Adagio

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Adagio

by Raziel
Chapter 1

The winter of 1845-46 had been mild thus far, and yet it had begun to seem interminable. Autumn with its blaze of color had given graceful way to the clean, fresh wonder of first snow, enlivened by Christmas finery. Then came January, a bleak colorless month, gunmetal grey skies low over mud-churned paths and streets stinking of sewage, paving stones heaved loose by early frost not yet repaired.

January was perhaps the hardest, least forgiving month for the poor of the capital, beggars and thieves alike bereft of the casual largesse of the gentry, who would have fled to their country estates for the cold months between social seasons. There was new money in the City and lots of it, but little charity obtained from these upstarts. Worthy upstanding burghers, manufacturers and ship owners and prosperous merchants, these arrivistes were tight-fisted with their hard-earned wealth and lacked a tradition of noblesse oblige, the inferred responsibility of the real upper classes to act with generosity and nobility toward those less privileged.

January of 1846, broke the longstanding expectation of a near-deserted capital city, or at least those precincts which housed and entertained the upper ten thousand. Parliament would be convened several months earlier than was customary in recent years. The new government of Lord John Russell was to officially take office and an incoming freshman class of House members had surged into town ahead of the opening. ¹
The general election called at summer's end had seen an unprecedented number of Conservatives claim seats. Because of the schism between Stanley's protectionists and Peel's supporters and what some called an unholy alliance between the Whigs, O'Connell's Reformers and even the Chartists' representatives, Sir Robert Peel was forced to resign, and John Russell stepped forward to claim the Queen's mandate on behalf of his party.

William Lamb, former two-term Prime Minister and newly-minted Duke of Melbourne, knew as well as anyone the hyperbole which invariably attended the mildest disruption in public life. He had served his sovereign and nation well in four decades of public service and was well-liked by all factions, enough so that his name had been bandied about, even put forth in private audience by Robert Peel himself, as the logical successor to Wellington. The old Iron Duke, a lifelong Tory, was held in such universal esteem that he transcended Party affiliation, and so, they said, did Melbourne. If only… was a sentiment heard often during contentious political meetings, in conjunction with the mention of his name, most often in his presence but sometimes without, accompanied by regretful head shakes.

The if only which rendered such suggestions ineligible – or, as Melbourne himself put it on more than one occasion, made them palatable at all – was the simple fact that the British system of constitutional monarchy had never contemplated the possibility that the husband of a Queen Regnant might lead her government. It was Melbourne's firm belief that nostalgia and impossibility explained the sudden fond remembrance of his leadership, and he whimsically explained it thus to the Queen to defuse the momentary bright spark of interest he saw in her face at the notion.

He had accepted her commission to the role which Wellington long held, a cabinet-level minister extraordinaire, officially unaligned, providing quiet guidance in whatever capacity it was needed or desired – not necessarily the same thing, he warned – and doing what he could to smooth the tumultuous legislative waters. It meant, he knew, exercising every ounce of tact he possessed to avoid even the appearance of exerting undue influence, but that had long been his modus operandi.

Melbourne knew well that he gave an impression of lazy insouciance, and it suited him to do so. If he secretly devoted great effort to understanding all sides of complex issues, often in more depth than those who considered themselves experts on a subject, he preferred that fact to remain unknown. An abhorrence of open conflict and unseemly fervor were part of his nature, and if he sacrificed some measure of respect by those whose impassioned excesses blinded them to his very real competence, it only meant they would ultimately underestimate him.

The Queen's levée was well-attended. Her salon was filled by freshmen Members of the Commons and their wives, many of them entering the storied halls of Windsor for the first time agog at the grandeur. Some were sons of the nobility who would eventually take a seat in the upper house, but a surprising number sprang from the new middle class, determined to appear blasé and unimpressed. Such posturing fell away, leaving them gawking and tongue-tied, unable to form a coherent sentence in the Queen's presence.

Those seeing her for the first time beheld a slender, very petite young woman. As they stood in the back of a very long receiving line, studying her at a distance, it was not uncommon to hear impressions exchanged which were not entirely complementary.

No beauty, was the waspish opinion of a provincial newcomer. A little dab of a thing, might have been murmured behind raised fan. Eager to mentally record every detail, the wives in line were quick to remark upon her simply arranged dark hair, gleaming waves allowed to frame her small heart-shaped face. The early childish roundness of that face, exaggerated in early portraits to highlight her innocence, had been refined to reveal an elegant jawline and better reflected the strong personality
within. Observers shuffling forward in line would be able to see large Coburg-blue eyes, darkened to a midnight hue, framed by thick black lashes, their gaze sharp under modestly lowered lids.

The little queen had avoided the tendency of her Hanoverian forebears to put on weight, it might be noted, with some matron sure to add so far.

"Only two children, and none more likely with a man her husband's age," one woman opined in broad northern accents. "Small wonder she can keep her figure then unlike the rest of those German brood mares and their stallions."

"Oh, I don't know," her companion answered firmly. "They say Lord Melbourne has cut a wide swathe amongst the ladies of quality, and not all that long ago either."

No female with any pretense to an interest in fashion could fault the exquisite cut of the queen's simple gown, although they might tsk at the graceful bell-shaped skirts which lacked the requisite exaggerated breadth which Godey's told them were indispensably in vogue.

Perceptions gradually changed as they drew nearer the throne. Features which seemed rather bland at a distance seemed to come into focus, imbued with the force of her presence.

Long before their Queen spoke a word, she captivated those who forgot tired aching feet and heads crammed with the details of feverishly rehearsed protocol, caught up in the awe-inspiring royalty dignity which had so impressed the ministers at her very first audience as a girl of barely eighteen years.

Each new Member was presented by the Lord Chamberlain. Ably aided by equerries from the Queen's Household, bows were made, curtseys of varying depth and agility performed, and then Her Majesty made some small comment. Her voice held no trace of the German accent they had somehow expected, nor was it as high-pitched and girlish as her stature led one to anticipate.

Victoria was diligent in her preparation for such audiences, studying note cards and insisting her secretaries quiz her until she could recall some pertinent detail about each one of the hundred-odd guests she would greet. She would shine the light of the Presence on each in turn, saying a few well-chosen words intended to personalize the encounter.

Lord Melbourne knew that such encounters would never come easily. She had shed much of her early stiffness, but such transient exchanges were one of the duties she most dreaded. Melbourne himself had perforce honed the art of social agility in his mother's drawing rooms before he was out of short pants. He acknowledged his own gift for repartee, dismissing it as no more than a parlor trick. Victoria Regina had a depth of substance he lacked, and when she wore the mantle of divine authority for her subjects she could not easily shed an overly solemn, even portentous manner. Her intelligence was undeniable, but she lacked the inclination and experience needed for social ease.

"I never know what to say, that won't sound silly or boring, Lord M," was her oft-repeated complaint, whispered once more in a husky undertone as they had prepared to enter the assembly.

"You are the Queen, ma'am. Everything you say is interesting." He had told her the same thing after her first drawing room, and she laughed her skepticism once more.

"It all comes so easily to you. You are so...so witty and charming. Everyone says so. You always know what to say."

"That, my love, is only the experience which comes with age. Well, and the fact that I never need to take myself too seriously," he had said only that morning. "You never had the luxury of that
freedom. I can utter any paradoxical nonsense and merely be considered eccentric."

Standing so closely behind her that that he could feel the warmth of her skin, Melbourne had briefly laid a reassuring hand at the small of her back and felt the *frisson* of connection between them like an electromagnetical current. She smiled gratefully over her shoulder, then straightened her already perfect posture and lifted her chin. A mask slid down over her features, the benign, remote expression of an idol carved in ivory.

Melbourne's presence was not needed at such a simple afternoon gathering, but he was content enough to stand behind her, pleased to lend her the comfort of his presence and support. During the presentations he would carefully restrain his own tendency toward gregariousness, eyes fixed on a point at the other end of the long hall except for the brief reassuring glances Victoria would seek. Later, the formal presentations completed, he would normally walk through the room with her, exchanging pleasantries with acquaintances and accepting introductions from those clamoring to meet the famous Lord Melbourne before taking his place at her side once more.

*Consort* was a largely ornamental role at which his young predecessor chafed. Melbourne had regarded Albert with sympathetic fondness during the years they all shared the same Royal household. He had done what he could to guide the young man in finding outlets for his energy and keen intellect. That they had grown genuinely fond of one another was perhaps the most improbable of outcomes, given the peculiar nature of the Queen's marriage to her cousin. Two children born of that union, both the titular offspring of a Coburg prince who had never graced his wife's marriage bed, and Melbourne had genuinely mourned the young man's untimely demise.

On this occasion, however, he was torn between his natural inclination to remain at Victoria's side, easing the strain of having to initiate all conversation and guide its direction, and return to the project which awaited him. No subject would dare suggest a topic, and by the strict rules of protocol could only respond to the Queen's overtures.

Still undecided, Victoria chose for him when she read his thoughts as she so often did. Sidling up beside him, her fingers found his discreetly and squeezed.

"You are distracted, Lord M. You have our permission to withdraw. *Ego patti*.

Melbourne looked down at her pretty upturned face and smiled into the shyly flirtatious blue-eyed gaze. He allowed his lips to quirk in appreciation at her clumsy Latin. Victoria had the benefit an education which would have been adequate for a young lady of good family but was sorely lacking for the heir to the throne. He would not correct her charmingly inaccurate pronunciation. Latin and Greek, Plato and Horace, formed part of the language of their intimacy.

"You will endure, certainly. And then, when you're done with your duties and dispensed with this herd, you will bear me company while I work?"

"If you wish, I would like that," she murmured softly, one small hand toying with the buttons on his coat.

Victoria still looked and sounded shy, as though uncertain her presence would be welcome, and Melbourne thought he knew why. It was she who, after the investiture, renewed her insistence that he no longer had any excuse to neglect his unwritten memoirs, pointing out that he was the husband of the Queen of England, a two-term First Lord and the supposed stepfather of the next monarch. Much ink had already been spent on the more salacious details of his life, sensationalized in the gutter press. Either he wrote his own biography or others would write it for him, interpreting as they went through the prism of distance and imperfect understanding. Confronted by the material he needed to begin such an endeavor, Victoria belatedly realized the enormity of the undertaking, and
the full scope of a life well-lived before her birth.

"I would like it very much, ma'am, if it doesn't bore you to watch me go through dusty journals and boxes of old letters. I never kept a diary on any consistent basis, you know."

Victoria had wrinkled her nose with a little moue of distaste, then sighed dramatically.

"Go ahead then. It's almost over. Mama has taken a group to tour the picture gallery, and they are setting out refreshments now. I'll join you as soon as I can."

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As soon as I can only came to fruition after another long hour in the reception room and then ninety interminable minutes over tea in the Yellow Drawing Room, entertaining the wives of Russell's new Cabinet ministers. Victoria silently blessed Lady Canning's insistence to Frederick Spencer, the new Lord Chamberlain, that the dinner for those same ministers and a few select members of the Upper House not be held on the same day as her levée.

When she was finally free of social obligations, Victoria dismissed her ladies-in-waiting and informed her steward she and Lord Melbourne would dine en suite. In her own boudoir, out of the public eye for the first time since midday, she felt her stiffened features relax. Victoria studied her reflection in the long pier glass, briefly weighing the advantages of comfort against the enhancement of stays which narrowed her waist and lifted her breasts up and out. She wanted, needed, to put her best face forward, knowing she would be competing against the ghosts of the past for her husband's attention.

It was the contemplation of all that went into a lady's disrobing, awkward fumbling with stays and layers of stiff petticoat, even the unclasping of the heavy weight of diamonds, nearly a breastplate, which decided her.

"Loosen my hair, Skerrett," she said briskly, full of determination. "One loose curl over my shoulder, only. No pins…and brush it until it shines. Then…something loose, and only a single petticoat over my shift."

Those are my rivals, Victoria thought, some part of her wanting to hiss like an offended cat. The rivals in question lived within the pages of those letters spread out all around Melbourne, written to and received from the women he'd loved. Lived in his mind and heart too, indelibly so, for how could it be otherwise? Victoria felt keenly her own disadvantage, the handicap of extreme youth which had already stolen so much which should be hers and hers alone. She knew Caroline the best and felt the least bite of jealousy where she was concerned. Melbourne shared his memories generously at Victoria's encouragement. After initial trepidation, she had come to accept that the love of his youth, the companion of his middle years, was an indelible part of his identity.

My first love, as you are my last, he had said, and Victoria was honest enough to concede that if she would not have William Lamb changed in any way, were such a thing possible – their age difference was an integral part of the magical dynamic between them – she would have to embrace that which made him who he was.

Even Elizabeth, Lady Branden, was tolerable. Whether through reasoned sensibility or avarice, Lord M's Dublin mistress, with whom he had exchanged those awful letters, full of sexual innuendo and lascivious reference to quite unorthodox erotic practices, had accepted his new relationship with equanimity long before it was a marriage. Lady Branden was his pensioner as well as the guardian of his ward before Susan had married and was careful to address her letters to them both, writing nothing objectionable or untoward since he'd sent her to Geneva to keep her out of Caroline Norton's
Victoria felt her quick anger rise at the thought of the bright, beautiful and inescapably obsessed Caroline. She shook her head firmly, as though by that concrete action she could push back the flare of temper and looked down at her husband, fallen asleep in his chair.

Liam slept too, at five still small enough to fit comfortably on his father's lap, his sandy brown curls spilling over Melbourne's sleeve.

Victoria sighed deeply, almost overcome at the sight of them. That her wonderful Lord M had put the seed in her womb, which made this beautiful boy, his perfect replica in miniature, seemed far too metaphysical an occurrence to be accounted for by mere physicality. An entire small human created from the desperate love of a young girl who refused to allow her happiness to be stolen.

In repose, all traces of age fled from Melbourne's classically handsome features. Victoria's hand went out of its own accord, and her fingertips twined through thick dark curls, mostly silver in the light of day but still dark in the warm glow of beeswax candles. His magnificent dark eyes, containing all there was to see of the man she adored, were closed against the light, and the strong Roman nose shadowed finely drawn lips which hinted at his sensitive, passionate nature.

Victoria resisted the urge to kiss those lips, leaning over him to see what he had most recently been reading. The sudden tight band around her heart eased, when she saw it was only a letter Augustus had written to Susan, returned with her response jotted in the margins.

What did you expect? That he would be reading aloud from those awful Branden letters?

She carefully withdrew the fragile foolscap sheet, so it would not be crumpled when Liam began stirring and laid it atop the open pages of a fresh journal. She wanted to read what he had written thus far but resisted the urge and instead whispered his name.

Melbourne's eyes opened a mere slit in response, and then he straightened in his chair and repositioned Prince William more comfortably. He peered at the mantle clock to see the time and groaned.

"I am quite stiff," he said in a hoarse voice. "My days of sleeping in my chair are long behind me. You have spoiled me, madam."

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1 All political events have been accelerated by 6-9 months, bringing John Russell into office nearly a year sooner than he would otherwise be and calling our general elections more than a year before those in actual recorded history.
The Dowager Duchess of Kent had arrived in a breathless swirl of taffeta, curls and flowery French perfume. She exhaled in a show of dramatic relief, one hand held to her bosom, exclaiming over her grandson, sleepily content in his father's arms.

Liam, it was explained, had escaped the children's apartment quite unseen some hours before and had been the subject of a frantic search ever since. The truant in question showed off work-grimed hands as proof of his earlier employment helping Papa with his boxes.

"Drina, the Baroness is too old to have charge of two small children and certainly not equipped to manage the education of an heir to the throne," Victoire pronounced, echoing her ancient well-worn litany of complaints.

"Mama, Lehzen is no older than you, and she educated me, didn't she?" Victoria had snapped without considering that she, too, had been insistent that Liam's tutor must be replaced.

The difficulty with Mr. Blunt was fresh in both their memories. He had been engaged the previous summer and Lord Melbourne had not liked him from the first. Liam, quiet and uncomplaining, shy and reserved in the company of those with whom he was not well acquainted had not complained but Melbourne declared the fellow required close supervision. When asked to justify his aversion he could offer no more than the man's pursed, red mouth and an unfortunate tendency to moisten his lips with his tongue.

Matters had come to a head early in the new year when the little princess incurred Mr. Blunt's ire on one too many occasions and that gentleman took it upon himself to impose discipline in loco parentis. Two footmen, summoned to the nursery by hysterical maids, encountered the Queen's husband shaking the scrawny schoolmaster like a rag doll and threatening to cane him with the same instrument he had used to strike Lily's hands. Within minutes Mr. Blunt was being lock-stepped out of the palace.

Children needed discipline, all agreed, and caning was an integral part of discipline. Melbourne couldn’t readily explain why, but suddenly, with these children of his later years, everything changed and the thought of corporal punishment was intolerable. He refused to debate the matter even with their mother.
Melbourne recognized genuine concern underneath Victoire's theatrical demeanor and set Liam on his feet, then rose to make his most graceful bow. He murmured an apology to the Duchess and gently invited Liam to do the same. Mollified, Victoire and Victoria gratified Prince William in turn by tsk'ing over the grimy palms he held up and admiring the semi-neat stacks of correspondence threatening to spill over the low table on which they had been sorted.

"He did all that?" Victoria said doubtfully, when they were alone. Melbourne heard the chuckle in her voice and hastened to assure her.

"Most letters have dates in a common location, and he sorted those by year."

"So many? I would have thought most of your correspondence was retained at Downing Street."

"Official correspondence, yes, for the most part. But if I'm starting this project, it seemed wise to assemble everything that was out there and go through it all to decide on its disposition. I'm something of a packrat, less by design than by my natural indolence."

"What are they all? And what's in that box there? More letters? You were a prolific writer, for a man who never kept a diary."

The box Victoria had indicated was set to one side, next to the grate. As soon as the words were out she sensed - although she could not have said why – her husband tensing.

"Will brought those from Panshanger. Em had them moved from Brocket Hall when she – when she went through the place several years ago."

Victoria was certain she knew just when Melbourne's sister had done so, and she assumed she knew the reason.

"Ah…your wife…" she glanced sideways, to see whether her guess was correct. Melbourne shrugged.

"Certainly, some of Caroline's writings, I'm sure, and letters from that time. And…other letters, I suppose. Nothing important."

Victoria felt something click in her mind.

"And nothing which will make it into your memoirs either, I'm sure," she said dryly.

"No, nothing which will make it into the Goddamned memoir," he snapped. Victoria's eyes widened, and she sucked in her breath. Instantly Melbourne flushed, and looked so contrite that she studied his expression closely.

"William…I believe you're embarrassed," she said slowly, watching to assess his response.

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"Show me some mercy, ma'am, I beg you. I was all of three-and-twenty when I wrote that."

Victoria held a small bound volume, her finger marking the place. *The Fashionable Friends, A Play in Five Acts.* Written – purportedly – by Mary Berry. An unlikely pseudonym, Victoria thought skeptically. The epilogue was written in verse by one William Lamb. She had plucked the book from one of the many boxes around his sitting room.

Dinner had been rolled into the private royal apartments and set out on a small card table. Cutlets had
been devoured, side dishes picked at and tarts consumed. Footmen cleared the covers and set out port
for Lord Melbourne and sweet, nutty sherry for the queen.

Conversation over dinner had been light, Victoria laughing at Melbourne's banter, his pungent
observations on the guests they had welcomed to the palace and the likelihood – or not – of their
assimilation into the life of the capital.

"And Mary Anne Disraeli, of course."

Dinner over, they removed to the long Chesterfield sofa, where a cheerful fire burned. Victoria
untied the ribbons on her slippers and stretched silk-stockinged legs on the cushions. She settled
herself against Melbourne and pulled his arm around her for comfort.

"Well?" he prompted, after she'd read in silence for several long minutes.

"It's charming, William! Completely wonderful, like the author! '…love of cards, and leisure for
intrigue; credit and curricles, and dice increase. Racing, and all the useful arts of peace.' Did you
write the play too?"

"I did not. That was once alleged, and I demanded a retraction. The play was written by a friend."

"What sort of friend, William?" Victoria asked archly. "A very close friend?"

"Very," he agreed amiably.

"How close?"

"Very close." Victoria felt his sides heaving in silent laughter and twisted around to catch a glimpse
of his expression.

"I confess to an early infatuation with the lady. She was one of Mother's friends, and I used to lurk
outside the parlor to catch a glimpse of her when she came to call. I was all of six or seven then, I
think. We continued the friendship. When she wrote this, she was…oh, I suppose the age I am now."

"And you were the age I am now? That hardly renders her ineligible for your…warmer interest. It
certainly is no barrier for us."

Melbourne opened his mouth as though he might speak, then considered and closed it again. Finally,
he settled for a weak, "Quite so, ma'am. Nonetheless, we were very chaste friends, I assure you.
Now, my jealous little minx, shall I read you a few lines of the play later? When we retire perhaps?"

Victoria liked nothing better than William reading to her when they were in bed. Well, perhaps there
were other things she liked quite as well, but one generally led to the other so that was all right. They
had most recently been rereading a book written by Melbourne's cousin, Mr. Lewis.

"Did you make any progress in writing?" Victoria asked, closing the small book and setting it
carefully aside.

"I made progress in thinking about writing," Melbourne laughed. "There is so very much to cover, it
takes planning before writing can commence. For instance, do I begin at the beginning, or the middle
or the end of my life?"

"'End'?" Victoria questioned sharply. "Your life is certainly not at an end."

"Past, present or future then – is that better? If I'm going to do this thing, I'm going to do it for the
children. I care little for what people a hundred years from now think, supposing they think of me at all."

"Will certainly found a great deal of material for you to peruse. What is in all those boxes?"

"Thanks to our son, I have a better idea. Letters, for one. No, really, Liam was quite helpful. Will has all the correspondence he found separated out from the books and journals. Letters I saved, copies of letters I wrote. Even a box of letters Caro received after *Glenarvon* was published. Letters I had in my files at Brocket Hall, the boxes we moved from South Street to Emily's residence for safekeeping when Cameron's people took over the townhouse. Yet more from Melbourne Hall, that Fred assembled."

Melbourne went on to describe how he set Liam to work sorting those letters, relying solely on the date inscribed in each upper corner.

"Five years old! *Five!* And he must have gone through a hundred of the blasted things before we settled down for a rest."

"Liam was reading at three," Victoria reminded him. "Lehzen deserves the credit. And you, most of all."

She referred to the fact that Melbourne had spent nearly every evening since the birth of his children the nursery, reading aloud long before the words took on meaning. An hour which was sacrosanct, a tradition established long before he had any right to be there, his presence accepted only because of Prince Albert, who had decreed that their friend William Lamb would – *must* – have free access to the royal nursery at any hour he chose.

An hour that Victoria sometimes begrudged, jealous as she was of Melbourne's attention. Seeing him with his children, utterly engrossed to the exclusion of all else, herself included, was not an entirely comfortable or even explicable experience.

*You must see them together, Victoria,* Albert had explained with painstaking deliberation. *It is a beautiful thing, to witness such paternal devotion. Your son – our son – is most fortunate to have Lord Melbourne.* Victoria had never known a father, and Albert a father's love, and if she was torn between pride in having given William the object of his devotion, it was Albert's emotional insistence that overcame her reluctance to share Melbourne's precious attention.

"Should we continue the…er…conversation we began previously?" Melbourne cleared his throat and to Victoria's amazement, the husband she had rarely seen less than at ease looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"You've asked me to write a comprehensive memoir, and if I'm going to do it I must revisit my past. I have no secrets from you, my love, but knowing something is different than reading it in gory detail. That is why I am somewhat…defensive, if you will, about dredging up old history. Personal history that has no relevance to my life in government, or our life together."

"You intend to go into all the gory details of your affairs? I think not." Victoria tightened her lips, but she was too pleasantly languid, weary after long hours on her feet, on display, to feel genuine ire.

"I think not too. And I'm not telling you to avoid browsing in those mountains of old letters and journals. I'm asking you. Of course, having said that, I'm sure now it will be an almost irresistible compulsion to do so."

"What do you want to do with them? The personal letters? You saved them for some reason."
"I want to burn them. I had no ulterior motive for retaining them this long. Once – after you and I – when we – oh, hellfire and damnation, if I thought once I had some interest in holding onto them, it was before I met you. Then...I simply forgot they existed. I'm glad Em boxed them up and sent them along because if not, they would have resurfaced sometime, sooner or later, and caused pain and embarrassment for you, or even for the children or their children. Now I want only to make certain they cease to exist."

"Then why didn't you burn them as soon as they arrived?"

Melbourne looked so amused that Victoria squirmed, knowing she had said something foolish.

"Sweetheart, if I had started burning papers as soon as they arrived, what would you have thought? I was between a rock and a hard place – if I destroyed them immediately, you would imagine far worse of me than you do now."

Victoria rose, but slowly. She considered what she might do next. Do I want to read them? What do they contain? Will I always imagine, and imagine far worse, if I don't know what they contain?

The box in question had not been opened; it was still securely sealed, sitting beside the fire, taunting.

"Your letters? Written by you, I mean? How do you come to have them then?"

"I bought them, that's how. And they cost me a considerable sum."

"Norton?" Victoria spat the name, as though to rid herself of a bad taste. She loathed Caroline Norton with a passionate hatred that sometimes boiled over, even now, after five years in an undeniably happy relationship with a man she knew without a doubt loved only her.

To her surprise, Melbourne shook his head. "Bess Crosbie's husband. Two thousand pounds delivered in cash by Michael Bruce to get the damned things into my possession."

"Bess? Lady Branden?" Victoria's shock was apparent in her shrill tone, and it caused Melbourne's lips to quirk in a small lopsided smile.

"Why are you surprised? You knew – know about our previous connection. I told you once I had no more secrets from you, and I meant it."

Victoria thought of the stout, very respectable looking woman she had met in Paris the previous year. She came from a good family – her mother had been one of the Russboroughs – but there had been nothing of the seductress in her. She had said everything that was proper when they met, the queen incognito, and all her letters contained no more than might be written by a sister to her brother, one friend of long but unobjectionably platonic standing.

"What did you write her that was worth two thousand pounds? And –" Victoria nudged the box with her foot. "how many letters did you exchange?"

"Somewhere upwards of two hundred. I know only because I made sure they were all returned, as nearly as I could recall. So...do you want to open Pandora's box, or can we retire and continue our discussion in more comfortable circumstances?"

Victoria was aware of sudden confusion, and she wondered whether he wanted her to insist on seeing them.

"I'll reserve judgment. For now."
With great deliberation, she went back to Melbourne and stood directly in front of him, so close she could feel his warmth and watch his chest rise and fall with each breath. Then she gently swayed forward as if she had lost her balance, the movement as subtle as it was deliberate.

"Tell me what you wrote, and I'll tell you whether I want to see it myself. And then we'll burn them. Together."

Victoria parsed her own thoughts and feelings as she was readied for bed. Jealous? Certainly; how could she not feel jealousy? But it was all past, without the same ever-present if remote threat posed by that awful, relentless Norton creature. Upset? Well, of course, she told herself. Or I might be, if I were to see with my own eyes what he found to say to another woman in two hundred letters.

She remembered the letters he had written during their separations, those long months after Liam was born, when he went on the first of his diplomatic missions, intended as much to allay suspicion of his continued presence at Court after his ministry ended. Paris before Lily was born, when she thought she would go quite mad with longing, desperate for him to return. Warm, witty, each missive in his familiar angular scrawl conveying his inimitable humor, the quintessential Melbourne she adored.

But certainly, nothing that would be worth two thousand pounds, had they fallen into the wrong hands. Even foreign powers would have found nothing with which to condemn either the Queen or her former prime minister.

Victoria said as much, when they were alone. Melbourne lazily sprawled across the wide canopied bed, his dressing gown gaping open to show a V of dark-furred chest. He watched her eagerly and Victoria knew, with the unerring certainty of married intimacy, that he was ready to forgo further conversation. Quite ready, she noticed.

"Your Lady Elizabeth – your Bess – was a more interesting correspondent than a mere girl like me, I suppose. She was more sophisticated, more skilled at holding your interest. When you wrote me, it was who you saw, what you ate…quite mundane things. Nothing worth £10 a letter, not to Louis-Phillipe or Monsieur Guizot's spies, not even to Princess Lieven and her cohort."

"My love, Dorothea guessed the extend of our relationship quite handily. She had no need to purchase letters to confirm her suspicion."

Victoria scowled at his overly literal response and stamped her bare foot on the rug. So swiftly she did not have time to react, Melbourne rose, lifted her and carried her back to the bed. He sat with a huff and a groan, keeping hold of her so she found herself unable to rise without an undignified struggle. Resigned to captivity, Victoria squirmed to find a more comfortable position on his lap.

"I am serious! How can letters you wrote to a…a nobody be worth more than those you wrote to a queen?"

And so, he explained. Melbourne kept hold of her while he spoke, stroking her bare arm, rubbing circles on her back as he might soothe a child, but neither his words nor the tone in which they were delivered were suitable for a child. When he was done he watched her closely, with a most curious expression. Victoria decided uneasily that it was some part embarrassment, mixed with genuine concern for her feelings as well as….

"Did you love her very much?" Victoria asked finally, sure it was not what she meant to say, unable to find the question she wanted to ask.

"No, sweetheart. I was very fond of her, and sometimes very exasperated by her. Much like – like she-who-shall-not-be-named. But I told you more than once, and I meant it – I have been in love twice in my life, the first time a pale juvenile imitation of the love I have for you."
"Then why…” Victoria didn't try to hide her confusion, even as she tried to process the things he had told her. On the surface, they made little sense, but she understood all too well the underlying meaning.

"You might be too young to understand, sweetheart, and I don't say that dismissively. But…quite often the contemplation of certain things is vastly more satisfying than the doing. That's certainly true when distance renders intimacy impossible. Then the imagination has free rein and it can be very…stimulating…to suggest…describe…ah, well…” He shook his head, remembering.

"The lady in question often complained of my inattention, my lack of – shall we say 'ardor'? when we were together. She once described an evening spent with me as an evening spent with an old woman. That letter is in the box somewhere; if you're going to read the worst of my foolish fantasies, then be sure to read her complaints as well. I don't suffer from the same lack of interest with you, my girl. But with poor Bess – and yes, her too – my pen was mightier than my sword."

Victoria blushed, as pleased by the compliment as she was by the truth behind it. Certainly, he had never lacked interest in her, or in her bed, but neither had he ever proposed the sort of things he admitted writing to another woman in what must be very passionate letters.

"Do you know, my little love, that at more than sixty I am finally the man that Caro wanted at twenty-five? I have had four strong-willed, demanding women in my life, so I suppose I run true to a type. But you, my darling, are everything I was searching for all along. You are delightfully innocent and allow me to teach you. You love me and desire me and that warms me as nothing else ever did. Without trying, just by being yourself and loving me, you accomplish what all that nonsense I wrote was supposed to."

His tone did not deviate from the playful and caressing, but Victoria heard genuine embarrassment and distress underneath. Here jealousy was there, banked coals, dormant but not extinguished, but she understood that this most splendid of men had placed in her hands the power to humiliate him and expose private things which should never see the light of day made her heart contract painfully.

"Our life, the life we share, is so much richer and more complete than anything scrawled in letters by a lonely man. If you want to know why I never wrote to you that way…it's because there was no need. You hold everything, you are everything to me."

Victoria turned so that she sat facing him and stroked his cheek while he toyed with the lace trimming on her night dress. Neither spoke for a time, their eyes locked on one another.

"Thank you for…for explaining. I don't want to see what those letters contain, and no one else should ever see them either. Burn them," Victoria whispered finally.

"You most certainly are not like any old woman I've ever known." She shifted herself on his lap, finding evidence of that fact, feeling proud, as though it was her unique accomplishment. "And your sword is mighty indeed. You're mine. All mine. Now…read to me? From your cousin Mr. Lewis' volume?"

"All in due time, Mrs. Melbourne. But first…” he tumbled her off his lap and rolled over to lean over her, tracing the line of her lips with one fingertip. "...things first.”
Chapter 3

The slanted rays of watery winter sun gave Melbourne a sense of the approximate time. Without that small clue he would have had no idea how much time had passed unaware, while his body was holed up in his small study and his mind journeyed twenty, thirty, even forty years in the past.

The pages of one bound journal were full, a second halfway so. All around him, like volumes lay open, pages marked by whatever came to hand, scraps of paper, bank notes, even the useless quill of an old-fashioned pen. He pushed back his chair and the sudden change in posture awakened stiff, protesting muscles so he groaned aloud. His mouth was dry, and his jaw ached, a sign he'd been clenching his teeth unaware. A dull thumping ache in his head, the pain radiating from his eyes to encircle his skull like a tight iron band. A weariness so complete he thought he might nod off where he sat at odds with fierce restlessness in limb that cried out for fresh air and movement. That notion made Melbourne laugh out loud. He habitually shied away from vigorous exertion despite his physician’s firm advice.

Diet and exercise, the twin evils of a desire to stave off decrepitude. His diet had changed beyond all recognition after the last, most serious attack of apoplexy. Victoria followed Dr. Holland's advice to the letter, banning the endless succession of rich dishes served in lavish overabundance at all but the most formal of State dinners and exercising the prerogative of protocol to accelerate the pace at which covers were removed. She even conquered the last vestiges of her own childish gluttony for his sake. Where once Melbourne might have consumed several beefsteaks, a whole lobster, some tongue and perhaps a few thick slices of ham in addition to some of a dozen side dishes, he now found himself content with far less. The Parisian saucier found himself demoted to sous chef while a young upstart with the knack of procuring the finest, leanest cuts meat and fish so fresh they still tasted of the sea found himself running the royal kitchen.

Melbourne could not begrudge such changes when brought about by a young, attentive wife who cared only to guard his health, even if he had warned her early on that if she proposed a reducing diet of potatoes and vinegar he would remove to the barracks where they still ate like men.

But if an exercise regimen for its own sake held no appeal, being deskbound for a succession of days
made the idea of riding out at a hard gallop, even strolling the length of St. James Street, suddenly seemed like a very desirable thing.

Melbourne stretched until he heard his joints pop and ran his hands through his hair, rubbing his own scalp to relieve the tension. He cocked his head, straining to listen for sounds of activity around him but the walls of the palace were too thick to admit any sound. Victoria had interrupted him only once, a welcome reprieve, coming in with the footmen who delivered coffee and biscuits at a half-past one. He showed off the volumes he had filled, aware as he did so that the appearance was deceptive.

"I don't know how much of it is useful, or how to make heads or tails of all of this. I'm trying to take all the advice I was given, by those far more accustomed than I to this business of writing. Just do it. Let whatever comes, come and you can pull it into shape after."

"You're a fine writer, Lord M," she had retorted, coming immediately to his defense, brows furrowing. Melbourne had laughed and took the hand which had been stroking his head, to kiss her knuckles.

"Thank you, ma'am. Even if you are a trifle prejudiced. But if you refer to those things I've written for the Edinburgh Review, it's far easier to pontificate when the subject isn't oneself."

He had pushed his chair back and turned toward her. Victoria accepted the unspoken invitation and sat herself on his knee, waiting expectantly. Melbourne savored her avid interest. He had spent long hours conversing with the brightest minds of a generation, during a period in which such intellectual exchanges were legendary, men vying to debate one another and win acclaim for wit and original thinking, and had excelled, enjoying every minute. Yet, talking to Victoria was a sublime pleasure, incomparable. Unlike most others, she didn't merely pretend attention until it was her turn to speak, impatient when the topic wasn't herself. She listened, completely engrossed, those big eyes sparkling with excitement, her expression one of unabashed adoration. He could see keen intelligence behind those eyes, processing his more esoteric thoughts in her more pragmatic mind, and what questions she posed were always unexpected, even nudging him toward fresh insights. Yet another way in which their compatibility manifested, he knew with deep gratitude.

"I'm still jumping around from one period to the next, as one recollection or another surfaces. I've been looking over some of the dispatches from '37 and '38. It's easy enough now, with the wisdom of hindsight, to attribute the loss of Elphinstone's Army to the generals – and I don't seek to let myself off the hook either – but the whole fiasco began with faulty intelligence and an irrational fear of the Russians' gaining influence much earlier on.

"We determined that Dost Mohammed wasn't sufficiently ardent in his profession of loyalty to British interests and might be courting the Russians. Was that right? More to the point, did it really matter to us one way or the other? Enough to decide we must replace the Emir with Shuja Shah Durrani? And why weren't we able to accurately assess the mood of the people? At that, there was no 'the people', as though the provinces of Afghanistan are a monolith, with common interests and goals. That pile of rock is ungovernable; it's a tribal region and no one man, even with the might of the British and East Indian armies behind him, can rule it all. Alexander learned that to his cost, as did the Persians…"

He had lost his train of thought then, content to look at her. Pretty in a blue frock with a wide white lace collar, her fine collarbones catching the light and making shadows in the tender area beneath. He would press his lips just there, so he could savor the sweet scent wafting up from her breasts and parts below...

He became aware of his rising response and looked away with mixed feelings of pride and
embarrassment at his own unruly member. Victoria's gaze flickered down at the bulge clearly outlined beneath loose-fitting trousers, and her bow-shaped mouth turned up in a knowing smile which he returned sheepishly.

She had tilted her head, fitting her mouth to his, while one hand slipped down onto his lap seemingly by accident. She stroked him once lightly and it leaped in eager response, so when she stood he groaned softly.

"I will let you get back to work, Lord M. Remember Russell and his ministers come at four with the casualty lists and dispatches from Hardinge."

Melbourne remembered now, simultaneously realizing he had not yet shaved or washed, and stuck his head out the door to send a page on the run to summon his valet.

When he entered the Queen's formal offices, he found most of the Downing Street delegation already present. Russell's Secretary of War, the Earl Grey; Sir Frederick Currie; Lansdowne – of all those assembled, the man most entirely at home in the rarified environs of Buckingham Palace – and the new Chancellor, Charles Pepys, Lord Cottenham, all stood in a row before the massive carved table where Her Majesty would sit. Johnny Russell stood apart, as befit his station. He was a pugnacious little man, thickened in late middle age from the wiry firebrand Melbourne had known for more than twenty years. He had, with the accumulation of pounds and inches and simultaneous loss of hair, developed a modicum of restraint, a good thing, Melbourne thought, in the man who must hold both Houses and a half dozen major and minor parties together.

Melbourne greeted each man. He knew them all well and in the past half-decade his ambiguous position, once viewed askance as contrary to the established division of Crown and Government, was no longer cause for either concern or constraint. Melbourne was still Melbourne, congenial, nonchalant with a propensity for uttering outrageous *bon mots* and paradoxical statements, unambitious, equally intolerant of pomposity and extremism. No gentleman cared to look too closely at another's domestic affairs, and even the age difference between former Prime Minister and the very young queen he had mentored and then wed no longer inspired comment. Even the ribald sotto voce admiration for his presumed prowess had faded. *People become accustomed to anything, with time* and familiarity, he had often said, and had finally drawn reassurance from that fact.

"We lack only Her Majesty to proceed, Melbourne," Russell said, glaring at him from under bushy unkempt brows.

"And Henry. He's with you, I assume?" Melbourne asked. The Viscount Palmerston, Foreign Secretary, was noticeable by his absence.

"He was to meet us here. He left before the clerks had completed transcribing the last of the dispatches from Gough." Russell's growl conveyed irritation.

Having had the services of his bold, brash brother-in-law through two terms in office himself, Melbourne felt vague sympathy for this new head of government. Henry Temple was a bold strategist and brilliant tactician, single-minded in his determination to see Britain assume its rightful place as the sole 19th century superpower, riding roughshod over anyone who got in his way.

If his style was not Melbourne's, if his abrasive certainty rankled on occasion and his blunt outspokenness threatened to topple alliances, then he was also the iron fist in Melbourne's velvet glove, the stick to diplomatic carrots. Palmerston was a big handsome fellow, an incorrigible flirt and inveterate skirt chaser. His boyish charm and sheer animal magnetism made him devastatingly attractive to women. If he was not strictly faithful to his wife, Melbourne's sister Emily, no one could
doubt their mutual devotion. Frederick was less sanguine in his opinions, despising Henry as much for the havoc he wreaked in the diplomatic community as for his exposing their sister to gossip during the decades of their affair.

Had they but known it, this larger-than-life character was at that moment engaged in pushing a wooden horse mounted on wheels, huffing and red-faced with effort. His royal niece gleefully shouted encouragement, her cries of faster, uncle, faster interspersed with giddy laughter, while the heir to the throne trotted alongside, reminding them both that he wished to take a turn. The queen watched, hands clasped as she giggled and cheered, while the children's governess took a well-deserved break. Finally, regretfully, Victoria clapped her hands and called out for them to return horsie to his stable.

"Henry, we really must go," she reminded, despite the protests of both children.

Despite the thickness of the walls and sturdy oak doors, Palmerston's booming voice and unmistakable hearty laughter heralded his arrival. A footman opened the door and brayed out a stentorian declaration:

"Her Majesty, the Queen. The Viscount Palmerston."

Victoria's cheeks were flushed prettily, and she still had her hand up, covering her mouth to conceal her laughter. Melbourne's gaze dropped to the hand he had against the small of Victoria's back, in a casual gesture more suited to the family atmosphere of Brocket Hall where they had all passed Christmas together, than the Queen's audience with her Prime Minister and his cabinet. His lips tightened slightly in disapproval.

Victoria held her hand out and her husband was first to genuflect before her, dropping gracefully to one knee. He allowed himself the liberty of pressing his lips to the back of her hand and inhaled sharply, savoring the light, slightly spicy scent of the lotion she used on her skin. When he rose, it was to take his accustomed position behind her and to the side, setting himself carefully apart to mark both his status as lower-case 'c' consort – he refused the actual designation, which must be awarded by Parliament – and minister extraordinaire with a seat in the cabinet and Privy Council.

The others came forward in turn, some using the old form as Melbourne had, others merely bowing low over her hand. When they had done she seated herself behind the table. Melbourne usurped the footman and drew out her chair himself, then stepped away and clasped his hands behind his back.

"Gentlemen, please proceed," Victoria said.

Her self-assurance and the mantle of dignity she wore like a shield made her seem larger than she was in fact. The sight of her small frame, narrow shoulders and slender elegant neck, never failed to stir Melbourne's protectiveness. So young, so deceptively frail and delicate, and so powerful – power both temporal and spiritual, but most especially the power of her presence, the most vividly distinct personality Melbourne had ever encountered. Victoria Regina. Gloriana. And my precious girl, my love, my life. My wife, to have and to hold, until death do us part.

