilled to the bone despite his oiled cloak and Melbourne had quietly sent the boy to the servants' hall in search of warmth and sustenance before sending him back out into the storm.

This chamber was set far enough distant from both that wing containing the family apartments and the North wing, where Leopold of Belgium and his extended entourage were housed, that the usual silence prevailed. Melbourne and Victoria were not entirely alone; the young Prince of Wales lay on a rug before the fire, chin in hand, reading a book, and his small sister was engrossed in play on a cushioned window seat, moving a stable of porcelain horses to and fro.

Melbourne had gone through his mail and that addressed to the Queen, setting aside pieces which
might interest her or require her attention. Victoria's diligent attention to the responsibilities of her role was one of her most endearing and admirable traits, and while he was careful to avoid even the appearance of hovering his eyes would rest on that head bent in concentration, all those small gestures she made without knowing which to him were infinitely familiar and held close to his heart. She might rub her chin with when considering how to word some response, suck her bottom lip against pearly white teeth when impatient with herself or tap two fingers upright against her mouth if about to address some question to him. He knew too that she would be slightly annoyed at the interruption if she became aware of his scrutiny and so he rationed his glances. Her annoyance would never last long; if their eyes met she would melt instantly and reach for him, turn her face up for a kiss, communicate in silence before turning her thoughts once more to the work at hand.

Knowing such little things and so many more comprised the warp and weft of intimacy. The business of living could all too readily assume primacy in any relationship, paradoxically more readily in an essentially happy domestic arrangement than otherwise. That latter was a truth his first wife had known instinctively, and he had learned under duress. The near-constant drama Caro enacted provided her with the impassioned intensity she needed, while it stole the tranquility he preferred.

Melbourne was as grateful for hard-earned experience as he was for Victoria's far more complementary nature. They were, improbable as it might seem from the outside, rarely well suited to one another and while nobody fell in love based on such logical assessment, it made the resulting match far more comfortable. But then, loving Victoria was far easier and more entirely effortless than anything else he'd ever done and marriage, finally, the perfect companionship he had once imagined it could be.

To distract himself from focusing too intently on Victoria while she worked Melbourne sorted through the correspondence he had already set aside as being of little importance and out of the mildest curiosity picked up an envelope addressed in some clerk's hand, from the Preston Guilds of Lancaster. He broke the seal and tore open the flap, extracting a heavy sheet of stationary.

Sometime later Victoria sighed and set down her pen, firmly closing the lid of the large red coffer which stood prominently at the center of her broad desk. She rubbed the back of her neck absently.

"How good you are, to bear me company when I ignore you completely," she said, to Melbourne's surprise.

"Why, of course, ma'am, where else would I be? Far too foul out there to venture into the center of town and if not forced to do so, there is no place I would rather be than by your side." He had been sprawled out in an armchair before the fire, tapping the letter he still held idly against the chair arm, but rose when Victoria spoke.

Standing behind her, he laid his hands on her shoulders and began gently working the tensed muscles he felt while she let her head roll forward under his touch.

"Mmm…so good, but I am not finished," she sighed. "I saved the worst for last, to discuss with you. Have you heard about this renewed determination to appoint a regency?"

Melbourne nodded, drawing her up with hands under her elbows.

"Come, sit by the fire with me, we can talk and be comfortable both." He led her to the long brown Chesterfield sofa set perpendicular to the hearth and, rather than permitting her to sit at one end, pulled her gently onto his lap.

"William," she laughed. "Lord M, this is quite unseemly."
"But so very comfortable, isn't it? Now...about the regency they propose...why are you opposed? It is quite routine."

"Lord M, it presupposes my death or incapacity and Liam's ascension to the throne as a minor."

"Yes, of course it does. It is nothing more than responsible contingency planning. The Archbishop of Canterbury, John Russell, the head of the Opposition —"

"Sir Robert Peel. Why didn't he press this when he was head of government, if he considers it a necessary measure now?"

"Because, my love, you have a way of inspiring your First Lords with an overwhelming desire to please you, and this measure displeases you each time it is brought up."

"Of course, I do!" Victoria stated firmly. "I—we will not expire before Liam's eighteenth birthday, and to plan for the alternative is unacceptable."

Melbourne understood the real source of her reluctance to even discuss the matter but did not want to upset her any more than Peel had.

"Must you wear so damned many petticoats even in your own office?" he grumbled playfully, struggling to push the great volume of her skirts aside so she could settle more completely in his arms, holding her as he would their child.

"You have a will, of course. I know because assisting you in preparing it was one of my first duties as your Prime Minister. The Crown holds the bulk of State treasures of course, but your private fortune is considerable. Liam has the Duchy of Cornwall in trust for him, and we have settled Albert's lesser holdings on Lily."

"Those are the entailed properties, William. I still have, as you said, a private fortune which I want to settle mostly on you."

"That is impossible, and it does not matter. About the Regency, please trust me when I say that it is no more than ordinary precaution. The change in government, and I suppose Lily's illness, remind us all how unexpectedly everything can change."

"If it is also usual and ordinary, why are you not the regent they propose?" Victoria snapped, suddenly sitting bolt upright. Her eyes were narrowed, nostrils flared.

Melbourne shushed her and soothed her as best he could.

"My darling, no one would separate me from the children, but no one would imagine naming me Regent either."

"The Regency they propose is a committee, not a single person. George Cambridge, Uncle Leopold, Lansdowne and whomever the head of government and the Opposition is at the time of enactment. It's absurd, that their own father not be among those named."

Melbourne was not entirely willing to concede his own dismay when the names had been proposed. The Privy Council had been so proud of itself, that it was a bipartisan effort and the Regents equally divided between Royal family and politicians. The addition of Leopold had been intended as a sop to those who felt strongly the child's paternal relations should be represented. Grand Duke Ernest was too far away and, Melbourne thought privately, too amiable to lobby for consideration.
"I am sixty-six years old, my love. And, lest you forget, not publicly acknowledged as Liam's father, therefore I have only a stepfather's negligible rights."

"The public loves you."

"The London public, ma'am. The rest of the country does not know who I am, or if they do it's with some vague familiarity with the old scandals and the regrettably heavy hand I had to use to suppress unrest."

"You did only what you had to do to maintain order. Hundreds of homes had their windows smashed, farm implements were destroyed, crops set alight…"

"Quite right, my dear, but the populace knows nothing of that. Their memory is short, except for what makes headlines, and even then, anger and fear outweigh peace and stability as motivators."

Victoria sat in silence and for a few minutes her posture remained ramrod straight. Then, gradually, she unbent and coiled herself against him so that his arms were able to contain her. He pressed his lips against her smooth head, finding the hollow behind her ear, the warm pulse point at her throat.

"We are invited to bring Liam to Lancaster. The Merchant Guild writes asking if the Prince of Wales could visit to open their new Hall," Melbourne said, tapping the letter he still held against her leg.

Victoria made no response, only burrowing her face in his shirtfront and sniffing. Melbourne smiled, unseen. They were so entirely attuned to one another that such secondary senses, smell and taste, were indulged as surely as the more primary touch, the words of love they exchanged. He tipped her back in his arms and lowered his head, finding her mouth with her own.

"You could bring Liam to Lancaster," Victoria said, although her words were swallowed by his kiss and it took a moment to grasp the meaning.

Melbourne lifted his head only infinitesimally, so he could look into her eyes, then lowered it and kissed her again. He nibbled her bottom lip, tasted the very corner of her bow-shaped mouth, dropped kisses on her eyelids and each temple.

"I am weary of this talk, woman," he said gruffly. "Leave off, do, and kiss me back." Victoria giggled at his adoption of a rough Scottish cant and laced her fingers behind his head, working them through his tangled curls.

Liam looked up from his book, his gentle face smiling approbation and Lily propelled herself from her perch on the window seat, so she could clamber up alongside her mother.

"My Papa," she exclaimed firmly.

"My Mama," Melbourne countered, making the little girl shriek with giggles when he tickled her.

"Stop!" Victoria protested. "You are quite squeezing Mama between you. Let me up!"

Rather than complying, Melbourne tipped both wife and daughter easily onto the rug at his feet, so the Queen found herself in a most undignified position. Then he got down beside them, the little princess wrapped her arms around his neck with such force he tumbled back and all of them laughed helplessly at the muddled pile.

", it is a very good idea, I think," the Duchess of Kent confided later, joining the continuation of
their earlier discussion on a possible visit to the city of Lancaster in the northwest of England. "But not only there. Make a progress, from Wales through the northwest and midlands."

Both Melbourne and Victoria showed their surprise at the enthusiasm her mother displayed.

"I am still a favorite of the people, you must admit," she said, lowering her eyes with near-embarrassment that Melbourne suspected was mostly assumed. "Well, that, and the fact that the people were loyal to their little Princess long before you came to the throne, were due to the many times we took you out and showed you to the people. Remember our progresses through England?"

Victoria did remember, and well. Conroy had been the architect of those outings, which enraged her Uncle King William, showing the little Princess Alexandrina and her mother to the people in places far from London which otherwise never received royal attention. She thought of something else.

"You told me once, royalty must be seen to be believed, Lord M. And Mama is right. We would visit the towns and villages and the people would cheer and throw flowers. I did learn then how important it was to go out amongst the people, to earn their affection." It was the closest Victoria had ever come to saying something positive about the loathed John Conroy and Melbourne admitted to himself that his strategy had been sound, building a loyal base of supporters for the young heir apparent.

"But there are no other claimants to the throne, Victoria. What need is there to show Liam to the people now, when he is so young?"

"France is in turmoil and you say yourself that Louis-Phillipe cannot hold on much longer. Isn't it more difficult to revolt against a living, breathing prince than a remote ideal? But…that is not the only reason I think it would be a good idea." Victoria paused, and carefully set down the cordial glass she had been holding with fastidious care.

She had of course changed for dinner and loosened the rather severe daytime chignon for a loose cluster of curls over one ear that prettily accentuated her large blue eyes. Her smooth shoulders were bared above the wide folded neckline of her dark gown and her skin gleamed temptingly in the candle light.

"What other reason might you have, ma'am? A wish to be rid of me for several weeks? Shall I be worried?" Melbourne took a brandy from the tray offered by a hovering footman and sipped, watching Victoria curiously over the rim of his glass.

"As Mama said, and to give the Devil his due, her popularity came from those progressions through the country with me. Before that, no one knew the wife of the Duke of Kent. Afterward her name was cheered at every appearance, and still is today. I want that for you. If the people demand it, you must be our son's sole guardian."

It was all quite unnecessary, an excessive response to a very practical decision reached jointly by the disparate members of the Privy Council. While Melbourne appreciated her loyalty to him and her determination he be honored – the matter of a Dukedom still was not settled, and he suspected in that he would be forced to yield for the sake of marital harmony – he knew too that Victoria did not easily accept any thwarting of her will.

Fortunately, they were interrupted by the late arrival of King Leopold. Accompanied by a young equerry who seemed to follow him everywhere, Leopold formally greeted his niece, then his own wife and sister before nodding briefly in acknowledgement of Melbourne. The disruption triggered a realignment of the conversational groups, with the Duchess of Kent enlisting her sister-in-law and
two others for a game of whist and Leopold proposing Melbourne join him in a game of Piquet. Melbourne despised card games even more than he did the visiting monarch but could think of no way to politely refuse.

Leopold cut the higher card and thus had to deal, giving him the choice of cards at the commencement of each partie. Melbourne cared little for the outcome and had to force himself to attend, but the other man's insufferable display of assumed superiority grated so that he found himself anticipating each turn of the cards and was the first to call.

"I saw an old friend of yours in London today," Leopold said with his irritatingly precise enunciation.

"Indeed? That makes two days in a row. We seem to travel in the same circles, Your Majesty." Use of the most formal address would not be customary in a familial setting, but Melbourne was punctilious in that regard, refusing to open himself to any suspicion of insinuating himself into the ridiculously overrated Coburg dynasty.

Leopold raised a blackened eyebrow, and the toupee laying atop his head like a small animal at rest lifted accordingly.

"You are so blunt, my Lord," he hissed the sibilant.

"'Blunt'? I do apologize, Your Highness. I misunderstood. I thought you referred to Mrs. Norton."

Leopold's small priggish eyes darted about, left and right, and seemed to grow wary when they rested on his own long-time subject and servant, Baron Stockmar.

They played a few sets in silence only marred by the soft thud of cards placed face down on felt.

"She tells me she has not seen much of you lately and assumes she has been replaced in your affections. If so, I confess I have been unable to find out who."

Melbourne was surprised into laughter at the other man's entirely unaccustomed frankness. He collected himself and searched the long narrow face for some hint of the meaning behind his honesty.

"Quatorzes," Leopold said with smug satisfaction, laying out his set of four for fourteen points.

"We don't all have your…er…charitable impulses, Your Highness. Or the admirable Baron Stockmar to act as procurer."

"I think you might not have heard. Baron Stockmar arranged an advantageous marriage for his niece, to Władysław Plater."

"I felicitate her, and you, to have such a very resourceful secretary at your disposal. We did well to send him back to you when we did."

"My Lord, do you truly not have any extracurricular interests of your own? How shocking, for men of the world like us. I suppose I have that to look forward to when I reach your age. Is that why there are no more children in the royal nursery?"

Melbourne inclined his head, courteously acknowledging Leopold's feeble riposte.

"You may assume what you like."
"I could still help you, Lord Melbourne. Give my niece a child if you can and he or she will become a part of my plan for Europe. I will undertake to arrange an illustrious marriage and your blood will flow through the veins of kings into the next century."

"That is a very tempting offer, Your Majesty," Melbourne murmured, placing his final three cards fastidiously under Leopold's sharp watchful stare. "And I will certainly keep it in mind…if I can, that is."

He permitted his mouth to quirk up in a small smile which did not quite reach his eyes. He rose from the card table and bowed gracefully.

"If you will excuse me, Your Majesty, Her Majesty and I will bid you good night."

"Oh, he did not! Bribe you to get me with child? If you can?"

Victoria bounced on the bed, on her knees with long hair flying, much as her own daughter might. Melbourne had only recounted a part of the conversation with her uncle, not to keep anything from her but to preserve whatever family feeling remained despite Leopold's unpleasant machinations. Victoria had looked to him as a father once and loved him still despite the recurrent unpleasantness and his repeated attempts to meddle in the affairs of England.

Melbourne had long ago advised the very young Victoria to provide Leopold with ample reassurance of her devotion while deflecting his heavy-handed attempts to advise her on policy. He had always been fortunate in the warmth of his own family ties, had a mother who openly adored him and brothers and sister who were unusually close and supportive – never have siblings been so fond of one another, who are so little related, Emily Eden had once quipped – and even the expansive Wyndhams welcomed him into their fold. He wanted Victoria to retain what few genuine family ties she could, at least those based on genuine affection rather than dynastic ambitions and say what he would about Leopold, he didn't doubt that at heart the man loved Victoria.

"And poor William! Poor little Willi – my awful uncle casting aspersions on your ability!"

Melbourne snickered at her delightfully bawdy reference to the organ which was quickly rising to the occasion.

"If you persist in calling him little he will take offense, ma'am, and refuse to do his duty."

Victoria giggled softly and caught up her long hair, winding it into a knot at the nape of her neck. Then she sprawled out beside him, head pillowed on his abdomen, and coaxed the object of her affectionate banter into good humor, very good humor indeed.
Alexandrina Victoria Her Majesty the Queen, Alexandrine, Her Grand Ducal Royal Highness and Alexandrina, the Lady Beauvale. Three young women, each able to display great dignity and reserve according to their various rank and stations, were in each other's company capable of reverting to the giddiness of girls much younger than they.

Lady Eleanor Stanley would write to her mother that "the Queen fribbles away much time with her sisters-in-law and the three are given to greater giddiness and frivolity than ever we maids-of-honor dare." While perhaps somewhat harsh, and possibly motivated by jealousy, Eleanor's assessment was not entirely unfair. The Queen had never grown close to her own maids-of-honor, those young women of her own age cohort who held honor appointments.

They were by long custom chosen for their birth and appearance as much as the positions in society their parents held, and the beauties thus favored expected a significant return on the investment in fine Court wardrobe. Since a young woman wore the crown, preferment was no longer earned by the amenability of some young beauty to royal libido. The Queen's husbands had neither of them a roving eye. Her first, the dour German prince, took far greater interest in those pretty mincing young men he appointed to his own household, and her second, despite his reputation as a rake and the manner of an accomplished flirt, had never gone further and showed little interest or inclination. Even Wilhelmina, now Lady Dalmeny, considered the most beautiful girl in England and the boldest in Her Majesty's service, had been firmly rebuffed and sent away for her trouble. When she returned from a season in Ireland her manner was considerably subdued and her tongue spiteful.

If the little Queen was gruff and remote with her young female attendants, she showed partiality to the older, more sedate ladies-in-waiting. Lady Portman was senior of these, in length of service and
familiarity with the royal family. The Duchess of Sutherland was still exalted as Mistress of the Robes, but the early promise of enduring friendship between she and the Queen had chilled when she continued to advocate for her friend Caroline Norton. Lady Douro, Wellington's daughter-in-law, and Charlotte Canning rounded out the set of near-permanent appointments, two Whigs and two Tories equally favored, although it had recently gone out of fashion to demand the Queen's private household reflect the government in power.

Whatever the personal tastes of those women who served, it was still highly-prized thing to be at Court. One heard things which might be tactfully repeated, with every appearance of reticence and disdain to gossip; one was, after all, at the very epicenter of the civilized world and no matter as insignificant as personal preference would alter the tenacity with which each clung to their coveted entrée.

Victoria had never enjoyed bosom friends her own age. Conroy's unpleasant daughters were thrust upon her as schoolroom companions, and later she had learned to value the acerbic wit and undeniable loyalty of Emma Portman, the exquisite taste and quiet good sense of Harriet Sutherland. She tolerated the younger women, all of them tall decorative girls with an inflated sense of their own worth, less graciously. She felt at a continual disadvantage when they so effortlessly bantered and flirted with the gentlemen at Court, a skillset they had acquired during their coming out period, ably mentored by mothers and sisters who were themselves fashionable, well-bred coquettes.

Her sisters-in-law took the place of dear Feodora, her distant half-sister who rarely visited England and was consumed by her own marriage and brood of growing children. Adine was married to Lord M's brother Frederick, a man of more than sixty who was, in Victoria's admiring estimation, nearly as handsome and charming as his brother. The third Alexandrine, called Sophie, was married to Grand Duke Ernst and while strictly speaking no longer her sister-in-law, was a natural third.

One afternoon their talk turned to the children they did not have. Adine doted on Victoria's daughter, almost resigned to having none of her own, and Sophie hungrily watched the nearly five-year-old Prince of Wales.

"You have your heir," she'd said wistfully. "Although he is not your husband's, dear Lord Melbourne loves him as his own. Ernst blames me for not giving him a son, I know he does."

Victoria had exchanged quick, discrete glances with Adine. Ernst, Albert's brother, knew the truth of their parentage but seemingly had, for his own reasons, chosen not to share that knowledge with his wife.

"William has reconciled himself to not having an heir. Fred will inherit the title, and after him, Adine's child, if she is so blessed."

"If I am not, it won't be for lack of trying," was her sister-in-law's answer, spoken with breathless giggles in the High German dialect they all shared to ensure the servants would not comprehend.

Three dark heads bent together, sharing in whispers the sort of details wives confided in one another, which would mortify most husbands, if they only knew. They had in common so much more than their age. Adine and Victoria had wed two brothers who were more than sixty, as virile and devastatingly handsome as men half their age, and all three were passionately in love with their husbands. None had presented those husbands with an heir.

After more conversation and a second pouring of sweet wine Victoria haltingly broached a new subject, one which she could discuss with no one else, save her two sister-friends.
"Do you ever – as much as we all love our husbands – feel restless? Not for anything in particular," she hastened to add. "And not out of any kind of regret, but just…restless? I sometimes do. I think of those early days, when William was Lord M and we had to steal our time together. It was so exciting then, as if everything wonderful waited just around the corner. And now…perhaps it is only that I am getting old. Once, when I was eighteen, it all seemed so impossible and now that I have everything I want…"

Victoria blushed and looked down, embarrassed. "Oh, I don't know what I mean. Pray, forget I said anything. It's all too hard to put into words. And I don't mean, for one second, that I regret my marriage or wish for something else, someone new. Only…"

"You feel bored, as if everyone is having more excitement than you? How do you think I feel, Drina, locked away in that dreadful old castle with the leaking roofs while Ernst pursues his pleasures abroad?" Despite her grim, resigned words Sophie's round face was flushed with excitement at having someone to confide in, who would understand and not rebuke or suggest recourse in prayer and good works.

"Or I? Melbourne Hall is hundreds of miles from anywhere and I am stuck there for months on end. When I was a girl my father was posted to the most exciting capitals of Europe, it's how Fred and I met. And now…I visit the tenants, I shop in Derby…a trip to buy cheese was the highlight of my entire month!" Adine bounced in her seat, eyes alight, seemingly enthusiastic about the prospect of a receptive audience.

"Then you don't think it's wrong, even a sin, to feel so discontent?" Victoria asked, brows drawn together in concern and puzzlement. "You understand I do not mean that I would change anything, only that…"

"…that it all feels quite flat sometimes and you wonder, is this all there is? No, I don't think it's a sin. I adore Fred, you know I do, but when his gout flares up and he doesn't rise from his chair and it seems the rain will never stop…"

"…and there are only so many good works one can do, only so many afternoon teas with stout pious burghers' wives you can attend…"

"…and one more audience where one must nod one's head and pretend interest in some worthy…"

"…and even making love to one's husband seems to be so very predictable…in bed, under the sheets, you know what's going to happen and when and…"

"…and trying to be adventurous seems so contrived…"

The words flowed so quickly they tumbled over one another, urgency overcoming discretion, and Victoria felt a great sense of relief wash over her. She adored her husband, every inch of him, and would not ever want another, but if Sophie and Adine felt likewise, those feelings of restless discontent couldn't be so very wrong, might even be natural to a young woman. Caught up in the moment, in the wonderful feeling of solidarity, she blurted out the one thing she could confide to no one else.

"A man kissed me," she whispered, unable to give full voice to the memory even here, in her private drawing room with only these two friends to hear.

She described the encounter, so innocent yet so pregnant with possibility. Not, of course, the prospect of engaging in some sort of forbidden dalliance, but simply the possibility of being wanted by a man other than one's husband. For their age and station and the society in which they
lived, the three Alexandrinas were unusually innocent, having lived sheltered lives. Of the three, Adine, daughter of a diplomat, had the most experience in being courted and admired, while Sophie had once been betrothed to the Russian Grand Duke, but none had ever danced and flirted and even kissed boys out of sight of a chaperone as most young women brought out into society had done long before they settled down to marriage.

Victoria's declaration inspired wide-eyed, awestruck admiration and their curiosity was boundless.

"Do you love him?" Sophie queried, as though nothing else were possible.

"No!" Victoria was quick to protest. "Of course not. I love my husband." A pregnant pause ensued, and then she added, "he said he loves me. Sort of. I think."

Adine remembered the big guard she had seen on a few occasions, always hovering about in the background. Handsome, uncouth, with a wildness about his air and appearance. The hair mostly, but also something arresting in his handsome face.

"…as though he imagines what you would look like under your clothes, without your chemise," she said, shivering a little at the memory.

"That's him," Victoria agreed, laughing. "That's Billy Cameron."

"Did he try to do more? Did he make advances?" Sophie asked eagerly, leaning forward in her seat.

"No!" Victoria once more protested, beginning to regret having introduced the subject. It was a vignette she kept tucked away in the back of her mind, uncertain what it meant or how to file it properly away.

"Does your husband know?" Adine demanded.

"Yes," Victoria said dubiously. "I think so. Billy is very respectful of William. They are greater friends than you might think. And no, he did not make advances. He was leaving. He has gone abroad, back to the East, so you see there is little chance I will see him again for…well, for years and years, probably. He is not the settling-down kind, so he told me."

Adine looked from one to the other mischievously. "Sophie, this fellow stands head and shoulders taller than most men around him, a head taller than my Fred, who is nearly six feet. Can you imagine…" she dropped her voice to a husky stage whisper. "how big he is?" And she made a gesture with her hands that left no mistaking to what she referred.

Sophie, all trace of piousness fled, joined in teasing Victoria mercilessly with bawdy speculation, and they ended the afternoon tête-à-tête in a spirit of giddy camaraderie.

When it was nearly time to expect their husbands, William and his brother from the halls of government and Grand Duke Ernst from an afternoon of appreciation for the arts in company with his uncle, they adjourned to dress for dinner.

Victoria's day dress was exchanged for a gown of rich black velvet worked with scarlet embroidered patterns and the curling irons applied so that long tendrils draped over one shoulder. She sent back the first jewels presented, tactfully deciding to forgo the costliest of her diamonds in deference to her sisters-in-law, and instead opted for only a waxy white orchid to decorate her bodice.

When she was nearly done and all that remained was for her dresser to dust her shoulders with fine white powder which added subtle iridescence under candle light, some small sounds from the
adjoining room told her William had returned. Under her usual rush of excitement Victoria felt the tiniest niggling of guilt for the talk she had shared, albeit in confidence and a spirit of silly exaggeration, and she impatiently tore off the towel pinned over her gown.

William was in his own chamber, stripped to the waist, having just completed shaving. His valet, encumbered by basin and used straight razor, made what obeisance he could and stepped around the Queen to rid himself of his burden. Victoria took advantage of the man's departure to step close to her husband. She ran her fingertips appreciatively down the curve of his back, tracing the outline of his spine under smooth skin made golden by candle light.

"You are a beautiful man," she said honestly, without guile or coyness. Suspenders hung limply at his sides and the high waist of black evening trousers obscured the rounding firm buttocks beneath. Her hand slid further down, stroking the curve of his hip, appreciating the crest of his backside.

Melbourne patted his face a final time to remove any lingering trace of shave cream before turning around.

"Mrs. Melbourne, you flatter me. And I am most susceptible to flattery," he said, pretending sternness belied by the warm glow in his dark eyes.

"William," Victoria blurted without thinking. "I want to do something different. Let us take a trip. Not a State trip, although if I must I will wave at crowds thus –" she mimed the back-and-forth motion of the gesture she had been taught in girlhood, with which to acknowledge the throngs who gathered for a glimpse of royalty. "-but then, show me some of the world I have not yet seen."

"Ah, you've reconsidered your uncle's wish that you visit Coburg? Has poor little Sophie implored you to relieve her isolation?"

"Not at all. Take me to…oh, I don't know, Lisbon or Venice or…someplace I have never been, that you would show your wife if she wasn't the Queen."

"What brings this on? Confinement with your relations? Too much of the girls' company?"

Melbourne's lips curled playfully, as he pulled on the billowing white shirt his valet held out.

"No! In fact, it would be grand if Fred and Adine could travel with us. Ernst and Sophie, not so much but – at any rate, this is something I want to do. I find I am bored doing the same thing day after day and whatever might remedy that, I want to do it with you. Perhaps I am getting old –"

She was interrupted by Melbourne's laughter, rich, from someplace deep in his abdomen. Victoria thought that she had never heard any sound as wonderful as her husband when he laughed so, giving himself over entirely to amusement. Her heart swelled with love for this inexpressibly amazing man God had given her.

"Old? My darling girl, if you are old at twenty-five, what does that make me?"

"Eternal, Lord M, eternal."

**

They dined in company with their guests and those members of the Household, his and hers, who were at Court. After dinner they listened to Herr Mendelssohn, the name under which the German pianist and composer Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy performed. Albert had first made the acquaintance of Herr Mendelssohn at university and had invited him to England. Since then, he had paid more than a dozen visits.
He had with him a protégé, Mr. Bennet, and at the suggestion of Lady Canning, the Swedish singer Jenny Lind had been invited as well. Victoria was transported by the romanticism of Mendelssohn's playing, but could not fail to see that Miss Lind was likewise spellbound. A romance in the works? Victoria wondered. There was a Frau Bartholdy, but perhaps what happened in London was a world apart.

Her musings kept Victoria occupied for much of the eleven divine minutes during which the air was filled with notes of such heartbreaking longing that all present were caught up in the mood. It was only when the music stopped that she caught a glimpse of her two sisters-in-law whispering together. Slightly annoyed at their lack of decorum, an affront to such a gifted musician, Victoria turned back to the front of the room, laying her hand momentarily over her husband's.

**

She could still hear the music when she retired to her bedchamber later, could still feel the seductive rhythm and sudden soaring grandeur which seemed to lead her onward and upward, as though she might take flight. William, she knew, pretended no appreciation for music and might have been content to snore away the evening hours had she not kept him awake with small hand-squeezes and nudging.

Miss Skerrett was waiting dutifully to undress her, and Victoria permitted careful hands to unfasten hairpins, unbutton her gown and untie her stays. As soon as she was free of encumbrance Victoria dismissed her irritably.

"I can do the rest myself, thank you, Skerrett."

Taking no offense, the woman merely nodded and ducked her head, then departed through the back servants' passage Victoria herself had once used. Left to her own devices, Victoria took up a silk dressing gown and tied it about her waist, then went to look out the window. She considered venturing forth, and knew she could not, without making a fuss.

*Trapped here,* she thought, unreasonably annoyed without clear cause. Of course, she was the Queen and could go where she wished. It would, however, cause whispers and needless speculation, were the queen to be seen wandering through dark corridors. Instead she paced, even shooing away the small dog who scampered to keep up.

She had made one, two, three circuits of the spacious royal bedchamber before some small movement made her glance up.

Melbourne stood in the doorway leading to the dressing rooms. His black cravat hung loose, untied, and his shirt collar was unbuttoned. He had removed his jacket but was otherwise fully dressed, and he leaned against the door jam, hands in trouser pockets. For the briefest moments, Victoria saw him as though he were a near-stranger, and the lack of recognition brought with it a little frisson of pleasurable unfamiliarity. *So handsome, so distinguished and debonair. If I did not know him, I would want to know him. That, at least, pleased and reassured her.* Of course, he was Lord M, the person she knew better than any other, the only one she wanted to know that well, or would allow to know her.

His eyes were serious, his beautiful face solemn, but the hint of a smile tightened his mouth.

"If you're not ready to sleep, will you walk with me?" he asked softly.

Victoria looked down at her own attire, most improper for strolling through the hallways past sentries and what servants might still be out and about.
Instead of remarking on her dishabille, Melbourne only extended his hand. Victoria took it. They walked through the hallways of the private family apartments, walked through the State rooms, entered the Grand Portrait Gallery where once they had walked together when it was their only opportunity to be alone in one another's company at night without gossip or speculation.

Victoria opened her mouth to speak a few times, but found she had nothing much to say. The restlessness was still present, excess energy and something else stirring in her blood, making her want to run, to ride out at a gallop. She feared that if she spoke she would give vent to her mood with a sharp tongue. It was virtually impossible to argue with Lord M, and she almost wished for John Conroy, a worthy adversary she loathed, who would not tremble when she lashed out, the way her mother did, or tease her into good humor.

"Shall I leave you?" His quiet voice startled Victoria and her mouth dropped open.

"No!" Her own voice was shrill with fear. "Of course not! I love you!"

"I meant," he continued, still quietly, his rich baritone with its customary intermittent hoarseness close to her ear. "if you would prefer to walk alone I will retire. Sometimes one needs to simply be, without another hovering about. But the fact that your thoughts would immediately go elsewhere troubles me. Why on earth would you imagine I meant leave you?"

All that strange restlessness had fled, vanquished by the sheer terror Victoria felt at his first words. She gripped his hand tightly in both of hers, pressing it over her heart.

"I'm sorry, William. I have been in a funny mood all week, or more. Since summer even. Just... restless. Discontent. Irritable. Quite horrible sometimes, to Mama and even the servants. I scolded the dogs today and demanded they be taken outside."

Melbourne looked down at her, cocking his head to one side as he listened intently. Victoria impulsively reached up a hand to cup his cheek.

"If there was anything I could do, you would tell me," he said firmly. "But sometimes a foul mood is just that, a foul mood without rhyme or reason. is that why you said you would like to travel?"

"Yes, I think so," Victoria nodded, and she was suddenly weary. She leaned her forehead against his shirtfront. "I have the silliest thoughts sometimes and being with Adine and Sophie, as much as I love them, brings out the wildness Lehzen and Mama always abhorred."

Melbourne chuckled and embraced her lightly. Victoria pressed herself against him and then was struck by the realization he did not hold her more tightly because he did not want to make her feel confined, controlled. He will even let me be wild, be bad, and love me anyway. He loves me enough to let me decide what to be and do. It was both endearing and unsettling, when depending on him for restraint and direction would be so much more comfortable.

"I won't always be here to guide you, my love, and even while I am, you must decide what you want."

Victoria almost huffed with frustration, but it required too much effort.

"But I want you to guide me. It's so hard to always be in control of everything."

He tightened his arms at her back so that she felt herself completely, wonderfully enfolded, and she sighed with pleasure and satisfaction.

"Come now, princess. I will guide you back to your chamber and hold you until you sleep or keep
you company if you wish to stay awake and plot your escape."

"Our escape," Victoria murmured against his shirt, tasting the starch and bluing, inhaling the odor of Melbourne beneath.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter had to end, but their night has just begin. He knows how to help her channel that restlessness...;)}
Chapter 14

No sooner had his words reassured her and Victoria yielded in response, she felt her temper surge up once more. *Why must I cower in fear that he will leave me? Why must I always be the one to submit?* Her thoughts swirled angrily as they walked along back to their apartment. Her hand was still tucked in his arm, but only because she resisted the urge to pull it away.

*Always it is me, pursuing, cajoling, feeling as though I will never be good enough. Why can't he ever once pursue me? Why doesn't he fear losing me, the way I fear losing him?*

If a very small part of Victoria's mind was weary of the old, worn rut in which her old, nearly-outgrown insecurities ran she pushed that part rudely away. She would never entirely forget the hot scorching shame of being turned away, and the desperate stratagem by which she threw herself at him again and again before finally he relented.

If a very small cautionary voice in Victoria's mind warned that she must not dwell on that past, must let it go, she silenced that voice angrily. *He told me once that as a young lover he thought he must surely die if Caro refused him. Yet he refused me and went on with his life.*

*It all compounded, this toxic brew which fermented with time. Going to Lord M and pouring out her heart's desire. Having him turn her away, kindly, but the kindness stung more than a slap.*

*Those awful days and weeks, the time in between, when she was the one who thought she might die of the pain, the heartache of lost love and shame of rejection. Resolutely going forward with the wedding they planned for her, walking down the aisle of the Chapel Royale where Albert stood at the altar and waiting, hoping in vain for Lord M to step forward and stop the farce about to play out. Instead he only watched in silence, his expression remote, holding the Sword of State in front*
of him as though it were a shield.

These were old hurts, scabbed over, healed and most often only pale scars on a heart filled to overflowing with the happiness they shared. But deep wounds rarely heal completely without damage under the surface. Victoria, for all the contentment of her life with William Lamb, was still reminded from time to time by the dull ache of knowing she was the one who had pursued, persisted, persuaded and finally prevailed. And nothing he had said or done since, despite knowing precisely the right thing to say or do at any given moment, despite knowing her better than anyone else alive, had ever entirely erased the realization that he had never once made a stand or fought for her. He would have been willing to retire in ignominious isolation rather than bend circumstances to his will and take what he wanted. To Victoria, that passivity was incomprehensible unless he didn't really want her at all, not as she needed him.

By the time they reached their own apartments Victoria once more had a fine head of steam. As soon as the page closed the double doors behind them she jerked her arm from his grip so violently that she overbalanced and nearly stumbled. When William reached to steady her, she slapped his hand away.

"It's too late to reach for me now," Victoria hissed angrily. The lack of comprehension she saw on his face only angered her more.

"You've never once gone out of your way for me, so don't pretend to do so now," she said next, in a clumsy approximation of icy dignity. Unfortunately, Melbourne was unable to quickly enough conceal the look of fond amusement her temper elicited, and that provided the spark which ignited her anger.

"I don't want to discuss this any further, my lord. I will retire."

Her slippers slapping noisily at the back of her heels, Victoria marched through the small sitting room without looking back. If she had she would have seen her husband watching her with a puzzled frown. Melbourne's rarely-used bedchamber lay beyond, and their adjoining dressing rooms. She had traversed the length of these while anticipating the feel of a strong warm hand on her shoulder. When she reached her own door and paused, momentarily at a loss, Victoria heard the drumbeat of her own pulse in her ears, felt the rush of blood to her face.

She tugged at the door, then redoubled her force and jiggled the knob. When it opened suddenly she was nearly thrown off balance for the second time, and dismay at her own clumsiness caused the final dam to break.

"Don't bother getting up. I will see myself to bed. Don't bother exerting yourself at all. But then, you never do, do you? Whatever comes easiest, is fine with you. No firm hand as minister, and allow your wife – excuse me, for I am not the first, am I? – your wives to do as they will. Far easier to have the sympathy of everyone for Caro's bad behavior, martyr yourself, than take a stand and… and punch Lord Byron or challenge him to a duel. Poor Mrs. Norton did all the work of seducing you, while you received only sympathy for the ordeal she put you through.

"And me – everything must be my choice, you say. My choice to marry Albert and then seduce you. My choice to insist you marry me a month after he died, rather than wait the year Wellington and Peel demanded as the price for their support. Perhaps allowing everything to be someone else's choice is the way you avoid having to make any choices of your own."

Victoria's chest was heaving and the air she dragged in burned in her lungs. She was aghast at the words spewing out and the festering hurt which propelled them made her want only to throw herself into his arms for solace. Only he could heal the hurt of her injured pride, only he could
soothe the childish pain of never being loved quite enough, not by the father who died before she could know him, not by the mother who nurtured and protected and arranged outings and wrote little notes of love to tuck under her pillow at night – yes, Mama had done that, and I saved each one, but it was never enough. She loved him too, loved that damned John Conroy and she was supposed to love only me.

She did not look at him; she could not, for if she did she would weaken and lose all control. Instead she stirred up the flames of her irrational fury once more. She picked up the glass of water Skerrett always left on her night table and threw it across the room. It dropped far short of its intended target, dropping unbroken to the thick rug and rolling to a stop against Melbourne's foot. Victoria wanted to wound, and despised that part of herself, the angry raging child never satisfied, always hungry for more, a bottomless well of need.

"If I want to know what it feels like to be the one pursued, the one somebody else longs for – would that be my choice too? Would you wait by the fire, while another man who does not wait for me to choose takes what he wants?"

Victoria threw the words down as a gauntlet, vaguely wishing he would show some emotion stronger than the amused tolerance with which he waited out Lily's tantrums.

She was genuinely surprised at the speed with which he reached her. The face she saw looming over hers still wore his habitually pleasant expression, but his eyes told a different story.

Melbourne gripped both her elbows and Victoria saw that he was breathing hard, as though from extreme exertion.

"I think it is time you retire. Ma'am." His voice was a low growl, still cultured, still smooth, but hard and cold – or is it hot? Victoria wondered quite illogically.

"I will retire when I choose," Victoria responded with great dignity, twisting the word with sarcasm.

"You will retire now. You are not yourself." He jerked her around, not cruelly but without his customary deference and care, and force-marched her into her own bedchamber.

"I've made you angry," she said, unable to inhibit the delight which she felt at the realization.

"You are not yourself, ma'am," he only repeated.

"What made you angry? That I spoke of the liaisons in your past…or my future?" Victoria chose the words only for their pleasing symmetry, the sort of thing people said in the novels she read.

Melbourne's face darkened until she almost didn't recognize the handsome stranger standing so close, and his lips tightened in a smirk which might have as easily been a snarl.

"You are speaking like a wayward child, a hoyden who needs to be taught how to behave. You were far too indulged, ma'am, by a mother who was too afraid of your tantrums to discipline you as she should and a governess who didn't dare. And you've confused their reluctance with my forbearance."

Victoria suddenly felt the worst of her anger dissipate, to be replaced by forlorn self-pity. She turned away from him then and dropped her face into her hands, releasing an angry half-sob.

"I want someone to want me, the way I want you."
Hearing her own voice, Victoria suddenly remembered. She shook herself as a dog might, shedding weakness and at least the outward signs of self-pity. She suddenly stood taller, pulling herself up to her full height and thrusting out her bosom as though he could see her.

"I will retire now," she told Melbourne distractedly, wanting the privacy and freedom to explore the knowledge which had presented itself with almost blinding vivacity.

Melbourne had lost his temper only a few times, early in his marriage to Caroline, and each time was left feeling horrified by his own loss of control, far more disturbed than Caro was.

Victoria was no Caro, was not unstable and was generally the most controlled of young women, but he knew under the surface she was both strong-willed and tempestuous. He had heard Lehzen speak of Victoria's ungovernable childish rages in comparison with their daughter's. He had seen how readily the Duchess quaked with real dread at her daughter's frequent harshness, the sharpness she didn't bother to subdue with someone as easily bullied as her mother.

Melbourne knew no more now than he ever had, what to say or do to defuse such emotional storms. He would not return anger for anger, and his first instinct was to retreat and wait it out. But women rarely permitted such strategic retreat, and even a palace of nine-hundred-odd rooms was not large enough to avoid a wife determined to vent anger.

One of the few detriments of being so entirely attuned to another was that Victoria knew where to aim her blows, using hard truths to inflict pain. Melbourne would not explain why she could be right and still wrong in her assessment of his relationships with Caro and Caroline Norton, because he knew that it didn't matter. Whatever might have triggered her outburst, he knew that the crux of the matter was her lingering hurt over the missteps of their own shared history.

When she wept, Melbourne felt all his own defensiveness ebb and he would have gone to her, whisper what reassurance he could, except he understood instantly, intuitively of what – or whom- Victoria was reminded.

_I will never lay a hand on her in anger_, was so essential a part of his very self that Melbourne needed no reminding. And yet, he was suffused by such sudden blinding white-hot rage that he balled his hands into fists until their trembling stopped.

Victoria, assuming him dismissed, was standing with her back to him, staring dreamily ahead. Certain of his control once more, Melbourne took hold of her shoulder and clamped down hard.

"You will not dismiss me that easily, Madame," he growled.

Victoria's head came up with a start and he thought she was genuinely surprised he had not obeyed her wish he leave. He correctly interpreted the faraway look in her eyes and disregarded the fainter sadness underneath. "I do not want you tonight, William. That is my choice."

"This nonsense has gone far enough. You've had your tantrum, now be a good girl and let us be friends again."

"Do you really imagine you can treat me like a...like a child? And all will be well because I am so besotted with you? That I am not capable of wanting more, of wanting a man who will pursue me, who will –"

His last vestige of control snapped, and Melbourne dragged her forcibly to the big State bed.

"Please don't play games, Madame. It does not become you. Do you imagine I don't know what
you are alluding to, who you are alluding to? If that is your ploy, to make me jealous, it's quite unnecessary. I can't change what passed between us years ago when things were not as clear, but I damn well will put my foot down now. If it's pursuit you want, by God it's pursuit you'll get."

Melbourne had begun angrily but he could not sustain it with any degree of purity, and by the time he finished speaking the piquant little heart-shaped face turned up to his had awakened his innate tenderness once more.

Her eyes were alight with something like interest, and a look of challenge. She pushed back, palms flat against his chest.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, my lord. You speak of jealousy, but what reason do you have to be jealous? Does some man want what you have? Is there a man who would take me, do all those things we do and perhaps even more?"

Victoria meant to taunt, and Melbourne knew it, understood that something else had at least partially displaced her earlier resentment. Yet he also knew that underlying her intent there must be something, some thoughts no matter how ephemeral. Had she imagined what it would be like to lay with another man, to lay under another man? Of course, she had; she was only human, a hot-blooded young woman whom he had awakened to carnal pleasures. He thought of how uniquely well-suited her body was to the act of love, and reason fled when he imagined someone else eliciting those responses. Would she moan, give voice to her pleasure as she did with him? Would she –

To drive the ugly thoughts out of his mind Melbourne squeezed her breasts in his hands, tugging at the nipples until they were proudly erect under the filmy chemise. Victoria pretended indifference and raised her chin defiantly, eyes glinting under her lashes. She made no move to touch him, nor did she step away, seemingly determined to remain unfazed by anything he might do.

"You will respond to me, by God," he muttered. "and I will rid you of whatever thoughts you might have of any man who wants what I have. And I do – have – you."

He had, without preliminaries, driven by some demon of need to possess, bent her over the high fourposter bed and entered her even while he spoke. Somewhere beyond the red haze of lust and anger he was aghast at his own impetuosity, even as he found the rhythm he needed. With one hand he twisted her long hair into a rope, and dropped his head to her shoulder, sucking at the firm flesh so there would be an unmistakable red mark left behind. So tight, so perfectly tight, and any lingering sense of shame or remorse fled when he felt her tighten in spasm, heard her small shuddering gasps.

It might have been over almost as soon as it began but he came to himself and withdrew long enough to position her more carefully. She wrapped her legs tightly around his back, riding him from underneath so he could take her more fully, higher and deeper. Victoria was uncommonly well-proportioned to receive full benefit of every movement. He slowed when she would have hurried him, greedy for release, and he could not resist showing her a teasing sensual smile.

"Patience, my darling…make it last…" She only groaned at his caution and worked herself against him, thrusting her hips. He moved again but slowly, long languorous movements, withdrawing almost completely and then pushing himself fully in until she gasped with the sensation from deep inside.

"I want you. More than any man has ever wanted a woman. More even than you want me. Tell me you understand that." He withdrew almost completely and locked his eyes on hers until he felt certain she looked into his very soul. "And I will pursue you to the very gates of Hell, Victoria. You are my everything. You are my world."
They found their ecstasy simultaneously, in that rare serendipity of perfect union, and when they were spent Melbourne collapsed beside her with a great gusty sigh.

"Shall I get your gown?" he asked finally. Victoria did not answer and when he glanced in her direction she was lying perfectly still, her eyes wide and fixed. Then she sighed in turn, drawing a great ragged breath.

"I am so awful when I go into my moods. How can you bear me?" She said, speaking in a low very serious voice.

"If I can withstand our daughter's storms, I can bear her mother's," Melbourne answered lightly. Then he raised himself on one elbow and looked down at Victoria while he drew the bedcovers over them both.

"You spoke some home truths. I do not deny your accusations."

"Oh, William, no – I did not mean to accuse… I spoke of things which are none of my business. I only repeated things I've heard."