"… crossed the Sutlej on 11 December. Punjabi, Pakhtun and Kashmiri infantry units fought with the Sikhs. Despite Gough's estimation, they did in fact have heavy guns at their disposal, units trained by white mercenaries.

Tej Singh advanced towards Ferozepur but made no effort to surround or attack our troops there. exposed British division there. Lal Singh engaged with our forces at Mudki on 18 December, an encounter I am pleased to say we won, not as cleanly as we might have hoped, but we did prevail.
On 19 December General Gough approached Ferozeshah. Gough proposed to attack immediately. Governor General Hardinge overruled him and ordered him to wait for the division from Ferozepur to arrive.

On 21 December, we attacked near sunset and our infantry fought desperately despite heavy casualties. The well-served Sikh artillery caused heavy casualties among the British, and their infantry fought desperately.

Lord Hardinge, in anticipation of defeat and in preparation for withdrawal ordered all State papers bearing Your Majesty's name and seal to be burned, and our brave troops made ready to lay down their lives. But for the grace of God Almighty, we would have faced catastrophe, yet at the last our brave men, despite their exhausted state, snatched victory from the jaws of defeat and overran the Sikh position.

At the date of writing, Lord Hardinge expects to mount a second offense by the end of the month. A division led by Sir Henry Smith will move to take Aliwal."

Victoria had been listening intently, her unblinking gaze fixed on Russell. As he wound down from his recitation he looked up from the document from which he had been reading. Victoria laid one slender white hand on the large globe beside her desk and turned it gently, bringing the central Asian region to prominence. Then she glanced up at Melbourne, and he took his cue.

"If I may, ma'am – how specifically was the grace of God manifest? What happened to turn the tide of battle in our favor?"

Melbourne ensured his tone was mild, conveying only the slightest curiosity. He knew the answer, as did Victoria, just as they had known the enemy had heavy artillery despite all Hardinge's assurances to the contrary. At least the Governor-General had been warned; whether he or someone else relayed that information to the Gough, the cavalry captains in the field had been forewarned, thanks to Cameron's behind-the-scenes efforts.

"The forces which sat across the river – Tej and Lal Singh's armies – did not advance, did not come to the aid of their brethren. They withdrew when their engagement would have ensured the decimation of our forces."

That had been the deal brokered by Cameron. There were too many variables, too many independent divisions and no single commander who could entirely capitulate and end the conflict. The best he could do to minimize casualties on both sides and ensure the survival of Jind Kaur's Sikh kingdom was to remove the two strongest armies, her closest allies, from the field of battle.

They had debated with Palmerston whether to inform Russell in advance. Palmerston was firmly of the opinion that until the time came to make terms of surrender, the fewer people who knew, the better. Jind Kaur, Maharini, would keep the throne for her son, and establish herself as Regent, in return for full compliance with the dictates of her new British overlords, just as other Indian princes had done before her. She was not, however, secure enough to survive her own countrymen, should it be known that she and her half-brother and cousin had made a deal with the British. She must appear to be conquered in lopsided combat.

Russell was at a loss to explain the inexplicable, not knowing of the delicate negotiations which had led to two Sikh commanders failing to advance. The explanation they gave to their own people was as vague as it was contradictory – they thought the British, rather than teetering perilously near defeat, were regrouping to outflank them and thus, strategically withdrew; they thought the battle already won and their services no longer needed.
The rest of the audience went swiftly. Casualty lists were presented, the dead and those wounded so grievously they were no longer able to fight were enumerated, and maps unrolled so that the Queen might be shown the current troop positions and the route of Gough's communication and supply lines, which must be defended at all costs. The bridges at Aliwal and Sobraon were marked, as were the encampments and probable current location of troops marching forward.

While they all pored over the military maps Melbourne moved forward, slightly closer than propriety dictated, allowing himself the slightest contact when his arm brushed the queen's sleeve, his hand resting near hers on the desktop. He stayed mostly silent, interjecting only a few questions to elicit some detail he felt had been omitted. Victoria's questions, Melbourne heard with pride and satisfaction, were not only crisp and informed, they demonstrated her grasp of tactics and strategy and the exigencies of armed conflict.

Victoria offered her thanks for the comprehensive briefing and declared the audience at an end. When the other men bowed and backed away Palmerston remained, relaxing his straight posture and dropping into an armchair. He laid his arm along the back and stretched his long legs out, grinning at them.

"So you bought yourself a rich kingdom with very little effort. Nicely done, man," he drawled, his voice rich and plummy.

"We avoided unnecessary bloodshed and did what we could to manage the least bad solution to a difficult problem," Victoria snapped, compressing her lips.

"Yes, ma'am, if you say so, ma'am. I have a notion I should go out there and make terms myself. No other way to be sure the thing is done right, is there?"

Melbourne read Palmerston's expression and couldn't help but laugh at the other man's comically wolfish leer.

"You have an idea you'll go out there to establish yourself with Jind Kaur," Melbourne said drily.

"Come with me, William!" Palmerston sat up straight, his lazy grin fading in favor of new enthusiasm. He was clearly enthralled by the notion such a thing might be possible.

"No!" Victoria did not bother to disguise her irritation. Moderating her voice by force of will, she continued more moderately. "Our Foreign Secretary can not absent himself for a minimum of three months – and that's if you stay only a short time – and neither can Lord Melbourne. If you don't understand why that's ridiculous then –"

Melbourne bit his cheek to keep from laughing; he knew it was never quite wise to show amusement when Victoria was wound up. Henry was toying with her, with them both; perhaps even with himself, titillated by the idea of meeting – and seducing – the infamous maharini. An exotic beauty, a dangerous seductress. She might be fat and fifty, yet she would be described thus – a woman commanding an army and standing off the British empire had to be seen as a sexual temptress, Melbourne thought. Whatever the case, he had no interest in traveling across the globe to find out.

He was to travel into Piccadilly with Henry, however, to dine at Crockford's. They would join with a half-dozen other survivors of their college society. Once a secret club devoted to drinking and debauchery, it had evolved into a rather more sedate assembly devoted to the consumption of fine wine and French cognac over long lingering dinners enlivened by discussion of literature and politics.

There would be table talk of families and estates, boasting of likely thoroughbred racers and
experimental farming techniques, up and coming playwrights and promising artists seeking patronage. Gout and arthritis precluded the overconsumption of spirits and any licentiousness would be confined to lewd reminiscence of youthful exploits.

Melbourne reflected that he should regret the inevitable changes in circumstance and inclination age brought. Instead he only reflected that he was already anticipating homecoming, and the warm tender girl who would be waiting in his bed.

"Henry, go away. Get your hat and coat and call for my carriage," he told his brother-in-law firmly. "I will join you when I've taken leave of my wife."

Palmerston grinned once more and took hold of Victoria's hand unbidden, without bowing. He kissed her fingertips, then leaned down from his great height and kissed her cheek.

"I claim a brother's prerogative, ma'am," he said, eyes twinkling. Victoria looked up and smiled warmly, liking the man even if the minister managed to annoy her too frequently for comfort.

"Good night then, Henry. Don't keep my husband too late."

When they were alone Victoria went into Melbourne's waiting arms, winding her own around his waist. They stood, each drawing comfort from the other.

"Will you be late?" she asked finally. "It looks to rain and as cold as it is, there will be ice on the roads."

"Mmm…" Melbourne kissed her head, then nibbled the edge of her ear. "Not terribly late, I don't think. Why, should I be?"

Victoria made a face. "'Should you be'? Why? What do you suppose I might do in your absence, that I can't do when you're here?"

"Go through Pandora's box, perhaps?" Melbourne teased, a smile quirking his mouth.

Victoria was entirely transparent, her every thought clear on that dear, expressive face. He was touched that she had not thought of exploring the mysteries of his past in his absence, but now that he'd been fool enough to suggest it…

She hesitated, then shook her head resolutely.

"If you wish…read over what I've written so far, and tell me your thoughts?" Melbourne asked. He watched as Victoria considered the suggestion.

"Read it to me, rather? I want to hear it in your voice. And…I like when you read to me."

"As you wish, sweetheart. What do you have planned?"

"George is bringing a young man by, a young man just graduated from Trinity. As a possible tutor for Liam. Of course I won't decide anything without you, and I explained that as his official governor, Lord Ponsonby has to approve as well. But I did tell George I would meet his friend."

"Is he- ?" Melbourne lifted an eyebrow delicately.

"I don't know – I believe so, only because George seems quite fond of him. Is that – is that a problem? You know Uncle again offered us Baron Stockmar."

"Never! You told him that, I hope?" Melbourne intensely disliked Stockmar's deviousness, his
Machiavellian influence stratagems, but he also harbored suspicions about the nature of the tutelage Leopold's adviser had provided Albert as a young, vulnerable adolescent. Suspicions which doubtless could never be confirmed; nonetheless, he would move heaven and earth to keep the man away from his son and daughter.

"I did." Victoria tightened her grip around Melbourne's middle, then sighed and turned up her face.

"Kiss me and be off then," she demanded.

Melbourne complied, kissing her slowly to savor the taste and feel, storing up her pliable warmth until he returned.

"Until I return then," he whispered huskily. Victoria accompanied him to the head of the Grand Staircase. Melbourne felt her eyes on him as he descended, then turned to look back at her while a footman held out his greatcoat.

"Until I return," he repeated under his breath, smiling to himself as he went out to climb in the waiting carriage.

Link to the list of works, for those who might be interested in earlier stories in this series.
Mild the winter undoubtedly was, Melbourne thought, yet the damp post-midnight air was damnably chill. *Old bones* – the thought raced through his mind, but his ebullient mood was impervious to even such a gloomy observation. Instead he merely turned up his collar and burrowed gloved hands deep into the pockets of the heavy caped greatcoat, smiling in the dark.

The dinner engagement which took him into the heart of Piccadilly had been most enjoyable. Once such dinners had been a monthly occurrence, scintillating conversation elevated to an art form, gentlemen of keen intellect who gathered in select assembly to exchange literary reminiscences, anecdotes of authors, criticisms of books. Melbourne found himself at home in such company, amidst displays of argument, wit, what a disapproving Scottish scholar had dismissively described as *intellectual gladiatorship*. Men of letters were heavily represented, as were the clergy. Family station
counted for less than intellectual achievement.

The years had seen a gradual fading of regularity, with the sedentary habits of advancing age, infirmity and worse taking their toll. Melbourne had keenly marked the absence of his old friend Sidney Smith, who had passed away in February of ‘45 and they had toasted him heartily with his favored claret.

Once those who gathered might have sat until dawn, but age had caught up to most of his contemporaries in one way or another, and the clock had barely struck one when the party began breaking up. Once those who gathered had rehearsed the stories they would tell, the philosophical arguments they would make. If such excesses of intellectual vanity had lessened over time, Melbourne reflected, it was only because there was less need to impress and more breadth of wisdom and experience at table.

Less congenial had been the aside offered by Greville, who had recently called on a mutual acquaintance. His description of the condition in which he had found their friend and colleague was unpleasantly vivid – "in a wheeled chair, pushed out by his daughter-in-law. I could see he knew me, for his eyes were quite alive, but a keen mind locked inside a body which must be tended like an infant is no life at all." Apoplectic stroke, leaving their once-vibrant friend drooling and uncommunicative – the image Greville painted made Melbourne wince inwardly and turn the topic to Brougham's recently published *Men of Letters and Science During the Regency Years*. Brougham, ever fiery, took the bait of gentle teasing. Melbourne was still chuckling to himself, reliving the delicate barbs exchanged, when the carriage drew to a stop under the portico.

Victoria reclined on a chaise in her boudoir, absently stroking the soft coat of a large cat. His rumbling purr was audible counterpoint to the thick silence of a slumbering palace.

She had dined in company with Lord Duncannon and Lady Northumberland and they had spent the better part of the evening with Lady Ehlers, who served as Victoria's private secretary for family and household matters, reviewing the growing stack of letters.

Certainly, no official announcement had been made, yet within a few days it was common knowledge that a search was on for a new tutor. Everyone near and far had a protégé to put forward, and letters had flowed into the palace directly, with even more recommendations finding their way to the titular Governor and Governess.

After bidding her guests goodnight, Lady Ehlers remained at the queen's request, accompanying her to her small sitting room. Elizabeth Ehlers was a new addition to Victoria's staff, appointed through some combination of patronage and chance, and she had instantly taken a liking to her.

She was a striking black-haired woman of indeterminate age with lovely eyes so dark they seemed almost black. The woman had some of Lady Portman's practicality and was utterly unimpressed by the preening ornamental beauties whose service seemed limited to tittering behind fans and making eyes at gentlemen, especially Lord Melbourne. Victoria was no prude and cared not at all what took place elsewhere; she minded very much when that behavior took place right under her nose, and resented them as much for their long legs, exquisite faces and effortless elegance as she did the barely concealed invitation in their eyes, directed toward her husband.

Lady Ehlers – Beth - was bright and funny and knew everyone. She was also, to Victoria's amazement, a published authoress, although her books had thus far earned little enough besides commendation from her faithful readers. Beth had acknowledged with refreshing frankness her need to earn her own living and had taken a position at Court with that necessity uppermost in her mind. Unlike the others, who resided at the palace during their duty rotations and returned to town homes
and country estates in between, Beth had moved into her grace-and-favor apartment, with four felines and all her earthly belongings.

"I'm quite bored with my own words, ma'am," she had announced, and produced a cheap smeared publication, more pamphlet than novel. Victoria pretended to pick at some needlework while her lady's maid brushed out her hair, but as Beth began to read aloud from The String of Pearls all pretense of distraction ceased. Victoria listened spellbound, and when Miss Skerrett dropped the hairbrush the noise made them both jump and issue squeals of fright. Meanwhile, Lady Ehlert's voice transported her listeners to the barber's establishment on Fleet Street occupied by one Sweeney Todd.

Lord Melbourne accepted the ministrations of his long-suffering valet. He had tried on previous occasions to assure Baines he need not wait up. That gentleman made it clear such a slight was not to be borne indefinitely, with phrases such as if your lordship finds I am not necessary to his comfort and as you say, your lordship, the last delivered with a woeful look of dignified rebuke. Thus, he was instead obliged to endure the owlish expressions of a sleep-deprived valet. Baines made a great show of suppressing every outward sign of fatigue in such a way that his sacrifice in the name of duty was evident.

The dressing rooms of Her Majesty and His Lordship adjoined, each large enough to contain, in addition to dressing table, was stand and water closet, a chaise and armchair. Baines walked ahead of him into his dressing room, clearing his throat loudly, and Melbourne looked down to conceal his grin when the queen's chief dresser sprang to her feet. She bobbed a quick curtsy and murmured something unintelligible, save for the words Her Majesty, while smoothing her tousled hair. He could not be sure, but behind his valet's carefully blank expression Melbourne thought he detected a look of…not entirely embarrassment, nor pride, but something in between.

His excellent tailoring required a second pair of hands to free him from the frock coat that seemed to mold itself, seamless, to his broad shoulders. Melbourne accepted that aid and the hot water and towels which quickly appeared. He insisted on performing the rest of his toilette in private, delivering a firm "That will be all, Baines. Have a good night," along with a wink so subtle the man could ignore it if he chose. Instead the narrow ascetic features split in a broad grin.

"Thank you, your Lordship, I will."

Victoria used her boudoir as an intimate withdrawing room, and he found her there, in her chaise, with her knees drawn up and body curled around a fat tawny feline. Her sole companion had ostensibly fallen asleep bearing the queen company; she snored lightly, head cocked at such an angle Melbourne predicted a sore neck in the morning. He cleared his own throat, much as Baines had done earlier, his lips quirking into a smile. Victoria awoke instantly, her eyes flying open with a look of startled near-panic until her vision cleared away sleep and rested on him.

"Who's our friend here? Shall I be offended at his intimate familiarity?" Melbourne teased, seating himself on the edge of the chaise. He reached out a hand to stroke the cat. He was a big, placid creature, surely more suited to decreasing the surplus rodent population below stairs than lounging in the very lap of luxury – and royalty.

"He is Adagio, one of Beth's cats. Deckel was quite put out to be displaced, so I confined him to the nursery."

Her Italian greyhound had been mauled by cats several months earlier, an improbable end for the little dog who had previously survived a gunshot wound delivered by Leopold in a hunting mishap. Victoria's fondness for animals did not extend to such malicious behavior, Melbourne knew. He could do with far fewer pets underfoot, particularly the more exotic specimens, and fervently hoped
this fat fellow did not intend to occupy space in their bed.

"Speaking of whom..." he looked pointedly at the lady-in-waiting, still sleeping soundly and giving every indication she intended to remain so until morning.

Melbourne was aware that Victoria had a tendency toward establishing extreme likes and dislikes and found little consolation in the majority of her attendants. She had not spoken of Emma Portman since their unfortunate parting and had presumably replaced that lady with this newcomer. Melbourne didn't mind – he had no opinion one way or the other on any of Victoria's companions, save for the intrigue they generally brought with them to Court – but wished he knew more about this one. Some distant connection of someone, it was assumed – but perhaps not a bad idea to have Cameron's people check her out further, if she was going to become Victoria's boon companion.

He cleared his throat again, more forcefully, then carefully scooped up the cat's limp pliable body and deposited him only a trifle more firmly than necessary on his mistress's lap. The sudden relocation did its work, and Adagio extended his claws to steady himself, thereby awakening the sleeping woman. She sat up, yawning so wide a full set of molars was on display, and stretched. In doing so, a book fell from her lap onto the floor. Melbourne bent to retrieve it and examined the cover with interest.

"A penny dreadful, your lordship. I thought it might amuse Her Majesty to see what entertains the common people." Melbourne looked from the cheap paper pamphlet to the laughing eyes watching his reaction. He lifted a brow.

"Indeed? If the queen is amused, then I must acquaint myself likewise. May I?" He gestured, the volume still in his hand. "'The Demon Barber of Fleet Street.' I would myself have applied that description to any number of journalists who likewise haunted Fleet Street."

Lady Ehlers rose without haste, made some vague movement Melbourne assumed must imply a curtsy, and tucked the cat under her arm while reaching for the book.

"I'll pick you up a copy, Lord Melbourne. Good night, ma'am." He watched her curiously as she departed. A handsome woman but without the usual sense, no matter how dilute and unacknowledged, of awareness. Good God, am I that vain? he thought, laughing at himself.

As soon as they were alone Melbourne pushed Victoria's sleep-mussed hair back from her face and bent to kiss her properly.

"And did you accomplish anything beyond giving yourself a good fright, ma'am?" he teased.

"Yes, of course. At least, we've narrowed the list of candidates. You can look over the lot, of course, but some seem ridiculously unsuited. And one, from a gentleman who claims to be a friend of yours, putting forth the name of a young German fellow." Victoria wrinkled her nose adorably so that Melbourne had to kiss it.

"A friend of mine? Must be a long lost friend," he mused. "Who was it? Some opportunist, I'm sure."

"The Provost of Eton? I remember your recommending him for the appointment but there was some acrimony from the department heads, using his friendship with Lord Byron as a reason to exclude him."

"Ah, Francis Hodgson. How odd that he wrote formally. We were all friends, once upon a time. I think you'll like him. May we invite him to dine and hear more about his protégé? Even if we're not interested in the candidate - and you're right, I don't think we want to consider any foreigners - I
would like to host him here." To show someone from those days how things are now? Melbourne speculated on his own motives. Not entirely that, he decided; he genuinely liked and respected the fellow, and his educational credentials were impeccable.

"Mmmmm…” Rather than climb directly into bed, Victoria stopped to embrace him. In bare feet she was even tinier, the top of her head scarcely reaching the level of his shoulders. She sniffed audibly.

"Ma'am?" he laughed. "Does some odor offend you?"

"No, silly," Victoria giggled in response. "I suppose I am pleased I don't smell any horrible French fragrance, but mainly…you smell so good. Nearly as good as you feel. Did I ever tell you – " she looked up at him, and Melbourne met her wide-eyed gaze. "- how very safe I always feel with you?"

Melbourne considered the sentiment. Certainly, he was no man of action, no Billy Cameron, and had not been so in his youth. Caro had regretted that as much as she did his mild manner and aversion to conflict, wanting a highwayman to sweep her off her feet, fight duels and carry on with a physicality that was anathema to him. But he knew – his heart understood, as it always had – that Victoria meant something more, and the knowledge was priceless to him.

"Cold fresh air, and the City. Tobacco smoke and whatever you drank. The cologne you use and underneath it all…just you. Spicy and musky and so very, very good." Victoria rubbed the tip of her little nose against his chest, then her cheek, and finally her lips, pursed, soft and warm. Melbourne shivered a little when he felt the tip of her tongue laving his nipple, making little fluttering circles.

Their lovemaking was sleepy and unhurried, neither of them fully committed to anything beyond the comfort of touch, deeply contented whether that final spark would be ignited or if they would simply drift off to sleep in mid-caress. Melbourne was profoundly grateful for their compatibility in that regard, that she had discovered her own sensuality in his bed. He himself knew without dwelling on it that someday the years would claim their due and he would then content himself with bringing her pleasure in so many other delightful ways, hearing the little mewling cries, feel the quivering spasms he could elicit with fingers and mouth. But not now, not tonight…he whispered it like a prayer, as he felt her part for him, felt her tight embrace all the way up to her womb, found his place in the very center of her world, his and his alone.

"You didn't ask about my evening," Melbourne said into the soft cloud of dark hair where he rested his chin.

"I didn't wish to pry." The fingers tracing small aimless circles over his midsection paused for only a second. "Did you pass an enjoyable evening?"

He guessed what was passing through her mind. Forty years ago, it wouldn't have been so far wrong, but even then…

"I did, although naturally bittersweet. So many old friends gone, but those who remain still give as good as they get. So…yes." He described the banter, repeating some of the repartee he exchanged with his old foe Brougham, each of them outdoing the other in elegant phrasing and an excess of civility.

"But Lord Brougham is a bad man. He said such very unkind things about you in the House."

"Unkind? No, my love. Unflattering, certainly, and he absolutely made my job harder on occasion. That matter of parading around the country with the Great Seal and refusing to surrender it into the King's hands. But that is the way of it in public life. In private, we are friends of a sort. I admire him
a great deal for his brilliance and tolerate his excesses on that account."

"And it was only gentlemen at your dinner?" Victoria asked shyly, ducking her head. Melbourne could see her cheeks and the tips of her ears grow pink. "I do not mean to pry –" she added for good measure.

He stroked her head where it rested on his chest.

"It was gentlemen only, ma'am. Mostly they once called our little assemblies The King of Clubs because in our youthful vanity, it mattered a great deal to establish oneself as the master of the conversational art and any attendant – er, revelry – would have diminished our performances."

Melbourne heard the suppressed laughter in his voice. They had indeed been overly proud, so much so that newcomers were as often put off by the consciously high-flown tone, as they were impressed by the orators at table. He himself had preferred to puncture the bubbles of pomposity with some paradox which would succeed in stemming the tide of a rehearsed argument.

Victoria pulled the quilt over her shoulders and adjusted her position. Her bottom pressing into his groin, and he turned himself on his side to spoon against her. Their bodies found the perfect alignment of curves and hollows, fitting together like the pieces of a puzzle.

"Well, I have no wish to sound like a shrewish, controlling wife but I am glad you didn't take yourselves to a different sort of club to finish the night."

He put his arm over her shoulder and nestled his hand in the warm spot between her breasts.

"My little love, I'm not sure whether you have an exaggerated notion of my…er…stamina, but I hope I've proved myself to your satisfaction." He spoke in the gravelly low tone of incipient drowsiness, yet she seemed to detect some seriousness underneath. Victoria turned herself enough that she could see his face and lifted a hand to stroke his jawline.

"Do you know, this is what I always wanted? No, wait, I do not merely make a pretty speech. Barring a few years of very early young manhood I was never as interested in the…um…sporting activities as most of my peers seemed to be. Without this – without the profound communion of perfect understanding it all seemed like so very much effort for so little reward." Melbourne suddenly laughed so heartily that he shook the bed, while Victoria watched him curiously.

"And now you know my secret shame, and hold my reputation in these little hands," he sputtered, still laughing. "Caro never let me forget my lukewarm nature and would taunt me with it during our battles. Before we learned to become friends, you understand. When she was still new enough to want a man of action, a hot-blooded lover to play opposite her heroine. And I…alas, I wanted a friend first, to love and be loved. Of course, I had my share of casual encounters – what man doesn't? – but I never took a mistress, through all those early years. She was quite more than enough for me, and I wanted no other complications in my life."

"Why do you call it a shame?" Victoria's eyes were limpid pools of midnight. He took hold of her chin and examined the sweet face turned up to his.

"Not very manly, is it? My fastidiousness in such matters? Certainly I can't claim any moral or religious grounds for my reticence and I heartily wished I had been able to get out of my head long enough to roister with the rest of our set. To whimper and whine for someone to love and understand me, rather than take advantage of my freedom when I could? I only mention it at all because digging in those boxes containing my history reminded me. And you, my love, relieved that I refrained from that which was never any great temptation, when I have everything I ever wanted."
"You are a notorious rake," Victoria whispered playfully, content enough to squirm herself into a comfortable position once more. "All the world knows, so your secret is safe with me."

"That's as it should be, my dear girl. Far better than thinking me lazy or heartsick or womanish in those bad old days, hidden away with my books or writing risqué letters to exercise my imagination at a distance. Bessie harangued me for my infrequent attentions, and as for – well, that person we do not refer to by name – " Victoria shushed him with a sibilant sound and slid her feet between his calves. Melbourne twitched from the shock of it, then chafed her feet with his legs to warm them. He wound his long body around hers and sighed from the pleasure of the contact.

"Good night, Mrs. Melbourne," he murmured, lips against her ear.

"Good night, Lord M."
"Lady Holderness' gowns were the proverbial straw which broke the camel's back. Or – to mix my metaphors – the tip of the iceberg. The *honorable gentlemen* of popular acclaim, bringing in the French brandy everyone clamored for, were a tolerable circumvention of trade restrictions. When Revenue agents seized a hundred fourteen French gowns intended for the wife of Prinny's Governor, Luttrell saw his opportunity."

Duncannon and Lady Northumberland, holding official appointments as Governor and Governess to this Prince of Wales, had laughed as heartily as the rest, hearing Lord Melbourne's recounting of the old tale.

"He ranted in the House, nearly apoplectic with rage, issuing his dire warnings that the mob would someday be provoked past bearing and attack what he called *that palace of contraband*. Lord North asked at whom his attack was levelled, and Luttrell named Lord Holderness as chief offender amongst those who used such Royal appointments to their own profit and the detriment of the national treasury. Lord North could only beg the petitioners to respite their demands, promising to endeavor to correct such abuses."

"Presumably he didn't try very hard," Duncannon observed drily. "Prinny's Oriental Pleasure Palace was a monument to the smuggler's art, some say it's very location chosen to facilitate the transfer of merchandise from those coastal inlets where goods were offloaded."

Melbourne had been regaling them as only he could, with such stories of excess and the exploitation of largesse by those who served their Royal Majesties.

"Such abuses could not happen now, surely?" Victoria asked, her voice still lilting with amusement. Lady Ehlers poured and passed the fragile china cups with such a graceless clattering and clinking that Lady Dalmeny took over.

"A cautionary tale for us, William?"

John Ponsonby, the Viscount Duncannon, was the eldest son of the 4th Earl of Bessborough, grandson of the 10th Earl of Westmoreland on his mother's side and niece of Lady Caroline Lamb. John had been only a boy when his notorious aunt died, but family feeling ran deep among all the Whigs. John remembered his father's beloved younger sister with much affection, having spent many
joyful hours in the undisciplined chaos of Brocket Hall with his auntie Caro and the pack of unruly children and pets she collected.

The 4th Earl, then Viscount Duncannon, had been Melbourne’s Home Secretary and Lord Privy Seal. Victoria was predisposed to look kindly upon those whom Melbourne favored, had appointed him Master of the Buckhounds, an absurd-sounding title to describe an entirely frivolous role, but one which ensured she would have friendly faces around her. The sinecure was funded from the Privy Purse, Victoria's own income, so exempted from reflecting the change in governments.

His more important role was that of Governor to Prince William. Charlotte Percy, Duchess of Northumberland, was Governess. Once these had been viewed as the most powerful positions in England, the incumbents assumed to have nearly unlimited ability to shape and influence the Heir to the Throne during his formative years. Over time they had evolved to almost ceremonial roles, yet not entirely.

Melbourne had been the first, most obvious choice, as official Governor to the newborn heir apparent. Only when he finally convinced Victoria and Albert that appointing him would not be in anyone's best interest was he given the right to select a suitable de facto guardian. After much consideration he had decided a Ponsonby for Governor of the Queen's firstborn son would be unobjectionable to those who would have protested a Lamb, and if they had their flaws, they had the advantage of longstanding familiarity.

Charlotte Percy was – well, a Percy, wife of the Duke of Northumberland, and a force majeur in her own right. Victoria had instantly embraced that selection, never forgetting that Lady Percy had been her own staunchest defender. Melbourne had known the Duchess since her coming-out, the younger daughter of Edward Clive, 1st Earl of Powis, and an accredited beauty. She had, in fact, relied upon their long acquaintance to bombard him with letters expressing her concern over the upbringing of the young Princess Alexandrina of Kent.

"Cautionary? Not at all, John. I daresay you would be much subtler than Holderness," Melbourne answered smoothly, to general laughter.

They were to interview several candidates for the position of tutor. Victoria had made it clear she deferred to her husband on the ultimate choice, and he in turn insisted that Baroness Lehzen and the Dowager Duchess of Kent sit in. He genuinely wanted whatever input they had to offer.

"This paragon you seek doesn't exist, darling," Victoria had murmured in his ear, while he pored over the credentials of yet another prospect.

"Tell me about your tutors, Victoria. Whom did you like, and why?"

"Mama and Lehzen both insist I was very difficult to manage," she pursed her lips in a show of disdain. "I only wanted those around me to do what was right and follow the rules. The rules, as she had defined them, refusing to submit to any attempt at discipline or the application of any constraint which did not apply equally to children and adults.

Melbourne saw in their daughter far more of the tiny termagant her mother had been, than Victoria cared to acknowledge. She consistently disputed her mother's characterization of her as an over-indulged, tyrannical child. Even Lehzen upheld that description, recounting the incident in which little Alexandrina hurled a scissors at her governess in a fit of rage.

"Mr. Davys came up with ways to make lessons interesting. He created a word game for me. He wrote words on cards and hid them in the nursery. He would call out the name of each one and I would search for it." She perched on a corner of the desk, pushing aside the stack of papers in a
gesture that made Melbourne grin. Still so much a willful little girl, he thought, utterly intolerant of anything that stole the attention she thought was her due. He extracted the résumé from beneath the royal derriere and shuffled them together, aligning the edges with deliberate care. Then he had grasped her hands and tugged her forward, catching her on his lap.

"Tell me which other educators inspired you, and how," Melbourne commanded, shifting his position so he might listen attentively while toying with the ribbons on her bodice.

"To be honest, I don’t remember any in particular. I had different instructors for each subject, experts in their field. Arithmetic, languages, history, foreign affairs."

Melbourne’s private opinion of her education was that, while far more advanced than most young ladies of gentle birth received, it had nonetheless been as focused and goal-oriented as an apprenticeship. She had an excellent mind and eagerness to learn, but there had been little attention paid to critical examination of the precepts she’d been taught and none to philosophy or the classics beyond standard Church curriculum. Of course, most females lacked the breadth and scope of fundamentals with which the future Queen had been inculcated, but for his own son and daughter he wanted even more.

"Tell me about yours, Lord M," Victoria asked in turn. "Did you love your governess as I learned to love Lehzen? Who was your favorite tutor? Did you enjoy Eton or was it terrible, being sent away from your family to live in a dormitory with other boys?"

"Well," he had mused, settling on one reminiscence certain to make her laugh. "There was the hideous woman Mother settled on as my first governess. A horrible, horrible creature."

"Did she—was she cruel? Did she...beat you?"

"Worse...she learned how to inflict the most inhumane of tortures. She fed me boiled mutton and rice pudding." Melbourne shuddered theatrically and was rewarded by the sight of Victoria giggling behind her hand. "You make light of my suffering? I am wounded. The wretched woman would place a dish of boiled mutton and turnips before me and I would sit until I fell off my chair, asleep."

"Now you are exaggerating, I'm sure," she had responded. "But I will be sure the kitchen never offers us boiled mutton." Victoria had paused, her expression quizzical. "I am not sure whether it's ever been served...but if so, never again."

"After that woman, my first real teacher was Mr. Cuppage. I quite liked him and learned the fundamentals of reading and writing. But it was not to last. I needed Latin and for that was sent to Rev. Marsham, the village curate. His method of instruction was to park me in front of a book and make me sit until I learned it. My poor mind did not comprehend even what I should do to begin the process of educating myself, and so instead I learned to malinger." He described the ferocious stomach aches which began as inventions of a desperate six-year-old and ended with an enduring susceptibility to gastrointestinal distress as an outlet for strong emotion.

"How awful! But your mother doted on you! Why would she allow such torment?"

"Sweetheart, in those days it was quite a usual thing, nothing out of the ordinary. But when Peniston returned from his Grand Tour and took me away, I felt as though I had been rescued from Purgatory."

He lost his train of thought, picturing in his mind the shade of that tall, glorious figure, appearing as the conquering hero to take his brother away from Hatfield and the long bleak days confined in the rectory.
They had been interrupted then, by a footman opening the door to announce Lady Northumberland and Lord Duncannon. Victoria took her time in rising, and Melbourne felt a quick flush of manly pride at the admiration he saw in his young nephew-in-law's eyes. Charlotte Percy allowed an envious smile to soften her haughty expression, and swept into a low, graceful curtsy.

"I am asked to convey the felicitations of my husband to the Duke of Melbourne." She extended her hand for Melbourne to kiss.

Only a half dozen of the most promising candidates had been invited to appear at the palace for interrogation. It was the sort of task that Victoria herself, and certainly any of her predecessors, had they been blessed with a healthy male heir requiring education, would have delegated to any one of the capable persons around her. Melbourne was grateful for the gravity her presence lent and understood she did it for him.

They had taken turns with the inquisition, Melbourne himself taking the lead. At his request Baroness Lehzen took her place amidst the dignitaries assembled – who better to understand the requirements of such a position? he'd told Victoria – and the children came and went at will, followed by a nursery maid and footman.

Duncannon and Lady Percy dined with them. Weary of the topic of educationists, Charlotte enlivened the table with the sort of sparkling repartee that enabled Melbourne to banter easily while his mind was elsewhere.

He mulled over Victoria's words. "This paragon you seek doesn't exist," she'd said. And then, later, when they'd pretended to bend their heads together in examination of a thick portfolio of poems presented by one over-eager young cleric, she had whispered the coup de grace.

Gentle, witty, able to engage the children's interest and make them hungry to learn. Someone who will love and cherish each of them, not stifle Elizabeth nor allow Liam to withdraw. Darling, that's you and they have you. We only need a tutor. She had been smiling playfully when she'd said murmured those sentiments, had even playfully reached up on tiptoe to kiss the corner of his mouth, but he'd been struck by the truth of it. The person they chose needs must have an easy manner, neither too stiff nor too inappropriately forward; he must take seriously the matter at hand without the excess self-importance which would make him intolerant.

It was not necessary that he be conversant in all the subjects which Liam and Elizabeth would need, because as Victoire had done for Princess Alexandrina, it was entirely certain that the headmasters of the best schools would fall over themselves to provide specialized instruction.

Most important, Melbourne decided, finally winnowing his list of requirements, was a pleasing manner and a quick wit that itself delighted in learning. That could be contagious, or, if absent, put the children off scholarly pursuits. He must make learning for its own sake an enjoyable and exciting prospect.

"The poet," he said out loud, over a bite of tartlet hovering before him. Victoria understood him immediately; her attention was never entirely diverted, a part of it always on him, as his was on her. Charlotte Percy, interrupted mid-on dit, showed her surprise and Ponsonby's mouth dropped open, his dismay plain.

"I say we hire the poet and be done with it."

"I mind Stockmar very much, but for his own sake, not his nationality. I have an enduring fondness for other Germans." Melbourne kissed her fingertips, smiling over their hands. Victoria repaid his gallantry with a glittering smile, then shrugged toward the table at large.

"Lady Northumberland, Lord Duncannon, will you agree to ratify our choice?" It was not strictly necessary, of course, but Melbourne had instilled the importance of acting on the strength of consensus whenever possible.

"Hodgson's candidate? Comes well recommended. I believe the boy served the King of Prussia in some capacity, until recently. Is his verse abominable?" John Ponsonby looked around the table. Then he returned Victoria's shrug, his own lifting of one shoulder a very Gallic gesture from a gentleman so entirely English.

"Devastatingly handsome fellow, as I recall. So manly." Lady Percy's glance went from her queen to each of the ladies-in-waiting seated at the long dining room table. "I'm sure he will be warmly welcomed."

Seeing no demur, Melbourne tapped his empty glass for the footman to refill, then lifted it in a toast.

"I am English," Victoria said under her breath. Melbourne laughed.

"You're going out?" Victoria asked plaintively. Melbourne was changing out of his dinner clothes, and she had entered just as he'd pulled on riding boots. Her eyes assessed his attire – serviceable trousers, shirt and waistcoat but only a loosely tied silk scarf at his neck – and seemed reassured that he did not plan a sociable evening in town.

"It's not yet warm enough for a night time gallop." Melbourne lifted his chin obediently so she could adjust the knot in his scarf. "But if you want to ride in the Park I'll change into my habit."

"You sound so wifely." He put his arms around her narrow waist and drew her to him. "I'm afraid this is the best costume Baines could come up with. I don't go out, but down."

He backed up, sitting on the corner of his dressing table, pulling Victoria with him to stand between his breeched thighs.

"To the bowels of Buckingham House. Did you know William Wickham had a whole warren of spaces down there, for his secret service back in the '90s? It's been abandoned these many years, but now we think it might be expedient to move Cameron's crew out of South Street and into that complex if it can be rehabilitated for them."

"Beneath this palace? I thought it was only a retreat for Queen Charlotte and my uncle kings."

"St. James Palace was the official residence, but during the French wars Wickham's espionage efforts were run entirely from beneath the floors of this place. Under the Prince's wing, to be precise."

Albert had established a separate household, a court within a court, in the East wing. Such separation provided the freedom to entertain the people who shared his eclectic interests. Some shared his personal proclivities, but many more – manufacturers, men of science and letters, inventors, musicians and poets – lacked the requisite social standing to be officially received by the queen.

Melbourne tightened his thighs around her legs, effectively trapping her. Victoria put her hands on his shoulders and swayed against him, resting her cheek on his hair.

"It sounds quite intriguing. I could go with you to look at the space. Is Captain Smythfield joining
"He is, and you would be quite welcome to join us except it is undoubtedly quite dirty down there and I suspect overrun by the rats which have been excluded from more heavily used spaces." He felt her shudder and was treated to the view of goosebumps rising on the curve of her breasts, prettily displayed mere inches from his eyes.

"Some significant remodeling will be needed. We mean to install an electromagnetic telegraphy system. Cooke and Ricardo would like a Royal warrant for their Electrical Telegraph Company and will wire us up to that end, connecting Buckingham to Downing Street and the Whitehall offices."

Victoria had been listening attentively, but Melbourne saw the fading of her interest. He huffed a small laugh and turned her, standing to nuzzle the soft furred hollow behind her ear. Victoria was the most pragmatic of women, and had no real interest in abstraction, nor in anything which distracted his attention from herself.

"I will approach you for permission to seek funds from Russell for the rebuilding. At the same time, George has some ideas for a new wing that will provide additional space for us and a new public facing on the east side. Albert choose it as his own for each of access, and we may as well take advantage of its location. Facing the Mall as it does, you could have a balcony that allows you to review the troops and put yourself on display to the people. Spectacle and pageantry, ma'am…"

"I know. It's what I exist for." Victoria looked away but not before Melbourne saw the little moue of distaste and heard the faint, shocking note of cynicism in her voice.

"Hardly, my love. This is not the time to enumerate the many reasons this great country needs you at its head, or the reasons I need you. Now –" he playfully swatted her bottom firmly enough that he knew the slight, stinging warmth of his hand would be felt even through the layers of padding, skirts, petticoat and drawers.

"I must be off. Here's the drawing Mr. Blore did for us." Melbourne unrolled the architectural outline. It was only a preliminary sketch and the only one which would accompany the request for funds. The detailed design of both lower and upper levels would be withheld for the sake of security and privacy, respectively.

He hesitated only briefly before presenting Victoria with a folded note, the seal broken. It bore only his designation as addressee, but he saw the moment she recognized what it was, a letter from Cameron. Usually they read these together, written to them both although for propriety's sake addressed only to Lord Melbourne. A nobody writing directly to the queen would cause comment and speculation, but Melbourne understood that there was more to it than that. He appreciated the rough soldier of fortune for all his good qualities and mostly tolerated the man's devotion to the
"Billy? What does he say?"

"We can read it later, if you wish. I only found it myself shortly before you came in. But he proposes to return to England – in fact, that was sent some weeks ago, so he might land any time. It's been a mild enough winter I think there will be captains willing to undertake an impromptu channel crossing. Billy can be very persuasive."

There had been an enclosure, one brief line written on a scrap of paper torn from the larger sheet. That was clearly meant only for his eyes, and it contained a single question. Chivalrous indeed, Melbourne thought, if not for the plain fact that the author had not waited for an answer. He was coming home, whether he had a welcome waiting at Court or not.

Melbourne was honest enough with himself to concede there was no reason to protest or turn a cold shoulder. Cameron had done nothing untoward, and if his outspoken, rough-edged brash manner was not precisely that of a courtier, he cleaned up well enough and there wasn't a drawing room in London closed to him. The highest sticklers were wooed by that rakish charm and won by the genuine kindness behind mocking eyes.

Billy's elaborate show of deference to him was what annoyed Melbourne most. It seemed to emphasize the fact that it was the other man's choice to not act on his inclinations, as though if he were ever to abandon his restraint, Victoria might be susceptible to his charms. Foolishness, of course – not for a single moment did he imagine his precious girl succumbing to the Irishman, tumbling into bed, spreading those creamy thighs – of course I imagine it, he told himself harshly. What husband wouldn't? What husband my age with a young wife wouldn't? Such imaginings were only the fruit of insecurity and his own vanity, not a real possibility entertained by his more logical mind. He knew her, knew Victoria completely, body, mind and soul, knew her devotion to him but also her fundamental underlying sense of her own consequence. No, she would never be prone to promiscuousness – if he discounted the strength of her love for him, there was still her dignity and natural reserve to constrain her.