"I've told you about Caro. You understand more now, I think. Nothing is ever easily understood, that happens in a marriage. Not by those looking in from the outside and often, not by those within either. But 'poor Mrs. Norton'? From whence did that sudden compassion arise?" His voice held laughter, and Victoria smiled tentatively in return.

"I think I made it up on the fly," she admitted ruefully. "One of many things I wish I could take back."

"Fair enough," Melbourne said easily, extending his arm in invitation so she could pillow her head on his chest. "There are many things I wish I could take back too. I understand how I hurt you and what a craven coward I was, in refusing to marry you when you first came to me. I live with the guilt of everything that flowed from that one act of cowardice. I can't change by wishing, or everything would be different. I am not the man now I was then. It took you to show me what courage looks like, and make no mistake, I would never let you slip through my fingers again."

Victoria made no answer, only pressed her cheek against the soft mat of dark curling hair on his chest. He felt the wetness of her tears and kissed the top of her head.

"Can I take you away? Venice in springtime? We will work out the details but at least part of the trip I would like for only you and me. And our protection detail of course."

1 The Time In Between

2 Everything Changes
Chapter 15

Melbourne was the first to arrive in the private dining room. Palmerston and Leopold had well-established back-channel communications and if one or the other was bruised enough by Dickens' recent exposes to take a stab at transparency, it was all to the good. He was prone to suspect Leopold's motivation in taking yet another stab at rapprochement – if one can't vanquish a foe, make them a friend – but he acknowledged the man's genuine family feeling, somewhere under his vanity and preening self-regard. Above anything else the wily German was a builder of networks, a spinner of webs, exercising a real talent for covert involvement in the affairs of others.

If nothing more came out of the next two hours, Melbourne would consider it well spent if five such disparate characters could establish some basis for mutual trust and cooperation. They were all devoted to England, and to the monarchy, for Leopold had never entirely extinguished his near-closeness to the throne, and Melbourne did not doubt the real affection he bore his niece. They were family, as Melbourne had grown up to understand the word, a construct of affection and commonalities more than a closed patriarchal system.

Two silent serving men came in, each bearing a heavy tray, and Melbourne stood aside to admire the nimble dexterity of white-gloved hands working in silence. His mind wandered, and a small dreamy smile softened his face.

Melbourne had slept well and dreamlessly the night before, what remained of it when they fell asleep in each other's arms, but Victoria's rest had been broken by small shivers and the little mewling whimpers she made, much as Lily when she'd cried herself to sleep after one of her fierce tantrums. Each time she did Melbourne knew and tightened his embrace, whispering groggy reassurance against her hair until she quieted once more.

No one had a bigger heart than his fierce, occasionally tempestuous little wife, and no one paid more dearly for her occasional outbursts of ill temper than she herself, in a frenzy of remorse. He knew too that he was uniquely privileged, along with Baroness Lehzen, to be the object of such remorse. Victoria customarily maintained emotional equilibrium by convincing herself of the justness of her temper. She had done that very thing with others, most notably her own mother.

Victoria, eager to share everything with him, had insisted he look with her at the boxes of childhood memories she so meticulously archived. Melbourne had read her childhood diaries, where she carefully documenting each day's activities; at her invitation, he had examined the cards
and letters she had written and received, the small gifts pressed upon her over the years of her childhood at Kensington Palace.

Those writings by her own hand, and carefully inscribed by her correspondents, showed him an entirely different view of her childhood than the one she so freely dismissed as a dark, lonely prison devoid of love and warmth.

In fact, the little Princess Alexandrina Victoria wrote gaily of outings, tea parties with Mama and the commonplace doings of a child surrounded by doting relatives and companions. She painstakingly described the dogs in the household, her beloved ponies and the ribbons she and her mother braided in their manes. While of course she did not go freely into the world, the world came to her and if she sometimes recounted disagreements with the Conroy girls who were her playmates and companions, she as often referenced this or that one in terms of such warm attachment it was clear she viewed them as near-sisters, certainly bosom friends.

The notes from her mother, folded handwritten missives which the Duchess would put under her pillow, or beside the napkin on her table, were silly or flattering or informative but always, full of love and the voice of a mother who took great joy in her child. Victoria had not disposed of these, Melbourne surmised, because she had an intrinsic sense of her own place in history and would not willingly rob the world of anything her hand had touched. Yet it puzzled him how her world-view could remain unchallenged, in the face of such evidence to the contrary. He thought he knew.

Victoria, a delightful precocious child he came to know her through her own thoughts, expressed nightly in her journals, pious, sensitive, generous to a fault and capable of great shows of love and compassion. She also had a bottomless need for affection, and to be the sole recipient of such affection. To her, love, even the love of a mother, was a win/lose proposition and any affection directed elsewhere was stolen from her.

John Conroy had been the most unfortunate of choices for her mother's regard. Had he been a kinder, more generous man, had he shown warmth and personal regard, she might have been forced to confront her own need to the be sole object of her mother's attention. Instead, her hatred was reinforced by Conroy's cold ambition and her mother's simpering ambivalence.

Melbourne's love for Victoria was part of the very fiber of his being, it did not exist as a thing apart, nor would he exist without it. He did not have to believe her faultless, a paragon of virtue, to cherish every inch of her, any more than she adored him with any less intensity for seeing him as a man and not a romantic hero. The idea of such saintliness, a soul without blemish, sounded extremely boring, in fact. Together they made a whole, perfectly imperfect, beautifully flawed and desperately right for one another.

Melbourne had long adopted an air of whimsical nonchalance to defuse tension and avoid confrontation. The past night, as Victoria's agitation spiraled out of control, he had been forced to concede that such pretend complacency did them both a disservice. She grew even more outraged as he clung to that old tattered armor of amused detachment, that same manner which had once driven Caro to extremes. He knew himself partially to blame for Victoria's verbal blows, just as he had born some part in driving Caro to her far more destructive excesses. He understood that Victoria would not stray for base motives, no matter another any man might think – Melbourne knew her too well to suppose otherwise - but her hunger for affirmation made her susceptible to the flattery of desire. Worse, she, like Caro, like the unfortunate Mrs. Norton – in fact, like every female of his acquaintance – considered jealousy proof of their own worth and forbearance, equal to disinterest. Greeting her more outrageous suggestions with his typical expression of indulgent amusement was, to Victoria, worse than a slap.
When the knock on their door heralded eight o’clock he had bestirred himself to respond, sending the girl away with his thanks. Then he had returned gladly to the warmth of their sheets and slid back under the heavy comforter. Victoria pushed herself against him once more without fully waking, once more so close that they touched from shoulder to hip. She crossed his abdomen with her arm and threw her knee across his groin, all without opening her eyes, clinging to him like a limpet, and they slept once more.

When the maid returned a second time the clock had struck ten. Melbourne opened the door a crack, this time accepting the burden she bore with averted eyes, the girl spoke up.

"They're asking for her below, sir. What shall I tell them? Is the Queen ill?"

Melbourne realized that of course, the Queen abed at ten o’clock when she would otherwise be at her desk by nine would cause some speculation.

He sat atop the bedcovers, resisting temptation to join her once again, and coaxed her awake with soft words.

"I don’t want to get up," Victoria murmured. "Stay with me instead."

He looked at the sleep-puffy little face, the lids of her eyes swollen and shiny.

"You wept in your sleep." He gently pushed back the strands of hair which clung obstinate to her lips, then offered her a drink, steadying the cup with both hands while she drank greedily.

"We can lock the door and send everyone to Uncle. Let him rule England for a day."

"Does it still haunt you so?" He asked, sure she would understand. Victoria lowered her eyes and shook her head.

"No! I am happy! You make me so happy. Only sometimes a mood overtakes me and then I – then it does, I suppose. Not since – having you is everything I ever dreamed of, and my life is perfect. But when I remember…oh, I don’t want to talk about it." Victoria hung her head, picking at an embroidered flower on the silk duvet cover until the thread unraveled.

"Please, can you forget my temper?" She lifted her chin in that gesture of indomitable courage, the resolution he could do nothing but admire. "I would change nothing that brought us together. Nothing!"

Melbourne thought how improbably tiny she was, for such fierce strength of character. He scooped her up bodily in one swift movement and set her on his lap, so that he could hold her more satisfactorily.

"I would," he answered her quietly. It is such an easy thing to show love, yet so difficult to show anger and pain.

"I once confided a silly youthful vanity, that I thought I would die if Caro would not have me. I was all of twenty-one then, younger than you are now and far more callow and green. Those days and weeks before your marriage, I knew I would surely die. All that stopped me was the prospect of losing you a day, an hour sooner than I had to."

Victoria said nothing, but he heard the slight hitch in her breath, the faintest stiffening which told him she was surprised at his admission.

"I cried for three days when Caro died, holed up in my room. And then I went on with my life.
Lady Branden awaited me in Dublin, I had other...distractions in London, my posting to return to, Augustus, Susan, oh, all sorts of interests which had never waned during my period of mourning.

"When I thought I had lost you, would see you wed to another man – young and handsome and virile, so I supposed – I knew I was done for. Those dreams which haunt me, that is the destiny they show me. The lonely death from which only your courage saved me."

"You were so cold during that time, so proper. I hoped you would say something, give me some sign you wanted me, and I would have called the whole thing off. Walking to the altar, my heart pounded so loudly I thought you might hear. I waited...I hoped...but you did nothing to stop me."

Melbourne's heart burned at her words, even though he had heard them before. That time in between, when they each believed they were lost to the other – he could have changed it with a single word. Yes.

"There is an old legend, a parable really, of Sufi origin. It is repeated in the Talmud, the Jewish book of learning." He fell easily into the rhythm of their old talks, when he would use aphorism and metaphor to make some obscure point plain and Victoria would drink up his words with an expression of avid interest. The Baroness had been a serviceable instructor and the Duchess had retained excellent tutors from Eton and Oxford but none of them excited a fanciful pupil's imagination the way her first Prime Minister did.

"A Sufi master and his pupil were sitting in the corner of an inn in Baghdad and overheard two figures talking. The pupil realized one was the Angel of Death. That grim specter was reciting his list of souls to claim, and our fellow fled in the night to a town named Samarkand, determined to cheat Death. A few days later, the Sufi master met Death once more, this time to answer a demand for his pupil's location. The master would not betray his pupil, so mentioned a town far in the other direction. This surprised the Angel, who said, "How strange! I have an appointment with him in Samarkand."

When he stopped talking Victoria raised her head from his chest staring in puzzlement and Melbourne laughed out loud at himself.

"I am not good at this, am I? I think that old story came to mind because it speaks of a man who tries to hide from the inevitable and runs right into it instead. I have always tried to hide from heartache and cause much pain, to myself and others, instead. I did that when I turned you away. I knew I did not deserve your love. You were so very young, so fresh and new and splendid in every way. And because I was certain I would lose you, I pushed you away instead."

"I was afraid of being hurt, and so I hurt myself. Of course, I wanted to spare you from the inevitable scandal and even disruption so early in your reign. And of course, I had the same image in my mind your family did – your mother and uncle, who love you and want the best for you – of my beautiful, precious girl living happily ever after with her bright, shining, new Prince Charming. We none of us do things from only one motive. But above all, I wanted to spare myself pain. If I had it to do over again I would damn the consequences and my own cowardice and trust that what we both felt was real and lasting."

He stopped and took a deep breath before continuing. "I think – I hope – you have forgiven me, but I would have you forget too if that were possible. Never doubt how desperately I have always loved and wanted you. Until I met you, my Gloriana, I loved no one better than myself. And then there was you."

"Well, well, Lord Melbourne. I am pleased to see you have already taken my advice to heart."
Leopold came in, freshly shaven, his face glowing pink. The brown rodent pelt on his head bore fresh comb marks and Melbourne quickly bowed his head to hide the laughter which threatened to bubble out.

"Indeed, Your Majesty," he answered vaguely, sure the other man would elaborate on his congratulatory tone.

"You and my niece were missed in the breakfast room, yet her maid tells the staff she is quite well. We might expect good news yet, I take it."

"I find the prospect of good news more pleasurable to anticipate than bad," Melbourne responded in a smooth tone.

"Please, let us use Christian names. I am Leopold and you are William, husband of my niece. It is time we learn to be friends, although I draw the line at you addressing me as uncle." This, for Leopold, passed as high good humor. Melbourne briefly debated telling him there would be no increase in the nursery, and why – through neither a lack of means nor opportunity, but an abundance of caution – before deciding discretion was the best policy. Victoria could tell him what she chose, when she chose, or use her Aunt Louise as intermediary, but he would remain silent on the issue.

They were soon joined by Palmerston and Frederick. Those two, never fond of one another, were as unlikely a pair as Melbourne and Leopold. Frederick disliked Henry Temple, holding that man's long affair with Emily against him. Melbourne regarded Temple far more generously, considering only his sister's happiness and disregarding the very substantial differences in style and substance between himself and his brother-in-law.

Frederick, most recently come from the Royal apartments, instantly roused them all to laughter with a description of their wives engaged in menial toil. The women, their gowns protected by long white aprons, were busily pulling out boxes of holiday ornaments and making a thorough mess of the storage room while a finicky steward rang his hands in dismay.

"...I told Adine they would cause far less work for the servants if they just shipped it all to Brocket Hall. This picking and choosing and debating of color schemes and themes will have two households in complete disarray," Fred finished with a flourish, as the other husbands laughed aloud at the image of five well-born ladies covered in dust and mouse droppings.

"Was it so complicated when we were boys?" Melbourne asked his brother. "I don't recall. Was the holiday such a festive affair? I remember Twelfth Night balls...."

Leopold regaled them with a story about the birds' nests left in the boughs of a great evergreen brought indoors without careful inspection, followed by a cautionary tale about the risk of candles lit amidst dry needles in an overly-heated chamber.

He smiled and blinked, drawn back to attention and forced to relinquish the taste of his wife's lips when he kissed her before taking his leave, the feel of her small hands turning his face to hers.

"William Lamb, I adore you with everything I am," she had said in stern tones. "Please don't ever for a moment think that my megrims mean otherwise. And only because I know gentlemen think differently, even you, I will remind you once more that even at my worst I never ever said, or thought, that I could ever want anyone else. I only had some silly notion that it would be a fine, exciting thing to be pursued."

He pretended to embrace her more roughly than was his inclination and she responded
immediately, gyrating her hips and rubbing her breasts against him so his new waistcoat was at risk of disarray. Then he detached himself and smacked her pert derriere, and the sound of her girlish giggle was music to his ears.

"You are happy?" he had said in near-wonder. "You make me very happy, Mrs. Melbourne."

She had raised his hand to her cheek, brushing her lips against the backs of his fingers.

"Do not ever doubt it, Lord M. You make me very happy. Now go…and return early, please."

They spent a long afternoon in the City, going from the club where they dined to view the progress of the new Houses of Parliament. They parted after that, Leopold in one direction bent on some mysterious business of his own, his nephew into the more doubtful environs of Drury Lane and Palmerston in the direction of his own town home.

When Melbourne found her Victoria was gowned in dark green watered silk with a matching band confining her dark hair. She and her sister-in-law greeted their husbands with proper decorum while Leopold's placid wife sat nearby, and little Sophie watched wistfully from a corner.

"You came home early!" Victoria said, sounding both surprised and pleased. Melbourne could not resist teasing her.

"I did, ma'am, but not because you bade me. It was my choice. I find there is no place else I would rather be."
Nearly a week had passed with Victoria's relations and his own in residence and Melbourne was pleasantly surprised at the lack of overt conflict. Ernst was the same gregarious, easy-to-please young man, and if his marriage seemed less than ideal to onlookers – no children, and his philandering undisguised – his wife was devoted and made no complaints. King Leopold was cordial and went out of his way to ingrati ate. If his condescending manner and excessive civility was grating, Melbourne was charitable in his interpretation: The man was certain he knew more about everything than anyone and considered it his duty to share that wisdom generously.

Melbourne was beyond pleased to have Frederick in London; his brother's companionship reminded him forcibly how much his siblings meant to him and he resolved they would not allow so many months to pass between visits. With the advent of railway mania, Derby could be reached in a matter of hours, not days. The first London-to-Birmingham trains took an incredible 5 ½ hours to complete the 112-mile journey and more recent technological improvements had shaved the time to arrival in Derby even further. He resolved to bring Victoria and the children for a visit in spring.

He took Frederick with him to inspect the progress at the new Houses of Parliament. Exterior work had reached the stage of completion where it seemed the business might conclude any day. Melbourne knew better; they were many thousands of pounds and months of work behind schedule and matters such as heating and ventilation, difficulties in draining sewage properly through miles of pipe laid in sandy reclaimed river bottom and a litany of other difficulties required the appearance of royal authority to nudge towards conclusion.

George Von Wettin was no longer one of a hundred nameless assistants; his diligence and understanding of every aspect of construction set him apart and he had risen quickly in positions of increasing responsibility. Once known only for his royal patronage, his reputation had earned him the respect of everyone involved from journeymen to the First Commissioner of Works and he occupied an office adjacent to Charles Barry's own.
When they arrived unannounced, planks were quickly laid over the vast expanse of red mud, necessary to reach the entrance to the Palace of Westminster through icy pellets of near-frozen rain. Lord Melbourne was a familiar enough presence that he was accorded warm welcome by the rugged workmen who labored near the entrance and a plumber's assistant was quickly dispatched to locate Mr. Von Wettin.

He appeared from the bowels of the cavernous interior, rubbing his hands together to warm them before executing a formal Teutonic bow. Melbourne shook hands with the man he had first met as an envoy from the Prince Consort and introduced his brother Frederick Lamb.

Von Wettin in turn introduced the gentleman at his side as the senior partner at Messrs. Ballantine & Allen, a design firm which bore his name.

"It's damnably cold in here, William. Will you come to my office to get warm before I show you what progress we've made?"

Melbourne agreed at once and they walked through what appeared to be acres of marble corridors, the roof high above doing nothing to combat the morbidly damp air.

"Cold as a crypt," Fred said in a pleasant enough tone. Melbourne wondered how the artisans he saw working so diligently on massive carved fixtures could hold their chisels, so cold was it without benefit of a sun overhead to combat the December chill.

The office they were led to was blessedly warm, a small hastily constructed chamber set apart from the main space.

"This will be completely redesigned, as part of the Lords' deliberation chambers, but for now it is serviceable enough."

A long dining table was covered with drawings and the tools of a draughtsman's trade, save for one narrow end kept clear as Von Wettin's own desk. A stove in one end of the narrow rectangular room provided warmth. Draped with several garments laid out to dry, it gave off the odor of baking wool along with burning cool in a poorly ventilated space.

"Sit down on this end and warm yourself, sir," Von Wettin offered, pulling out his own chair nearest the stove.

"These are the drawings approved by your Fine Arts Commission last year, your lordship. Pugin redesigned everything since and so we are sparing no effort in manufacturing the new pieces, but it is a laborious task." The gentleman introduced as James Ballantine addressed Melbourne directly, giving vent to frustration and offended sensibility.

"And an expensive one, no doubt," Melbourne responded mildly.

He recognized the difficulties inherent in any great undertaking, especially one with so many hands on the wheel. The undeniably gifted but famously overwrought Mr. Pugin brought considerable talent but also much strain, both to Mr. Barry and those tasked with overseeing the project. Melbourne took great interest in the outcome but refrained from weighing in on the execution, exerting his influence only to do what he could to prevent interference.

"We had hoped, with strict attention to character and costume, it might be practicable in the windows of the House of Lords to give an abridged pictorial history of Great Britain, wherein might be traced the progress of the national mind, through all its various stages, from the earliest period of which we have authentic record, until the present time. With this view, the History of
Britain would be divided into twelve great cycles. The Kings, Queens and leading personages connected with the principal events in each distinct period are represented...

Ballantine chose from the stacks of illustrations those which depicted the stained-glass windows Melbourne remembered approving the year before. He laid those before the Queen's husband proudly and stood back, hands clasped behind his back.

Melbourne glanced at each one, satisfying himself they were as he remembered, then slid them to Frederick, who likewise gave each elaborately colored drawing close examination.

"And these, sir, are the current designs, *not* approved by Your Lordship's commission. You see the issue? We spent the last half of 1844, and the first four months of this year, creating the windows which were approved and then Mr. Pugin took it upon himself to alter each. We are talking about hundreds of windows, sir, with thousands of soldered parts in each. The production of the glass alone –"

Melbourne accepted a second set of drawings and laid them out, so Fred could see also. He saw no difference between first set and second.

"These specifications are where the difference lies, sir, to an untrained eye." Von Wettin pointed to the neatly printed measurements, each exploded section of window.

"It was, from a manufacturing standpoint, a complete redesign. Structurally we've had to make changes to the framework for each, and that in turn affects the –" Von Wettin was a very serious young man when Melbourne first made his acquaintance, as careful of the proprieties as any bourgeois student determined to make his own way in the world, but he had been a member of the Royal household and very nearly family in their unorthodox early arrangement. He was on familiar enough terms with this royal consort to take liberties.

"I know it's all gibberish to you, so I won't bore you with an explanation Trust me, sir, when I saw that as long as Pugin has Barry's trust and Barry has that of the Commission, such whims will continue to cost us time and money. Worse, there are whispers this whole redesign arose only from his desire to please some noble lord who paid an unofficial visit and offered his artistic opinion."

"Are you suggesting that there needs to be change at the top? I believe Mr. Pugin is most unsteady and difficult to handle."

"I do, sir. I know you won't quote me or lay the blame at my door. The last thing I need at this stage is Pugin having one of his nervous collapses at my feet." Melbourne grinned, and Von Wettin returned in kind, the two of them reaching an understanding.

"I'll see what I can do to assist. Discreetly, of course."

"Of course," Von Wettin responded promptly, his relief evident. "Can I offer you some coffee, or perhaps brandy?"

"Both," Melbourne pulled his coat more tightly about him, chilled despite the roar of the stove. His thick curling hair was damp about his ears and a trickle of rainwater ran down his neck. "The ceiling leaks?"

"It does," Von Wettin agreed, pouring coffee into thick china mugs and setting out a bottle of brandy and glasses.

They drank and talked of inconsequential, Von Wettin pleased to answer the questions Frederick posed.
"Well, shall we do a walk through? So you can report back that work continues apace, even on such a beastly day."

Early December, yet the unusual precipitation of summer continued. Now, however, rain was frequently mixed with ice pellets and even flurries of snow. When a strong wind blew, as it did on this day, it was felt throughout the great stone construction.

Melbourne momentarily considered declining the offered inspection. He thought he must be feeling his age, for his bones ached from the damp and he was unaccountably fatigued. Shaking it off, he rose and looked to his brother.

"Coming? You may see the monument to my final failure," he quipped.

"Nonsense, William. Place your faith in those of us who will see this palace built and it will be a monument for the ages. Now let me show you the murals. Her Majesty will be pleased with these at least."

They walked for the better part of an hour, Melbourne following Von Wettin's lead in clambering up scaffolding to view the intricate carvings and detailed, gilded murals. He allowed his eyes to slide past the larger-than-life depiction of the Spirit of Justice. It was not such an accurate representation of Caroline, he thought, that it would be instantly recognizable to Victoria. He suspected that knowing she would for her lifetime be confronted with the image of her predecessor might dim her appreciation of the artistry.

On the ride back to Buckingham House Fred discussed the project. He had traveled extensively throughout the capitals of Europe and could cite from memory the details of the great public buildings, palaces and cathedrals he had seen there. Despite its current state, he opined that the new Houses of Parliament would compare favorably to the grandest of these.

"You're unusually quiet, William," he had commented at one point. "Are you napping?"

"Just resting my eyes, Fred. Just resting my eyes."

At late afternoon the windows of the palace were all brightly lit and seen through the rain Melbourne thought it was a beacon of welcome. *Home. My home, because she is there.* And warm, he hoped. Windsor, despite well-fed stoves and well-banked fires, never entirely lost the dampness of an ancient stone fortress. Buckingham House, so much newer, was far easier to keep tolerably warm.

A footman relieved them of overcoats and hats and Melbourne stripped off the leather gloves he wore, flexing his fingers to restore circulation. They were shown to the red drawing room, where the Queen sat surrounded by her attendants and the guests who would dine with them that evening.

Uxbridge was an old friend whose family home was near enough Brocket Hall they considered themselves neighbors. He was a recent widower – Melbourne had quite liked his lady, a friend of long acquaintance – and had brought with him two of his daughters. He knew everyone present, of course – it sometimes seemed as though there were no new faces in England, at least none worth knowing – and made the rounds civility demanded, bowing, kissing extended hands. When he finally sank down onto the cushion beside Victoria on a long flowered sofa he heard himself sigh with relief.

The stove in the corner did its job and a wood fire burned merrily in the hearth but neither helped dispel the chill he felt.
"Your coat is damp," Victoria whispered. "Do you want to go change?"

"I will leave you to dress for dinner shortly. Shall I tell you what the state of work is, at the site?"

Everyone within earshot peppered him with questions. While the active construction site was supposedly off-limits, many with standing to do so exercised their prerogative and demanded tours which put an effective halt to any work being done. Still, it all changed so rapidly that few had other than a general idea, from those drawings on public display, what the status was at any point in time.

Melbourne, ably assisted by Fred, described what he'd seen, minimizing the extend of any difficulties and putting a humorous spin on the fiasco with Pugin's late redesign of the stained-glass windows. He answered those questions he could, without giving rise to more speculation about the enormous and ever-increasing cost of the project.

He accepted the glass of sherry offered on a silver tray but held it rather than drinking, until he felt Victoria relieve him of it. She set it on the low table before them and moved imperceptibly closer.

"You will spoil your dress, ma'am," he whispered, bending close to her ear.

Victoria had already changed for dinner, wearing a lovely dark blue gown with long tight sleeves and a square neckline. Her jewels were modest, sapphires set in silver, and her hair was arranged loosely at the back of her head.

"It is too pretty to ruin with my damp coat. I will excuse myself to change for dinner." Melbourne rose and excused himself to the company.

Sometime later he became aware that Victoria was at hand. He could smell the sweet scent of her skin, overlaid with the light floral fragrance she favored.

"I must have dozed off," he murmured, and he heard his own voice come out with a rasping sound.

"Indeed, you must have," Victoria said softly. He felt her soft hand on his forehead, brushing back the hair; her breast pressing against his arm as she leaned over him. "And without taking those damp clothes off. What was Baines thinking to allow it?"

She called for his manservant, and he heard the fellow answer promptly from the direction of his dressing room.

"I will rise now, and dress for dinner. I suppose I will shave as well." He began to rise from the leather couch, but his head pounded so he lay back against the cushioned back.

"You don't have to," Victoria said immediately.

"I cannot appear to our guests grizzled," Melbourne quipped, watching her face for a smile.

"I meant, you do not have to join us for dinner. I will have something sent up." He saw her frown, her big blue eyes narrowed. "You don't look well, William. Do you feel quite all right?"

"I am fine, ma'am, merely worn out from trekking through that enormous building on your behalf." He meant it jokingly but saw her frown deepen. She laid her palm flat on his forehead and held it in place.

"You feel very warm," she told him.
“Well, I was damnably cold before, so I suppose it is a relief to feel warm once more. Leave me if you must or keep me company while I shave and dress.” He did stand then, disregarding the surge of pain which clamped down like a vice around his head.

She opted to stay, taking a seat on the small straight chair beside the armoire. A small stove in the corner of the dressing room was cold, and she instantly demanded that a footman be sent for to light it.

Melbourne stripped off his shirt and washed quickly, determined to give no sign of the cold which instantly assailed him. He allowed his valet to shave him, a task he normally completed himself, and dressed quickly, grateful for the thickness of the waistcoat Baines chose. When his toilette was complete he looked to his wife. She came to his side at once, laying a hand on his arm so he would pause and look at her.

"Are you sure you feel quite the thing, Lord M?"

They were two dozen at dinner, a small party, and Victoria, normally considerate of those at table who did not partake as lightly as she, laid her fork down promptly at the end of each course so the footmen could bring in the next. Protocol dictated that when the Queen was finished all diners would likewise be finished, whether or not they were satisfied and so the meal was concluded expeditiously.

They had no musical entertainment planned. A notable poetess had been invited to read her verses aloud instead, and although Melbourne doubted anyone present could understand what she was going on about they all applauded politely at the end of each piece. Victoria was attentive to her guests – she had outgrown most of her early stiffness in company, with Melbourne's silent support – but he noted she led the conversation most efficiently, more like an audience than an informal evening entertainment, devoting a precise amount of time to each guest in turn before moving on to the next. He wondered briefly what she was about but was only grateful she relieved him of the need to be sociable. It was good, he thought, to be here, in this warm well-lit room, beside a wife who was now an adept, accomplished hostess well able to lead the assembly. Even better, the sense that he could rely on her to see to things on occasion. He was so very, very tired and longed for the pillow.

She did not question him on his unusual reticence, only holding his hand as they walked back to their private apartment. That too was good, for Melbourne did not feel up to talking. He concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other and moved with great deliberation.

"Shall I stay?” Victoria asked in his dressing room. Their intimacy at day's end was one of his favorite times, and they often chatted from one room to the other while her maid and his valet performed their services. Melbourne cleared his throat and forced the semblance of a smile, then shook his head.

Garbed in dressing gown and night shirt, Melbourne sank down onto the bed in his own rarely-used bedchamber, listening for the cessation of sound from Victoria's dressing room. He would go to her when Skerrett was gone, so that he could be spared even the need to be courteous to the well-trained dresser. It seemed to take unaccountably long, so long that he laid back against the pillows without removing the spread, intending only to rest until he could join Victoria in the privacy of her chamber.

"William?” He lifted his head from the pillow – *it felt so very heavy; how odd!* – at the sound of his name on her lips.

"I'm coming,” he answered, and realized as soon as he spoke that he sounded far harsher than he
intended. When he stood the room seemed to spin and he reached out instinctively for support. Victoria speedily came to his side and put her arm around his waist. He wanted to smile at the absurdity – she was so tiny, she could never bear his weight – but somehow, she did, encouraging him to lean on her.

The big State bed had held generations of sovereigns in repose. The stout carved bedposts and ornate headboard were nearly as imposing as the throne itself. New hangings had been made when Victoria took occupancy, rich heavily-embroidered brocade to match the canopy as vast as the ceiling of a small room. Many thick down pillows were banked at the head, and a goose down comforter covered the whole. They both enjoyed sleeping in a cool room under heavy warm bedcovers and the heat they produced between them, but tonight Melbourne felt himself shiver uncontrollably.

Victoria turned back the bedclothes and arranged his pillows, and Melbourne wanted to smile at the maternal domesticity of her small homely gestures. As though she's a housewife; as though she cares for a brood of youngsters without an army of servants. Instead, he merely got into bed gratefully and waited for her to join him.

"You are ill, William. I will send for the physician." Her sweet dulcet tones were stern, brooking no refusal, but he disputed her intention nonetheless.

"I am fine, Victoria. A chill only. Holding my wife will be the best medicine. That, and a good night's sleep by your side." He met her eyes squarely and held out his arm. Victoria did not look convinced, but she did take her place at his side. She felt cold, he thought, when her skin met his. Or is mine excessively hot? A fever, perhaps, in which case she must not be exposed.

The suggestion that he would sleep alone so that she did not contract whatever ailed him was dismissed out of hand.

"Don't be silly, William. I am not allowing you to sleep alone. Now hush and try to rest, else I will send for the doctor before morning."

Melbourne might have argued further but his teeth were chattering so that it was difficult to speak. He settled for turning onto his side, away from her. Immediately she molded herself against him, so that every inch of her pressed into him, and her little arm held him tightly.

So good. Melbourne knew he should not permit it, but her presence felt so very good and he lacked the fortitude to resist. It really was so very good to have a wife at such a time, even if that wife was a young woman and the Queen. Especially if that wife were this young woman and the Queen. Ague if you're lucky, he thought, influenza if you're not, you damned fool.
Chapter 17

Victoria woke long before her customary eight o'clock hour. Normally slow to surrender the languor of sleep, she awoke all at once and for a moment wondered why. Beside her, William still slept and she shifted away slightly so she could raise herself on one elbow without disturbing him. He was beautiful in repose and she traced the fine lines at the corners of his eyes, then kissed her fingertip and pressed it against the gossamer-thin skin. Even that minimal contact confirmed what she must have sensed; his flesh gave off a startling dry heat.

She murmured his name and gently laid a hand on his shoulder to coax him awake. Always attuned to her, even in sleep, his eyes opened and his lips formed a small tender smile. Victoria dragged in a deep breath, relieved that nothing much was amiss, and was jostled by the sudden cough which wracked his frame.

"You are sick!" she exclaimed and despite his feeble protest clambered over him to reach the floor. No matter the hour the Queen was never entirely alone. She knew she would find a page standing beside their outer door and a sentry at the end of the hall. Victoria had no wish to send rumors flying throughout below stairs, so she only required that her own maid be found and brought to her. When the girl arrived only a few minutes later she was neat as a pin despite the early hour. It took considerably longer for the royal physician on duty to be summoned from his grace-and-favor apartment.

Despite the discretion she insisted upon, nothing much could remain entirely unknown amongst those who formed the Household. Victoria herself was served by a half-dozen senior attendants, including Mistress of the Robes, women of the bedchamber and ordinary ladies-in-waiting, as well as another bevy of younger, more decorative girls who served no real purpose except to reward their families for some service. The most senior of these companions arrived on the heels of the Duchess of Kent.

"You've sent for the physician, Drina? Are you all right? The children-?" The Duchess of Kent had clearly omitted her usual elaborate toilette. Her pale hair was bound back in a severe style which did not flatter a thin, aging face and her complexion was sallow without cosmetic assistance.
"We are fine, Mama. William is – is slightly ill. Nothing much, and no need for concern."

Dr. James Clarke lacked the natural gravitas one expected of a man of learning and accomplishment. He was a career courtier with no private practice and no extraordinary reputation in the medical community, so had appointed himself physician-in-chief, a title which existed nowhere but in his own mind. Victoria didn't particularly like him, found his unctuous servility distasteful and was unable to forget his involvement in the Flora Hastings scandal.

"Your Majesty," he began ponderously, with the clear expectation of kissing hands. Victoria kept her hands folded at her waist and her eyes fixed forward.

"Well? What is wrong with my husband, Dr. Clarke?" She felt her mother's cold fingers brush her arm, a warning to subdue her impatience.

"His Lordship suffers fever, with chills and much shivering. He complains of headache and malaise." Victoria clucked angrily.

"Yes, Dr. Clarke, I concur those are the symptoms I observed. *What is wrong with him?*" Victoria tutted impatiently.

"I believe it to be an ague, madam. We will advise him to remain in bed and take in as many fluids as he's able. I offered to bleed him, out of an abundance of caution, but His Lordship declined."

"Ague?" Lady Portman repeated, her dry tone redolent of skepticism. "But that is merely another way of saying fever and chills, doctor."

"Er…yes, madam is correct, ma'am. could be anything from malaria to typhus to cholera. We will not know until the disease progresses."

Victoria felt her heart lurch painfully in her chest and had to swallow past the constriction in her throat.

"Malaria? We have seen no one returned from the east. And typhus – why, I nearly died of typhus when I was fifteen, didn't I, mama?"

"You were very ill, Drina. For several days. You recovered but you were young and strong –" The Duchess of Kent, so habitually on edge for fear of incurring Victoria's wrath, invariably managed to say just the wrong thing.

"My husband is strong, Mama, and he is not old," she snapped.

Lady Portman intervened once more.

"Ma'am, you and the Duchess are getting ahead of yourselves. Let's wait until Henry arrives. It could also be influenza – there have been cases reported in the City already."

Lady Portman glanced toward Clarke for confirmation, and that gentleman, grateful to anyone who diverted the Queen's wrath, agreed at once. "Or even a heavy cold. He was chilled and quite damp when he returned from the City yesterday."

"You are right of course, Emma. Henry will see William and then advise us on the best course of treatment. We will wait for him together." Victoria moved around the physician, annoyed that he did not step aside for her to pass and laid her hand on the knob.

"No!" Dr. Clarke said in a tone which caused all three women to stare.
"Excuse me?" Victoria lifted a brow and stared in disbelief at the impertinence.

"The risk of contagion, ma'am. You cannot expose yourself."

"Oh, pooh! I am never ill – I have only been sick that one time in my life. I am perfectly healthy and never even take cold." She began to turn the knob.

"Ma'am, forgive me, but it is Lord Melbourne's wish that you do not attend him. He was most emphatic."

Nonplussed, Victoria was about to turn the knob once more when Lady Portman laid a hand on her arm. Victoria's quick temper rose, offended by the lèse majesté, even more so because they thought to keep her from her husband.

"Ma'am, perhaps it is best to wait until we see what Dr. Holland says. If William is feeling poorly it will do him no good to worry about you. And he would not forgive himself if you were to become ill from attending him."

Victoria was about to shake off the woman's restraining hand but instead dismissed Clarke and stared at his departing back until he was out of the apartment. Then she turned that same imperious glare on her lady-in-waiting.

"I think you forget your place, Lady Portman."

"I'll go in and see how William does, ma'am," Lady Portman said in a smooth voice which held steel under the surface. "He will not send me away."

Victoria felt a quick surge of jealousy. Emma Portman had been Lord M's friend and confidant for many years before Victoria herself met him – for more years than she had been alive – and was on easy and intimate terms.

"You think he would see you and not me?" Victoria demanded, knowing she sounded like a sullen spiteful child, which is exactly how she felt.

"Precisely, ma'am," Lady Portman responded quickly, wearing that insufferable smile which always hinted to Victoria the other woman knew things about her own husband she did not. "He is not nearly so careful of me."

She slipped inside while the Queen fumed and stayed only a few minutes. Victoria searched the woman's face and felt reassured at the absence of concern.

"You need not fear for him, ma'am. A few days only and he will be up and about good as new." If her clipped, matter-of-fact delivery was meant to reassure, it fell short of its goal.

"Poor Lord M!" Victoria exclaimed. "Thank you, Emma. I will see him now."

Lady Portman's thin lips tightened into a small smile which was both understanding and resolute.

"No, ma'am, that would not be wise. He does not want you to attend him when he is ill."

"But I want to."

Lady Portman's glance flickered to her queen's mother and saw no help there.

"Ma'am, consider what William wants, please. He is a man and does not want you to see him in distress, ill, bedbound."
"That's ridiculous, Emma. I think you say that, so you can be the one who comforts him." Lady Portman's glance went from her petulant mistress to the pained expression worn by her mother.

"Ma'am," she said in a much lower tone. "He was most emphatic you are not to attend him. There are many ways to show love and this is one."

"Ridiculous, Emma," Victoria repeated forcefully. "He cannot lie in bed alone, sick, with no one to care for him."

Lady Portman's stern expression softened into a smile of genuine amusement.

"Ma'am, he lies in the one place on earth he would never find himself unattended. The devoted Baines, his gentlemen-in-waiting – rest assured he is well-cared-for. Doctors Holland and Cameron have been sent for and will arrive shortly. Now, please, get dressed and go about your day like a good girl. As William wishes."

**

Melbourne could not recall a time in recent memory he'd felt quite so out-of-sorts. His bones ached as if from a severe beating and it felt as though an iron band compressed his forehead. The latter made it difficult to concentrate for long and he wanted only to sleep. He had refused all offers of assistance moving from the bedchamber he shared with Victoria to his own seldom-used retreat on the far side of their adjacent dressing rooms. Baines and a young man he dimly recognized hovered about him and he waved them off with a feeble gesture he saw in his own mind's eye as that of a cantankerous grandfather. That mental image reinforced his determination he would not receive the Queen in his current state. She must not be exposed to any contagion was the sentiment he gave voice to and it was entirely true, but he knew in his heart a substantial component of that determination arose from vanity, pure and simple. They could deny the truth of his age when he was vigorously upright but felled by sudden illness the fact could not be so readily concealed.

Clarke he merely tolerated, wanting only to be left alone. The very notion of allowing the man to place leeches, the only remedy he knew, was repulsive and felt vaguely threatening. When Henry Holland appeared bedside sometime later, setting down a black leather case filled with clinking metal weapons of torture, Melbourne groaned and swore under his breath. Holland was accompanied by his former protégé, Daniel Cameron.

Melbourne was forced to inhale and exhale repeatedly while Holland pressed a long conical listening device to his skin. His pulse checked, each beat counted against the movement of the second hand on his physician's pocket watch. He answered a series of impertinent, distasteful questions on the condition of bladder and bowels, all the while keeping a curious eye on Dr. Cameron, who did not more than lean against a wooden wardrobe with arms folded across his chest. Like his brother, the man seemed to have never met a barber he liked, and he utilized the same head-tossing gesture to clear the forelock from his eyes that put Melbourne in mind of a half-wild stallion.

Holland meticulously wrapped each instrument in velvet and replaced it in his traveling bag, then rolled down his sleeves and put his black coat on once more. He stepped back, just out of earshot, and spoke to his associate, clearly offering the opportunity to perform his own physical examination.

"I'm a surgeon, so unless you have a part you'd like removed, I'll pass. Sir. I only came because George and Stephen insisted. So here I am," Cameron finished with a flourishing exaggerated bow. Melbourne did not take offense, recalling clearly the young man's abrasiveness even when he'd lived in Albert's household.
"Thank you, no, I'll pass. Good to see you again nonetheless. We hear much of your success," Melbourne said with as much civility as he could muster. Damnation, but it hurt to speak! His chest felt as though it were on fire, each breath sending such discomfort through his lungs that he exerted conscious effort not to wince. "You are already considered in a league with Liston, and now we learn the great man himself has taken you into his practice."

Robert Liston was famed for his surgical prowess, and those of his more spectacular cases transcended the medical journals to make their way into the public sphere. Liston lectured as far away as America and was as well-known for his caustic manner as the near-incredible speed with which he operated. Cameron was a good professional match for the older man, his own speed enhanced by an utter lack of caution when he was certain in his own mind of the need to cut. Where Liston had removed a 45-pound scrotal tumor in under 4 minutes Cameron had without hesitation, on a dining room table, pierced the chest wall of the Queen of England, thereby relieving the pressure of a pneumothorax which was rapidly threatening her very life.

Cameron had, along with his elder brother, played a vital role in saving the Queen's life when a madman had fired on her one hot August day. It was this fellow with his fearlessness and skilled surgeon's hands who had stopped the Queen's hemorrhage and removed their infant daughter before she could drown in the womb in her mother's blood.

"As long as I'm here..." he pushed himself up off the cabinet on which he leaned and came forward, sitting bedside without invitation.

He had a surgeon's hands, long delicate fingers on an otherwise athletic frame, and had, despite the constant sneering scowl, a preternaturally beautiful face framed by hair as long as his brother's, his own a pale shimmering gold hue unlike Billy's chestnut mane.

Daniel Cameron used only two fingers to palpitate various points on Melbourne's chest and employed no more than his own natural hearing to assess what he heard. He laid the back of his hand on Melbourne's forehead in a near-perfect parody of Victoria's earlier, tender gesture. Then he shook that waterfall of hair back once more and smiled crookedly.

"You'll survive, m'lord. If they haven't told you already, you have influenza. I hear no lung inflammation so far – do you, sir?" Cameron belatedly engaged his colleague. Holland, having trained the brash younger man, took no offense, merely offering agreement.

"Don't let'em quack you. Would do no harm to give you a day's worth of laudanum. It will make you comfortable and let you sleep, but it'll also suppress the worst of the cough so don't overdo it. Coughing happens for a reason no matter what people suppose, and if secretions are allowed to pool in your lungs it'll cause a lung infection."

Melbourne thanked them both, detesting the unfamiliar quavering sound of his own voice, and then tugged at Cameron's coat sleeve.

"One more thing..." he gasped. When he'd made his request – demand, more to the point – Cameron smirked.

"Quite right. No visitors, especially not the Queen. No man wants a female fussing about when he has no use for her."

Melbourne slept off and on throughout the first day and night he was ill, resorting to small sips of laudanum when he awoke, forced to swallow what seemed to be copious quantities of lemon water and tea in exchange for miniscule doses of sedative. He dimly recognized one or the other of the gentlemen attendants who peopled his official household staff, their presence augmented by a
changing cast of footmen he did not remember. Whatever he might have said if asked, he was glad enough to not be left alone and even appreciative of the all-male retinue. Cameron had been right about that – he wanted neither Victoria herself nor any female maidservants caring for him. Had Emily arrived he might have tolerated his sister but only to spare her needless worry; no other woman save his long-dead mother would have been welcome in his sick room.

That room was kept warm and illuminated by trimmed beeswax candles, the air always pleasantly scented. He resisted attempts to aid him in performing the most intimate of tasks but otherwise felt too weak to do anything but accept gratefully when bedcovers were freshened, and he was helped into clean nightclothes still bearing the fresh odor of the laundry line and a hot iron. Pillows were fluffed and turned and there was always the comfort of knowing someone was at hand, undemanding, unobtrusive but providing the best of care.

He was attended to instantly when he opened his eyes the following day. His head still hurt but it seemed as though the worst of the pain had abated. His throat was raw, and his chest hurt with a dull ache that went straight through to his spine, and when he thought about it he found the same ache echoed in his limbs. Overall, something in that brief assessment told him that perhaps the worst was over.

No sooner had he come fully conscious than the young man seated in a chair beside his bed came to him Ilchester's youngest, he guessed, from the high cheekbones and full mouth. The fellow looked fresh as a daisy, his linen immaculate, neckcloth tied in a looping bow. Whether he had shaved that morning or ever was indeterminate for his complexion was poreless and as exquisitely fine-grained as that of a debutante.

"How do you feel this morning, Lord M?" The boy – Stephen Fox, Melbourne was nearly certain – asked cheerfully. Then Melbourne knew what he had only guessed, this was one of his own formally appointed Gentlemen-in-Waiting. There was a whole company of these, originally put into place by Albert over the months following his marriage to Victoria. Melbourne was so averse to any of the pomp which normally attended a royal marriage that he had neglected to name any of his own attendants. This was no longer a matter of party affiliation – Peel had seen to that, after the unfortunate contretemps involving Victoria's women – and yet Melbourne knew that to eliminate such a significant number of sinecures would engender more hostility than it was worth. *Far more difficult to take something away once people became accustomed, than to refrain from giving it at all.* All – or at least most, to be perfectly honest – were filled by wellborn young men, younger sons of the aristocracy, but they had been chosen for another commonality. They were each of Albert's persuasion, unable or unwilling to conform to the demands of their families to at least ostensibly live according to the social mores.