Melbourne shook off the transient irritation of nerves. He found himself nearly to the door before he turned back to take his leave. One hand splayed at the small of her back to hold her steady, he kissed Victoria's lips with great deliberation while he explored the folds of her pleated skirt. He did not release her until he sensed the liquid softening in her limbs and heard the soft, rumbling purr from the back of her throat.

"Kiss our children for me, ma'am, and enjoy your evening with Lady – Lady Whosits and the Demon Barber. I'll not be late."

Sir William Cameron, Colonel, Nth Cavalry Regiment, Ret; Founding Director, Her Majesty's Secret Service
Victoria scanned the lines briefly before laying the letter aside. She had, of course, instantly sensed the slight alteration in her husband's mood and knew it was triggered by the idea of Billy's return. His attitude puzzled and confused her, as much because he seemed to expect her to have an entirely different interest than the mild, comfortable brotherly affection she felt. It had long been plain William was unsettled by Billy Cameron in some undefinable way. Victoria had once assumed it was only the result of her own jealousy-fueled indiscretion, but then why did he seem to befriend the man, even conspiring with him to create that personal protection squad now grown to an official governmental department? It seemed absurd to contemplate that he – splendid, handsome Lord M, pursued by women far more beautiful and accomplished than she herself would ever be – could feel jealousy because of her.

Victoria accepted that she was no beauty, not like Wilhelmina Stanhope or Harriet Sutherland…or either of the Carolines who preceded her in William's affection. She did not discount her own virtues but was dispassionately aware what she lacked. Her skin was clear and her eyes fine. She had regained her figure after giving birth through a strict diet regimen that replaced the sweets she craved with en Salade and engaged in exercise made tolerable only when William accompanied her on long ambling walks. Her teeth were good but poorly aligned, so that she was ever mindful of dear Feodora's long-ago advice to cover her mouth when she laughed. Most of all, she lacked that sparkling wit and scintillating presence, the charisma which might have made her a worthy successor to the women he had loved before.

In Lord M's presence that all changed. He made her feel beautiful, his gaze never left her, his attention never wandered. In his presence, Victoria became what he saw. Melbourne's attitude towards Billy, of all men the least likely to capture her imagination, thoroughly confused her.

Never – never! the word repeated like an incantation – would she look upon another man like she did Lord M. He was the most divinely handsome, the most charming and charismatic man she had ever met when she first laid eyes on him, and the years since had not altered her opinion. But of course, there were others who moved her to take more than a passing interest, gentlemen who triggered awareness, even transitory speculation when they grazed her hand with their lips, what it might be like if those lips were to kiss her own, to graze her neck, her breasts. Harmless thoughts, everyone had them, Lord M said, and they meant nothing.

Henry Temple, with his smooth charm and that naughty glint in his eye, that made her pulse flutter when he bent over her hand as much as his strong personality infuriated her. The Duke of Buckingham, so refined, with his wiry muscular physique and that mysterious tension under his
sophisticated veneer, made her feel quite a fascinating creature when he turned the full weight of his
debonair charm in her direction.

Even – and at this, Victoria's conscious mind rebelled with distaste – Mr. Disraeli. That man, on their
infrequent meetings, attracted as much as he repelled her, by his sheer vibrating intensity, a sort of
animal magnetism. Crude and striving, bluntly critical even while he exerted himself to please with
such silly excessive flattery. Disraeli, all passionate intensity, veritably vibrating with suppressed
energy and an aura of the other, a Jew for all he had converted as a youth, imperfectly concealed
beneath a fashionably lackadaisical manner.

But Billy? Never. He was a beautiful animal, full of health and strength and vigor, but there was
nothing mysterious about him, none of that lounging ease and insouciance, no subtly of mind or
manner. In short, Victoria decided, he was not Melbourne, nor even one of Melbourne's cohort, part
of that fabulous post-Regency era she herself had been born too late to experience.

Billy Cameron was a man of action, good-hearted and kind and loyal, and she hoped she valued him
as she should, for he served her well. It was gratifying when he pretended affection, and she was
flattered when he ignored the long-legged beauties at Court to flirt with her. Victoria probed the
recesses of her own mind, as she might probe a sore tooth with her tongue, searching for any trace of
attraction, and found nothing. Still, if Lord M thinks there is something special about Billy, perhaps
there is, and I am too stupid to see it.

Victoria summoned Lady Ehlers but it was reported that lady had left the palace before tea time and
not returned. She then summoned Lehzen. Victoria wanted to draft the letter offering Mr. – Herr
Heyse – a position, and then consider the matter closed. He would begin under the auspices of
Frances Hodges, Provost of Eton and Lord M's old friend, using the curriculum that gentleman
designed.

They finished the letter in short order, Victoria signed, and it was set aside to be delivered by the
Lord Chamberlain.

Next? Victoria asked herself. The dispatches had been read and signed, except for one especially
thick one from Lord Hardinge. She was familiar with the contents, having read past iterations of the
same general theme.

Like his predecessor Lord Ellenborough, Hardinge's stated overall strategic aim was to neutralize the
threat posed the Sikh army, without strong leadership to restrain them, along the border. Cameron's
information generally concurred except when it came to that very point. He countered that the
military preparations made by these Governors-General were offensive in nature and thus inflamed
the sensibilities of a sovereign state. The Punjab was the only remaining formidable force threatening
British hold over India and the last independent kingdom not under British influence. The kingdom's
reputed wealth was legendary, and the fabulous Koh-i-Noor was only one of its many treasures.

Countering Cameron's firsthand assessment, if he but knew of it, Major George Broadfoot stressed
disorder in the Punjab and recounted every tale of corrupt behaviour at the court. Victoria was not
prone to approve of female sovereigns – other female sovereigns, that is – and was prepared to
believe the worst of her own sex, and on that subject Billy stayed mute. He clearly harbored
admiration for Jind Kaur, although his letters contained little to provide a convincing case for
compassion. He laid the root cause for war on the greed of the East India Company, while
Melbourne doubted the Company would have deliberately attempted to annex the region on their
own, had the war not occurred. Even their well-funded private army would not suffice to keep hold
on the territories once won.

Victoria tapped her teeth with the end of her pen, lost in thought. She knew herself to be easily
swayed by stronger personalities, unless her passions were engaged or her duty was made unavoidably plain. It would be easy and quite comfortable to turn to Lord M and ask him to make up her mind. He would never publicly usurp her authority, but in private she sometimes wished he would be firmer in guiding her. Fortunately, or not – depending upon her mood and state of mind – he was circumspect in withholding his own opinions to not overshadow hers. Instead he told stories, made her laugh with his funny observations and gentle aphorisms, and waited for her reach her own conclusions. And that, she supposed, was as it should be. So long as Victoria knew she had his strength of mind to protect her, his love to sustain her, and his vast experience to draw from, she was quite content to rule alone.

Victoria laid the last of the documents in its diplomatic pouch, secured that in the locking chest and fastened the lock. Then she stood and stretched, yawning widely.

"I am so very eager for spring. I haven't ridden out for days and days, only through the park. I long to canter, and I'm sure Jezebel does too, poor dear." Her mare, a feisty little miss, was exercised regularly by the grooms but the paths were still too slippery with winter mud and standing water to risk slipping or worse.

"If that will be all, Your Majesty," the Baroness said, reverting to the formal usage once more.

"That will be all, Lehzen. You may retire, if you wish. When Lord M returns, if it's not too late, we will look in on the children together."

Victoria tucked her hand through her governess's arm and walked with her to the door, intent on preventing a formal curtsy or any unnecessary nod to protocol. Impulsively she kissed the Baroness's cheek.

"Good night, my dear Lehzen," she said softly and stepped back so the waiting footman might close her door, then debated what to do. Go on reading from that deliciously frightening serial novel? No, she decided, not without Beth. Part of the fun of being scared was perversely the cozy sense of security one only found in company. A single sharp knock signaled Lehzen's return and Victoria turned back gratefully, reluctant to wile away the hours alone.

The footman who stood without was another, not the one who was given the signal honor of opening and closing the queen's door.

A young page held himself stiffly, arms pressed to his sides, and bent forward in a crisp bow that made Victoria suspect he was freshly returned from active military service.

"Lord Melbourne asks Your Majesty to – " he cleared his throat and took a deep breath, then began again. "Lord Melbourne asks if Your Majesty would like to join him and the other gentlemen. He said to say – it's quite chilly, mum, you will want your shawl."

Victoria lost track of the number of turns they took, hitherto-unseen corridors through which they passed and narrow flights they climbed down. They were headed generally east, she surmised, but rather than take the wide well-travelled main corridor past the Grand Stairway toward what was still called Prince Albert's Wing, the boy was taking her through utilitarian passageways which grew increasingly dank and dusty.

Their journey ended outside a nondescript door, so low it just accommodated Victoria's five-foot height. She envisioned a dungeon within, sweating stone walls redolent with sweat, blood and centuries past. That was purely fancy, of course. Buckingham House as it stood was not even two hundred years old, constructed as a town house for the 1st Duke of Buckingham, and had undergone near-constant expansion and renovation ever since, first by her grandfather, then her uncles. There
were no dungeons, nor did it hold the structural memory of torture and mayhem. Far more likely, she thought, glancing nervously about, that it harbored well-fed vermin grown fat on the kitchen stores.

To her surprise, George Von Wettin opened the door for them. It wasn't an easily accomplished maneuver, but he put his shoulder to it with a great protesting squeal as the hinges reluctantly opened.

"Come in, Vi – ma'am," he adjusted smoothly in deference to the page. "Thank you, you may leave Her Majesty with us."

Victoria was shown into a plain unadorned interior hallway, from which doors opened at intervals. The space was bone-chillingly cold yet dry, with little of the mildew odor one expected from dungeons. The dust, on the other hand – she sneezed repeatedly, as their footsteps stirred up great grey clouds.

He led her to the farthest doorway. The interior resembled one of the many clerks' offices in her own working chamber, or perhaps more accurately those she had seen on infrequent visits to Whitehall. At first glance nothing remained of whatever work was done here.

"Come! See what I've found!" Melbourne was crouched in a sort of balcony, reached by means of a ladder on casters, elbow-deep in a sort of treasure chest. He passed it down to Von Wettin and then swung himself over the side, catching the ledge with his hands and dropping gracefully to the main floor.

Victoria felt herself smile broadly and belatedly raised her hand to cover her mouth. He looked so appealingly boyish, she thought, charmingly disheveled with his curls all mussed.

"They cleared out of here after Napoleon was no longer a threat. Pitt – the Younger, you know – dispersed them to locations all around Whitehall, tucking them away here and there. By the time Lord Grey was in office, the whole notion of an intelligence service seemed obsolete. All Wickham's work – well, I'm sure reports remain somewhere but he took the bulk of it with him, since no one seemed to value it."

He steered her toward the nearest desk and hurriedly dusted off an upended chair with his handkerchief. Victoria listened closely, struggling to pick up the threads of what was clearly an ongoing conversation between Lord M and George, or perhaps Lord M and Lord M. She tried not to be distracted by the animation of his expressive, mobile features or the delightful enthusiasm sparkling in his eyes.

William Wickham, Melbourne explained, was the founder of the modern British secret service. In 1795, when England was openly combating the French revolutionaries who had beheaded King Louis XVI and his Queen, Wickham established a spy network in France and northern Europe. He plotted with French Royalists and was behind the infamous la Vendée uprising.

Victoria listened to him wide-eyed, as entranced by his lively method of making the tale come alive as she was by this spymaster whose name she had never previously heard.

"He did all that right under Aunt Charlotte's nose?" she asked at one point. "Why here? Why not in a government office, or the Army headquarters?" Melbourne huffed a small laugh, then took off his brown coat and wrapped it around her shoulders against the unheated basement. Victoria hugged herself within the embracing garment, still warm and bearing a trace of the bergamot-and-lime scent he favored.

"Right under her feet, yes, ma'am." He pushed aside some of the old closely written journals he'd
unpacked for her inspection and sat on a corner of the desk.

"Wickham strengthened our British intelligence system by centralizing the process - query, collection, collation, analysis and dissemination. He recognized the efficacy of one center for all intelligence. Why here? The more I've considered the matter – from my new perspective, and not that of a Whig minister – it makes complete sense. Governments change, politicians come and go, and of course policy is dictated by those in charge at any given time. But if the information on which decisions are made is to have any value, it must exist as a thing independent of those who seek to apply it. Two things above all should remain constant – the Crown, above and beyond the reach of any political agenda, and the facts upon which actions are based."

"The government secretly funded Wickham with a substantial budget for his objects, but that funding was entirely dependent on his results serving the interests of whichever government was in charge. Wickham lobbied hard for independence from the changing tides of Whig and Tory policy. So long as he was answerable to, and funded by, the Crown and not the government in office he would be independent. But after the specter of Napoleon was no longer a motivating – and unifying – factor, they moved him out of this basement. His team was spread out over multiple locations, some answerable to the Home Secretary – before I held that post, you understand – and others, to the Minister of War, or the Colonies, or the Secretary of the Army. And as those appointments were made and remade, so their mandates changed until the whole enterprise gradually died of attrition."

Victoria's eyes had never left Melbourne's face and her attention was unwavering. When he stopped speaking she remembered to breathe, and to blink, digesting all he had told her. How much she still had to learn about the workings of her own government!

"Do you know Mr. Wickham? Can you summon him to see us, to speak to us?"

"We would be disappointed. He died some five years past. I knew of him. He was Irish Secretary before I posted there, and his name crossed my desk on occasion when I was in the Home Office under Grey. I am quite embarrassed to say that I knew far less than I should have, about our intelligence-gathering apparatus while I was your Prime Minister. Fred would know more than I do. All such activities – particularly the directorate which is specifically charged with reading diplomatic correspondence – is run under the auspices of the Foreign Service."

"I do run on, don't I? But it was quite exciting to discover not everything had been removed and dispersed or destroyed. There are boxes and boxes of the cryptographic records in that cabinet above the bookshelves. While the information is of course sadly outdated, the methods they used can be extrapolated. But I've been remiss in keeping you overlong in this hidey-hole."

He took both of her hands and chafed them between his to warm them, then tugged the collar of his coat more closely around her exposed neck.

"What?" Melbourne inclined his head, grinning sheepishly. Victoria realized she had been gawking. She blushed and ran the tip of her tongue over her top lip, then looked down self-consciously.

"Nothing! Only – you're right, it is exciting. And I love to hear the way you tell it."

George came up behind them, carrying a lantern.

"I've reached the point where Barry uses me more as a negotiator than draughtsman or architect," he said. "If you requisition my services here, I doubt he'll complain overmuch. I have all the measurements I need and have already obtained as many of the original drawings as were on file. All this does not show, of course, but that's why I will come back and do my own, with specifications. What you do with them afterward –"
"He means," Melbourne told Victoria, grinning. "that one can't have a secret service working out of a location that can be neatly pinpointed from a perusal of public records. That's why, with your approval of course, I'd like to put George in charge of getting these offices in habitable condition again and modernized. We need gas down here, and whatever they need for the new telegraph system to be operational and…"

George had led them out of the warren of darkened rooms, relying on his excellent spatial sense to take them up a second flight of stairs which led to a small withdrawing room within the apartments he once shared with Prince Albert. They parted company only after he declined Victoria's offer, endorsed by Lord Melbourne, of a late supper, a brandy, and even a particularly fine Madeira.

Victoria tried and failed to return Melbourne's coat for the walk back to their own wing. The unheated corridors were none too warm, and Victoria wasn't entirely sorry he refused. He held her closely by means of an arm around her waist until they approached the Grand Stairway, and then in a nod to decorum tucked her hand in his arm.

Once in their own apartment, Victoria turned into Melbourne's arms so suddenly she nearly toppled them both. He caught her neatly and looked down with a bemused expression.

"Kiss me," she demanded, swaying against him. He willingly complied, holding her head in his hands and Victoria allowed a small rumbling sigh to escape. When he tried to release her, she gripped the open collars of his shirt and nudged him more pointedly with one knee.

"My reward for unearthing the history of your spy service?" he joked.

"I love you, I adore you, you are the most exciting man in the world," she insisted urgently. Then, aware how entirely foolish and forward she must appear, Victoria laughed at herself in confusion. "Never mind. I am silly."

"Now I am wounded. Just when I allow myself to preen…darling, don't be embarrassed. Don't you know how entirely gratifying it is to have a beautiful young woman throw herself into my arms?" His voice was caressing, crooning, and he gently drew her back into his embrace. "Not a beautiful young woman. This beautiful young woman. My wife."

"Look what you made me do," Melbourne laughed, looking from his begrimed hands to the corresponding smudges on chemise and sheets. "Let me ring for hot water and I promise to return as soon as I remove the top layer of dirt."

Victoria tightened the grip of her legs, scissored around his. She lay half-across his chest, hair fanned out, so a curling strand tickled his nose with each breath, and at his suggestion uttered a groaning protest.

"Very well." Melbourne kissed the top of her head, then blew to dislodge the errant curl. "You condescended to hear me describe at length my evening. What did you do? Did you read the next installment of your horror story?"

"No. My lady went out and did not return." Victoria frowned, puzzled. "They are not supposed to do that, you know. I anticipated problems when Willie- Lady Dalmeny – returned, but so far at least she has exerted herself to please. I did not expect Beth to go on that way. She told me herself, she needs her wage."

Melbourne made a noncommittal sound, intent on twisting several locks of dark hair.
"Since Emma resigned, there is no one to take charge of the ladies-in-waiting. Lehzen can't do it; she already oversees the household accounts and has full charge of the children and their attendants."

"I think Emma was discharged, ma'am, was she not? You demanded her resignation?" Victoria pushed herself up on one elbow, frowning.

"Do you think I should allow her to return?"

Melbourne only shrugged, wisely perhaps.

"I'm afraid the matter is beyond my scope of expertise, ma'am. That is for you to decide. Now, if you have been deprived of your lady's fearsome bedtime story, shall I attempt to take her place?"

"Do you know of any..." Victoria grinned. "...any penny dreadfuls? You only read very serious books."

"You misjudge me, ma'am. My interests are vast and varied. However, sometimes fact trumps fiction. Do you remember hearing anything of the peculiar events which began in 1838? A villain our own Lord Mayor learned to call Spring-heeled Jack?"
Sun washed the morning room in cheery warmth. Its southeastern prospect, six sets of French doors opening onto a wide balustrade that ran the length of the wing, looked out over rolling brown lawns. Beyond those, Hyde Park Corner bustled with early traffic taking advantage of the unusually fine mid-winter weather.

Breakfast was taken in the morning room, *ala carte*. Dishes of eggs, bacon and slices of ham were replenished as those who sought to break their fast as early as eight o'clock must be accommodated as satisfactorily as His Grace the Duke of Melbourne, who rarely made an appearance before ten.

Her Majesty the Queen most often came in shortly before nine, without ceremony, and seated herself at one of the several small tables set out for the purpose. The kitchen having been alerted to her imminent arrival by means of a second footman whose sole purpose it was to relay word from Her Majesty’s dresser, a cup of hot chocolate prepared in the Spanish tradition with frothed milk and a dusting of cinnamon would be set before her. Already in place, a dish of peeled and deveined citrus slices arranged to resemble some fantastical bloom, toast in its rack accompanied by pots of marmalade and whipped butter and the morning papers fanned out for her perusal.

Victoria rose at precisely eight o'clock every morning, by Marianne Skerrett's discreet second knock at her door. Her principal dresser, the first servant she had chosen as an adult, had not served in any previous aristocratic home and so had no preconceptions to overcome. Most married couples did not share a bedchamber, and in the early years the Queen’s situation had been complicated even more by the unique composition of her household and marriage. Miss Skerrett, only a few years older than her young mistress, had been consistently composed and unflappable – and had kept their secrets well.
Without being told, Skerrett understood that the most indispensable quality of a body servant was discretion, superseding even the ability to anticipate every need. That eight o'clock knock would be followed by the sound of a serving cart coming to rest just outside the closed bedchamber door, and then they would be left to themselves for a predictable fifteen minutes while the elements of the queen's morning toilette were readied in her dressing room.

Victoria looked forward to those fifteen minutes and used them well, exchanging mumbled endearments and dreamy caresses. Sometimes she would only lean on one elbow and watch him, his sleep-softened features revealing the boy within, eyes a dark sparkle under heavy lids and the exquisite line of his lips quirked in a tender, crooked smile. Other times she would find him startlingly hard, more so even than when it was a more deliberate response. He had explained the biological phenomenon, a dismissive explanation she usually ignored. It was a delicious treat, to take matters in hand while he lazed only half-awake. Then, she could do what she wished. She was rewarded with an entirely wicked sense of her own potent power.

Melbourne was slower to leave the comfort of his bed and Victoria had learned to subsume her own desire for his constant presence. Amusing anecdotes had reached her ears, of insistent envoys presenting their petitions before a Prime Minister in his nightshirt and dressing gown, of a tailors' guild being shown into my lord's dressing room where they stood uncertainly while he shaved. Emily, Victoria recalled. It had been Emily who rather pointedly shared those admittedly funny stories and then, lest she have missed the underlying message, chattered on about the adjustments she and her own husband, wed in middle age after a decades-long romance, had to make as they learned to live under the same roof.

Having overseen the Queen's toilette, her chief dresser would relegate tidying up to a lesser maid and adjourn to the offices, where she would sort through incoming correspondence. Victoria had tried out a succession of private secretaries. Lord M had filled that role admirably during her first months, and Albert had later replaced him. Will Cowper, Lady Palmerston's son, had acted as his uncle's private secretary and then, when Melbourne left office, had stepped into that role for the queen.

Now, under John Russell, Will was still a Groom-In-Waiting, but also made a Lord of the Admiralty. Even before that his ongoing friendship with Caroline Norton made it impossible for Victoria to be comfortable entrusting him with a position which would give him plenty of fodder with which to regale Melbourne's vindictive former mistress.

Emma Portman had gradually assumed an ever-expanding role as de facto superintendent of the Ladies- and Gentlemen-in-Waiting, the Maids of Honor and grooms, coordinating schedules and meting out rewards and discipline for any infraction of the household rules. She had also fallen into the habit of conducting all necessary correspondence with tradespeople, the commissioning of artists and engravers, answering begging letters from old retainers, and even paying the bills relating to the making and maintaining of the queen's clothes. Since Emma had left – and Victoria was firmly convinced in her heart of hearts that it was only Emma's spitefulness and refusal to humble herself and admit she had been wrong which accounted for her absence – those tasks were apportioned between Baroness Lehzen, Charlotte Canning and even Marianne Skerrett.

_Had she wept and blamed her nasty words on – oh, something! anything! – I would have allowed her to stay, Victoria often thought. We would have shown her how happy we are and how much better I know my own husband than any mere acquaintance could. Not only had she been robbed of a very efficient servant and amusing companion, but cheated of the right to be vindicated, to rub Emma's nose in their domestic happiness. All because she could not keep her long nose to herself!_  

Victoria sighed and began paging through the first of the newspapers while sipping chocolate, only half-listening to the silly chatter of her attendants and trying to drown it out entirely. She was
surprised to note how much time had passed before a flurry of motion roused her from reverie.

Her ladies-in-waiting had already risen to greet the new arrival. Emily Temple, Lady Palmerston, had been divested of her furs and advanced toward the queen's table wreathed in smiles for her young sister-in-law. She swept a curtsy of the proper depth and murmured the requisite Your Majesty in response to Victoria's greeting.

"Emily, what a treat! I did not expect to see you today…" Victoria said doubtfully, casting her mind back over the week's schedule. It was not impossible that something even more critical than an audience with Emily had been overlooked, with her affairs in somewhat of a muddle.

"If you do not have time for me, I'll toddle off to the nursery and see the children," Emily retorted, her dark eyes – so much like her brother's, always seeming to hold some secret mirth, Victoria observed – resting on the assembled ladies-in-waiting who watched them.

None would be so stupid as to openly slight Lady Palmerston. She was one of the most powerful society hostesses in London and had been for nearly half a century. She knew everyone, was near-universally liked and just as generally feared, at least insofar as the prospect of incurring her disapprobation. She was also a patroness of Almack's, generally considered the most approachable of the four doyennes, a high stickler who was also sympathetic to those seeking a coveted voucher. It was plain to an astute observer that while none of the younger ladies would show any hint of it, the sight of the queen slighting Lady Palmerston would be a rare treat.

Victoria guessed as much and favored Emily with a bright smile.

"Nonsense! How could I ever not have time for you? I am so glad you arrived when you did. We have decided on a tutor for Liam and…" Victoria rose and indicated Emily should walk with her. Almost as an afterthought, she glanced over her shoulder.

"I won't need the rest of you. Fanny, will you walk with us?"

Once out of earshot, Victoria grinned conspiratorially. Then, instantly contrite, she frowned at Fanny's girth. "Fanny, should you be on your feet?"

Emily laid a hand on the prominence under her daughter's gown.

"What better beginning for my newest grandchild, than to be born here?"

"Robert is certain this one will be a boy, and Roden's heir should be born in Ireland."

"Nonsense!" Emily retorted sharply. "You're due in little over a month and that family can not expect you to endure a February crossing. You'll come home to me for your confinement."

Fanny had married into a sternly religious family, a fact which her mother viewed with deep disapproval. The heir to the Earl of Roden had seemed a good match, and certainly Fanny had been head over heels in love, but her mother sometimes suspected that it was as much a desire to avoid her mother's new husband as any genuine romantic attachment.

"And you, Victoria, I haven't seen you in weeks. How goes it with your new First Lord?"

Victoria shrugged. "He's fine. I did grow quite accustomed to Robert Peel, and Lord M predicted that in time I will learn to be comfortable with Sir John as well. He's so…compared to the memories William shared, so, well, tame. Boring, even. And he does drone on."

"Henry will keep you on your toes, never fear. How goes that so far?"
Victoria hesitated. It was nothing new, in a family such as hers, the need to segregate one's personal, familial relationships from the business of government. Uncle Leopold was one such case in point, and Lord Palmerston another.

"Henry is...Henry," she said diplomatically. "You know I am quite fond of him, as a brother-in-law."

Emily squeezed her arm reassuringly. "You need not prevaricate, Victoria. I know my husband, but I also know you. And my brother. You won't be bored, at least. You already managed to put his nose out of joint with that business of the Sikh division turning back without a fight."

"It was to our advantage, I think. And I believe that without the Singh princes leading their ghodachadas, their cavalry regiments, against Gough the outcome is certain. And relatively bloodless."

"That's all to the good. And mind you, dear sister of mine, I don't take sides when it's a matter of my husband and my brother – or his wife. But I believe what galled Henry was the fact that you appeared to have your own intelligence source, apart from the dispatches submitted through proper channels. It certainly put a few noses out of joint, that you knew more about how matters would play out than the ministers in charge."

Victoria felt a certain satisfying click. No matter how completely she believed in Melbourne's wisdom and illimitable expertise, it gave her a little thrill to hear yet another of his prognostications realized.

"I believe it's in everyone's best interest for the Crown to have accurate information independent of the party in power. It is our duty to advise, even warn, and to do so, we must have an elevated vantage point."

Emily smiled, a small expression of peculiar satisfaction. She nodded.

"I thought perhaps it was no more than Henry's bluster fueling my son's tendency to see William's hand in everything, as though he was omnipotent. You know Will thinks his uncle nearly as perfect as you do?"

"I don't think, Emily; I know he is perfect." Now Victoria was easy once more, reassured by Emily's teasing, confiding tone. "Do you care to tell me what Will thought he saw Lord M's hand in?"

"My son has scarcely been in his new office a month, and the admiralty is all abuzz. As is the department of the Army, and the Foreign Service. Rumors from the ground up – or below ground, since these originate from the codebreakers and intelligentsia who work below stairs."

"And what are these buzzing about?"

"The rumor is that you and William intend to consolidate the various branches of our information-gathering apparatus and bring it all together under your own roof. I'm not sure if that's meant literally or metaphorically, but you can see why it's unsettling to the party in power, to think they will no longer control the flow of information and dispense it according to what they want Your Majesty to affirm."

"Indeed?" Victoria only pursed her lips, to prevent all but the merest hint of a grin from showing itself. "You must ask William his opinion of that rumor, if you want to know whether there is truth to it. But for the sake of argument, what does Henry think? Truthfully?"

"So long as he's a part of it, he thinks it's a good idea. But you know Henry, I think. He cannot bear
the idea he is not front and center of any endeavor. If you want his support, involve him in setting it up."

"Involve him in what?" They had reached the double doors opening into the children's dayroom, and Melbourne stepped out to greet them. He was carrying Lily, his arm supporting her backside and hers around his neck. Instantly she saw Emily, the little princess chortled with delight and leaned forward so precariously she nearly toppled out of her father's grip. Laughing, he set her on her feet and went to Victoria's side to watch their daughter greet her aunt.

Since it was not yet midday, Princess Elizabeth had not yet achieved a notable degree of progress on dismantling her appearance. Long chocolate-brown hair hung in shining waves, held back from her face by a wide satin ribbon, no significant stains marred the tiny gown and her stockings had not yet drooped from her tendency to climb on any piece of furniture offering a foothold. Looking up at her father with a precociously calculating expression, Lily caught up her skirts and made a perfect curtsy.

"Aunt, I am pleased to see you," she recited, her babyish lisp scarcely noticeable. "Welcome to our home."

Emily cooed, demonstrating lavish appreciation of her niece's performance, and glanced over the curly little head toward Melbourne. He did not see; his gaze was fixed on his daughter with a look of love so vast that his fond sister wanted to weep with gratitude.

Melbourne had heard enough of their conversation to have a fair idea what topic Emily discussed, and was well satisfied. He did not conceal himself, nor did he step forward until they'd nearly reached the nursery. He had complete faith in his sister's loyalty, while not discounting her real affection toward and solidarity with her husband. If they were already talking about it, then it would come as no real shock when there was something firm to discuss. After all, it was nothing new he intended; merely a revival of the original formulation Wickham had in mind for his espionage service. Independence from political consideration required protection of the Crown. That overarching neutrality, a firm bedrock, was the point of the Crown in a constitutional monarchy. The sovereign was not merely a glittering figurehead; he (or she) represented both the weight of history and the hope of the future and must retain relevance to be viable. And what else shared those attributes? Why, information; facts; truth, so far as it can be known.

Then he watched Princess Elizabeth, so perfect a miniature of her mother, make her curtsy and all thought fled, leaving room only to feel. His girl, his other precious girl, his baby, encompassing everything he had never known he needed, she and her brother both. How easy it would be, the thought flitted through his mind like an errant sunbeam, to do nothing save watch them grow, to secrete himself and them away from the world!

Ah, he reminded himself, everything in moderation. They could easily become the center of your world, but that is far too onerous a burden for any child to bear. What's more, they had a mother and she had a destiny, and carried the weight of the world on her shoulders, placed there squarely by her own ingrained sense of duty.

"Sister mine," he whispered theatrically, leaning over Victoria's shoulder. "Shall we conspire to steal the queen from her duties? It looks to be a fine day for a ride in the park."

Emily had no habit, she protested, and Fanny was in no condition to ride. Melbourne had Victoria's mare and his own city mount saddled and they rode in tandem alongside one of the queen's landau carriages. The top was taken down to take full advantage of the early February sun and rare bright blue sky. Fanny Jocelyn kept a blanket tucked around her legs, choosing the backward facing seat, while Emily and the two royal children facing forward, all three chattering gaily and waving at the
pedestrian traffic as they passed through the Decimus Burton's Wellington Arch.

At the junction six streets converged - Park Lane, from the north, Piccadilly, from the northeast, Constitution Hill, Grosvenor Place, Grosvenor Crescent and Knightsbridge to the west. Melbourne stopped outside Wellington's Apsley House and leaned toward his sister, murmuring a few words.

Victoria stayed at his side as they turned in the direction of Green Park, and she grinned broadly when they broke into a canter on the long promenade. In warmer months it would be a risky endeavor, but Melbourne knew Londoners would not be on foot during the wet months.

A small thing, he knew, but a treat nonetheless, a brief respite from the confines of her gilded cage. They rode in companionable silence, the wind fresh in their faces, until they came to the small wooden bridge which signified the end of the straight stretch. When he glanced in her direction Melbourne was pleased by what he saw, her cheeks flushed as much from exhilaration as from the winter air.

Emily's town home lay just beyond the edge of the park, only a half-block distant. Melbourne stopped his horse at the bridge and swung down, then went to Victoria and held up his arms to help her. She slid into his arms and down. He saw, out of the corner of his eye, the protection officer who had followed them at a discrete distance, now conversing with the equerry in clear conspiracy to afford them what privacy was possible.

The trees were still bare and unbudded, but the sun had warmed the earth just enough to release a hint of springtime to come. They walked together over the little bridge, and Victoria paused at the center to look over. In another month, the sluice might resemble a bubbling brook but now it was only a dank trickle. Even in riding boots she stood a full head shorter than Melbourne, and her tailored habit, while most flattering, accentuated her tiny stature. He moved to stand closely behind her, ignoring the two men waiting patiently no more than fifty yards away. The protection officers were good at what they did, so good, he reflected, they were easy to ignore.

He might have asked her thoughts, except he knew without asking that she was merely reluctant to continue and end their idyll, these few precious stolen moments. As he was. Instead he only put his hands alongside hers, his arms around hers so his body enfolded her. When he did he could feel her warmth, the familiar pull of body to his.

"I'm happy," she said simply, her voice casual. "I will remember this. Being here, with you, sending Em and the children on so we can be together looking at — " her lovely silvery laughter overtook the words. "- at dead leaves in the park."

"Let's go to Brocket at the end of the week. It's been a month since we were there last."

"You open Parliament on Monday next, and then there is the *bal costumé*," Melbourne said, not liking to be the voice of reason, doing so all the same.

"And you have your own work — your writing. Emily says that Henry will support us if you involve him, and there's Ireland, and no end of matters which require our attention." Victoria recited the litany of their obligations, then shrugged, and it was a very adult, very *French* gesture. *Good girl*, Melbourne thought, pleased. *She's learning to compartmentalize.*

"And none of it will stop, yet we must live our lives. We will leave Saturday morning and return Sunday afternoon. I'll send ahead so the house is ready."

She turned away from the rail and into his embrace, her lips parted slightly. Melbourne obliged by kissing her, flicking the tip of his tongue against hers for effect. Then he slid his hands down her
sides, smoothing her habit as an excuse to stroke the firm young curves underneath.

He helped her mount and arrange her skirts, then swung into his own saddle. Together they rode out of the park and towards the Palmerston’s town home.
They reached the Palmerstons' town home flushed and exhilarated from their brisk ride Green Park. Melbourne had wisely avoided the traffic along Piccadilly and opted to take the long bridle trail through Green Park. In season the path would have been shaded with a canopy of overarching trees, but in February only the ranks of evergreen shrubs heavy with melting snow provided some camouflage.

Such a small thing, riding out seemingly unattended and free of pomp, obligation or agenda. That they might experience even the illusion of freedom was itself a testament to the men and women of the queen's resurgent secret service, two representatives of which followed at a discrete distance. So long as they were in the park proper, and on a midwinter's afternoon when it was all but deserted, Victoria enjoyed herself extremely. Having Lord M all to herself, his attention and hers undivided, was an increasingly rare occurrence and the circumstance frustrated her.

"Surely a married couple should have more privacy, not less, than a young unmarried woman and her counselor?" William had only quirked an amused smile at her complaint. Their mounts walked placidly side by side, accustomed by long familiarity to tolerate such proximity. A well-matched pair.

"Life, ma'am, has a way of asserting itself once the ink is dry on the marriage contracts. Other people, other things, demand one's attention. Some couples grow accustomed and turn their attentions to other matters – family, society, ambition. Fortunately, we have more time in one
another's company than most."

"But never alone! And rarely just to talk as we used to. Oh, I remember the talks we had early on…"

"We don't do so badly in that regard – or any other. And that is because I chose wisely." He had been teasing then and she knew it.

"You once told me that if a gentleman of sixty decides to marry, he does best with a very young girl. Older ladies are more set in their ways."

"I believe I also said that youth is more malleable, more gentle, and has more compassion for infirmity." Victoria remembered everything he had ever said, and while she no longer felt the need to commit everything to writing at day's end, she jealously hoarded each utterance.

They had little need to write – he was nearly always at her side – but on the rare weeks that family business took him to Melbourne Hall he had written daily. His letters had never been racy, nor had they contained anything which the most censorious prude could condemn, but she cherished each one, for the inimitable voice of her Lord M.

Victoria's hand had flown to her mouth, to conceal the laughter which bubbled forth at the notion any might consider her gentle and malleable, and she explained between giggles how poorly those traits defined her. "I am no more gentle or malleable than you are infirm."

"I beg to differ, my love. You can be exceedingly gentle, at least when it matters." Victoria was surprised by the sudden surge of heat which overtook her, right there in the park, and she nudged her mare into a trot so that they covered the last stretch in a half-playful undeclared race for the finish.

Engaged in such idle chatter, Victoria had lost all track of her surroundings and was surprised to see they had reached the stone gates marking the far edge of the park. She glanced back to reassure herself that the neat gentlemen who rode behind, out of earshot but well within the distance of a well-aimed pistol, should the need arise. These two Lord M called Tweedledum and Tweedledee. He saw her looking and smirked, murmuring the old rhyme.

Some say, compar'd to Bononcini

That Mynheer Handel's but a Ninny

Others aver, that he to Handel

Is scarcely fit to hold a Candle

Strange all this Difference should be

'Twixt Tweedle-dum and Tweedle-dee!

She grinned while shaking her head in pretend admonishment. They did quite resemble one another, with nondescript features, indeterminate age and unremarkable tailoring. Both were average height and physique, although Victoria assumed that even in absentia Billy Cameron held enough sway that they would be well-muscled and physically fit under those plain coats.

"Penny for your thoughts," Melbourne said, his fine lips quirking in a knowing smile.

"Oh, just speculating on our twin protectors – and what might be concealed under their clothing." Victoria met Melbourne's gaze, her own expression one of exaggerated innocence. Touché, she chortled silently, pleased with herself for the retort.
Leaving the shelter of Green Park, Emily's house stood at the end of a fashionable cul-de-sac just off Piccadilly. Palmerston had bought the house for Emily just after their marriage, putting his own South Street property to rent. The Cowper townhouse had been entailed and, like Panshanger, had a new mistress in the person of George's wife, Lady Anne. Victoria remembered Lord M commiserating with Emily at the pain she felt in being usurped by her daughter-in-law, no matter how natural the circumstance. Henry, in a desire to provide his wife with consolation – and a worthy setting in which to continue throwing the salons and political dinners which furthered his own career – had found the perfect substitute in the lovely five-story pink brick Georgian mansion which graced the far end of this exclusive enclave.

Melbourne dismounted and handed his reins to the waiting groom, then led Victoria's mare to the mounting block and held up his arms. She relinquished her own reins, then gripped his forearms and allowed herself to slide to the ground. He would have stepped back but she did not immediately release him. He looked at her quizzically, lifting a brow.

Victoria did not want to release him. She wanted to stand just as she was, so close that she could feel the heat of his body even through the layers of his winter clothing and hers. Her gloved hands tightened, and she gave a little gasp, recognizing the sudden quivering in her stomach, the languid liquid warmth rising there. He feels so good! For a long moment they stood motionless, each breathing in the scent of the other, Victoria's gloved hands on his arms, his on hers. Then, with a little sigh of regret, Melbourne released her.

"Emily appears to have a houseful," he observed, indicating the rear courtyard where a jumble of wheels was just visible street side. "I suppose George is in town to take his seat in the House and brought Lady Anne and their who-knows-how-many progeny. And young Emma with Ashley and their brood – although I'd be surprised if they've all packed in here, when he has a perfectly respectable house of his own."

Victoria stepped back with her own soft sigh. Aware of his eyes on her, she arranged her features into a pleasant mask and tightened her lips into the promise of a smile. Then she brushed the skirts of her habit and lifted her chin resolutely.

Melbourne understood. Victoria relied upon the security of her gilded cage more than she liked to admit to herself. She might chafe at its restraints and express a wish to be only an ordinary gentlewoman, but in the world, without the buffer of her attendants and the structure of her carefully scripted role, she was still painfully unsure of herself and how to go on. He understood all of this without being told, and it was all part of the wonderful, contradictory complexity of this marvelous creature he adored. Victoria knew with perfect certainty that he did understand, better than she herself perhaps, and once more blessed divine providence for his loving support.

"I will explain straight off that we cannot stay; that sky looks like snow is coming on." Victoria's blue eyes warmed with gratitude, and she tucked her hand trustingly into the crook of his arm.

"I find a houseful of my relatives all nattering at once gives me a headache," he continued mildly, tightening his arm against her hand so it pressed into his side.

"And if it's going to snow in earnest, I'd much rather appreciate the sight from a warm apartment, in front of the fire…in my dressing gown, holding my wife and…" They had reached the door while Victoria was lulled by the sound of his voice and was able to smile brightly at the butler who bowed them into the entrance hall.

"Cannot stay," despite the best of intentions, was a sentiment far more easily expressed than observed. Emily must have been watching for them, Victoria surmised, because she swooped in to greet them
as though their arrival was a surprise. She explained rapidly that upon her own arrival with the children, her home had already been overtaken by her own children – George, the 3rd Viscount Cowper, as Melbourne had guessed, but also Fanny's husband Robert Jocelyn, who had escorted their own girls and their nurses as well as his mother and sister.

"Don't worry; he did not bring them. I will have them to dinner on Sunday, when I can be sure that woman's thoughts will be all on Scripture. I vow, she has no conversation!"

The Earl and Countess of Roden were nearly puritanical, as Emily described them, and their extreme religiosity was viewed as much askance as his political conservatism by the very liberal Lambs. Victoria knew that Fanny was deeply in love with her husband, and had difficulty imagining such a vivacious young woman happily subdued by her pious in-laws.

"Will is here – he came in with Palmerston at the same time I arrived," Emily added as an afterthought. "They are in the library. You must go in and say hello."