Some were given to the more flamboyant excesses of any young male when he first comes into his own as an adult. Yet none, over time – and Melbourne had kept an eagle eye on such things, for the sake of Victoria's reputation - none were objectionable for any reason other than their attachment to others of their sex and unwillingness to marry some poor unsuspecting or otherwise unmARRIAGEABLE girl. They had become so accustomed to the acceptance, the freedom and even the respectability, of service in the royal household that after Albert's death they simply didn't leave.

Melbourne had no objection. The half-dozen young men were ornamental, exquisitely well-mannered and sticklers for the etiquette required of a courtier, and no more was required for a Gentleman-in-Waiting. If their number had increased over time, with the appearance of a footman here, an equerry there, no one protested too vehemently. At Buckingham House they occupied a dormitory in the private wing Albert had made over for his companions, and at Windsor an unused many-room apartment was their home.
"Better," he croaked in response. "Good morning. Have you been here all night?"

"No, I arrived shortly after seven. It is nearly noon now. You slept well, despite the coughing."

"The Queen…?" Melbourne attempted to reach for the water on his bedside table, but his attendant gently pushed his arm back and picked up the cup. He supported Melbourne's head on his arm and held the cup with his other hand. Melbourne knew he should find the help humiliating but the cool water felt too good going down, cooling his sore throat, and he acknowledged he would be too shaky to manage alone.

"We are keeping Her Majesty informed. She is not pleased to be kept away but she trusts us to care for you."

Melbourne lifted a hand and ran it through his air, feeling damp matted locks sticking to his face. His nightshirt likewise felt unpleasantly damp.

"Your fever seems to have broken and which is why you perspired profusely. That is a sign you will soon be yourself again although you will be quite weak for a time. As soon as you wish, I will help you bathe and change." Melbourne knew he should protest, even feel unmanned at the prospect, but it was all so very much effort.

"Thank you," he said instead. "And please, thank your companions for me. I am not accustomed to being tended to."

Once more the young man laughed merrily, and Melbourne saw his eyes were kind, even affectionate. "It is our pleasure, Lord M. This is our home and because of you we were not put out after the prince died and you married the Queen."

In fact, it had been quite the opposite. The arrangement they had during the first years of Victoria's marriage had been admirably well-suited to all of them. Albert had been free to pursue his own inclinations, living openly – or openly within the privacy of the marriage which protected them both – as a man who loved other men, while loving Victoria as a sister. Melbourne had been welcomed into their faux marriage, with Albert's partner George Von Wettin a fourth in the cozy domesticity of their very unorthodox family. He had grown fond of the boy cousin Victoria called husband and was entirely content to have all the benefits of marriage without the public scrutiny and ceremonial duties of the Coburg priceling.

Such scrutiny lessened considerably when a Prince of Wales arrived eleven months after the marriage, and the birth of the Princess Royale two years later, as traumatic as the events which surrounded it, only cemented the popularity of the royal couple. Melbourne's place in the household, after his ministry ended abruptly, was unremarkable; his was the voice of wisdom and experience, his role to mentor the young German Prince who was unstinting in his very public affectionate regard for Lord Melbourne. If there were whispers about the Queen's husband, they never rose to the level of censure. At some things no one wished to look closely. Nearly every great family had a young man who performed his marital duties punctiliously and whatever he might do elsewhere, so long as it did not interfere with those duties or cause public scandal, it was tolerated with little more than a wink and a nudge.

Melbourne was put entirely at ease by the young man's banter as he assisted Baines at bathing and shaving. His hand trembled too badly with weakness and the effects of fever to hold a blade, so he merely turned his face on command and allowed his valet to wield the straight razor. A sponge bath was the most his careful minders would permit, but after his hair was washed and he accepted a fresh gown Melbourne decided any embarrassment was well worth the effect of feeling clean and renewed.
His long sleep left him unwilling to take to his bed once more and so he sat in an armchair instead. Several more of his gentlemen-in-waiting brought in a late luncheon for them all to share. He partook of late luncheon, accepting a small piece of boiled chicken and a cup of broth with a rich golden glow and pungent aroma and flavor. *Turmeric* and *ginger*. The one called Roland explained that he had bespoke a pot of chicken stock and completed the seasoning and simmering himself, adding such exotic spices as much for their restorative properties as their flavor.

Melbourne requested brandy, at the least an aperitif, and was roundly rebuked. Tea was offered instead.

"By God, I hate the stuff. It's an abomination how anyone can tolerate something that might be found in any gutter after the rains."

Coffee was requested and after much debate, allowed to be unobjectionable in small quantities. Melbourne dispatched Baines for his imported coffee making apparatus, a grinder and Jamaican beans, and proceeded to dictate the procedure for brewing one perfect cup of rich black coffee.

They passed the cup from one hand to another, inhaling the steam which rose and daring one another to take a taste. Melbourne laughed so hard he ended in a choking fit, when the bravest of these, a very effeminate, small-boned man wearing a neckcloth and velvet jacket in the fashion of the late Lord Byron, nearly spit out the sip he ingested.

A cribbage board was produced, and they vied to remind Melbourne of the rules of play. Much merriment could be heard in the corridor as Melbourne, reclined comfortably enough in a large winged armchair, his feet elevated on an ottoman, made as many errors in play as he could reasonably muster, only for the distraction of hearing his companions correct one another as they made the rules increasingly complex.

He passed such an enjoyable afternoon in the camaraderie and warmth of his male companions he almost entirely forgot to be ill. When the fever rose again at dusk, as fevers often do, he was dismayed to think he had suffered a setback on the road to speedy recovery. No amount of reassurance from Dr. Holland at his return visit could dissuade Melbourne from the frustration he felt at his own infirmity.

"The Queen can visit you briefly when you've been without fever for twenty-four hours, sir. Until then we cannot guarantee her safety. There are many theories of contagion, but all modern men of medicine concur that person-to-person contact is indisputably the primary cause."

Victoria would, Melbourne knew, be frantic with worry and her ever-present fear of any circumstance which caused, no matter how reasonably or briefly, their separation.

"I will explain it to her again, sir. Better yet, send along a note, however brief. Something in your hand that will reassure her."

While Dr. Holland measured out yet another dose of laudanum and added another noxious substance to the array of bottles on Melbourne's night table. *Cinchona febrifuge*, Holland explained, was a remedy much used in the Indian subcontinent by Army doctors to treat ague. It was paired with *liquor arsenicalis*, of which Cameron had provided a small quantity.

"This stuff is effective?" Melbourne asked, eying the murky fluids with suspicion. Holland's good honest face displayed his doubt.

"I wouldn't give it to you if it were dangerous, William. As to its effectiveness…we'll see. Time is the best cure for what ails you but according to our doctors in the east, it has the effect of reducing
transmission of malarial complaints, when sufferers are dosed promptly."

That alone was compelling enough that Melbourne drank it down without hesitation, chasing it with a full glass of water liberally flavored with the juice of lemons and limes.

He had a pair of hands to assist him in removing his dressing gown and getting back into bed. The sheets felt so good, freshly changed, and he laid his head back on down pillows with a sense of deep gratitude, despite the ache in his bones. *How very fortunate I am!* was the last thought he remembered before falling into deep sleep. *How awful it must be to battle illness – and advancing age – alone.*

*When he awakened once more it was full night and the room was nearly dark. Only a single candle burned on the bureau opposite his bed. Beside it, one of the heavily perfumed powders burned in a shallow bowl, sending its narrow plume of smoke rising. Incense, they had called it, and he had recalled Albert's apartments redolent of the same rich, exotic scent. Before he could move to change position, his eyes went to the chair where his companions had sat keeping watch. It was vacant, and he felt disappointment entirely disproportionate to the circumstance – one could not expect another to abide by night, no matter their dedication.*

*Any thought of abandonment fled when he felt the tingling warmth of a body close beside him. Without giving any sign he was wake – and in truth he felt so weak, as helpless as a babe, he was not sure what other sign he might give – he forgot to breath, anticipating what might come next.*

*He knew that Victoria had come to him, despite all prohibitions, and knew he should instantly send her away. Her lips pressed against his shoulder and he felt her hand go around his back to embrace him. Her mere presence brought him so much comfort, made him so happy, that he could not force himself to speak the words which would banish her from his sickroom. Instead he only lay perfectly still, keeping his back to her in the vague hope she would abandon her effort and depart of her own accord. Instead she pressed her lips against his back, his neck, his upper arm and then delicately reached under his nightshirt to stroke him. Her touch was feather light and her fingertips moved across his skin as though memorizing each inch, and it felt indescribably soothing and good. He understood she was giving comfort for comfort's sake and he was content to receive it. Without erotic intent, with no thought of seduction in mind, simple touch was both headily indulgent and liberating and he wondered that he had never known that before. He allowed himself to float within a blissful cloud of pure sensation.*

*Her small hand glided over his ribcage, her fingers found his navel and the muscles of his abdomen. She tweaked and toyed with the hairs growing there and then moved over his flank. She used the very tips of her fingers to follow the curve of his hip and the rounding of his buttocks, then traveled with exquisite slowness over his outer thigh.*

*Melbourne had given himself over entirely to the moment and his illness and the laudanum in his system made it nearly certain his libido would remain dormant. He felt no embarrassment; her touch demanded no response and he felt only love in its purest form in this gift from her. But when her hand returned from its exploration of his long leg muscle and traveled upward once more he was fully erect. In the lovely limbo of Morpheus, it felt a thing apart, making no demands. She gently rubbed his testicles and then found his shaft, and her touch was oddly innocent. Her fingers made light fluttering circles as though exploring the difference in texture between that silky soft skin on the head, different down below.*

*When her hand moved he almost groaned with disappointment and then surrendered once more. Her breath was sweet when she exhaled against him, her breasts both soft and firm against his back. It was all he could do now to not roll over onto his back and clasp her to him, but he would*
not expose her, at least, to his cough and whatever noxious contagion might be expelled. He felt her draw back slightly, as though she were afraid to disturb his rest further, and although the headache had returned with full wakefulness he thought he would not readily sleep again without her. Still, it was best she went and quickly— he would not risk sickening her, no matter how great his desire for her presence.

He almost gasped aloud when her hand returned, the hand of his wife, the precious virgin bride he had made his own, and gripped him with full familiarity. She knew exactly what he liked and needed, how he wanted to be held, what firmness was most satisfactory and when to speed the movement of her wrist to greatest advantage.

She did not tarry, but brought him to climax almost immediately, an extension of the comfort she had brought. Melbourne found it peculiarly exciting sensation to be entirely dependent and passive and his heart overflowed with love when she tended to him, wiping him clean with great tenderness. Then he did turn over to face her and felt himself devoured by the blazing intensity of the love in her eyes. He would not give her his mouth, he retained that much cautionary discretion, but he cupped her cheek in his hand.

"You are my everything," she murmured, turning her face into his palm and kissing it. The words he spoke to her so often, this time it was she making the declaration. His throat still painful and his voice raspy, he could only muster a single word.

"Everything."

"I only pretended to be sleeping." She had not outgrown a babyish lisp and her words tended to tumble out helter-skelter.

Ernst was already present. It was common knowledge he stayed out until dawn and his uncomplaining wife seemed to expect nothing else. Yet here he was, seemingly none the worse for
wear. Victoria took in the scene, Albert's hard-drinking, womanizing elder brother holding her little daughter. Elizabeth had not yet shed the ribbons Lehzen carefully arranged to hold back her thick curls, her stockings were in place and the ruffles on her little gown intact.

Liam, Prince William of Wales, would always hold a special place in his mother's heart. Victoria knew it was in part because he was an easy child, careful and courteous, but also because he was the very image of William Lamb as depicted in that Reynolds painting, soft light brown hair, exquisite features and wide eyes which held an earnest sweetness.

Paradoxically he manifested the best traits of both the men who called him son, William's easy-going nature and Albert's reserve, William's unforced, winsome appeal and Albert's careful formality. His love of all things mechanical and fascination with trains and gears had to be a learned interest, of course, for genetics played no part in those characteristics he shared with Albert. Victoria remembered how patiently her late husband had helped pudgy toddler hands assemble notched blocks into an elaborate construction, connect the sections of track on a miniature train set, study the insides of a mantle clock they had disassembled.

Unlike her brother, Elizabeth had no firsthand memories of the man they called their first father but to both children, Albert would always be Father and William Lamb their beloved Papa. Albert's early death had been heartbreaking for all who loved him, she and William included, and these children were his legacy. If not for him, they would not have been born.

"Uncle, tell her she did not see der Heilige Nikolaus. Tell her that if she had, Krampusse would have known and she would not get anything in her stocking." Liam's reasonableness excited further argument from his determined sister.

"I did so!" Lily protested shrilly. She crossed her arms across her chest and raised her chin in such a determined expression that Victoria had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. It was so clear who her daughter was imitating.

If Victoria had a partiality for her son, Princess Elizabeth was her father's darling. All men claim to want sons, her mother had once told her, but they all lose their hearts to a daughter.

The table before them held an assortment of items which might have been considered odd to any Englishman without German relations. One of each of the children's high buttoned shoes stood beside small piles of trinkets and treats.

"What is all this?" Victoria asked to distract them. Both children began talking at once, and Victoria glanced at Ernst, who grinned back at her.

"Cousin, surely Tante told you. Knecht Ruprecht carries eine Rute to beat naughty children. But of course, there are no naughty children here so only good things were left."

Victoria vividly recalled Albert explaining the traditions of his German home, to his companions and to William. He revered December the 6th nearly as much as Christmas itself, both sacred because they were part of his boyhood. She remembered his taking Liam's tiny stockings and stretching them wide to hold sugarplums and a silver rattle, and sneaking into the chamber where she slept with William to find and fill their shoes with sugarplums and sweetmeats. Even the dogs were not overlooked, with new red balls and strips of braided tugging rope left in their bowls.

"When Albert and I were boys he would not come out from under the covers, not once all night. He feared the good Nicholas's evil companions far more then he cared for treats and coins. Me, I always must see for myself. I would sneak out of bed and hold vigil. But the next morning! Ah, no one was more excited than Albert. He always believed in magic, where I wanted to dispel illusion."
“Did you ever see them, Uncle Ernst?” Liam asked, wide-eyed. Victoria could readily imagine her sweet, shy boy taking the part of Albert while his sister, fearless, would play the role Ernst once did.

“I thought I did once. At least, I saw a dark dirty fellow with a ragged beard and filthy clothing sneaking out in the night. There was an outcry and the next morning, there was one less housemaid to be found.”

“He stole her?” Liam's eyes were round with shock.

“Was she a bad girl?” Lily asked in a whisper, her own eyes wide at the implication.

“Oh, she was indeed,” Ernst laughed. "I am sure she was very, very bad for such a man to steal her away."

“Ernst!” Victoria admonished. "Lily, your uncle tells silly stories. And there are no bad girls here for Krampus to steal, so we don't need to concern ourselves."

Victoria watched her children choose which sugared candies to eat at once and which to save until later. Liam paused, his hand over a selection, and looked up at his mother with sweet, kind eyes.

"I will save these for Papa," he said, setting aside a prize orange pillaged from the succession houses.

Lily, not to be outdone, offered Victoria two pieces of toffee already half-melted from the little hand which clutched them.

"Your mother may not visit your papa's sick room because the doctors do not want her to get sick too," Ernst answered for her, and Victoria was grateful. She could not speak for the lump in her throat and tears threatening to spill over. "Because she is the Queen. I will go see your papa and bring him your gifts."

Ernst hugged Lily and set her on her feet, then picked up the orange and tossed it from hand to hand. Victoria showed her brother-in-law a watery smile.

When he sauntered into the drawing room some time later, Ernst was as ebullient as usual. Victoria's eyes immediately went to his face, searching. He leaned down and kissed her cheek.

"That is from your husband, cousin. He sends his love and his wishes that both his girls contain their impatience. He also charged me with a very important mission. We are to assemble the decorations you wish to use at Brocket Hall and dispatch a team of servants to begin making ready. Lord Melbourne wants Christmas at his home to be memorable for you."

What Victoria did not know, and Ernst of course did not tell her, was the second commission he had been given. He held in his pocket a very detailed handwritten instruction he was to have executed as soon as possible. If they worked promptly it would be completed by Christmas according to Melbourne's wishes.
"These are called Kugels." Dazzling colored balls lay in their straw beds like fantastical eggs.

Leopold had joined Ernst in the throne room, the only room large enough to hold the many tables needed to lay out a dazzling array of ornaments. Some had been accumulated over hundreds of years, elaborate jewel-encrusted gold candelabra and great free-standing urns meant to hold ferns and evergreen boughs. Others had been added by Albert during the three years he had superintended the transformation of Windsor Castle every December, and still more arrived in a shipment accompanying Ernst and Sophie.

"What are Kugels, Uncle Leopold?" Victoria admired the way light was refracted and reflected in the sapphire orb he held high.

"Kugels are blown glass reflection balls. They are hung from the ceiling, in windows, and in gardens and resembled earlier witch balls that were used to ward off evil spirits." Victoria thought she had never seen anything so pretty and resolved to send them all, imagining the red, blue and green glass spheres hanging in every window of Brocket Hall.

Liam lifted the figure of a small silver deer from its resting place in another chest. These and other animal shapes caught the children's fancy and Lily instantly began miming movement, causing the little deer to prance along the edge of the table.

The children were entranced by the shimmering treasures all around her, but Victoria was most warmed by imagining her husband's home, now hers as well, bringing their families together for the holidays. It seemed to her as though that would set the final seal of acceptance on two people, two families, becoming one.

Victoria knew her husband was on the mend, was sick with no more than common influenza, and understood that the panic she battled was completely disproportionate to the circumstance. And yet in some fundamental way it was a harbinger of what was to come. Whenever that dark premonition took possession of her thoughts, it made her head swirl with a sickeningly vertiginous sensation. Only Lord M could reassure her, drive back the stark terror of that eventuality, tether her to earth at his side. Without him Victoria knew with absolute certainty she would cease to be; gravity would not contain her. She would splinter into a million pieces and float off into oblivion. Without him, there was no her.

She realized they were all staring at her, watching and waiting for some response. Sunbeams washed the marble floor with light and set dust motes to dancing. She was surrounded by their blended family and their beautiful children and she would not spoil it by brooding senselessly.

"It's nearly time for your audience, ma'am," Lady Portman reminded. Victoria took that opportunity to give decisive instructions and name Emily her proxy, and then she swept out, her retinue in tow,
to meet with the Prime Minister.

He had brought with him the Secretary of War at her request. They went through the dispatches with speed and efficiency, Victoria insisting on saving those from the Army until last. These she read through carefully, making small cryptic marks in the margins at various places while the two men stood in silence. She had not invited them to sit.

The Duke of Wellington timed his arrival precisely and Victoria greeted the old soldier with warmth she did not yet feel towards the newer chief ministers.

"Please, Duke, be seated," she said graciously, returning to her own side of the desk as though it were a bastion to be defended.

Victoria knew how she wanted the next few minutes to go. She knew she must use the lightest touch, must trade on her youth and gender and the tendency of men who did not know her very well to assume her naivete.

"What would William do?" was uppermost in her mind, his insouciance, the air of distracted nonchalance which convinced others he took nothing seriously and only half-understood the weighty matters of government. One of the anecdotes she cherished most, repeated to her early on in hopes of lessening his influence on a very young sovereign, was Lord M blowing a feather about to amuse himself during some long speech. It was that moment when the scales dropped from her eyes and she knew without a doubt her affection was not that of a daughter for her father or pupil for a much-admired teacher. The image of William blowing that feather across the table before an assembly of angry men ignited the spark of passionate, romantic love into a full-blown flame.

The questions Victoria posed to Sir George Grey, Secretary of War, were superficially simple and her bright, attentive smile and wide blue eyes did nothing to warn him otherwise. He answered in kind, oversimplifying complex matters and easily falling into the polite fictions intended to reassure. She tilted her head to one side beguilingly, encouraging him.

Gough was in position to move at once and there would be no opposition. Governor General Hardinge counseled patience only to permit an orderly transfer of power and for the necessary civil servants to prepare to answer the invitation of the lawful rulers in the Punjab. The elite of the Sikh army had no desire to fight and the irregular cavalry or ghodachadas were small in number. These ragtag forces would be easily overcome and sent back to their fields.

This much Victoria knew to be true, but she quickly assessed that Russell and Grey had no such intelligence. If those gentlemen assumed the sudden sparkle in her eyes to arise from relief at their optimistic view, it was because they did not know the formidable young queen well.

Victoria allowed them to speak. Melbourne said men are invariably fond of the sound of their own voices, and if one lets them talk long enough they will frequently talk themselves into a deep enough hole that one need only extend a hand to help them extricate themselves.

Still speaking in girlish tones, Victoria summarized what they would have her believe and then furrowed her brows with exaggerated puzzlement. You say they have no artillery? Jind Kaur cannot field an army? Our people have been invited in? To her satisfaction she saw they still took nothing she said very seriously, in fact looked slightly bored at having to go over the same things again.

Victoria had memorized every detail, troop strength and movements on both sides of the Sutlej, the number and nationality of the mercenaries who had trained infantry and artillery units to wage European-style warfare. She knew the exact number of men at the large Sikh entrenchment at
Ferozeshah, information that even Gough did not have. Rather than betray her exhaustive knowledge she made a show of reading haltingly from a document in front of her, making certain to look to Wellington at regular intervals as though to seek reassurance. His creased face was stern, but Victoria imagined he might smile if he were not so disciplined.

It was all a bluff, of course. Victoria knew she might have far more detailed information than her own ministers, but she could do nothing to affect the war they would wage or its all-but-certain outcome. They were rattled nonetheless, and perilously close to losing face. She did not want that; wanted them to have no sense they had been outflanked.

"I do hope there will be no heavy losses. It would be a grievous thing to learn of bloodshed over Christmas half a world away, especially if such might have been prevented. What if we wait to reconcile these opposing reports? If our boys will face artillery, if there is a well-trained mounted cavalry unit… oh, I shudder to think what the press would report."

"Battle losses are inevitable, ma'am," Wellington spoke up after a long period of silence. "But you are right in that preventable losses are unforgivable, and those incurred due to faulty intelligence or overconfidence in the field especially grievous."

Victoria knew, and Wellington knew because he had access to the same firsthand information she did, that victory was all but certain and if Grey and Russell minimized the difficulty they would face, it was the sort of glossing over she had come to expect. What mattered was they did not know that in the end Gough and General Harry Smith would find their opposition evaporate. Lal and Tej Singh would inexplicably withdraw under some pretense and in return be handed their country back, under British rule. She had shaken their confidence and raised the specter of a very humiliating public debacle, something no new government with a slim majority could risk.

Satisfied she had done as much as she could to delay the inevitable and had earned their approval in the process – for she had most properly put her dependence on her ministers to make the final decision and assured them of her support whatever course they determined to pursue – Victoria neatly turned to a subject not on their agenda.

"There is one more minor matter…." and she passed over the formal letter of intent her chief secretary had drafted, for the Prime Minister's signature to join that of the others already in place, those of her cousins George of Cambridge and George of Cumberland and Grand Duke Ernst of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. Ernst had been the easiest; the Georges had driven harder bargains, but Victoria thought she had acquitted herself well in the negotiation.

How did I do, Lord M? As soon as she was alone in her office Victoria hugged herself, wanting nothing more than to run find William and feel his arms around her, hear his calm gruff voice commending her, asking astute questions and grinning at her answers.

Victoria had gone to him four nights in a row, always after midnight, always when assured that he was asleep. One or another of his gentlemen-in-waiting was always in attendance, and whomever it was would only meet her eyes with conspiratorial understanding and discreetly remove to the small sitting room.

At her last night visit he had been fully awake, seated in the chair beside his bed, and unattended. Relief flooded her, releasing the tension she had been holding since he fell ill, and she ran to him.

He had held her off laughing and begged her to be patient another day, until the physicians concurred he posted no risk of contagion, and Victoria had burst into tears.

Sweetheart…my precious girl…my love…he whispered endearments, beautiful words in the voice
she had so longed to hear and it soothed her.

He had lifted her chin and dabbed at her tears with his sleeve, but he would not kiss her.

"I will not have you fall ill. Be patient a little longer, sweetheart." Victoria wanted nothing less than to leave the comfort of his arms, but she recognized resolution under his soft, caressing tone. Reluctantly she had released him.

Infuriatingly, Dr. Holland did not arrive until after they had dined. Victoria had toyed with the food on her plate, sitting at table only long enough to allow the rest of her household to eat their fill. When he was finally announced by the steward no one was surprised when she laid down her fork and rose.

She retained little of what he said, beyond his assurance that William's fever was gone, and his breathing was much improved. *Influenza*, without a doubt, and it was spreading quickly in all quarters of the city. No one could know where such things arose but several of his colleagues speculated that the number of laborers living in primitive sanitary conditions in temporary encampments around the construction site were passing it among themselves. If the winter was as wet as the previous summer had been, it would surprise no one if cholera outbreaks began as well.

When he uttered his final opinion, that although Lord Melbourne must allow his strength to return gradually, there was no further fear of contagion, Victoria picked up her skirts and fled, nearly running down the corridor.

He sat at ease, resplendent in a dark green velvet dressing gown she had never seen. Several bottles had been opened and a party was clearly underway, Victoria observed crossly. A mood of good humor and camaraderie was evident, and Victoria noted with some ire that at least two of the men who had once been Albert's companions were making no attempt to hide their admiration of her devastatingly handsome, debonair husband.

Someone continued a story he had been telling, some account of a scandal hushed up and the secret life of a well-known peer. Melbourne contributed *on dits* from an earlier generation, censored for her sake but still salacious enough to pique her curiosity under other circumstances. Victoria was content enough so long as she could sit at his side and listen to his easy laughter, but she was not sorry when the talk began to wane.

When the door finally closed she leaned against it and took a long deep breath to steady herself, suddenly exhausted, the marathon of separation now run. Victoria wanted nothing more than to resume the cozy normalcy of their life. Melbourne did not move from the doorway. He came closer and leaned in, resting the flat of his hands above her head on the door so she was unable to move, confined by the weight of his body against hers.

She looked up at him and felt her insides grow warm at his nearness. His thick head of curls, still mostly dark with a light frosting of silver. His beautiful lean face, strong nose, voluptuous lips. A triangle of dark hair showed at the open neck of his white shirt and she raised a hand, touching her fingertips to the hollow of his throat. Then she pinched a fold of the lush green velvet and smiled.

"Very fine, Lord M. Did one of your admirers choose this for you?" Dark silk piping trimmed the edge of the lapels, pleasant to touch.

Instead of answering, Melbourne bent and found her throat with his mouth, pressing kisses all along her neck to her jawline. His tongue flicked out at intervals, teasing.
"Silly girl, to miss me so after only a few days. Do you need me? I need you." His words were indistinct, muzzled, and the warmth of his breath sent delicious shivers down her spine. "May I show you how very much I need you?"
"I for one am all in favor. Melbourne is a gentleman, liberal and straightforward with no meanness. He is incapable of selfish trickery and intrigue. And if we all know him to be habitually careless and insouciant, a man who loves ease and hates contests squabbles, that should be reason enough to allay any suspicion of his motives." Charles Greville, Clerk to the Privy Council and noted diarist, was known for his sharp wit and sharper pen. He did not lightly bestow praise and had been one of Melbourne's most vocal critics as a weak minister.

"I will tell you all now that I never saw a man behave more honorably than Melbourne did when the King got it into his head to dismiss the government. William confided to him, of all people, the difficulty of his situation and I had it on good authority Melbourne told him 'he had better send for the Duke of Wellington and depend upon it he would get him out of it.' Melbourne offered to be the bearer of his Majesty's letter asking me to form a government. When some question was asked about the messenger, Melbourne said, 'No messenger will go so quick as I shall; you had better give it to me.' I tell you, no man could have acted more like a gentleman and a man of honour than Melbourne did." When the Duke of Wellington spoke, all crosstalk ceased. He retained an air of command and his gravelly voice need not be raised to subdue opposition.

"I for one would be heartily surprised if he were the one pushing for this. Why, to be named Regent at his stage of life is the farthest thing on earth from a life of ease." John Copley, 1st Baron Lyndhurst, had been a thorn in Melbourne's side as Leader of the Opposition. A contemporary of the Lamb brothers, he was in his third term as Lord Chancellor. "But I have no objection to approving Her Majesty's regency document. She is a mother, looking out for the best interests of her children, and whatever else you say, Melbourne loves those children as a father. Had the Prince lived, this would all be moot."

"It's damn near a moot point now. Little Vicky will outlive him by many decades –"

"It's what she wants, and he can refuse her nothing. What harm is there?"

"Plenty, as I see it. If the worst should happen – and with revolutionaries and madmen taking potshots right and left, it's far from an impossibility – and then he falls, we'd be subject to years' worth of turmoil and unrest. It might be the end of the monarchy and beginning of republican rule, to have an orphan king in short pants and no strong Regent behind him." Improbably it was Lord John Russell, new in his first term as Prime Minister, who voiced the objection.
"I say we give him the guardianship and let the matter of regency rest in the hands of the council, when and if a need arises. I say nothing against Melbourne – never was a man so universally liked, who made a career of politics – but I know him well enough to know he has no stomach for a fight." John Ponsonby, 4th Earl of Bessborough held no Cabinet position but was regarded as a valued colleague in Government, due largely to his ability to keep his head in a crisis. No one bothered to cite his family ties to Melbourne, and through him to the Crown – all Whigs were related in some degree, and it behooved no one to mention his younger sister Caroline Lamb.

"Guardian to a young child is as good as Regent, and well you know it. Why'd you suppose the King hung on as long as he did?"

"Because of the prospect of that German woman and her Irish knave having the power. Even without a regency, it's what would have happened. A young child will always be putty to be shaped and molded by whomever has physical custody, and regency be damned."

"Enough. Give her what she wants and be done with it. None of us might ever live to see the day when a Regency is necessary, or it might happen tomorrow. In the end, it matters little enough to the affairs of government who signs the proclamations. The Queen – or the little King-to-be - need only smile and wave and not be so damned expensive they bankrupt the country. Power rests with the party in power. We can afford to consider the wishes of the Queen and the domestic happiness of the prince and princess. We are agreed, I think?" This time when he spoke, Wellington's words carried an unmistakable note of finality.

Some of them Tories, some Whigs; some Conservatives and others Liberal. They knew how to wield power and use their influence where it mattered, not in fine speeches made on the floor of the House but in discussions such as this where deals were made. Duncannon and John Russell were the youngest, and Russell was still so new to the ultimate seat of power that he depended on the goodwill of the others.

Only Wellington knew what had passed at the Queen's audience and only he could appreciate the mastery with which their young sovereign had played her First Lord. He suspected he knew the source of that very accurate intelligence, and the delicate balancing act which ensued. He had never considered her unintelligent but had underestimated her capacity for subtlety. She had no cards to play and had bluffed Russell to a standstill without ever dropping her wide-eyed, innocent demeanor. The Punjab would fall – that was a foregone conclusion – but either Russell would insist on playing a waiting game and allow it to implode, then move in to mop up the mess, or he would disregard the intelligence his Queen had shared and allow his generals to blunder in with a great, and avoidable, loss of life. Either way he was in her debt because he couldn't unhear what she'd read from that Irishman's dispatches.

Melbourne had received his summons, politely delivered by Greville's secretary, to wait on the Council at his earliest convenience. They were pleased enough, he surmised, to not have to make the trip to Windsor with a wintry mix turning the roads near-impassible.

He was still shaky on his feet and moved with deliberation, content to permit his system time to recover from illness without taxing his strength. He would not make the trip to Whitehall until after the Christmas season. It did not come easily or comfortably to exercise the privilege of position, but it was a compunction easily overcome when it meant he conduct what business required his attention within the confines of Buckingham House. Seven hundred-odd rooms were enough to accommodate all manner of meetings, and when he considered the matter at length he decided there was really no need for a Minister such as he, with neither portfolio nor department to oversee, to make the trek to the center of town.
When Greville requested his presence in the block of rooms devoted to council business, Melbourne surmised the reason. Victoria had only just told him that morning she had obtained her English cousins’ agreement to naming him sole Regent and had presented it to the Prime Minister as a fait accompli. Melbourne had winced at the fierce determination in her pretty heart-shaped face and forbore telling her such a thing was meaningless without the support of her government, both the party in power and the opposition. She had only showed him a mysterious smug smile and assured him of their support.

He had not found the resolution to dispute her assumption. He had awakened in the most blissfully content of states, the natural feeling of well-being which can accompany convalescence from illness. More than that, the lassitude which followed a night of extraordinary lovemaking. Victoria was entirely naked beside him and he allowed his gaze to range from the small, well-shaped breasts with their nipples just large enough to make a mouthful, to her flat stomach and the tempting triangle of dark hair between trim muscled thighs.

Melbourne had delighted in her bold playfulness the evening before. She had arched her neck, melting against him when he’d suckled there, and a large reddish mark was just visible under her waterfall of hair. Then she had squirmed out of his grasp, giggling, and teased in retreat, backing away just enough so he had to pursue her. When she allowed herself to be caught his senses were inflamed, far beyond the point of wondering whether his physical stamina would be sufficient to the occasion.

Victoria was not content, even then, to submit. Instead she played the role of seductress, acting as she imagined a harlot might, and he conceded her imagination far exceeded more mundane reality. No harlot eager to dispense with preliminaries would delay gratification as she had, touching herself, moving with such sensual grace he could only watch in wonder. Still fully gowned and jeweled, she had eased each breast out of her corset and stroked her nipples until they were proudly erect.

Melbourne had been content to watch her, his own grin fading as his arousal took control of his senses. She had taken hold of the sash which held his dressing gown closed and led him into her boudoir, sat him on the side of the bed and dropped to her knees to pull off his slippers. For a moment she had looked endearingly confused, until he turned her around and unfastened her dress and untied her stays.

He thought he had never seen a vision as erotic as Victoria in her chemise and stockings. Enough dark hair escaped from careful pinning to lend a look of wanton dishabillement, and when her breath quickened he thought she was ready for him. Instead she pushed him back against the pillows and straddled his legs, so he could not move, then sat back on her heels and dropped to her knees to pull of his slippers. For a moment she had looked endearingly confused, until he turned her around and unfastened her dress and untied her stays.

When she took him into her mouth he almost – almost – moved her away, so eager was he to be inside her. Instead he found what remained of his patience, wanting to allow her full freedom to do what she would. She brought him unerringly to the very brink, using her tongue to lave the sensitive underside, working her magic in ways he had never contemplated. Not from her. He was ready, more than ready, painfully, frantically ready. Through the red haze of pure lust Melbourne met her eyes and saw the question there and it sent a flood of pure, almost tortuously intense love
through him, cooling his ardor just enough to pull her down and give her his mouth. He kissed her deeply, pouring into her his devotion, receiving from her the adoration she gave so willingly. When he released her, she raised her hips and slowly lowered herself onto him until he filled her completely, so deeply and tightly encased they were one.

"You are my everything, Victoria," he had said afterward, when he held her in his arms, cradling her small body against his own. "I loved you before I knew you. I love you with all I am. My precious, precious girl."

"You are my world," she had whispered back, and her voice was throbbing with emotion. He knew she had found the final release of the stress she had carried during his illness and their brief, forced separation. He understood she believed she needed him, and while it was a treasure beyond price, the knowledge carried with it some guilt, some concern. She should not need him so absolutely, for he would not be with her forever. Melbourne pushed that thought away, knowing Victoria was stronger than she knew, and their love would strengthen, not weaken her.

"You are mine. All mine." She was so resolute, and her voice contained so much simple pride he could only wonder at the turn of fate which had brought him all he had ever dreamed, and so much more.

They laid in one another's arms, in the dark, and talked far into the night.

"I was so frightened, Lord M. Without you…tell me you'll never become tired of me." That sentiment struck him as so patently absurd it was all Melbourne could do to refrain from laughing aloud. He knew she spoke her truth, from her heart, giving voice to her deepest insecurities. To Melbourne the weight of the decades which separated them, of his own past, the women he had loved before, brothers and friends who had marched inexorably into the grave, seemed like a near-insurmountable barrier to deserving the heart of this splendid child. That she could love a world-weary man who had thought himself spent until the moment he looked into her eyes and saw himself reflected there, the self he longed to be, was a source of unending wonder, gratitude so deep it nearly drove him to his knees. That she feared losing him seemed so incredible as to defy belief. And yet…she did.

"Victoria, I could never tire of you if I lived a thousand years. You must not fear something so impossible."

"But I am afraid. I am…not beautiful, and not sophisticated and not as intelligent as—as other women. And I love you so much it terrifies me sometimes, knowing how little I deserve a man like you. If I were not Queen—if we had not met as we did—you would never have looked twice at me."

Melbourne tightened his embrace, so that he felt her heart beating behind her breast in time with his own.

"But you see, I am afraid too," he admitted. "That's a part of loving, I think. When we love enough to feel the fear and step beyond it, to risk our own peace of mind, to surrender our own need for self-protection and give it into the hands of another...perhaps that's the deepest proof of love." Melbourne shook his head then, chuckling softly. "See what you do to me? I despise poetry, yet I sound like a romanticist."

"You are beautiful, Victoria. I am looking at you now, all of you, and you are my beautiful, my precious girl. You are brave and true and your honesty shines like a beacon. You do not dissemble, nor play the tiresome games of those women you call sophisticated. That is all artistry, and I vastly prefer authenticity."
They finally slept, and Melbourne's rest brought no ominous landscapes, no visit to bleak colorless realms. Morning came and with it, Victoria's offhand announcement. He would be sole Regent and guardian of their children. So had she willed it, and so would it be.

A persistent knocking pulled Melbourne out of his reverie. He bestirred himself to answer the summons, deeming it a sufficient wait for the council to have hashed out their differences and reach consensus. The regency document, as he had told Victoria many times, was the most simple and straightforward of contingency planning, no different than the Secession Order she had executed shortly after the birth of a healthy son. She had resisted all these years, and he himself maintained his pragmatism only by forcing himself to ignore the very reason a regency might be necessary.

The Council would agree, or not. He cared little, so long as Victoria did not make it a protracted struggle with himself at the center. If he had been forced to give an opinion he might have concurred with those who considered him unsuitable – too old, too common, not a blood relative of the royal children, or so they supposed. It was a pretty fiction and Melbourne knew there were few at any level of aristocracy who did not suspect the truth. He had no ambition and was the last man alive to contemplate a world without her in it, and only Victoria's refusal to be deterred from naming any regent if it was not her own husband persuaded him to consent.

Wellington looked irate and made a great show of examining the hands on his pocket watch. Greville was hunched over his journal, but pulled the book of Council minutes back into place when Melbourne came in. The others rose and shook hands and exchanged commonplace greetings. The rest was anticlimactic. Baron Lyndhurst as Chancellor showed him the formal writ in the ornate ancient style of a proclamation, bearing the signatures of two Princes of the Blood and those members of the Privy Council acting as witnesses.

"Written precisely as Her Majesty dictated it. All it needs is your signature here, Melbourne." Charles Greville stood aside, keeping his finger on the page, ostensibly to point to the last page, where his signature was required. From long habit formed over many years in government, Melbourne quickly scanned the legal prose on the Order itself. A single word stood out from all the rest, and although he knew it was used in the legal sense only, under the old Common Law which assigned that status to any man legally and lawfully wed to the mother of a minor child, seeing it still stirred him to the very depths of his being. Father.
Regency Act 1845

Chapter 18

An Act to make provision for a Regency in the event of the Sovereign being on His Accession under the age of eighteen years, and in the event of the incapacity of the Sovereign through illness, and for the performance of certain of the royal functions in the same and on behalf of the Sovereign in certain other events; to repeal the Lords Justices Act 1837; and for purposes connected with the matters aforesaid.

Whereas Your Majesty, by Your Majesty's Royal Message to both Houses of Parliament, has been pleased to recommend that provision should be made for a Regency in certain events:

And whereas Your Majesty in the same Message has both Houses of Parliament in mind of the difficulties which arise in relation to the exercise of the Royal Authority at the time of the Accession of His late Majesty King George and recommended that Parliament should consider whether it be not expedient to make provision for the purposes of securing the exercise of the Royal Authority as well as the event of the incapacity of the Sovereign, or in the event of the majority of the Sovereign on His Accession and in certain other circumstances:

1. The Regency while the Sovereign is under eighteen.

   (1) If the Sovereign is, on His Accession, under the age of eighteen years, then, until His attains that age, the royal functions shall be performed in the same and on behalf of the Sovereign by a Regent.

   (2) For the purposes of any enactment requiring any oath or declaration to be taken, made, or subscribed, by the Sovereign or on or after His Accession, the date on which the Sovereign attains the age of eighteen years shall be deemed to be the date of His Accession.

   (3) A declaration under this section shall be made by the Privy Council and communicated to the Government of His Majesty's Dominions.

   (4) If a Regency becomes necessary under this Act, the Regent shall be the husband or wife of the Sovereign, William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne, who acts in the capacity of natural father to the Sovereign.

   (5) During a Regency, unless Parliament otherwise determines, the Sovereign is under the age of eighteen years, and unmarried, Lord Melbourne shall have the presidunce of His person.
Chapter 20

Emily Temple, Viscountess Palmerston, née The Honourable Emily Lamb

My carriage bumps along the turnpike, normally as smooth a road as one could find. After a rainy summer and autumn and several hard freezes the ruts have hardened to iron and it feels as though my teeth will rattle out of my head in stages long before we reach Hatfield. For something to do – other than rap on the window when I think John Coachman should moderate his speed – I think of where I am bound, and where it all began.

I need not go over old history *ad nauseum*. My brother's story is too well-known to need rehashing. Nearly broken by the weight of the scandal, his career all but destroyed in the wake of Caroline's outrageous behavior, he rose from the ashes like a quiet, unassuming Phoenix to take the highest political office in the land. And the Prime Minister's seat was not the pinnacle of his ascent – oh, no, not our William. Somehow, if not kicking and screaming then certainly dragging his feet, he found himself consort to a queen. I should say, as any shrewd sister whose ambitions all came to fruition through the men in her life, that I saw how it would be from the beginning. I did not.

William is the most charming and least ambitious of men. His charm is not the oily sort which puts off anyone with a modicum of discernment. My brother inspires liking in men, love in women, without taking himself or anything else seriously. I think if he's reached such heights without ever *trying* at anything, what could he have done with just a small measure of effort? Perhaps not much more than he's already done, for it will be his flesh and blood who reigns over what my dear Palmerston tells me will be an empire that spans the globe.
Back then, in 1837, I played little part in our new queen's early days. Cowper died shortly after our King and so of course I had to observe the deepest mourning, hearing about the Princess Alexandrina – who called herself Queen Victoria – from my brother and Henry. I marked the change in William almost at once, a new lightness in his step, reinvigorated zeal for the job he had been ready to give up. When I was finally presented and could examine her closely, with the natural interest of one female in another, I was not impressed. She was a plain little thing, a mere dab of a girl, with no claim to beauty beyond a pair of wide dark blue eyes, clear creamy skin and excellent posture. She had great dignity but no presence, and although slim enough then I thought she would run to fat later in life like so many of those German princesses we've imported over the years. If I was not impressed by her as a woman although I thought she would do very well as a queen.

She covered her mouth with her hand when she laughed, and she laughed often when my brother was at her side. She made no secret of her partiality to her handsome Prime Minister and when he offered to serve as her Private Secretary as well, they spent six or more hours a day together. Yet there were never ugly rumors, as surprising as that sounds to those who know how often my brother's name was linked to the most titillating scuttlebutt. William was praised in all quarters for the fatherly interest he took in her education, his patience and objectivity. His harshest ideological foes, men like the fiery Brougham, conceded that he took no advantage.

Of course, I saw the way she looked at him. She was infatuated, and why not? My brother had that effect on women, all women regardless of rank or station. His own tastes had always run to females in our Mother's mold, bold, sophisticated and witty, beautiful of course but beyond mere beauty, something which rendered them singular and striking. He had been drawn to Caro for her vivid personality and that wild, fey quality which made him christen her Arial, his fairy queen. And after her, so many I've lost count – worldly, accomplished Emily Eden, Lady Stanhope, that horrible Norton woman who, I will give credit where due, is an accomplished authoress and nearly as astute a political hostess as I am. William was always much addicted to gallantry, and had endless liaisons with women, most of whom continued to be his friends long after they had ceased to be his mistresses, much to the credit of all parties. So, no, I did not grasp what was unfolding or where it would lead.

What did he see in her? That was the riddle. William Lamb is the least ambitious man to ever hold public office. He abhors notoriety, avoids controversy like the plague, and mocks pomp and pretension. What does any sixty-year-old commoner, a career politician sprung from the lowest rung of the peerage, already twice burned by the flames of public scandal, do to find the peace he craves? If he's my brother, he beds and then weds the most famous young woman in the world. This should be where I piously opine that they love each other, and nothing else matters. There is no fool like an old fool, and that is what I considered William, and what I would be if I was such a ninny as to believe that. Of course, they love each other, as the world now knows, but love alone counts for little and rarely lasts. It's what they each bring to the union which makes it strong and despite my initial doubt I now believe that never were two people so perfectly suited. Our little Vicky does not sparkle, does not light up a room, but she has a grounded, centered quality that steadies my brother. That quiet dignity of hers, which does not show to advantage in social interaction, soothes William's troubled spirit in a way his scintillating mistresses never did. She openly adores him, and what man can resist that? She hangs on his least word, writes down his sayings and looks to him for strength and reassurance, without ever losing herself in the process. And William? He has finally found the peace and tranquility which eluded him so long. Like one of his hothouse flowers, he has bloomed beyond all imagining, a December rose. He is happy at last.

They will celebrate their third anniversary this year, only a day before Christmas, and before that
my nephew, Prince William Albert Augustus of Wales, will celebrate his fifth birthday. Victoria wants to spend the holiday season at our humble Brocket Hall. Sir Matthew Lamb, my grandfather, spent a small fortune on the grand ballroom and a dining room which seats 80, fully intending that his home would entertain royalty. Little did he know how modest that ambition was.

Brocket Hall was where our Queen married for the second time, and for all I know where she conceived our next king two years before. Brocket Hall is our Queen's favored home, above Windsor and Buckingham and that gilded monstrosity at Brighton. Brocket Hall is not a cottage by any stretch of the imagination but how it will accommodate all those who have been invited to pass Christmas there is anyone's guess. It falls to me to make the arrangements, while appearing to only suggest.

William is firm about that. He tells me I am too overbearing, and Palmerston concurs. Her Most Sovereign Majesty is Lady Melbourne and her doting husband wants her to believe she is Lady of the Manor. The poor little ninny wouldn't know how to begin, what provisions must be laid in, how many additional serving wenches must be brought from Panshanger to augment the year-round retainers at the Hall, where to procure the number of footmen needed, or even where to stable the horses which will carry the mounted Household Cavalry.

I tactfully deferred to her in asking what color scheme she preferred for each of the public rooms – making sure that the only two options I offered were unobjectionable – and kept her busy with the menus my own French chef devised, so her choices were narrowly limited without appearing so. Little Vicky is as easily managed as a child – far more easily managed than her own little tyrant Elizabeth – so long as one allows her to think she is in charge.

Now she can go back to the business of queening and I can get down to work, making Christmas at Brocket Hall.

---

Caroline Norton, author  (7 political pamphlets, 11 published poetry collections, 5 novels, 2 plays)

I dread the month of December most of all. It is a season meant for happy families, or those able to maintain the pretense as I never was. I have half a mind to set out for the continent, flee these shores where I am a figure of scorn. I will not be pitied, will not play the part they cast me in. The
boys will be with George's family of course, and Grantley has no use for me. I dare not invite myself and jeopardize the new goodwill between George and me. I have had the boys for a full six months of the past twelve, and if I do not see them at Christmastime I still have little of which to complain. Georgy, dear Georgy, expects me to spend the time with her family, but I would rather be far away from this island and spare myself hearing about Melbourne's domestic felicity. It is as though no one in society can talk of anything else in my hearing.

My childhood friend Sophia Armstrong will marry the second son of Admiral George Cadogan, third Earl of Cadogan at St George’s, Hanover Square. We grew up together at Hampton Court Palace and yet she dared not invite me to attend. It stung but I understood why she could not have me and sent Sophia a gilt malachite dish from myself and an inkstand from Lord Melbourne as wedding gifts. He had known and grown fond of Sophia through me, and in the moment, it seemed a reasonable gesture to make on his behalf. I do not wish to think dear Sophia betrayed me, but whether she or her prim pious family or that harpy Emily Temple, I was mocked to scorn for what they called my presumption. They do not understand. I have an existence separate from “the world” and shall be remembered and dreamed of, when the gossiping women of my day have ceased to talk and are a handful of dust.

Would I change it all if I could? Would I change any part of it? That is the question I am most often asked in alternately hopeful and despairing tones by my sisters and those few friends like Harriet Sutherland who have remained faithful, staunch supporters.

George, my dull plodding husband George Norton, was the author of my greatest happiness and deepest despair. It was he who set me on the path that ended here, insisting I use our Sheridan family ties to Lord Melbourne to gain him a well-paid appointment. Never were two people so instantly attracted to one another, set so entirely alight by the spark jumping from one pair of eyes to another. And it was not simple or superfluous. We talked for hours, William and I, and soon enough not a day would pass that he did not visit me in Storey’s Gate. Those notes entered into evidence at the trial were so damning because of their simplicity. Norton's lawyers made much of the fact that no salutation was needed, no signature obtained. That there was nothing in them to condemn was proof of our intimacy – *I'll be around before nine o'clock* and *This day runs on overlong. I shall be delayed, and I cannot come today but I will come tomorrow.*

There was no doubt that he loved me, but it was his great liking in which I found myself. Because he found me worthy of his respect and admiration I could find in myself something more than *wife, mother* and even *beautiful*. I had always written my poor sonnets and was reckoned to have some talent as a lyricist, but it was Melbourne's easy confidence in me as his intellectual equal which gave me both courage and determination to publish serious work. We were lovers, of course we were, and in that as in everything else he was superior to all other men but he never took it too seriously and seemed almost indifferent until opportunity presented itself. Perhaps because when we came together physically it was incidental to the rest, only a continuation of the great love and friendship and mutual admiration between us.

With Melbourne I felt complete, half of a whole. In the end it was as simple as that, and as profound.

Those who love me tell me in exasperated tones that I am my own worst enemy, and I cannot deny. It was perfect between us for so long, but I wanted more. I egged Norton on, flaunting and taunting, knowing just how to enrage him. I was sure that despite his family's opposition and their warnings to him I would ruin his career Melbourne would step up and do the right thing, and publicly claim me. But when Norton was at his worst, Melbourne counseled restraint. He told me I must do my utmost to make the marriage work. I was sure, so sure, that in the end I could force his hand by causing George to cast me out. I humiliated my husband beyond all endurance, mocked
him for the cuckold he was, two sons in the cradle put there by his patron. In the end I paid the price as women always do, losing everything in that last desperate roll of the dice. The scandal sent my dear Melbourne skittering for the shadows. Where I wanted boldness there was none. I understood Lady Caroline Lamb then, for the first time, how this man's tepid reserve could drive us to excess.

And yet, I love him still. If he were to come to me today I would have him on any terms. Host his political dinners once more? Invite some celebrated author to dine, as when he told me to host Thackeray, insisting the man was someone he should know, no matter how tedious? Curtsey and simper at the feet of the little ninny he married? Yes, even that I have done and would do again, if only to bask in the warmth of his friendship once more. I have behaved rashly, lashed out, written intemperate scoldings, condemning him as the most heartless of men. In my own defense I can only say that is proof of the hold he has on my heart. What keeps me going is the fact that I know he will always love me best. His little whey-faced dumpling can never occupy the place in his heart and his brilliant, unorthodox mind that is mine; she does not even know what she does not have.

As if things could get any worse, blame for that dreadful story in the Times which caused the government to fall has been laid at my feet. It's said that Sidney had told me in confidence – in bed, they make sure to add – that Peel intended to recall Parliament to recall the Corn Laws, and I made sure the Times had it. Those who despise me remind everyone that it was I who repeated what Melbourne shared of his life at Court, who made certain rash unflattering observations of our little Queen, and now even Leopold – no friend of Melbourne's and long an admirer of mine – avoids me like the rest. Sidney assures me that nothing has changed between us, but a woman knows, and soon I will be cast off by him too. He will marry to please his family and I will be free to be as bad as they think I am. How foolish are those who compare me to Wollstonecraft! I frankly despise my own sex and would never advocate for the rights of females in general. My case is unique.

No, London holds no appeal for me this Christmas of 1845. I will go quietly, without a fuss, taking what's left of the advance from my publisher and take cheap lodgings in some warm place. I will forget for a time that while I am alone he is with his new family, beloved by all. As if the glitter of Buckingham House does not content little Vicky, as if the sprawling ancient fortress of Windsor will not suffice, Willie Cowper tells me they will spend the holiday at William's country home. For me it will be Sicily, and for her, his royal girl, it will be Christmas at Brocket Hall.

They were talking of Taylor's new poem, 'Philip van Artevelde.' Melbourne had read years before and admired it. The preface, he had said, was affected and foolish, but the poem very superior to anything in Milman.

"There was one fine idea in the 'Fall of Jerusalem' — that of Titus, who felt himself propelled by an irresistible impulse like that of the Greek dramatists, whose fate is the great agent always pervading their dramas."

Victoria examined her reflection in a gilt mirror in the anteroom. She momentarily wished she had changed her gown into one less suited for entertaining bishops' wives. The dark blue velvet was well enough and accentuated her narrow waist, but the square neckline was so modest as to be dowdy, saved only by tight sleeves which displayed her shoulders to advantage. Her necklace and earrings set with large square sapphires did little to reflect the light, although she thought that at least they highlighted the dark blue of her eyes. She mentally chided herself for lurking, eavesdropping on the conversation in Melbourne's office, feeling acutely her youth and ignorance as she did not when he was talking with her. He would read beside her in bed, choosing passages to share and elaborating at length in his funny way so that she never felt completely out of her depth. Hearing him now with his contemporaries Victoria was reminded once more what a remarkable
man her husband was.

She had been well-taught by the best tutors from the finest universities and had been a diligent pupil, but her learning had been by rote and without any emphasis on critical thinking. Moreover, she knew her mind was not capable of the sort of abstractions at which her Lord M excelled. When she would confess apologetically that she could not understand some obscure passage he would only make fun of his own pedantic tangent and pass it off as of no importance.

Victoria stood rooted in place, listening as he and his friends talked over one another, abruptly changing the subject from anecdote to literature to philosophy. She felt as though she heard a language which sounded familiar, yet which she could not speak or understand. They seemed to hold Wordsworth cheap, except Spring Rice, who was enthusiastic about him. Another gentleman thought Crabbe the greatest genius of modern poets while Melbourne dissented. None of them had known Coleridge personally but agreed that although his lectures were very tiresome, he was a poet of great merit. Then they spoke of someone named Spencer Perceval preaching in the streets with Irving.

Melbourne described with dry wit how Irving had called him remonstrating against prohibition. They talked of men they had known at university, Goulburn, who was called a saint and gave lectures in his room, by which he has caught several young men, the last greeted with much laughter until it was belatedly recalled that they were in the presence of not only a lady, but their sovereign. Someone named the female authors, Madame de Sévigné, Madame de Stael, and one they called Sappho. Miss Austen's novels were deemed excellent, and there Victoria felt on more solid ground for she was a great admirer of that lady's work. Someone brought up the recent sensation 'The Child of the Isles', and Victoria stiffened, unable to go proceed or retreat.

A footman interrupted her loitering, unaware. When he saw the Queen in the anteroom he stepped smartly forward and opened the door to announce her arrival.

When Victoria felt uncomfortable in company or ill at ease she retreated behind the impenetrable mask of her station. She had no sooner felt her features settle into that smooth remote expression than Melbourne leapt to his feet, laughing and reaching out his hands. The gentlemen with him rose as one with the well-trained ease of lifelong courtiers. Victoria's gaze met Melbourne's and she saw in his eyes such a look of warm, affectionate delight that all awkward reserve faded away.

He presented each in turn. These were friends of long standing, and she had met them all at one Court function or another. At those she was the Queen, glittering in gold and diamonds, seated on her red-velvet-and-gilt throne on a dais, removed from any need to make an impression. Here, she was aware of an urgent desire to favorably impress these men.

Thomas Spring Rice, 1st Baron Monteagle of Brandon was the eldest, nearly ten years senior to Melbourne and retired from public life. Victoria was better acquainted with his son, Undersecretary of State for the Colonies. She extended her hand and stopped him with a little shake of her head when he would have genuflected.

"Here, my lord, I am only my husband's wife," Victoria said, winning a fond smile from Melbourne. "Please, be seated. I do not want to interrupt. I only looked in to say hello."

"We would be honored if you joined us," Melbourne said, then murmured more softly so only she could hear, "and give me the pleasure of showing you off."

He could have found nothing better to say and Victoria happily took a seat beside her husband.

"We were discussing the modern poets, ma'am," one of Melbourne's companions said. Victoria
recalled that the man her husband called Bobus Smith had once been Judge Advocate-General of Bengal, India, had the close friendship of Emily Eden in common with Lord M, and was brother to Sydney Smith.

Gradually they picked up the thread of their previous discussion once more. Even with asides to explain some esoteric reference, Victoria gave up trying to understand and contented herself with listening as she would to a church sermon, letting the words wash over her. Melbourne quoted Vigilantius's letter to Jerome, and then referred to the dialogue between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Ely at the beginning of Shakespeare's 'Henry V.' Melbourne knew it all by heart and recited parts to make some point which was roundly disputed by his companions. He then quoted Tooke's 'Diversions of Purley,' from memory, and Victoria thought she would never hear another sound as thrilling as his lazy drawling voice, sounding as casually light-hearted as another man might when discussing the prospects of some middling racehorse.

"Melbourne, I will not have it," Smith interjected. "Ma'am, your husband enjoys shocking us all with his outrageous opinions." They all laughed together, Melbourne as well, and Victoria only smiled while his friends provided examples of some of his more outré declarations. Lounging at ease with his friends, entertaining them here, meant the palace was surely his home and the thought gave Victoria a feeling of profound happiness. Seated at his side entertaining men who had gone to college with him nearly a half-century before she was born made it all so very real, that this remarkable man had truly chosen her, considered her worthy of his affection.

Victoria looked down at her own hands folded in her lap, and she lightly stroked the wedding band which marked their union, unaware of the soft smile which crept across her face.

Their party broke up soon after. Victoria echoed Melbourne in inviting them to dine but one after another cited an engagement in the City. She looked to her husband inquiringly, wanting to reassure him she would not object to his dining with his friends at one of the gentleman's clubs they frequented, and was relieved when he showed no such inclination. They stood together at the top of the winding staircase, Melbourne's hand finding hers, and watched until his guests were out of sight.

"I am only my husband's wife," he said softly, leaning so that his breath tickled her ear. "Prettily said, Mrs. Melbourne. I could learn to like such humility."

"Don't become accustomed to it, Lord M," Victoria returned saucily. "Humility doesn't suit me. But I will always be your wife before anything else."

As they walked together through the corridors and antechambers of Buckingham House, Victoria's hand held in her husband's, she fell silent, bathed in golden gossamer warmth. She reflected that at the end of a perfectly unremarkable day, on her way to join the various and sundry relatives, friends and courtiers who filled their household, to look in on the children and hear their prayers, she had rarely felt such a perfect contentment, and it was all due to the man at her side.
Lord Melbourne returned to Buckingham Palace at late afternoon on what had been an uncommonly satisfying day. He held in his arms the limp body of his sleeping child, his chin resting on the boy's silky curls, so like his own, and was content to pass the time it took to travel from Great Russell Street in his own drowsy reverie.

Little Prince William had accompanied his father – or, rather, Melbourne had accompanied him – to a ceremony to mark groundbreaking on the long-awaited fourth and final wing of the new British Museum. Persistently rainy weather had delayed demolition of the venerable Montagu House, so that when it was finally completed the Lord Mayor of London had hastily arranged a public dedication.

The Queen had endowed this wing, and a rotunda which would house the Reading Room, in memory of her late husband and had suggested Lord Melbourne give the brief introductory remarks in her stead. The Prince of Wales would participate by laying a time capsule atop the cornerstone, and he had performed his part well. At the end, unprompted, the little boy had executed a perfect bow at the foot of a marble statute representing the man known as his father. That simple, reverent act by a small child made the crowd erupt in cries of *God save the Queen* and *God bless Prince William*.

Such salutations had not impressed Liam nearly as much as later cries of *tits and arse, bloody 'ell* from a crew of urchins they encountered while strolling past the carts of enterprising street vendors. Where Melbourne saw all the hallmarks of extreme poverty, mouthfuls of blackened rotting teeth from the gin fed by overwrought mothers, ragged coats held together by bits of twine
and the pale rabbity faces of the slums, Liam saw only children his own age running about gaily and demonstrating a most colorful vocabulary. Despite the boy's innocent obliviousness his father quickly distracted him and led him away before his tender heart could mark the difference in their stations.

Liam was enthralled by wonders such as chestnuts roasted over charcoal braziers, handheld pies stuffed with meats of dubious origin and even a whole shank being turned on a spit over glowing coals in a trough. Melbourne felt confident in the presence of their protection officers and happily led his child through the marketplace, even as he steered them away from more dubious encounters, toothless inebriated harriđans and London's ubiquitous prostitutes and pickpockets. It was all part of the great sprawling metropolis over which Victoria ruled, greatest city in the world and beating heart of an empire.

"Tits and arse, Papa," Liam had exclaimed more than once with his clear diction, and Melbourne knew this phrase would be repeated in the nursery, shocking their prim spinster governess. The notion made him chuckle aloud, and that made Liam laugh, pleased with himself, so that passersby turned to watch, warmed at the sight of an elegant urbane gentleman so happy in the company of his child.

When he stepped down from the carriage in the west portico Liam only raised his head and looked about with bleary eyes before resting his cheek against his father's chest once more, content to be carried. Melbourne had no intention of relinquishing his burden any sooner than he had to, knowing full well that soon enough a boy's dignity would make such comfortable helplessness a thing of the past.

He had loved Augustus and that love had twisted and torn his heart. That son had never been right, and the occasional glimpses of what could be had only rent his feelings further. He had told himself he accepted his firstborn son, and in fact he had – he and Caro both had refused to surrender their only child to the care of others, even when that child was the size of a man with a man's urges and his erratic behavior terrorized more than one young unattended female. And no, he could not, would not, compare the two, that son and this. He had given Augustus his all, kept him at home, found a way to manage his outbursts, to provide the care and companionship he needed. And yet, if any man would find solace in late fatherhood, how much more so one who had immersed himself so completely in one poor, flawed son, mourned his loss and then found himself inexplicably graced with another? A beautiful, perfect boy who was the image of his father?

That he could not claim him troubled Victoria far more than it did Melbourne. He himself had grown up in a family where paternity was variously distributed amongst his mother's many admirers yet bore the name and title of the one with whom he shared no blood ties. He was content enough, grateful even, to allow Prince Albert the dignity of public acclaim as father to the nation's heir. Without Albert, there would be no Liam and for that Melbourne would be eternally grateful. Without the protection and friendship of her German first cousin, he would not have had his precious girl at all or the two children she bore him in love. Or would he? That was an unanswerable question and one which did not bear scrutiny. It was in the past and this was the present – this warm, living boy in his arms, the irrepressible Princess Royale in the nursery and his wife-Queen somewhere within.

"Her Majesty is in the White Drawing Room, Lord Melbourne."

Baroness Lehzen met him in the corridor leading to the nursery. She had, he surmised, been awaiting his arrival with some impatience, carefully concealed beneath her proper reserve.

"Mein Leibchen, come, we must wash and dress you. There is someone your mother wishes you to
Melbourne raised a brow quizzically but Baroness Lehzen's expression was inscrutable. "Let me take him now, Lord Melbourne."

Melbourne set the boy on his feet and stooped to kiss him, brushing hair back from his brow. When he rose, he did not immediately enter his own apartment, but stood watching the two figures depart.

The White Drawing Room was rarely used during the day. It was the most formal of the public spaces in the palace, generally used for private presentations before grand public events in the adjacent State rooms. As he washed and dressed Melbourne cast his mind back, wondering whether he had overlooked some signal event on the Queen's calendar. A late change in some delegation, requiring the Queen to receive a new ambassador? No, he decided, such things were never spontaneous, no matter how suddenly an envoy was recalled and replaced. Yet not a purely personal occasion either, for Victoria would have discussed any such happening with him beforehand.

After five years together, three of them married and openly cohabiting, the routines of a marriage were comfortably established. Each evening when they had retired to their inner chamber they would discuss the less significant events of that day, what gossip Melbourne heard in town or Victoria gleaned from the chattering females in her retinue. Family news was likewise relayed, which of Emily's brood was in an interesting condition, with whom the Duchess of Kent would stay for an extended weekend in the country. Melbourne would lull his wife to sleep with the humorous anecdotes he related, racy on dits and reminiscences of his long acquaintance with most of the illustrious families in the kingdom. Mornings, over his coffee and her sweet heated chocolate drinks, were the time they discussed the day's agenda, the order of her audiences, which of the many commissions on which he sat required his presence at some meeting or with whom he would dine, if he expected to stay in town that evening.

More serious business, matters of State upon which she wanted his opinion, issues of policy which Melbourne had been requested to set before the Queen, were reserved for their afternoon meetings, a vestige of those previous four o'clock audiences established when he was Prime Minister.

They had fallen into this routine by unspoken agreement to segregate political and governmental business from that which was more purely personal between husband and wife, and it worked well. Thus, Melbourne was vaguely unsettled by the nagging suspicion he had forgotten something of importance which Victoria had imparted.

He accepted fresh linen from his valet, buttoning a billowy white lawn shirt and ruining several cravats before arranging one to his satisfaction. Baines held out a smart dark blue velvet coat, one of his best, a fact which did not go unnoticed. Body servants knew everything, often long before the masters they served, and although a well-trained gentleman's gentleman would never be so crass as to betray such intelligence, one learned to read the signs. So, it's an important occasion, or visitor, one I am meant to impress.

An apt pupil of Brummel who had preached understated elegance in all things, Melbourne disdained foppery. He wore only a signet ring on his right hand and a plain band on his left. Gentlemen did not wear wedding bands, of course, but in that as in all things Melbourne cared little for the opinion of others and had chosen, when he placed a ring on Victoria's finger, to wear one as well. If he evaded the more public aspects of marriage to a Queen Regnant, he would proudly proclaim their union in this subtle, generally-unnoticed private fashion.

The White Drawing Room, as part of the State apartments, were in the central part of the Palace.
Melbourne strode briskly down the corridor, past the curving Grand Stairway with its bronze balustrades, and through the Gallery and Throne Room. He nodded genially to the sentries he passed, members of the Coldstream Guards standing at attention at key points along the way. A Royal footman was stationed immediately outside his destination, signifying the Queen's presence within. Inside the door a steward prepared to announce the arrival of the Queen's husband in stentorian tones, until Melbourne stopped him with a disapproving shake of his head. Hearing his own title bellowed each time he entered a room was one of the least palatable aspects of life in the royal household and he discouraged the practice with variable success.

Tea and light refreshments had evidently been set out for the ladies present, while footmen circulated bearing stronger spirits for the gentlemen. Melbourne took a glass from the silver tray held out to him and sipped from it thoughtfully while he scanned the room. He recognized nearly everyone present as members of their own household, unusual as it was to see them all in one place despite the absence of an equal or greater number of visitors.

There were the Queen's ladies-in-waiting, if not huddling together then certainly conversing with one another as though there were no guests to entertain. Melbourne watched as the younger women and girls, the maids-of-honor whose presence Victoria only grudgingly endured, flitted about, doing their duty to provide light, very ornamental distraction. Several young equerries moved about, talking mainly to one another in desultory fashion. The Queen's mother, the Duchess of Kent, was addressing a man Melbourne could not identify, the first stranger in evidence. He did not see Victoria, although the cavernous space was far from overcrowded, and was about to make his way around the perimeter of the room for a closer look when Lady Portman approached.

"There you are, William," she said, in her inimical knowing fashion. One thin brow was arched in what he assumed was meant to convey some message he could not quite decode.

"Here I am, Emma," Melbourne agreed amiably.

"You were missed." He wasn't sure what to say in response, so opted to say nothing. Women in general, and certainly Emma in particular, could be expected to fill any silence, he told himself, and was promptly reinforced in his belief.

"Your Queen has visitors."

Melbourne's sleepy smile only became more pronounced, making his disinterest obvious to conceal the rising irritation he felt. Emma was an old and dear friend and he could generally bear that insufferable smugness. Now, however, he felt an unfamiliar urge to snap at her.

"Where is the Queen, Emma?" He asked instead.

"She is with her cousin." This pronouncement was delivered in portentous tones, and with baited breath as she waited for the inquisition sure to follow.

"Ernst?"

"No, William, not Ernst."

"We could go at this for hours, Emma. I believe Victoria has upwards of two dozen cousins. Are you intending to be more specific or must I name them all?"

He nearly laughed aloud at Emma Portman's frustrated face and was tolerably certain she would have stomped her foot if it could pass unnoticed by those who stood nearby.

A sudden lull in conversation stopped her from uttering a sharp retort. They both followed the
stares of those whose heads had swiveled towards the far side of the room, where heavy mirrored panels concealed the small door which permitted the Queen to enter discreetly when guests occupied the Throne Room and public reception areas. Victoria was laughing aloud at some sally, and her face was turned away from them, looking up at the man who followed closely on her heels.

Something about her companion was familiar to Melbourne. He was tall and well-built, Victoria's age or slightly older, and remarkably handsome.

No, Melbourne reconsidered his initial assessment, *not merely 'handsome', his face was stunningly beautiful, so much so that to call it less would be dishonest.* And then recognition clicked into place. This was the cousin to whom Emma referred, and he had seen him before, had met him in 1837 during his last visit to London. Victoria had pressed him then, on whether he did not consider her favorite cousin extremely attractive. He had conceded as much, laughing at her giddy exuberance, commending a pair of exceedingly lovely eyes and a good head of hair.

*Alexander von Mensdorff-Pouilly, Prince Dietrichstein von Nicolsburg.* A maternal cousin, of course, one of the numerous progeny of her mother's sister Sophie.

Much had been made of the new Queen's open partiality for this cousin, and speculation on a possible marriage had even reached Whitehall. Victoria herself had dismissed such discussion, resorting to her oft-repeated assertion that she was far too young to consider marriage to anyone. Melbourne recalled having some concerns at the time, seeing her obvious pleasure in this prince's company, contrasted with her disinterest in the other cousin, Albert.

Victoria had lost much of her dignified restraint in the company of Alexander, flirting and frolicking like the very young woman she was. Melbourne had repressed his own feelings of jealousy as unworthy of a man who stood in the position of surrogate father and trusted advisor. He had listened to her gush about the strength of her affection for this favored of all her cousins and encouraged the confidences she shared, wanting not to stem the tide of her artless admissions.

*"He is quite the nicest cousin I have," she had gushed to Melbourne. "Not to slight poor Albert, of course, but Alexander and his brother were so very amiable when they visited me at Kensington. I never wanted them to leave!"*

It had all come to naught so suddenly that Melbourne had never been quite sure of the reason. Some talk of the young prince's carousing with Covent Garden dancers, whispers of excessive drinking and gambling – whether it was because of this or through some other cause, the prince had abruptly departed, and Victoria never spoke of him again. And now, eight years later, here he was, back in London and clearly being treated with every distinction if this gathering was in his honor.

Melbourne emptied his glass of champagne and exchanged it for another before meeting Emma's expectant gaze.

"Ah, *that* cousin," he drawled softly, a smile tightening the corners of his mouth.

“What?” It was his turn to raise a brow quizzically.

The two old friends stood together, watching Victoria and Alexander cross the floor. They paused several times, seemingly so engrossed in one another and their conversation that their progress was impeded. Melbourne watched more closely than he wished Emma to know, as Victoria's normally reserved manner was abandoned, and she displayed the pretty natural animation generally reserved for family.
But he is family, Melbourne reminded himself. More precisely, it was the completely unguarded warmth and expressiveness she showed him alone. And that, the wide-eyed look on her upturned face, the slightly parted lips. That expression and her rapt attention was something he had grown to believe was for him alone.

He understood the loneliness of her Kensington girlhood, as she perceived it in memory. Whether objectively as grim as she described, it was nonetheless the experience that lived in her mind and as such, this young man had been one of the few bright spots, one of the only memories of unadulterated joy she recalled. No wonder then that she should regard him with such bright, unalloyed affection.

Melbourne set his glass on a nearby table, and if the fragile crystal stemware landed more vigorously than he intended, only Emma Portman noticed. He arranged his own features into their customary insouciant ease and sauntered forward to claim his wife.

They dined in state to Melbourne's surprise, and he assumed that Victoria had opted for the spectacle of a formal occasion to impress her visitor. It meant that according to protocol he would be seated at her left hand, with Leopold in the seat of honor at the opposite end of the long table and his brother-in-law and nephews arranged at his end. Melbourne, as a mere Viscount, was free to take the place he preferred, nearest Victoria. She smiled brightly at him and maintained a patter of light conversation with both him and the gentleman on her right, but he had no opportunity to speak to her privately until they retired for the night some hours later.

Her dressers moved expeditiously, hurried along by their mistress, and Victoria was already in bed when Melbourne stepped from his own dressing room. Her dark hair was spread out over her shoulders, gleaming in lamplight, and her smooth shoulders and round breasts were prettily displayed under a filmy French peignoir. Her attire proclaimed she might well be receptive to amorous advances, for if she was exhausted by her day he would be more likely to find her in a modest high-necked gown.

Rather than go directly to the big State bed, Melbourne only leaned against the door in his dressing gown, arms folded across his chest, and studied her, smiling.

"What?" Victoria tilted her head, beguiling him in the process.

"Nothing. Only, enjoying the picture you make. Have I told you how utterly delectable you are, Mrs. Melbourne?" He spoke the name in caressing tones. Once, it had been hurled as an insult as she sat in her box at the races, but she had swiftly appropriated it, relishing the implication in those early days of her infatuation.

"Not today, Lord M. Please tell me more but come closer when you do." Victoria rose onto her knees and reached out her arms for him.

He went to her then, unable to stay away, and for a long moment they held the position, Victoria's arms around him and his around her, lightly pressing her head to his chest.

Victoria was avid for his touch and expertly plied her own, knowing his body so well she could bring him to the absolute pinnacle even as she rode the waves of her own sensation. My girl. My precious girl. My love, my world, my everything. He whispered the words hoarsely, urgently, as he felt her body shudder and spasm under him and lost himself in the whirlwind of his own climax.

After, sated, he held her, toying with her long hair as she purred contentedly. He waited for her to ask about Liam's part in the museum ceremony, to tell her how well their son performed, how he inspired the crowd to ovation with his spontaneous bow, but she only lay in thoughtful silence, her
head pillowed on his chest, fingers tangling themselves in the dark hair growing there. He waited for her to discuss the reunion with her handsome cousin but she only said that he had come for the holidays and would accompany them to spend Christmas at Brocket Hall.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Posted on 24 November, 170 years from the day William Lamb took his last breath. Dear sir, I hope you know how loved and honored you are in the year 2018. I write the life you should have had, not perfect as no mortal life is perfect, but full and rich with love and laughter and living.

Yesterday's temperatures were almost balmy by comparison to a morning which presented itself with a thick layer of frost coating shrubbery and rolling brown lawns alike. Those of a certain age might feel the icy chill in their bones; those of a melancholy disposition would feel the absence of sunlight under a low iron-gray sky reflected in their mood. But for the young, and young at heart, all that mattered were the fat white flakes falling in earnest.

Lord Melbourne stood in a window looking out at the grounds beyond, remembering a boyhood many decades past and how excited he and his brothers would be by the first snowfall. They had wintered at Melbourne Hall in the North of England most years, closing Melbourne House in the City and abandoning the cozier confines of Brocket Hall. Pen, William, Fred and George would be up at first light, charging downstairs, frantic to be outside. Emily, the darling of her brothers, would clamor to taken along and they would take turns pulling her about and then throw themselves belly-down on sleds to zoom down the steepest hill on the property.

He saw with the perspective of age the risks they ran, steering only by means of shifting their weight to one side or the other with looming trees threatening their trajectory, ending perilously close to a fast-moving stream. Such daredevilry would be impossible for his own son, as it had been for his firstborn. That boy lacked the mental agility to comprehend an act so out of the
ordinary, and this one – well, he was England's heir, and it was unthinkable to expose him to danger. Nor, Melbourne conceded, could he understand the equanimity which had allowed his own mother to give her progeny such freedom from supervision. His own precious boy was never unattended, was cossetted by loving caretakers and doting parents who managed every aspect of his and his sister's life.

Melbourne's reverie was interrupted when Victoria entered with her mother.

"William! You rose early!" She came up to him and turned her face up expectantly. He complied, kissing her lips and the corner of her mouth.

"I did. I think I felt the snow before I saw it. Old bones." He held her shoulders and turned her gently toward the window, and the view beyond.

"Oh, pshaw, Lord M. I felt a headache coming on even before I opened my eyes. I've always gotten a pain behind my eyes when snow is imminent. I must have old bones too."

Melbourne enjoyed the sight of her fresh prettiness. She wore a gown he had not seen before, and assumed it was new, a shimmering blue-green set off by white lace at collar and cuffs.

"Look, Mama," Victoria cried in delight. "First snow! Do you remember at Kensington, when we would go out to walk in the fresh snow just to see our own footprints?"

"Good morning, Duchess," he said. "You look especially well this morning. One might mistake you for sisters."

The elder Victoria simpered in response, inordinately pleased by the complement. Melbourne meant it sincerely: she was wearing a gown of deep russet which flattered her complexion and jewels which normally made their appearance no earlier than early evening, most often complementing a dinner gown. He guessed the reason for such morning finery.

"My cousin must be a slug-a-bed," Victoria said, sounding disappointed.

"Drina, your uncle and cousin traveled for days and came directly from Dover on the train to see you," the elder Victoria reminded her.

"And to what do we owe the pleasure of their visit, after so long an absence?" Melbourne had much experience in concealing what might be on his mind under a veneer of sophisticated ease.

He was not sure what he thought, or more to the point, felt about her cousin's presence. Victoria had been openly euphoric last evening, basking in the young Major's presence, glowing under his affectionate attention. Melbourne was not accustomed to the sight of his normally reserved wife display such unguarded affection towards another, nor with her manner in Alexander's presence. She was completely at ease, playful, bantering. That was the girl he had always seen, but it was not the remote, somewhat stiff royal face she showed others, to the point of being dismissed as boring and stuffy by her own courtiers.

"I have Mama to thank," Victoria said, showing her mother a bright loving smile that made the Duchess blush with pleasure. *How little attention it took to revive her,* Melbourne noticed, *like a drooping plant brought back to life.*

"Mama has been writing to Uncle Emmanuel, and they decided between them to surprise us by bringing Alexander for a visit."

"Ah, a surprise! You knew nothing before they arrived on our doorstep, Victoria?" Melbourne saw
her eyes narrow momentarily, and instantly regretted his question. Of course, she had not; if she had, she would not have withheld the information. To what end?

"No, William, I did not." Victoria laid her hand over his and tilted her head in that most beguiling gesture, one which he could not resist.

"Then you succeeded admirably, Duchess," he told his mother-in-law in a teasing tone. Then he picked up the little hand resting on his and kissed it.

Victoria attended to him with her usual sweetness, buttering a roll, refilling his coffee cup. It was a small vanity of hers, to play at caring for her husband with her own hands as any simple wife might.

Watching her, reassured by her customary loving attention, Melbourne was able to remember when he had seen Victoria gambol about, romping and playing with childish abandon. It had been with her own husband and his companions, in the privacy of their apartment where Melbourne had been no interloper but a party to that unorthodox marriage.

*It is no more than that,* he told himself, *a fraternal bond with the cousins who were linked in her mind with rare freedom and merriment during that closely guarded isolation at Kensington.*

Melbourne and Victoria read the papers delivered to the breakfast room each morning, each calling out headlines likely to pique the other's interest. The *Times*, the *Manchester Guardian*, the previous week's *Evening Standard* and whatever papers had been sent by Her Majesty's various embassies abroad all made their appearance. Anyone else who might be at table generally lost interest and wandered off in search of occupation, while the Queen and Lord Melbourne lingered over their cups, alternately laughing at some absurdity or intently discussing a more curious byline.

Victoria belatedly asked about their outing of the day before. She sighed over the bow and beamed proudly when he described the crowd's response. Melbourne made her laugh with a description of their child's repetition of some guttersnipe's curse – *tits and arse, bloody 'ell!* – and her face grew soft as he mentioned as an afterthought Liam's happy exhaustion, of holding their boy as he slept on the ride home. For a few intimate minutes they might have been any two parents sharing a much-loved child, bound together in love and commitment. Victoria touched his hand once more and smiled, and he thought she had never looked lovelier than she did at that moment.

"*Home,*" Victoria repeated softly. She looked up at him from under lowered lids which trembled slightly. Then she rose from her place at table and went to him, laying her cheek against his.

Victoria left to begin working on the early dispatches, parting from Melbourne with a promise they would meet again in an hour. He watched her walk away, heedless of the footmen standing at intervals, caring not at all that love and pride were writ plain on his face. Then he himself wandered off in search of his brother.

Fred was still in his own suite, the remains of breakfast on a wheeled cart. When asked, he said Adina would doubtless be in the nursery, her thoughts full of the babies they did not have. If his brother did not produce an heir, the title would go extinct. Liam could never inherit name and title, although it was of little importance beside the array of ancient titles he already held in addition to Prince of Wales. What did a mere Viscount Melbourne signify beside Duke of Cornwall, Duke of Rothesay, Earl of Carrick, Baron of Renfrew, Lord of the Isles, and Prince and Great Steward of Scotland? Even if he abandoned his long principled opposition to a Dukedom, it would die with him, with no living heir.
"Tell me, what did you think of the newest cousin?" Melbourne asked without preamble, sprawling in an armchair. *The advantage of brothers – one needed no lengthy explanation to speak one's mind.*

"Alexander?" Fred shrugged noncommittally. "Seems an agreeable sort. Major in the Austrian Army. Has some interest in diplomatic service, none in making a dynastic marriage to please his uncle. In fact, I gather that's never been on offer. I think there's bad blood between Leopold and Emmanuel."

Fred rubbed at the stubble on his chin as he studied Melbourne. "What did you think of him?"

Melbourne leaned back and steepled his fingers, weighing what Frederick had said. His brother's long, successful career as ambassador to Vienna and other prime stations had honed his ability to accurately assess personalities and follow rapidly shifting alliances. He met and held Fred's gaze, staring into a pair of dark eyes so like his own.

"Your wife seems very attached to her cousin," Fred said finally. His voice held no inflection, but Melbourne knew he was prodding as only a brother could. It irked him to have his private thoughts so instantly understood, but it was comfortable too.

"Victoria has a great many cousins and she is attached to them all," he replied.

"As you say," Fred said mockingly, lifting his mug in a pretend toast. "There was talk years ago, when she was just a schoolroom chit. It reached us in Vienna."

"What sort of talk?" Melbourne asked sharply.

"Nothing untoward. She was – what? Fourteen or so? Far too young to be married off, but common knowledge all the same that she had a decided preference for this cousin. Nobody wanted her looking elsewhere, so it had to be an English marriage or one of her German cousins. *Why did she choose the other one? It seemed they didn't take.*" Fred made it clear he was merely relating gossip, and Melbourne took no offense.

The reason she had married Albert was clear, but he was less certain what had happened to change her feelings toward Alexander. *Or had they changed? Had he refused her too?*

"Well, she did, and here we are." They looked up in tandem at the sound of their sister's voice. Emily had been relieved of bonnet and cloak, but she still brought with her a fresh outdoor scent. Her color was heightened, and her eyes sparkled.

"Em! We didn't expect you so early. What time did you leave?" Melbourne pecked her cheek and stepped aside to offer her choice of chairs.

"At first light, and still nearly four hours on the road. I had them push the horses and change twice. I didn't want to be stranded far from town if the roads grew impassible."

Emily was still an attractive woman, even with the signs of age. In company her brisk manner could be admirably concealed by the airs of an accredited beauty, and she had her fair share of the Lamb charm.

"Why do you stare, William? Pray, sit down and keep me company while Fred dresses."

Knowing himself dismissed and no match for his sister, Frederick took himself off, calling for his valet.
"You're a pretty woman, Em. Palmerston is fortunate you took him, when you could have had your pick of swains," Melbourne said, meaning it. Emily only grimaced, but he could see the tenderness in her eyes reflecting his own.

"Tell me how Brocket Hall fares. Are we ready to receive the Court?"

"I have executed all of the Queen's instructions, to the letter. She overlooked no detail." Her drawling voice was heavy with sarcasm. Melbourne pretended not to notice. "I think she will be pleased."

He understood that Emily would be at a loss if she could not officiate at their family home, tending to all the myriad details required of a hostess. He was grateful to her for allowing Victoria the dignity of pretense, sparing her pride and her feelings too. Victoria could be prickly and overly sensitive, but in Emily's case it imperfectly concealed her shyness and how desperately she sought his sister's approval. The Court would travel as one in another day's time, while Emily would return to her townhome and arrive as a guest on Lord Palmerston's arm.

"Come, let us go find her and you can tell her yourself." Melbourne offered his arm, and Emily took it.

To his surprise, Victoria's working office was empty, her desk tidy and the boxes locked. *It had not been an hour, surely?*

Melbourne shrugged and looked to his sister questioningly.

"Never mind, I'll find her and look in on my niece and nephew while I'm at it. Yes, William, I said it – my niece and nephew."

He did not touch the dispatch boxes; he would not, despite having her often-repeated encouragement. Instead he idly looked through the letters which had been left on a silver tray, chose one which bore his name and hers jointly and made himself comfortable on the long leather sofa to await the Queen.

When he opened his eyes, the movement seemed to entail a great deal of effort, nearly more than he could muster. It was cold, damnably cold despite the heat given off by coals in the stove. His limbs felt leaden, his face oddly numb, and a dull ache in the center of his chest radiated through his shoulder and ran the length of his arm. Suddenly the pain became more acute, or perhaps he had awakened it with his notice. If I lay still, he decided, it will recede to a more manageable level. The pain did not stir alarm; instead, he felt better than he had in weeks, months, years, utterly at peace, content…resigned? Where did that come from?

Emily entered, and he was not surprised. Of course, Emily – Em would always be there, she and Fred and sweet Adine. Why had she left him, what had she been about? Ah – he remembered.

"Did you find her?" he asked and was shocked at the effort it took. The pain in his chest would not let him breathe deeply. As though a blade went through his breastbone and out his back so that he was pinned flat, unable to expand his lungs. But that pain was distant, easily ignored, and did not disturb his lethargy. But he had to know –

"Did you find Vic – the Queen?" Melbourne persisted. Emily's face was sad, so very sad he wanted to comfort her. She came forward and sat beside him, stroked his brow so tenderly it brought tears to his eyes and hers as well.

"Shhh, William," she said only, crooning, gentling him as one would a fussy babe. As he had –
what? why did the memory, fully formed, evade him?

"Is she coming?" He had to know, he must wait, he could not miss her again. They did that, kept missing each other, he or she in another place, another room, another –

"Yes, William. If you have faith you will see her soon." Now fat tears rolled down his sister's cheeks and she did not wipe them away. Her nose ran unheeded and she suppressed the sobs which shook her shoulders violently.

"Are you…certain? Will she find me here?"

"Oh yes, William, if there is an Almighty God in Heaven, she will find you again." And then he was content; it was all he could do, to relinquish his grasp, his tenacious clinging to this terrible ache in his heart.

"William! I say, William, wake up." Emily once more, her tone strident. Where had the gentleness gone?

"The Queen is riding out and would like you to join her. She and her cousins were already saddled and did not wish to keep the horses standing." Melbourne opened his eyes, blinking furiously. He was sprawled on the long leather sofa in the Queen's office, the letter from Cameron still unopened on his chest.

"I was just resting my eyes," he said sheepishly, shaking his head to clear it.

"Evidently so," Emily snapped back. "Your wife and her party will ride through the park. If you hurry you can catch up to them."

Melbourne waited for his head to rid itself of the sticky cloudiness which sometimes accompanied daytime sleep. His impromptu nap had otherwise done him no good; rather than rested, his pulse was as rapid as if he'd just run a race, and he felt the beginnings of a nasty headache. He massaged the back of his neck.

"Join your wife, William. Take your groom, and Fred if he's ready, but catch up to her."

The snow had begun to fall in earnest since early morning, and several inches at least covered the grounds. His horse was saddled and ready and as Emily advised, a groom waited to attend him. Fred had been unwilling to venture out, and recommended Melbourne do likewise but Emily was insistent and almost pushed him out the door. He turned up his collar, glad of the muffler she had wound around his throat like a good sister and flexed his fingers inside leather gloves before nudging his mount forward.

Victoria would have headed down the Mall, with intention of circling the lake, he surmised, and almost groaned aloud at the thought of going so far simply to ride on their heels, never quite catching up to her party. Their tracks were nearly filled in, which told him they had a probably insurmountable lead. It appeared to be a good-sized party. Victoria and the cousin – funny how already his mind refused to attach the man's Christian name – and probably a half-dozen or more companions.

Melbourne already felt the cold, but it might otherwise have been an enjoyable ride, if only he was at Victoria's side. Why hadn't she waited for him? He brooded on that question for a quarter-mile, cursing the wet snow sending rivulets down his neck, damning the tight throbbing band of pain encircling his skull, and for good measure wished heartily that his wife had substantially fewer cousins to plague him. Then he caught himself, sounding even in his thoughts like a curmudgeonly
old man, and huffed a grudging laugh.

St. James Park, with Buckingham Palace in the distance

St. James Park was mostly a level, well-maintained promenade used almost exclusively by upper class Londoners who wished to see and be seen. Halfway through the flat terrain was relieved by gently sloping banks which lead to the angular man-made lake.

A pair of long-suffering grooms walked the horses back and forth while the Queen and her guests cavorted in fluffy white stuff. The ladies present, well bundled against the wintry air, shrieked with laughter as they pretended to flee from the snowballs being hurled by the males. Melbourne recognized Ernst, Lord Alfred, Prince Alexander – there, he thought triumphantly, I've used his name – and thought he might know several of the others in Royal livery. Lily ran between the two groups tossing armfuls of snow, having not yet grasped the need to shape it into a ball to achieve satisfactory flight. Liam stood behind his elders, methodically packing spherical shapes with his wool-mitted hands and passing them on as fresh ammunition.

Melbourne suddenly felt very old, not as much nostalgic for his own youth as feeling very much out of place here, among people who were not yet born when he reached middle age. He would have preferred to retreat but knew he could not; Victoria had spotted him approaching and waved vigorously.

"You found us, Lord M. I am so glad you came," she exclaimed, clutching his stirrup for balance to prevent her sliding on the treacherous ground. Her face was prettily flushed, cheeks glowing with youth and vigor, eyes sparkling with happiness.

"I did," Melbourne said gently, unwilling to spoil her pleasure with the gruffness he felt. While she still stood with her face turned up, Alexander came up behind her and deposited a handful of snow at the back of her cloak, making her yelp with surprise. He slid to a stop and composed himself.

"Hello, sir. We've taken the children for a ride in the park to see the snow," he said needlessly.

"So I see." He recognized Victoria's curiosity at his curt response and softened it for her sake. "And
they're having some fine sport."

"Alexander promised to teach me how to ski, when we reach Brocket Hall. It sounds quite exciting."

"If you don't break your neck, ma'am," her cousin remarked laughingly, then caught sight of Melbourne's expression and sobered. "I'm joking, of course, sir. My cousin has always been too fearless for her own good."

"I know how much courage my wife has," Melbourne's slight emphasis did not go unnoticed. Melbourne leaned down from the saddle and spoke quietly to Victoria, assuring her with all the sincerity he could muster that while he would return to the palace she should remain with her companions. Victoria would have none of it, shaking her head once and snapping her fingers for the groom to bring her horse.

"The children rode pillion, William. Will you take Liam behind you, if I take Lily with me?" He wondered briefly with whom his children had ridden out and assumed he knew the answer, if it mattered.

They sorted themselves out, and in the end Victoria's maids-of-honor offered space in their open carriage so that Melbourne and his Queen rode side by side unencumbered. Her glance flickered to him several times, and he saw her brow furrow with concern.