Emily's children had withheld their approval of her remarriage as long as they could, and none of them wholeheartedly embraced their new stepfather. Yet they loved their mother and valued her happiness, and for her sake put on a united front in accepting Henry Temple. Victoria remembered hearing that Lord Shaftesbury had remarked that between Lord Palmerston's attentions to Emily were those of a perpetual courtship. She didn't quite understand how Emily could choose to remain ignorant – for surely it was not tolerant? - of Henry's peccadilloes. Lord M had blithely explained that so long as Henry acted with discretion and confined his amorous conquests to the lower orders to avoid public scandal, Emily suffered no loss of his affection or attention. If he were to fall in love, it would be an entirely different matter but so long as his interests were purely carnal… Victoria had warned him, her own eyes blazing, that she herself was not nearly so sanguine. She blushed, remembering how that discussion had ended, as Lord M exerted himself to demonstrate where his own carnal interests lay.

"Where are Liam and Lily?" Victoria asked, hoping to stem Emily's tide of chatter, wanting suddenly to be home once more. She had no appointments to make, no ministers to see, and she had released her attendants from duty, so they could return the children to Lehzen's care and then, even if they must dine with Mama and the old aunts, they would have the entire evening at their disposal.

Emily waved vaguely and hooked her arm through Victoria's.

"William, I am going to steal your wife away. We must say a few words to Lady Anne and the girls – she will be insufferable if she thinks I allowed Victoria to escape without bringing her in."

Lady Anne was the daughter of Sir Thomas de Grey, upon whom Victoria had bestowed the Garter two years prior. She had given her lord five children already, four in the schoolroom and one in the nursery, and had just shared the happy news that she was once more in the family way. Victoria found her unobjectionable, if a trifle stiff and aware of her own consequence, but with none of the radiant charm of Emily and her own daughters, Fanny and young Emily, called Emma in the family.

Victoria, seeing herself trapped, looked briefly at Melbourne and then allowed Emily to lead her into the drawing room.

Melbourne watched from the entrance hall, until Victoria was swallowed up in the sea of bright gowns, all his nieces rising en masse to make their curtsies. He reflected that Victoria might feel at a disadvantage in her severe green habit, but it showed her slight, slender figure to advantage, augmented by the natural grace of her perfect posture. She had shed much, but not all, of her physical insecurity, the tendency of very young women to compare themselves unfavorably to their
peers. He knew she did not consider herself a beauty to equal the fashion plates at court, tall leggy beauties like Wilhelmina Dalmeny and Harriet Sutherland. Which was nonsense, of course – if anything prevented Victoria from being their equal in purely superficial terms, it was only her dignity and reserve, which was anathema to the sparkling flirtatiousness which made a man take instant notice. As a man, Melbourne himself was not immune, but he had been entangled with several flamboyant creatures with just that knack for drawing – demanding – attention and knew how wearying it became to love such a one.

Henry Temple, the Viscount Palmerston, once his Foreign Secretary and now John Russell’s, was sprawled on the long leather sofa. He had discarded his cravat and his shirt collar was open so far that a thatch of golden chest hair was visible. Will Cowper, Emily’s middle son and Melbourne’s namesake, sat across from his stepfather in the armchair Melbourne wanted for his own use.

"Whiskey? Before dinner? What will the ladies say?"

"I don't know. Will you join us and find out?"

Melbourne nudged his nephew to displace him. "Henry keeps a bottle of the special stuff in a secret cabinet – if you slide that panel sideways, you'll find a compartment – " Will Cowper leapt to his feet and looked in the direction Melbourne was pointing.

"Ah…" he sank down into the soft, welcoming cushions and lifted his feet to a tufted ottoman, feeling somewhat dismayed by the relief in the muscles of his lower back. There was a time he could ride all day without a twinge, but those days were long gone.

"Stir up the fire while you're there, Willie." He took the glass his nephew offered and cupped it in his palms, warming the cognac while he inhaled its bouquet appreciatively.

They chatted in desultory fashion, Palmerston reclined so far that he was able to balance his own glass on his abdomen. Then Melbourne showed him a flickering smile, measuring.

"You have some concerns about the source of my – ah, prescient information from Hardinge's territory?"

"I do," Palmerston agreed. "Surely you don't begrudge me? We're family –" he made an inconclusive gesture, one Melbourne assumed was meant to indicate their surroundings.

"First tell me, does anyone else share your curiosity? Anyone who matters?"

Palmerston winced. "Ouch! That smarts, old fellow."

"Don't take offense where none is intended. I meant only, anyone who might misinterpret my interest? Which is, I remind you, only to ensure the queen has accurate and complete information. That commodity is often in short supply."

"Coming from you, that's disingenuous at best. Did you tell the old King everything you knew about anything?" Palmerston arched a sandy brow and stared at Melbourne.

"Did any of us? King William couldn't find his own arse with both hands in a well-lit room. In his case, a little knowledge was a dangerous thing, and more knowledge without wisdom would only have amplified the risk. He was – volatile." More than that; the old Sailor King was erratic, and entirely too willing to stretch the limits of his authority, dismissing his ministers on a whim and making no secret of his Tory allegiance.

"I don't argue with you, William. I only ask that you share the wealth – of resources, and
intelligence. Are you bringing the intelligence services back under the protection of the Crown? Directly, I mean? Is this business of you having your own agents in India the start of that?"

Melbourne burst out laughing. "Henry, you give me far too much credit. The only source of direct intelligence I had from the field came from one fellow who – well, intelligence is not the first word that comes to mind when I think of him."

Privately, Melbourne wondered whether that assessment was unfair. Cameron was a bright man, well-educated and savvy under his rough exterior, but compared to the silent cyphers of the intelligence offices he had met, then no, he was in no way their equal. Observing and analyzing were two entirely different things, and although Cameron was an adequate witness to events as they unfolded – more than adequate, he utterly lacked the sophisticated subtlety of a genuine spy.

"The Scotch fellow the women all swoon over? Your Victoria's not-very-secret admirer?" Palmerston asked, dumbfounded, when Melbourne told him.

"Irish," was his only response.

"Scottish. Achnacarry was the seat of the Cameron chiefs since the castle was built around 1655. The old pile was demolished and the new castle as it stands went up in, oh, 1800 or thereabouts. Your fellow might be a distant relation, but he's no Irishman. 'Cameron' is as Scots as any of the Macs."

Melbourne was aware of a vague curiosity, but not enough to pursue the matter conversationally. He waved a hand dismissively, savoring a mouthful of warmed cognac.

"As you say. At any rate, if you know who I mean, you'll agree he's hardly anyone's first choice as a spy."

"He did a first-rate job of reviving Cecil's old Elizabethan secret service. Good enough that Wellington is supporting the notion of bringing it into the Army's jurisdiction. In doing so, it will spike your guns if you intend them to branch out into the foreign intelligence arena."

"Impossible," Melbourne said flatly. "The entire purpose of Cameron's squad is to protect the body of the Queen. That necessarily entails keeping abreast of what's being said in the pubs and on the docks, putting men – and a few women – into some unsavory situations, but it has nothing at all to do with foreign adventures."

"And if a threat is traced to its source, and that source is a foreign government? What then? To whom would they turn?"

"Apples and oranges, Henry. Cameron’s squad – his protection officers, and the…well, I suppose we'll have to call it domestic intelligence interest, is all to the protection of Her Majesty's person. Nothing else."

"We could debate this at great length, William. For now – bring the fellow back, fold up whatever scheme took him to the court of the Punjab, and let's agree to share information going forward. I think we'll find less opposition if you pretend transparency. If they let you keep this secret protection service under the Crown, there is some precedent."

"There is precedent for combining the intelligence services as well. You know that. Until Napoleon was finally routed for good, they worked right underneath the Queen's feet at Buckingham House."

Melbourne kept his voice casual – in fact, he felt no animosity, having worked with Henry long enough to know that his brother-in-law's default manner was aggressive. The fellow was loud and
forceful, a bull in a china shop, and if his style was not Melbourne's it did not make him a foe. Deciding they had said as much as was needed, Palmerston summoned Will Cowper and required him to pour the Cognac – a reserved 1789 pedigree – all around. He lifted his glass in salute, touching his brother-in-law's and stepson's in turn.

"To the Queen," he said, grinning broadly. "That's where my first and last loyalties lie, William. Whether she knows it or not – Queen and country."

"In that order?" Melbourne asked softly.

"They are one and the same," was Palmerston's ready reply.

Melbourne glanced out beyond the heavy velvet draperies and saw that the lamplighters were already at work. If he had come alone, he would like nothing better than to linger here, in Henry's study, comparing impressions on the new men taking their seats and the prejudices, personal and political, such political newcomers were bringing with them. As it was, he had Victoria and the children – spirited out of Buckingham House for what had begun as a ride in the Park – and it was high time they were underway.

Despite the pounding of many running feet above their heads, Palmerston directed him to the solarium at the back of the house. Melbourne waved off the offer of an escort and made his way down the corridor opening onto drawing room, dining room and Emily's morning sitting room. Across the back of the long narrow house, overlooking a winter-barren yard and, beyond, a view of the park, was the sunroom Emily had fitted out with bright wicker furniture and an array of winter-blooming plants. He knew that she took her flowers from the conservatories at Brocket and Broadlands but was surprised to see a distinctive creamy flower.

*Em, you little devil, you've gotten the Cattleya to bloom!* Botanist William Cattley had gifted Melbourne a cutting from the orchid specimen sent back from an expedition to Columbia. He had nurtured the unprepossessing stem, bringing it back from near-death, and greeted its first green leaves with jubilance. Much of 1819 – not a good year, Melbourne thought ruefully, except it was the year of Victoria's birth, had he only known what the future held – had been devoted to his books and his conservatory, in an effort to shut out the less pleasant aspects of his life. This beautiful flower now gracing Em's sun room was the fruit of that toil.

He touched the long petals lightly, not wanting to disturb the orchid in any way to its detriment, enjoying the momentary communion with this remnant of his past life. This survivor, he amended. Not much else survived that era – not Caro, not Augustus, not the man he had once been, melancholic and defeated, resigned to his fate. *Ah, if only I had known then…*

All his attention had been focused on the large exotic plant with its proud blooms. Only belatedly did he realize he was not alone.

At the far end of the sunroom, three little girls and a female who must be their nurse. Two others, that he recognized as Fanny's daughters, and Lily. His own daughter, her stockings predictably sagging and her white pinafore bearing clear indication of her preoccupation, was concentrating on her task so intently that her tongue was clamped between her teeth. It was an unconscious gesture that her mother so often made when engrossed in some particularly complex document, most generally containing columns of numbers.

Lily sat on the lap of the woman who was supervising their activities, a female whose back was turned to Melbourne. She leaned over Lily's shoulder, whispering something, and as Melbourne watched she paused to brush back some of the little girl's dusky curls and kiss the round cheek affectionately. Melbourne frowned, just slightly. *Certainly, it was good that the governess in Fanny's*
employ was so fond of children, but perhaps it would be better if she confined her familiarity to her own charges? He chided himself for the churlish thought. Perhaps we could – no, it would hardly be right to try to lure her away to the palace, but if she were discontent, and already fond of Lilly –

It was rare that Melbourne saw his tempestuous, overactive daughter so quiet and well-behaved. Whatever they worked on, she invited her playmates to take a turn and withdrew her own dimpled arms so that they could join in.

"I am reluctant to interrupt, but –"

"Papa!" Lily smiled sunnily, her pleasure evident, and beckoned Melbourne over. "This is my friend."

The woman holding his child so affectionately had not yet fully turned, when he recognized her. Melbourne stopped in his tracks, awash with emotion at the vision of his old friend and his little daughter so obviously the best of friends.

Emily Eden had no children of her own; she had never wed, preferring to travel with her brother, and write her books. She was no bluestocking for all that, but a lovely, lively woman with whom he had shared a long and intense friendship. When she'd departed for India in ’35 he had found himself adrift, and keenly mourned her absence. They had exchanged frequent letters, so that the warmth of their mutual affection never faded, although time and circumstance had changed. Nonetheless…

Melbourne held out his arms and Emily rose and went into them, carrying Lily so the little girl remained in between. He laughed and kissed each of them in turn, then as an afterthought bowed formally before his great nieces. When he kissed each of their hands in turn, they shrieked with giddy laughter.

"What brings you here?" Emily asked, wide-eyed, her cheeks flushed with pleasure. Then she looked down at Lily and laughed aloud. "I sound quite the ninny, don't I? I'm just – oh, why don't I hush now and let you speak while I compose myself."

Melbourne had always known that his sister and most of polite society assumed they would wed. Emily might say that she found him bewildering, but such a composed and accomplished female, well-traveled and accustomed to acting as her brother's hostess, was not easily flustered…or bewildered. He had been more sincerely attached to her than to any female other than his sister – and that was the crux of the issue. He pined for her when she'd left the country, exulted at her return, and the emotion he felt when in her company was one he could only define as love. But not that kind of love, not the sort of romantic head-over-heels, all-consuming eros which left one dizzy and breathless.

Before Victoria, when he considered only Caro and Caroline and Bess, Lady Branden, he would regretfully acknowledge that he was drawn to, if not bad women, then tumultuous, demanding, deeply passionate women whose affections were akin to some heady narcotic.

"How have you been? I've written letter after letter –"

"I haven't written, thinking you wanted to get on with your life and –"

They laughed at the cross-talk. Lily, not content to be ignored, tugged on her new friend's sleeve. Melbourne was shown the seedling which they had repotted, and a small pile of desiccated petals which they had plucked from the bank of potted Christmas roses along the windowsill. He expressed his admiration for the effort, and discovered that, by pretending to speak to Lily, he and Emily could converse satisfactorily. Lily, for her part, sat quite contentedly on Miss Eden's lap, so long as her
papa pulled his chair closely enough to permit her to keep a proprietary hand on his sleeve. She listened to the back-and-forth of her elders, interrupting periodically to respond to some especially cryptic comment, and her dark curls swung back and forth in time with the rhythm of their voices.

Victoria listened attentively to Lady Anne. She had given her husband five heirs, four in the schoolroom and one in the nursery, and went out into society so seldom that it precluded any discussion of events of which her husband had not seen fit to inform her. As the current Viscountess Cowper, she was no favorite of her mama-in-law, who addressed her with icy civility. Young Emily, Lady Ashley, had an unimaginable eight children, all of them sickly, scrawny things. Victoria was forced to admire the youngest, who closely resembled a spider monkey she had seen at the Pavilion. Will's wife Harriet was a sweet, unobjectionable young woman, and the entire family made much of her. Victoria found nothing to dislike, other than her husband's continued friendship with Caroline Norton – and one could hardly blame his naïve young wife for that, Victoria told herself – but Lord M's effusive praise of Lady Harriet set her teeth on edge.

Wishing Lord M would come rescue her from the tedium, Victoria resisted the urge to glance too often at the door or the mantle clock. Well over an hour had passed, when Fanny's girls ventured in.

The Honorable Misses Victoria Alexandrina and Alice Maria were, respectively, three and four years old, and if age had not rendered them natural companions for Princess Elizabeth, their bright vivacious Lamb personalities and bold temperament did. If Fanny successfully concealed that aspect of her persona from fear of offending her husband's strict Protestant family, her daughters did not try. They tread purposefully across the carpet, holding fast to Liam's hands as though they kept him from retreating.

"Ma'am," Miss Victoria Jocelyn stood before the Queen for whom she was named. "Lily will not play with us anymore. It is very rude. This is our Grandmama's house!"

Fanny blushed the deepest scarlet and tried frantically to hush her child.

"Never mind. Send the footman for Nurse and have the children brought upstairs," Emily Temple laughed. "You have no idea the things we would say to embarrass Mother at her Drawing Rooms. Why, once the Regent was –"

"Mother," Liam said in a breathy whisper. "I don't feel well. May we go soon?"

Victoria was instantly grateful for the excuse, then remembered to feel badly for her son. When she rose, the others at once stood as well, deferential despite the informality of the occasion.

"Emily, if you would be so good as to tell William we would like to leave, I will go find Lily." Victoria took her son's hand in hers – not clammy, she thought with relief, at least it isn't a fever - and asked Fanny's daughter to show her the way.

"Will Lily be punished? We don't want her to be punished, only to play with us." The younger girl furrowed her brows with concern. Victoria shook her head.

"No, dear. We really must be leaving though. You can see it's getting quite dark. Our officers will be –"

The hallway was still unlit, and the late afternoon shadows rendered it dark enough so that the solarium beyond was bright by comparison. Victoria was easily able to enter without disturbing the occupants.
William and a woman sat at a glass-topped wicker table, their heads bent so closely together that his thick silver-streaked dark curls appeared in danger of touching the woman's ash brown waves. Victoria did not think to notice her face or figure, except that she was a handsome well-dressed woman. Her laughing eyes and the intimate familiarity of her expression, however, was unmistakable.

She saw him only in profile. His gaze was fixed on the woman's, with a look of lively attention Victoria knew well. It was such a look which made one feel as though no one else existed. While she watched, time passing in a blur – she would think later it was only seconds, surely less than a minute – the woman absently kissed the top of Lily's head and stretched out a hand toward Lord M. He picked it up in both of his and stroked it with his thumbs while he said something that made Lily's midnight blue eyes grow wide.

Victoria knew who it was – had read Miss Eden's letters and the books she sent, had even received her at court and invited her to dine. She was, Victoria had always thought, quite old, too old to be considered a rival, and she behaved with perfect propriety, always deferential in her letters, addressing them with propriety to both.

But suddenly Victoria saw her in an entirely new light, without the prejudice of extreme youth which makes fifty seem positively ancient. If Lord M's sister was a beautiful woman at nearly sixty, this Emily was striking at fifty. She had that self-assurance, that very interesting air which compelled attention, a vivacity at odds with the gentleness in her lovely eyes. Victoria thought she might faint, or worse yet, vomit on the parquet floor.
Chapter 9

The inner chamber was quite cozy, awash in the warm glow of the beeswax candles Victoria preferred to more efficient and mundane gas lamps in their most private space. Icy pellets of sleet pinged against the windowpanes, heard but unseen behind heavy velvet draperies drawn close against the night.

Melbourne savored the moment of their retiring, this golden hour when he had her to himself, his precious girl-queen, when it was his right and his privilege to close the door against all those who had a claim to her time and attention. He could never, would never, grow entirely accustomed, or fail to marvel at the web of fate and circumstance which put him, in the autumn of his life, in a marriage bed once more. It was not the outcome he had necessarily sought, accompanied as it was by inevitable notoriety and a life in the spotlight once again. And yet – he sighed contentedly – here he was. In dressing gown and slippers sharing all the homely intimacies of married life.

During their ride home – he had not balked when Miss Kelly and Mr. Bowles had jointly decreed that it was too dark and the weather too inclement for Her Majesty and His Grace to return on horseback and must ride in the closed carriage for safety's sake – Victoria had attended closely to Liam. The boy was pale and clung to his mother, eyes heavy-lidded. He did not complain but when asked, whispered that his head hurt, and even his sister ministered most tenderly. From her father's lap, Lily had patted her brother's curls and cooed soothing sounds she must have learned from her own doting Lehzen.

He had begun several times to test the waters, but the moment was never right, and it would be churlish to begin a discussion which might end badly. Not that he had any reason to assume, he told himself – Victoria had been all smiles, saying everything that was proper in greeting Miss Eden. She had expressed dismay at the misadventures of a winter Channel crossing and laughed appreciatively
at the colorful description of a *nouveau riche* merchant family who had commandeered the best cabins and missed no opportunity to flaunt their means.

Melbourne had watched Victoria closely, not quite holding his breath but not far off. He was *not* guilty of any wrongdoing, but quite perversely felt as though he was. Emily had briefly met his eyes, her own full of amused understanding, which only redoubled his own irritation of nerves. Victoria did nothing to betray herself – if there was anything to betray. Her manners were poised and polished, her sweet face composed, and no one who did not know her as entirely as he did would guess anything was amiss.

He had done no more than visit with an old *platonic* friend and was cautiously optimistic that Victoria was able to accept that at face value - but long experience with the female sex in general and Victoria in particular strongly suggested otherwise.

Melbourne recognized the small familiar sounds from her dressing room which indicated her evening toilette was complete, heard murmured female voices and the soft *snick* of the door to the servants' passage signaling her maid's departure.

Their own door opened to admit Victoria. Her long dark hair was brushed smooth and spread out becomingly over the light shawl which covered her shoulders. Her face glowed pink from washing with the milled French soap scented with attar of roses. Melbourne watched her over the rim of his spectacles, a small smile lifting the corner of his mouth.

"So young – still so very young!"

She was the picture of adorable contradiction, he thought – conflicting emotions struggling against her attempt to restrain them. Her own lips were curved into a Mona Lisa smile entirely devoid of humor and she kept her eyes carefully averted as she kicked off her slippers and got onto their bed.

Melbourne still held the *Edinburgh Review* he had brought to bed with him, intending to read and able to do no more than hold it as a prop. He had to remind himself to exhale and did so with more gusto than he intended. Victoria allowed her hair to swing forward, obscuring her face, and kept her back to him – but that back promptly rested itself against his arm, a telling gesture that sent a surge of tenderness so powerful it was all he could do to resist.

He would wait, he decided, and allow her the right to determine her own reaction. If she was successful in reasoning her own way beyond the simmering resentment (*the hurt, to be fair, whether justified or not*) he would not deprive her of that victory. He was more than willing to give her the reassurance she needed, but if he were to soothe and cajole prematurely it would be for his own sake, not hers.

"Lehzen thinks Liam does not have a fever, but she will make up a pallet next to his bed."

"Is that necessary?"

"She thinks it is, and if he wakes in the night it will be a comfort."

"I was not much older than him – six, I think – when I began having sick headaches!"

"You? Surely you were never as timid as Liam? As…fragile?"

Melbourne chuckled. Of course, she would think that.

"I was a shy, sensitive child. It's all to my mother's credit, and Pen's as well, that I came out of my shell and developed a…*persona*. But deep inside, I am *exactly* like our son."

As he talked, he toyed with the ends of Victoria's hair and he felt the rigidity of her spine relax as she
leaned more heavily against him. Still, she kept her face turned away and had not gotten under the bedcovers. *I will wait.*

"Henry and I had a chance to talk. He tells me there are rumors – more than rumors, I suppose – already circulating that we are seeking to consolidate the intelligencers under Crown control. True enough as far as it goes, but not for the reasons they imagine. Still, we'll need him if we are to go forward."

"Need' Henry? Why, is there a chance he would oppose us?" Victoria frowned, considering the prospect.

"Perhaps." Melbourne shrugged. "Or not actively support us, which would be the same thing. I will confide in him and hope for the best. It is not grasping to regain the power your uncles let to slip away, only the Crown seeking to perform its constitutional role. As an unaligned ballast keeping the ship of state from leaning too far in either direction. That's what information should be – not ammunition for either party, but unbiased fact untainted by partisanship."

"Fred told me about an article in the *Examiner,*" Victoria said, her tone so artificially bright he knew she was feigning interest in this new conversational gambit. "I thought it was another such as Punch, but he told me it's where the tale of the two Fairies came from. He showed me a very droll article about Lord Grey. 'You're not strong enough for the place, John,'" she repeated, laughing. "And he is sending me another he is sure I will find amusing, called The Artful Dodger."

"I think we quite corrupted you, introducing you to *Punch.* You must not reveal your taste for political satire to the Tories," Melbourne murmured, his fingers dancing up her arm as they lightly tugged a lock of brown hair.

"I am not so easily influenced as that, Lord M. I know my own mind. I am no longer eighteen and unformed. Or malleable." Ah, he thought, there's the sharp edge I was waiting for.

She turned her head to scowl at him, then lifted her chin and swung back her hair in a gesture clearly meant to convey insouciance.

His own feelings were mixed – wait for her petulance to drain away or burst like a boil brought to a head? Reassure her and by doing so only affirm her insecurity?

"You are my everything, you know. You have my whole heart in your keeping." Melbourne was surprised by the sound of his own voice, the tone mild as though commenting on the weather.

He had not intended to speak. *Heart rules head,* he reflected with equanimity. His fingers had reached her shoulder – lovely shoulders, creamy and sloping to a décolletage bereaved by the drooping neckline of her sleep dress – and slid his hand under the shawl, finding her breast.

"Is that an apology?" Victoria said even more sharply, the ire in her voice at odds with the nipple hardening under his touch. But she did not pull away.

"No," Melbourne replied, setting aside the paper and taking off his spectacles. "Not at all."

*How could this lovely creature allow herself to be so stirred to possessive fury? Doesn't she know?*

Melbourne traced the softly furred edge of her ear with his lips, nibbling lightly, tickling the curled cartilage with the very tip of his tongue. Denying him her mouth, Victoria tipped her head back, arching her neck to invite further exploration.

The avidity with which her body responded never failed to give him a heady sense of power, a very masculine pride in his own virility. He could arouse her and assuage that arousal in a thousand ways,
and she had eagerly opened herself to exploration of everything he suggested. She had given her heart, and her mind, with the same unhindered generosity and if the price she demanded was to possess him completely – No, the word came of its own volition, and once more he was surprised by the sound of his own voice.

"I am sorry that you are upset," he murmured equivocally.

Victoria pulled away with a huff and wrapped the shawl tightly, hugging herself as though to shield her vulnerability. Melbourne caught just a glimpse of her ferocious scowl, a precise replica of their daughter's visage before a storm broke. But she did not speak. She sat as still as a statute, staring into the distance, chest heaving with the heavy ragged breath of incipient rage.

"Talk to me, sweetheart," Melbourne prompted. He kept his hand on her, knowing from long experience that the anchor of touch – his touch – kept her grounded when her emotions threatened to bubble over.

Her nostrils flared – adorably, he thought, then pushed aside that observation as ignoble and demeaning – and she growled.

"About what?" Victoria snapped. "If you're not sorry, there is nothing to talk about."

"If you say so," he agreed mildly. "But if you decide you'd like to tell me what you're feeling, I will listen."

"You – you let that woman hold our daughter!" Victoria sputtered. "And kiss her!"

Melbourne knew he must not laugh and resisted mightily. Nor would it be wise to utter the ready witticisms which came to mind, he told himself. There were times when Victoria could be made to laugh at her own temper, but this was not yet one of them. He merely waited.

"And were – were quite private. Why didn't you join the rest of us? Why was she skulking back there, if not to lure you away?"

Melbourne squeezed her arm lightly, then picked up her clenched fist and gently unbent her fingers one by one.

"I endured Emma's prattling and Anne's ridiculous pretensions and you were – what? Hearing about that woman's travels? The books she writes? I'm sure her conversation quite outshines mine – I've never been anywhere. Did you laugh together, that a ride through the park – my park – constitutes an adventure for poor little Vicky? She writes novels and has spent months with the Maharaja riding on elephants while I sign my name endlessly. It's no wonder you prefer her company to mine!"

The speech came out in a rush, and when she stopped she closed her mouth with a snap. Even in candlelight Melbourne could see the pink flush rise, coloring her cheeks. Victoria would not forgive herself, or him, readily if she made herself sound foolish. He put his hands on her waist and turned her around bodily, pulling her forward so she fell against his chest.

"This all means you are jealous of Emily Eden? I thought you liked her, when you met before?"

"I did – I do like her – but – that doesn't mean I want you to like her!" Victoria muttered the words against his dressing gown, not troubling to lift her face, so that the moist warmth of her breath sent a shiver up his spine.

"I do like her. Must I not?"
"What if I asked you not to? To – to sever your friendship with her for my sake?"

Melbourne exhaled, not quite a sigh. *So very young!* He thought once again. *Youth is not always an advantage.* Remembering Emily's quiet, composed self-assurance, her appreciation of irony and the look she had given him. Knowing that it could not compare, not even as respite, to the tumultuous, tempestuous, fiercely passionate and possessive, precious girl in his arms. *"You do not love us in spite of our flaws, but because of them."* Truer words had never been spoken, even if flung in a fit of temper. Little as he had appreciated hearing that, from another tempestuous possessive female, he had recognized the truth of it.

"I think you would not ask such a thing," he answered quietly.

Victoria raised her head, blue eyes filled with tears and lips in a perfect pout. He held her chin and met her gaze squarely.

"You do not want a man so easily led," he whispered. "Nor do you believe it is necessary. Not in here," Melbourne found a small firm breast. It fit into his palm perfectly and his fingers curled, squeezing gently.

"I do ask it. I want you to want only me. I do not – oh, I hate feeling this way. Sometimes I think it would have been easier if – I hate losing myself – losing control –" He saw that there was no conviction in her voice, and the disjointed phrases were only an expulsion of the residual conflicting emotions still swirling through her.

"Indeed," he said, ruefully. "But think how boring it would be, how cold, if we did not risk losing control. My love, I won't tell you that there is no need for such distress, or that you haven't a right to feel what you feel. Only that it will pass, and in your heart of hearts you know that I am yours, as you are mine. And –"

Victoria pushed herself up and swung a leg over his so that she straddled him.

"I am still angry," she warned, tossing her head to swing her hair back. "I don't know why, I just am. I want to scream and stamp my feet and break things and – and I can't turn it off that easily."

"Then don't," Melbourne said, his voice suddenly thick and almost harsh. "I will show you how to use it, until your anger is spent."

"You invited Emily to dine," Melbourne whispered in the dark, when he had caught his breath. "Dare I hope that means I can look forward to more of this after? Only to relieve your jealousy, of course."

Victoria lay beside him, limbs akimbo, her skin gleaming with the perspiration of her exertions. He leaned over her and studied her face, still flushed with the exhilaration of lovemaking and not entirely peaceful – there was a troubled shadow in her eyes he could not quite like – but better. Melbourne found his own discarded nightshirt and held Victoria's gown, smiling when she put up her arms like a child, so he could dress her.

"I will have your entire attention on me, Lord M. I think I achieved that." Her tone was smug, not entirely without an edge, and he smiled in the darkness, his flesh still quivering from how entirely she had achieved her purpose.

"You will not dine tête-à-tête. We will make up a list. I suppose there are others who are overdue for an invitation. The Earl and Countess of Ripon…the Duke of Richmond…Viscount Milton and his lady.-"
"Don't forget the Earl and Countess of Roden, since you're naming all the most tedious, least desirable dinner guests we've managed to avoid this season…"

"Is that your way of saying I'm being spiteful? It's a credit to your friend Miss Eden, that she can enliven any table. There, are you satisfied I've paid her a compliment?"

"I am satisfied," Melbourne muttered, clearing his throat. "I may not survive additional satisfaction but will die a happy man."

"Don't be stupid," Victoria retorted, making a little moue of impatience, but turned onto her side to press against him full length and squirmed to get comfortable. Her hand found his under the covers.

The warm darkness, faint tang of their lovemaking perfectly blended with attar of roses and a lighter fragrance wafting up from the dark head under his chin. That, and her warmth, the weight of the quilt and patter of freezing rain against the window – it was all so exquisitely perfect Melbourne felt a peculiar nostalgia that clamped his bowels and sent a shiver up his spine. *Was there a better word than nostalgia for missing something not yet past?* That was the last conscious thought which carried him off into the misty nether regions of his dream-landscape.
"Your schedule is quite light, ma'am." Lady Elizabeth – a courtesy title, for she had no family honorarium – ran her index finger down the court circular. "And I expect a few of those with afternoon interviews might cancel on account of the weather."

Their heads both swiveled to the tall windows opening onto a bleak aspect. The south-facing drive could be discerned only by the tops of clipped shrubberies along the edges. Groundskeepers had been at work spreading ashes throughout the night, but sometime before dawn the icy sleet had turned into snow. Snug inside Buckingham, drafty as it was, Victoria was grateful she was not confined to the damp dank halls of Windsor. Or Kensington, she added.

Buckingham Palace had been hastily expanded, her uncle throwing money at it by the bushelful with more thought for grandeur of appearance than functionality – so said George, with his encyclopedic knowledge of engineering and architecture. Victoria liked the light airy colors, high ceilings and the multitude of windows which kept the drawing rooms awash in sunshine.

"Then I will write some letters." By custom, reinforced with her own sense of historical relevance, all the Queen's letters were copied and sent to archivists. All? had been her first incredulous protest. All, was the unequivocal response. Letters she wrote to her uncle in Belgium, no matter how strictly confined to family matters; brief notes of condolence; chatty missives to her aunts Louise and Adelaide and numerous cousins spread across the continent – all would be retained for posterity.

Victoria tapped the tip of her pen against her teeth, considering what she might write to Leopold. It had been commonly decided that no son of Louis-Phillipe should marry the Queen of Spain. Moreover, they had agreed that no son should marry even the Infanta until the little queen was safely married and had produced heirs.

Lord Palmerston's name was all over correspondence which seemed to violate the spirit, if not the letter, of that agreement and he mentioned Prince Leopold – a cousin of Victoria's – as a candidate. It put the English crown in an untenable position and Victoria had been livid with rage when she learned of his impudence, imagining that everyone would assume it was she who played false. Worse, it had the appearance of royal mandate because Henry didn't hesitate to trade on his own ties by marriage, and now France and Guizot considered themselves free to proceed as they chose on the
matter, no longer bound by the earlier agreement.

"Oh, Henry, how could you!" Victoria muttered. She preferred to handle this herself and save Lord M from feeling obliged to intervene. He could not manage the headstrong Palmerston when he was Chief Minister – how much less so, as mere brother-in-law and consort? And if her Foreign Minister's underhanded actions were not bad enough his chief co-conspirator was her own uncle.

Victoria scratched out a few lines, beginning with the flowery endearments Leopold should know preceded a firmness which was necessary to make clear how seriously annoyed she was. That he thought he knew what was best for every country in Europe, her own included, was bad enough; that he should conspire with her own ministers was beyond bearable. He was her uncle, her childhood confidant and sometime-protector – although he had done little to reign in Conroy's domination of her mother – and she loved him dearly as an uncle. But he was scarcely entitled to the title of King, and that he considered himself a kingmaker was intolerable.

Her duty done in that regard, Victoria pushed her finished letter to Lady Elizabeth, so she could copy it verbatim in her finishing school copperplate hand. Next?

A dispatch from an undersecretary for Eastern European Affairs reported insurrection in Silesia. Austrian troops had been driven from Cracow. Austria was supported by Russia and Prussia, as the protecting powers of Cracow by the terms of the Treaty of Vienna, and they swiftly invaded, decimating armed resistance. Cracow as an independent city-state was no more; it was annexed by Austria and lost to Western influence, a state of affairs only made possible because entente between England and France was no more.

Well, Henry, I suppose you never heard of the law of unintended consequences? Victoria silently rebuked him. No one opposed Russian influence more passionately than the Viscount Palmerston, and no one did more to strengthen it than he, by his interference. Foreign adventuring, Frederick had called it, no admirer of his brother-in-law's undisciplined tactics. Fred, a career diplomat with more than his share of the Lamb charm and ease of manner, was the antithesis of Henry Temple's brash bold outspokenness, or his shoot-from-the-hip style.

She put aside that dispatch and looked through the box, seeing only red-velvet lining. Even that is light today, it seems. Knowing that the messenger from Whitehall was doubtless ensconced in the kitchens, being made much of by serving maids and force-fed delicacies by the pastry chef, who made no secret of his admiration for the handsome young riders in their gold-braided livery.

"Take this to the kitchens, where you will find our Downing Street courier," Victoria said, sealing the flap of a note inviting John Russell to attend her the following morning – considering our weather, you may hold off a day, no longer – and bring Henry Temple with him. We as ask that the Earl Grey also attend us.

Of course, she had much to say to them all. But the inclusion of Grey, formerly Viscount Howicke, at the same audience as Palmerston was intended to unsettle the latter. After the fall of Sir Robert's Tory government, as Russell made a second effort to form his own, Grey had steadfastly refused to be a part of any Cabinet which had a role for Palmerston to play. He had eventually yielded but his enmity was implacable and well-known. Having him present might temper Henry's tendency to ride roughshod over her criticism, even as he bantered playfully as though they were the best of friends. As we are, Victoria conceded, but I am also your sovereign and you need reminding.

"Take this fellow for me, ma'am," her lady said, depositing the limp pliable form of the big yellow cat on Victoria's lap. "Else he'll follow me to the kitchens, and Cook will have a conniption fit."

Victoria watched, dumbfounded, as the stately figure of her attendant receded, skirts swaying
rhythmically, in the general direction of the back stairs. *What an odd person!* she said softly, stroking a finger along the cat's cheek. He opened his amber eyes wide and meowed his agreement.

Every candle in his bedchamber was lit, and an ornate baroque candelabra had been relocated from some distant gallery to augment the existing fixtures. A woodfire burned in the hearth and the stove threw off such warmth the air shimmered in its vicinity.

Melbourne sprawled on his bed, forearm flung over his eyes to protect them from the glare. His migraine was intolerant of light; it sent piercing blades of pain straight through his skull. Yet he could not bear the gloom of the day, so reminiscent of that dreamscape which haunted him.

He had awakened near dawn, gasping for breath, a steel band tightening around his temples. He would have remained motionless, except he knew he could not hold back the sickness surging up his throat and so threw himself out of bed and ran for the water closet in his dressing room.

When he had emptied his stomach of all it contained he stumbled towards his own bedchamber, eyes clenched shut against the least trace of light and the vertigo that splintered his vision into a hundred jagged-edge pieces.

Emotional remnants of his dream, as well as physical misery, nearly made him weep with wanting comfort and he thought of his own son, whose governess had slept on a pallet by his bed. Melbourne knew he could call out and Victoria would come instantly, thought of her soft cool hands and the tenderness he would see in her eyes. *I won't have it,* he muttered, collapsing onto cool clean sheets stiff with disuse. Instead, too sick even to release bedcovers trapped under his form, he turned on his side and folded his arms across his chest for warmth.

Victoria had known when he left her bed. How could she not? She came instantly awake, knowing from his speed that it was no mere privy visit. She heard him retching through several stout doors and forced herself to wait, knowing he would not want her to see him thus. As soon as it was clear he would not return she padded barefoot through their dressing rooms and found him huddled on his own bed.

The chamber was clean, its furniture carefully oiled, pillows fluffed and rugs swept regularly, but while his small sitting room was a favored retreat the bedroom had an air of disuse.

Albert had overseen the decoration when George designed the space, and had chosen most carefully the rich jewel tones, emerald green and midnight blue enlivened by touches of amber glass and topaz silk cushions all tied together by Turkish rugs. It suited Lord M, Victoria thought absently, far better than her own chamber, done in pale green, ivory and rose pink.

She laid a hand on his head to check for the return of ague and felt only the dampness of perspiration that matted his curling grey hair. Eyes tightly closed, he responded to her touch by turning his face into her palm while simultaneously demanding she leave him.

"Only a migraine," he'd muttered through clenched teeth. "Leave me, please."

Victoria gently moved his broad unyielding shoulders and tugged loose the blanket and quilt. She pulled them up to under his chin, then went to fetch water and cloth.

"Sip, darling," she whispered, holding the glass to his mouth. The look he gave her – sheepish and annoyed – was so quintessentially Lord M that she was reassured. His migraines were a curse, but not dangerous – unless they concealed the advent of another apoplectic stroke – and Victoria knew sleep was the only cure. That, and keeping the room as dim and quiet as possible, for he had told her
often that light only made the pain and nausea worse.

"Send a footman for candles, please. I can't bear the gloom." Victoria blinked, surprised and unsure whether she had heard right.

"But your eyes – your headache –"

"I need light. I can't bear the dark," he repeated, groaning from the effort of speech.

"How is he?" Victoria whispered to the equerry who opened Melbourne's door.

She saw beyond him into the sitting room, its chronic disarray warm and inviting and familiar. Lord M, when he closed his office on South Street, had caused crates of letters, papers and books to be packed and moved to Brocket Hall. Over time, unopened and unsorted, these had made their way back to Broadlands, where Emily and Will took it upon themselves to sort out the accumulation of a half-century of public life and private study. Now much of that material had come to Buckingham Palace, to Victoria's private satisfaction. It was only right; this was his home, his primary residence, and having it all under this roof was yet another small sign of permanence and commitment.

"Sleeping peacefully, mum," the young man – Stephen, one of those she still thought of as Albert's companions – said in a low tone. He was a pale pretty man, slender as a boy although the fine lines around his eyes and bracketing his mouth put him at nearer thirty.

"Has he been sick again?"

"Off and on all morning. I doubt he has anything left to bring up, and he won't take laudanum for the pain. Says the aftereffects are worse than his migraines."

"Has he been tidied? I won't have my husband laying unattended."

"Yes, mum," Stephen said, and Victoria distinctly saw him roll his eyes at her impertinence.

"Well, then –" she drew her skirts together and nudged him aside, since he showed no sign of stepping back to invite her in. "I will check on him."

While the sitting room was normally lit by a single low-burning gas lamp on the corner of his broad desk, the bedchamber was stifling, and so bright Victoria had to close her eyes until they adjusted.

"Snuff these candles, Stephen," she said firmly. "I will be here when he wakes."

Melbourne knew when Victoria entered; it was as though light and warmth made up her very essence. He would have told his gentleman-in-waiting that the candles were no longer needed, but speech took so much effort he abandoned the attempt.

Unshaven, breath undoubtedly reeking of vomitus despite the brandy he had swirled and spat out, his stomach protesting at the very idea of swallowing it down, hair in disarray…. part of him, the vain preening fellow who took such pride in a good head of hair and exquisitely tailored coats that showed his figure to advantage – wished her away. That part was easily overruled by the needy boy, the melancholic man lonely in a crowd, craving unconditional love.

"You smell good," he murmured, his voice hoarse and cracking through a raw throat.

"You don't," Victoria answered, her own voice soft and so tender he felt tears well in his eyes. He risked a brief glance and found that opening his eyes was bearable without the glare of too many
candles all flickering and dancing.

Her hand rested flat on his forehead and it felt so good he moaned. Victoria stepped away and came back with a boar's hair brush from his vanity. She used it to smooth back his matted hair, gently teasing apart the tangles.

"Is it my fault you got sick, Lord M?" Victoria's voice quivered with uncertainty.

"Yours?" She could not mistake his surprise, he thought, wondering what on earth she meant.

"You told me once that your headaches came on from anxiety and tension. When – during the trial, and when that awful man Brougham was giving you so much difficulty in the House. Did I – were you concerned that I would behave badly about Miss Eden? Is that what gave you a migraine?"

Melbourne shook his head from side to side, moving gingerly.

"No, sweetheart. I am not that fragile." He even managed a slight, twisted smile.

"Then what?"

"The weather can do it – the oppressiveness in the air, when heavy weather is coming. Or…my dream. I rather think that might have triggered it. But not you, never you. Now be a good girl and leave me to rest."

Victoria stood slowly, taking time to brush her skirts smooth. Reluctant to go, she narrowed her eyes and studied him.