"You were only recently ill, William. You should not have come out. I did not think –"

"You need not coddle me, ma'am. I am not so decrepit yet." He heard how he sounded but did not correct the impression. When they'd nearly reached the gate opening onto palace grounds, Melbourne stopped his horse and dismounted.

"I will walk from here, ma'am, I wish to clear my head."

He tossed his reins to a groom and began walking along the long winding drive, already cleared by groundskeepers. Victoria, foolish impetuous girl, attempted to dismount unaided and very nearly landed in an undignified heap, except Melbourne had rushed back in time to catch her in his arms. She did not look back at the riders with her, so it was left to Melbourne to direct them.

Cinders had been spread to melt the ice and snow, leaving the broad walkways safe for pedestrian traffic. Melbourne had intended to trudge along without company, circling the outer walls until he had burned off his excess temper. Instead, uninvited, Victoria walked with him and he had to shorten his stride so as not to appear churlish. He was angry, infuriated, irrationally so, and that self-awareness paradoxically made his foul mood even worse. Angry at whom? Victoria? Never! The cousin who appeared out of nowhere, childhood sweetheart, dancing partner, whatever-the-hell he was to her? Not in fairness; the man had done nothing except respond to his aunt's holiday invitation, and if his behavior toward Victoria was too familiar for a husband's liking, it had not crossed or even approached any line of propriety. Then whom? What? Where could he lay the blame for this simmering rage which threatened to flare at any moment?

She had not brought her large sable muff, a fine thing sent from the other Alexander, Grand Duke of Russia, and her small gloves did little to protect delicate hands from the cold.

With no tenderness, out of practical necessity, Melbourne reached for her hand and folded it into his arm, then replaced his own hand in the pocket of his coat. They marched along in silence, Victoria's breath coming more rapidly as she moved her legs faster to keep pace with his own.
"Are you angry with me, William?" Her voice was small; she sounded timid, frightened even. This was not the voice of a Queen Regnant, but only a girl, unsure of herself. Am I such an ogre? No, he knew that was not accurate; she did not fear him, but the loss of his affection. Any withdrawal, no matter how transient, had the power to humble her instantly. It was not a power he abused, or even wanted, but it was his to wield.

"Angry at you? No, why should I be? How could I be?"

"I don't know, but I feel as if you are. Or, that something is troubling you. Will you talk to me?"

Melbourne sighed audibly in frustration and saw her wince, and suddenly all his ill humor drained away, defused by her innocent concern. He stopped walking and drew her into a convenient alcove formed by two walls set at right angles. She turned her face up expectantly, searching his own.

He lifted her chin with one gloved hand, pinching it lightly in an almost avuncular gesture. Like an elderly uncle might. Except she had a plague of uncles, and cousins too, and he was none of those, or father either. He had taken her maidenhead and awakened her lust, had possessed her in every wonderful way possible, knew every precious inch of her inside and out.

Melbourne met her dark blue eyes and searched them, seeking something he did not want to find. And then he knew and was reminded of what he knew. Knew, with absolute certainty that only a damned fool would ignore at his peril.
"I know I'm a damned fool, ma'am," Melbourne said conversationally. "But that's neither here nor there. It's part of the condition of man."

He wrapped her cloak more tightly around the slim shoulders underneath, and kept his eyes focused on the task.

"But you once said no man is worth anything, until he knows himself for a fool," Victoria's pert response and the clever, expectant look in her eyes wrung his heart anew. *Such a child still, an adoring child, my precious girl.*

"Never mind. I was feeling my age suddenly, but it's a passing thing. One of the benefits of advanced age is the facility for quickly forgetting what troubles one. Speaking of which, shall we continue this inside? My old bones protest this damp and cold. It's damned uncomfortable out here, when we stop moving."

He marked the quick irritation which flitted across her face.

"Why do you *do* that, Lord M? I hate it so when you denigrate yourself and think it's amusing," Victoria thrust out her chin pugnaciously and the sight made him laugh.

"My staunchest defender," he said, putting his lips, thinned by the cold, on her plump warm ones.

They bent their heads against the snow and walked quickly while fat flakes clung to eyelashes and an icy wind nipped exposed skin. As they made their way along the deserted path, Melbourne reflected on her question. It was a reasonable one to ask.

As a very young man entering a society predisposed to lavish affection upon Lady Melbourne's son, he had harbored a sensitive young intellectual's horror of making a fool of himself. He had assumed an exaggeration of the family manner, adopted a contemptuous pose, as of one who
dissdained to compete. Blessed with Victoria's love and a late second chance, he had tried to rewrite the old scripts which had so signally failed him before, but old habits die hard. Better he be the first to say what others were thinking, self-mockery being more palatable than that which was expressed by others. *Or something like that*, he supposed ruefully.

What he knew with absolute certainty, was that Victoria's heart and mind and body and soul were his alone, his to cherish or squander. He saw it in her open unguarded looks, the single-minded devotion blazing in her eyes like twin flames. He felt it in her instant response to his touch, a spark leaping from one to the other, always ready to ignite passion. To sully her innocent, exuberant pleasure in her cousin's company would be to squander the gift she gave him, which was his alone.

That doesn't mean – was it Caro's admonishing tone he heard in his mind? or Emily's or perhaps Mother's? – that he should deny his own feelings, smother them under pretend complacency, conceal all trace of possessiveness.

Once Emily had been so incensed by the ease with which he'd accepted Caro's foibles that his dear sister had even mocked him to others. Emily was outraged when, at the height of a later scandal, she saw William at a concert in company with Caroline and her reputed lover.

"William looked such a fool arriving with them," she had said, according to those who made it their business to repeat the hurtful comments. And it had stung, oh! how it stung, to be ridiculed by his own dear Emily. But by then he had inured himself to Caro’s lunatic excess and only sympathized with the men she caught in her web. Her midnight assignations with Bulwer-Lytton when she had moved him into Brocket Hall to cohabit with herself and her husband, had only roused Melbourne to slightly squeamish pity for the beleaguered young man.

Melbourne knew Caro had lost all touch with reason and it was her own awareness of her rapid decline that propelled her to ever more avaricious pursuit of distraction. So what message should he take? He decided, as he had before when reflecting on the influence of past on present, was that when he had earlier accepted the impossibility of controlling another, he had simultaneously abdicated any responsibility for the impact of his own self-protective instincts.

He did not want to diminish Victoria's happiness or inhibit her naturally open and trusting manner, but she was his wife and he would not allow anyone to forget that fact either.

They helped each other out of damp clothing and ruined footwear and while Victoria waited for her hastily-summoned dresser to arrive she sat herself down on her husband's lap so suddenly he had to catch them both before the chair tipped. Caught off-guard, suspenders still hanging at his sides and shirt unbuttoned, Melbourne gave up any attempt to finish dressing and enjoyed the moment.

"Now, tell me," she said, tilting her head inquisitively. Her blue eyes were direct, probing his own.

"Tell you what, ma'am? That you are a fetching armful, in your corset and drawers? Or that we will scandalize the good Miss Skerrett?"

"She's seen far more than that, my dear husband. Tell me, do you dislike Alexander? Shall I send him away?"

Melbourne gazed into those bright guileless eyes and shook his head a little.

"I don't know your cousin enough to have formed an opinion, but I do not dislike him. Why should you send him away?"

Victoria waited for him to say more, disproving Melbourne's long-held theory that no woman
could bear indefinite silence and must say something to fill it.

"You would do that for me?" he asked finally. Victoria's nod was solemn as a sacrament.

"Of course. You are my husband and your wishes are paramount."

"Not above your own, my love." He stroked her smooth soft cheek with his finger. "Do you think me very foolish? Need I explain myself and remove all doubt?"

Victoria shifted to arrange herself more comfortably in his arms and the light dressing table chair creaked under their combined weight. Melbourne rose, pleased that he was able to lift her without straining, and carried her to the high bed. He dropped her unceremoniously and threw himself down beside her.

"It's not entirely comfortable for me, to see you so pleased in another's company." He shrugged dismissively. "And then I act the fool because I'm not sure what else to do. You have done nothing wrong, sweetheart," he added hastily, hoping to check the concern already darkening her expression.

Victoria turned onto her side, supporting her head on her hand, and Melbourne's eyes went to the breasts threatening to spill out of her corset. He touched her lightly, his fingertip tickling the soft downy hairs in her cleavage.

"I felt as though I was fourteen again, when Alexander arrived. It was such a surprise that I had no time to prepare myself..." her voice trailed off. "And I do enjoy his company. But not to the exclusion of yours. I like him greatly; I love you with all my heart."

"I've become far too accustomed to have you to myself. It's not natural, in a great Court. I'm no country squire or provincial lawyer, who can expect to keep my young wife out of society. Nor would I want to. You are young, and this is the life you will look back on, when you're my age. I would have it be full and happy."

Victoria's eyes welled with tears. She pushed forward on her elbows until her nose nearly touched his. He felt her hand cupping his cheek.

"I am happy, and when I'm your age I will look back on exactly the life I prayed for." She kissed him, and her lips were soft and firm and sweet. Melbourne dragged in a great sigh of contentment and held her head in his hands, moving his lips over hers, deepening the kiss until he felt it to his toes.

Melbourne exerted himself at dinner, drawing out her uncle and cousin, earning appreciative laughter from the younger man and intercepting several measuring glances from the elder. He himself was amused and even a little touched by the Duchess of Kent's saccharine fawning over her late sister's husband. She tossed her head so that her curls bounced and laughed at every word he uttered, incongruous since levity was not the man's strong suit. When the ladies withdrew, and brandy was brought in Melbourne moved to the far end of the table, to more easily converse with his guests. *His guests* – as little desire as he had to put himself forward as consort to the Queen, he found himself quite willing to assert that he was, in fact, master of this household.

"Peace, no matter how precarious, has its advantages. For one, you are able to leave your station and travel. Her Majesty has no such opportunity, as much as she'd like to go abroad and see something of the world." *Put to rest Leopold's nonsensical notion that Victoria and the children could tour the German states as he proposed.* Unfortunately the sentiment was wasted by
Leopold's attention to his cigar.

Melbourne was informed by his son that Emmanuel von Mensdorff-Pouilly was no longer a field officer. He held the rank of lieutenant field marshal and had been made vice-president of the Hofkriegsrat, the Imperial War Council. Emmanuel shrugged modestly.

"I serve where I can be most useful. Men our age must know when to cede the action and glory to younger fellows, eh?" He'd looked right and left, to Leopold and Melbourne, accurately considering them contemporaries.

"Quite right," Melbourne said agreeably. He said all that was proper in praise of the younger von Mensdorff-Pouilly. "You must be quite gratified to see your son following in your footsteps. And your other children…?"

The eldest, Alphons, would inherit the title and already had a promising family of his own. The youngest, Arthur, was still finding his way, Emmanuel said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"He means Arthur is destined to remain der Junggeselle like our cousin Albert. But Albert surprised us all; perhaps Arthur will as well. I tell Papa not to worry so about him."

Melbourne understood the euphemism and the concept well. He avoided responding directly.

"You have a fine family, Your Highness," he said instead, using the honorific appropriate to his nominal familial rank.

"Please, 'Emmanuel'," was the cordial response. "And you, Lord Melbourne? You have no children? No enkelkinder?" Despite the awkwardness of the question Melbourne detected no hidden subtext, only kindness. In his peripheral vision he saw Leopold exchange speaking glances with Ernst. So he had been attending...

Melbourne lifted a brow. Was Emmanuel completely removed from what was common knowledge in England, and most of the royal houses of Europe?

"My son Augustus died some years ago. He was not well."

The young Austrian major spoke intelligently of regional affairs, avoiding any hint of pomposity by the insertion of comical reminiscences, anecdotes which impressed Melbourne by their unaffected humility. He was no poseur at least, Melbourne decided.

Alexander emphasized his Austrian nationality, earning a nod of approval from his father and a contemptuous look from Leopold. That was interesting, Melbourne thought, and filed his impression away for later review. Perhaps they could not all be easily lumped together as Coburg cousins. The family of Emmanuel von Mensdorff-Pouilly originated in Lorraine, and as such their mother's filial allegiance might be of little importance.

When they rejoined the ladies they found Victoria seated beside Emily, with Adina and Sophie seated nearby. Queen Louise sat at the pianoforte, playing some light air. The Queen's mother was the first to mark the entrance of the gentlemen, rising to greet them with as much effusiveness as though the separation had been weeks and not minutes. Victoria had abandoned her early objection to the practice of men lingering at table, a refusal to be without her Prime Minister for a moment longer than necessary, but Melbourne still refrained from keeping them overlong.

She smiled at him with unmistakable warmth and when Alexander would have taken the seat beside her she subtly indicated her expectation that Lord Melbourne would occupy his usual place.
"Oh, William, Emily has been telling me how fine the Hall looks, all decked out for Christmas!"

"I did everything as Your Majesty wished, that is all," Lady Palmerston confirmed. "All the decorations you chose, and the arrangements you specified." Melbourne's glance flickered briefly to Victoria, to gauge her reaction, but she only nodded approvingly. He showed his sister the merest admonishing shake of her head and was met with a look of exaggerated innocence.

"I can't thank you both enough for opening your home to the Court for Christmas," Victoria added.

"It's your home too." Melbourne and Emily spoke in unison, and the three of them looked at each other and laughed.

"I'm not such a ninny as you suppose, Emily. I am fully aware I don't know the first thing about administering a household, and so I am grateful to you for seeing to the arrangements."

Victoria sought her cousin out and called him over.

"Alexander, you will be surprised by Brocket Hall, I think. It's lovely and yet not so stuffy and grand as the palaces. I feel as if I can breathe there and be myself."

The Duchess of Kent coerced Emmanuel into joining her at the whist table. Ernst suggested a game of billiards and took Alexander away, so that only Leopold and Fred remained with Melbourne to entertain the ladies. When they returned some time later he was the recipient of a rather strange look from Alexander, one which passed so quickly he was not certain if he'd imagined it, until Ernst, close on his heels, winked.

Adina replaced King Leopold's wife at the keyboard and began playing a livelier tune. Victoria's foot began tapping in time.

"Alexander, do you remember teaching me the waltz?" She laughed at her mother's shocked expression.

"Oh, Mama, we did it only in private. Of course I would not waltz in company but for only for our amusement. Dance with me now, please?"

Her cousin, to his credit, instantly demurred. "This is not the time or the place for dancing, cousin. We are in a drawing room."

"Oh, nonsense! Come, show my husband how I became such a good dancer. William, I was only fourteen. Alexander and Arthur came to stay, and we had such good times! Dear Feodora was here, and her darling children, and of course the other girls –" she meant, Melbourne knew, Conroy's daughters, once her childhood companions before she declared them the enemy.

She looked from one to the other of them, her expression appealing. Ernst stepped forward and bowed before her.

"If Alexander is reluctant, and with your husband's permission--?"

Melbourne spread his hands wide in a magnanimous gesture.

"But I won't be the only one. Alexander, you have your choice of partners. I claim our cousin for this dance."

Fred's wife leafed through the sheet music and found one which satisfied her. The Ariel Waltz, she told them, an American import.
It was no formal occasion and much merriment ensued, as the young people sorted themselves into couples. Alexander relented and tactfully extended his hand toward his aunt, leaving Ernst's wife to sit beside her elders in watchful silence. Melbourne speculated on the source of her acceptance, rare in a girl who had so obviously married for love. Ernst was likeable and a good friend to Melbourne, and he knew full well no one could know the state of a marriage. What might appear the most callous infidelity in the one and cold indifference in the other, might well feel entirely different from within.

When Adine's hands came to a stop there was so much general protest that she began again, except to Melbourne's surprise the dignified, pious Belgian Queen insisted on taking her place so she could dance too.

"Make my husband partner you. He is a fine dancer," she said in French, not so softly that the others failed to hear. Louise-Marie turned the pages of a songbook until she found a piece she liked.

With only modest protest, Leopold complied, extending his hand and sweeping Adine into an exaggerated pose before squiring her about the floor as though they were in the center of a grand ballroom.

When Ernst took his own wife's hand she blushed scarlet with confused pleasure, leaving Alexander to approach Victoria – somewhat hesitantly, Melbourne noted with surprise.

Louise played well, and Victoria danced well, giving herself over to the hypnotic sway of the waltz. Melbourne had little opportunity to observe since at formal Court functions she rarely took the floor without him as her partner. He forced himself to move past the discomfort of seeing his wife so close to another man, in a dance that had long been condemned as a prelude to intimacy liable to corrupt the youth of his generation. As though we needed corrupting, he thought, his lips twitching in a smile.

It was painful, he conceded, to watch her body so in tune with her partner's, but he was determined to see it through her eyes, as merely a pleasurable recreation, no more. He was relieved when the last note was played.

"One more, oh please, one more! My cousin dances so well. Unless – William, will you dance?" Victoria looked to him eagerly.

Melbourne rarely did so, except to open and close State balls with his wife. Dancing was for younger people, he often opined, but the truth was even the slightest weakness which remained in his left leg after the stroke made him fear a clumsy display. Certainly in a space as intimate as this, any lack of grace would be painfully obvious.

He shook his head. "Excuse me, ma'am, if I decline. I'd far rather watch." He leaned back to demonstrate his intent, stretching his arm across the back of the sofa in a casual pose.

Louise began playing the prelude, and Melbourne instantly recognized it. As though on cue, Adine moved to the pianoforte and began humming. The words set to music were keenly, painfully familiar, from one of Fanny Kemble's performances at Drury Lane.¹ They spoke of a man who longs for the love he knows lies ahead of him in time. As his sister-in-law sang them in her fine simple voice Victoria began swaying in her cousin's arms.

Melbourne lasted only until the second stanza. Still smiling, moving with nonchalant ease, he rose and crossed the distance between them to claim his wife. Alexander surrendered her and stepped away, and Victoria moved gracefully into Melbourne’s arms. As he led her around the floor, he

¹Fanny Kemble was an English actress who performed at Drury Lane Theatre in London. She is best known for her portrayal of the title character in the play "The Country Wife," written by William Congreve. Her performances were known for their emotional depth and her ability to connect with the audience. She was also known for her political activism and her support of women's rights.
whispered the words to the song in her ear as Adine sang aloud.

"I close my eyes in the evening, I never held you near. And as I sleep you come to me, And whisper in my ear" 

“This is better,” she murmured. "You dance so well! I want no other partner, ever. Only you."

---

1 **Love Next Time** will not become popular until later in the 19th century but the lyrics are perfect for Melbourne and Victoria. It does speak in the voice of a man who desperately loves a much younger woman, who loves him in return if only he could accept it.

---

**Music:**

It's your eyes in the sunlight
I saw your tears in the rain
And through the years you were kind to me
I suppose that's your affair
Oh, what a wise soul

Danced up the hill
Drove your hands in mine
Danced in the sun through the rainy pines
And to my love in pain
Oh! Like my love this time.

**Music:**

In your eyes in the sunlight
I saw your tears everywhere
And through the years you were kind to me
I suppose that's your affair
Oh, what a wise soul

Danced up the hill
Drove your hands in mine
Danced in the sun through the rainy pines
And to my love in pain
Oh! Like my love this time.

---

**Music:**

I cuddled you in the feathering
I saw your tears in the rain
And through the years you were kind to me
I suppose that's your affair
Oh, what a wise soul

Danced up the hill
Drove your hands in mine
Danced in the sun through the rainy pines
And to my love in pain
Oh! Like my love this time.

---

**Music:**

I cuddled you in the feathering
I saw your tears in the rain
And through the years you were kind to me
I suppose that's your affair
Oh, what a wise soul

Danced up the hill
Drove your hands in mine
Danced in the sun through the rainy pines
And to my love in pain
Oh! Like my love this time.

---

**Music:**

I cuddled you in the feathering
I saw your tears in the rain
And through the years you were kind to me
I suppose that's your affair
Oh, what a wise soul

Danced up the hill
Drove your hands in mine
Danced in the sun through the rainy pines
And to my love in pain
Oh! Like my love this time.
Melbourne strolled down the corridor, anticipating his audience with the Queen. The letter from India made a thick bulge in his coat pocket, impossible to ignore.

They had retired past midnight, having spent an enjoyable evening in company with their various guests. Melbourne had surprised himself by shedding that transient sullenness inspired by his own insecurity and even mildly regretted how acutely attentive Victoria was to any subtle change in mood. There was something to be said for keeping one's own counsel and not dwelling on those fears which lurked somewhere in the back of everyone's mind.

Melbourne had some inkling that a corner had been turned with the cousin-prince-major, and even suspected its prompting. *Ernst had winked.* In fairness, Alexander had not been forward or behaved like anything other than the older cousin he was, no matter how uncomfortable that might make a jealous husband. While his demeanor was proper in every way, he had relinquished the careful courtesy which he had previously shown. That excess of civility was what one showed an elderly person, and it grated on Melbourne. Whether due only to increased familiarity or to Ernst's intervention, it was far easier to tolerate the fellow after his cousin loosened him up.

It was only four o'clock but near full dark outside the mullioned windowpanes. Victoria's private study was an oasis of light and warmth, with candles lit and a log burning cheerily in the hearth. She sat at her desk, and Melbourne was suddenly, powerfully reminded of their early days. When she came around the desk to greet him he dropped to one knee to kiss her hand, grateful he could still do so with a modicum of grace.

"Your Majesty," he murmured as his lips just brushed Victoria's soft skin.

"William, get up, do." She giggled softly and when he complied he pulled her close, finding her lips with his own.

"Do you know how often I imagined doing that very thing?" Melbourne asked huskily.

"As often as I imagined you doing that very thing? Why didn't you, then?"

"And go to the Tower for my pains? I think not; I am too fond of my comforts to risk them just to kiss a pretty girl."

"'Just'? For that you *should* go to the Tower, and I would send you, except I would miss your
kisses…and…other things…"

Melbourne laughed and twirled her around. Victoria had already changed out of her day dress into an evening gown which bared her lovely shoulders and accentuated the elegant line of her neck. He pulled her against him, her back to his front, and nibbled at her earlobe.

This late afternoon audience was the time they reserved to deal with State business. It was in some part nostalgia for the early years but primarily a practical means of segregating the work of the Crown from their life as husband and wife.

"Shall we get down to business, ma'am? We no longer have to live for these few hours together."

"Did you really?" Victoria's voice was sharp with surprise. Melbourne looked at her from under his heavy lids, the hint of a smile twitching his lips.

"Did I really spend all day thinking about four o'clock? Yes, I did."

"But we rode in the morning, and you dined at the palace nearly every night."

"But that was not enough, never enough." Melbourne felt a stirring in his groin which quickly spread, sending heat up his spine. "I was left to withdraw at the end of the night, to my lonely bed, where I could only imagine…" There was something to be said for unrequited longing, but damned little. It neither purified the soul nor honed man's intellect, as the early classicists suggested. Celibacy was vastly overrated, even when uncoupled from chastity.

"No," Victoria said softly, her lowered eyes showing that unpredictable blushing shyness which could still delight him when it made an appearance. "It would never have been enough. I was never like Elizabeth. I am not made that way."

"And for that, I am grateful."

Melbourne removed the packet containing Cameron's letter and laid it on her desk. As he watched, her hand moved forward, hovered over the bundle – and then withdrew once more.

The evening before, in the privacy of their apartment, Melbourne had shown her the envelope from Cameron, borne in a courier's pouch all the way from India. At Victoria's invitation he had broken the wafer while she was readied for bed.
Melbourne was not pleased by what the first page contained. Victoria had watched him with an expression of mild curiosity as he scanned the subsequent sheets, sensing his displeasure. What Cameron had written in a thick angular scrawl, contained everything he had avoided throughout his ministry, everything from which he would have protected Victoria if he could.

He had offered her the opportunity to see for herself, but Victoria made no move to take the letter.

"It can wait for tomorrow?" Victoria had asked, her gaze tranquil and trusting.

"I think it should," he had answered simply.

The inner chamber, their oasis, sanctuary and retreat. The great bed with its two steps, heavy carved headboard and posts, luxurious jewel-toned canopy and hangings. Those small gestures repeated nightly, homely motions which meant nothing, and everything. An armchair near the headboard, where Melbourne would sit and read by the light of a beeswax taper while Victoria wrote in her journal. Then it would receive his old dressing gown, laid across one arm while she turned back the bedcovers. Turning down the bed was a chambermaid's task, but one which the Queen reserved for her own hands. He would kick off his slippers and settle himself against the goose down pillows while Victoria knelt and said her prayers. Then she would clamber up and in a touchingly childlike manner walk on her knees across the vast expanse of mattress until she reached his side.

She was never unwilling and rarely disinterested but in the nonverbal dialect of marriage, what she wore would signal her amorous intent. If she came to him in a diaphanous French silk negligee, that would say one thing; a convent-stitched white lawn gown with Belgian lace collar becomingly framing her face say another. She could be seduced, always avid for his touch, and Melbourne would take his time, as though it was their first, willing enough – more than willing – to lead only as far as her own inclination followed.

Other times, in one of those filmy gowns or even in her chemise, she would seduce him, shy and sly and pulsingly eager, daring wonderful things with mouth and hands and the deep warm crevice between her breasts. In that, as in everything else, they were perfectly attuned, senses combining in ethereal synergy, the lust of one igniting that of the other, or content to hold one another and exchange chaste tender kisses, talking in whispers before sleep claimed them. Even then – especially then – when surrendering to the vulnerability of sleep, they would touch, never entirely losing contact one with the other. Victoria's cold feet wedged between Melbourne's legs, her knee flung over his thighs, his chin on her shoulder, her fingers grasping a bit of his nightshirt, his nearness comforting her as hers tethered him to earth.

When he'd shown her the letter he was relieved that she put it aside, had only gotten into bed beside him and pillowed her head on his chest. Victoria still looked like the girl she had so recently been, face scrubbed clean and shining in the lamplight, hair brushed into a sable cape covering her shoulders. Melbourne was grateful she had not inquired more closely. There would be time enough in daylight hours, he thought; this place is ours alone and no place to speak of bloodshed and suffering half a world away.

Melbourne's sleep was not undisturbed. Another of his lucid night visions had claimed him, showing him an unfamiliar realm, the same as this one but different. While again he saw himself aged and infirm, it was otherwise not at all the same. This dreamscape was as filled with joy, with happiness and peace as that other sucked him into a morass of despair. He wanted to laugh, to wake Victoria and tell her what he had seen, who he had seen, grown tall and beautiful and strong, as he had once regaled his mother with boyhood dreams
when he called out in the night. Instead he merely turned onto his side, curving his body around hers, and slept with a smile on his face.

Victoria asked him about his day, and Melbourne, happy enough to delay, rattled off the tasks which had occupied him. *This* letter to the Chancery office, *that* letter to a magistrate in the writer's home county, another recommending some worthy for a bishopric to be considered at greater length before setting before Victoria for final decision.

"Do you want to go over the appointments? I once thought bishops died only to plague me, and time has not changed my mind." Melbourne's lips twitched as he spoke, and Victoria nearly smiled in response, but instead she shook her head sternly, drawing a deep steadying breath.

"What does Billy have to say, that you preferred I not read last night?"

Melbourne handed her the pages one at a time – there were many, closely written, lines crossed and recrossed. Several small enclosures fluttered from the sheets, small scraps of paper written in different hands, a ribbon, a lock of hair and a portrait in miniature.

"What day is this?" She asked suddenly. "The eighteenth, I believe?" Her question was rhetorical.

"The battle for the Punjab has begun then. It might even be over," she said, and Melbourne attempted to decipher her tone.

Victoria's faith in her own divine authority, her religious scruples and the moral principles which she was determined to guide her reign all urged her to action. Nobody ever did anything very foolish except from some strong principle, was Melbourne's firm belief and it was his responsibility was to guide her where he could but above all protect her. He would not see her wounded or disillusioned, nor did he want to tarnish her idealism with his own more pragmatic views.

From what he wrote to them, Cameron seemingly had freedom of movement, from one side of the Sutlej to the other – Melbourne couldn't imagine how, but the Irishman was nothing if not persuasive and resourceful. And brave – he gave him that. He had no difficulty in visiting the troops bivouacked around Ferozepur as well as those in Hough's garrison within city walls. And what he had done was write to the Queen introducing the men he met.

A blacksmith's son from York, a widow's youngest son who ran away to enlist at 17 and begged someone to take a message back to his mother. A failed farmer who left his wife and seven children when no work could be found in his home county and sent every pay packet back care of the local vicar. A misplaced young poet who scribbled verse by the light of a stubby candle. Manchester twins who weren't old enough to shave and had never known a woman. Each of them ardent royalists, simple and true in their allegiance to Queen and country, and now they were *real* to her and would weigh heavily on her conscience.

Melbourne understood why Cameron did what he did and roundly cursed him for his damned
impudence. Billy wanted the Queen and her ministers to fully comprehend the human cost of decisions reached in Whitehall. He wanted each man who fought and died to be present when decisions were made, strategic advantages weighed, wanted Victoria to know them and see them and mourn them, not merely part of an amorphous mass relegated to terms such as *troop movement* and *casualties*.

Cameron had undoubtedly made the acquaintance of many more but had chosen twenty and told their stories. Melbourne admitted the wisdom of that tactic; obviously, Billy knew what he was doing in presenting a manageable number. It was easy to detach from two hundred, even easier from two or twenty thousand, but twenty men and boys whose names the Queen now knew, who had mothers and sisters and children – those names would be etched indelibly into her mind.

Melbourne sighed audibly, venting his frustration. Honesty between them demanded he conceal nothing, and Cameron's letter was addressed to them both only as a nod to propriety. It was the Queen whose name was on every soldier's lips as they faced enemy fire, as Billy bluntly stated, and the Queen in whose name wars were fought.

"Billy's letter was posted a week ago. It came in the official pouch, by courier. Do you think by now the battle is over?"

Hardinge's most recent dispatch, undoubtedly sanitized for the Queen's eyes, had arrived only the previous day. He reported that the Sikh army had begun crossing the Sutlej on 11 December 1845. Although he downplayed the element of surprise, he reported as fact what Cameron had previously conveyed, that they had artillery consisting of heavy guns, organized and trained by European mercenaries.

The Sikhs claimed they were only moving into Sikh possessions, but the move was considered hostile and provided the justification for a declaration of war. Tej Singh advanced his army towards Ferozepur where British troops prepared for battle.

"Ferozeshah," she said aloud, tasting the exotic place name, trying it out as though she knew it must become familiar.

It would not become another Kabul, of that Melbourne was tolerably certain. The massacre of Elphinstone's army had been the first defeat of such gigantic proportions in their history, and Victoria had been protected from any real emotional impact. To Peel's credit, she had been spared – as she should be – from the bloody details and Melbourne, Albert and her ministers had worked together to manage the information which reached her. Only later did she come to fully appreciate the full scope of their defeat, and the enormity of their losses made it easier to ignore the real human cost.

"They might already be dead," Victoria said conversationally. Melbourne's gaze narrowed, and he took in her sudden pallor, the two bright spots of color high on her cheeks making her big eyes look even larger.

"When Kings led their armies, they gave more thought to what wars they would fight," she continued. "But now, I am half a world away, warm, safe, comfortable and my ministers push around markers on a map. How many of them ever served? Russell? Lord Palmerston?" Victoria did not add *you?* but Melbourne heard it.

"If you mean that war was ever a noble endeavor then your history was embellished. War has always ever been about greed."

"Then what, Lord M? What should I think? And what should I *do*? What can I do? It's all done in
"What your heart tells you," he responded finally. "You have the right, the duty, to advise, to warn, to represent those higher ideals for which the Crown stands. If it moves you to do so, then express your feelings – cautiously, diplomatically, as I know you will – to Russell, and to the gentlemen of both Houses when you open Parliament."

"Is that enough? Will it be enough?" Victoria asked him, her eyes beseeching. Melbourne's heart went out to her, wanting to assuage her doubt and the sense of responsibility she felt.

"Ma'am, you are God's anointed, and if God Himself can only advise and warn, and then must allow men free will to make their own choices, how can He expect you to do more?" It was a specious argument at best, but one which she contemplated perhaps more seriously than it deserved.

Victoria sat very still, lost in thought. Then, just when he thought he must go to her, her face wiped itself clean of doubt. She heaved a great sigh.

"Oh William, it's so very hard to know what to do, what I can do."

"In most cases, ma'am, you will find it best to do nothing."

Victoria looked down thoughtfully, tracing the words before her with a fingertip.

"I want to see the casualty lists. Please send for Viscount Howick tomorrow morning. Let him know I am aware there was a battle fought and I want to know the outcome as soon as he does. And I want every name, every rank, of any man injured or killed. If there's nothing I can do to affect the outcome, at least I will know their names."

Melbourne would have gone to her, but he sensed that Victoria's straight spine and fixed, tranquil gaze meant she was summoning her own inner strength, and that was a good thing. She blinked once, twice, and then made some banal comment. He responded in kind and gradually they found the thread of their easy rapport once more. He talked of his time with her uncles, taking them both at their request to view the vaulted ceilings and admire the newly frescoed walls in the gallery at Westminster. Victoria related a humorous anecdote involving the little hellions in Leopold's wing of the palace and proudly described their son's increased willingness to stand up for himself to her uncle's brats.

"He had better, else in thirty years we'll have young Leopold's arse on the English throne. Unless someone strangles him in his sleep first. That boy is all greed and arrogance, and not in a good way."

Victoria's mouth softened, and when he saw the dimple appear Melbourne knew she had compartmentalized her earlier concerns as she must. Whatever went on in the greater world and however she dealt with it, he knew her happiness depended on being able set each aside much as she would lock her dispatches back in their box at day's end.

"Have you given any thought to what kind of king our Liam will be?" Victoria asked him. "And what the world will be like when he is king?"
Melbourne was startled by her question. The dream he had had was not far from the forefront of his mind, and he wondered – not for the first time – whether such synchronicity had a deeper meaning.

"I have," he answered slowly, remembering the wonderful hazy bubble of contentment which had enveloped him in the dream, and later, on wakening. "Our son will be king in – oh, a hundred years or so, when I've grown impatient waiting for you to join me on the other side."

Victoria did not pursue it further, and Melbourne was content to have it so. If he was to be periodically tormented by the other dreams, those of a dark loveless place, and if those were meant to be a glimpse of what could have been, then perhaps this other one, where he grew old watching his son and daughter reach their majority, was what should be, even what would be. Or, he told himself laughing, it might all be so much nonsense, in the words Victoria read aloud from Mr. Dickens' novel, "an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of underdone potato."

"Tell me what's so funny, Lord M," Victoria crooned, standing in front of him and extending her hands.

"I laugh because I'm happy, ma'am. You make me happy. And you? Are you happy?"

"I am," she answered, smiling into his eyes. Then her expression brightened even more. "It's Christmas in another week, and we shall be celebrating at Brocket Hall!"
Uncle Leopold and dear Aunt Louise have already been here a fortnight and will remain until after Boxing Day. They have a large set of apartments to themselves, the easier to provide them with the privacy they need for their family. They brought the children with them of course, Leopold who is ten, Phillipe who is eight and Princess Charlotte, five years of age. I say nothing about the two younger children but his eldest is a cruel boy who I cannot like. I would not commit those words to my journals, will form a part of the history of my reign. Here, in these private pages, I can write what I truly feel and no one the wiser.

Our little William, the Prince of Wales, is an angel, so much like his father. My Cousin Alexander has remarked on our boy's resemblance to Albert. Uncle L gave him such a look, the scorn he felt
so apparent that I was quite in charity with him at that moment. Of course, Alexander was not
precisely told how things were and we saw nothing of him during the years of my first marriage,
but how can anyone think an interest in mechanical things, trains and gears and such, matter more
than his beautiful sensitive face which is the mirror image of William Lamb? Or his gentle nature
and pleasing modesty? And above all his indifference to little Leopold’s braggadocio strutting? I
can’t deny that the things he says are no more than what he has overheard, and yet he is old enough
to take pleasure in wounding our son’s tender heart, so it is no mere mimicry. What an awful child!
There, I have said it plain.

12 December 1845

Uncle Leopold and dear Aunt Image have already been here a
fortnight and will remain until after Boxing Day. They have a large
set of apartments to themselves, the eaiser to provide them with the
privacy they need for their family. They brought the children with
them, of course, Leopold who is ten, Phillips, who is eight, and Princess
Charlotte, five years of age. I say nothing about the two younger
children, but his eldest is a small boy who I cannot like. I would not
commit these words to my journals, will form a part of the history of
my reign. Here, in these private pages, I can write what I truly feel
and no one will see.

Our little William, the Prince of Wales, is an angel, so much like
his father. My cousin Alexander has remarked on our boy’s
resemblance to Albert. Uncle Leopold gave him such a look, the scowl he
felt so apparent that I was quite in charity with him at that
moment. Of course, Alexander was not precisely told how things were
and we saw nothing of him during the years of my first marriage, but
how can anyone think an interest in mechanical things, trains and
gears and such, matter more than his beautiful sensitive face which is the
mirror image of William Lamb? Or his gentle nature and pleasing
modesty? And above all his indifference to little Leopold’s braggadocio
strutting? I can’t deny that the things he says are no more than what he has overheard, and yet he is old enough to take pleasure in
wounding our son’s tender heart, so it is no mere mimicry. What an
awful child! There, I have said it plain.

14 December 1845

One would not think that a palace as large as Buckingham House with its 700 rooms could feel so
crowded! I am overjoyed to have my family together, my whole family, and that includes my
brother and sister by marriage, Fred who is so like William I cannot but love him and dear Adine, a
true sister of the heart. Everyone goes on in perfect amity and that is as it should be. Uncle
Emmanuel, quite unlike Uncle Leopold and my English uncles, not proud and stiff, yet properly
reserved with great dignity. Lord M concedes he likes him very well and has great respect for the
way in which he made a success of his career. He has earned the rank of Feldmarschalleutnant and
sits on the Austrian War Council as its Vice President. Alexander first was introduced to my
husband when he was my Lord M, and I recall with embarrassment my confiding foolishness,
going on at length about my cousin's beauty, even demanding William's agreement that he was the most handsome of men. My darling assures me he found such excess quaint and amusing but I do wonder whether he holds it against me now. He has not been himself since my Austrian family arrived. My angel will not say anything, for he would not spoil my pleasure, and yet I feel that he is not entirely pleased by my early exuberance. I always imagined I would like it extremely but in fact, when I see my William troubled I want only to lock us away from the world and smother him with kisses and caresses. When I glimpse some sadness in his beautiful dark eyes, when he becomes quiet and reserved in the company of my cousin, then I am entirely remorseful for allowing childish amusement to cause me to forget my duty and privilege. How I adore my darling Lord M!

17 December 1845

I can write but little. It's long after midnight and my eyes are bleary with exhaustion. More importantly, my darling awaits me in our bed and I long for his arms about me, to feel the warmth from him and hear his heartbeat under my ear. My darling was jealous of me! He confessed it was so! May I be forgiven the tiny flicker of pride for I would never, could never, will never wish to cause my darling a moment's distress.
I am no beauty, even if I can be pretty enough at times. I am small and do not have the air of a Stanhope, or the striking singularity of that Norton woman whose image will reign over the new Parliamentary palace for far longer than I will rule England. I have no conversation, no social ease, and find myself awkward and tongue-tied when I must make small talk with strangers. Lord M once advised me to say anything, no matter how trite, rather than cast about for one of those bon mots which come so readily to his lips. He told me in jest that as Queen everything I say is interesting and the rest is only a parlor trick I will learn with age.

It is no easy thing, to love the comeliest, the most charming, the most universally loved and admired of men, so may I be forgiven for the least bit of gloating that he might know what I felt. But when I understood he felt his age a disadvantage I cared only to reassure him how silly such a notion was. He is not old, he is only Lord M, who makes me feel safe and cherished. My darling, my angel William Lamb, and of all my titles I want Mrs. Melbourne first in my epitaph.

18 December 1845

My official journal will record what transpired, all that I learned from Billy Cameron’s writing, so different from the dry columns of numbers, the stilted language Lord Howick lays before me. The proclamation of war was delivered in my name on 10 December. All that is for the other journals, those records in my own hand which will someday be studied by those who wish to understand the
history of our reign. What I wish to express here comes from my heart and not my head.

There are those, critical, importunate, who imagine that a chief minister exercises supreme authority, just as they think a sovereign is omnipotent. Whether our form of government is better or worse than others, I do not know. Lord M has told me, civilization moves on so that there are no more absolute monarchs in the Christian world. England conceded the rights of all subjects since the Magna Carta was agreed to by King John of England at Runnymede, near Windsor, on 15 June 1215.

Those poor boys Billy wrote of, they will go into battle with my name on their lips, while their mothers at home pray for their safe return, not knowing which day their son breathed his last. Accepting that I can do nothing, not knowing what the right thing to do would be if I could— all that and so much more, is only possible for the Queen with Lord Melbourne at her side. I speak as a Queen now, and not a woman. I could not bear the weight of the Crown without William's tempering words, without his strength to bolster my own, without his compassionate understanding to guide me. I can only console, and by the Grace of God bring some peace to those who must fight and die for our empire. And then I will put it aside and find peace in my husband's arms.
"William! You must persuade your daughter to sit still for an hour. She will listen to you."

Victoria's entrance was made in decidedly unregal fashion. She burst through the door without preamble, leaving a discombobulated footman in her wake.

Far from the more public areas and even those apartments devoted to the life of the Household, this space was Lord Melbourne's private domain, as evidenced by the tilting stacks of books and papers on every surface, spilling in untidy heaps on the floor. Dust was evident in the crevices and tabletops marred by telltale whitish rings from hot and cold beverages abandoned helter skelter. The clutter collectively spoke of the eclectic interests of Lord Melbourne, the worn leather armchair cushions bore the imprint of his shape, and although it frequently Her Majesty's refuge she most often entered hesitantly, as though afraid of rebuff.

Melbourne found his wife's deference both touching and faintly absurd. She would rarely linger and never without his express invitation. While he was never sorry to welcome her, he appreciated having a retreat all his own, free of overwrought splendor, a small dimly lit room of human proportions.

The German painter Herr Winterhalter had had arrived in Leopold's entourage, already commissioned to produce a portrait of the young Duke of Brabant. Victoria had suborned him to capture her children as well, and while Liam had sat without complaint the Princess Royal had no
such patience.

"Can't he capture the essence of our daughter without intruding? Surely he has the skill to observe without requiring his subjects to conform?" Melbourne mused.

He watched from under lowered lids the play of expressions on Victoria's face. Her every passing thought was so easily read that she had no need to speak them aloud. It was one of her most startling and refreshing characteristics, and while it was no advantage to her position it was one – just one – of the things he found most enchanting.

_of course, Lily must sit for her portrait_, Victoria might have said. Melbourne's lips twitched with a suppressed smile. A simple, silly orthodoxy to challenge, but it was all to the good each time she discovered that it was not necessary to conform to every established expectation.

"Never mind," Melbourne laughed. "I'll see what I can do to keep her amused, although I would like our daughter painted in a style which captures something of her character."

Victoria smiled sheepishly. "It does sound foolish," she conceded. "If I can paint the dogs from memory, surely such a famed artist can work from a few quick sketches. Please do speak to Mr. Winterhalter and ask him to try for a more natural pose. And you will persuade Lily to at least sit still for that much?"

"Yes, ma'am," Melbourne said easily, making no move to rise. "My daughter is enchanting, and I have had little opportunity to visit tête-à-tête of late. Perhaps she will grant me an audience."

"Poor darling! Has Lehzen been very strict?" Victoria still stood near the door, and Melbourne extended his hand toward her. She came to him eagerly and sat herself on the arm of his chair.

"Am I a horrible sloth?" he asked, rubbing his unshaven chin. "Still in my dressing gown at nine o'clock?"

There was a time when he would not awaken until noon, not bathe and dress until three, receiving visitors in his dressing gown, still in bed, papers strewn about the covers. And then a young queen with decidedly different habits came into his life and everything changed.

"Perhaps somewhat disheveled, but I like you this way. You are all mine, like this." She put her arm around his neck and bent to brush his whiskers with her lips.

"What are you reading? Punch?" The satirical periodical was just one guilty pleasure to which Melbourne had introduced the Queen.
"One often finds unadulterated truth in satire," Melbourne's pious tones belied by the twinkle in his
eyes. "And in far more palatable form than prosing worthies who lecture."

He glanced up at her and then, when she settled in more comfortably, began to read aloud.

"For, isn't Hunger sacred? isn't Starvation solemn? And the Want of a nation is staring DANIEL
O'CONNELL in the face, and the LIBERATOR replies with a grin and a jibe –"

As he read Victoria's fingers played in his hair. Melbourne found it a soothing, entirely luxurious
sensation, and he knew his soft sigh gave him away. Interludes like this brought forcefully home
the sublime perfection of his life, only emphasized by the slight sense of unreality. Is it real? At
home in my dressing gown, in Buckingham Palace, with her soft hands tending me so lovingly? It
is all like a dream…

"Mmmm," he heard her croon before she pressed a kiss to his forehead. Melbourne rubbed his chin
against small firm breasts, earning a girlish giggle.

"I like that," she whispered in response. "When you haven't shaved. And when your hair is long
and mussed…like this…"

"Overlong, ma'am. I am in sore need of barbering. I'm afraid I look quite disreputable."

"No!" Victoria protested, as he guessed she would.

"Far too much silver in there now, for long hair to be becoming." It was true, much of the dark
replaced by gray that was still disconcerting to behold in the mirror.

"You are handsome in any case, but when your hair has grown out especially so. Leave it long for
me? Until after we sit for our portraits? For the investiture?"

"The investiture," Melbourne heard the distinct lack of enthusiasm in his voice and hoped it did not
cause her to pull way. He was not ready to relinquish her yet, and to emphasize that point gently
scratched his cheek against the silky-smooth skin over her collarbone.

"The investiture, Lord Melbourne." She did pull away then, so she could look at him clearly.

"It will be as private as we can manage without subterfuge. Will you be terribly displeased? Do you understand why it means so much to me?"

Melbourne sighed, resigned, and picked up the hands she folded in her lap. He kissed first one, then the other.

"I know you abhor public attention and consider ennoblement…” Victoria struggled for the word she wanted as Melbourne waited, curious. *Did she understand, when he scarcely did so himself?*

"I know you refused an Earldom when my Uncle William begged you to take one, and the Garter. I know you've been refusing a Dukedom since – since I first offered. You are first Lord in the land, and I would make you King, Prince Consort, set you above all others, including the Princes of the Blood. Or I would live with you in America as Mrs. Melbourne. It's all the same to me. But I *will not* and cannot have you slighted, and if titles mean nothing to you, they mean everything in some quarters."