"Do you really want me to go?" she asked hesitantly. "I will read quietly, and not disturb you, if you permit me to stay."

Melbourne opened his mouth, then closed it again. Finally, he turned his hands palms-out in a gesture meant to convey resignation. Inside his spirit was soaring.

"As you wish, ma'am. I think I feel well enough already to sleep away the rest of the pain."

He closed his eyes once more, grateful for the lessening of the head pain which allowed him to arrange his thoughts. It was better, for her sitting quietly in a chair near his bed. She had taken a bound volume at random from the pile on his desk – he saw the gilt print on the spine marked 1834. He was no diarist and had started and stopped keeping even a commonplace book more times than he could count. He recognized the brown leather cover as that of the more official journals he had kept during his years in office. Good, he thought. Nothing compromising in there.

There was nothing Victoria did not know of his past. Nothing. He had made a clean breast of it all, fearing unfriendly disclosure by those intent on separating them. He had done so soon after they became – what they were. Lover and mistress he despaired, to label the ethereal quality of their union. He would relinquish in a heartbeat all pleasures of the flesh, if it meant that he could retain her friendship and affection.

That was what he had told himself then, when seeing her wed another seemed inevitable and the notion of being more than a trusted advisor – a father figure – was more than lèse majesté. Sacrilege was not too strong a term to describe the romantic and erotic feelings he had for a fresh, unsullied eighteen-year-old virgin.

"Poor darling, your head is worse?" He felt the tip of her finger against the paper-thin skin at the corner of his eye, and knew she dabbed at the tears she found there.
He denied it but did not open his eyes to meet hers though he felt the warmth of her sweet breath hovering just above him.

The dreams. Always they caught him unaware and took him through some portal in his mind to another reality, a world like this but…not. It was even more horrific for its familiarity, the people he saw, the places he visited, the things he knew took place all around him. The most benign of the dreams – no, he corrected, benign could never apply to that glimpse of hell on earth – the least of the worst of them involved no more than the murmur of voices, snippets of conversation, aggravating as much for their reasonableness as for the alien nature of their origin.

*Hardinge writes that Smith's regiment*...

*I am to be a grandmother* again…this last, spoken in tones of dismay by the Duchess of Kent, apropos of nothing, filtering through an otherwise unobjectionable twilight half-sleep.

*Lord Melbourne advised me*….Victoria's sweet dulcet tones, his name on her lips sending a wrenching pain into his chest that lingered when he awoke.

*Lord Uxbridge and his daughters are here to see you*…Knowing that Uxbridge had lost his wife in this world too, even knowing when and why, yet the place and the messenger were all wrong, Emily acting as hostess at Brocket, her gowns and Fanny's filling the closets where Victoria's should be.

But the worst of them – ah, that was the crux of it. Remembering send new sharp daggers of pain through his skull, and the bile rose in his throat again.

"Should I tell you about my dream?" he whispered raggedly, knowing he should not burden her with these visions, unable to keep the bewildered anguish bottled up.

Victoria showed no surprise. She compliantly put aside the journal she had been perusing and went to the door only long enough to send orders through the gentleman-in-waiting for Baines, a hot bath and some broth and bread. Then she returned bedside, neatly tucked her skirts beneath and settled herself beside him. She extended her arm and took his head on her breast in a quaintly maternal gesture which reassured immeasurably.

"Where to begin?  "It was that – other region again. Purgatory or hell or what that psychic medium called alternate reality. You were there. No one else this time, only you. And I was…discorporeal. You were walking alone in the fog, the mist. A road, so desolate, and everything gray all around, with purple heather and rocks and…." he frowned, searching his memory for some relevant detail to explain how he knew with certainty he was seeing a real landscape, albeit one he had never seen in life. This life.

"Scotland perhaps? The Orkney Islands?" he mused, his shiver of distaste mirrored by her own.

"I hate Scotland, sight unseen. So primitive and barren, all hairy legs and eating sheep's intestines and people never bathing and…" Victoria stopped herself, putting a hand over her mouth to hide her girlish giggle. Melbourne knew it was meant to distract and cheer him and showed her a faint smile in return.

"Nonetheless, there you were. So very alone. And I couldn't reach you, even when you called out for me. I was right there and had no hand with which to touch you, no voice to let you know I was with you. No way to comfort and warm you. All I could do was follow behind and pray you felt my presence. I knew you were cold but could not…warm you."

He allowed his voice to trail off into silence. Words were inadequate to express the sense of
overwhelming, soul-sapping despair he had felt, seeing his precious girl turned into someone else, consumed by grief and sadness, all her light and warmth, the essential sense of joie de vivre which defined a young Victoria, extinguished.

Victoria's gaze was fixed on his lips, as though she clung to the words where they formed. Her expression was so ineffably tender and full of love he wanted to weep once more, knew that ready tears were forming and threatening to spill over.

"But it's all right now," she said firmly. "I am with you and I will never leave."

He drifted off to sleep once more while she stroked his head, and when he opened his eyes the next time it was to be met with that sense of languid bliss which rewarded the end of a bout of migraine.

"Baines has a bath waiting. I will tell him to add the water he had on the stove. Will you eat something first, or after?"

"Have you been here the whole time?" Melbourne asked, rubbing his face briskly to drive away the remnant grogginess.

"I have. I gave the Bishop of York to Mama, who is well-suited to his purpose. He spouts scripture and condemnation of contemporary morals, and she replies in German so neither has to acknowledge what the other has said."

"Then I will not keep you waiting any longer." Melbourne swung his legs out of bed, then winced at the flash of residual dizziness sudden movement engendered.

"Slowly, sweetheart. I will give you over to Baines and find something to put over my gown. Tell him I will wash your hair."

Melbourne manfully resisted the mournful sense of loss he felt when she left him. He concentrated instead on wielding the straight razor, guiding it through thick shaving soap, liking the clean rasp of its blade over his jaw and upper lip.

Fragrant steam rose from the great copper tub, and water splashed over the sides when he stepped in and lowered himself. Albert had insisted on full baths when he had the bathrooms remodeled to incorporate the new indoor plumbing, and if it was considered a frivolous folly in some quarters Melbourne appreciated the boy's zeal to modernize and improve. Rather than a hip bath, the most one expected to find in even the finest homes, he could stretch himself out full-length and luxuriate in the heat prodding loose the perpetual nagging ache in his lower back.

He sniffed and looked at the attendant valet suspiciously.

"My cologne, Baines? Really?"

"Madame insisted, Your Lordship. I'm sure I'm not one to pour a half-bottle of your scent into the bathwater."

"Anything else in here?"

"Glycerin, sir," Baines told him in an expressionless voice, his blank visage clearly conveying his opinion on such notions. "And salts. To soften the water, Her Majesty's lady's maid said."

Melbourne grimaced because he thought it was expected, to uphold his own sense of what was proper to a gentleman. Baines was not old enough to remember the macaronis who occasionally graced Lady Melbourne's drawing room, seeming to mince about in a cloud of French perfume,
flaunting pink-dyed wigs and many yards of Belgian lace in pants so tight they threatened virility.

The valet set out a stack of folded Turkish towels, placing them near the stove so they might be warm when needed, then backed out of the room when the queen entered.

Melbourne tilted his head up, and a smile quirked his mouth. "A veritable stew I'm sitting in, ma'am. Did you come to baste the tenderloin?"

Victoria had changed out of her gown, into a simple wrapper. He suspected what was – and wasn’t – underneath and gave himself over to the enjoyment of anticipation.

"I didn't want to get wet and make more work for Miss Skerrett," she explained needlessly.

"Show me," Melbourne demanded. She opened the front of the dressing gown to show him her stays were still laced over a lawn chemise and drawers. Her stockings had been abandoned and her feet were bare – well-formed, very small feet with pearly nails on each toe. It was a simple, guileless reveal, so devoid of lascivious purpose he thought he should be disappointed. Then he realized it was yet another indication of just how attuned they were - his languor after the ravages of migraine extended to all but the slightest flicker of desire.

"Now lean back and let me wash your hair," Victoria said, in a business-like tone which did not hint at any erotic water play. The warm water poured over his head, her fingers making small circles as they rubbed his scalp, the lather made by her special soft scented soap all combined to make him forget he had desired anything else.

She did not stop at his hair; while he lolled, thinking vaguely he should feel some self-consciousness at being tended to like a Pasha in his harem, she used a sea sponge and fragrant soap with much attention to detail. Even his feet did not escape her attentions. As he watched from under heavy lids, Victoria lifted first one foot, then the other, and scrubbed so assiduously that he almost avoided a most unmanly squeal at the tickling sensation.

"There," she said sometime later with satisfaction. "I will leave you to soak. If you keep down your broth and bread, you may have a chicken breast for dinner. Oh – " Victoria had reached the door to her own bedchamber and paused, looking back. "We have Tom Young in the servants' hall. He would not take no for an answer and I couldn't turn him back out in the weather. He had no carriage and no chairmen were available, so he walked all the way to our gates. The poor man was quite frozen."
Melbourne lounged until the water grew tepid. Then he stood, wrapped a bath sheet around his hips and went in search of clothing, food and his wife.

Restored to its usual appearance, absent the excess candles, his suite retained the pleasant odor of beeswax, mingled now with the bergamot-and-lime Cologne liberally added to his bath.

There had been some of his youthful contemporaries so refined they did not pull up their own drawers. George Brummel, for one, who had stood like a Grecian statue while his gentleman attendant dressed him before the eyes of worshipful acolytes

His own valet maintained his wardrobe to perfection, ensuring his boots were polished, linen immaculate, and his coats the envy of the peerage. Beyond that Melbourne rejected excess attentions and rejected any hint of fussiness in his appearance.

Baines now hesitated over the choice of dinner wardrobe.

"Never mind, we are private tonight," he waved off the selection of coats and cravats, and accepted a simple brown velvet waistcoat and breeches to go with the full white shirt he had already pulled over his head.

Mr. Baines struggled over the appearance his master presented. He had the professional pride of any gentleman’s gentleman at the pinnacle of his profession, and although some might consider service to a Prince of the Blood Royal took precedence, well, how often did His Royal Highness the Duke of Sussex appear at Her Majesty’s side?

"What?" Melbourne asked, cocking an eyebrow skeptically. "Does the Queen wear blue?"

Baines had the good grace to avert his gaze and Melbourne nearly chortled aloud. Caught!
wanted to say, at risk of offending the man's dignity. He tied a simple country neckcloth loosely around his throat and ran through his hair one last time. It was too damp to brush satisfactorily and if Mr. Baines feared the loss of his reputation, he could be assured that Victoria would not complain at his informality and hers was the only opinion that mattered.

They were interrupted by a sharp tap at dressing room door. One of the gentlemen-in-waiting stuck his head in and harrumphed urgently.

“Sir, there is a person demanding to see you.”

Clearly, more than one, Melbourne thought, judging from the footfalls without.

Two stalwart members of the Household Cavalry, moving in lockstep behind the outraged footman who apparently summoned them, a young man Melbourne only vaguely recognized as one of the underemployed gentlemen assigned to his household staff and payroll. And a square weathered face set above burly corduroy-clad shoulders, said face creased into a broad smile at odds with watchful, calculating eyes.

“If you’ll tell these young’uns that I’m known to you, sir, we can be rid of my escort.”

“Tom Young,” Melbourne said, for lack of anything better. “Welcome to Buckingham Palace.”

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The footman who found himself addressed by the Queen shifted his gaze left and right, hoping against hope relief was at hand. His shift was nearly over, and he yearned for the familiar clatter of the lower servants’ hall.

“Excuse me,” Victoria said, confused by the footman in red livery – her household livery – whose only job consisted of opening and closing the door he now stood before.

“Your Majesty.” He held himself stiff, arms at his sides, and bowed so deeply his chin banged against his thighs.

“Yes.” That answer, from Herself, seemingly discombobulated him further.

Victoria laughed softly at the foolishness of their impasse. Was he an imbecile? Do we employ imbeciles? I must ask the steward.

“Please open the door,” she asked reasonably, pronouncing each syllable with care.

As she watched, bewildered, the boy appeared to sag before her eyes. Slumping, he rolled his eyes heavenward and heaved a great sigh.

Beyond the corridor running the length of their private family wing, the door opened into a spacious vestibule. To the right a set of double doors opened into the Queen’s private sitting room, and to the left another half its size used by her husband. When Victoria achieved her goal of passing through the first door she huffed a laugh of frustration and pushed forward on her own, fumbling with the unfamiliar act of turning a door knob.

“William, you won’t believe –“

She stood stock still, surprised into a stunned silence by the sight of a stranger. A quite dangerous-looking stranger, was her first impression. Rough working-man’s clothing, crumpled cap pressed between his knees, one fist clutching a tumbler filled with amber fluid.
Victoria’s mind worked swiftly, considering her options. The imbecile boy stationed outside would be no help at all; he was scarcely taller than her own five feet and hadn’t the wit to go for help. Their private apartments were unguarded; the only access point was a central stairway at least a hundred yards distant, and she herself had insisted no uniformed officers be posted beyond that. The nursery was her only option. A plainclothes officer would be found within, one of the sturdy females Cameron had trained up to guard the children while maintaining a non-threatening presence in the interest of normalcy. Victoria wiped damp palms on her skirt and tensed to bolt for the door.

“Your Highness.” She jerked her head back, suddenly aware the man had risen and was approaching with his hand held out.

“‘Your Majesty’ is the preferable form of address.” Victoria stiffened at the sound of Lord M’s hoarse drawl. He had been in the shadows, half-turned so she saw him in profile, then moved so swiftly to her side he reached her side before the other man could cross half the distance.

“Ma’am, this is Tom Young. My – er, factotum in years past. Tom, you may make your bow to my wife.”

Victoria drew back her shoulders and raised her chin. She forced her features into the composed half-smile she wore like a mask when greeting the throngs who lined up to see her on public outings. Her poise suffered only slightly when the man reached for her hand.

“That won’t be necessary. A bow will suffice.” Melbourne’s voice held more than a hint of suppressed laughter, and his humor served to reassure Victoria. He took her hand and held it in his own.

“How do you do, sir – Mr. Young?” she asked rhetorically, expecting only a noncommittal response. There was a form to these things – one addresses some commonplace, receives a polite response, and then one moves on to greet the next in line. Understanding that the circumstance was hardly suited to the expected ritual, Victoria looked up at Melbourne for guidance.

“Tom has been catching me up on the news from town. He’s always been a most useful set of ears, letting me know the mood of the people.”

“How very…useful.” Victoria winced inwardly at her own ineptitude, envying Melbourne his ease with everyone he encountered. Not, perhaps, envying him this particular sort of acquaintance but if Melbourne valued his service – his friendship? She wondered.

If Young remembered the occasion of their previous meeting, he gave no sign, but Victoria surmised from the sharp intelligence in his face that he missed little and forgot less.

She felt Melbourne’s hand at the small of her back, guiding her further into the room, to one end of the Chesterfield sofa. He must have made some sign, she thought, or Mr. Young was far more considerate of his patron’s wishes than general social usage, for he had aborted an unthinking attempt to resume his own seat and hastily repaired to the armchair instead.

“Tom has been bringing me up to date on what’s being said in the – er, more colorful environs of the city. He’s always been my weather gauge,” Melbourne remarked, “through him I am able to look down below; which is for me more important than all I can learn from the fine gentlemen clerks about me.”

Victoria accepted a cordial from her husband’s hand. He sat beside her, his distance only enough to give a vague nod to the proprieties, close enough so she could feel a hint of his warmth and that faint current of awareness proximity brought.
Mr. Young began speaking again, and Victoria was perplexed at his apparent comfort in her presence. She tried to decide whether to feel perturbed or flattered, that he spoke as she imagined he might to anyone with whom Melbourne was especially close. *Had he called on Lord M at La Norton’s abode?* Victoria pushed the thought away.

He was talking about some characters with whom Melbourne was at least generally acquainted, for the colorful names rolled off his tongue without pause for explanation. *Mad Madge* and *Buckshot Billy* and *Duchess of Quim* – at the last, Victoria experienced a flash of delayed recognition, and felt the heat rise in her cheeks. She would give no sign, of course – a lady could not – but glanced at Melbourne under her lashes.

His beautiful dark eyes were hooded and sleepy, and the merest hint of slackness in his features spoke to the lassitude he generally experienced after one of his sick headaches. She knew that if this gentleman – this *person*, she amended mentally – had not made his impromptu arrival on their doorstep, she could have easily convinced Lord M to recuperate within their inner chamber. *That* image made her blush again. He had once described that state of post-migraine inertia as not dissimilar to the aftermath of especially satisfactory lovemaking, when limbs were heavy and a state of blissful relaxation seemed to suffuse one’s veins with honey.

Victoria sipped her sweet sherry and listened to their conversation, knowing it entirely inappropriate for the ears of a well-bred female, far less those of the Queen of England and Scotland, Supreme Head of the Church of England. She guessed that Young was exercising what he considered a great deal of tact, or Melbourne was conveying some unspoken caution, for he employed entirely unconvincing euphemisms and abruptly terminated sentences at random. Lord M seemed to understand regardless, for he laughed heartily and interspersed occasional follow-up questions.

“I should leave you gentlemen to visit,” she murmured at a lull in the conversation, making a vague motion to rise. Melbourne had cocked an eyebrow and lifted the corner of his mouth in that endearing little half-smirk which never failed to charm Victoria.

“Only if you must,” he drawled. “I would prefer you stay and bear us company.” Victoria hesitated, gauging his intent. Secretly, she very much wanted to stay and continue to be entertained by this very unusual visitor, by the thieves’ slang he intermittently allowed to slip out, and by the novel experience of seeing Lord M in a new and very intriguing light. Everyone adjusted according to the company they kept, of course – but *this* Lord M was unfamiliar. Undoubtedly the result of his physical state, depleted by the ravages of migraine, it was also, she suspected, a side of him that his subordinate was familiar with, for Young and he bantered easily back and forth in a conversational rhythm that seemed well-established.

His usually impeccable urbanity was just a trifle less apparent, displaced by the merest hint of coarsened manner. *No*, Victoria decided, *not coarsened, only slightly rougher, with a hint of something dangerous perhaps*. A man who would not flinch at drawing a sword or pistol, if it were a hundred years earlier when duels were commonplace. A man who would be at home in establishments such as the one presided over by the Duchess of Quim, or the gambling hells where fortunes were won and lost on the turn of a card.

It was certainly not an aspect she preferred in general but it was rather exciting all the same, to have this glimpse of another Lord Melbourne. Victoria settled herself, feeling the residual tension – normal for any instance in which she was forced to engage with an unfamiliar presence, outside the boundaries of her scripted role – drain out of her shoulders and spine. It was quite pleasant, she realized, to sit quietly at her husband’s side and be no one *except* his wife.

“-the late Prince, he said– ” Melbourne’s nonverbal reaction to this lastest conversational gambit from
Tom Young, more than the words themselves, piqued Victoria's renewed interest. Young swallowed whatever might have come next, along with a large gulp of claret. A glance upward at Melbourne's expression told her that, while his lethargy was not completely vanquished, it had been pierced.

"Please, Tom, go on," he encouraged, refilling the man's glass as reinforcement.

"I've no wish to upset the lady, sir," was Young's ready reply. "Lady Melbour- er, Her Highness."

"'Majesty', Tom, 'Majesty'. There is a difference of degree, you see." Melbourne grinned lazily, and lifted Victoria's hand quite openly, raising it to his lips, then keeping hold of it. "Pray continue."

"Well, as I said, the fellow's been coming round for a few weeks. Never seen him before, now he's a familiar face all a' sudden. Always willing to stand a drink, or a round, and takes a special interest in yours truly. My impression? He's throwing shit at the wall to see what sticks. As regards the late prince, well, it's no secret where he met his end, or how. The Peelers gave out as how they knew the why but there was always some who speculated there was more to the story."

Victoria felt Melbourne's fingers tighten on her hand reassuringly, but she had no urge to speak. Albert's demise in a molly club had been attributed to his zeal for social reform, and his own desire to save the unfortunates in that denizen from their sins. It was his desire, she had no doubt, but not to save souls.

Victoria harbored no little residual annoyance with the cousin she'd loved like a brother, for the risks he took and the scandal he so nearly brought down on all their heads. He had had the freedom to live his true nature, the genuine affection of George Von Wettin and the companionship of gentlemen-in-waiting who shared their interests, yet he had grown increasingly restless in what he deemed confinement and seemed driven to explore the basest sectors of that underground society. George had regretfully left Buckingham House and his own place in the royal household, being of a soberer, more conservative nature. George had, in fact, gone to Melbourne in distress then, imploring him to intercede and warn Albert of the dangers he courted.

"And is something been said now, of that old story? What can this man be saying to have you concerned on our behalf, Tom?"

Melbourne's fingers twined themselves in Victoria's and she shifted imperceptibly closer to his reassuring strength. Albert's activities could not threaten her or her crown, but he was the titular father of Prince William and the Princess Royale. For their sake, any rumors must be squelched, that their deceased father had been a sodomite.

Victoria watched the tough, no-nonsense demeanor of Tom Young and thought he could be ruthless. She also thought that it was far better that ruthlessness was employed on her husband's behalf – either of them – than against them.

"He said – asking, mind you, as if he wanted my opinion, or knowledge of the matter – if it were possible you had a hand in the matter. 'It all worked out quite well for Lord Melbourne, marrying the widow before her husband was cold in the ground.' He said surely if such a thing had happened, no one would be surer to know about it than me, and that information could make me a rich man, richer than my wildest dreams."

"And what did you respond, Tom?" Melbourne's tone was mildly inquisitive.

"A spot more of that excellent claret?" Young was already on his feet, clearly intending to serve himself. He held the decanter out towards Melbourne in a comically generous manner. Victoria took her cue from Melbourne and concealed her own impatience.
"Why, I asked him, if I had the means and opportunity to kill a royal highness for you or anyone else, what made him think I'd hesitate at seeing him floating in the Thames."

Victoria had listened closely to everything said thereafter. She heard one familiar name – Sir Francis Walsingham – used in derogatory fashion by the mysterious man who had sought out Tom Young and raised so many red flags he ventured out in an ice storm to storm the palace.

"He asked me – rhetorically, I assume – whether you had it in mind to be another Sir Francis Walsingham. Said you weren't content with your secret service protecting the queen's life, you had a yen to try your hand at espionage as well and soon you'd have the whole country under your thumb. 'Information is power,' he said. 'And I'm in a position to know.'"

"How much did you make off him from this one conversation?" Melbourne's joking tone surprised Victoria; surely this was far too serious a matter for humor. As if reading her thoughts, he quirked his mouth in another intimate smile and began stroking her palm with the side of his thumb.

"A hundred pounds, for that one conversation. It was the price I set and he didn't balk. When he comes back for my answer –" Young shrugged broadly, and Victoria wondered whether this was the point at which they were expected to outbid their faceless adversary.

"Not bad, but don't you wish you'd have gone higher?" Young laughed and Melbourne joined him.

"You see, ma'am, Tom and I go back too far for me to imagine he intends to betray me at any price. Yet this fellow – whatever he calls himself – is wise enough to know that if any man could damn me, it would be Tom. His presence in my office used to set tongues wagging when I was Home Secretary; more so when I became First Lord."

"'Carrot and the stick, m'lord." Young sighed heavily and made such an expression of distaste Victoria wanted to giggle. "He showed me his stick."

Melbourne did not ask, and of course, Victoria could not. This interview was his; this remarkable retainer, his.

"In '32 I wrote a letter from your office, to the leader of the Birmingham League. I…suggested they take…er, more aggressive means to be sure support for your Reform Bill broke down. You – well, I thought as I was helpin' and didn't want to burden you with the details of how it got done. Smythfield – for that's what he calls himself – has that letter. Said if it becomes public, especially now that you're married to the queen herself, it would cause no end of trouble. Said she –" he nodded his head towards Victoria, and even in her absorption she felt a mild annoyance at his inability to use either name or title on her behalf. "– would have to disown you, distance herself and the little ones from you, else the Tories would be in an uproar, the Young Englanders would use it to prove that the crown itself was compromised and no government to support her as long as she was married to you."

Victoria's mouth turned down in an unpleasant expression of impatience and distaste.

"That's absurd, Mr. Young. Please, if the subject comes up again, inform your acquaintance that such a threat is hollow. I am the granddaughter of a King who faced far worse scandal and retained his Crown, and I certainly would not divorce my husband over a letter you wrote, fomenting insurrection."

"Yes, ma'am, I will, ma'am. I think his point was, the matter would not be yours to decide. If I took his meaning clear, there are plenty on both sides of the bench who think we should go along fine without anyone wearin' a Crown. Not what he wants, save he wants it known he has the power to
push the matter whatever direction he chooses."

"And what does he choose, Mr. Young? What's the point of his inquiries into my husband's affairs, past or present. Lord Melbourne or Prince Albert?"

"He didn't say, ma'am, not outright. But if I put two and three together – I think he wants to stop Lord Melbourne from meddling in the intelligence business. I reckon he thinks he's got that market cornered."

Victoria only belatedly became aware that as she spoke, Melbourne had grown silent. She realized her intervention had been bold and incisive, unbecomingly so in the presence of a husband who should properly speak for her. In public audience or private interview with her ministers, Melbourne was scrupulously self-effacing, careful to avoid even the appearance that he exercised undue influence. But this was his friend, in his apartment, in a discussion which pertained specifically to him. She lowered her eyes and cleared her throat nervously.

"You behold my wife," Melbourne spread his hands wide, taking her own, still captive, with him in flight. She gauged his reaction and was warmed by his look of affectionate pride. "For those who think she is managed or controlled. However –" and his caressing tone suddenly grew harsh, his voice dropping several decimals. "- neither am I. I think your visitor does not know me well, if he thinks I will permit even a hint of blackmail. It's been tried before and I called the bluff, to what end everyone knows." Victoria understood that reference to George Norton and Bess Branden's opportunistic husband, and their failed attempts to extort Melbourne.

Young leaned forward and clinked his glass against Melbourne's in an impromptu toast. He hesitated and Victoria brashly leaned forward, offering the lip of her own glass.

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The intimate supper Victoria had asked for in their suite arrived, and a third place hastily set out on the small card table in her more spacious drawing room. Tom Young's bulk and appearance provided a startling contrast to the pale silk wallpaper and vaguely feminine atmosphere of a room which had changed little since Queen Adelaide's occupancy. She rarely entertained in that apartment, preferring the larger Yellow Drawing Room even for evenings spent with only her ladies-in-waiting and the handful of ever-present courtiers.

Tom Young ate more sparingly, and with far better manners, than she anticipated, and readily adopted a more polished manner, presumably learned in his long service to Lord Melbourne. Victoria laughed easily at Young's ripostes, leaning in towards Lord M, aware as she did so that she had let down her guard and found this strange man genuinely amusing.

At shortly past ten, having dispensed with the brandy offered by a hovering footman, Melbourne had abruptly and quite genially told the man it was time to say good night.

"You'll stay, of course. It's too foul even to send you back in a carriage. I think we can find a spare bed to put you up," he added, laughing. Victoria warmed at the sound of Melbourne's gravelly chuckle.

He asked the footman to take Young to the prince's apartments, still called so despite the absence of the prince in question. "Who knows, you might solve your mystery overnight. Most of Albert's companions are still in residence. But –" and for a moment, looked quite serious. "-bear in mind that we all cared deeply for my wife's late husband, myself included. There are no skeletons in our closets, but I will not have his memory tarnished. I ask you to help me protect it."
Melbourne shook hands with Young, and bid him the timely good night he had proposed. Victoria extended the hand she had earlier denied him, and was pleased that he understood one did not actually press lips to royal flesh.

"Good night, Mr. Young. It was a pleasure to meet you." Once again, she added mentally, recalling the night he had pulled her in out of the rain at the house on South Street, mistaking her in her hood and veil as a prostitute summoned for Melbourne's pleasure.

"It was a rare pleasure to meet you again, ma'am, and under more congenial circumstances than the last time."

Victoria watched Melbourne watching Young depart. She was struck once again by the very tantalizing difference in his appearance and demeanor. Despite the rather tense interlude when the subject turned to the unpleasant reason for Young's visit, he was still somehow loose (more uninhibited? Victoria mused, parsing words to describe his aura of sensual languor).

Victoria felt foolish, stirred by her own husband's mere appearance. Whether it was the slightly overgrown hair allowed to dry unbrushed so it curled in disarray, or the open collar and uncovered sleeves of his billowing white linen shirt, William was devastatingly attractive and the effect was one of sensual dissolution. His long lean legs encased in casual breeches might be those of a pirate striding the quarterdeck, and the edges and shadows of his face borrowed a tawny hue from the ambient lighting.

"Is your – your headache quite gone, William?" she asked when he caught her staring.

Melbourne laughed his wonderful hearty laugh and turned toward her.

"You can stop mothering me, ma'am. The headache's gone, and I remind you it's my job to care for you." He closed the distance between them in two steps and took hold of her hips, grinding himself against her, leaving no doubt whatsoever that his recovery was complete.

"I like taking care of you," Victoria whispered, and meant it. Her fingers toyed with the wisps of curling dark hair escaping from his shirtfront. He made a sound low in his throat, like a growl, but one conveying heat rather than threat.

"I should visit the nursery. I have not checked on Liam since this morning. Lehzen planned to limit his activities today."

"Later." Victoria's mouth opened slightly, her surprise evident. Lord M was most scrupulous in paying an evening visit to the children at their bedtime, even when duty or circumstance took her in another direction.

His mouth was close to hers when he spoke the word, but his lips hovered over hers, not quite touching.

"You were a tigress when Tom roused your ire," he said hoarsely.

"I was not angry at him, precisely. You do think he understood that? I wouldn't wa-" Victoria knew she was talking excessively; she was unaccountably nervous, powerfully aroused and embarrassed at her own arousal, titillated by his gruffness, his proximity and the clear evidence of his own arousal. In the drawing room. Where the footman could return, where Miss Skerrett might well enter –

"You were a tigress," Melbourne repeated. "Quite naughty, speaking out of turn. A lesser man might have felt...inadequate." She knew he was teasing her; the playfulness was apparent but she wondered whether there was an undercurrent of resentment.
"You're not angry?" Victoria asked hesitantly.

He laughed, and it was a free, joyous sound. "No, my love. My manhood is not so delicate, and I am not so insecure. I saw a different side of you..." his mouth clamped on the sensitive place just under her ear, where her pulse pounded. She felt the lapping of his tongue, and the edge of his teeth nibbling there. "...and it was exciting."

He had been walking forward, causing her to walk backward in time to his steps. When she could go no farther, and the upholstered Louis XIV settee pressed into her back, Melbourne pushed his knee between her legs to spread them apart. His hands cupped her buttocks, squeezing rhythmically, and he was hard against her stomach.

"You have a scrumptious arse, Victoria," he observed in a conversational tone, as though complimenting a fan or hair ribbon. "May I see?"

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"Ugh...stays are not made for horizontal comfort," Victoria groaned. She was laying on her stomach, wearing nothing but those stays and a chemise trapped underneath. Her hair had come half-undone, long strands having escaped confinement.

"You have a lovely arse. Have I told you?" Melbourne raised his head far enough to look admiringly at the object in question. He traced the cleft of her buttocks with a finger, causing her to squirm against the silk duvet cover.

"Mmmm...do that again please," she groaned.

"More? Ma'am, you are insatiable." He complied nonetheless, grinning at the sight of her rump arching up against his hand.

"I am quite satiable. I just...mmm...you know me so well...."

Melbourne rolled over and straddled her hips, then began working out the knots in her laces. When the offending garment was loosened, she lifted her torso just enough to permit him to pull it free, then jigged her rear against him. In response he flattened himself against her, laying full-length so that she could not move further.

Propped on his forearms, he began working to untangle her hair, dropping bone hair pins onto a table beside the bed, then pushed himself up and smacked her rump sharply.

"Now sit up like a good girl and I will brush your hair. I am nothing if not a full-service maid."

"You serviced me very well," Victoria said, ducking her head bashfully at her own bold double entendre.

Melbourne leaned against the headboard and spread his legs, pulling her back to sit between them. He took up her brush and began running it gently down the length of her hair.

"What did you make of Tom's encounter?"

"Do you think it's someone important enough to matter? Or an opportunist taking advantage of your association to stir up trouble?"

"Both," Melbourne replied slowly, considering. "I doubt anyone who isn't in some degree influential or in a position to whisper damaging insinuations in the right ear would have any interest in our
attempt to consolidate the intelligence services. After all, I've made it plain that we will not attempt to sway the process, or the information itself, merely to ensure that the flow of information is untainted by the considerations of whichever party is currently in power. The crown is neutral, or should be, and likewise, the information upon which policy decisions are made should be neutral. How that information is used will naturally by the right of the government in office to decide."

"Is it –" Victoria paused, gathering her thoughts, wanting to express them accurately. "Is it wiser perhaps to leave things as they are? To not try to reform the process, if it causes such animosity?"

Melbourne huffed a small laugh. "You accuse me of being a reformer? Ma'am, have we met? I am Melbourne, perpetual foot-dragger, avoiding change at all costs."

"Or seeking to steer it, if change is inevitable. And change is nearly always inevitable, so the only remedy is to guide it down the path of reason and caution. That's what you told me, Lord M."

"Touché, my little tigress. Hoist on my own petard." He laid the brush down and nudged her in just such a way as to demonstrate his own choice of words was a double entendre.
Chapter 12

The morning brought bright crystalline light. Forgiving sun had washed away the night’s cloud cover, leaving everything fresh and new.

Normally reluctant to wake, Melbourne opened his eyes to such tranquil beauty he did not wish to close them again. Victoria lay so close beside him that her exhalations tickled his skin. She slept like a child, in all innocence, one hand tucked under her cheek. The impression of childhood purity extended even to the sweetness of her breath, a glimpse of flawless enamel where her lips parted. On the rounded cheek nearest him Melbourne could see a glint of baby fine down, gossamer against flawless creamy skin touched by faint peachy pink. Plump cupid lips were enticing but he would not wake her prematurely. Instead he found an outlet for his need to touch in redirecting a single strand of hair which had caught against her mouth, then scarcely grazed the hollow at her temple with a kiss. Where once he would have felt like a defiler, over time her love had made him new, washed clean of past sins.

Their intimacy had been playfully saucy, nips and tickling and his palm applied to the pert derriere waggled tauntingly in invitation. They had shared laughter, her pealing giggle counterpoint to the gruff belly laughs he did not suppress. She had trapped him beneath her and he pretended to be caught, while mounted and rode him. Shoulders bared where her chemise slipped off, its hem rucked up around her waist, Melbourne thought he had never seen such a dizzyingly erotic sight as Victoria with her hair a Medusa tangle, lean thighs clasping his hips, eyes looking inward while she bit her own lip in concentration. He had stared transfixed at the point of their joining until his head dropped back in delirium.

Afterward they had talked of ordinary everyday things, her rounded backside pressed into his groin, sheltered by his arms. He was nearly asleep and thought the same of her when she spoke once more.

“Your nightmare was a lie to make you despair. It - it will not be that way. You will be surrounded with love, because everyone who ever loved you will be waiting. Your mother and -and Lady Caroline and your brothers and friends. If you leave me behind, then you will have my life to warm you. Our children will honor you all of their days. And I will remain your wife, the wife of William Lamb. I will love you forever, until God allows me to join you again.”

Her clear certainty rang in his ears like a hymn. He wanted to believe, and decided that if the picture she made could not convince him of an afterlife then he would cling to her voice as a talisman.
against the terrors of the night. But maybe, just maybe, it would be as she promised.

Skerrett’s first tap at the door woke Victoria as it was meant to. Her eyes opened and Melbourne smiled into them.

“Good morning, Mrs. Melbourne.”

The previous evening’s freezing rain had bejeweled the city with the sparkle of nature’s diamonds. February was a changeling month, and this day promised to be a fine one again. Melbourne was able to feel the sun on his face like a benediction.

Beside him, Tom Young pretended to be impressed by the subtle touches of luxury in their conveyance, gaping and fondling the gleaming brass fixtures, stroking calfskin seat covers appreciatively. Melbourne ignored him as long as he could, then made a face.

"Oh, leave off the vulgarian affectation, Tom. I found you serving Devonshire; surely he was not a primitive?"

Unchastened, Young merely sat back with an air of satisfaction.

"You did well for yourself, m'lord. None of it woulda happened, had I not told you bein' Chief Minister was a fine thing and you ought to do it."

Tom's prescient words so long ago had not tipped the balance, no matter what he might think, but Melbourne could not deny that they had had some effect. What had he said, in his inimical encroaching way? As though reading his thoughts, Young repeated verbatim that earlier advice.

“… if it only lasts three months, it will be worthwhile to have been Prime Minister of England.' And look where it landed you."

"Enough, Tom." Melbourne gave him a censorious look, anticipating some crude reference he could not overlook.

Melbourne thought of the warnings Tom had brought, the scuttlebutt and its bearer, the stranger who hid behind a pseudonym. Of everything Tom had reported, it was his almost off-hand reference to insinuations regarding the circumstances of Albert's death which were most concerning. Had there been some unasked question? Could Tom think he'd had the Coburg prince murdered, or sent him to his doom? Out of ambition or a wish to supplant him?

To some, of course, Melbourne supposed it might be seen in that light. Out of an abundance of caution, Peel and Wellington had induced him to wait until the end of a year's mourning for that very reason. He and Victoria had defied both convention and the warnings of their friends, marrying a scant month later. But any who thought it was the outcome he sought did not know him at all. Melbourne had been content with the status quo, happier than he had ever imagined possible. Albert's death marked a violent end to their unorthodox domestic arrangement and thrust him into the very limelight he would have done almost anything to avoid.

Gemütlichkeit was the word George Von Wettin once used. While religious zealots would have foamed at the mouth, knowing that a nest of sodomites occupied the very halls of Buckingham Palace, in truth the atmosphere therein had been the farthest thing from lewd and corrupt.

When Melbourne had returned from self-imposed exile following Victoria's wedding, he had been swept up by Albert's exuberance into the midst of their married life. What that had consisted of was a pair of young cousins allied against their elders in a marriage of convenience, surrounded by a
rollicking band of young men consumed by joie de vivre after a lifetime of having to hide their true nature.

*Gemütlichkeit*, George had explained, was untranslatable. It referred to the feeling of coziness, contentedness, comfort and relaxation which filled the apartments of Victoria and Albert, once Melbourne had returned to take his place at her side. It was a unique kind of family feeling for which words like *cozy* or *comfortable* were too simple. A soft chair in a corner of his own library might be considered cozy. But sit in that chair surrounded by close friends and a hot cup of tea, while soft music plays in the background, and that sort of scene is what you’d call *gemütlich*. In short, Von Wettin had explained earnestly, it referred to the comfort of the atmosphere itself more than to the comfort of physical objects.

It was to that atmosphere Melbourne had returned, and been embraced by the fraternal affection of the young Coburg prince, the collegial warmth and camaraderie of his merry companions…and Victoria. She was the heart and soul of that new life, of course; and the babies which followed were unlooked-for miracles. But Albert himself played no small part, eager and admiring and shyly affectionate, a gawky man-boy who had known only criticism and ridicule from his own distant father. Together, the three of them had forged their own brand of family.

Melbourne felt the first stirrings of anger, at the mysterious stranger who would tarnish those memories to only to discredit him.

He sat across from Tom Young and the protection officer, lost in thought as the carriage made its way past entrance to Green Park, down Pall Mall and through the morning rush clogging Trafalgar Square. A driver and one postillion were not necessarily sufficient to ward off the potential threats envisioned by the sober Welshman tasked with his safety, at least according to the man's alert demeanor and constantly moving eyes.

Mr. Carantok ("Call me Ollie, m'lord") was the officer on duty. He took his job seriously, as did all of the men – and women – Cameron had selected to provide what he called close protection. They were all equally presentable, nondescript and adequately mannered but only a few allowed any trace of personality to show. Those who did generally ended up shunted off to nursery duty. Seeing the street sign marking their turn onto the Strand, Melbourne adjusted his many-caped greatcoat and took his hat and cane in hand.

Victoria had turned her face up and when he bent to kiss her, lapped at his lower lip, biting it gently. Melbourne remembered and ran his fingertip over the spot where the feel of her sharp little teeth lingered, smiling to himself as he stepped down from the carriage before a narrow four-story building on Fleet Street. The ground floor was occupied by a coffee house and bookstore; the next by the offices of a recently-fledged newspaper.

Mr. Dickens had covered Parliament during most of Melbourne's time as Home Secretary and then Prime Minister. He was a passionate liberal, and the bane of the Tories, but showed no mercy to any serving minister. Dickens' weapon of choice was his wit, and the sharp satire which he applied equally to friend and foe, Whig and Tory, was no less perceptive for its humor.

The official first edition of his newspaper had reached the streets on 21 January, with over 10,000 subscribers. Melbourne had sent off a note of congratulations, accompanied by a bottle of '87 Veuve Clicquot only three weeks ago. Some months before that, Mr. Dickens' series of exposés on the financial servitude of many MPs had reached such gargantuan readership even the venerable Times was forced to give him column inches. The note he received in return boasted, not without some truth, that he had nearly brought the great Rothschild banking house to its knees. While Melbourne considered that a trifle exaggerated – after all, the information had originally come from a Paris
branch of that family – it had definitely brought matters to light many would have done much to keep buried.

Melbourne still held title to a house at 39 South Street. He had once lived and worked at that address, preferring it to the ramshackle, rundown inconvenience of 10 Downing Street. Since Dover House had been sold in '30, South Street had been his official London residence as well as a working office for the head of government, but like many gentlemen of means it was not his only income-producing property. This Fleet Street address, if one had cared to search out the deed, was held in the name of a holding company directed by his Hatfield solicitor.

Charles Dickens claimed to know everyone, or know someone who did. That particular braggadocio wasn't an exaggeration, Melbourne had long decided. The fellow could walk the alleys of Cheapside by night un molested by the pickpockets and thugs; he had acquaintances in the lowest stews, in the cells of the penitentiary and the soup carts pushed by Methodist missionaries. He hoped that knowledge could be put to use in discovering the identity and affiliation of the man who had sought out Tom Young. Melbourne was fairly certain he knew what the man was, but his name and location and which of the ministries laid claim to his services would be quite useful information to have.

The general editor of the News would have known Lord Melbourne on sight, even if they had not recently extended their acquaintance significantly. None of the others who looked up at his entrance recognized the Queen's husband, or a former Prime Minister. Some few who had covered the trial – yes, that trial – would have expressed doubt that the easily smiling visitor to their offices, aglow with contentment and an air of general well-being, was the haggard co-respondent in George Norton's suit against his wife nine years before.