"Such as the north wing?" Melbourne meant Leopold's quarters.

"Among others. I don't know *yet* how we will resolve the issue of the children's true paternity. I have considered adoption – "

"My love, that's impossible, or at least extremely inadvisable. There is no precedent for stepfather adoption of an heir to the Crown."

"We will leave that consideration for now. But a Dukedom – for the children's sake – and the resulting precedent outside the Household – for the dignity of the Crown – to make things easier for plenipotentiaries credentialed to the Court – "

Melbourne conceded his innate aversion was as foolish as it was futile. Each time the subject was raised a feeling of almost superstitious dread overcame him. To push that thought away he pulled her fully onto his lap and held her in his arms.

"For the plenipotentiaries, ma'am? – " and he made her giggle again, loving the sound, kissing her so that his beard tickled. Victoria's hands cupped his cheeks, her thumbs rasping against the gray-black beard sprouting there and kissed him back with great deliberation. His papers slid to the floor forgotten.

Melbourne's senses full of her, the taste, the feel, the heady scent and time was forgotten as he lost himself in the moment. They were only interrupted by the unmistakable sound of Baines, the valet, clearing his throat.

"Leopold has summarily announced his intention to travel by way of Claremont," Victoria told Melbourne while he was dressing.

"Oh? Stockmar have another cousin tucked away at Longwood House?" He elongated his upper lip and deftly ran the straight razor up and down in sure, quick strokes. "Or has Mrs. Bauer returned for an encore?"

He intended no slight; her uncle's peccadilloes were expected for a man of his rank and station. Melbourne knew Victoria, reared in isolation from society by a strict Protestant spinster, felt
otherwise, but it was to her advantage she become accustomed. Not for them – every aspect of their union was unique unto itself and he felt no desire to look beyond the marriage bed – but for the world at large, the world in which they lived.

Melbourne idly wondered whether, if he were still young, he could as readily promise fidelity even to Victoria. Such a thing was impossible to speculate; everything about them was predicated on their age difference, as much as he might rue it. He would not be her Lord M and she his precious girl, if they were the same age. *It had to be as it is.*

"If so, I haven't heard, but I suppose that's the other logical explanation," Victoria said thoughtfully. "I thought he was seeking some peace and quiet away from his mismanaged brood. Dear Aunt Louise is completely overwhelmed and is far too saintly to see just how awful little Leopold is. The other two are not much better, but that boy –"

"Can we send that brat to the Tower? If we convince him it's a great honor, and only his due? We can remind him of the fame of those princes who went there in the past…"

Melbourne rinsed the long silvery blade and paused so his valet could strop it. Victoria would fall silent at each application of blade to skin, holding her breath in dread of a mishap. As often as she'd watched, fascinated by the ritual, she never quite trusted him to avoid injury.

"You are leaving for Brocket Hall in advance of the rest of us, and by way of the Palmerston estate. Do you have an actress tucked away I should know about?" Melbourne glanced at her quickly and saw she was teasing.

"You are unbecomingly pert, Mrs. Melbourne. Certainly, I have no actresses you should know about. I believe such affairs only prosper in the absence of knowledge." Victoria rolled her eyes expressively and he dabbed a bit of snowy lather onto the tip of her nose, then waited for her to take the hot towel Baines wrung out over the basin and apply it delicately to his face.

They parted ways, Melbourne strolling down to the sunny high-ceiling chamber in which Herr Winterhalter had set himself up with the tools of his trade. His thoughts had been consumed with Victoria's talk of investiture and his own aversion to openly denying her, but the sight of his daughter provided swift intercession.

The Princess Royale was seated on a raised dais, her position further augmented by a stack of boxes which teetered precariously. Elizabeth had been dressed in a long white lace gown, with a red sash across her breast, a small scepter in her hand tilted like a lance and an exquisite miniature tiara nearly lost in the cloud of dark curls which framed her face. A ferocious scowl advertised her royal displeasure.

Melbourne knew he would be undone if he met her gaze squarely. Instead he averted his eyes and walked slowly toward the painter's easel, hands clasped behind his back as though he had all the time in the world. It was too easy, too tempting, to figure always as his little girl's hero, and Baroness Lehzen, undeniably wise in the ways of child-rearing, had impressed upon him the need to permit others to do what he could not. Lily's late misadventures, the sight of his beloved, wayward babe carried lifeless from the river, tempered his desire to permit her every freedom.

Despite the obvious difficulty of getting her to sit, a remarkably lifelike watercolor image had been sketched onto the artist's pad. Melbourne was inordinately pleased, and His Lordship's open admiration did much to soothe the offended sensibilities of an illustrious court painter.

He said everything that was proper and true in praise and won a reprieve for his daughter in the
process. Only when she was dismissed did he swing her up into his arms.

"Papa take Lily away," she demanded.

Melbourne neatly caught the tiara midair as it toppled free and plucked the gold rod from her hand just before it could drop and shatter the crystal orb at its tip. Setting both aside, he carried her away.

One plump arm wrapped securely around his neck, a mop of hair as dark as Victoria's, as curly as his, her eyes as big and blue as Victoria's but darker, fringed in thick black lashes, and her mother's heart-shaped face, this joyous headstrong child embodied everything in his life that was almost too good, too perfect, to be entirely believable.

Once before, so long ago it was nearly lost in the mists of age, he had held an infant girl who only lived a day and had thereafter abandoned all thought of more children. He had poured all his hopes, blighted to be sure, into Augustus, pursuing every new treatment no matter how far-fetched, bringing in physicians and tutors who provided little more than distraction for the boy's mother. There would be no more children, he had accepted; that part of his life with Caro was over, never to be reanimated. He had never been tempted to remarry, never entertained the idea of becoming a father again, was content with a carefully constructed bachelor existence devoted to work and pleasure.

Melbourne did not regret a moment of the past, but the course of his life had seemed written when he'd buried first Caroline, then Augustus. And then came Victoria.

Through some alchemy which bore no scrutiny, his life had veered radically off its predicted course and this sprite in his arms was the result, she and her brother who-would-be-King and their mother, the last and eternal love of his life. If it all seemed too good to be true, he might be forgiven for fearing any further disruption of fate, what the eastern holy men called karma. And that, my love, is why I must refuse a Dukedom or any public ennoblement. No garter, no title, no especial public recognition. Do you understand?

Even imagining the delivery of such a speech made Melbourne wince, knowing how ridiculous he would sound. He pictured Victoria's direct, guileless gaze, her look of incomprehension.

Melbourne had long immersed himself in the study of religion and philosophy, attempting to give the inchoate form and definition. If he himself could not properly explain or even understand why everything precious to him felt transient and ephemeral, how could he expect Victoria, impatiently dismissive of any doctrine more esoteric than that espoused by the Anglican Church, to understand?

"Shall we tell Mama how well you sat for Herr Winterhalter? And what a fine portrait he will produce?"
A delicate curtain of white, lacy snowflakes fell unappreciated outside the window of a closed carriage, one of three such which made slow progress down St. Albans Road. The driver, a seasoned unflappable fellow called John Coachman by the Quality he served, John Baxter to his own, had a muffler wrapped tightly and a slouch hat pulled low. Icy rain the night before had coated the roads with treacherous glaze and a single lapse in attention could cause even the most sure-footed animal to stumble. There would be no keeping the iron-wheeled vehicle upright. He was a Hertfordshire man born and bred, served the Lamb family as his father before him and his before that all the way back to old Sir Matthew Lamb, one of a select few entrusted with the maintenance of the estate during its master's long absences.

His Lordship's absences had grown more frequent in the past few years, sometimes months at a stretch between visits, but when the master did return it was with his wife and the children, and all the fine London servants and soldiers who came with. The past month all the staff had been thrown into a tizzy by preparations for a royal holiday visit. The little royal mistress was a sweet undemanding thing, was the opinion of all who served her at Brocket Hall, but she was bringing with her a whole bevy of Kings and princes and assorted foreign gentry.

There was no need to change horses in Barnet, the halfway point and only fit stage house. Their pace was so slow the teams were scarcely tasked. Instead, John Coachmen had instructed the post boys to brush the animals down well and dry their sleek coats, then provided a half ration of bran mash while his passengers refreshed themselves. They were only just loosening the harnesses when Lord Melbourne spoke for the first time, only to say that he wanted to be back on the road within the hour.

The same icy rain had been coming down in fits and starts all the previous day. Buckingham House was a glowing pile of brick at dusk, seen in the distance through heavy fog when they finally approached. Melbourne had done his best to subdue rising impatience throughout the afternoon and was not churlish enough to protest every time Adine said "just one more stop." He was heartily
Melbourne had been disappointed to find their apartments empty except for Baines, reading beside the grate. His valet painstakingly placed a marker in his book and removed his spectacles before rising. The great copper bathing tub had been halfway filled and several basins of water simmered on the stove, filling the dressing room with not-unwelcome scented steam. He surmised, from towels spread out to dry and a hint of the light floral fragrance Victoria favored, that she had already dressed and departed.

"The Court uniform?" He'd been surprised at the outfit Baines had ready. The heavy gold-braided jacket and accompanying formal white wool knee breeches were generally required only for State occasions. Victoria's admiration when he wore it was almost flattering enough to almost compensate for the discomfort of wearing it, but even she was unlikely to insist on its appearance at the family table.

Baines had only inclined his head, then proceeded to lay out small clothes and shaving gear.

Melbourne had been equally surprised to find a pair of equerries standing outside his door. When he emerged, they swept low bows in almost-comical unison. He had only momentarily puzzled over their presence, then shrugged and accompanied them.

"The Queen requests your presence in the Throne Room, Your Lordship. The Honorable Gentlemen have already assembled."

Why, he castigated himself, why didn't I question further? Question any of it, all of it? Am I that easily led?

To what end? was the only response. The thing was done, your humiliation all but complete. It needed only flight to cap an event which would live in the annals of the absurd.

Their thick shoulder muscles rippled under well-kept chestnut coats, and polished leather harnesses laid easily over the beasts, as eager as their master to be underway. The three coaches in their party, Lord Melbourne's own followed by the Palmerstons' and a heavily-laden third vehicle bearing trunks, household supplies and six or seven London housemaids all squeezed in together, set out under a clearing sky. By midday the road was only wet, ice warmed and worn away by the morning's traffic and temperature hovering just above freezing.

A few muttered comments from the grooms and postilions, accompanied by hearty guffaws, earned them giggles from the maids and a terse reprimand from Mr. Baxter. Lord Melbourne strode past them all unseeing, ignoring them as well as Lord and Lady Palmerston, and demanded his own horse.

"I will ride the rest of the way," he snapped, nearly shoving the young man aside who was hurriedly working to untie the animal's lead reins.

Melbourne craved the single-minded focus of a hard ride as greatly as he wanted to avoid of Emily's knowing looks. He preferred to be alone with his thoughts, to exhaust his roiling emotions with a hard trot up Dancer's Hill, a final all-out gallop down Marford Road and then to cross the
Lea spent and ready to collapse in his own bed. Even that thought brought a brief sharp twist of pain – that after six years in hers, he still considered the master chamber at Brocket Hall as his own bed. It reminded him that nothing behind him was his. It was all hers, would always be hers, to control as she willed.

As promised, they were all waiting. A handful of Privy Councilors hastily gathered – or so he assumed – from those few who still in town and willing to be so summoned. Viscount Canning, the Duke of Bedford, Russell’s Vice-Chamberlain Edward Fitzalan-Howard. Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, Palmerston on behalf of the new government and even his old adversary Brougham. Charles Greville, mincing and simpering, feet dancing with nervous excitement. Already imagining how he would write the account, what sharp acidic wit he could employ to maximum effect, no doubt, Melbourne reflected bitterly.

The anteroom was bathed in candlelight reflected in countless mirrors, an abundance of gilt and deep yellow walls, the glitter suffocating in its brilliance. Standing in the doorway, Melbourne felt as though he could not breathe, as if the room itself was attempting to smother him. Through the doorway beyond, the throne room itself – not the much-larger version used on great State occasions, but this smaller but still-grand space reserved for...

Two thrones stood side-by-side, before a deep-scarlet hanging. Victoria sat in one, immobile, lifeless as an effigy under her cloth-of-gold cloak. Melbourne was suddenly sure he would vomit on his shoes and swallowed hard in preparation.

He soon left the slower coaches behind, using his heels to spur his horse on, prepared to treat the market road as he would a hunt course, swerving around obstacles, ready to nudge his animal over any barrier which might present itself. Melbourne had never been an enthusiastic huntsman, had attended the more notable hunt gatherings in season only to see and be seen at the balls and take his ease indoors while hard-riding sportsmen rode the course, returning scratched, torn and muddied. Now he rode as though to a pack of hounds, driven by the cacophony in his mind and the piercing pain in his heart.

Improbably after all that had passed, what tormented him most was such a simple thing, the feel of holding Victoria on his lap while she wound her arms around his neck. Childlike in her eager, innocent affection, the look of unguarded adoration in her eyes, the negligible weight of her. It was easy to forget how small she was, until she climbed onto his legs and curled herself against his chest. How utterly impossible to reconcile that Victoria with the other, a scheming, calculating autocratic puppet-master.

Since childhood Melbourne had concealed and for the most part successfully subdued a naturally hot temper, disliking above all things a disturbance of the smooth exterior he so carefully cultivated. Only a few times over his decades of living had he lost all control, and never with Victoria. With Caroline, oh yes – in that time between the first blush of newlywed bliss and later, when he resigned himself to the impossibility of marriage as an institution and withdrew both emotionally and physically. Caro had begun the rows, but he had ended them, unleashing all the unbridled fury of which he was capable.

It was not like that with Victoria, and could never be, no matter how angry he had been. She did not take the same sensual pleasure in seeing his outbursts that Caro had; when Victoria raged it was injured pride which propelled her. Seeing the horror rise in those blue eyes had quickly quelled his temper, and he was as sick with remorse for having lost control as he had ever been after those early battles with Caroline. Melbourne found it as difficult to forgive Victoria for having
brought that buried part of his character to the fore, as he did her original offense.

If she was hurt, then he was too, and for better reason. He had asked nothing else of her, had served, loved, honored and cherished her, yet Victoria the queen had overruled him on the one thing he asked. Worse, infinitely worse, she had abandoned cajoling and acted with high-handed determination, enlisting her ministers – his old friends and colleagues, the peers he had known from boyhood – in a farce more ridiculous than any performed on Drury Lane. The searing sting of public humiliation was a thing no man could bear, and he had borne it before, always at the hands of a woman.

They stood in two rows, not precisely with the rigid bearing of full Court ceremony but at attention nonetheless. Melbourne knew he did not imagine the amusement he saw in more than one pair of eyes, did not mistake lips tightening in near-smirks. Yet each man bowed as he approached, bows he returned in exacting degree, and although a few heads bobbed in collegial greeting no one spoke.

Melbourne had instantly adopted a nonchalant air, his own features a pleasant bland mask. "I will do what I have always done, smile and carry on."

To give himself something substantive to focus on, Melbourne’s practical mind ran quickly through his study of law and knowledge of tradition. What precedent existed, was as varied as the occasion. Wellington's investiture had been a fully public affair, coming as it did on the heels of his victory over Napoleon, the well-deserved reward from a grateful nation. His title was created and brought with it a respectable income from a grateful nation, unanimously approved by Parliament. If there was no grant of income then there was no need for the assent of either House; only the sovereign could award a dukedom. The last to be created in Parliament by the fastening of a ceremonial sword took place in the 17th century. Since then an investiture was what the sovereign made it, the title itself conferred by letters patent under the Great Seal by the Sovereign’s authority.

He had approached the throne because it was expected of him, had knelt and kissed the small white hand she extended, the hand which bore his mother’s garnet signet ring. A cheap trinket in comparison with the wealth of jewels held in the Tower, and it almost made him flinch with embarrassment, remembering the gravity with which he had slid it on her finger.

Lyndhurst had read the proclamation, Victoria had done her part and bid him rise and take his place beside her on that second throne. At that his pretend complaisance rebelled, covered quickly by old Arthur Wellesley stepping forward to pay his respects.

Melbourne's fevered energy, his frantic pace, ebbed along with the horse's endurance. He added the shame of abusing a dumb animal to his list of sins as he slowed to a walk, knowing that if he were to stop altogether the sweating beast would soon take a chill. He felt only a great, overwhelming fatigue and beneath it, cold emptiness.

When he tried to parse out the toxic mix of emotions, he found genuine hurt under battered self-respect and simmering resentment. Righteous anger had strengthened his spine last night, facing down a Victoria he did not recognize and could not like. He'd tried to withdraw as soon as he decently could. Their guests left with unseemly haste, claiming icy streets as an excuse to cover the few short miles between Buckingham and their own residences in the city. There was nothing he could say, nothing he dared say in the grip of anger such as he had not felt for a very long time.

Victoria would not have it; would not grant him – them – the mercy of a reprieve. She persisted, demanding a conversation he was not ready to have.
"The thing is done, ma'am. You went ahead without permission and got your way. Behold, the Duke of Melbourne." He had executed a sardonic bow and retreated ceremonially, without turning his back on her, in the most formal usage to underline his point.

*Permission? The title was mine to bestow. I needed no permission.*

"Not even mine, ma'am?" he had asked, expecting no answer. "With your permission, Your Majesty, I should like to withdraw."

He had finally pierced the fog of her self-satisfaction, and watched the impish grin slowly fade.

*I knew you were too modest, too self-effacing to accept unless I...*

"Unless you held me up to mockery and scorn by proceeding behind my back?" he'd spat out the words, already knowing it was too late to stem the furious tide overtaking him. "If you wanted a duke, a prince, even a king, they were in no short supply. I believe I told you once, when you offered the Garter, that I was proud of having accepted no titles, no honors, from either you or your uncle."

He'd proceeded to mock her notion of his so-called modesty, calling her naïve and her notions childish. He did not go so far as to tell her to her face that her belief in her own divine authority and the magical nostrum of royal patronage was as ridiculous as it was unbecoming; that her insistence on granting him an exalted title and a seat beside her on the dais was offensive to his very nature, aristocratic by birth and refined by temperament, member of a Whig dynasty which viewed their German sovereigns and the gilded artifice of the Court little more than quaint.

It had cut him to the core that the precious, unaffected and adoring girl he held in his arms at night could turn into a quintessential autocrat, making it plain she did not consider him worthy without elevation to her lofty height. All that and more had raced through his consciousness, and while he exercised all the control he could muster Victoria's own hot temper rose and both flung words readily taken out of context to mean far more than intended.

"Wellington was honored for his heroism in conquering Napoleon. What did I conquer by comparison? Your maidenhead. Deflowering a virgin queen, cuckolding her lawful husband, deserves no such public recognition."

"Is that how you will be remembered, Lord Melbourne? You describe a scoundrel. What legacy is that for my son when he is King?"

"Perhaps I am not meant to be remembered. When I am gone, let me rest in peace in an unmarked grave, forgotten by history. You will be a great Queen, and I a footnote in the history of these times. For the sake of your son, let it go."

Melbourne had seen her face soften, the tears well in her eyes, heard her gasp audibly.

"And all this – all we have – us – you would have preferred no one ever know. You are sorry I forced you to marry me."

The rest of it devolved quickly into fast-flung recriminations, attack and counter-attack, no different than a thousand marital skirmishes in a thousand households throughout England. A squall over as swiftly as it began, leaving Victoria white-faced and trembling. It was that which put the brakes on his own humiliation-driven anger, damped down simmering resentment.

The carriage train caught up to Melbourne shortly before they turned off the Great North Road, and he stopped them long enough to fling himself out of the saddle. Climbing wearily into the coach he
looked a warning at Emily and turned his collar up, hoping to sleep the final distance.

He had little rest the night before, harsh words ringing in his ears, unable to put away the image of his contemporaries gathered to witness that humiliating display. *An unwilling Duke, how peculiar.* What was worse, *Melbourne the ambitious schemer playing his long game to perfection or poor hapless William Lamb, manipulated by another woman, dancing to her tune?*

Melbourne had every intention of passing the night alone, and to that end locked himself in his study with a bottle of Madeira. As the level in the bottle went down, so did his stony resistance to the sound of soft weeping which passed through even stout palace walls. *Or maybe it is only my imagination,* he'd thought. The empty bottle was discarded with a violence which sent it to the floor with a thud and when he went to the sideboard in search of another, traitor feet led him in a different direction.

Victoria had not locked the door against him as he'd half expected. When he turned the handle she only continued to stare at the full moon, curled up like a child in her snowy white gown on the window seat. He had made his unsteady way to her and laid a hand on her shoulder. Victoria wordlessly followed him to the bed and allowed herself to be put under the covers. When he sat beside her and held out his arm she'd come to him without speaking, and so they rested, bodies sharing the comfort of warmth and companionship even while minds and hearts remained far apart.
Chapter 28

"Beware the fury of a patient man."

John Dryden

It must not be thought that the Queen might disappear for an entire evening and spend the following day holed up in her office, without giving rise to much speculation. Most of that, in a household comprised primarily of women with too little occupation and too much experience, was fairly accurate, if only they knew. Little sympathy was to be found among those who whispered.

*Life isn't a fairytale and it's time our royal miss discovered that for herself.*

*Lord Melbourne is a saint to give in to her every whim. Perhaps he finally put his foot down.*

*William Lamb a saint? Hardly! But he is a man and I think sometimes our little Vicky is ignorant of what that means outside the bedchamber.*

*Surely you meant to say, 'What it should mean.' In his case, I see no sign that poor William has much to say about anything.*

*Perhaps he finally came to his senses.*

Those two who had served longest and knew the man of which they spoke most intimately were Charlotte Canning and Emma Portman. Neither of these showed any inclination to contribute their own thoughts, but neither did they censure the others. They merely exchanged speaking glances.

Chatter fell silent when the Duchess of Kent swept in. She had lately taken to high Spanish collars, the better to hide a scrawny aging neck, or so it was most spitefully remarked. The stiffened elevation of these only reinforced her haughty posture – nothing new in that, to be sure – but her face was thought to be even more grimly disapproving than usual.

Those who had not been invited to holiday with the family were to be freed from duty for a fortnight beginning on Saturday the 21st of December. The elder Victoria's disdainful gaze swept over the women clustered together, and beckoned Lady Portman.

"Without the Queen's permission, ma'am?" was that woman's shocked response to the instruction she had been given. She received no answer, only a cool expectant stare, and inclined her head in grudging agreement.

"You may all leave at once. The Queen has no need of your services until after the New Year." The younger maids-of-honor, Victoria's contemporaries, were no friends to her and the ladies-in-
waiting, positions of greater responsibility held by the wives of aristocrats and prominent politicians, were too poised and sure of their own consequence to reveal what they might have thought.

"You will receive your usual stipend, and your Christmas gifts will be brought to you while you pack."

Delivered in a thick German accent, this last may have been intended as a consolation but only fueled greater speculation.

"Does Her Majesty need me, Your Highness?" Lady Portman asked, determined to accept her own dismissal only from the Queen. She had been invited to Brocket Hall as a guest, and if she was sent away from Buckingham House with the others it was where she would go. Edward, Lord Portman, was content enough to putter about his stables and cowsheds ten miles distant and could be easily sent for, to lend his dubious countenance.

"Do as you will, Lady Portman. I would not presume to dismiss you." The Duchess adjusted the lace shawl spread low over her shoulders, carefully arranging its graceful folds. When her light blue eyes met Emma Portman's gaze, she permitted a trace of concern to show.

"I only want to spare my daughter and her husband the presence of those who are not discrete. And loyal."

**

Victoria concentrated every bit of attention she could muster on the work before her. No more than a stack of notecards, each bearing holiday wishes, that would be delivered to the many hundreds of servants who remained in Buckingham and Windsor palace on Christmas morning and sooner to those going home on leave.

She had asked for them to be brought to her, so she could add a brief message in her own hand and sign each one. The Chief Steward had been unable to hide his open-mouthed shock.

"All…nine hundred-odd, Your Majesty? Surely, you mean deliver to your clerks?"

The mirror told her that her eyelids were puffed and shiny, and even rice powder and rouge surreptitiously borrowed from her mother's dressing room could not disguise a splotchy complexion and reddened nose.

Victoria determined she would see no one and work provided the ready excuse. Her own bedchamber was not as inviolate as the Queen's Closet, that innermost working study where she had once met with Lord Melbourne for her lessons in Statecraft – the very memory made her choke out a sob – and hence was reserved for private audiences with each Prime Minister.

She would have lain abed longer if she could, but an hour past her usual eight o'clock rising already had her dresser, underdresser and several housemaids whispering outside her door. William had risen at first light, untangling himself gently from her grasp. Victoria had held her breath, unwilling to move or give any sign she was awake, fearful of what the day would bring. He did not speak to her then, only went into his dressing room where she heard him undressing himself – no doubt eager to avoid the inevitable notice of his valet, that he had slept in those white silk breeches and shirt from the evening before.

Victoria still lay in unconvincing approximation of sleep when he'd returned. She knew she could pretend no longer, when she felt him seat himself on the very edge of their bed.
"Victoria," he'd said, in a quiet careful tone. That sweet roughness in his voice, alternating high and low, so familiar. The absence of his usual teasing, light-hearted manner, frighteningly unfamiliar.

"Shall I call for your maid? Do you wish to rise?"

She had peered up at him from under heavy lids, her hair in a tangle over her face. He would push it away, surely, brush it back with one tender touch? But he did not, and so, resigned, Victoria pushed herself to a sitting position and tried to reassemble the remnants of her dignity.

"You are dressed for travel. You will ride?"

William had almost smiled then, she saw his tight lips quirk, one of his thick brows nearly arch. Instead, he had merely answered in the affirmative.

"I will ride part of the way, weather permitting." He stood, and Victoria examined him, polished knee-high boots, close-fitting buckskin trousers and heavy caped great coat, while he slapped his gloves against his palm. The gesture spoke of impatience, or perhaps, discomfort if the urbane Lord Melbourne felt any such thing. Victoria was aware of her disadvantage in position, barefoot in her night gown, still in bed. She wished viciously that she had had the gumption to rise even earlier than him, so she could stand armored by stays, imposing gown and her finest jewels. Instead she summoned every ounce of dignified reserve.

"Very well. Have a safe trip." She had almost added 'Lord Melbourne', it was on the very tip of her tongue only because it would have flowed so well and enhanced the image of remote unconcern she wanted to convey. But she could not do it, the cold designation would not come.

"I will see you on Monday then. Brocket Hall looks forward to welcoming Queen and Court."

Victoria stared at him, assessing the import of his choice of words. Was he being coolly sarcastic? Feigning distance? She was not aware, but her uncertainty shaped her face into a quizzical expression, head tilted slightly, which nearly broke through her husband's reserve. Melbourne had already pulled on soft chamois riding gloves, but he lifted her hand and bent to kiss it. When she did not react, he nodded briefly and departed.

Seeing his shoulders, the back of his thick curly hair, every strand of which she knew better than her own, Victoria felt hot tears flood her eyes, her nose fill. As soon as the door closed she gave herself over to wild sobbing.

Three hours in, her hand was cramped and her neck stiff from bending over the blasted cards. A stack several inches tall awaited delivery and yet more remained, ready for her signature.

She had turned away her mother when the Duchess tapped tentatively at the outer door, and sharply reminded the footman standing outside exactly what 'do not wish to be disturbed' meant. Surely that should have ensured privacy, and Victoria had gone back to her desk when Lady Portman entered so suddenly she nearly collided with her mistress's back.

"Emma, I do not want to be disturbed. I have much work left to do, as you can see."

"Fiddlesticks, ma'am. There are clerks for that, and the attendants your mother had me send away and – oh, any number of able hands to scratch out VR for you and lay on a drop of wax."

"Nevertheless, I wish to do it myself. That will be all, Emma."

"You and William had a spat? Long overdue, if you ask me. This idyll of yours is neither healthy
"Lady Portman, you forget yourself!" Victoria had drawn herself up to her full height, and nearly five feet of regal outrage confronted Emma Portman.

"William is far too careful with you and as a result, you do not respect him as you should. There, now do you wish to dismiss me? I will surrender my keys and return to private life gladlly."

"How dare you?" The Queen nearly hissed, and it would not have been entirely surprising if she had spat like an angry cat.

"I'm not saying it's entirely your fault. You are young, and William is weak. He will avoid confrontation at all costs, until the resentment is bound to boil over at some point. And last night's performance was…exactly what anyone who knows him might know was his boiling point. What on earth made you think it could end well?"

Victoria had retreated until the hard edge of her desk pressed into her thighs. Her hand touched something and without pause she gripped it and flung the inkwell hard against the wall. It fell unharmed to the floor, leaving a garish black design spreading out and down across richly textured wall covering. Tiny black dots freckled both the Queen and her Mistress of the Bedchamber.

"I love my husband and he loves me," Victoria asserted needlessly. Emma Portman showed her that insufferably smug smile once more, no humor in her eyes to soften the disdain.

"I do not doubt it. You have taken the finest man who ever lived and turned him into a…a house pet. Like your dogs and your monkey and that miniature horse King Louis-Phillipe sent you. Like the exotic animals in the royal menagerie. Pampered, spoiled, catered to and undoubtedly loved. But are they respected? Do they have the freedom of self-determination? Do you ask them what they want or merely lavish them with what you choose to give?"

"Get out!" Victoria heard herself and was aghast at the snarling near-roar of anger, a sound which bore no resemblance to the many lessons in deportment from Baroness Lehzen and a succession of French preceptresses.

"You want a companion and William resigns his position as premier to attend you. You want a husband after yours conveniently expires and he flouts all those advising him to wait and marries you out of hand, even though it means giving up even his cross-bench seat. Then you decide you want a Minister to sit in where he's not wanted and impose himself on the new government and voilà, off he goes. Did you give any thought how painfully awkward it would be for a man of William's sensibility to insert himself where he is not wanted, among men – old friends and colleagues – who must meet in secret to avoid him? No, of course you didn't. Then you want a Duke, because marriage to a mere Viscount does not suit the Queen of England, so you make a Duke."

"Get out! Leave and do not return. I do not want you under this roof any longer."

For the second time that day a door closed in the Queen's face, and for the second time she collapsed in half-angry, ugly crying. They do not understand, none of them! I try so hard and it all goes wrong!

Her sense of injustice was overpowering at that moment. Every word, every action, of the past eighteen hours was seen through a distorted lens and as Victoria calmed herself she began to take stock. The conclusions she drew sent ice water through her veins.
Even in her ungovernable rage, Victoria could not entirely dismiss Emma's ugly words. Had it been so awful for William? Had she not known? But he had been happy – hadn't he?

*Whether she had forfeited his affection, or it had never been reciprocated in full measure, something precious and irreplaceable had been broken.*

*Loving William Lamb was meant to be but having him was not preordained.* And, worst of all,

*They all knew. If he had felt humiliated by the small private ceremony she had so carefully arranged with every care to avoid the pomp and public display he despised, how much more so the Queen, who had given the highest honor in her power to give, and had it virtually thrown back in her face?*

Further than that, she could not go, not even in her furious self-pity. Victoria wanted to calmly regard her future and devise a plan to go on, to recover from her self-inflicted humiliation and show a face of calm dignified reserve befitting a Queen. Because her dignity and the crown were all she had that was hers, to have and hold. All the rest was only on loan and could be – perhaps already had been – taken away. She might not be loved, or even liked, but she would be respected and admired, even feared.

Having reached that decision, Victoria blew her nose and wiped her eyes and tried to decide how she could escape this small office in the State wing and make her way back to her own apartment unseen.

George Von Wettin carried with him an oilskin pouch containing the newest revisions to the heating and ventilation system, detailed drawings which Lord Melbourne would undoubtedly favor with a cursory glance. More importantly, he carried with him all prior cost revisions along with Mr. Barry's new requirement for an additional £500,000. The original estimate of £780,000 had been overrun many times, and to date, by Von Wettin's calculation at least £1.5 million had been spent. Now, the whole enterprise was threatened by late recognition of a fact he had been bringing to the attention of anyone who would listen since Mr. Barry first set him up as third assistant: the entire edifice had been planned down to the least detail without ever taking into consideration the need for duct work and means to adequately warm and refresh the air.

He had with him a portion of the report damning Barry and his men, which would be read aloud in the House when Parliament resumed. It read in part, "*Mr. Barry has, no doubt, long made the discovery, although he has not had the candour to acknowledge it, namely, that he has failed in securing a proper foundation for the tower and to save him himself the mortification of acknowledging his want of skill, he seeks, by disparaging the system of ventilation, to render the building of the tower . . . unnecessary.*"

George dined at the palace several times a month, never on State occasions and rarely when the Queen's extended family was present. He visited the apartment he had once shared with Albert on occasion, spending an evening with one or another of his old friends, the gentlemen of Lord Melbourne's household, smoking hashish and enjoying a safe space free of both public scrutiny and all the ugliness and squalor which invariably hallmarked those clubs which catered to his kind. He had been pleased and warmed, but not entirely surprised, by the note in Melbourne's angular hand, advising him on what date the Court would leave for Brocket Hall. There was no hint of invitation, only an unspoken assumption that he would be there as a part of the family, and that, more than the rest, made him deeply grateful.

*Lord Melbourne is not available.* The sentry at the foot of the Grand Staircase made no move to allow him to pass, and George briefly contemplated leaving his portfolio and returning to London. Instead he bowed civilly and departed, making his way around the perimeter to that far portico.
which permitted discrete access to the Consort's wing.

Von Wettin did not entirely approve of the frivolity and flamboyance of some of his English brethren. Their lot in life was difficult enough without adding to it by mincing exaggeration and flirtatious feminine gestures. In an earlier century, men of the Beau Monde carried fans and affected beauty patches, powder and paint, ruby red lips and kohl-lined eyes. Some of these fellows, in their off hours, emulated that style, while others aspired to Lord Byron's instead, flowing locks and open-collared shirts, big loose bows in place of properly tied cravat. He tried not to judge – he himself was what he was, and his refinement of taste was no means to hide his true nature – but felt annoyed for Lord Melbourne's sake and protective of his reputation.

He was swiftly informed what had transpired. If servants saw and heard everything then these, living on sufferance in a grand palace, understood what they learned and were quick to paint a complete picture. George made it plain that any further discussion was inappropriate at best, ungrateful at worst, but when he left it was not by the outer door.

"George!" Victoria opened the door with her own hand, and only shook her head at the footman who offered to eject him from the Queen's presence.

"William is not here. He has gone ahead to Brocket Hall, as planned, to prepare for the holidays. You are joining us, of course?"

He thought the Queen was herself, or far more of herself than the tales he had heard led him to believe. If he allowed himself to look closely then yes, perhaps there was some trace of distress etched on her face, but he was neither accustomed to looking closely at women in general, nor to gawking at a Queen's countenance.

He presented the portfolio he had used as an excuse to gain entry. "I thought it important that Lord Melbourne see this beforehand, so he can prepare any questions he might have for me."

**

Victoria realized she was weary of her self-imposed isolation and thought that George Von Wettin, quiet and unassuming, his manner not so cloying as to be intrusive, nor so formal as to require reserve in turn, was a welcome visitor. She invited him in, through the small anteroom where her secretary would normally be working and into her own private study. When she saw his gaze flicker over the untouched luncheon tray, cold congealed soup covered by a napkin, Victoria only pointed to the stack of cards on the edge of her desk.

"I have been occupied by these cards all day. You see, I thought it would mean more if they were written by the Queen, but I had no idea there were so many. Do you know we employ over nine hundred souls?" Victoria would have continued, but she suddenly realized how silly it would sound.

"You are coming to Brocket Hall for Christmas? You did not come to make your excuses, I hope? William would be so disappointed." She realized belatedly that question had been asked and answered, and her confused embarrassment deepened. To give herself time to recover her wits, she untied the string holding the portfolio closed.

"You will see, ma'am, that a considerable sum is being requested to continue with the work. Mr. Barry has taken pains to apprise the various commissions along the way, and has been called before committees on innumerable occasions to answer every conceivable question posed by men who –"
"Who have no idea what they are talking about, or what to do with the answers they hear? Yes, my husband has told me."

"Since Your Majesty placed him at the head of the Royal Commission and we can rely on him to deflect such time-wasting things have gone much more smoothly. Mr. Barry hopes – I hope, as well – that if Viscount Melbourne presents our funding request and assures the honorable gentlemen that –"

"The Duke of Melbourne," Victoria interjected, her tone both resigned and wary. "My husband is now the Duke of Melbourne."

"Indeed," Von Wettin bowed his head, and Victoria thought it was to hide his expression. *He is not surprised. Lord M was right, Emma was right, news of last night's proceedings would be all over the London clubs by now.*

"Oh, George, if only we could all go back to the beginning and start again. I've made an awful muddle of things!"

Victoria had no more tears to shed. She told the story as dispassionately as she was able, finding George Von Wettin an easy audience. He did not fidget or emote, nor did he betray that hungry eagerness some showed when hearing of another's misfortune.

"Lord Melbourne did not wish to be a duke and now he is one. He is angry, and his pride is injured so you parted on less than amiable terms." Von Wettin's accent was a mere trace, with none of the harsh guttural consonants of her mother and uncle's tongue. His very tone, so dry and unemotional, was soothing.

"But why would he not want to be a duke? That makes no sense to me," Victoria wailed plaintively, stomping her foot for emphasis.

"I have never been entirely certain why anyone would particularly want to be one, ma'am. I am not the best person to ask. Perhaps the point to take is that he did not want it, and there was no need for you to understand his decision, only accept."

He told her, with more than a trace of fond wistfulness, of the titles with which Albert had promised to shower him if only he came to England and made marriage to a woman bearable.

"And I told him, no. I had no desire to be a favorite. This is the 19th century, not the court of Louis Quatorze, where a sovereign – or sovereign's consort – might surround himself with as many pretty, useless boys as he could hold, merely for ornamentation. Nor would I be temperamentally suited to a life of leisure." Von Wettin spread his hands wide and smiled modestly. "I would not have turned down a sum which might have enabled me to buy interest in a firm like Mr. Barry's rather than start as only a draughtsman, but as it happened, I learned a great deal and was able to make myself useful rather quickly. No doubt, if I had been showered with gold – your gold, ma'am, since Albert's father is penniless – I would not now be a part of building history. But handing over such a lump sum would have entailed Albert giving up control, and that he would not do."

Victoria only stared, willing him to say something she could use to understand her own situation.

"I am not the man to ask, if you want marriage advice, ma'am. My mother and father fought behind closed doors, yet I think they would both say their marriage was a happy one, at least until I revealed myself to them."

"How can I know what William wants, what to give him, to make him happy?"
"I'm not aware you can make someone else happy, ma'am. But if you want to know what your husband wants, ask him. And if you mean, you want to ensure his love by arranging his life, lavishing titles and awards on him...I doubt it's necessary, but I do know it's impossible. Albert tried that repeatedly, offering me titles, income, citizenship – oh, any manner of things. Albert was devoted to me, and I to him, but that wasn't enough. He needed to ensure I would stay with him, so finally...I left. If only he had simply trusted what was, trusted me, trusted us."

He did not finish the sentence; there was no need. Had he and Albert maintained their close friendship – Victoria, even in her own mind and with her heart full of affection for them both, could not bring herself to call it anything else; she was too squeamish and her strict Protestant upbringing could not reconcile the virtue of the individual with the vice they practiced – her husband would not have been struck down in a brawl over a young male prostitute. And she would not have been free to demand William marry her.

"You've never shared Lord Melbourne's taste for theological reading, ma'am. Give The Hind and the Panther a try. Your husband is fond of quoting from Dryden and we've discussed his work on several occasions. Many memorable sayings have come out of that one trilogy. 'First the man makes the habit, then the habit makes the man,' and 'Beware the fury of a patient man.' But he especially likes the passage which goes something like 'If not by Scriptures, how can we be sure, what tradition's pure? For you may palm upon us new for old; All, as they say, that glitters, is not gold.'"

George rose and bowed. "I will be off, ma'am. I will see you when I return to travel with the court to Brocket Hall. For now, kleine Schwester, do not distress yourself unduly. You and your husband exchanged words perhaps; he was angry, you were angry, and you wounded each other. Such things happen, and they mend themselves. You have a strong, a happy union. I am the one whom Albert sent to bring Lord Melbourne back to you. The man I encountered that day in Brook's Club was deeply unhappy without you. I have never seen that man, since. But maybe...trust more, allow him the freedom to choose."
THE HIND AND THE PANTHER.
A POEM,
In Three Parts.

——Antiquam exquirite materem. Virg.
Et vera, incessu, patuit Dea.


L O N D O N,
Printed for Jacob Tonson, at the Judges Head in
Chancery Lane near Fleetstreet, 1687.
Chapter 29

It all seemed like much ado about nothing, at a distance of thirty-six hours and as many miles. They would laugh over their cups in the gentlemen's clubs of London, true, but there would doubtless be more than a few envious glances as well. Not only for the second such newly minted rank in over a century, but for being man enough to catch and hold the affection of a beautiful young woman so determined to favor him.

That early lightness of spirit was swiftly followed by renewed horror at the memory of losing control, of the harsh words he had flung in her direction, and the shocked hurt on her face before an icy mask slid into place.

All of this before Lord Melbourne even opened his eyes to greet a new day. He was in his own bed, and it was a cold and lonely one. True, he would have awakened alone in any case – it had been planned that he would ride ahead with Emily to ensure the Hall was ready to receive guests. But at least he would have greeted the dawn of another day without either the nauseating pain gripping his skull vice-like, or shame at his own loss of control, a response far disproportionate to the rather ridiculous offense.

*The Reluctant Duke.* It sounded like the title of a book by Miss Austen, or perhaps some stage play too contrived to earn a place in one of the premier theatres. Something Caro might have written, along the lines of her overwrought gothic romances. He lunged for the chamber pot and emptied his stomach of last night's liquor soured by an abundance of bile.

When he was done and had tended to the rest of nature's needs Melbourne stripped off his nightshirt and flopped back down on the bed. He drew the heavy winter coverlet up over his shoulders and turned onto his side, willing sleep to return.
Sleeping alone had never come easily. He remembered how often he had found his way back to Caroline's bed. Knowing she had been with another man, he still craved the creature comfort of closeness and warmth long after romantic love and conjugal passion were dead. Sometimes, stung by his lack of carnal interest, she had mockingly turned him away but most often she had welcomed him.

*Migraine or the aftermath of two nights' heavy drinking?* It hardly mattered; he was sick and alone and as soon as he could manage, there was a house to inspect, outbuildings to assess and land to survey. He was here to ensure Brocket Hall was ready to receive visitors, and he would not fail at that.

*But first I will try to sleep this blasted headache away.*

When Melbourne awakened the second time he knew it must be midday. The pain in his head had receded to a dull thumping ache which matched the beat of his heart.

"Emma!" Melbourne swore roundly, dragging his leg back under the bedcovers and pulling the coverlet up over his waist.

Emma Portman marched in – no other word for it. Her brisk determined gait matched the military look of her face – and set down the tray she carried. Crockery clattered, and he detected the welcome fragrance of coffee. A rasher of bacon, eggs, and several slices of buttered toasted bread almost tempted to try his digestion.

"What the hell are you doing here? Other than bringing me food? I think I employ a housekeeper and even a few scullery maids who could provide that service."

"Eat first. I'll pour your coffee *after* you have food in your stomach."

Nothing in her no-nonsense manner or the stern expression on her face gave Melbourne reason to suspect her presence, yet he was not entirely comfortable with the situation. Emma was an old and well-liked friend, but he was the husband of a fiery tempestuous girl who already had reason to be angry and she was a woman. He considered her a contemporary, but in fact she was only ten years older than Victoria, reason enough to send her out of his bedchamber.

The Right Honourable The Lady Portman had once been Miss Emma Lascelles. She had been one of Caro's most devoted admirers. When his wife no longer went out into society she surrounded herself with a flock of neighborhood children, consoled by their admiration and amused to mold them in her image. Emma might have been a mousy girl destined for a spinster's quiet life, but spirit, wit and unconventional directness gave her a distinction nature had not.

"I would prefer to dress and meet you downstairs, Emma. Appearances, you know."

She snorted her reply, waving a hand dismissively, and sat herself down on the edge of the mattress.

"You won't be seeing me at Court anymore, so it needn't trouble you. Your wife already threw an inkwell at my head. I don't doubt she'd claw my eyes if she found me here."

His curiosity piqued, and seeing she was not about to be dissuaded, Melbourne wrapped the quilt around himself for modesty's sake and got out of bed on the far side. He strode into his dressing room and returned in the previous day's buckskin trousers and a billowing untucked shirt.

Melbourne intended to eat sparingly, but found he was genuinely hungry and realized he had gone without food for the past two days. While he partook of fluffy yellow scrambled eggs and crisp
bacon Emma unburdened herself.

When she'd wound down she surprised him by bursting into tears.

"I said what I thought she needed to hear, William. But I don't want to lose my place at Court. If I have to return to the country and listen to Edward prattle on about his precious cattle and his plans to improve the Alderney strain I will – I will go mad."

Melbourne knew that he was expected to reach out to her and offer comfort, but found he lacked both energy and inclination.

"Can you – can you get me my position back? I will apologize, I will bow and scrape if that's what it takes."

"Poor girl," he murmured, only belatedly understanding that she might confuse his meaning.

"You and I, Emma – we need to protect my sweet girl. The last thing she needed was someone else haranguing her."

"You spoil her, you pamper her and say nothing to thwart her. And then she does something so unconscionable and –"

"Emma, Emma, you show me just how ridiculous I sounded. Really - she did what? Grant me a new title? One I admit I did not want and am not pleased with holding. What passed between us after that is unfortunate but – I behaved badly and needed no intercession from you."

"Of course, you take her side. Why did I expect anything else? Will you speak to her for me? Allow me to remain here, as your guest, so I can plead my own case and implore her to overlook my faux pas?" Emma looked up at him pleadingly.

Melbourne pushed aside the rest of his meal and took up the china mug of strong black coffee, brewed from fresh-ground beans just the way he had taught his cook. He inhaled the rich steam before taking an appreciative sip, all the while watching his old friend over the rim of the cup. He knew what he had to do, and it would not be pleasant. Add this to the list of wounds I've inflicted.

"I am not sure that is wise. Perhaps you need a break, some time away from Court. At home with your husband, or –"

"You're banishing me?"

"Emma…” It was so damnably awkward, Melbourne wanted to skirt the subject. He forced himself to continue. "Don't you think it would be more comfortable for you, if you had some distance to… to sort things out? Gain some objectivity, restore your peace of mind?"

It was the closest he could come to addressing outright what had never been said, not even when she was a debutante keeping her dance card empty, so he might find her when he strolled into Almack's.

Melbourne watched the flush rising from her neck, turning her cheeks a dark shade of red. He fervently hoped she would rise to the occasion with her usual acerbic wit. Emma Portman née Lascelles did not disappoint.

"William, your head must still be addled from drink if you think watching the mud dry on Portman's boots will restore my peace of mind. I need occupation and to be in the thick of things. And I would heartily miss being able to assert my authority over those flighty girls the poor Queen
is burdened in her retinue. But if that's the way you mince words and obfuscate with Her Majesty it's no wonder she didn't hear you saying you did not wish for a title."

Emma rose and began arranging used cutlery and dirtied dishes on the tray in preparation for removal. She only hesitated when she was already at the door, and then spoke without turning. "You will try? Please?"

**

There was an amazing quantity of foodstuffs in the storeroom, and fresh produce imported from London greengrocers filled bins to overflowing. Fine white bread would be baked in quantity, and cakes and pastries made fresh each day. A week's worth of menus had been planned by his sister and the French chef whom Emily had pilfered from Lady Jersey and installed at Panshanger. In the ice house, slabs of beef, plucked poultry and hams hung in neat rows suspended from the ceiling. Seafood had been ordered, Emily assured him, and would be delivered fresh from the coast in time for Christmas Eve, Scottish salmon and lobsters and oysters in their shells, kept fresh in a rich brine. Melbourne tried to attend and could do little more than nod, standing silently by with hands thrust in trouser pockets.

"You're as useless as Henry. Go, then – " and she had shooed him away.

A day passed and then another. Melbourne was sanguine enough to understand that such disagreements happened – marriages were, after all, not easily broken – but it was still disappointing to receive no word, not even the briefest of notes written under some pretext or other.

He busied himself paying long-overdue visits to the pensioners domiciled in cottages dotted up and down the lanes of estate lands and to the neighboring squire, a hearty red-faced man whose stocky spotted daughters giggled and simpered when he bowed over their hands. He rode land that he knew by memory, stopped at the nearest neighbor's and admired a new foal, and farther on said what was polite over a lusty new grandson.

Saturday was market day and he decided a trip into Hatfield was more than his nerves could bear, opting instead to ride into Lemsford. He dismounted outside of a low-ceilinged, heavily-timbered pub that had been ancient in the year of his birth. Melbourne hoped to find his old friend the vicar and was not disappointed.

These country folk were plain-spoken and congenial, neither impudent nor overly impressed, and when they exchanged pleasantries with Lord Melbourne they asked after his wife and not the Queen. He admired their ability to make the distinction, and thought it must be because to them, London was a different world and the lady of their seigneur had a fixed relevance which could not be assigned the Queen of the United Kingdom. Melbourne accepted an invitation to take luncheon at the rectory and lingered over a refreshing blackberry brandy, finally taking his leave only after securing the old clergyman's promise to dine at the Hall later that week, to mark the date he had officiated over a wedding by special license four years previously.

When Melbourne swung his leg over the saddle and turned his horse toward home the sun hung low in the sky. He momentarily reflected that Victoria would not be pleased if he rode cross country after dark, quite unattended, and that thought made him laugh out loud. How very married you sound, Melbourne, he told himself.

Riding across the same winter-hard fields he had crossed at high noon was foolhardy at dusk, even on his own land, and there was nothing to hurry home for in any case, which decided him on taking the slightly longer estate road at a sedate pace.
Melbourne was regretfully aware that they would have to talk at some point. Not talk; of course, they would talk, it came as naturally as breathing when they were together, as naturally as lovemaking and laughter. But talk. What can I say? How can I explain myself in a way she'll understand when I don't really understand it myself? All his resistance stemmed from a desire to avoid even the appearance of competing – for power, or position, station or regard. Or something like that. Melbourne could not adequately clarify, even to his own satisfaction, why he must appear indifferent, even reluctant, to anything which smacked of achievement. He had enjoyed the busyness of his career, the immersion in constant, varying demands of government and the opportunity to study the extremes of human nature. He had savored the satisfaction of achievement, working out some knotty problem, the sense of being effective when he'd firmly subdued civil unrest and brought about compromise which incrementally moved the affairs of State. Melbourne knew there were those who were prepared to consider him a lazy minister, too detached and frivolous to do a creditable job, and he knew they were wrong. He was more than capable of hard work and application, but preferred others view him as nonchalant, indifferent to outcome.

_Hell and damnation, man, forget that philosophical drivel. Get down on your knees if you must and apologize. She is your wife, but she is also a Queen and no matter how much you might wish it, you cannot separate the two._

A niggling persistent warning voice told him that to follow his nature and completely submit wouldn't drain away a lingering resentment that would only fester until the next time it erupted over a trifle.

_I don't care anymore about the damned title. I can admit my resistance has no basis in any logical sentiment. But I do care that she ignored my wishes and then went behind my back to conspire with men who have known me longer than she's been alive._

Melbourne was thoroughly weary of the seesawing thoughts pulling his mind this way and that and decided that he would find a way to express some of what had dragged him down into entirely disproportionate anger when it seemed right to do so. But not, absolutely not, when he first saw her. Then he wanted only to –

He had nearly reached the Broadwaters when he noticed the cloud of dust only just beginning to settle. He peered ahead through fast-descending gloom and what he saw made him kick his horse into a fast trot. He told himself that there was no reason to think, far less assume, and he was more likely than not to be disappointed and yet, his heart soared. _It was her._

The plain black carriage was a hundred yards ahead, then seventy, then fifty and closing. The red coats of military outriders and Palace livery of postillions confirmed what his senses already knew. Melbourne veered off the road and allowed his horse to find the way, back to his stable and the hot bran mash which awaited him.

He was waiting outside the front doors when the vehicle pulled up and stopped, and it was Lord Melbourne's hand which opened the door. Before a step could be put down, he gripped Victoria's waist and lifted her free.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Melbourne." He would not kiss her in full view of soldiers and coachmen, but he did not allow her to move away. Feeling her warmth through his coat and hers was enough, and he kept his hand on her arm. Further movement in the carriage told him she had not come unaccompanied, and he allowed the groom to secure the mounting block, expecting to see her maid or perhaps Baroness Lehzen step out.

"Papa!"
If it was not precisely the reunion he had imagined, it was just as it should be, Melbourne thought. Only Liam's absence made it less than complete. Lily chattered incessantly and refused to be put down. Even her small cloak and bonnet, a perfect replica of her mother's had to be removed while she held tightly to her father's neck. Melbourne held her in one arm and kept the other around Victoria's shoulders as he led them into the Hall.

His housekeeper was overjoyed to see one of the babies, cooed and crooned as she flustered about, calling for food more suitable to a wee'un to be prepared and brought to the nursery. Lily would have none of it and could not have been sent away regardless, for as Victoria explained, she had flung herself into the carriage and refused to be dislodged without even a single nursery maid in attendance.

"Our daughter knows her own mind," she said ruefully. "And will not yield when she is sure she's in the right."

Lily emphatically agreed, scolding Melbourne for good measure, expressing her displeasure at his untimely disappearance, then patting his face with a chubby hand and assuring him he was once more in her good graces.

Melbourne's first supposition, that Victoria had brought the child as distraction or to conceal a residual unwillingness to be alone with him, was swiftly discarded. Her melting looks, the way her gaze never left him, even the excuses she found for touch, laying a hand on his arm, brushing her fingers over his, reassured him that no ill will remained. We will talk and say what must be said to clear the air, he told himself. But not quite yet.

They kept country hours, although that would change when the court was officially in residence, and Melbourne chose to take his wife and daughter directly upstairs. While he indulged his daughter, Victoria accepted the assistance of a second housemaid, agog with the honor of serving the Queen, and shed her traveling clothes in favor of a loose dressing gown and slippers. A simple meal of fresh bread and rich stew, thick with chunks of meat, with sweet biscuits wrapped in a napkin. Melbourne called for burgundy, one of a case of dusty bottles the first Viscount had laid aside, and that was brought along with buttermilk for the little princess. Melbourne ate at intervals, feeding Lily each bite as though she was an infant, by her very particular direction. Victoria leaned against him, perched on an ottoman by his legs.

The child would be easily put to bed, he thought, seeing drooping eyelids and the little fist curled, babylke, beside her cheek. But each time he tried to carry her to the nursery she wailed with such piteous sounds that he could not do it, so instead he laid her on his own big bed and called Victoria to join them. Lily was so slight that his arm easily embraced them both, and with two dark heads pillowed on his chest he spoke in a low voice of inconsequentials. Victoria tried several times to apologize in a low halting voice, or so it seemed from the serious tone in which she spoke his name. Each time she did he shushed her, continuing with his soothing patter until their child's even breathing told him she was deeply asleep.

"Now, Mrs. Melbourne," Melbourne growled in a hoarse whisper, pulling Victoria by the hand into his dressing room and closing the door firmly behind them.

"William, I – please, let me speak. I am so very sorry. I never meant to disrespect you, just the opposite but I know that I –" Melbourne looked into the upturned face, so sweetly earnest and imploring. He bent and tasted her mouth, kissing her with exquisite slowness so he could savor the contact.
"I am sorry too, my darling. And we will talk about what happened. But…not…quite…now, if you please." His lips trailed along her jawline, finding the tender spot behind her ear warmed by her pulse, flicking the tip of his tongue against a soft furred lobe. His hand cupped her breast under the silky fabric of her wrapper, gently kneading and squeezing.

Victoria moaned, made a soft mewing sound that inflamed his senses further, and her hand found him with delicious knowing familiarity.

"Stop now," she laughed breathlessly. "We can't –"

They were in a small dimly lit room, three walls lined with racks and shelves. The fourth held a dressing table and chair, and Melbourne sat, pulling Victoria onto his lap. She balanced daintily, her feet not touching the ground, and he laughed at her.

"Ma petite reine," he whispered and found her breast once more, teasing the nipple until it stood firm. Victoria squirmed, eliciting a guttural groan.

"Vous aimez ça, monsieur?" Pleased with herself, she grinned, then moved her bottom more strategically.

"Vous êtes une taquinerie sans coeur, Madame."

"We should stop. Before this goes further." Victoria inclined her head towards the closed door, indicating the bedchamber beyond where their daughter slept.

"She is sound asleep, and quite safe. We can hear if she makes any sound."

"But if she wakes – we can't –"

It was Melbourne's turn to grin. "Oh, we most certainly can. I can move rather quickly when the need arises. So to speak."

"But where…? How…?" Victoria's gaze flickered around the long narrow dressing room.

"I see there are still things I can teach you." He cupped her face in his hands and pulled her gently forward. "Yes indeed," he murmured between kisses. "Exactly so."

**

"Mrs. Melbourne, have I told you yet how very much I love you?" He leaned against the wall, arms folded across his chest, while she tidied herself.

"You have my permission to tell me now." Victoria stood on tiptoes to reach his chin with her lips, rubbing them against the stubble on his chin. "You are quite scruffy. I like it. You look quite disreputable, a regular ruffian."

"Victoria, I love you utterly, madly, completely. I love you with everything I have and am."

"Everything," she repeated. "My darling, you are my everything."
The air was deliciously redolent with the smell of baking, with the good fresh smell of rooms recently aired, rugs beaten, and wood polished so thoroughly a glow rose from the very depths. Brocket Hall had never appeared to greater advantage. *His* home was just that, a *home*, stately, elegant but still meant for living.

The thirty sleeping rooms were not insufficient for the guests they would shelter, although only two guest wings did not promise the privacy to be had in grander estates. If the salons, the billiard room and library, and the smaller family dining room were not as expansive or numerous as their counterparts in the larger estates, the banquet hall built by the first Viscount Melbourne, with it silk-lined walls, scrollwork ceiling panels and intricate murals, lacked nothing in comparison with Blenheim, Chatsworth or even the Howards' country house. Peniston Lamb had spared no expense indulging Lady Melbourne's social ambitions, and they would dine in state on his mother's Sèvres china and gold flatware. The dining room and adjacent grand saloon looked down on the lake, a spectacular vista at sunset.

Their tiny daughter had occupied the largest available space in her parents' bed, spread out like a starfish, arms and legs akimbo. Her reluctance to sleep alone for the first time in her life might be understandable, but until her brother and their familiar nursery maids arrived her father resolved to find some acceptable substitute, whether the companionship of a housemaid or two, the dogs - or *her pony if that's what it takes* - to lure her into her own bed in the nursery. He selfishly wanted his wife for himself and told her so firmly over breakfast.

They toured the house, so Victoria could see for herself the fruit of Emily's labors, and she had nothing but praise for what she saw. When Melbourne encouraged her to make any alterations she wished, Victoria could think of nothing and told him so with pink cheeks and shining eyes.

"Oh, do not change a thing! It's all so very beautiful and perfect, just what I imagined a real home would be." Melbourne knew she didn't intend the pathos of that speech and looked away, so she
would not see the tears welling up in his eyes.

"This is your home, Victoria. Pray regard it as such. It's one of the few advantages of being my wife…Duchess Melbourne." His fine mouth twitched in a teasing smile and his eyes were soft when he looked at her. Victoria impulsively picked up his hand and pressed it to her lips, her own gaze averted, uncertain.

They had not discussed the argument, or the events leading up to it, and Victoria was cautiously optimistic they would avoid any painful rehashing. As far as she was concerned, so long as his affection was constant and true no words flung in anger mattered. She knew herself quick to anger and equally quick to contrition and forgiveness, at least where he was concerned. No, she corrected herself, there is no forgiveness needed. It is I who should beg pardon, if only for erring in ignorance. As long as he loves me, nothing else matters.

When the novelty of rolling out dough with the longsuffering cook faded, Princess Elizabeth found them and clamored to be taken to the lake forthwith, so she might feed the swans from the bag of crusts her friends in the kitchen so thoughtfully provided.

The lake had frozen over only on a few memorably hard winters in recent memory. Fed by a tributary to the River Lea, it was home to a venerable patriarch and his family. Victoria was for once grateful for her daughter's incessant chatter peppered with questions directed at one or the other of her parents.

Melbourne reveled in the cozy domesticity, warmed and reassured by the easy restoration of perfect amity between them. He had expected no less, but always after a misunderstanding there was a niggling fear that something might shift between them. O ye of little faith, he mused, laughing away his trepidation. He would prefer nothing else be said of the cause of their disagreement, content to let it be. But was that the best in the long run, for the health of their marriage? Love was such an ephemeral thing, fragile and sublime, and he was almost superstitiously afraid to subject it to what smacked of negotiation. Far easier to let what was past lie unattended. And yet…had his way of avoiding all unpleasantness been entirely successful?

After Lily emptied her bag of crusts and the swans had demonstrated their appreciation, she insisted on walking back, slipping and sliding through the packed snow with a pair of hounds running circles around her small sturdy legs. Melbourne and Victoria walked behind her, hands linked.

"We'll hunt on Boxing Day if the weather holds. This is reckoned to be good fox-hunting ground. Pen spoke well of the run hereabouts. He and our father were aficionados."

"Hunting?" Victoria wrinkled her nose with an expression of distaste. "You don't hunt, William."

"Hunting, ma'am," he said firmly. "Your uncles and cousins will expect some sport and it's part of country home hospitality."

"You will ride with them?"

"But of course. What sort of host would I be, if I lounged about with the women while the men took the field?" Melbourne's voice was rich with humor, for of course that was his longstanding custom when invited to others' country estates.

Without trained nursery staff at hand the rest of the day was consumed by the needs of their daughter. Several chambermaids and a jug-eared boy summoned from the larder all were at the little princess's beck and call, but she took full advantage of her parents' accessibility. To keep her
amused and her attention diverted from the crates of fragile ornaments waiting to be hung they permitted her access to the long gallery where family portraits were displayed. Victoria hung back while Melbourne identified each of the figures, waiting eagerly for him to become entangled in syntax. *Your* grandmother, was the usage she hoped to hear. Knowing Lily was far too young to appreciate the significance of pronouns, she still stepped forward, joining in when they stood beneath the picture of a lovely chestnut-haired woman with dark eyes.


"You were named for her, Lily," she added. "She was your grandmother."

Their eyes met over her head. Victoria was suddenly aware that the exchange played out once more the crux of their previous argument, Melbourne's insistence on abrogating his status as husband and father. *Stepfather*, if he must cling to that polite fiction, still held more significance than he was willing to publicly claim.

The moment passed without comment and they moved further along. Peniston, then William himself as a handsome boy of ten, full of himself and sure of his place in the world. Frederick and George, Emily as a babe on her mother's knee.

"Who dat?" Lily sang out, when her father failed to pause at one painting.

"'Who is that,'" Victoria intoned, her own voice hinting at laughter, amused at her husband's discomfiture. *How would he handle it?* She wondered.

"That was Lady Melbourne," he said simply. When he would have redirected her to the last and most recent portrait, Victoria's own, Lily tugged at his hand imperiously.

"Another Lady Melbourne? Mama is Lady Melbourne too. What her name?" The little girl craned her neck, standing on tiptoes to better see the image of a slim, even sprite-like young woman, tomboyish her fey energy apparent even in formal pose. Her hair was cropped, not a common style even amongst the most daring, and something in her gaze, at once wary and defiant, always called out to Victoria. *Caro*.

"Her name was Caroline, darling," Victoria said, when it was apparent Melbourne would not – *could not* – speak. "She lived here once and had a little boy named Augustus."

"Where he now?" Before she could persist, her father swung her up into his arms and led her to the final painting. Victoria, wearing only a simple tiara, hands folded to display the garnet ring her husband had placed on her finger. She had sat for the artist here, in Brocket Hall, to firmly demarcate the line between Queen and Lady Melbourne.

**

Dusk came early in the waning days of the year and the beauty of the Hall was only enhanced by candlelight. The family dining room was part of the original 1760 design by Sr. James Paine, far less splendid than the magnificent Great Saloon. Victoria paused in the doorway, charmed by the warm glow of cherry paneling and rich jewel tones so unlike the soaring white-and-gilt French-inspired salons of her own palaces.

Melbourne was waiting, and when he rose Victoria caught her breath. His beauty still had the power to take her by surprise, beautiful dark eyes, exquisitely molded features imbedded with whimsical gentility, even the silvery curls feathered against his cheeks. She saw he had bathed and
shaved and had chosen a perfectly-fitted dark blue velvet coat over ruffled white shirt.

Victoria looked down at her own dark blue velvet gown and smiled a little, amused at the serendipity of her choice.

"Do I meet with your approval, ma'am?" he asked, spreading his arms wide and turning for her inspection.

"You clean up well, Lord Melbourne," Victoria responded flirtatiously, stroking his clean-shaven jaw with the tip of her finger.

Covers had been laid for two at one end of the table, and Melbourne led her to her chair and pulled it out himself despite the footmen flanking them.

"Dinner for two!" Victoria marveled. "I don't think we've ever had the privilege of such privacy, in London."

When they'd been served, Melbourne dismissed even the solitary footman. They chatted easily as they ate, finishing one bottle of an excellent Burgundy and cracking a second. Melbourne reminisced easily, calling up anecdotes about his mother and her early successes - Lord Coleraine and his £13,000 barter, wits claiming Lady Melbourne could not resist testing the bonds of every marriage she encountered, even referring with no little pride to Byron's steadfast fondness - that might have been critical, even scandalous, except for the very apparent pride he took in her eccentricity.

Somehow or other, midway through the second bottle, Victoria asked almost shyly whether the story of that birthday celebration had any basis in fact.

"Ah, yes…that birthday. It remained my most memorable for many years, until supplanted by an even better one." He lifted his glass in toast and Victoria blushed, gratified by the heat in his eyes, remembering the first time they had lain together, and he made her a woman.

"Did it distress you, when Lily asked about her? You…seemed upset." As soon as the words were out Victoria wished she hadn't spoken, hadn't broken the fragile bubble of golden peace which surrounded them.

"No, sweetheart, no…" he laid his hand over hers, then refilled their glasses before continuing. "The…incongruity took me aback, I suppose. But not distressed, and not upset. Never upset, by our daughter, or by her mother."

"Thank you," he whispered. "For telling Lily my mother is her grandmother. And for introducing her to Caroline."

Victoria stared at him uncertainly. "You truly don't mind? It – it was what we fought about that night, at least, what I remember of it. Your reluctance to…" she stopped, confused and uncertain.

"…to what, my love? To protect our children, to protect the future King, from charges of bastardy?" Melbourne's voice was gentle. "Victoria, there is no roadmap for what we are about. We're hardly the first – my own mother comes to mind – but I think that we have love, and the children are loved, and as long as I'm alive that won't change."

"For anyone else – if we were ordinary people – that would be enough. But William, history will remember me, and that won't change. Your name and your legacy – everything good and wonderful about you – must be known as well as mine. It's…it's the only way I can bear it…if…when…" Victoria's voice broke, and she choked out a little cry.
"Is that why you insisted on the title?" Melbourne asked in a hoarse whisper, upsetting his glass in his haste to reach her, ignoring the spreading red stain. Victoria wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and showed him a tremulous smile.

"The services of this minister lie not so much in acting in great crises, as in preventing these crises from arising; therefore, they are obscure and unknown; subject to every species of misrepresentation, and effected amidst obloquy, attack and condemnation, whilst in reality entitled to the approbation and gratitude of the country. Lord Melbourne's many such services might be lost in the very tranquility which they have been the means of preserving, and midst the prosperity which he himself created. It is thanks to Lord Melbourne that England, alone of European countries, succeeded in getting rid of the old régime without a revolution with his cautious stewardship in guiding the Reform Bill to a moderate and judicious conclusion."

She had recited the words in a rush, from memory, and when she finished, she was breathless.

"Those words, the language of the proclamation, were written by Charles Greville with input from Wellington, and Brougham and Lord Stanley. You never read the words of the letters patent, the decree issued under the Great Seal." Victoria looked down, gathering her courage, dreading the reignition of his anger and coldness. Then she raised her eyes to his again.

"So you see, it was not only for conquering my maidenhead, for sharing my bed, even for the sacrifice you made in marrying me that you will be remembered. You served our nation well and honorably and for that alone you must not be forgotten."

Melbourne sat in silence, absorbing her words and the heartfelt emotion with which she delivered them. He studied the sweet, earnest heart-shaped face more familiar to him than his own, the wide shining eyes which hid nothing of her adulation. Then he reached for her.

When she was settled on his knee, he put his arm around her, idly stroking the nap of her velvet gown.

"I disappointed her too, you know. Quite often. That night you asked about comes to mind. Caro sought to make one of her grand gestures, having herself borne by several sturdy footmen, popping quite naked out of that ridiculous tureen set in the center of this very table. And I- I was only mortified, by the flamboyance and most especially by the attention it turned on me. Not –" he chuckled, shaking his head. "Not that there are any other similarities between the two situations, only my aversion to the limelight. I think I fear being the object of gossip and public scrutiny because of all things, I abhor the prospect of ridicule, of being compared and found wanting…"

His voice trailed off. Victoria understood he was exploring his thoughts more than definitively explaining them, was content to listen and absorb what meaning she could.

"Thank you. For wanting to please me, and for your…the esteem in which you hold me. I can't come up with a better explanation for my conduct that night, than that. If I have the right to ask anything – and I'm not sure I do, for you already love me far better than I deserve – it is that you keep nothing from me, not even with the best of intentions. It does cast the thing in a new light, that Wellington and the others were willing participants, and I understand why you did it, but as hard as I try I might never react well to surprises."

Victoria cocked her head, straining to fully comprehend his meaning. All her attention was on her husband; when her hand dropped to her waist, she was unaware. Melbourne showed her his most charming smile, communicating without words. He gently pushed back an errant strand of hair and cupped his hand at the back of her head, drawing her forward until their lips met.
"How did that evening end?" She asked suddenly. "The night – the evening Caro presented herself to you?"

The question surprised Melbourne, and he considered his response.

"Not well, I'm afraid. I was quite...er...churlish, to say the least. I accused her of being drunk and sent her away. Bulwer was present, and some other of our friends, and we sat up drinking while Caroline sobbed in her bedroom."

"Well...should we...make a better memory?"

Melbourne saw her impish smile and wondered what she might have in mind. Victoria leaned forward once more, this time to initiate the kiss, and her tongue boldly probed his mouth while her hand strayed farther down. He huffed a laugh, the sound muffled by her mouth over his, but made no further move, curious to see what she intended.

Victoria made it plain in short order, taking the initiative, nibbling at his ear, his neck while she stroked him through the fabric of his trousers.

"The dining room?" he asked once, dubiously, and was answered when Victoria gracefully dropped to her knees and applied lips, tongue and hands which knew him well to great advantage.

"The dining room, Lord Melbourne. We are alone so if this evening ends memorably, you need not worry about gossip and scrutiny, and I promise you, you will not be found wanting..." Victoria stood before him, coaxing and cajoling, licking her plump lips seductively. Melbourne's gaze went from her face to her breasts to the simple gown she had chosen.

He knew what was expected of him and pulled her forward into his arms, burying his face in her breasts and warming them with his breath. Under his hands, he felt warm sweet yielding flesh, his own tingling in anticipation of her touch. Victoria waited expectantly.

"You are ravishing, my love, entirely desirable..." Melbourne bent once more, suckling at first one breast, then the other, while he caressed her flanks. "...and if you are suggesting what I think you are, that I take you right here..."

Victoria stroked the back of his head, encouraging, swaying lasciviously against him, and Melbourne considered his next move with as much care as he could muster. He understood what she was about, perhaps better than she herself did.

The absence of footmen meant no dishes had been removed, and the table was littered with the carcass of a roast chicken, several serving bowls and their own dishes. Victoria leaned back, bracing herself on both hands, readying herself for what she clearly imagined would come next. Melbourne's gaze flickered back to her face, and he caught and held her eyes.

"Ewwww," she squealed suddenly with a grimace of distaste, and held up her arm so he could see a globule of congealed gravy on her lace cuff. Her jerking movement upset the candelabra which tilted precariously, dripping hot wax onto the linen and when Melbourne made a grab for it a bowl of potatoes gratin upended, propelling the serving spoon into the air. Melbourne's lips twitched, and after a moment Victoria's did likewise and they both erupted into great whoops of laughter, sniggering shortling, guffawing laughter. When her eyes fell on his manhood, sadly diminished and still on full display, Victoria's giggles were so utterly delightful that Melbourne could do nothing but join her. Finally exhausted they leaned into each other and Melbourne rested his forehead against Victoria's while she tenderly buttoned his pants.
"Oh my God, I love you, woman," he growled without lifting his head. Victoria gasped another giggle, which faded into a contented sigh.

"I am quite silly, aren't I?" she asked sheepishly. "I thought it would be romantic if I seduced you in the dining room. Like –"

"Oh, sweetheart…if you want me to make love to you here, in the midst of the remains of our dinner, I promise I will do my utmost to rise to the occasion." Melbourne's expression grew serious, almost somber, as he probed her eyes.

"Not silly, never silly. Charming, adorable, completely wonderful. I do think we must abandon our efforts to christen this hundred-year-old table. On the other hand, if you'd care to finish what you started while I enjoy my port…"

He had been teasing and was surprised when Victoria took the decanter and poured, then pushed him back down into his chair and knelt before him.

"Victoria, you don't have to –" Melbourne tried to protest but Victoria only shushed him, taking him in hand. She began light-heartedly but soon applied herself in earnest, using everything he had taught her and much he had not. Her fluttering tongue swirled over him, flicking delicately at the sensitive underside. Groaning, he stopped her before she could continue and helped her rise.

"I think we have exhausted the possibilities of this salon, ma'am. Shall we retire? I would like to continue this in a more *convenable* location."

Melbourne, a full head taller, looked down at his petite wife and was riveted by what he saw. Even the demanding fullness in his groin receded before the feeling of perfect, profound love which consumed his senses.

"My love, my queen, my precious girl. My everything."
And just like that the Hall was full, thrumming with life and the hum of many voices. The din of children underfoot all clamoring to be heard, easy laughter from the men gathered as far from the nursery crowd as could be managed, favoring billiard room and library while their ladies clustered in ornamental groupings, speaking in more genteel tones, careful of servants always about.

And the servants, those who had spent half a lifetime serving the masters of Brocket Hall and newcomers brought in covered wagons, newly hired or borrowed from neighboring estates, fresh wenches pinching their cheeks to bring the color up before inviting flirtation from the dragoons stationed about, bearing trenchers of beer and hot mulled wine to relieve them from duty which was none too arduous. A French chef – or was he Italian? or perhaps from the East End? – looked down his long nose at the proud cook who considered the kitchen her own domain, hissing derision until Lord Melbourne, surrounded by outrage, implored Emily to take her man in hand.

Victoria found Lord Melbourne leaning over the second-floor banister, arms crossed on the rail. Without turning, he extended his arm by instinct and felt her slide into place.

"The Hall hasn't been like this since Mother was alive and in her heyday. Never such a pack of children since we were all small. Mother and Father hosted weekend house parties, and when I say everyone came I do not exaggerate. The Prince Regent condescending to attend ensured it."

He felt her rub her cheek against his lapel and turned his head to land a kiss on the top of her sleek dark head.

"Do you mind terribly? Is it all too much?" she asked. Melbourne considered the question and was surprised at his answer.

"No, not at all. I'm sure I shall and be glad enough to see the last of them in a week but for now… everything is just as it should be. The Hall was made for this."
They leaned farther forward at the same time, spying a curly dark head just visible between the shoulders of taller children. Liam was walking backwards before his cousins, talking with such animation his own curly head bobbed up.

"The children enjoy having others about."

"They do. Of course, give it five minutes and someone will be wailing."

"Yes, but in five more minutes everything will be forgotten, and they'll be off on their next adventure. When we were children my brothers and I grappled like puppies, trying our teeth, and it meant nothing. Ah, we were so close! Still are, Fred and me. When Pen and George were alive we were all the best of friends."

When the children were out of sight once more Melbourne turned around. He leaned against the rail and pulled Victoria against him. She rested the back of her head against his chest and folded her own arms over his, across her abdomen.

"Do you think Liam wishes he had a brother? Of course, he adores Lily, when she'll let him, but a brother is a friend for life."

Melbourne's idle, musing tone gave his question little consequence but Victoria stiffened slightly nonetheless. She could not bear more children; the doctors were unanimous in their verdict. Or, rather, she could but must not, for the sake of her health.

"Fortunately, we need not put ourselves to the trouble," he continued lightly. "As you see, between my family and yours, there are cousins galore and the nice thing about other people's children is, you can send them packing when you tire of them."

Victoria did not answer, but her hand tightened over his, pressing it more firmly against her.

The time passed so quickly they had few opportunities to be alone. Victoria delighted in the presence of her sister. Feodora had been the most constant, loving presence of Victoria's early years, and her 1828 marriage had marked the end of their physical inseparability but not the bond between them. Her husband, the 4th Prince of Hohenlohe-Langenburg, struck Melbourne as a stiff, dour sort. It sometimes seemed as though Albert and his brother alone had escaped that familial curse of perpetual dreariness, although who knows what Albert might have been without his escape from the effects of joyless Lutheranism and constant censure? Feodora, twelve years older than Victoria, shed much of her matronly dignity in the company of the younger women and soon laughed as gaily as the others.

Melbourne busied himself in playing host, finding unexpected satisfaction in the remarkably easy camaraderie between their extended families. The Hall and surrounding grounds were capacious enough to provide various amusements for those inclined toward billiards or dice, and his expansive library contained enough obscure volumes to earn him a grudging commendation from Leopold himself.

Alexander and Emmanuel rode about the neighborhood with Fred, astutely questioning the experimental farming methods used by Edward Portman and doing that gentleman the honor of viewing his prize breeding stock, while Ernst lounged in the drawing room flirting outrageously with any female not his wife. Adina was the frequent target of his gallantry and Melbourne noted that Fred required no reassurance; in fact, he thought he might learn from his brother's tolerant humor.

Feodora's five children were all considerably older than the rest and kept apart, displaying a
condescension common to older adolescents eager to set themselves above childish pursuits. Melbourne pleased the eldest boy by introducing him to George Von Wettin, whose quiet good sense appealed to a young man of sixteen soon to be at university.

All in all, Melbourne mused, his beloved Brocket Hall bursting at the seams, entertaining royalty and near-royalty in a large blended family group, seemed to exude a sense of rightness that was nearly sentient, as though the great Palladian pile was pleased to be fulfilling its purpose at long last.

"Ride out?" he asked, belatedly realizing that Victoria had spoken. Some plan for her guests, he surmised.

"Yes. Will you go with us? Feodora is a great horsewoman, you know, and has little opportunity to indulge herself away from the demands of her husband and children. You will show us about the estate?"

In the end they were a party of five, Victoria and her half-sister, that lady's eldest daughter, Adina – eager to be away from Ernst's attentions, Melbourne guessed – and Emily, shedding years almost visibly as the cold air reddened her cheeks and brightened her eyes.

Another light dusting of snow had fallen, leaving a pristine layer of white, and he led them across the open field toward a bridle path winding its way through the park.

"You can see for miles, or nearly so," Feodora remarked. "At Kensington we were surrounded by cultivated land, but here it is wild, or nearly so?"

"No, ma'am, I'm afraid that is an illusion only. Herefordshire has some good hunting runs, but what you see in the distance is primarily farmland, with several small villages hereabouts. You have to go considerably farther north to reach anything approaching true wilderness."

Melbourne enjoyed talking and the ladies surrounding him listened eagerly as he related some of the history of the area. Brocket Hall was not the largest of the country estates in the vicinity of Hatfield, but its eighty acres was not a mean holding either. He held his reins loosely and his horse followed a path familiar from their summer rides.

Victoria recognized what lay before them first and she nudged her own horse forward eagerly.

"Feodora, look – I wrote to you about the beautiful pond William made for us."

The pond, or what was left of it after the ravages of the late flooding, had been constructed carefully to provide an enclosed setting not visible from a distance. Much of the terraced banks had been washed away, but the general shape remained, and enough of their small dam held to keep a
constant feed which prevented the surface from entirely freezing.

"Victoria!" Melbourne called out, his voice sharper than he'd intended. What had once been a gently sloping bank had been carved out by briefly raging whitewater, so that the land dropped away sharply. Melbourne had not been back since the day of Lily's accident, and in his memory their placid, peaceful glade was replaced by deadly-fast current.

He rode up beside her and stopped, dismounting only just in time to catch Victoria as she slid to the ground. Together they approached the edge gingerly.

The grass was gone, and only frozen black earth remained beneath their feet, but once more the contours were familiar, and although some deadfall was left to be cleared, it was not the debacle he had imagined.

"We'll put it to rights before summer?" Victoria asked, looking up at him imploringly. She laid a gloved hand on his sleeve.

"It will always be a temptation for the children, and can never be made entirely safe, even without a hundred-year flood to contend with," Melbourne answered. He knew even as he spoke that Victoria would not be persuaded.

"Lord M, everything is a temptation for children, and nothing is entirely safe. You made something beautiful here for me, designed and built it for us to enjoy, and nothing has changed." He knew, and knew she knew, that his reluctance stemmed from residual guilt, for his inattention and even his overindulgence of their willful child.

"We will restore it," Melbourne agreed, and Victoria beamed at him.

She called the others over and pointed out the landmarks she recognized, describing the rest from memory.

"It's lovely, Tante. I can see it as you describe, and even in winter there is such a sense of peace here. How I would like such a grotto of my own, to escape from – well, to escape to."

Princess Elise, a willowy consumptive-looking girl of fifteen, stared dreamily out over the vista before them. Melbourne knew that they all lived in a moldering castle on sufferance, dependent on the allowance Victoria provided. They could have lived more comfortably in England, but Feodora's stateless, penniless husband clung to his pride and somehow found more dignity in maintaining a pretense of independence in Langenburg than in bringing Feodora back to England permanently. Either way, Melbourne thought, they are pensioners of the British Crown. It sometimes seemed as though Britain supported half of Europe through its Hanoverian monarchy. For Victoria's sake, he made no objection to the arrangement as Prime Minister and had no standing to do so now, even if he had been so inclined. It was merely further proof of Leopold's now-abandoned goal to conquer England, and Europe, one bed at a time.

"This would make a lovely watercolor! Look, at how the blacks and whites cast shadows. One almost expects to see faeries peeking out. Oh, do let us return with sketchpads while it is still light!" The young woman's wan face blushed pink when she was reminded of the presence of a gentleman, Lord Melbourne.

"If you please, sir," she added with pretty modesty.

"I am at your service, princess," Melbourne drawled, making a small bow to her.

"Must you flirt with the child, William? Spare her blushes, do." Emily whispered, laughing.
"Em, one forgets what a lovely creature you are," he teased, seeing the irrepressible little scamp she had once been, in the middle-aged lady before him. Her bonnet strings had loosened, and her hair blown free, and that small untidiness suited her as well as the fresh air and exertion.

Melbourne was not eager to disappoint them, but the ground was not yet frozen hard and melting snow made the precipice more treacherous. Moreover, the pond – as tempting as it appeared, glistening even under an overcast sky – was not yet frozen hard, and might not do so, freshened as it was by the diverted current. Regretfully he recommended they do their drawing from memory and leave the pond until he might bring them back on a bright summer day.

He helped the women to mount, assisting Princess Elise first and then throwing Victoria up into the saddle. She rode astride in the privacy of her husband's estate, in the sturdy divided country skirt Emily preferred, halfway to breeches. Melbourne allowed his hands to slide down her rounded derriere, discreetly squeezing, laughing into her startled face. Then he lifted her hand to his lips in a more decorous gesture.

They parted once more back at the Hall, and for the rest of the day Melbourne only saw Victoria in passing. Newspapers reached the Hall regularly, and when the Queen was in residence the courier who brought her dispatches from London bore with him reports from Leadenhall Street as well as Whitehall, and the gentlemen descended en masse to dissect and discuss the news at length.

No word had yet arrived from India, concerning troop movements into the Punjab. Whether a battle had been fought and what the outcome might be, was the topic on everyone's mind. Von Wettin was acquainted with Charles Wheatstone – Melbourne vaguely remembered meeting him at one of Albert's salons – and expounded at length on the electrical telegraph, which he predicted in a few short years would make it possible to receive news from the East in a matter of hours and not days. At present, using rail transport and the fastest Channel packet, it would take a week's hard travel for an Army messenger to reach Britain. The Company with the resources at its disposal – a standing army 260,000 strong, more than four times that of the government, and billions in revenue to fund new technologies – could best that time by a few days at most.

Once again, they dined in state, being two dozen in number, and while there was no processional, still the King of the Belgians was jealous of his dignity and insisted on claiming his rightful precedent, which exactly suited Melbourne. At the long table in the grand saloon Victoria's place was at the head of the table and her uncle, by his own expectation, was placed at the opposite end, where otherwise the Queen's husband might have been relegated.

Victoria bridled on the first night, offended on Melbourne's behalf that he would not take precedence over her uncle at his own table. He teased her out of her momentary pique by demonstrating the fortuitousness of having her husband on her left, near enough to fondle her leg under the cloth. Moreover, although they each observed etiquette in conversing with their guests, neither Victoria nor Melbourne took nearly as much pleasure in the conversation of others as they did in each other.

"You look very pleased with yourself, ma'am. May I ask if there is any special cause?" She did, he thought; her lovely blue eyes were bright and soft as she looked out over the long table. "It makes you happy to have your family nearby?"

Victoria smiled rather mysteriously, he thought, but shook her head a little.

"No – well, yes, of course it makes me happy to see my family and yours together. It makes me very happy to have my family here, in your home. This is a house made for entertaining, and fit for royalty, as your grandfather envisioned. And because it's yours – ours, as you so graciously remind me – that matters a great deal to me. The palaces belong to the Crown and the country. I am only
the latest tenant. But here, at Brocket Hall, it feels different, as though I can really take pride in it all. Thank you," she whispered, ducking her head and looking up at him through thick lashes.

The Duchess of Kent, on Melbourne's left, addressed some remark to him and he leaned in her direction to hear it. Victoria lifted her wine glass and sipped, then turned slightly and asked her uncle Emmanuel a question about their day's outing.

**

The Queen's dresser bustled about on one side of their shared dressing room while Victoria disrobed behind a painted Chinese screen. Melbourne's valet attended him in his bedchamber, helping him out of his close-fitting black coat, removing discarded cravat and setting aside boots for polishing. Melbourne found a special golden charm to the small domestic rituals of this time behind closed doors. Perhaps more than any other aspect of married life, this was the real proof of their intimacy and the reward at the end of the day. That he had the right and the privilege of shutting them way from the world, away from all the demands on her time and attention, and it was only the two of them, this was the ultimate proof that he had the prize he had always yearned for, craved without knowing. He was loved and even more, he had someone upon whom he could lavish his love; could speak in low tones, share his thoughts and they could laugh or commiserate together, the two of them facing the world together.

Melbourne dismissed his reflections, laughing a little at such solemn rumination. Victoria's sweet voice thanked her maid and bid her good night, and then she stepped into his chamber.

Her dark hair was brushed smooth and hung loosely over her shoulders. Her face glowed from hot water and application of Milk of Roses, dewy with youthful good health, color flattered by the rose-pink of her silk negligee. Melbourne smiled broadly and held out his arms. Victoria went into his embrace, exhaling a contented sigh.

"Long day?" he asked against her hair.

"Mmmm…" Victoria's head came up suddenly. "Wait, I have something for you."

She ran into her own room, on the far side of the dressing room, and returned with her sketch pad.

"For you, if you like it." Her expression was suddenly shy as she handed him what she had made.

Melbourne looked down at a charcoal sketch of the pond. Since he knew they had not gone back without him, she must have recreated it from memory. Like most genteel young women, Victoria had been taught drawing and watercolors by a succession of governesses under the direction of her mother and Baroness Lehzen. She had a good eye and he had often watched her engrossed in the application of pencil to paper. He examined it closely and saw the many details she had accurately captured – there was the large boulder, and there the righthand bank. Even snow-covered, one could discern the shrubs cultivated to provide an al fresco changing area and even the gleam of clouds reflected in still near-frozen water.

"It's beautiful, Victoria. Really good." Melbourne understood that it was more than merely good; words were inadequate to convey how touched he was by her real affection for the glade he had made with her in mind, where they had spent long summer days together.

"The pond is beautiful, and the idea you created something so beautiful, for me, for us. We had such fun there, and we will again."

"You're beautiful," he whispered reverently. "I remember you splashing about like a fish, in your
drawers – and out of them," he added, teasing now, his tone light. "Now if you were to draw that-

He set the drawing carefully on the table and swiftly, without warning, scooped her up, one arm behind her knees and the other under her shoulders. Victoria squealed and hooked her arm around his neck. Melbourne grunted for effect as he strode the few steps to the bed and dropped her down so that she bounced on the mattress. Then he tumbled across her and pulled her to him, both laughing, and they murmured nonsense at one another, silly meaningless observations, sharing the minute details of their day. Gradually they grew quiet and after Victoria slipped out of bed to kneel and say her prayers she came back to nestle in his side, her head on his shoulder, and Melbourne kissed her forehead with great tenderness. *If I was sure to Whom I was praying, was his last cogent thought before sleep took him, I would be praying my thanksgiving for this.*
Chapter 32

The man chosen by Lord Cameron did not travel alone. He had with him a young, proud Sikh nobleman's son, built along the lines of a woman, or so it seemed to the burly Scot. He quickly learned that appearances were deceiving, and on the hard ride across eighty miles of desert it was Robbie Fraser, late of the armed services of the Honorable East India Company, whose endurance waned until he thought he would fall from the saddle.

Their overnight rest at Shepheard's Inn revived him enough to save his pride, and once on the P &O steamer out of Alexandria he stood on deck, stalwart against churning nausea, until they reached Marseilles.

Fraser carried no more than a flat oilskin pouch, along with his weapons and the crossed bandolier which never left his person. The young man who rode with him, slight as he was, was as tightly wound as one of the tigers glimpsed at a distance in the Indian upcountry. He had shed his bright native silks for civilized Western attire, but the painted leather pouch was a constant fixture, imperfectly concealed under the loose broadcloth coat made for a bigger man.

In the port of Marseille two more west/east travelers went unremarked, and Fraser made his way to a dockside inn where good Scottish whiskey flowed freely and he had his first solid meal – good beefsteak and potatoes – in the years since he'd last been on Christian soil. The next morning, they boarded a train to Boulogne and from there it was only to cross the Channel on an overnight steam packet carrying the mail.

A winter Channel crossing was nothing to take lightly, but Fraser's orders were plain and his pride in the trust placed in him by once-Colonel Cameron propelled him up the plank, boarding with his head high and stomach already roiling. Behind him, his companion, called Ranjit Singh Aulakh, walked in accepting silence. He was the nephew of that Queen, to whose insurgent court Cameron had attached himself, son of the man beheaded at her feet. He carried with him her suit for peace, to be placed in the hands of none other than the Queen of England. Robbie Fraser, born and raised in hard-scrabble poverty in the bleakest corner of Caithness, found himself in a rare and entirely unlooked-for position of trust assigned him by the man who stood between two queens.
It was not to be thought that gathering for the holidays might be an entirely tranquil affair. By the day before Christmas, innumerable squabbles had broken out. As was to be expected. The children bickered as much as they played, forming and reforming alliances that had little to do with degree of familial connection. Someone was always in tears, it seemed, and someone else crowing their complaints to any adult who would listen. Flustered nursery maids and governesses took the part of their various charges, only adding to the noise level.

Victoria and Lord Melbourne managed to stay above the fray, regrouping at stolen intervals to compare notes on who was currently at odds with whom.

Ernst had persisted in his amorous pursuits, succeeding with the well-bred young Frenchwoman who waited upon Queen Louise, and for that his pious aunt-in-law bestirred herself to insist that arrangements be made to send the girl packing forthwith.

Henry Temple found himself in similar straits, except his usually tolerant spouse rebuked him
sharply enough that he pouted for a day, confining himself to a wing chair in Melbourne's library and threatening to remove himself to his own estate. Henry and Emily both appealed to Melbourne for intercession, the one calling on masculine solidarity in the face of spousal interference and the other, on her brother's natural protection.