If one of these scribblers harbored a secret penchant for novel-writing, he might have described their visitor's pleasant expression as that of one who found his fellow men both interesting and amusing. He might even have waxed poetic in describing large, beautiful dark eyes set above a pleasing countenance with a smile of such warmth and charm it quite melted even a 12-year-old Cockney newsboy's heart.

Melbourne greeted Mr. Dickens affably and accepted his instant invitation to visit the press room. He expressed suitable admiration for the gargantuan appliance now lying dormant, awaiting its call to service. Dickens introduced him to Douglas Jerrold, his assistant editor. Melbourne recognized the man by reputation as a fiery social reformer, and assumed by his presence on the News editorial staff which direction future issues would take.

He also thought, with some regret, that such emphasis on the gloomy facts of life would quickly sink yet another of Dickens' journalistic endeavors. His novels took despite their examination of society's underbelly because they were sufficiently entertaining and engaged one in the fate of their protagonists. A daily paper, by its very nature, would soon exhaust the compassion of even the most dedicated reader.

"Very impressive, sir. 10,000 subscribers certainly put your brethren at The Times on notice." It was true enough, and it did no harm to recognize the achievement.

Eventually even Dickens' considerable – and perhaps justified – ego ran out of achievements to tout. He dispatched a boy to fetch refreshments from the coffee shop beneath their feet, and took Melbourne into his office.
After a brief but satisfactory private chat with Mr. Dickens, the outcome of which was the latter's assurance that he would exert himself to assuage his own curiosity and Lord Melbourne's without any immediate prospect of printing what he learned, Melbourne stepped back out into the sunshine. The air was mild, so much so that mud mixed with less wholesome elements oozed up between broken paving stones, splattering the finnicky pair each time they were passed by larger draft horses pulling heavy carts. The driver turned off Fleet onto Dunstant Court to get away from such commercial traffic and emerged onto the more civilized vista of the Strand.

Melbourne asked to be let down at the end of Regent Street. He felt as energized as a schoolboy and wanted to walk. He was to meet with Francis Russell, 7th Duke of Bedford, at three of the clock, and relished the prospect of several free hours ahead.

The merchants of Regent Street collectively subsidized its maintenance for the sake of their genteel clientele, and both sidewalks and street showed the benefit of rigorous brooming and soil collection. Melbourne had taken Victoria here once, to browse in the shops like any ordinary noblewoman, and she had been giddy with delight, remembering the pleasure of such shopping excursions undertaken with her mother as a young girl.

The well-bred fellow shoppers they encountered could not suppress their emotion at encountering the Queen in their midst, and it soon became apparent that Victoria would not be granted even the pretense of anonymity. Since that time Melbourne occasionally came alone, either unrecognized or too familiar to cause a stir. He brought back humorous anecdotes, amusing word-pictures of the people he encountered, their foibles and excesses, along with sundry trinkets and treasures for Victoria and the children. She could command any goods she desired, and purveyors would fall over themselves to appear under Royal Warrant, so Melbourne looked for the absurd, novelties and little luxuries she would not think to ask for.

His first stop was at the shop of a Swiss expatriate, who had arrived several years before with letter of introduction from Susan Cuénod, née Churchill. Monsieur Boudry and his wife had emigrated from the canton of Neuchâtel, where they had been prosperous bourgeois. In a second letter written privately to Melbourne himself, Susan had confided that her husband's banking family had not been
discreet in boasting about their familial ties to the husband of the Queen of England. It brought new depositors in droves, seeking to avoid the looming civil unrest between the urban liberals on the one hand and populist supporters of the Sonderbond on the other. Britain, France, Austria and Prussia bickered on exactly what and how much support to provide which faction and Palmerston was vociferous in backing the Liberal cause. As in all such ideological clashes, there were those such as the Boudrys, whose neutrality made them despised equally by both sides.

Monsieur Boudry, whatever he had been before, now imported exquisitely crafted mechanical toys. He displayed his Royal Warrant proudly, as much or more as a talisman against any ill will which might have followed him from his homeland as to boast of his right to exclusively provide certain goods to Her Majesty the Queen.

Melbourne had brought Liam on several occasions, and Monsieur Boudry put aside any new arrival which might interest the Prince. Today he had an intricately crafted tabletop theatre to display.

"See how the curtain goes up, voilà! And the stage lowers thus. And these wires permit the performers –" he presented exquisitely detailed little figures, no taller than the breadth of his palm. "- to appear like this, and this." Attached to fine clips on their backs, these figures made a creditable imitation of flight, zooming in from above the rafters of the miniature stage.

A matron standing nearby applauded, smiling broadly.

"Oh, Your Grace, that is charming! For the Prince of Wales? I must have one for my nephew – Marlborough's heir, you know, just the age of His Royal Highness."

Lady Louisa Spencer-Churchill's presence in the shop was a bit of a coincidence, Melbourne thought. Or not. Perhaps Susan and Aimé are in communication with the Marlboroughs. Good thing, and high time if they are. And he almost entirely meant it.

Susan had been raised by Caro – and William – as foster sister to Augustus. After Caro's death it was he, Melbourne, who inherited parental responsibility for the baseborn girl. Brocket Hall was the only home she'd ever known, and he had allowed her to remain, grieving the loss of her foster mother, until vile rumors began to spread. He had not spent a single night since Caro's passing under the same roof as his fourteen-year-old ward, and Susan herself – a irrepressible, pert miss who modeled herself on Caroline's free spirit – praised Melbourne as the kindest and most careful of guardians. Yet there were those who stooped to blacken the reputation of a child in order to tarnish the Viscount Melbourne, and the leaking of those regrettable Branden letters were conflated in the public mind with the name of his ward.

He had sent her abroad for her own good, in the care of Bess Crosbie, Lady Branden. Melbourne had paid for their upkeep and provided a substantial dowry. Susan's natural father, George Spencer-Churchill, 6th Duke of Marlborough, and her mother, Harriet Spencer, had never acknowledged the girl's existence and for her part, Susan aligned herself firmly with William Lamb in loco parentis.

Still, Melbourne thought, they had all moved on and if Marlborough's family were willing to acknowledge the daughter born out of wedlock, it was long overdue.

Shrugging it off, chatting amiably with Susan's half-sister, Melbourne examined a succession of clever gadgets, hand-carved spinning tops, foundry-cast locomotive engines and spinning magic lanterns. An entire shelf was devoted to dolls outfitted in period costume, and another to soft stuffed infant variations of the same theme.

Liam was easily pleased. The boy was fascinated by anything comprised of intricate moving parts, or pieces which called for meticulous assembly. Liam could amuse himself quietly for hours in pursuit
of perfection, his happiness complete when Melbourne could stay at his side, listening, engrossed, to the five-year-old's precocious explanations.

Lily lacked the patience for inanimate objects. Her half of the playroom was full to overflowing with magnificent dolls sent from foreign courts – foreign suitors, half of them, to Melbourne's amused contempt. Dolls of every description, from primitive rush-stuffed items scarcely recognizable as human, to life-sized jointed creatures with eerie glass eyes that seemed to track one's movements.

Lily had Victoria's childhood dollhouse set up on a low table, its interior refurbished annually with miniscule furnishings, sofas and chairs, beds and even a harpsichord which produced notes in tune. Her favorite toy was the rocking horse Palmerston had carried in, a monstrous creature with the proportions of a well-fed pony. Beyond that, she was so constantly on the move that only the dogs and that blasted monkey kept pace. Those, and her Jocelyn cousins, the three of them striking terror into the hearts of any nursery maid expected to keep order.

And yet, with the unpredictability Melbourne had come to expect, his little daughter would suddenly revert to the more traditional forms of play. She would insist he join her for tea time, painstakingly set out on a miniature set of Limoges china, or wring his heart so it clenched by tenderly soothing a cloth baby doll, her curly head bowed in concentration.

He chose a book for his daughter – bedtime, when he read to the children, being the only time he could count on holding her attention – and, as an afterthought, a hand organ accurately sized for a small pair of hands.

Those purchases were carefully wrapped and set aside. When Lady Louisa had taken her leave, the shopkeeper hung a sign in his window and turned the lock. He invited Melbourne into the more discrete private showroom, effusing all the while about recent additions to his inventory.

This space was windowless, illuminated by candles in red glass. Melbourne accepted a glass of Burgundy wine and leaned insouciantly against the doorframe, his mouth quirking in amusement as the merchant spread a length of velvet and unlocked the glass display case which held his treasures.

He had some idea what to expect – there were only so many variations on a theme, after all – and yet each time he was surprised anew.

"A few new rings, my lord. This one jade – look closely at the carvings – and here is an ivory. You will see it copied perfectly from the illustration."

He flattened the spine of a small bound volume, to better prove the truth of his claim. Melbourne was familiar with the book in question. It had lost little value in the hundred years since its first printing.

"These are – er – unused?" he joked, using the corner of a white linen handkerchief to pick up the translucent pale green ring. In circumference it was about the size of an infant's wrist, but no infant would ever be given such a plaything.

"Even you, my lord, might be impressed by my newest acquisition. From the orient – our Singapore traders deal in more than simple opium, you see. I've been assured these were used to considerable effect by the Emperor's chief concubine."

Boudry worked the clasp on a small wooden box. Within, nestled on a silk cushion, were three silver balls. Each fit neatly in the center of a man's hand, or – Melbourne lifted a brow quizzically, his eyes laughing.

"They contain a mercury core, so – see – the slightest movement results in a most considerable effect." Holding one of the balls in his palm, Monsieur Boudry moved his hand only slightly. As
both men watched the orb began a gentle concentric motion, seemingly possessed of a life of its own.

"Most considerable, indeed," Melbourne agreed. When he grew weary of watching the little silver ball quiver, he poked at a sheaf of what appeared to be organic matter.

"Reeds, sir. From the banks of the Nile, or so I am told. One soaks them in water, then wraps them around the member. When they dry, they stiffen yet remain pliable and quite...gentle to the touch."

"I see." Melbourne rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I am sure any who require such aid are most grateful." Not I; not yet, at any rate, he thought, almost wishing he was a Papist and could cross himself to ward off such an eventuality.

"Ah, and only for the most discriminating and enlightened – there are these. Your countrymen – we Europeans as a race – are most misogynist. Our Eastern brethren are far more enlightened in that regard. I'm sure you are sophisticated enough to appreciate the value of these."

Boudry lifted the lid of yet another small chest with a stage magician's flourish. When Melbourne did not immediately respond, the merchant lifted his eyes nervously, calculating whether he had overstepped.

"This one – the pièce de résistance – I must demonstrate." Melbourne experienced a momentary, horrifying image of the man demonstrating the object he lifted so proudly from its cushioned bed. But he only held it aloft and twitched his wrist. The slight movement set eight inches of carved ivory in motion so it swayed and quivered with the same internal kinetic motion as the silver balls.

"Mercury?" Melbourne guessed.

"Yes!" Boudry trilled, sounding as proud as though he was personally responsible.

"You see the carvings? As I'm sure you can imagine, these are not purely decorative. Feel, here? And here? The ridges are smooth but prominent enough to provide a pleasurable friction, and here –" Boudry's index finger indicated what resembled nothing so much as a frilled Elizabethan collar, encircling the base of the device in question. "I ask you to contemplate the effect of this against –"

"I am sure you are right, Monsieur Boudry," Melbourne said hurriedly. Unwillingly, he contemplated exactly the effect it would have, along with an entirely too vivid mental image of a particular small hand putting it to use. He shook his head to clear it.

"Very entertaining. However, I –"

"Sir! I know I do not have to assure you of my discretion. The safety of my family – my presence in this great country – all I have is due to your patronage and protection –"

Melbourne chuckled and clapped the man on the shoulder to reassure him – and silence him. In the present context, he wanted no reminder of who he was, or to whom he was married.

"As I said, your collection is quite amusing. And if ever the topic arises at my club, I will recommend you to any who might have an interest in such playthings. Now, however, I must be on my way."

"Very well. If I could show you only one other item – quite different, and yet equally rare –" Before Melbourne could protest, Boudry reached under his counter and produced yet another box, nearly flat, covered in embroidered material.

"Pure Chinese silk. Nothing like the crude material normally produced for export. This originated in the Imperial City, and nothing of its quality has ever been available for trade."
He displayed a translucent garment made of silk spun so fine it could have fit through the circumference of the wedding ring on Melbourne's left hand. It felt nearly alive somehow, the delicacy inviting touch, sending small shivers of pure sensation along his fingertips. The cloth was dyed precisely the dusky rose of a woman's tender essence. Melbourne stroked the fabric, unwilling to sully it by contact, unable to resist. He saw the rest of what was obviously an ensemble, and was instantly grateful Boudry had the tact to avoid calling attention to the other scraps of silky fabric. Direct reference could only make its association to the queen unavoidable; it was well known in certain quarters that he was the rarest of creatures, a faithful husband, and anything he chose would was not destined for a mistress. Melbourne made up his mind.

"I'll take it," he said, almost gruffly.

His final errand took him to the reading room of Brooks' Club. A table for two had been set up before the hearth, and the man he had arranged to lunch with was already seated. The wine steward held a towel-wrapped bottle out for inspection.

"Melbourne!" Francis Russell stood and exchanged bows, waiting for Melbourne to take his seat.

They spent some time in debating the relative merits of the vintages on offer, and more easily dispensed with the formality of ordering luncheon. Melbourne genuinely liked the fellow he still thought of as Tavistock, the title he had held until '39. Of greater immediate interest to Melbourne was the new dignity he hoped to bestow: Lord Warden of the Stannaries.
Time was behaving most erratically, telescoping to improbable lengths, then folding back in on itself so that those few moments – *surely no more than that?* – replayed themselves in excruciating detail magnified by repetition. The trip from Brown's Hotel on Albemarle Street seems to have been accomplished with superhuman speed, even allowing for the route they took, through the heart of Mayfair to permit a hasty stop at South Street.

*Don't try to speak, Your Grace.* An admonition which was no less irksome for its redundancy. Drawing breath hurt like the very devil but speech was necessary, nonetheless.

*Upsy-Daisy* –insufferable sing-song as though to a child or feeble-minded elder– *no one had been allowed to speak thus to Augustus once he reached manhood, even when his conduct necessitated
restraint and the sort of treatment normally reserved for toddler tantrums.

Hell and damnation, I hurt – why can’t I draw a breath without infernal pain in my chest?

I’m fine, Goddammit – required words for a gentleman, no matter the truth of the matter. If only they weren’t delivered in a hoarse, croaking voice, I might be more convincing.

Try to think back to the last time I took a pummeling – was I eight? Nine? First term at school and never again; yield, if you can't talk your way out of it. Victoria had commended him when he told her, thinking it exceedingly sensible, “After the first round if I found I could not lick the fellow, I said, ‘come this won’t do, I will go away; it is no use standing here to be knocked to pieces.” Always hated the notion of fighting, physically or otherwise. Find a way to compromise, or laugh them out of their ill humor. No time for that today; the fellow wanted me dead, if I'm not mistaking the matter.

Nine hundred rooms and not one beyond some set of prying eyes. Won't do to have backstairs tittle-tattle alarm her. Of course, she'd have to be told, but I'll by God tell her myself. When I've collected my thoughts and –

"Get me a brandy, for God’s sake. And rid me of this bloody shirt."

Knowing the time provided structure, a framework upon which he could begin assembling some plausible construct, first in his own mind, then the explanation she would demand. It was nearly half-past eight when he entered their apartment, and the familiar smells – beeswax candles, whatever they used to maintain a glasslike finish on the wood furnishings, the fine old upholstery fabrics, a subtle entrancing blend of odors scarcely noticed yet telling him, if he were blindfolded, that he had stepped into their private world. Sanctuary – the word formed itself in his mind, soothed his addled thoughts while his eyes grew wet with gratitude. He berated himself mentally, chiding himself in relentless inner monologue.

One unscheduled stop – from Brooks's the carriage turned northwest on St. James, to Abermarle Street by way of Bennet, rather than the expected route south through the Park. A detour which should have taken no more than the five or ten minutes, fifteen at most, required for a courtesy call. The thoroughfare outside Brown's Hotel was congested, and he’d impatiently rapped on the window to tell him to pull over in the road and let him down. A folded note inviting him to take tea tête-à-tête, an invitation he had no intention of accepting. Only, out of the fondness one old friend bore another, explain with the nuances which couldn't be committed to paper, why the easy habits of their past informality must now be redefined for the sake of his marriage.

The black unmarked carriage, no crest to identify any royal prerogative, roundly cursed by the driver of a larger conveyance, some country squire up to London to take his place in the Lords. No one – thank God – to recognize the tallish gentleman who stepped down, making his way past the mountains of baggage awaiting a porter's attention. Emily standing in the way, a hatbox on her arm, as though just returned from a day's shopping. The notion, fleeting as it was, reminded him of the packages he would deliver, which in turn made him yearn to be done with his day and back under the same roof as his family. His height was an advantage, as he impatiently threaded a path through pedestrian traffic – Emily saw him, looking up with an expression of surprise and pleasure. A stout red-faced fellow, nose sporting the broken veins of a tippler expostulated, swinging his walking stick back and forth to clear his path – it was that walking stick Melbourne thought, however improbably, had struck him. The fat, sweating face was the last clear impression he had before a stitch in his side stopped his breath. Looking to his left, only belatedly aware of the horrified O of Miss Eden's mouth, and of someone shoving him roughly from behind so he nearly lost his balance. One more blow, almost an afterthought it seemed, this one catching him midway between front and back and strong hands grasping him in a formidable grip, turning him and forcing him back into the carriage.
"I came away as soon as I could," Victoria said in breathless whispery voice.

Melbourne looked up blearily, straining to focus. He felt the strain in his throat, his face, melt away, felt the warmth spread, softening his features. The fortified brandy had done its job, perhaps a trifle too well, but he had refused the laudanum they tried to force on him. Opium – what it had done to Caroline, and the bizarre, disjointed dreams it brought on the rare occasions he had resorted to its use, the remedy worse than the disease.

She was still dressed for dinner and drawing room, looking so very lovely in pale blue satin and a white lace collar. It was only right he tell her, that she might hear it from him.

"You're so very pretty, ma'am," he drawled, thinking it a fine thing to say to one's wife. Can't forget the little niceties, was a wise piece of advice. **Who had said that?** **Had anyone?** **If not, they should have. Perhaps I will; write it in the memoirs, that's the thing.**

Her bow-shaped mouth twisted into a tender, maternal smile.

"Another sick headache, William? Let me rub your poor head for you. Would you like that?"

_Not my head? Surely not my head? No, that's not where the pain is._ His hand rested protectively on his side, over the thick swatch of bandage which bound his ribs tight, immobilizing them so nothing shifted.

"Yes," he answered agreeably, and so she did. Still in that very pretty dress – _and I never liked a woman in blue! How foolish of me!_ – Victoria untied the ribbons on her slippers and climbed onto their bed. He was in his nightshirt already, put to bed by Baines and Cameron – _Cameron? Why yes; but not that Cameron, the other one_ – with strict orders to remain there until the physician reexamined him the following day. _Surly fellow with no manners. Doesn't share his brother's agreeability, but that's all right. Competent, doesn't coddle. Well, coddles his share of peers' wives, if rumors are true. And a few peers, as well._

He would have said that he was beyond relaxed, alcohol making a warm pool in his stomach and blunting the throb of pain in his side. As soon as Victoria's fingers began making circles on his scalp, finding their way through the thicket of his hair, Melbourne felt tension he did not know he was holding drain away. She found the corded tendons at the back of his neck and pinched, kneaded, prodded them into relinquishing their grip so that his head lolled back against her breast. _Sweet breasts, fit perfectly in my palms. Apples – like apples – is that a thing one should say? Better not; apples are not a particularly romantic image. Firm, yet soft, upright as a virgin's. Ah, but not a virgin; you had her maidenhead and she birthed your children. Something to be said for a wet nurse, of course; no woman of quality would nurse her own children and forfeit her figure, but how I would have liked to see my babe at her breast. Perhaps with the next –_

"Lord of the Stannaries – he accepted. Bedford. You'll receive him, have an audience. Let Grey set the terms – not Palmerston or Johnny. Won't due to have his brother or mine appear to call the tune."

_It made sense when he thought it out, but the words came out disjointed and he threw up his hands in resignation._ "I spoke to one too many, thought to stir things up and shine some light but – stirred up one too many people. Our faceless man not pleased at having to lose his autonomy – best announce the thing at Privy Council so they know your hands are clean –"

Victoria hummed her agreement – or to shush him, he thought, conceding it was neither time nor place to discuss the business of government.

"Reform has always been a dangerous thing. Maintain the status quo, always seemed…the best
policy…” She had moved to one side, pushing gently at his shoulder to urge him to recline, then leaned forward, bracing herself on his arm. The sound which escaped him startled them both, a groan dragged from somewhere deep in his chest, and Victoria backed away, startled.

Melbourne waved his hand in a vague dismissive gesture, his arm clasped protectively against his side. He read her thoughts, writ so plainly on that sweet heart-shaped face – puzzlement, concern… suspicion?

"Let me see," she said quietly, sitting back on her haunches. He tried to murmur a demur – *it's nothing, a twinge* – and failed miserably.

Victoria laid her hand back on his arm, more carefully this time, and tugged it insistently away. With the lightest of touches, she felt along the edge of his abdomen, down, up, to the side, following the line of the bandage beneath soft white linen.

"William, let me see." He sobered suddenly, at the sound of her solemn tone. The voice she used with the children, most often Lily, when their daughter was especially recalcitrant.

"It's nothing, Victoria. Let it be. I'm not up to lengthy explanations tonight. We'll talk about it tomorrow. Come to bed. Please."

"We can talk about it tomorrow, but now I want to know what it is. Let me see."

As Melbourne watched helplessly, Victoria pulled away the heavy down comforter covering his legs and then grasped the hem of his nightshirt. She tugged it free of his hips and slowly, in a pantomime of seduction, raised it by inches. Never had he been so unmoved by a woman's hand exposing his manhood. The poor thing lay curled up in its nest like a wounded creature, insensate, until she paused in her determined examination to cup him in her hand. When she stroked him with the edge of her thumb it sprang to life, and despite himself Melbourne heaved a sigh of relief.

Above his waist, the wide band Danny Cameron had bound so tightly. The merest dotting of dark brown stained it at the level of his forearm, several small freckles of blood having seeped through the pad underneath.

Melbourne looked up at Victoria sheepishly. "Insignificant, ma'am, I assure you. I'm a bit stiff – " the ghost of a smile quirked his lips, winning a response in kind. "- and will be sore for a few days. Nothing more. As Dr. Cameron will tell you when he visits tomorrow."

"You had Daniel here? And I was not told?" Victoria's tone sharpened and her lips tightened, her anger building. Anger, Melbourne understood, was a far more comfortable emotion than fear, and he did not begrudge her.

Daniel Cameron's head had been shorn the last time he appeared at Court. Now his blonde hair hung past his shoulders once more, with the unfortunate family tendency to ape the fashion of an earlier age. His wardrobe was expensive, as befitted a celebrated Society physician, and he was as surly as ever, with the voluptuous pout which bewitched more than one Duchess. According to gossip, the handsome Irish physician had bedded more peers' wives than George Byron in his heyday, and with the same essential disinterest and callous disregard.

Cameron stood, flinging that curtain of pale shimmering hair off his face with a gesture identical to that of his elder brother.

"You got poked, all right. Nicked a rib and bent the blade or it would've gone through your liver. Shoddy workmanship; they should have gone with one of the Toledo armorers, they make a fine
blade for this sort of thing." Cameron, unbidden, threw himself onto the other end of the State bed upon which Melbourne reclined.

"Are you going to keep this thing as a souvenir?"

The object he held up was a Malacca walking cane; the sword which it had contained was bent at the tip and no longer slid back into its shaft. The fluted spiral top was silver plate, the plating now worn with age.

"This wasn't made for you," Cameron added speculatively. "See, there's a frosted acid etched panel on the blade face. This was – is someone's family heirloom."

"Should I be offended, that I wasn't considered worth the investment of a new weapon?" Melbourne was pleased to hear his breath coming more evenly. His side still hurt like the blazes, but he no longer felt on the verge of passing out.

"So when the blade bent -? What happened then? You've got contusions enough that he must have swung the bloody thing like a cricket bat."

Victoria never cursed and rarely adopted the language Melbourne himself tried to curb in her presence. She still sat on her haunches, a difficult posture in which to exert authority, yet she managed. Authority, and the sort of explosive rage with which her forebears had vented their spleen.

"Something like that," Melbourne suppressed a groan, discovering the strain of reaching for her required more fortitude than he could summon.

He watched her collect herself by sheer force of will, but her features were still drawn tight in a mask of barely-suppressed fury.

"I – to lay hands on the sovereign – or –"

"It is not treason, my love, and we cannot make it so. I am not royal, nor do I have the title of consort."

"Ours is not a morganatic marriage. How could it be, when I am the sovereign and require the permission of no one to marry? I want this – this bastard apprehended, and put to a traitor's death."

Melbourne did not remind her that drawing-and-quartering was no longer an option, not even in the case of those poor benighted madmen who had attempted to murder the queen herself. Although this was no madman—

"You think it was planned? Against you?" Her shrewd question told Melbourne he had spoken aloud, and if he was still so under the influence of shock and alcohol that he could not guard his tongue, then it was best they defer further discussion until the morrow.

"This man waited for you outside Brooks's – to prevent you from meeting with the Duke of Bedford, do you think? To stop you appointing him to take the intelligence departments in hand?"

"It seems probable this was to prevent or punish my meddling, as some have called it," Melbourne answered cautiously, wincing slightly as the grinding in his side sent another sharp bolt of pain up his spine. Instantly her expression changed, back to her former look of tender concern.

"My darling, I will not plague you further tonight. I – I will get out of this gown and come to bed." Victoria backed up gingerly, setting her feet on the ground and hurrying off to the dressing room
where her dresser would be waiting room.

Melbourne watched her go, eager for her to return, not as eager to pick up the thread of their conversation.

That there would be no talk, nothing in the papers, no whispering in the clubs or from the back benches of the House, had been his paramount concern. The incident had unfolded too quickly, too unexpectedly, for passersby to witness. If he himself had not realized he was struck until the protection officer dragged him backwards into the carriage, then odds were no one nearby had remarked anything more than an impatient skirmish. The red-faced man had been the only one Melbourne himself had noticed; whether his carriage driver or Captain Carantok had seen more, remained to be discovered. But now, he understood he had another dilemma on his hands – whether, and how, to explain his presence at the Brown's hotel.

Victoria returned quickly, her hair down and streaming over the shawl she wore over her nightdress. She stood hesitantly bedside, frowning.

"I don't want to hurt you," she whispered. "Shall I -?"

Melbourne rolled his eyes comically, in hopes of winning a smile.

"You cannot hurt me, ma'am, except by not sharing my bed."

She walked around to the far side of the bed once more and crawled up with exaggerated caution. Despite the sharp pain tugging at contused flesh, Melbourne exerted himself to lift the arm on his good side. Once she was settled, her small body curled around his, he took her hand and laid it on his stomach.

"There," he sighed with satisfaction. "All is as it should be. I will mend quickly."

And with her in his arms, it was and he would. Odd, he reflected, how I could be quite unmanned when I had only myself to console. With her in my arms, I feel as though I could go another round or two with the bloody fucking coward.

That notion made him laugh aloud – Melbourne the pugilist, nothing less likely, but there it was, for all that – and he pressed a kiss against the top of her dark head. Grateful to be whole and relatively unscathed, even more grateful to be at home in their bed, her skin warm against his, melting into him so he could not tell where one left off and the other began. One.

"I adore you, Mrs. Melbourne. You are my everything."

"Everything," she echoed, the sound muffled by the folds of his nightshirt, her voice small and soft in the darkness.
28 February 1846
Windsor

Edward Bulwer-Lytton

Ned-
3 three months’ work has gotten me precisely this far. I concede the necessity of committing to paper some recounting of my time in government, to please the queen and answer to generations yet to come. I must also set down some apologia of a personal nature. Therein lies the rub, my friend. As you know all too well, it takes no effort for me to go on at length in dialectic discourse, but the prospect of knowing what, and how much, of myself must needs be present to satisfy the demands of those few future readers seeking to become acquainted with the man has quite -

Dammit man, come to Windsor where we are now in residence and write this bloody manifesto. You will have the queen’s gratitude and affection as well as my own. To achieve that end you will have a wealth of raw material, boxes of moldering government documents brought out from the Records Office on Chancery Lane. To think it was my bloody idea to establish such an archive! "Hoist with his own petard"?

And another slew of boxes containing as much of my correspondence – for good and for ill – as has survived through the years. I made only sporadic efforts at maintaining a commonplace book and prudence dictated destroying much of a personal nature. You will also have a free hand in dredging up the recollections you need. I promise to withhold nothing and will rely on your discretion and editorial judgment, trusting in your instincts and understanding of my current position and what is owed the Queen and the prince and princess, who will undoubtedly read your words someday to refresh imperfect recollection of the man who, at the sunset of his existence, played some fleeting role in their young lives. I doubt anyone else will be much interested in Melbourne two hundred years from now. I am no Francis Walsingham, or even Robert Dudley.
Here we are at Windsor. My girl…nothing if not unpredictable. Her response to hearing the full story of that unfortunate encounter on Abermarle – and seeing the spreading blue-black tint of bruising more than a handspan in width staining my skin – was to order the Court removed to Windsor at once.

White-lipped and severe, she summoned Spencer and the chief steward. I had it in me to feel some compassion for the Earl Spencer, new to the role of Chamberlain. Vice-Admiral may have given him a command voice to send shivers up the spine of a navvy, but moving the entire household at a moment's notice nearly caused him nervous spasms.

"At once," was unfortunately not achievable even for the Queen, even for Victoria in a temper. Having been unoccupied since early autumn – unoccupied, that is, save for the several hundred servants and retainers always in residence – two days passed before we could make the trip.

I understood. It was not logical, of course, but the attack on me shattered her nerves in a way the assault on her own person had not, and that I also understand. I might never grasp the why and wherefore of it, but my little queen, with the world at her feet, is deeply attached to me, and for that undeserved blessing – the very exemplification of grace I can only repay her as best I can. She is my everything – no mere love-talk, truer words I have never spoken – and if my poor life gives meaning to hers, I will do my utmost to guard it well. If moving our household for a few weeks or months satisfies her need to take action, so be it. She is home to me; the locale is irrelevant.

Victoria spared no effort in ensuring my comfort on the move, which took place before even our surly, discomplacent surgeon recommended. I accepted the hot bricks for her comfort as much as mine, and even the lap robe she spread over my lap, but the feather pillows she proposed to bundle around me were firmly rejected as too invalidish to be borne. And so we set off, baggage trains having preceded us, we were a small enough convoy, by royal standards. Her predecessors had traveled in state, but the more ornate coaches were considered far too lumbering for safe agile movement by our ramped up secret service detail. The Household Regiment surrounded us, and that too was for her sake, and that of our children. My mind is still preoccupied by thoughts of the chore set before me – that memoir, which I have now given up as impossible to write unaided – and I can not but be struck by that one word, of the thousands upon thousands of words which will flow into the thing, which can never be written – our children.

Just as Dr. Cameron had predicted, the morning after saw me feeling considerably worse. The pain in my side was severe but could have withstood with some semblance of dignity. The aching in joints which were unscathed and systemic trembling and weakness made me think of the ague, and I fought to stand straight and assume my usual gait. For her, I will not be thought of as weak.

At least she was firmly excluded before he applied his instruments of torture. It was necessary to widen that small, neat slit in my flesh in order to probe for debris left behind and I gritted my teeth until I was sure I'd fracture a molar while he poked and prodded. All he extracted were some bits of thread and the tiniest scrap of something foreign he assured me would have proved troublesome, a bit of my waistcoat carried on the tip of the blade. As if that was worth the suffering I endured, blasted bloody wicked fellow, like all his ilk. Surgeons are bloodthirsty ghouls, not content until up to their elbows in gore, and so I told him, laughing with the relief of having his hands out of my chest.

I almost – very nearly, at least – welcomed what Cameron so cavalierly called the discomfort of my condition, as it provided me opportunity to redeem myself from my vapors of the previous day. Much ado about nothing, in truth, and even Daniel Cameron's offhanded compliment did little to
assuage my chagrin, even as it caused Victoria to look upon him most favorably, with a warm smile of pride in my direction.

*Handled yourself well, from what I heard. It was you grabbed that sword-cane out of the fellow's hand, twisted it out of his grip before he could run and drop it in the gutter unseen.*

What could I say? Pure reflex, and the accident of nature which gave me slightly more than average height. I remembered then, that my assailant had been half a head shorter. I had no coherent recollection but as we talked, a few other details became clear in my mind. Dressed like a clerk, he had been – no workingman or footpad, nor a dandy. Brown suit, it seemed, or some other equally unremarkable color but at least we could safely rule out chance or an opportunistic thief, with which London abounded. Few of those armed themselves with such a weapon as the one now displayed on my mantle, for lack of a better repository. For no reason whatsoever, save perhaps some half-glimpse of swarthy complexion and narrow face, I thought he might have originated in some Mediterranean region – Corsica, Greece, Sicily.

I had little doubt that the attack was directly related to the plan I had set in motion. Power corrupts, and whoever managed to make a guild of sorts, of the various and sundry analysts occupying desks in a dozen different departments, had a great deal of power indeed. It was the motivating factor behind my desire to revive Walsingham's unified secret service. So, if I could safely assume our appreciation of the power inherent in central command and control was identical, it was only our unknown adversary's reluctance to relinquish that control that set us at odds. That reasoning, in turn, only confirmed my belief that such was a good and necessary measure. Our faceless man was sadly uninformed, however, if he acted out of a belief that I sought such power for myself. My meeting with Bedford at Brook's, at a table in sight and earshot of any who cared to eavesdrop, would have confirmed that.

So the remaining question was why make a move after that meeting. What could be gained by such a seemingly-impetuous attack on my person? I had handed off the formidable job of cleaning up the intelligence services and bringing them to heel under one non-partisan director. If they knew I would be at Brown's Hotel, they had to know I had just come from the meeting with Bedford, so why not accost me before I laid the matter before Sir Francis Russell? Was it the perceived scandal such an attack just there would cause? Some fool who knew me by reputation only, yet didn't travel in the same society as Auckland and I? So they assumed that my previous troubles meant that I naturally was engaged in liaison amoureuse with any woman to whom my name was linked?

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" – that at least had been catastrophizing on my part, thank whatever god you might. Victoria had sat in on – presided over, more accurately – the post mortem, crisply interrogating each of us, and no more than the merest tightening of her lips in something which might have been a smile threatening to emerge, or may have been intended to accompany a raising of her eyes heavenward, when I corrected her assumption as to the locale in which the assault had occurred. I had transferred the notepaper – Emily Eden's brief invitation to take tea at the hotel café – from the discarded coat of the day before, and took it out as I spoke, to show her.

It was obvious enough, I suppose, that I had not intended to stay. The carriage was double-parked, blocking traffic at the busiest of late-afternoon hours in that part of town, and I had already caught sight of Emily standing on the sidewalk. Moreover – although I didn't offer it as proof, because I didn't need to – the carriage itself was burdened with the fruits of my errands, an extremely large wrapped parcel containing the mechanical stage and the other trinkets I had picked up in town. Including, of course, the rose silk negligee and chemise for my wife, although I omitted mention of that before the stern-faced captain and his superior.

And after her questions were exhausted, my darling girl had only two pronouncements. One, *send*
for Billy. It's time he returned to his duties here, did not surprise me; in fact, it had been the intention I expressed to her, privately. The second, we will go to Windsor, a non-sequitur. Then I understood. To Victoria, the venerable old stone castle might be unfashionable, damp and grim of aspect, but it also represented safety and security which could not be had in the middle of London. Buckingham Palace was a modern, airy place, full of light from the many windows George III and King William had placed in abundance during each reconstruction. We were not about to be under siege, and one man wielding a sword cane until I twisted it out of his hand and thwacked him on his retreating backside was not an invading army. Victoria needed the thick stone walls of her fortress to reassure herself that she would not lose me – yet.

Victoria came around the last corner, nodding briskly to the footman she passed. Venerable Windsor had not been made for the convenience of modern monarchs, or families, she thought – undoubtedly in earlier times, the sovereign sat in state doing little but summoning those he, or she, wished to see. Not necessarily she, since Elizabeth had not been overly fond of Windsor either, engaging in extensive and costly renovations to restore the crumbling stronghold while preferring Richmond for comfort and convenience, Hampton Court for sentimentality and the legendary Nonsuch for – rumors said – romantic liaison with her favored companion.

The suite most suitable for the nursery was at some distance, in summer giving easy access to a charming courtyard outfitted with playthings and trees just the right size for climbing. The spacious outer room served as schoolroom and she found Prince Liam there, reciting his Greek in a sweet clear voice. Victoria held a finger to her lips, and with a minute shake of her head discouraged the footman from braying his conventional announcement. When Liam saw her arrive he continued, scarcely faltering, but Victoria did not miss the straightening of his small shoulders and proud lift of his chin.

When he came to the end of the passage she clapped, beaming.

"Well done, Liam! Herr Heyse," Victoria inclined her head in acknowledgement of the tutor's deep bow. "How do you go on? Do you have everything you need?"

"Thank you, madame. I need little. Prince William is a very good pupil. His articulation and understanding are superb, madame. He does not merely recite, he comprehends. And he applies himself, which is a native trait no educator can impart."

Victoria beamed with pride at the words. "Thank you, Herr Heyse. William, do you agree with your teacher?"

The boy's fair complexion pinked at his mother's question, and he paused before answering.

"I try to work hard, Mama. I am not as quick as Lil- as Elizabeth, but I think I work harder. Of course, she is little yet and will work hard when she is as old as I am. Perhaps."

Victoria was touched by her son's careful self-assessment.

"You work very hard, and you are very intelligent, like your fa- your papa. He reads and thinks about what he reads and that is more important than only reciting." He looked so very much like his papa, Victoria thought, loving him even more for that reason. Perfectly molded little features, sweet sensitive eyes and a delicate upper lip which hinted at his tender heart, the boy was a perfect mirror image of the middle child in Reynolds' Affectionate Brothers painted sixty years earlier. No one who saw, could mistake his parentage and that pleased Victoria greatly. What we can't say, must still be known, she thought yet again, caressing her son's soft cheek.
"Herr Heyse, if being this far from town is a great inconvenience to you I am sorry for it. We will stay here for the immediate future so if you would like us to send for anything – books, anything for your personal amusement – please, ask. Lehzen can arrange it."

"Thank you, madame. It is a privilege to be at Windsor Castle, the scene of so much history. The library here – the armaments gallery – the paintings – a dream come true. And I have done some writing of my own, in the evenings and when the Baroness or His Grace take the children."

Victoria listened politely as he described the epic poem he was working on, offered some bland, blameless praise for the plot he outlined and excused herself at the first opportunity.

The Princess Elizabeth was in her father's lap, listening raptly as he read from a children's book illustrated with lavish pastel drawings. Victoria stared, her heart melting with affection and wistfulness at the image her husband presented. His masculine beauty, the essential maleness of his broad shoulders and proud features accentuated by the tenderness with which he held the small girl in his arms. Long shining hair, as thick and curling as her father and brother's, cascaded over the arm supporting her back and a white frilly pinafore with its lace trimmings served as counterpoint to her father's elegant black ensemble.

Victoria had heard her own mother describe how proudly the Duke of Kent had carried her about, showing off his baby daughter to everyone he encountered, but she had no memory of the man and knew him only through the formal portraits on display. Part of her – a small, shameful part – was fiercely jealous of her own child, but the greater emotion was one of surpassing love for them both, and pride that she had given him this tiny girl he adored.

His love for his son was absolute and undeniable, but it was a gentler, less all-encompassing affection. Victoria had been reassured over and over by her own mother and the women who surrounded her that such a thing was only natural. Men claimed to prefer sons but in truth they became besotted by their daughters; with mothers, it was generally the opposite.

"Princess and the Pea, Mama," Lily lisped. "Like me. Papa says!"

Victoria bit her lip to hide her grin. Mr. Anderson's Princess and the Pea had been published some ten years before, and she had read it along with his other works. The book Lord M had purchased for Lily was a delight to peruse, with lavish watercolor illustrations, but the story was especially apt.

"Yes, indeed, like you," Victoria said sweetly, unable to resist her daughter's vivacity. "May we listen to Papa read?"

Lily considered the request at length, then sighed and threw up her chubby dimpled hands.

"You may," she said grandly.

"Oh, very badly!" said she. "I have scarcely closed my eyes all night. Heaven only knows what was in the bed, but I was lying on something hard, so that I am black and blue all over my body. It's
horrible!

Now they knew that she was a real princess because she had felt the pea right through the twenty mattresses and the twenty eider-down beds.

Nobody but a real princess could be as sensitive as that.

So the prince took her for his wife, for now he knew that he had a real princess; and the pea was put in the museum, where it may still be seen, if no one has stolen it.

There, that is a true story."

"Will you read to me?" Victoria asked, her hand held by her husband's as they made their way back to their own apartment.

Supper had been taken with the children, in the children's own dining room. Baroness Lehzen had offered to send to the kitchens for more elaborate adult fare, for Lord Melbourne. Boiled chicken and peas and pudding were considered suitable nursery foods, but hardly what a gentleman was accustomed to seeing on his plate, she had said.

Melbourne had declined and praised the bland offering, managing to swallow a few mouthfuls with a show of enthusiasm and even pretending to drink the milky tea which finished their meal.

"Will you show me your new chemise and peignoir, if I do?" He asked in return, cocking a brow as stared at her meaningfully.

It had been more than a week, five of those days spent at Windsor. The bruising had gone from black to garish shades of yellow and green, and if some pain persisted it was only a manageable reminder. Victoria was all tenderness during his convalescence, but made it plain in the silent communication of marriage that she would brook no romantic overtures for the sake of his health and well-being.

Nurturing was well and good in its place, he thought, but being treated as a fragile vessel, an invalid, had run its course.

Never excessively hot-blooded, he had long since resigned himself to the handicap posed by a deep strain of romanticism. Or perhaps I am just a late bloomer, he reflected, amused by the notion. Victoria so exactly satisfied every need, her innocent adoration as stirring an aphrodisiac as the ardor which awakened only for him. Their passion could be playful or bawdy, prolonged or so raging it burnt itself out fiercely in exhausted satisfaction; she willingly partook of every new sensation, and if she was sometimes shy in the midst of intimacy, it was only the remnant of girlish insecurity. But whatever deliriously pleasurable activities preceded it, the moment of their joining was a sacrament to him and in that ineffable sensation of entering her, quite literally two made one, the essential loneliness of his soul found respite in the act of coming home.

As soon as the door closed behind them, he stopped her, his hands encircling her waist.

"Mrs. Melbourne, tonight you will do your wifely duty," he said huskily, mock-serious tone betrayed by the rough cracking of his voice. Victoria's face softened; she reached her arms up and crossed her hands behind his neck.

"Yes, Lord M," she responded sweetly, her lips already pursed to invite his kiss. She stepped back so that he could see her clearly, and lowered the neckline of her gown in a slow, provocative movement. Where he expected to see a glimpse of proper white corset, he saw dusky rose satin instead.
Chronological List of Works in Series
Chapter 15

My dearest Lady Blessington,

I left London rather suddenly for an appointment with Lord Melbourne upon a matter of some importance, and thus came here to Windsor, where I will take up residence as a guest of Her Majesty and His Grace for an indeterminate period of time.

There is hardly any person in the world I esteem and regard so much as yourself, or for whom I feel so grateful and warm an interest, and to prove this to you, however humbly, would be a delightful vent to my sentiments. There is to be a grand entertainment at Chatsworth to mark the end of Lent and the opening of the spring season, a bal masque. I will obtain you a card from Devonshire and you may see for yourself the shocking tone of the royal couple. It is not at all what you might expect from what has gone before, on either side. This pair is most desperately in love.

I have been taken into the very bosom of the family. I was at once settled with every care to my comfort in rooms only a short distance from the Royal apartment. You will be interested to know – and I have no doubt I can trust your discretion – that they share one bedchamber. Servants talk, even those body servants entrusted with their masters’ most intimate arrangements, and I have it on the best authority that such is the case for our young sovereign and the senior statesman to whom she aligned herself in marriage so precipitously.

I will spare your blushes in my description of how this pair go on, away from public scrutiny. Her ladies remain unflappable and for myself, I find it quaint and charming, if unintentionally smug and self-involved. They touch each other constantly, fingers intertwined, one’s hand resting on the other’s shoulder, as though even that small a distance is not to be borne.

Lord Melbourne has about him the air of a happy and contented man, his every ambition fulfilled.
beyond measure. I don’t ascribe to him worldly ambition, for he had reached the pinnacle of power when our little Queen was a schoolroom miss, and the role of consort to a queen regnant is an awkward role at best, a stud put to mare for the sole purpose of procreation. Since, so far as the world knows, he has failed at that, what else is there to satisfy worldly ambition? No, having known him in the waning days of his previous marriage, I daresay I am something of an expert. I lived under his roof for weeks at a time, caught up in Lady Lamb’s web. I was once refuted when I called Melbourne the kindest and most honorable of men, with the late calamities brought to his name. Then, he was resigned, and like all men, took what comfort he could, where he could. Now he bears the stamp of a man well-loved, who loves deeply in return.

Even his detractors commended his devotion to the poor enfeebled creature he and Caroline between them raised to adulthood. Those who saw his tender care of Augustus would not be surprised at the warmth of his affection for the Queen's children. I will not add my voice to those who cannot leave well enough alone. I will only remark, for your private edification, on the startling resemblance of our Prince of Wales to his stepfather. I have previously viewed it as fantastical, that any infant of tender years can be said to have the look of a grown man but none who see them together can mistake the similarities. 'Affectionate Brothers' has long disappeared from public view but it once occupied a prominent place at Brocket Hall, and had sixty years not passed since Reynolds first slapped paint on canvas, I would assume the boy I behold now had sat for the artist. You would think me consumed by sentimentality if I said there was something more even than mere symmetry of features and coloring, so I will leave it at that and say no more.

My old friend permits the royal children the run of his apartments, even his inner sanctum where we have begun our work. His Grace listens with the utmost interest to their childish prattle and allows them to clamber over him at will. Thankfully, I am not required to pretend such interest as I do not feel.

I will write more of the undertaking in which I am to play a part, but for now I will close this with my firm wish for your continued good health. Pray make your arrangements to come to London forthwith; too much solitude and ruralizing can be as detrimental to the spirit as too frenetic a pace.

Yours-
Edward

"How do you want your story to be told?"

Melbourne blinked slowly, then chuckled and pushed himself up. He stretched luxuriously, relishing the freedom from frock coat. Edward Bulwer had given directions to the cadre of clerks sent up from Chancery Lane, bearing boxes filled to overflowing with the letters to and from Lord Melbourne, and the text of the speeches he had made during his tenure.

"So few?" Melbourne had mused, somewhat shocked at the thin sheaf of papers containing his speeches. All those years in the House, holding a bench first in Commons and then in the Lords, with little to show for it. Only myself to blame, he acknowledged. If it's a matter of blame.

Speech-making was not his strong suit; his first was probably his best, that first effort Caro had helped him prepare. They had written and rewritten the text and he had practiced ad nauseum while she listened and offered criticism. When the day came, she had dressed in a boy's suit and smuggled herself into the gallery, then raced back to Melbourne House to celebrate his return as a conquering hero. We were so very young then, infatuated as much with all the possibilities of life stretched out before us, as with each other.
Victoria had longed to hear him speak, and devised various impractical schemes to accomplish her goal.

"I am no orator, ma'am," his sincere disclaimer had gone unheeded, Victoria's assumption to the contrary unshakeable.

It was no false modesty, although he could not convince her otherwise; too many thoughts crowded together in his mind, and any attempt to do other than read from a prepared text was bound to go awry when his attention wandered. Some new counterargument always occurred at the most inopportune moment, some errant challenge to his conclusion which demanded instant examination, so that he hemmed and hawed and stuttered and lost his train of thought entirely.

"With the statement that nothing can be understood without context. A schoolmaster might require his pupil to memorize a list of dates, but until the pupil understands what each event signified in the context of its own time, there can be nothing gained by looking at the past." Melbourne allowed that reflection to stand. He walked around the broad oak table they were using as a desk and went to look out of the window. The children were walking along a path with several companions, followed by hovering caretakers and the ladies of the queen's household.

The Baroness had been permitted to continue the practice she'd instituted at Kensington, bringing other children in to share the royal schoolroom. It had done little good in the strained atmosphere of Kensington, but he wholeheartedly endorsed the notion for his own children. Her children, he amended mentally; Bulwer-Lytton's presence would quickly become ubiquitous and such slips could not become regular.

"My mother was not a chaste woman, but she was a remarkable person and a good and loving mother. I will offer no apologies or excuses for her personal habits, for none is necessary. In the context of her time, and her marriage, she did her duty. She provided her husband with an heir, and a promising family. He – and she – were content with their lot. My mother secured the title for her husband, as well as a position at Court. Beyond that…" Melbourne shrugged. "I am proud of my mother and I think, I hope, she would finally be proud of who and what I've become."

He realized belatedly that there was some pathos in the phrase he had used. He had been her favorite, and he had disappointed her in his early lack of ambition and later retreat from society and the business of government. He had unwittingly violated the strictest of social mores, do what you will but above all avoid scandal, not once, not twice, but thrice, and all through the machinations of strong-willed, tempestuous females cast in his own mother's mold. And yet…he often wondered what she would make of her late-blooming son, and where he had landed in the second half of his life. Prime Minister and then…Victoria. If Lady Elizabeth Melbourne only knew it, her ambitions would be realized a thousand-fold when her grandson ascended the throne. Someday. God willing, that day would be far distant, shrouded in the mists of time.

Edward knew the general outline of his early years, and deftly asked questions to flesh out the litany of rather mundane dates and events. His early horror of boiled mutton and peas, used by a harsh governess to torment him. His school years, and the early shock of a sensitive bookish boy doted on by his mother and siblings cast out into the world. How he had swiftly learned to navigate the shoals of Eton, becoming a popular student and making lifelong friendships.

He talked so much his mouth grew dry, his voice rasping, while Bulwer-Lytton wrote steadily. Melbourne only stopped, dragged back to the present by the other man pushing back his chair.

"We have a good start. Let me write it up, assign some order to the thing, and see if it gives us a sense of where we'll be going with it. I have some ideas, but of course whether you want this to be in my voice – third person narration – or yours, will dictate the format."
Melbourne shrugged, rolling his shoulders to ease the ache settled there.

"The format is – whatever they need it to be. I write for them only. For me, I couldn't give a damn what conclusion, if any, future generations draw as to my character or accomplishments, if I'm held to have any."

"Well, for one, there's this –" Bulwer-Lytton indicated the stacked boxes bearing neat markings, month, year and type of material contained therein.

"Your idea, wasn't it? To create an official archive of all government business? Moldering manuscripts left to the mice at Westminster, the Tower and damp attics at #10."

"Self-interest, Edward, purely self-interest. When I took office there was nothing to tell me how to go on. It's the sort of job you can't prepare for, but it helped tremendously when I could find some record of how my predecessors approached some signal event, what prompted them to take the course they did. First Lord of the Treasury – Prime Minister – did not exist before Walpole. He created the position and each thereafter added his mite. To be able to benefit from the experiences of the men who came before…" Melbourne shrugged once more, eloquently, then He motioned with his chin towards the scene below.

"What do you see, Ned?" he asked mildly, stepping aside so the younger man could join him.

At a distance, little more than bonnets and gowns gave a clue as to the identity of the parties they watched, yet Melbourne unerringly knew which figure was hers. The set of her shoulders? Her lack of inches? A musicality in her movements?

"Ego amare et amari sum," Melbourne's voice was so quiet he might have been only thinking aloud. "I loved, and I was loved. The rest –" he waved a long, elegant hand, the gesture strangely Gallic for an Englishman through and through.

"In my own defense, I never did a thing only for self-gain, nor solely to bring about the destruction of another. If some will say I did not have the courage of my convictions, I would say I never had unalterable convictions. Who was I to declare the final word on those complex issues which confronted me? For every argument on one side of an issue, there were a dozen more, equally compelling, leading towards diametrically opposed conclusions."

"Then that is what we will make plain. If you lacked any quality, it was not firmness, but the willful blindness to all but your own course. William, if you ask me – and I must assume that on some level, you do, if you ask me to write your biography – you were the finest man of your generation, or any that came after. A gentleman, in the truest sense of the word, with an innate sense of honor and personal integrity. Caro once –" Bulwer-Lytton stopped, glanced at Melbourne as though assessing the weight of that name, then continued.

"You did not abandon her when any other man in the world would have, under such circumstances. Do you remember what you said when she begged you to separate and save your own reputation? 'Caroline,' you told her, 'we will stand or fall together.'"

"She was ridiculed and scorned. She had lost herself. She did not deserve the persecution heaped upon her. Except for me, she had not a friend in the world. I could not desert her in such a plight."

Melbourne felt a feather-light touch brush his heart, the ghost of his first love.

"What we write must vindicate her, as much as we can. While there is no need to rehash the old stories, they will have to be addressed. Do so with a light hand, please, and do not elevate me at her
expense. We loved, we stumbled, we paid the price, each of us in our own coin. Can I say, if I had somehow met —" he did not say the name, only looked once more at the petite figure on the path. "- if it had been me, rather than Caro, would I have been able to stand resolute against such an irresistible impulse? Love is medicine, and madness, and above all the elixir of life.” Melbourne cleared the thickness from his throat, then shook his head and laughed.

"Oh good Lord, man, we will not make me into Galahad, nor my Ariel into a scarlet woman. That's all I'm trying to say. Let's get on with it then. Her Majesty expects me at four o'clock, if I do not find her sooner."

Victoria walked beside her sister-in-law, both ladies cloaked against the raw March wind, careful to keep some distance between them and the group of chattering ladies-in-waiting just ahead. Leading the procession, Baroness Lehzen and Herr Heyse chaperoned the children on an exploration of the flora and fauna to be found on the edge of the Great Woods.

Victoria glanced up at them from time to time, satisfied with what she saw. The tutor crouched patiently and with a show of interest each time he was presented with a new discovery, examining variously the skeletal remains of an amphibian, the half-shell of a discarded turtle egg from the previous summer's hatch and a quantity of stones offered up in the apparent belief they were precious gems.

Harriet and Wilhelmina pretended an enjoyment of nature Victoria was certain they did not feel. Outdoor air chapped and reddened Lady Dalmeny's porcelain complexion and the hem of her gown was damp and bore several clear paw prints, while her coiffure suffered equally from damp and the light breeze blowing off the water. She carried a basket full to overflowing with the muddy accumulation of the children's walk, swans' feathers and interesting rocks and the skeleton of a large frog. The sight made Victoria determined they would encircle the entire pond before turning back. With luck, Deckel would clamber to be picked up and that task would fall to Lady Dalmeny as well. If only the monkey could have been extracted from his hiding place, Victoria thought spitefully, he could have been thrust on that arrogant beauty as well. “That would give her something to do besides flirt with my husband, she and Harriet both.”

Resisting the urge to smirk at her attendant's state of disarray, Victoria glanced down at her own gown. It was heavy silk satin in a dark blue and black tartan pattern which concealed any stains at the hem. Her cape had a collar which blocked the damp wind, and her own hair was smoothly contained under a wide-brimmed bonnet.

"I'll have the dressing of Henry, of course. I assume you've chosen William's costume?" Emily's dark eyes danced with humor.

"Why do gentlemen so dislike costume balls?" Victoria dimpled at the thought of Lord M in the à la mode fashion popular amongst young man eighty years before. He would wear a wig, of course, an extravagant concoction with curls far past his shoulders. "And those divinely skin-tight breeches. Do you know, they wore nothing underneath?"

"I do. Those white cashmere trousers our late Prince and his friends wore left little to the imagination. Will you make William go au naturel? I can insist Henry do likewise."

"They will have layers and layers of lace ruffles and gold embroidery, knee buckles, striped stockings, and shoes with bright red heels…"

"A bejeweled snuff box for each of them, and of course swords…"
"Tricorne hats, or chapeau bras."

"William will go as Horace Walpole. That means Henry go as the Prime Minister, and lord it over him."

"We have you to thank, that we are invited to Chatsworth? The Duke has always been fond of me, and I know he is an admirer of yours, but my husband is not refined enough to suit our bachelor duke."

"Nonsense, Emily. Lord Palmerston is a gentleman. If Chatsworth survived my uncles, Henry will do fine. He only," Victoria stopped herself in time, determined to choose her words carefully. "He irritates me sometimes, but that is political. If he ever goes too far – well, you will still be my sister, and he my brother. And he loves you so!" She finished in a rush, glancing shyly up at the older woman.

"We waited a long time to achieve the happiness we have now. I know he is not an easy man to manage, but he is truly devoted to England, and the Crown – and you, ma'am."

They walked along in companionable silence, each of them watching the gaggle of children weaving in and out of the tall reeds in search of a swan's nest. Victoria was doubly pleased, that her own son and daughter had the companionship of others, and that they would grow up a part of this large, loving, noisy extended family.

"Little Lambs," she murmured.

Florence and Adine were George Cowper's girls; little Vicky, Anthony and Mary Ashley were young Emily's and the little Ladies Victoria Alexandrina, called Alix, and Alice were Jocelyn's. At any given point, the royal schoolroom was filled with a rotating cast of Emily's grandchildren to bear their cousins company and mitigate the self-centered isolation which would otherwise be their lot. Victoria was determined to provide her own children with a facsimile of the noisy camaraderie of William's childhood. She privately conceded that the twin demons of social insecurity and possessive jealousy she struggled with as an adult might have been tempered had she not been the sole center of attention as a child. Lehzen and the gentleman tutor concurred, neither fazed by the additional demands upon their time and attention.

"Have you heard from Fanny?" She asked. Francis Jocelyn had been one of her first attendants at Court, and an attendant at her first wedding. She had retired to her husband's estate in February in anticipation of confinement.

"She does well, but Robert and his mother are driving her to distraction. She is sure this one will be a boy, but –" Emily shrugged eloquently. "-if not, they must try again. Not an arduous task for the man at least. We women have the worst of it."

Victoria sighed pensively. "How I would love to give William a child he can own!"

"He adores the two you have. No man has ever been more besotted by a child than William is by Elizabeth, and when I see him with Liam –" Emily's voice grew thick, and she shook her head impatiently. "You have made him happy, ma'am. He loves, and he is loved. He is content."

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"I supposed I should dress for the Prime Minister. Can't be pottering about like this." Melbourne indicated an open collar and the scruff on his chin.

"How goes the writing?" Victoria asked absently, turning her head this way and that, frowning at her
reflection. She made an impatient request of her dresser, and then turned her attention to her husband. "Is it really as awful as all that? You tell such wonderful stories, and make everything come to life in such a droll way. It needs only writing down."

Melbourne chuckled, rubbing the day's growth of beard so it made a pleasant rasping noise. He slouched against the bureau, hands in his pockets.

"If only it were that easy. The authors of my acquaintance say there must be an outline in place, with some clear sense of where I want to go and how to flesh it out towards that end. There should be a symmetry, balance, structure. Instead all I have are anecdotes and memories."

"You think about it too much, darling. You are an exceptional man who has lived an interesting life. And the symmetry comes from the fact that you have always been you. You told me that as a boy you disliked fisticuffs, or even discord. So you found other means to settle disputes, to the good of all. Isn't that the common thread throughout your life? Other men are driven by their certainty that theirs is the only right way and refuse to see there might be – thank you, Skerrett, you may leave us now."

Melbourne watched affectionately as Victoria, glancing up at him, schooled her expression into a pleasant smile and modified her sharp tone.

She had changed into a simple dark blue silk with wide white lace collar and cuffs, with pearl drop earbobs and only the wedding band Melbourne had placed on her finger. When her maid had departed she turned her back toward her husband.

"Button me, please," she demanded sweetly.

Melbourne looked down at pale smooth skin, graceful swan's neck above lovely sloping shoulders. He delicately traced each vertebra until his fingers reached the fine lace edging on her corset. Then he began at the bottom, working each covered button through its hole. It was a chaste, yet headily erotic task and he took his time, savoring the intimacy.

Neither he nor Victoria moved when the blue silk was securely fastened, content to linger in such close proximity that a tingling current seemed to connect them. Then he leaned down and put his lips close to her ear.

"Ego amare et amari sum."

Victoria rolled her freshly-coiffed head against his shirt front. Then she sighed deeply and straightened, pulling her shoulders back in that gesture Melbourne knew signified determination to do her duty, however little she was so inclined.

"John Russell and Lord Palmerston," she said. "And Lord Grey. The Council will convene here tomorrow and I want no surprises."

Victoria picked up one of Melbourne's hands in both of hers and studied it so intently he grew curious. She examined the lines in his palm, tracing each one with the tip of a finger, then pressed her lips against it so her breath tickled the sensitive skin.

"Je vous adore," she whispered.
Chronological List of Works
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Crest of the 7th Baron Byron

It might have been a glum group to assemble at dinner, Melbourne mused, save that Henry Temple's bluff good humor was impervious to slight, little Johnny Russell – grown stout with the advent of middle age, which made for a rotund Tweedle-Dee figure as sober in private as he was bellicose at the lectern – circumspect and Victoria herself remarkably self-composed. Where once, as a very young woman still in her teens, she would have allowed her earlier displeasure to color their later interactions, Melbourne witnessed with admiration and some understandable pride how she now set aside the heated exchange he had witnessed and adopted in its place a feminine version of his own deliberately urbane speech and manner.

"Have you ever met a revolutionary you did not like, Lord Palmerston?" Victoria had snapped earlier, to her Foreign Secretary. Not at all cowed by the flashing blue eyes and sharp tone, Henry had responded with a lazy smile.

"Not yet, ma'am, but I suppose there might come a day."

"Do you think I am an anachronism? The Crown I wear, the duty I perform, only an artifact suitable for philosophers to study and music hall pantomime?" Victoria threw his earlier, ill-considered words back at him, nearly hissing.

Melbourne deliberately remained behind her and to one side, lounging apparently at ease, while she stalked back and forth like an angry jungle cat ready to pounce. He even found himself appreciating her appearance at that moment, the electromagnetic energy she seemed to exude along with that transcendent thing beyond simple dignity which lent credence to the notion God's anointed. It was easy to imagine her at the head of an army, rallying her troops to the charge.

Some small part of him felt the pull to rush to her defense, but keen awareness of his position relative to hers kept him still. She was the sovereign, the Head of State, and he merely the retired politician advisor. To intervene would be to cost her dearly, only to gratify his masculine ego. The gist of the argument was no more or less than Henry Temple's obsessive need to interfere on the side of any ideological child of the late French Revolution, the proximate cause his domineering temperament and tendency to ride roughshod over anyone.
"No, ma'am, certainly not. We in England manage the monarchy quite satisfactorily, thanks to our constitution. You've not upset that balance yet and so long as you refrain from interfering..."

Melbourne was certain he had winced visibly at the choice of words. *Henry, for God's sake, use some tact,* he mentally admonished.

Thankfully, the Army dispatches had been reviewed, those further orders which required the Queen's signature had been expeditiously dealt with. Despite losing his baggage train, Harry Smith's division was victorious. On 28 January he had eliminated the Sikh bridgehead at Aliwal and on 10 February knocked down the final obstacle and took Sobraon, thanks in no small part to Taj Singh's defection from Jind Kaur's standard. The terms of the treaty were laid before the Queen and she had handed Melbourne each sheet for his review prior to signing. In that regard, and in only the capacity of a senior adviser, he had scanned them, exchanging a single probing glance to assure her he found nothing objectionable.

No sooner had *Victoria R* been affixed to the last page of the treaty document, than she laid them aside and fixed Palmerston with an icy glare. And so the battle commenced.

It was no true match, for Melbourne knew not even his fiery brother-in-law would go so far as to explode in the presence of the Queen. If his insolence was tempered with humor and a dash of what he considered charm, it nonetheless infuriated Victoria further.

The audience terminated abruptly when Victoria dismissed him. Her icy civility was met with only a warm, ingratiating grin.

"Thank you, ma'am. I had to rise at an ungodly hour in order to make the trip to Windsor. Until dinner then..." and his features twitched with amusement as he bent over her hand.

As soon as they were alone Victoria vented her outrage. Melbourne only listened, schooling his features to remain still. When her temper wound down sufficiently he laid his hands on her shoulders and gently kneaded the tightness there.

"It isn't only my pride that is offended, William. He plays a dangerous game. I might understand that he's typical of many Englishmen – you, even – in holding a genuine allegiance to the idea of the crown. But do radicals in Europe, and even here, in our own country, truly know that? Or do they think that if I were deposed they would have the support of men like Henry? Doesn't that threaten everything I stand for, and our son?"

Melbourne did in fact think she was correct in her assumptions – both of them. He had long considered the monarchy a quaint institution, and his devotion to the Crown a mix of sentimentality and reverence for tradition. But he also believed – and at heart, so did Palmerston – that it was a necessary institution, for the continuance of their national identity. Monarchy provided the only stability in a constitutional democracy which saw its government change, and its foreign and domestic policy change with every election.

And he had long been frustrated by his own inability to control Palmerston's mercurial adventurism. It could be useful in its place, in international diplomacy, the threat which made reasonable overtures more attractive than open discord between nations.

He tried, with mixed success, to separate his competing roles. The stakes were far higher now, and visceral emotional attachment impossible to segregate from rational political considerations.

"Louis-Phillipe is constantly anxious. Uncle Leopold advises eternal vigilance. They were both put on their thrones by rebellions and don't dare forget who holds the real power. My godfather the
Emperor is forced to be harsh because he cannot dare forget unrest which led to the Decembrist uprising and advocates for the suppression of any liberty."

Melbourne looked down at his hands on her shoulders, thinking to how large they looked, how powerful in comparison to the fragile stem of her neck…and how they were beginning to be veined with age. How long can I keep her safe? he wondered.

His time in Dublin, those years as Home Secretary when he had been forced to act firmly – some said harshly – to suppress the Swing Riots, and his time as First Lord of the Treasury and chief minister, had been devoted almost exclusively to finding that elusive middle ground, to keep the nation from a destabilizing tilt too far in the direction of either unrestrained liberty or repression. Whether The Reform Act with which his name was most closely associated had achieved a permanent solution or if it had only deferred the inevitable, only time would tell. Can the monarchy survive? Melbourne wondered, not for the first time.

He had been a boy when the French Queen went to the guillotine. Like his schoolfellows, the notion of a people's rebellion against all authority had seemed a distant, exciting prospect. As a man, naïve youthful liberality had collided with the real threat it posed to his way of life. And as the husband of a queen regnant, the father of a future king, no prospect loomed more horrifying.

Melbourne pushed back such grim reflections and strove to project the strength she needed.

"He'd be more dangerous out of office than in," he cautioned. "I know, and you know, that he is sincerely devoted both to you and the Crown. And he loves the children dearly. If he views you as indomitable – which I believe he does, to your credit – perhaps they are the key to making him realize the real danger his unrestrained support of foreign revolutionaries poses at home."

She turned so suddenly he was nearly thrown off balance, and then she was only a girl again, soft in his arms, needy, hungry for the protection of his arms.

"Let's go down to the nursery. And then we can rest before dinner too."

Melbourne ran his hands down her arms against the soft material of her gown, and found all pliable warmth, her body molding itself to his touch.

"Our little naturalist can show me the flora and fauna he found," he agreed, smiling at his son's gentle enthusiasm for all things scientific, an odd artifact inherited from the young man who had been his father in name only.

Russell's secretary had delivered a sealed packet, bearing the imprint of the Duke of Bedford. A cursory glance seemed to indicate it had not been tampered with, and Melbourne was curious what he had written. He tucked it in his coat pocket as they left the library.

Full spring was nearly upon them, and with the lengthening days it grew more difficult to impose Lehzen's strict bedtime routine. When they turned into the cul-de-sac corridor containing the children's apartments Melbourne heard the unmistakable sound of his daughter's imperious dissent, her lisping voice capable of penetrating even the thick walls of Windsor when in a rage. The look he exchanged with Victoria reassured him. It would not be unknown for mother and daughter to square off, one the perfect replica of the other in miniature.

"Your daughter, ma'am," he said, knowing his face had softened when she might have preferred he be stern. And she was, through and through. Elizabeth had inherited her mother's dainty frame, as deceptively fragile as a fairy princess. She likewise had Victoria's coloring and heart-shaped face,
with large expressive Hanoverian blue eyes. From the stories her mother told and Baroness Lehzen's reminiscences, she had also inherited her mother's autocratic temper and a tendency to fly into ungovernable rages when her will was thwarted. The little Alexandrina had famously thrown scissors at her beloved Lehzen and driven a succession of predecessors in that role to quit in tears.

Elizabeth, called Lily, had been born a month early, on the occasion of a madman firing point-blank at the Queen one hot August day. When the impossibly tiny bundle had been placed in his hands – for his two hands could contain the entire scrap of humanity – he had felt his heart pump love like lifeblood into her veins.

That face, no bigger than an apple, the sweep of long lashes and gentle inquisitive gaze, rosebud lips pursed as she examined the first face she saw upon opening her eyes – it was a gravid image indelibly carved on his soul, the promise of the universe and every god who ever was.

Just now, that ethereal being was jumping up and down on the four-poster bed in nothing but lace-trimmed drawers, alternating between shrill laughter and shrieks of protest directed at the nursery maids attempting to seize her. Melbourne, taller than the females in their black broadcloth, white aprons and mob caps, leaned in and extended his arms. The little princess launched herself off the mattress and into his embrace.

He listed carefully to her complaint, seemingly the early hour as evidenced by full daylight beyond the castle walls. Bathing was an activity reserved for evening Lehzen says, yet upon returning from their afternoon exploration of the grounds the schedule was disrupted by the arrival of their bath. In the light, Papa! Lily exclaimed, sounding scandalized at the prospect.

"Let's see what the Baroness has to say for herself," Melbourne responded, making sure he properly conveyed the seriousness with which he took such a breach in protocol. As he brushed past Victoria he winked, and she rolled her eyes in return.

Liam was already seated at the worktable in his room, painstakingly arranging new leaves on a board. His wet hair and the frilled cuffs of a nightshirt under his dressing gown indicated he had survived the daylight bath. Baroness Lehzen preempted inquiry by briskly explaining the efficacy of a hot bath to ward off any chill from wet, mud-soaked stockings, and firmly demanded her younger charge surrender at once.

Melbourne felt the little arms tighten around his neck, and allowed himself to savor the sensation. Then he hugged her in return and detached her firmly. Any potential unpleasantness was averted when Victoria announced she would bathe her daughter herself. Lily brightened at such an unaccustomed treat and went off happily at her mother's side.

Melbourne sat down beside Liam and listened to a careful identification of each leaf and the properties which rendered it unique. He himself only vaguely recalled lessons in natural science from a half-century past, and was yet again impressed by the boy's ability to absorb information. Augustus had once demonstrated a similar ability, although in his case – Melbourne shut down the comparison harshly.

This child was naturally shy, but perfectly ordinary in every regard, demonstrative with his parents, loquacious when his interest was aroused and had mastered the intricate protocol of presentations and Court etiquette. And it was Lily who manifested some of the ungovernable rages which were a hallmark of life with Augustus, although even in her case there was no sign of his animalistic abandon. She never sought to do harm, and her worst storms were accompanied by articulation of the grievances which prompted her. Dr. Frankenstein's monster, Emily had once described her nephew in his twenty-first year, an epitaph which had been all the crueler for its perspicacity.
That dread had never left him, during each of Victoria's confinements – the possibility that whatever the cause of his first son's mental defect, it might reappear in the Queen's children. A feeble-minded heir to the throne would end the monarchy and make England the republic her American cousins longed to incite, yet another in the long line of wrongs for which there was no atonement.

Sitting beside his son, Melbourne cupped the back of the boy's curly head in his hand.

"I love you, Papa," he heard the boy say suddenly. Responding to his caress, no doubt, he told himself – not as though he had read his thoughts.

"I love you, William," Melbourne replied, hearing his voice crack and rasp with emotion.

The sound of dishes clattering announced supper's arrival.

"Will you and Mama stay and eat with us again?"

"Not tonight. Your mother and I have guests. The Prime Minister and Lord Palmerston. They will stay the night."

"Will Uncle Henry come to visit us?" Melbourne reflected on Palmerston's rash, even risky, embrace of radical liberalism juxtaposed with the man's tender regard for his niece and nephew. It was not unusual to find the Foreign Minister down on all fours moving miniature train cars around or galloping in response to Lily's command.

"I think he will," he said, bending to kiss his son.

"So what does Bedford have to say? Has he already begun the task you set him?"

Melbourne was sprawled on their bed, shoes off. He had finished reading the four closely-written pages in the elder Russell's hand. And it was his, rather than a clerk's, Melbourne thought. He would not have trusted this to a subordinate.

"He says that there is no connection between the – er, incident outside Brown's Hotel and his – my – intention of reforming and consolidating the intelligence services. Coincidence only."

"He's sure of that?" Victoria sat at her ornate little writing desk, most often used to write in her daily journal at bedtime.

"As sure as he can be. They found a hansom cab driver who had been questioned by a Peeler, for blocking the interchange. That fellow had been given a few quid to wait while his passenger ducked into the hotel – to deliver a cane for his master, so he said."

"Then they were able to trace the man who attacked you?"

"They were. Discreetly, of course, since we didn't want to involve anyone official in our inquiries. So far only a handful of us even know anything unusual happened. My stop was brief, the street was crowded and so far as bystanders know, I was merely jostled by a porter."

"So…" Victoria rose from her seat and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. She laid a hand on his arm, her brows furrowed with concern.

"So, it was a personal grudge, in a manner of speaking. A man named Francis Beck, from Nottinghamshire." Melbourne sighed heavily, waiting for some sign of understanding. Victoria merely tilted her head questioningly.
"The reckless fate of these poor creatures,
Fills the town with sad dismay,
For Nottingham, with its bright features,
Could not check that dreadful day.

To see the prime of youth now wither,
‘Midst relations, friends so dear,
It makes one’s blood almost to shiver,
Who could stop the burning tear?

Hearson, Beck and Armstrong boldly,
Met their fates beneath the tree;
Villains swore against them coldly,
And their doom we all shall see.”

"The workers' riots of the early 30's. We had to make an example, but there were those who claimed we did so in haste and with little regard for the guilt or innocence of those who were condemned to hang. I commuted as many sentences as I could, but in total 19 men were hung. Beck was one of them, and one of the two or three whose guilt was most in doubt."

Melbourne watched her sweet face processing the information. Victoria might have known, as Heir Apparent, of the unrest sweeping through the country in the '30s, during his tenure as Home Secretary, but he doubted it. A girl of eleven would have been spared much, and the rest of it heavily censored. Another reminder of the vast chasm of years separating us, he thought, wincing internally at the image he conjured. A Home Secretary of 50 and a schoolroom miss. What if they had met? Had they ever met, on one of her infrequent visits to Court? And if they had, why did he not recall? How could something so momentous as that leave him completely unaware?

"What are you thinking? Tell me," he prompted, wanting her to reach for him and close that gulf the years had opened up.

To his great relief, she did.

"My poor darling! How hard that must have been for you! You are so tender-hearted." Victoria's eyes were filled with love and compassion – for him, and him alone.

"My assailant was – or claims to be – his brother's witness, that he was innocent of the charges against him, that he had been a ringleader of the Beeston riot and the destruction of Lowe’s silk mill. A youth of 15 at the time, he watched his brother swing. Hearson left only a young wife and two small children, and she has since remarried. Of Armstrong’s family, no more was heard. But our fellow, Beck, had a widowed mother and sickly young sister who both died that winter – of
starvation and cold, for they would not go to the poorhouse."

"He must be charged!" Victoria exclaimed, squeezing his hand tightly in hers.

"No, ma'am, he must not. We do not need a martyr, nor to open up those old wounds. The Reform Bill did its job of giving hope that things would change for the better, and most of those who had a grudge against the government for their circumstance gave up the fight. Our economy improved, and when men see some profit from their labors they are less likely to riot in the streets and overturn their means of earning a wage."

Melbourne knew as he spoke that it was what he might have said to any such as Mr. Dickens – or, come to think of it, Bulwer-Lytton - about that part of his career.

"Civil disorder is the worst of all evils. Government is impotent and ridiculous, unless the public peace can be preserved and the liberty and property of individuals saved from outrage and invasion," he continued, his only concession to a deep-seated need to have her understand. And grant absolution? Perhaps.

"You kept us all safe – my uncle, and Mama and I as much as any merchant or shopkeeper who would have seen his life's work destroyed in a night."

"We were all convinced then that we were tottering on the brink of chaos. France – Belgium – well, the harvest failed in '30 and when people are hungry…” Melbourne waved a hand, then let it fall on her shoulder. Victoria took it as invitation and crawled further up the bed to lean against him, resting her head on his chest trustingly.

"But I wish it had not happened. All of it. Bedford advises, and I concur, that since Beck has no ties to Nottinghamshire, we will do best to send him to America."

"Transportation?" Victoria murmured, her fingers toying with a button on his waistcoat.

"No. We will settle a sum on him sufficient to allow him to set himself up in trade, and support himself until he does so. He claims he did not plan the attack on my person. He heard someone in the crowd mention my name and the old grudge overtook him. He had a job, and was in fact at the hotel that day making a delivery."

"The sword-cane?" Victoria's arched brow conveyed skepticism as eloquently as her voice.

Melbourne chuckled. "The sword-cane. I thought I recognized the crest. Our Mr. Beck is – was – in the service of the 7th Baron Byron."

Victoria's mouth dropped open, her eyes wide with such a look of surprise that he laughed again, and hugged her to him.

"Yes, Byron. Our 7th Baron is the cousin of my old…er, friend. Despite his best attempts to gamble away the Rochdale estate, it passed to his cousin when he died in '24. The sword-cane had once been a fashionable affectation of that Lord Byron."

Victoria squirmed even closer, her body pressing against his. He felt the reassuring warmth even through layers of petticoats and silk, and closed the door in his mind firmly against all reminders of the past to concentrate on the very pleasant present.

"Well, my darling, shall we join our guests for an aperitif?" he asked finally, reluctant to relinquish the comfort of her embrace. "I think you've given Henry quite enough time to repent of his excesses."
"That Palmerston will not dine with us. I will only see Emily's husband, and your brother-in-law."
Victoria sat up with all the agility of youth, and spread out her skirts while Melbourne watched, admiring her neat economy of movement. Then she turned once more, eyeing him fiercely.

"Very well. Send that man away – far away. If he returns, I will – I will ask Billy to deal with him. Permanently. When I think of him daring to raise a hand to you, I –"

"My adorable little cub has become a fierce tigress," Melbourne said, remembering the old comment made only partly in jest. "With sharp teeth and claws. You need not fear for me, my darling. It is my place to protect you, and I will."

Victoria was every bit the great lady and fashionable hostess, permitting no hint of her earlier displeasure to be displayed at table. Melbourne only became aware he was gaping with an expression as love-struck as a schoolboy when his sister poked him sharply.

Where was the young girl, in so many endearing ways even younger than her eighteen years? He wondered somewhat wistfully. No longer was her every thought writ plain on her face; now she controlled her manner and expression quite diplomatically, a poised and polished young woman whose elegance added a sheen to the fresh prettiness of youth. My girl, he thought, so full of pride he thought he might burst. My precious girl. Gloriana.

She bantered with Henry and drew out her Prime Minister, disposed to be quiet and withdrawn at the Royal table. She encouraged Bulwer-Lytton's wit and gratified him by her interest in his vast store of society on dits. Melbourne knew he censored the worst of them, but the tales he told her racy enough to bring a charming color to Victoria's cheeks.

"Your plump little duckling has become a swan, William. What will you do when she no longer looks to you to mentor her?" Emily had asked archly, reading his expression with unerring accuracy.

"Oh, I imagine I'll think of something," he had retorted, arching a brow.

"Perhaps it's time to fill the royal cradle again? With a Lamb in name as well as face this time. While she's still willing."

Melbourne frowned, turning his full attention on his sister.

"For God's sake, don't put that notion in her head, Em. She would, if she thought it would please me, no matter the risk to herself. And I won't have it. When we lost the child last summer –"

"Oh, please. She's young and healthy, and you – well, you mustn't let too much time go by –"

"Emily, please," he said sharply, annoyed at the implication. "Sometimes you are too much like Mother."

"Think of Mother, then. How proud she would be, if the next Duke of Sussex or Cambridge were a Lamb." Both those titles reserved for royal dukes, younger Princes of the Blood. Melbourne grimaced. A small shameful part of him thought longingly of a child he could claim, and he pushed it away as unworthy. Worse than unworthy, tempting fate.

"I could love no child with my name better than those we have."

"I know, William. Truly, I do. But I remember how – how difficult it was for you, when Prince William was born. I saw you with that baby in your arms, and then saw you have to hand him over to another man and step back."
"The Prince Consort was nothing but kind," Melbourne said sharply, remembering. Yes, it had hurt, had torn him apart, to have to avoid the nursery except on carefully measured brief visits when he would have devoted hours to gazing at that wondrous little boy in the cradle. His son, born thirty-three years after the first, four years after he laid his firstborn son in the cold, cold ground. A son who forever after would be considered the child of another man.

"Let it rest, Emily. I am the most fortunate of men, and I could wish for nothing more."

"What were you and Emily talking about so seriously? I quite thought you were angry with her?" Victoria's maid had left her, and she sat on the bed in her negligee rubbing rose-scented lotion into her hands.

"No more annoyed than any brother at an overbearing sister," Melbourne smirked, careful to look down at the exact moment he spoke. She often read his thoughts with uncanny accuracy.

"Feodora was so much older than I. We rarely quarreled. If I grew insufferable, she merely left." Victoria drew back the covers and climbed into bed, handing him her hairbrush wordlessly.

"You were fortunate in some ways, but unfortunate in others. My sister and my brothers were, and still are, my dearest friends. Emily is much like my mother in ways, but I love her nonetheless." He applied the brush to her already-smooth hair. Miss Skerrett had removed her pins and brushed out the coiled chignon, but this part of her toilette was for purely for pleasure and a service he was pleased to perform.

"Ah…" Victoria settled herself more comfortably between his knees.

"You appeared to be enjoying yourself," he observed, lifting a hank of hair and coiling it over his hand like a rope.

"You think I did well?" Victoria asked hopefully.

"I think you did very well, of course. You are the Queen. It matters not what they think of you, only what you think of them. But – appearances are important."

"And did my appearance meet with your satisfaction, Lord M? I can't compete with Harriet. Her gowns show to such advantage, while I have to compensate for my lack of inches."

"Your appearance is perfection, my girl. As you well know, it satisfies me greatly." He was joking, and let her hear the humorous tone in his voice. His body showed its own appreciation of the proximity of her rump against his groin. He groaned involuntarily when she deliberately squirmed against him.

"I find the Duchess a most…intimidatingly statuesque figure, despite her fashion sense. I prefer a more petit paquet."

Victoria smiled her thanks and laid the brush aside, then settled herself beside him, leaning against the stack of feather pillows.

"Is it safe to return to London? I dislike Windsor, and it's so very far from everything."

"It is safe," Melbourne assured her.

"John Spencer invited us to Althorp. For the week after Devonshire's bal masque," Victoria said. "I received his card today."
"Ahah, so the progression commences," Melbourne quipped. "Your ancestors saved a significant amount of money by going from one great home to another. It's a thought…"

"Do we accept?"

"I suppose we have to."

"You are still taking me to Italy in May?"

"I am," Melbourne assured her.

He was touched at her almost-shy plea for reassurance, as though in fact she could not travel exactly where she chose, when she chose. Italy was an especial goal of hers, and he suspected it might in part be due to his trips there with Caroline in the early years. Theirs would not be a State visit, and he looked forward to showing her Venice as an ordinary husband and wife, if an extraordinarily well-guarded one.

Melbourne extinguished the beeswax candle Victoria insisted on lighting, preferring both the quality of the light and the scent to recently-installed gas lighting. Then he rearranged their pillows and slid down, holding out his arm for Victoria to find her accustomed place in his arms.

"Good night, Mrs. Melbourne," he whispered against her hair.

"Good night, Lord M."