Victoria the queen mother had allowed her partiality for her sister's widower to overcome the usual fawning attention her own brother expected, widening the rift between those two gentlemen. Melbourne observed his mother-in-law's gratification sympathetically, understanding that for someone of her age – or his – the idea of two males, no matter how closely related, vying for one's attention compensated for much previous neglect. Victoria the queen, seeing the drama, did not conceal her impatience with her mother's coy, flirtatious manner.

Allow her some sport, darling, Melbourne had cajoled during one of their brief encounters. She leads a lonely life without male companionship.

Does she believe she can marry Uncle Emmanuel? Victoria had hissed, wide-eyed with outrage. Melbourne, choosing his battles wisely, thought that question might wisely go unanswered.

Melbourne was pleased that the worst altercation he had with his old nemesis was a spirited disagreement on the relative merits of a 1775 Massandra Sherry, which Melbourne preferred, and the 1811 Château d'Yquem Leopold claimed was vastly superior. They finished both bottles, determined to put the matter to rest, but the debate continued until Melbourne called for one of the remaining cases of a 1787 Château Lafite which had formed part of his inheritance. Perfect agreement was reached on this queen of all vintages and the newly-minted Duke of Melbourne ended the evening exchanging toasts with His Majesty King Leopold of Belgium.

Victoria herself finally lost patience, taking offense at a chance remark from George's wife Lady Anne. The Princess Elizabeth, reunited with Fanny's girls, quickly shed any recent attempts at greater discipline. Tangled dusky curls flew behind her, sash untied and stockings sagged as she and her little band of female marauders ran about, in the unfortunate words of Emily's daughter-in-law like savages. That might have been allowed to pass, but it was followed by somewhat mild criticism of Baroness Lehzen.

"Perhaps a more modern governess, one who understands the proper training of young English ladies," Victoria repeated to Melbourne, miming the admittedly-starchy tones of the 6th Earl's wife. She was the daughter of Thomas de Grey – only the second Earl, so I don't know where she comes by her air of hauteur, Fanny had added, firmly aligned with Victoria. Melbourne soothed their ruffled feathers and sent them off with a kiss after extracting a promise to play nicely as example to their daughters.

Victoria, uncharacteristically in sympathy with her youngest child, bit her lip to suppress a smile when Lily, instead of apologizing, stuck out her tongue and then her bottom lip and stood with folded arms glaring at her elder. As soon as escape was possible Victoria rescued of her youngest from solitary confinement.

"Where are we going, Mama?" Victoria only held a finger to her lip and led her daughter through the storerooms, stopping only to grab up two of the rough shawls hung on pegs for use of the scullery maids. She led Lily out through the kitchen-yard, past a gate leading to the shrubbery-enclosed herb garden and along a flagstone path.

The conservatory was their destination. As soon as they stepped inside mother and child were met by the heady fragrance of exotic fruits and flowers flourishing in abundance, with bottom notes of mulch and damp soil.
In the warm air of this glassed building, Melbourne and his horticulturalists grew oleander, hibiscus, lily of the valley and camellias, fresh vegetables and, in one entire section, oranges, lemons, pomegranates and figs. Perhaps most favored of all were the exotic pineapples. An entire building was devoted entirely to these towering trees, and while Brocket Hall could not rival the great estates in quantity or variety of winter-forced fruit and flowers, the orangery was well-established when Melbourne inherited the title and in the years since he had implemented judicious improvements.

"Where's Papa?"

"Papa took the gentlemen shooting, I believe."

Victoria had intended to address the need for civility, but in the fantastical tropical surroundings, alone with her wayward child, she abandoned the notion. Instead they wandered about, eating fruit from low-hanging branches, watching delightedly as the near-tame birds who called the upper reaches home landed without fear. Turning a corner, they came upon a crew working industriously over planting tables holding magnificent scarlet flowers.

The chief of these workers, a tidy man with deeply tanned skin and sleeves rolled past his elbows, stepped forward and bowed.

"Your Majesty, did you come to see the poinsettias? We are readying them for the house now, as you can see."

Victoria refrained from betraying her ignorance of Emily's arrangements. "They are perfect. I remember we had some at the Palace last Christmas, but never in such abundance."

She estimated there had to be nearly a hundred plants potted, each one at least a foot tall and more than that in width. No two containers were the same, and she assumed that was because the ever-resourceful Emily Temple had raided the storerooms of each of her own homes, the palace and undoubtedly some of the neighbors as well. To introduce conformity, wide silver ribbon was tied around each.

"What do you call them again? I think they are not common to England?"

The man repeated himself, and Victoria committed the name – poinsettia – to memory. He proceeded to explain their origin, and the means by which they had been introduced to civilization – first America and from there, England and France, by the American ambassador to Mexico, only a decade before.

"They naturally bloom only at Christmas time, ma'am. We do nothing but provide the proper conditions to encourage healthy growth. Would the Princess Elizabeth like to hear the quaint tale told of how that came to be?"

Whether she understood all or most of what he said, Victoria knew her daughter liked nothing more than to be addressed directly, and she once more bit her lip to hide a smile, this time at the sight of her tiny daughter effortlessly charming the botanist kneeling before her.

"Your Highness, it is said that a poor Mexican girl just your own age had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve Services. Her name was Pepita and she had a brother, just like you, who loved her very much and was a very wise boy for his years. As Pepita walked slowly to the chapel with her brother, her heart was filled with sadness rather than joy. 'I am sure that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes," said her brother to console her.
Pepita made a bouquet of common weeds. She felt very sad and embarrassed by the poor offering and fought back tears when she entered the church.

As she approached the altar, she remembered her brother's kind words and as she knelt to lay her gift at the Christ child's feet, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all who saw them were certain that they had witnessed a Christmas miracle right before their eyes. From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the Flores de Noche Buena, or Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season.

Lily was entranced, whether by the story or the man telling it, and Victoria felt a mother's pride in the sweet, beautiful child at her side. That rush of love and pride was accompanied by vague regret, when she recalled how much more often she felt only frustration and impatience.

"May I, ma'am?" The gardener held a single bloom in his hand and waited for her permission before delicately sliding the stem behind Lily's ear.

"Mama is it pretty?" Lily turned her face up to Victoria. The red flower nestled in riotous dark curls was indeed very pretty, and Victoria said so, impulsively stroking her daughter's cheek.

"Oh yes, Lily, it is very pretty. And you are beautiful!"

"Mama too, please, sir? Give Mama a flower so we are both pretty for Papa?"

Victoria laughed and took a blossom from the gardener's outstretched hand, fastening it in her hair with a pin.

"Can we take your flowers to church, please? So I may leave a gift too?"

"Certainly, princess," and the gardener bowed once more. "If Your Majesty and Your Highness will excuse me, we must finish our work now. Thank you very much for condescending to visit us."

"Wait, sir!" Lily tugged at his coat tail. She held out a bunch of grapes, somewhat the worse for wear from being extracted from her pinafore pocket.

The ladies and some of the older children, along with some of the gentlemen, had spent the evening hanging the rest of the decorations on the two largest evergreen trees, at either end of the Grand Ballroom. Furniture had been brought in and arranged, to accommodate the entire extended family group on Christmas morning when Father Christmas had deposited his bounty. George had entertained them with a selection of English and German carols while they worked, and their labors were rewarded with a bowl of hot punch Ernst concocted.

Neither Melbourne nor Leopold – in fact, none of the absent gentlemen - had yet reappeared when the tree-trimming party broke up.

"The gentlemen will not come out of hiding until it's quiet in here, I think," the Duchess of Kent had observed slyly.

"Then I will retire," Victoria decided. "It's been a very long day."

Before ascending the stairs, she sent a footman for as many candles as he could muster and had them set out in the master chamber. Her maid had hot water waiting and after she undressed and bathed, Victoria rejected the soft cotton gown she held out, calling instead for a diaphanous peignoir. She dabbed perfume on her shoulders, between her breasts and behind her ears. Then she
settled into the big armchair Melbourne kept beside the bed and waited.

**

"What a lovely sight to see at the end of the day!" Victoria jerked awake, only belatedly aware that she must have dozed off. Melbourne stood over her, stroking her hair.

"You did not have to wait up for me. I'm afraid your uncle and I lost track of time. We were… settling a dispute between us. A mere difference of opinion," Melbourne hastened to add when he saw the small wrinkle of concern between her brows. He repeated their arguments on competing vintages, mimicking Leopold's manner so aptly Victoria giggled.

"You look tired," she observed. "Or perhaps showing the effects of that third bottle?"

"I am. We have quite a houseful and it's been a long couple of days. But never too tired for you, ma'am. If you excuse me, I'll –"

She had already risen and began untying his cravat. "Let me help you?"

While she worked, Victoria shared the highs and lows of her day. She described their visit to the succession houses and their visit with the gardener.

"...she was quite charming, William," Victoria finished, laughing softly. "If she weren't a mere baby, I might have thought she was flirting with the man. At any rate, your daughter knows how to bend gentlemen to her will, an art she's honed with you."

"I will go to church in the village on Christmas morning," Victoria said as she worked to open the buttons on his waistcoat. "Aunt Louise and her children will go to separately, to the Roman church in Hatfield, and I will attend services at St. Æthelthryth's. I'm sure most of the gentlemen will find one or another excuse to remain here – they've spoken of pheasant hunting – so you need not accompany us."

"I will most certainly accompany you. I would not dream of missing services, my dear."

"St. Etheldreda's. The vicar and I are old friends. It was his predecessor who married us. Caro is buried there, you know. I haven't attended a service there since we laid her to rest, although I've lifted a few with the vicar at the King's Arms, across the way."

"Thank you. I won't ask you often, but it will make me happy to attend services in your parish with you at my side."

"Always," Melbourne said, laughing out loud. "I am no church-going man, as you well know. But I know my duty."

His head slightly muzzy from spirits and fatigue, Melbourne allowed her to continue to undress him. The time it took, her deliberation, combined with the ethereal flickering illumination of only candles, transported him into a state of blissful relaxation. Neither spoke, content to drift in heady silence while even the sound of their breathing came in unison.

Victoria's hands were cool and soft when they rested on his hip bones, before sliding onto his flanks so she could push down his trousers. When he stood in only a long loose shirt she reached her hands up and explored his face as if sightless, tracing the planes of cheek and jaw, the corded neck muscles and soft hollow under his Adam's apple. Her expression was serious, almost reverent, and that was nearly more than Melbourne could bear. He let his own hands move over the filmy fabric of her gown, and cupped each of her breasts in his palms.
Wordlessly, Victoria led him to their bed and sat him down. She tugged at his shirt and lifted it over his head. Then she gently pushed him back against the pillows.

"Well, ma'am? What do you see?" Victoria had sat back on her haunches, simply looking, until he had to ask.

"Beautiful," she said simply. "You are...perfectly beautiful. Perfectly perfect. Mine. All mine."

Victoria lay beside him, turned into him, subtly shifting her leg in invitation, and her own hand found him under the covers. There was no urgency in their caresses, each content with slow, deliberate exploration. Melbourne's finger had only just found the source of her pleasure, already primed and eager, when they were interrupted by a sharp knock on the door.

Melbourne frowned, then rose and pulled on his dressing gown before opening the heavily carved oak door. One of his own Brocket Hall footman shifted nervously, still buttoning his coat, clearly donned in haste. He delivered a garbled message which only confused his master further. Finally comprehending the gist of it, he gave a brief instruction.

"From India?" Victoria sat up, startled by Melbourne's words. She self-consciously raised the quilt to cover her bare breasts, Melbourne noted absently. "Billy?"

He sat beside her and shook his head. "No, I think not. I know not. If it were he, we would be hearing him bellow outside the door. And not an Army courier; they would not come without a ranking officer, nor would they disturb us this late without someone from the Ministry in attendance, no matter how dire the situation. These men have been sent to the kitchens for whatever late supper can be had and are content to retire to the stables until morning."

The stables had been greatly expanded in recent years to accommodate the officers of the Household Cavalry who invariably accompanied the Queen on her visits, with a fully outfitted barracks with bunks, dayroom and several individual officers' suites.

"But if you like, I will dress and go down to speak to them now. Undoubtedly they bring word from – or about – Billy."

Victoria caught her breath at his words and seemed to consider his offer. Then she shook her head.

"No, there's no need. Whatever it is, we will see them in the morning. They must be exhausted, if they came straight here." Victoria said resolutely, and Melbourne's lips quirked in a small humorless smile. Then, making up his mind, he put out the candles and went to his wife.

"In the morning," he repeated. "The night is ours."
The air was golden, bathed in the pinkish glow of winter sunset. Surreal clarity and gently blurred soft focus co-existed in a hushed tableau, one of those knife-edge moments when time itself seems to pause and take stock, marking a memory for all eternity.

Victoria had intended only to steal away for a breath of air and instead stood transfixed. Something timeless and eternal, beyond thought and feeling, and the awareness of memory being made at the very moment of its conception. She leaned against a low fence, meaning to watch Deckel patter about on his short, wrinkled legs but, lulled by the stillness of the shimmering landscape, she allowed her mind to drift.

Brocket Hall. So much of importance had happened here, not only because its walls were imbued with the very essence of the man she existed to love. They had spoken their vows here, blessed before God – the Almighty God to whom Victoria owned all thanks and praise, for He had put her on the throne to serve and had given her the one man in all the world who could provide the strength and wisdom she needed to do her duty. What if held no more power; here, now, on the eve of His Son's birth, Victoria understood that whatever obstacles had been put in their path were no more than stepping stones. Yes, it could have been otherwise, but only through disobedience to His divine will and rejection of their souls' imperative. She and William becoming one, creating new life between them, guiding and nurturing that life together, were right and good.

She laughed softly, the sound startling Deckel so that he looked back at her with a droll inquisitive expression. Soon it would snow in earnest, the ground would be covered in a fresh blanket of white, and Victoria reckoned the little German sausage dog would refuse to venture out and expose his low-slung nether regions on any but a well-shoved path.
“Very well, let’s walk further then, while we can. While you can, little man.” Victoria had lifted a light shawl from its peg near the door, kept there, she guessed, for quick trips to gather eggs and such. If there had been wind, or if the fat flakes wafting down in desultory fashion came in earnest, she would soon feel the cold but for now, the brisk air felt good on her face and she would take advantage of these few minutes alone with her thoughts.

Having all their family under one roof was not without its tensions and having the serenity of Brocket Hall disrupted by constant activity for five days and counting was not an unmitigated blessing. And yet, Victoria was suffused with bone-deep contentment. The coming-together of good English Lambs and her own Hanoverian relations, with a sprinkling of French and Austrian blood, was the culmination of what had begun more than a decade before, when a two-term Prime Minister genuflected before his eighteen-year-old sovereign. Their physical union, blessed before God if not His church, had only sealed a bond which was already unbreakable, and the birth of their son, such love made manifest. Time – every hour of every day, every action, every interaction – wove the strands of two lives into one fabric, indivisible. It was an image Victoria could hold in her very practical mind, a cloth so finely woven one could not discern individual threads. Some rich jewel tone, she decided fancifully, emerald or sapphire, changeable like her favorite sateen gown, here dark and mysterious, there almost golden where it reflected the light.

Deckel caught sight of the swans and barked manfully, the deep resonating sound from his barrel chest surprising in so small a dog.

"Deckel!” Victoria admonished, startled at their distance from the house. Thread, fabric, gowns… how absurd you are! Rarely did she permit her mind to wander so completely. By education and inclination, hers was a concrete intelligence, more concerned with actual doing than with theory and ideas. Lord M can claim the realm of the theoretical, she told herself, content with this fundamental difference between them. As in so many other ways, it illustrated that together they were two halves of a perfect whole, complementary. Together, not the same.

She more often thought in the same language which would later reflect her thoughts and experiences in the journal she kept.

_Having our families together at Brocket Hall binds us even more completely. Just as we are one, so are they all one family through us. William and Uncle Leopold have much more in common than they have differences. Emily's children and their husbands and wives are between them as stiff-necked and concerned with their own consequence as any of my Coburg relations, and no comely female is safe from either Ernst or Henry's lechery. Uncle Emmanuel and cousin Alexander share many acquaintances with Frederick and seem to have much to discuss about which way events will play out on the Continent._

That was exactly what pleased Victoria most of all, she decided. No matter how deep, how eternal, the feelings between them were, she had an insatiable need for proof that their union was equally inviolable, that nothing and no man – or woman – could separate her from Lord M in life. _And what better proof of our marriage before the world, than our families becoming one? Except, perhaps, for Parliament recognizing William, first Duke of Melbourne, as Royal Consort. And a child being born of that marriage. The first of those, Victoria had accomplished; the second...would be God's will._

Deckel did not bark, but his tail began waving furiously and he abandoned his determined stalking of the cob and his pen. Victoria guessed without turning, who approached. She did not turn away from the water, only waited until a pair of large warm hands rested on her shoulders, followed by the welcome weight of a thick cloak.
Melbourne folded his arms around her, standing so closely she could feel the heat of his body against her back.

"You look pensive, Mrs. Melbourne. All the ruckus too much for you?" When he spoke, his mouth was so close to her ear his breath sent shivers down her spine.

"Not at all," Victoria laughed. "But it's nice to be out here too."

"I think we'll wake to a considerable snow cover. The country people claim to be able to feel it in their bones when a hearty snowfall is imminent. The older I get, the more I know what they mean. I'm getting quite stiff in my dotage." His arms still around her, one hand laid over the other, left Melbourne within easy reach and Victoria took full advantage.

"Quite stiff, Lord Melbourne? Not quite yet…but…ah, yes, there we are…"

"You naughty minx," he growled in her ear, his breath tickling.

"What were you thinking of?" Melbourne rested his chin on her shoulder and Victoria shifted herself more firmly against him.

"My gown," she answered truthfully.

"With your new Indian tiara. I assume that is your intent, to honor our guest?"

Victoria had already forgotten, or perhaps dismissed from her mind by an effort of will, the bizarre encounter.

"Hardly," she said drily. "That was not uppermost on my mind."

***

They had received Cameron's envoy – or, more accurately, the nephew and envoy of Maharini Jind Kaur – earlier in the day. He and his escort had been consigned to the barracks, but it soon became apparent that had been a miscalculation. The young man, handsome with his light golden skin and liquid dark eyes, was clearly well-born and spoke impeccable English. He made no complaint about his quarters, but if Melbourne had not already noticed, Frederick and Palmerston were both quick to assess the situation and the standing of their guest.

He introduced himself simply and with quiet dignity, properly making obeisance to the Queen first, then to her husband, uncle and brothers-in-law.

"Your Majesties, your Lordships, I bring greetings and salutations from my aunt, Queen of the Lahore." He said all that was proper in such an unorthodox meeting, one taking place outside the bounds of diplomacy. Victoria courteously returned his greeting in kind and invited him to sit, sent for refreshments and engaged light conversation. Ranjit Singh Aulakh was the eldest son of the maharini's dearly beloved, and prematurely departed, brother. He made only passing reference to his father's demise, and none to the circumstances surrounding it.

Nicely done overall, had been Palmerston's whispered assessment. He is either well-trained or has first-rate instincts and knows that if he comes to make terms it cannot begin with a recounting of their perceived mistreatment.

Melbourne's first instinct was to have his brother-in-law steer clear; unlike their unexpected visitor, Palmerston had a knack for saying exactly the wrong thing and offending allies and adversaries alike. He was Foreign Minister, true, but the prince, if that's what he considered
himself, was merely an uninvited guest, due hospitality out of consideration for his rank and birth.

***

Melbourne had summoned his solicitor, from an abundance of caution, suspecting rightly that the matter upon which he sought advice was far beyond the scope of a rural lawyer. Still, it was a beginning, and their visit helped him to clarify and consolidate what had been no more than an amorphous notion. By the end of that Christmas Eve it would grow to assume the proportions of an imperative call to action.

When they emerged from his study, it was to an eerie silence. The children, and most of their mothers, had retired to recoup their strength for the evening ahead. Those gentlemen who had not followed suit were holed up in various secluded spots. Leopold snored gently in an armchair, toupee askew, and Palmerston was stretched out full length on a sofa. By chance Melbourne caught sight of Victoria's small form in the distance, walking along the banks of the pond, and he was glad of it, for it meant they might have a few minutes alone.

She was so engrossed in her own thoughts that she did not hear his footfalls crunching over winter-crisp turf, and he had nearly reached her when the little dog alerted.

He felt and heard the hush, as though the earth itself had paused, as if time itself rested on a knife's edge between past and future. There was only the present, this present, and they might be the only two sentient beings to bear witness. A pregnant pause, the words came unbidden. Some greater meaning attaches to this moment than we can know. Melbourne shivered, not from the cold. Instead, he had the sudden fanciful notion that this very moment, this place, this time, was a linchpin linking the two worlds he knew, waking and dreaming, what was and what might have been. Foolishness, man! Next you'll be hearing choirs of angels sing, and then it will be animals speaking in the stables.

Melbourne cleared his throat of some imaginary obstruction, swallowing hard past the lump there, and draped the warm cloak he had brought around Victoria's shoulders.

"You look pensive, Mrs. Melbourne…"

In fact, her expression was so rapt she might have been sharing his own sense of supernatural wonder. While he watched Victoria drew herself up and pulled back her shoulders in a gesture so infinitely familiar he knew the lift of her chin which would accompany it. His Victoria, his splendid, precious girl, with her German practicality and earthy English forthrightness. His tether, the anchor which kept his philosophic melancholy from taking flight, the fire which warmed his essentially cool, overly sensitive nature.

She did just that, with a single bawdy movement, dispelled any trace of the ephemeral when she reached behind to grasp him so that he sprung to life under her knowing hand.

They parted to bathe and dress – there was no time for dalliance – and he only smirked when he saw her again, resplendent in a black velvet gown with daringly low neckline that bared her creamy shoulders. His own black velvet tailcoat had been carefully brushed and ready, and his valet had wordlessly held it out for him as soon as his neckcloth was arranged. There was no room to doubt; clearly the young buxom blond who dressed the Queen was colluding with his valet. I only hope he's reaping the rewards, Melbourne thought, speculating on the probable times and places of a liaison about which he preferred to know nothing. Surely not in our beds? was his fervent hope.

Victoria possessed the proverbial king's ransom in jewels, accumulated since time out of mind, the wealth of a kingdom at her fingertips. Diamonds the size of robin's eggs, sapphires and emeralds
and rubies. Melbourne had given her his mother's garnet signet ring, along with a plain wedding band he had placed on her finger four Christmases ago. He had persuaded Emily to part with the last of their mother's jewelry, part of Elizabeth Millbank's dowry at the time of her marriage to a very rich and very dissolute young commoner. These pieces, a garnet and diamond tiara, necklace, earrings and bracelet, had been the most modest and seldom-worn of their mother's eventual collection. Gifts from the Regent and a succession of other male admirers had been considered income, investments to be liquidated before and after her death. Only the garnets remained.

Melbourne had taken the lot and had them remade into a far lighter piece, modern as befitted a very young woman, delicate filigree suited to a very petite Victoria. It was a humble offering to bring to a queen, sovereign of the greatest nation on earth, she who possessed more concentrated wealth than any of her predecessors, thanks to the revenue of a rapidly expanding empire. And yet…and yet…

Victoria's delight had been entirely unfeigned and soothed his initial near-embarrassment at such a modest gift. Fastened in her dark hair, the tiara encircled a cluster of curls at the back of her head and cast mysterious darts of reflected light across her cheekbones. The earbobs danced nicely – there, the jewelers had truly excelled, giving small stones a recutting so that every facet captured any ambient light.

"These are from you, William, and for that alone I cherish them. They are also the first jewels of my very own, not held in trust for my heirs or property of the Crown. Thank you!" Victoria's voice trembled with real emotion and her eyes were alight with love when she raised them to his own.

They dined formally, if rather expeditiously, and then moved to the grand salon where the children were shepherded in by preening nurses eager to show off their charges, shiny-clean, brushed and beribboned, splendid in their best clothing.

"Tonight, I want to stay at your side. We are family – there is no need to play host and hostess," Victoria had whispered confidingly. Melbourne was pleased enough to dispense with the aristocratic custom which considered any husband and wife who showed signs of preferring their own company to that of their guests guilty of an unforgivable faux pas.

Melbourne searched for and found his own in the ranks of young people by Liam's gleaming sandy brown head and Lily's riotous dusky curls. He admired the picture his daughter made, tidy and well-turned-out in red velvet with white rabbit fur collar and cuffs, her white stockings properly tied up and shoes as yet unscuffed.

The children sang, and recited bits of the nativity story, were applauded and praised, given sweetmeats and each a small gift, knowing the bulk of their presents would be waiting under the tree on Christmas morning. Every parent undoubtedly considered their offspring superior – Leopold surely wore a look of such smug pride Melbourne was certain the man was enraptured by public proof of his own fertility, rather than any paternal feeling inspired by the children themselves – but Melbourne was quietly sure that in his own case it was true.

Liam, the son he could not publicly claim, recited in a clear treble, his voice and expression equally sweet and pure. And Lily – ah, Lily, my little princess! Melbourne thought, knowing himself utterly smitten by his daughter, perfect miniature of her mother, Victoria as she would have been yet if not for the weight of duty, the mantle of dignity placed on her narrow shoulders. If sometimes he thought – they both thought – that she would have come more naturally to the role than her more timid, careful brother, Melbourne realized that to do so would stifle her spirit, dampen that wonderful impetuousity which made her so unique. Liam knew himself to be heir, and already grasped the significance. His son would be, someday in the far distant future, a careful,
dutiful monarch, not prone to excess, wise and benevolent. Lily would be…Lily.

Victoria squeezed his hand, beaming proudly as Liam bowed before each of his parents. His grandmother had already smothered him with kisses and now had her thin arms around Feodora's youngest, who was surreptitiously trying to wipe off traces of the lip rouge she left. Lily performed a curtsy as she was prompted, and then without further ado climbed onto her father's lap, heedless of her own modesty and the claims of primogeniture. Liam, tolerant of his small sister, merely tweaked one of the ribbons meant to confine her unruly hair.

All the children were permitted to stay up far past their usual bedtime with the promise that those who were awake at midnight would be taken to the barn by Ernst and Alexander, to hear for themselves whether the animals spoke. It was a promise which did not have to be kept; by shortly after ten, the last of the little ones was carried out, limp in the arms of a governess, and those older ones who remained had little interest in an old fable.

Melbourne saw with mingled approval and relief that Fred kept their young Indian visitor occupied, explaining the more esoteric traditions, plying him with food and drink while Adina – daughter and wife of diplomats – prettily attended to the young man's stories of his own traditions. Melbourne did not see his young sister-in-law's eyes grow suddenly wide or hear what she whispered to her husband when their companion excused himself briefly.

The clock struck two before the master of Brocket Hall was able to retreat to his own bedchamber. The party had broken up shortly after one o'clock, and Victoria had gone up directly while Melbourne remained behind, at the *sotto voce* request of his brother.

When he entered, tugging off his cravat while he moved through the darkness, Victoria was already abed.

"Finally! What kept you?" she protested, her voice husky with fatigue. Melbourne struggled to shed his close-fitting coat and gave up, accepting her assistance in lieu of his valet.

"Get back in bed, sweetheart. I'll join you directly." He knew his tone sounded distant, even strained, and compensated with a brief caress. His hand cupped her cheek, fingers stroking the elegant jawline.

Once in his dressing room, Melbourne removed his clothing and then, in his old tattered dressing gown, sat down and took a deep breath to steady his nerves. What Fred had confided was, as his brother had pointed out reasonably, neither unexpected nor exceptional. Only the source rendered it unthinkable.

"It's bound to happen, William," Fred had said, soothing his initial outrage. "Are you telling me there hasn't been talk before now?"

"This is 1845, Fred. For God's sake, we're not living under feudalism. This isn't the middle ages."

"It's been how long since the affair of the Spanish marriages was on everyone's tongue? There's a certain practicality in settling such matters early, to avoid speculation and the sort of posturing we saw there."

"For the love of all that's holy, Fred, she's a baby!"

"Are you telling me old Leopold hasn't suggested any matches yet? Highly unlikely; he's got that boy of his, the one who makes my skin crawl. And if not that one, then –"

Melbourne had slammed his palm against the wall so hard it set the sconce to trembling.
"Look, I'm not for a moment saying there's anything to consider. They're fighting a lost cause out there; the child is a heathen and a—"

"Fred, I don't care who it is. My daughter will not be bartered to make any alliance. I don't give a damn if it's to a Mohammedan or Hindoo, or a Christian prince. It's obscene to even suggest such a thing."

"William, she's a princess of England and as such her hand will be highly sought after. Mind you, I don't say such betrothals are necessarily binding. We all know too many instances when promises are forgotten, alliances made and broken. I'm saying it's inevitable, and only surprising the first one comes from an upstart houri on the other side of the planet, making a proposal that will serve only as fodder in the clubs, when the news is out—"

If that levity was meant to defuse tension it failed miserably. Melbourne grew white with rage at the thought of the denizens of London's gentlemen's clubs – his own peers – having his daughter's name, the prospect of his daughter's marriage, no matter how many years distant, bandied about.

Melbourne was not to be consoled, nor reasoned out of his anger. He had known – of course he had; how could he not? – that within the small community of European royalty, marriages were arranged, and the closer to the throne of a major power, the more valuable a commodity was any child. But Lily? His Lily? Never!

He leaned forward, resting his face in his hands, willing the tension to leave him. There was nothing to be done; it was the middle of the night, Christmas morning would dawn all too soon, and the princess in question would be clamoring for her parents to join her in the mad dash to see what gifts had been left under the tree. Taking one deep cleansing breath, then another, Melbourne went to join his wife.

"Is everything all right, William? You were gone so long, and then—"

"Everything is fine, sweetheart. Only a— a matter of business Fred needed to discuss. Something which could have waited until another time because it was patently ridiculous and didn't deserve the attention we gave it."

Melbourne turned onto his side facing Victoria and traced her profile with a finger.

"My little love," he whispered dreamily, feeling all the weariness of a long day loosening his muscles as the late surge of emotion drained out away. Here, now, this was all that mattered, the warm pliant woman in his arms, big blue eyes under thick black lashes, kissable lips, sweet heart-shaped face.

"We should sleep," she whispered. "The children will be up early."

Melbourne looked at her speculatively, wondering whether she was saying she was too tired for what he needed to drive out the vestiges of that earlier, ugly conversation. The soft hand making circles on his abdomen said otherwise, feather-light caresses making a path farther down. He pulled the quilt up over them against the chill of the night, and then slid her gown down, baring one shoulder. Her breast popped out, the nipple already hardened in anticipation, fitting perfectly in his palm. He could smell the alluring, musky scent of her wafting upward and it stirred him powerfully.

"Happy Christmas, Mrs. Melbourne. Shall I show you what else I have for you?"
Chapter 34

Melbourne strolled through the public rooms of his beloved Brocket Hall observing the quiet industry of housemaids and footmen. For the past week his own retainers, augmented by wagonloads of servants transported by his efficient, enterprising sister from her own household and neighboring estates, had seen to his guests' every need. Their own body servants doubled the number of mouths to feed, beds to make and meals to be served.

At nightfall on the day after Christmas – Boxing Day, when servants and tenants alike had received their annual gift – everything Melbourne surveyed was seen through the patina of his own contentment, mellowed by fatigue and satisfaction. He briefly entertained the fanciful notion that his home absorbed and reflected the energies within. Once imbued with quiet melancholy which mirrored his own solitary state, it had sprung to life with the advent of a new mistress and children sliding down the curving mahogany banisters. The past week Brocket Hall had seemed to be preening itself in all its spangled finery, flickering candlelight refracted by crystal, mirrored in the depths of polished wood and brass, casting auras around the glitter and gold of holiday decorations.

Now the Hall was quiet. Those who left had done so well before sunset, although a near-full moon over new-fallen snow made the night nearly as bright as day. Those who remained had retired as soon after dinner as they could decently make excuses, and even the children had gone uncomplaining to their beds. Melbourne imagined he might hear the Hall heave a great sigh, as pleasantly weary and satisfied as he himself. The fires had been carefully banked, and Melbourne dreamily gazed at glowing embers under their blanket of ash.

They had traveled to the village church on Christmas morning in a landau on runners, drawn by a glossy black pair bred for winter travel. At least six inches of snow covered the lanes, and under a watery pale sun the fields sparkled as though scattered with diamonds. Victoria's darling face, framed by the thick silver-tipped crystal fox fur of her hood, had been alight with exhilaration, eyes wide and cheeks pink in the cold clear air. She held Lily on her lap, and Melbourne took Prince William on his, the children giddy with delight at the sensation of flight provided by a sleigh.

The service by his old friend the vicar was considerably shorter than those Melbourne had attended at the Chapel Royal. Afterward he had stood with the Queen to greet parishioners who bobbed curtsies and ducked heads in the matter-of-fact manner of locals. The celebrated marriage of their most famous near neighbor was an old story, remarkable only for the influx of London swells and
increased attention to the needs of their township. Brocket Hall was not the grandest of Hertfordshire estates, but in recent years had employed scores of residents to make it worthy of the new Lady Melbourne.

Victoria's gifts managed to surprise. The first, a grand new Winterhalter portrait of the four of them, destined for pride of place in the Grand Gallery, was undoubtedly executed from the artist's sketches and his superb visual memory. They had not posed for any such work, in Melbourne's memory, yet Winterhalter had produced a composition which spoke volumes. Victoria sat a brocade chair with Deckel at her side while Liam leaned casually over to pet the dog. Melbourne stood at her other side, one hand resting on her shoulder and his expression one of affectionate pride. Their eyes seemed to meet as she glanced up at him. Her expression was nearly perfect, Melbourne thought, that unguarded look of melting adoration which had brought him back to life and thawed his frozen heart. The Princess Elizabeth, accurate to her halo of curls and one sagging stocking, was lifting her arms to her father, her impish expression a near-mirror of her mother's.

Victoria had given him a second gift as well, a pocket watch. Melbourne read and considered the engraved words within. *Amor in vita hac et in aeternum.* Attached to the timepiece was a fob with a sapphire the size of a pigeon egg, the twin of another engraved with his seal. Melbourne had no doubt these were taken from Victoria's own vast collection of gems.

Melbourne expected to see at least a few smirks of derision, of suspicion confirmed. *Leopold, certainly, always sure that avarice and self-advancement were at the heart of any match.* But when he finally looked up it was to nothing worse than admiration and envy.

"You told me it is easier to ask the time than to tend to a watch, but we all have to make concessions to progress so…" Victoria dimpled prettily, but he saw the careful wariness in her eyes all the same. *So afraid to displease him,* Melbourne knew, and hastened to reassure her.

"I love it, and the seal too. Thank you."

Upon request, he passed the gifts around for inspection, as the other adults present had done once all the children had retired. To his great – nay, inexpressible – relief, his private fear, that he was still viewed as a scheming interloper, was not realized. Even the massive gemstones were not considered excessive by royal standards. Queen Louise proudly wore a new necklace of deep sea pearls looped three times around her neck and still reaching nearly to her waist.

The watch now rested in his pocket and the fob swung gently from his waistcoat, catching and reflecting what remained of the light.

Melbourne became aware of a soft voice addressing him. Without turning, he extended his arm backward and drew Victoria forward. Their bodies fit together as perfectly standing as laying, her curves filling in his hollows. He rested his chin on the top of her head and folded his hands flat over her midsection. They stood that way before the carved hearth in silence, content with each other in the serenity of Brocket Hall.

"We'll be returning to Windsor," Victoria said. "Rather than Buckingham Palace. We will remain until I open Parliament in late February or early March, as Lord Russell advises. Uncle Leopold, you are welcome to come with us unless you feel you are needed at home."

Palmerston lounged at his ease, long legs encased in riding boots stretched out before him. King Leopold sat erect, with ramrod straight spine, his head held as though balancing a crown. Frederick Lamb sat on Leopold's other side, exchanging congenial glances as friends of longstanding. Victoria sat behind Melbourne's own broad desk, new during the Regency, its surface scarred and
stained where the blotter failed, and lovingly polished to a rich shine.

Melbourne strode forward and opened the door to usher in Prince Ranjit Singh Aulakh. The young man stepped in alone, unaccompanied by his erstwhile traveling companion. Aulakh was thin but wiry, and Melbourne estimated he was not as delicate as fine features and a slender build would suggest. The young man had traveled light and in haste but managed to present himself in a well-tailored black suit and snowy white linen. His straight black hair was drawn back and fastened with a ribbon in the fashion of the previous century.

Once the courtesies were dispensed with, tea offered and taken, cursory inquiries into the price of passage on the steam locomotive which bisected southern France to the coast and the relative discomfort of a cold weather Channel crossing, Victoria signaled her intent to proceed with more substantive matters. Melbourne gloved with pride at the subtle means by which she exerted effortless dominance, even over a seasoned trio not unaccustomed to the rarified air of authority and power.

He took up a position at her left and slightly behind, to indicate clearly that while he did not consider himself her equal, nor was he on a par with the King of the Belgians and England's Foreign Secretary. Despite having hosted this young emissary for the past several days, and including him in their family celebrations, it was Queen Victoria granting formal audience.

The Prince began what was clearly a carefully scripted speech, liberally laced with effusive praise in the floral poetry of his native land. His English was nearly flawless, a mere hint of lilting intonation lending the most prosaic utterance pleasant musicality. There was no direct reference to the army outside the gates of his aunt's last fortified garrison, no allusion to the political climate in his native India, and Melbourne noted with grudging respect that the young man's quiet dignity assumed equality, on behalf of the maharini he called queen, with the sovereign of the greatest nation on earth.

He quickly sketched a favorable image of his young cousin, a boy of some eight years, ascended to the title and dignities of his father upon the latter's death. "...raised to honor all women, out of respect for his lady mother...western tutors since the age of four, fluent in English, French and Latin...." Blah blah blah, Melbourne wanted to hear, aware that in any other circumstance he would find the situation novel enough to be intriguing. He studied his nails, fastidiously pushing back a cuticle, in pretend nonchalance.

And so, the dance begins, Melbourne thought. He even felt a trace of sympathy for the poor benighted woman struggling to hang on to the memory of power, thinking she could stand in the way of inexorable progress and somehow block the expansion of the British Empire. Quixotic at best, and doomed to failure, of course, yet it was not the mythology of the rebel queen, vilified by his countrymen to fuel a false moral outrage, that roused his own simmering anger. Nor was it even the outrageous proposal, to betroth her son to his daughter. That would be easily and summarily dismissed as the impertinence it was.

Melbourne, like his old friend Emily Eden and her brother Auckland, once governor of India, was not predisposed to consider the ruling classes of India with their pale skin and Aryan roots, on a par with Sub-Saharan savages. Under Auckland, not a few of his officers established Indian families with well-born local women. Charles Metcalfe, acting Governor-General in the '30s, had sent home three fine sons to be educated at Eton and Cambridge before entering society, and William Frazier, British commissioner to Delhi in the same decade, had returned to London with a dark-haired beauty on his arm who was received everywhere, even Almack's. No, his outrage was not based on the ethnicity of this first proposed suitor. The Indians of Jind Kaur's rank and station were considerably more refined in their attitudes and traditions than the working classes of post-Regency
England.

Still, it was ambition and power for which she fought, not mere survival. England and the Honorable East India Company were not interested in mass annihilation; the Indian princes and aristocracy of those provinces which had made terms were civilized fellows, who saw their fortunes exponentially multiplied when the Company began sharing the vast profits they reaped under colonization.

"No," Melbourne heard his own voice breaking into the smooth, oiled delivery so that the young man flushed, verbally fumbling to pick up his disrupted petition and managing no more than disjointed phrases.

"No," Melbourne repeated, this time more gently, his own tone silky. "It is out of the question, and I beg you to go no farther. We entertain no offers for our daughter's hand, from any source. Please, convey our sentiments to your aunt."

He lazily ran his gaze over the four men facing him. Prince Ranjit Singh Aulakh betrayed the least surprise, only inclining his head respectfully in acknowledgement.

"I meant no offense, sir," he said in liquid accents.

"None taken, sir. I wish your aunt the very best. We hope to receive her at Court someday if circumstances allow. Along with her son. Now, I believe Lord Palmerston wishes to convey his own assurances from our government…"

Victoria rose from her seat behind the desk and stepped back slightly, so she stood beside her husband. She extended her hand to Aulakh, who bent and kissed it as a courtier born, then backed out of her presence. Palmerston likewise took his leave, intending to travel back to London with their visitor.

When the door had closed behind them Leopold puffed out his chest, full of his own consequence, and the normally-grim face showed early signs of a smug smile.

"Well done, William. I confess I was surprised that you chose today to speak for my niece at an audience, but you did well. Put him in his place firmly yet didn't slam the door on any possibility of a diplomatic solution to that unfortunate situation in Lahore."

Melbourne watched with benign detachment, as Leopold rose from his chair and came forward, closing the distance between himself and Victoria. He was relatively certain what would come next, and the King of the Belgians did not disappoint. Good, he thought. Let's have it said, so we can all be clear where I stand.
"You certainly set Uncle Leopold to rights," Victoria said mildly. She and Melbourne walked through the snow at dusk, kicking up great clouds of the fluffy white stuff as they went. When a sudden gust of wind came through he stopped and adjusted the edges of her hood more securely, retying the string under her chin. Then he raised her face and bent to kiss her.

"I think he was finally resigned, so long as he is assured no other suits will be entertained."

"And do you really think that our daughter should be free to choose her own husband?" Victoria's voice trembled with laughter at the notion. Melbourne chuckled and reached for her gloved hand, tucking it into his own pocket.

"God, no," he responded, sputtering. "But I do think any such thing can wait for, oh, a decade or two. And then, if she's permitted to go out into society like any well-born young lady, introduced to appropriate young gentlemen of good family, she can gain some experience."

"Lily! William, our daughter is more likely to run off with a…a circus performer, or a groom from the stables…"

"That is precisely why I trust you will handle her wisely, choosing your battles and constructing an environment which allows her to flourish in safety, free from the distraction of – circus performers and the like. But never forget your Shakespeare, ma'am. Every young lady likes to imagine herself Juliette to some star-crossed Romeo, and our Lily will be especially prone to taking whatever course she imagines is opposite that which has been set down for her. A light hand on the reins, and foresight, ma'am."

Since the young lady in question was just then sitting down to a nursery dinner, having been coaxed into returning her wooden rocking horse to its assigned stable at the head of her bed, the matter was of no immediate concern. Still, Victoria frowned mightily.

"Don't!" she said sharply. Then, softening, she whispered so that Melbourne had to stop walking and bend down to hear her. "Don't speak as though it will all be up to me. You will manage her as you always do. Together we will see her safely – and, yes, happily – married, with babies of her own in the cradle."
"Perhaps. Or not, as the case may be. Our daughter may prefer no husband at all, but rather a kennel filled with dogs, a stable full of promising horseflesh…"

"…and the company of her father to that of any potential suitor," Victoria finished for him, showing the beginnings of a tremulous smile.

"To that end, sweetheart, I have something for you. A late Christmas gift, if you will, or…well, you may judge for yourself." Melbourne reached into his many-caped greatcoat and extracted a folded vellum sheet. Victoria peered at it in the moonlight but could make out little, except for the ornate script of a legal document and the wax seal at the bottom.

"The deed to Brocket Hall and the surrounding property, ma'am. I am leaving it to you to hold in trust for our daughter. Your home and Liam's always, but Lily's separate property if she does not marry, along with the income. It is not entailed, and Fred and Emily are in complete agreement that the Hall is mine, for you and our children."

"Never! Not while you are – never." He heard the anger in her voice, real perhaps but most likely a comforting diversion from the dread he knew she felt at any mention of a future without him.

"So long as you are aware, my love. I'm not planning on an early exit, be assured. But I doubt either you or our daughter will change in the years to come and I want her provided for. She is so much like you, strong-willed, tempestuous, and without the burden of your duty to restrain her. I merely want to ensure she never feels obligated to accept any offer of marriage merely as a means to an end."

They had reached the end of the long promenade which, in warmer months, was pleasantly shaded by trees trained to grow in a cathedral ceiling of greenery overhead. Where they would turn to return Melbourne stopped and took hold of Victoria firmly.

"Darling, every prudent man plans for the future, for the disposition of his worldly belongings and any estates to which he holds title. It's the system which has sustained us for centuries, the great names and great estates as well as the Crown itself. No more, and nothing to distress yourself about. I merely tell you now because…" words failed him and instead he pressed his lips to her cold ones, warming them under his until he felt her respond, kissing him back.

"Let's get in out of the cold and call for some mulled wine by the fire. This is our last night at the Hall, and we must make the most of it."

He did not tell her the rest, the letter he had sent with Palmerston or the request to be delivered to Nathan Rothschild. Neither did he explain the use he had found for the £60,000 a year which came with his newly minted title. Some, he conceded, would find its way into their daily life, allowing him to shower her with the small trinkets she could command at will, yet held special significance when they came from a doting husband instead. But the bulk of it, he hoped, could be invested prudently in America, as a hedge against whatever uncertainty a tumultuous century might bring. Even the richest woman in the world could see her fortune vanish overnight, swept away by the tides of revolution. If he were no longer there to protect her, he would endeavor to leave in his place the means to escape and start anew. He had been a very young man when tales of the Terror in France reached England, but like every erstwhile reformer he had quickly lost the idealism of extreme youth when confronted by the brutal power of the mob, once unleashed.

Moving swiftly, Victoria slipped and nearly lost her balance. Melbourne deftly caught and righted her and when she caught her breath, she laughed aloud and began sliding in earnest on the snowy path. Melbourne laughed as he followed behind, enjoying the spectacle of his precious girl playing with abandon like the child she had so recently been.
As they drew near the house she stopped and stared, her expression filled with wonder.

Behind mullioned windows the drawing room gleamed like a jewel, amber light reflected in sparkling ornaments, every candle on the tree lit, the glitter of tinsel and quieter beauty of heavy golden candelabra on the piano.

"Look!" Victoria exclaimed. "It's so pretty! I will always remember just this view. It will remind me how happy this Christmas has been, at Brocket Hall!"

End Notes

Thank you all so much for reading and sharing the alternative reality of this wonderful man. If you think others might enjoy, please link to share. We don't have some of the ordinary search tags - "Whitehall" and "Melbourne" are our genre and specialty niche - so won't show up in many other searches.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!