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Chronological List of Works

Chapter End Notes

No, there is no conspiracy involving Lord Byron or his heirs.
Yes, the three men hanged in Nottinghamshire as an example to suppress civil unrest had ties to "that" Lord Byron's family estate. Obviously, everything regarding the sword-cane incident is invented...except Byron did carry one and occasionally wave it about.
Chapter 17

*Noise.* That was Melbourne's first thought upon wakening. Murmurs, indistinct shuffling, drawers opening and closing, pattering footsteps and an occasional louder sibilance as one shushed another. *Unusual, but no cause for alarm,* was his next thought. Then he recollected firstly, that it was a Saturday and thus Victoria allowed herself an exemption from the strict workaday routine she set for herself, and secondly, that the household had only last night been informed that today they would move back to Buckingham.

He cleared his throat audibly and was rewarded with a sudden cessation of all sound from the adjacent dressing room. Content with the knowledge that the maids had either left them alone or would pretend they had, he stretched luxuriously and rubbed a hand over his face.

Victoria, beside him, slept like a child. Her cheek was pillowed on her hand and one leg was thrown over his. As though sensing his gaze, her lids fluttered open.

"Hullo," she said in a low, sleep-hoarsened voice.

"Hullo yourself, ma'am," he responded, smiling his contentment.

The finely milled cotton sheets felt delicious against his bare legs and her essence enveloped him in sweat heady warmth. They lay together, coming awake, breathing in unison and content in undemanding languor.

"Move day," she said finally.

"Mmm…Anson and Stephen spent the evening seeing all my papers safely back to London."

"All?"

"As appropriate," Melbourne amended. "Those we are working with, will go to my office at Buckingham. Anything with State significance goes back to the Chancery Street archive. And the rest – we've been burning as we go."

"We're having Disraeli for dinner tonight." Victoria lifted her head, struggling to gather her tangled hair.

"Oh? Perhaps…a ragout instead? Or a nice North Sea lobster? Turtle soup, even?"

Victoria's giggle was music to his ears. When it went on longer than his mild sally deserved,
Melbourne's curiosity was piqued.

"I've asked him to meet with me beforehand. I have a – a matter to discuss with him. You'll entertain Mary Anne while I borrow her husband?"

"Of course," Melbourne said agreeably.

He pushed himself up and rubbed at his grizzled chin. Victoria rubbed herself against the roughness when she kissed him, claiming it lent a dashing, piratical air, but his vanity despised the preponderance of grey.

"Is there anything else I can do for you today? Look over the text of the speech perhaps?"

Since the beginning of the New Year, newly elected Members had been meeting with their caucuses, accepting committee assignments, and feverishly vying to get a chance to add something – anything – of significance. The first months were the most tedious for seasoned observers, as men clambered over one another to reach the podium and hear their own voices in august assembly.

The Queen was only permitted to address the Houses once each term, when she opened Parliament. That duty had been duly performed on 23 January 1846, when Victoria performed each element of the archaic ritual. No matter how many times he had witnessed her performance – the most recent had been the tenth – Melbourne still teared up each time, awash with powerful emotion, at the spectacle and the image of this girl-turned-woman become something so much more.

Russell, and the now-Opposition Leader, Robert Peel, were aligned on their stance in favor of Corn Law repeal. Both would have fallen over themselves with gratitude, had she uttered a word of support for repeal. That, Melbourne had cautioned her, would simply not do. Show support for the government, most certainly – but avoid any overt stance on the issue itself. She applied herself assiduously to crafting just the right message of compassion and understanding for each delegation, writing and rewriting what she would say and then rehearsing its delivery, depending on Melbourne to excise any inadvertently touchy subtext.

"Oh yes, please. Have they kept you informed? Is – are you satisfied with the cooperation of the ministers? You're not being excluded?"

"Of course I'm being excluded," Melbourne laughed easily. "And that's all right, at this stage. Johnny has the right to set up his store the way he pleases. It's his cabinet, and his government, and his show to run. But I'm confident that after closed-door planning is complete I'll be duly included in all Cabinet meetings, just as Wellington was."

Wellington had only recently retired as a minister without portfolio, and Melbourne stepped into his shoes. He had done so with certain qualms, easily brushed aside by the old Iron Duke himself.

"Do you think yourself better than me?" Wellington had asked gruffly.

"Do you forget that I was foisted on your government, by the old King? If you don't take the sinecure you ensure that the position can only be held by the wealthy and privileged, and that will set you apart far more than your relationship to the queen. I might not have been in bed with the king, but there were plenty who said I was – metaphorically of course, and without the delightful fringe benefits you enjoy."

Arthur Wellesley had spoken in his usual harsh meter, capped by a lewd wink, but Melbourne knew better than to take offense.

The appointment meant that Melbourne held a cabinet-level ministry position with no specific
responsibilities. The sinecure was particularly common with coalition governments and gave him the right to participate in all significant policy discussions and the right to cast a vote in cabinet decisions.

As had been the case for the past quarter century and more, Wellington's endorsement put the seal of approval on any decision affecting the country as a whole. His popularity had not diminished one iota in the years since he'd routed Napoleon. Melbourne never discounted how much he owed the nation's commander-in-chief for his support in the matter of the queen's marriages, past and present.

As though plucking the name from his straying thoughts, Victoria said, "The Duke of Wellington will dine with us too. Lady Elizabeth went ahead with Lady Canning, and has promised to deliver him." Knowing Wellington's fondness for his daughter-in-law, despite the prickly relations with his own son, Melbourne had no doubt the Lady Elizabeth Douro would deliver her redoubtable father-in-law as charged. Why was the question?

"Tomorrow we will be only family," she added brightly. "The Palmerstons, and –" Victoria stopped herself suddenly, and waved her hand in an airy gesture. "And other family."

Victoria's expression was bright, alert and strangely charged. Melbourne decided, studying her, that she was also oddly effervescent and looked pleased with herself. He told her so, winning another laugh.

"Why shouldn't I be pleased with myself, Lord M?" she crooned, leaning forward to twine her arms around his neck. She rubbed the tip of her little nose against his breastbone, tickling the chest hairs which peeked through the open front of his nightshirt.

"I am in love with the most handsome, most charming, most wonderful man in the world, and I want everyone to know it." Victoria kept her lips against his skin while she spoke, and the words sent a vibration through his chest all the way to his heart, even as he wondered what the little minx was plotting. She was most certainly up to something.

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His own valet had, with customary efficiency, packed his valises and kept out only the day's attire and his shaving gear.

Melbourne and Victoria parted, each into the hands of their own body servant. When they met once again in the breakfast room, only a few of the other places were occupied. The Duchess of Kent had charge of her grandchildren, explaining archly that she had given Lehzen leave to attend to the removal of the nursery to Buckingham Palace.

"I do not know why you must decide such things at the last minute, Drina. Madame Thérèse is coming for fittings today."

Victoria wrinkled her nose but spoke pleasantly.

"Madame will have to change her plans, or you may receive her. I have no time."

"That is why Elizabeth is with Grandmama," the Duchess said, crooning at the little girl sitting atop a stack of cushions beside her. "We will meet with the modiste for her spring frock fittings. Liam will be left on his own."

"Mama!" Victoria's voice grew sharp. "I'm sure he won't be alone. There are – what? Certainly hundreds of servants about. And Miss Donovan." She smiled warmly at the plainly-dressed woman
Melbourne followed Victoria’s gaze and suppressed a smile at the quick flash of dismay in the protection officer’s eyes. The women assigned to protect the royal children were generally good sports, but they also tended to be jealous of their dignity and unwilling to take on any responsibilities not asked of their male counterparts.

"I’ll take him," Melbourne said suddenly. "Before we leave I'll take him for a walk through the castle. There are places I've only read about and would like to see too. Hidden passages and the like."

As soon as he spoke he recollected that Charles Murray, who had made a good start on writing the history of the place, had recently resigned as Master of the Household and been replaced by a newcomer, Captain Henry Meynell. Well, he thought, perhaps the new fellow will be up to his ears in minutiae and be glad of a reprieve. And if not – oh well, rank has its advantages. The more he considered the matter, the more he decided a morning spent pottering about the Lower Ward, climbing to the top of the Keep and examining the dynastic carvings in St. George’s Chapel might amuse Liam and even spark the boy's interest.

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Victoria kept her eyes on the lines before her, reading without comprehension. When enough time had passed that she could safely look up, her eyes followed Melbourne’s retreating figure.

She felt disproportionately uncomfortable, only because she was accustomed to speaking her mind freely. Talking to Lord M had always, since the very beginning, been so very, very good. With him, she could say anything and he would be neither shocked nor censorious. He would listen without judgment and enter perfectly into her feelings. He neither pandered nor preached, and if sometimes his very funny sayings and aphorisms led her to change the course of her own thoughts, he never led her in any way she was not inclined to go. That was why it felt so strange, so very uncomfortable, to withhold even the most mundane information. Her mind went back to the morning she found Liam and his tutor painstakingly drawing out the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha family tree.

"My son is an English prince, Herr Heyse. He has no need to look farther than his English roots."

Even in the grip of her quick temper Victoria had been struck by a sudden, blinding realization. This was where she would begin.

She had no well-thought-out plan, no firm notion of how such a thing might be accomplished, but she had known from the moment she was told she had given birth to a male, a future King of England, that he would be raised to take pride in the fact that he was his father’s son, an Englishman through and through. The son of William Lamb.

Had dear Albert lived, it would have been more difficult, but not impossible. Albert would have followed her lead in the matter, in public as well as in private, so long as they tread carefully to avoid the real calumny of an open accusation of sodomy, a capital offense. Naturally, no such charges could ever be proven against the Queen’s husband, but rumor would be enough to condemn him to a life of shame.

That was no longer a consideration. There could be no open avowal—unless the law of internecine bastardy were changed, a child born in marriage would always be the legal heir of the husband – but in practice…why not? There were many instances of a thing becoming common knowledge, accepted by all, with no formal announcement. And to start, it must be a natural thing for Liam and Lily to think of their beloved papa as their father. Any other was simply a name spoken with the
respect due their mother's cousin, their grandmother's nephew.

What better representation of the relationship between Crown and State, the delicate balance of monarchy and representative democracy, than that embodied by the Prince of Wales himself? That was romantic symbolism so powerful she knew instinctively it would resonate with every man, woman and child in the country. Their future King's parentage would be no liability; it would be the strongest argument for continuation of the monarchy in an age of reform which saw the people empowered as never before in history.

And it would all begin with something as simple as a redrawing of the family tree, first in the royal schoolroom...and then in schoolrooms across the land.

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Bringing her thoughts firmly back to the day ahead of her, Victoria reached for her journal, the public one which would serve as a record of her reign.

14 March 1846, Saturday

Today we leave Windsor and return to London, she wrote. How pleasing it has been to spend time in this venerable place. Windsor! I am proud and humbled both, to walk these halls in the footsteps of my forebears. Our line has ruled with this as our primary seat for more than nine hundred years. It is well and truly our home.

The Disraelis will be with us at Buckingham Palace, she continued. The Duke of Wellington also. It will be a most propitious time to discuss my intention of granting Cousin Albert a posthumous English title. We were most remiss in not doing so while he was alive to receive the honor. No one loved this land of mine more than my dear cousin, Mama's favorite nephew. He should, and will, be remembered for his work on behalf of our English society, for his care for the conditions of the poor and his interest in promoting English art and science. Mr. Disraeli has always been a firm friend and admirer of my poor late cousin, and has suggested naming the great public gallery at the new House of Commons for Albert. We will encourage him to use the new title, and endow the Royal Arts Commission, of which Albert was patron, a suitable sum for the frescoes and decorations. Albert Coburg, Duke of Claremont, will be his title and designation. He will be remembered as our dearly loved cousin and friend, and a great friend to the people of the United Kingdom.

I am to travel this spring, alone with my dear husband William. It would be a good thing, and fitting, were the Prince of Wales to travel also. I was not much older, although not yet Uncle William's heir, when Mama took me on a traveling tour of our great country. He would be surrounded by family for his comfort, and if B.C. is returned by then I will suggest he accompany Liam. We will ask Lord Derby to invite him and introduce the Prince of Wales to his citizenry.

Tomorrow is William's birthday, the 8th I will celebrate with him. We will have a small private celebration, for he says he does not like a fuss made of him. Lord and Lady Palmerston, any of Lady Palmerston's children who can attend – I will remember to pray in church tomorrow for a safe confinement for dear Fanny – and Fred and Adine, as a surprise all the way by train from Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire and already at the Palace as I write, Mama and of course our children. How I wish I could find a gift which conveys how very much this wonderful man means, to me and to our country as a whole. He has led us safely through tumultuous times which ravaged other nations, brought peace and prosperity to the United Kingdom through his wise and steady hand, and is the sole strength and support which allows me to bear the burden Almighty God has laid upon me as sovereign Queen and Head of His Church.

Victoria studied what she had written, reading each line carefully through. Then she nodded once,
and scrawled her initials at the end, just as she always did. Someday, these journals would be pored over by historians in a time so distant it was beyond imagining. But Lehzen had always instilled in her the sense that everything she said and did had meaning far beyond the present, and in this case, that was good and right. Then she relaxed, sighing deeply as a dreamy smile stole over her face.

Dear Lord M, darling Lord M – tomorrow is your birthday and may God allow many more for us to be together. Someday you will belong to history, just as I will, but for now you are all mine.

**

Melbourne strolled slowly through the arches of the Chapel of St. George the Martyr, enjoying the sensation of his son's small hand clasping his own. They found the "secret" passageway, really a short access corridor cunningly concealed behind fretwork at one end of the labyrinth of private stalls. Together they tapped on carved wooden panels, finding several more hidden cupboards that appealed to a five-year-old's sense of intrigue. When they craned their necks to look at the heraldic crests lining the walls and ceiling of the anteroom, Liam asked what each one was. Melbourne described the stylized beasts as best he could, guessing at the rest – gryphons were easily identified but what on earth was the hybrid monstrosity just there? The Earls of Lincoln and dukes of Newcastle were well-represented throughout, and Melbourne called out the names of others he recognized.

"Where is yours, Papa?" Melbourne peered up at a bronze plaque and found the answer he'd been hoping to spot.

"See there? In tiny letters? It says 'King Henry VI', which means they were put in place even longer ago than I've been alive."

"When you were a little boy like me?" He felt tears welling in his eyes at his son's innocent inability to imagine a world without him in it.

"Even longer," Melbourne assured him. "Look there – that fellow has a bug as his." Poor Roche of Bromham, he thought, smirking.

"Look, Your Royal Highness, up in that corner. That is my family crest – do you like our lions?" Wilhelmina Dalmeny pointed to a bifurcated red and white shield on the right side of an angel bearing the shield of St. George, patron of the Order of the Garter.

Obediently, Liam followed direction she pointed and nodded politely. Then he caught sight of a whole row of familiar images, repeating in a frescoed design bright with signs of fresh refurbishing.

"And there you are, my boy. The Prince of Wales' feathers!"

Passing through the narrow back passages, Lady Dalmeny held her wide skirts tight and brushed against him each time he stood back to hold open a door. She had intercepted them in the family wing, offering herself and her knowledge of the old castle, using as an excuse her study of the history of the noble families of England. The young woman went on to describe her interest in history and genealogy, telling Melbourne that she had formed the intention of writing a book. It would consist of short histories concerning the origins of several hundred English families of Norman origin, based on names supposedly contained in the legendary Battle Abbey Roll.

"I am so grateful to see these old designs!" she gushed. "To think I've spent so much time here without ever really having the chance to explore. I'm quite unafraid of being called a bluestocking, Lord Melbourne. I have more than my looks to offer."

Melbourne smiled to himself at the artfully artless confession. How was he expected to respond?
Why was he expected to respond? This was his time with his son, and the last remaining lady-in-waiting might be of more use attending her mistress than traipsing after them through dusty unused spaces.

She went on, taking over the job of tour guide, reciting details about spandrels and gleanings and the long-deceased bishops and knights who were buried beneath the slabs they walked upon. A comely young woman – Melbourne had heard her described as the most beautiful woman at Court – Wilhelmina Stanhope had been present in one capacity or another since Victoria first ascended the throne. And for that I have only myself to blame, he recalled with an inner grimace. Her mother, an old and very intimate friend, had beguiled him into suggesting the daughter as one of Victoria's first companions and she had never left for long.

She had no need to curry favor – she had both wealth and influence through her family's connections – and had married well. He doubted whether a young female of her startling good looks would devote quite so much flattering attention to any other man of his years, if not for the perverse desire of some women to disrupt a happy marriage. The same had once been said of his mother, that Lady Melbourne never saw a happy marriage without trying to destroy its harmony. The sins of the father – or mother, in my case flitted through his mind while he deftly shifted his forearm to remove the slender hand.

They were interrupted in the tiny priest's alcove, Melbourne lifting Liam up at his request to look more closely at an intricately painted figure riding a dragon breathing fire and extending its wings in preparation for flight. Lady Dalmeny jumped back, gasping in alarm that seemed disproportionate to the nature of the interruption.

One of the new equerries, a chatty young fellow, the younger son of a minor baron, stood stock still in open admiration of the lady.

"Yes?" Melbourne prompted, lowering the boy.

"Um…yes, Your Grace. The Queen sent for you. The carriages are ready to depart."
Mary Anne Disraeli was not nearly as big a fool as she seemed, Melbourne decided. Whether she dismissed him as not worth maintaining a façade, or she tired of the effort required by a woman nearly his own age to sustain the vapid, tittering affectations unbecoming a debutante, he was pleasantly surprised to discover some sense in the woman. Whether her husband deserved the pedestal upon which she placed him, Melbourne had some doubt, and her conversation had an unfortunate tendency to circle back to *Dizzy says*. Despite those barriers, he was genuinely amused at the woman’s *bon mots*, her shockingly uninhibited frankness and her ability to engage in playful banter just verging on innocent flirtation, that most enjoyable of drawing room pastimes.

The party assembled in the drawing room, sipping aperitifs and engaged in light conversation, was surprisingly lively. The tone was informal, insofar as *informal* could ever be applied to a summons to dine at the palace, made more so by the mix of his own relations.

Fred and Adine were already installed when the Court returned from Windsor, and Melbourne experienced a mild sense of relief when he saw them, thinking that if *this* was the surprise Victoria had been plotting, his earlier suspicion had been baseless.

"May I be the first, then, to wish you the very happiest of birthdays?" Adine had whispered in his ear. "Victoria persuaded us there was no need to warn you we were coming."

"Warn?" Melbourne had laughed, bussing her cheek. "A delightful and always-welcome surprise, to be sure."

He had turned then to his brother and the two men embraced warmly. Fred slapped his back jovially.

"How is that nephew of mine doing? And the little princess? May we pop down to the nursery before your other guests arrive?"

Victoria had prettily taken Wellington's arm, giving him the honor of escorting her into dinner. Melbourne had begged Victoire to accept his escort, gratified at the pleasure such a small thing gave
to his mother-in-law. The other couples easily mixed, all of them understanding that to escort one's own spouse would be a faux pas.

Dinner conversation predictably included the Sikh conflict, everyone assuming that Wellington, as Commander-in-Chief, would share information not publicly available. The ladies were most interested in the Maharini, and what is she really like? Was nearly as popular a question as those concerning her costumes and jewels.

After the usual brevity of their separation – the petulance of the younger Victoria when gentlemen lingered over their brandy had cured any tendency to dally – Melbourne had led Wellington, Disraeli, Fred and the other men into the drawing room. A harpist had been found and was applying herself diligently. Melbourne silently commended the steward in setting her up in the farthest corner of the room, in a shallow alcove with heavy brocade hangings which almost entirely muted the dreadful sound.

Rather than any overt request to attend her privately, Victoria merely extracted first Wellington, then Disraeli, on the pretext of showing off a new acquisition in the Long Gallery.

She had waited until they were dressing for dinner to confide her intention, and passed it off as inconsequential, so little worthy of discussion that it was a mere aside. Melbourne was no less curious after than before, amused by her exaggerated nonchalance.

"A posthumous title?" he had only echoed, his tone deliberately casual to match her own. Fortunately Baines chose that moment to require he turn, to permit the careful insertion of his arms into a new, closely-tailored blue velvet jacket. Victoria would surely have seen the smile tugging at his mouth, and not missed his skeptical expression.

"It shouldn't be a problem. There's no income, obviously, and any incidental costs will come from our private funds. A memorial endowment as well, of course bearing dear Albert's new style and honorific."

"Is that the royal pronoun, ma'am?" Melbourne had asked, turning back to her. "There, what do you think? Does the color suit? Will the velvet soon be too heavy for the season?" Two can play at this, he thought with mild satisfaction.

Victoria had immediately turned her full attention to his figure, and her sweet face was once again open and guileless, shining with admiration.

"The color suits," she had announced. "And I hope it won't become too heavy in the near future."

Victoria had stepped closer then, taking hold of his lapels and stroking the soft nap of the fabric. He had time to note the near-perfect match of the hue of his coat and a pair of limpid blue eyes, gazing up at him with frank adoration. Then he bent his head and kissed her mouth, thinking my precious girl, I only hope I won't dislike whatever scheme you're hatching in that pretty little head too much.

Wellington had slipped back into the drawing room unannounced, and joined Melbourne. The old soldier did not seem perturbed; if anything, his demeanor conveyed the faintest hint of puzzlement. They had no opportunity to converse, but Melbourne was relieved that at least he knew the gist of Victoria's tête-à-tête so there was no need to pretend obliviousness.

As she had said, there should be no problem. If granting a posthumous title was not commonplace, neither was there any prohibition. Wellington in the Lords and Disraeli in the Commons; Wellington because he was a friend to the Crown, but also blunt and pragmatic and would warn her off if he anticipated trouble as a result. Disraeli, presumably because of his slavish admiration of the late
Prince – Melbourne recalled with a grimace that overwrought eulogy published in the Times – and his patent eagerness to ingratiate himself with the queen despite his Young England affiliation.

Long familiarity with his queen, and an even greater intimate understanding of his wife, convinced Melbourne Victoria had something else in mind, of which this new dukedom – the second in six months and both to men ennobled only because of their relationship to the Queen – was only a part. I'll bide my time, he decided. Unless my darling has hidden depths of which I am unaware, she won't be able to keep it bottled up indefinitely. Not with me.

When Disraeli was called from the room Melbourne recognized his call to duty, and turned his attention to Mary Anne. She had been watching her husband retreat, the little Queen on his arm as he bent to hear something Victoria said.

Melbourne was momentarily startled at the openly hungry look on her face, clearly announcing her unfashionably romantic attachment to her own husband more clearly than all her effusive praise.

"Don't be concerned, ma'am," he'd murmured, leaning close. "He will be returned to you forthwith, and unscathed by the experience."

Her eyes had flashed with appreciation – at his wit, or the relief of being addressed by another like herself, smitten by love found in a most improbable union? Melbourne wondered. Certainly true in his case more than hers; she had been widowed, and twelve years older than the up-and-coming Benjamin Disraeli and it had been widely assumed he married her for her money.

"Dizzy married me for my money," Mary Anne said suddenly. "But if he had the chance again, he would marry me for love."

Melbourne had no response for that; none was needed. Instead he complimented her on the jeweled breastplate which adorned her saffron-yellow silk gown. It was truly an amazing piece, and he told her with all sincerity that the Queen herself had nothing nearly so magnificent.

Nor, he might have added, would she have the poor taste to wear it, if she had. The Tower contained a treasure trove of spectacular one-of-a-kind jewels, gifts from Eastern potentates, even the Russian Grand Duke, who ought to have known better. None would ever be worn by the Queen, who had inherited her mother's sartorial sense and exercised restraint, choosing exquisite detail over gaudy ostentation.

Melbourne dismissed his criticism as unjust – accurate, perhaps, but unjust – and redoubled his effort to engage her in repartee. Mary Anne responded, turning her full attention to him, and her entertaining observations of people they knew in common soon had him laughing appreciatively.

When Victoria returned she accepted a glass of champagne and neatly inserted herself in the conversation between two of her ladies. Melbourne, not wanting to appear churlish, waited until Mary Anne's attention was on another guest and then excused himself. A chair was left vacant for his occupation, as had been the case since their earliest days, so he could be at Victoria's right hand. It had often been the site of some satisfying naps, when some musical performance lulled him to sleep.

When he was seated beside her, Victoria relaxed imperceptibly. Even when she was entirely at ease and seemingly engrossed in whatever entertainment was offered or caught up in merry chatter with her guests, the mere presence of Melbourne elicited a sense of comfort upon which she depended. He knew that and had long since accustomed himself to remaining close. Whatever it was between them, he had often mused, was so potent as to be nearly tangible. Far more than mere attraction, certainly no simple dependency, for Victoria was a strong-willed young woman whose confidence had grown by leaps and bounds during her years on the throne, there was some metaphysical current
between them, like an electromagnetic umbilical, that drew them together, neither fully complete without the other.

Promptly at midnight, as told by the ormolu clock on the mantle, Victoria had risen. By unspoken protocol any such movement by the Queen necessitated the instant attention of all present. Melbourne slouched down, certain what was coming, already both embarrassed and pleased.

A phalanx of footmen marched in, followed by pages bearing trays filled with champagne flutes. Bottles were decanted, and the servers stood ready. When Victoria nodded they moved efficiently around the room, filling glasses.

"It is now 15 March, the anniversary of the birth of my husband, William Lamb. I ask you to join me in asking the blessing of God Almighty on him for another year, and in thanking him for his long service to Crown and Country.

Without him, I would not be who I am and the nation we love would not be what it is. William has led us safely through decades of turmoil that consumed other states, leaving death and destruction in its wake. He mentored me and taught me to revere our Constitution, and instilled in me the deepest respect for our system of governance. Now he has embarked on another God-given role, one which will shape the future of your children and grandchildren. As father to your future King, William's wisdom and his love for England, for peace and prosperity, tranquility at home and the realization of our destiny abroad, will sow the seeds for a hundred years of progress for our great British Empire."

Victoria dipped into a deep, graceful curtsy – the Queen, curtsying; how irregular! the detached, unemotional observation steadied Melbourne when otherwise he would have choked and wept – and then lifted her glass high. As the others followed suit, she finished.

"Have the happiest of birthdays, Your Grace. My darling. Lord M."

**

Melbourne washed quickly in the basin Baines filled, and took the warmed towel his valet offered. He had consumed just enough champagne to feel a pleasant liquid languor in his limbs, and looked forward to his bed – and his wife.

Not a bad start to the day, he decided. After Victoria's clearly planned-out toast everyone had clustered around to offer their personal congratulations. It was not nearly as awkward as he'd feared, being the center of attention. They were all well-meaning, and if the year of his birth could be overlooked, having one's existence celebrated could be rather pleasing. The ladies had all begged permission to kiss his cheek, and he thought he must be as ruddy as a Scotsman from the press of all those lips. Victoria had stood by his side, looking proud and pleased at the accolades, and even the Stanhope girl's embrace had not unduly irked her.

The men had quaffed champagne and then called for something stronger for their own toasts. Led by Wellington, these had been jocular and decidedly less flattering than the Queen's. Their roasting had occasioned much laughter, and Victoria had joined in, all the while keeping hold of his hand unseen in the folds of her gown.

She was already in bed when he entered the room. Her hair hung in gleaming waves over her shoulders, and the frothy lace collar of some French concoction hinted at the ensemble hidden under bedcovers.

A single candle burned bedside – Victoria preferred the soft warm glow of candlelight in their bedchamber, to the more utilitarian gas fixtures – and its flame cast shadows which gave her dear
face an exotic appeal.

They did not speak, and no words were needed. Melbourne kicked off his slippers and laid aside his dressing gown. He slid his legs under the goose down quilt, enjoying its weight on his limbs, the feel of the cool sheets and hint of promised warmth.

"Words are not enough, never enough," Victoria said in a low voice, ringing with urgent sincerity. He looked at her quizzically.

"I tell you how much I love you, but those words are inadequate. You are my heart, my soul. I can say how very much I admire you, and like you, that you are the most captivating person I can ever imagine knowing. That I could spend a thousand years at your side, listening to you, laughing at your wit, learning from your stories, and it would not be enough and never be enough."

Victoria spoke slowly, and this time he was sure she had not planned what she would say. She sounded almost melancholy, but not quite; her expression was turned inward, as though struggling to articulate precisely, lest words failed her completely.

Melbourne felt the tears spill out and run down his cheeks, and he did not bother to wipe them away. His gaze was locked on hers, and he would not break that connection until she did. She heaved a great sigh then, and shrugged helplessly.

"It's not enough, it could never be enough to tell you everything I feel," she finished, looking down with a tiny smile curling her lips.

"I know," Melbourne whispered. It felt like the only possible response to her confession; any modest protest, even simply an attempt to return the sentiments, would fail to do honor to the gift of her heart. "Thank you," he added simply.

Victoria shifted, moving slowly and sinuously. He felt her soft hands on his thighs, lifting the hem of his nightshirt. He accepted what she gave, because she wanted to give it and because acceptance was his to give in return. He did only what she wanted, putty in her hands. She loved him with her body as she had with her words, so that he floated on a rapturous cloud. There was no one but her, and her love for him, and there had never been a past, only the present, this life with his precious girl. He had been born in another century, was the product of an earlier time, an anachronism perhaps by the reckoning of ages, but in her he was new again.

"Happy birthday, Lord M," she said pertly, when his breath had stilled and he was able to attend. The girl he saw, inexpressibly beautiful in the wantonness only he was privileged to see, unashamed of her nakedness because in his eyes she saw herself and was perfect, had the same Mona Lisa smile she had worn that earlier.

"You look very smug, ma'am," Melbourne teased, reaching out a lazy hand to flick his thumb against a nipple, twisting a hank of hair around his finger. "Are you pleased with me, Lord M?"

"Are you pleased with me, Lord M?" she taunted, running the tip of her tongue over her top lip.

Melbourne made a guttural sound, and pulled her down to rest her head against his shoulder.

"Very pleased, as though you can't tell," he answered. Victoria huffed a little moan of her own, one of the soft sounds presaging her intention to settle into sleep, and squirmed into a comfortable position in his arms.

"And perhaps, sometime soon – although certainly not this exact moment – you will tell me exactly what scheme you have in that devious little mind."
Victoria didn't reply, but he thought the muffled sound might have been laughter. At any rate, he decided, *it can't be anything too unpleasant*. If he was sure of nothing else on earth, he was sure of her devotion to him – grateful, mystified, in total awe of his late unaccustomed good fortune, and never ever taking it for granted, but *sure*. 
Chapter 19

The lanes were predictably rutted and potholed, as to be expected even after a winter as mild as that of 1845-46. On his ride around the property, they had passed several crews of burly farmhands shoveling coarse gravel into the worst of these. The fields were well-drained, thanks to Lady Elizabeth Melbourne's unlikely interest in progressive farming and land management techniques, and a few were already under the plow. There were fences to mend and roofs to patch, deadwood already being chopped into kindling. Only a small portion of his income derived from rents – most of what remained of Matthew Lamb's fortune was in the Exchange – but he found it quaintly satisfying to assume the role of *seigneur* and stop for impromptu visits with his tenants and neighbors.

The man riding beside Lord Melbourne was a newly acquired professional horticulturist called Richard Ruffett. His contract stipulated that he would oversee not only the grounds and succession-houses at Brocket Hall, but also function as a general property manager for the estate.

He might wince at the exorbitant annual salary, but Melbourne was otherwise well-pleased with Ruffett thus far. The improvements he proposed were practical and well-thought-out, striking a balance between maintenance and innovation.

The modest greenhouse which had once been established as hobby and refuge for its owner now consisted of three soaring glass pagodas, each a veritable Eden. One held exotic fruits, the second a dizzying array of blooms, Chinese chrysanthemums, gardenias, and some of the more obscure ornamentals cultivated according to the requirements of Lingua Flora. Ruffett had grinned...
appreciatively at this explanation, but confessed to a familiarity with the romantic notion.

The third glasshouse was devoted to the orchids which had become somewhat of an obsession of Melbourne's during the bad old days when he retreated from a world abuzz with the outrageous escapades of his wife. He had first read a mention of them by Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle, and then in the writings of another Greek, Dioscorides. Even Confucius took an interest, which persuaded a much-younger William Lamb to try his hand at the notoriously fussy, fickle flower.

The grounds surrounding Brocket Hall were in need of refinement, consisting of little more than an expansive green enlivened by those daffodils and later tulips. Melbourne described the verdant swimming glade he had designed, now ravaged by late-summer floods so that little remained save the rocks and a few bedraggled shrubs.

"My family insists that we restore it, and with your help I'm sure we can construct something even better – and safer – this time," he had explained, nudging his horse to follow a scarcely-discriminal path towards the river.

Despite the column in that blasted gossipy News, the visit had been merely one of their semi-regular weekend home visits, a retreat from the protocol of the Court to his modest country estate where Victoria could pretend to be an ordinary gentry woman. Salisbury had taken advantage of proximity to plan a ball, stealing a march on Cavendish and Spencer.

Melbourne had left Victoria behind at the Hall, determined to play her own part as lady of the manor. It was both touching and comic to watch her, his Gloriana, as she attempted to project domestic competence. Most well-born young women grew into the role, having spent their adolescence watching mothers, aunts and grandmothers oversee the staff of large country homes, while Victoria had been drilled in the arcana of constitutional law and foreign treaties, in the thousand-year history of the crown she was destined to wear.

When he had taken his leave of her, she had been standing beside the housekeeper, her expression solemn as that worthy inventoried the linen and silver. A bevy of maids and what appeared to be a battalion of footmen washed windows and scrubbed floors in a frenzy of spring cleaning, while another brigade of workmen disassembled the great pipe organ in the Great Hall. No one had played since Caro's manic midnight concerns so long ago, and he'd found a buyer whose price would allow a small orchestra pit to be made in its place.

Melbourne rarely carried a watch – far simpler, he protested, to simply ask the time – but he kept a close eye on the position of the sun. Victoria would fret in his absence, with the Salisbury ball looming. Her arrival was the signal for any event to begin, and she could not abide the notion that a hundred or more guests would be kept standing, awaiting her appearance. He judged it no more than a half past three when they rode into the stable yard.

Behind a tidy brick wall, Melbourne could hear the high-pitched chatter of what he guessed rightly were the housemaids, giggling as they worked. A distinctive, not-unpleasant odor wafted on the light breeze, the scent of soap powder and starch mixed with the charcoal used earlier to heat the great cauldrons of wash-water.

Melbourne handed his reins to a waiting groom and politely reminded the man to remove all trace of mud before it could dry and harden. He shook hands with Ruffett and as an afterthought, invited the man in to tea. It was a relief being turned down, leaving a few private hours before the crush at Hatfield House.

The little Prince of Wales – so called, even though formal investiture would be several years ahead – detached himself from a group of boys, dependents of the various servants who lived and worked on
the property. Melbourne was surprised to see how tall the boy had grown, too tall to be easily picked up and carried. *Five,* he thought to himself, *no longer a baby but well and truly a boy.* He laid a hand on the top of a curly head which came nearly to his waist, and stroked it absently as they walked. Brocket Hall gave him a chance to escape the pomp and stiff protocol which could not be entirely avoided at Windsor or Buckingham. Liam was uncomfortable with the attention his rank entailed, although he had already developed the faculty to conceal his feelings. Shyness was not compatible with a future King.

Shyness was not a trait his sister shared. At three, the Princess Elizabeth was bold and headstrong. Baroness Lehzen had achieved remarkable success in subduing Lily's willfulness and ungovernable temper, but the little girl's fearlessness was legendary and her perpetual motion a trial to the maids whose sole job was to redirect the worst of her impulses.

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Lily propelled herself in Melbourne's direction, nearly taking flight in her eagerness to be lifted high in her father's arms. She was clutching a squirming bundle of fur and outrage, which Melbourne laughingly disengaged before it could be smothered in his coat.

One of Mr. Ruffett's litters, he surmised, hounds bred down from their sturdier forefathers. They were an offshoot of the more famous North Country Beagles, the adults maturing to no more than thirteen inches at the shoulder. Good scent hounds but too small to hunt more than rabbits and vermin, several of his earlier attempts to modify the breed had already found their way into the possession of Excisemen, used to detect smuggled goods the cruder bloodhound noses missed. More than one of what Ruffett had begun calling Brockett Pocket Beagles now graced the carriages and laps of fashionably sportive ladies who appreciated their compact size and short smooth coats, as well as the silky brown ears which could be fondled and stroked.

"Who is your friend, Lily? Surely he is too small to be away from his mother?"

Lily happily babbled an explanation of the animal's provenance, only half of which was intelligible due to enthusiasm and babyish lisp. Nonetheless, Melbourne listened with complete, rapt attention. He knew himself completely enchanted by this fairy-creature, her petite mother in miniature with both Victoria's autocratic nature and her devotion to him. Small boots reached her knees, frosted with mud and a more odiferous substance undoubtedly picked up in the kennels. She wore boy's corduroy breeches under a dimity frock and coarse-knit oversized sweater that had probably originated in some farmer's cottage. Long unkempt curls escaped in every direction from a wool cap that had been plunked carelessly on her head.

"Princess," he murmured, knowing his voice was thick with love; knowing too that her appearance could only be explained by Baroness Lehzen's absence. That worthy lady had gone off to visit a friend in Bedford, and would rejoin the household in a week's time.

"Let us return him to his mother's care, and then we will go find your Mama. It must be nearly time for tea and if you wash well, you may join us. Liam, will you go ahead and let your mother know I have returned?"

The puppy was greeted with much yipping by his littermates, and a thorough wash from the mother dog. Melbourne kept Lily in his arms, lest she stray into another of the brown piles littering the barn floor, and scraped his own boots thoroughly before entering the mudroom at the back of the house.

He called for hot water and soap and washed his daughter as best he could in the absence of any female to take over the task. Then he scrubbed his own hands well and brushed his coat, and went in search of his wife.

A tea cart was being trundled into the library, where they most often retreated at late afternoon to
look over the day's newspapers and what dispatches from Westminster had found their way to the Queen. Melbourne lifted the covers and filled two plates for the children. He settled them in one corner of a small sofa, then looked about absently.

"Where is your mother, Liam? Did you tell her I'm here?"

His mouth full of bread and meat, the boy shook his head.

A footman, the butler and two housemaids could not enlighten him; they disavowed all knowledge of "Lady Melbourne's" whereabouts, for such was the title she used at Brocket Hall. His housekeeper, when summoned, was equally uninformed.

"The men just loaded the last of the pipe organ, sir, and I was keeping my eye on them to be sure they didn't scuff the floor with their wagon."

He delegated her to stay with the children and climbed the elegantly curving main stairway.

Melbourne's mother, the first Viscountess Melbourne, had retained possession of the grandest suite, refusing to yield her claim to the new wife he'd brought home. It was that suite which he had assigned Victoria, even before their marriage, and over time Emily had done a fine job of redecorating it to please the Queen's. Caro's room, adjacent his own bedroom, had gone untouched for the decade between her death and his remarriage.

The nursery had changed little over the years; even as a full-grown man, Augustus could not tolerate any change in circumstance, so it had only seen the addition of a larger bed to accommodate his height. When Victoria was with child, his sister had superintended a metamorphosis, stripping the outdated, worn furnishings and enlivening the space with brightly colored murals.

He went now to the apartment at the end of the main hallway. A door had been cut to allow direct access between his chamber and Victoria's, although his own was used primarily as an expanded dressing room and study. At this time of afternoon little daylight reached the central corridor, and wall sconces had not yet been lit. Melbourne thought that if she was in her bedchamber, light should be escaping under the door and he saw none.

Still, the Hall is not so large we can lose a Queen, he mused, huffing a little laugh at his own whimsy.

The spacious apartment was decorated in rich colors rather than the whites and pastels Caro had preferred – why on earth did I think that? Melbourne chastised himself for the intrusive comparison. Cushions and bed hangings were all done in a rich teal embroidered with gold threads, and a similar fabric draped the windows. He recalled with a smile Victoria's pleasure, when looking over bolts of fabric and drawings, at being asked to choose what pleased her.

The windows looked east, over the Well Lawn and the woods beyond, a vista not apparent behind drawn draperies. A quick glance told him the room was unoccupied and he strode across the floor, intending to enter his own chamber by way of the interconnecting door. The merest movement, or perhaps an indrawn breath, drew his attention and he belatedly saw her seated in a wing-back chair beside the hearth.

"What are you doing in the dark, sweetheart? Let me send for a boy to light the candles." He squinted, scarcely able to make out her features in the dimness.

Victoria took so long to answer he guessed she might have been dozing, but when he'd reached her, he saw her eyes wide open, the whites seeming to glow fiercely.

"I'm just…resting," she said finally, in a hoarse whisper. "I had – a headache, but it is better now."
Melbourne saw that her hair was unpinned, flowing down over her arms. *So her head did ache, then,* he thought, and then wondered at the origin of such a thought. *Did I doubt it?*

He stroked her hair, cupping his palm over her head much as he had done the boy’s, earlier. Victoria rewarded him with an oddly tremulous little smile, and just for a second he thought her eyes grew suspiciously bright. Then her sweet face became animated, all trace of the prior stillness fading.

"Have they brought you tea? You must be starving, and we can’t expect anything substantial to eat at the Salisbury ball." Victoria stood, untangling the legs which had been drawn up under her skirts, and he followed suit.

"Mmmm...you smell of the outdoors and – eww, is that --?" Melbourne laughed at the way in which she wrinkled her little nose.

"I'm afraid so. Your daughter took me into the kennel, so we could return a wayward pup."

She looked so appealingly tiny, even fragile, that Melbourne put his hands on her waist and gingerly drew her close.

"And here I am, standing before the Queen in all my dirt and – er – other vile substances. Are you well enough to join the children for tea? I left them with Mrs. Barrett."

"Of course I am," Victoria chirped brightly. She laced her fingers through his and tugged gently to move him along. "Come with me. I don't mind your dirt, and if you wish, I will help you bathe later. Wash your hair, that is," she amended hurriedly, seeing Melbourne's lips quirk in appreciation of her risqué proposal.

"With pleasure, Mrs. Melbourne," he said easily, keeping hold of her hand as she led him out of her room. Victoria was ahead of him by enough that he could not see her features, but he thought he heard a ragged, half-sobbing sigh escape before she could turn it into a chuckle.

**

*I lost track of time, else he would not have found me sitting in the dark. I did not cry, I had not been crying. At least I had that much self-control. In truth, I didn't know what to do, or how to act, or even what I felt. I still don't.*

*We have no secrets between us, but we do have – should have – a modicum of privacy, nonetheless. There are things even the closest of spouses need not share, something I have learned over the past few years. I no longer go looking for such hidden things. He is a good man, and he loves me, and whatever happened before he knew me belongs in the past. Then why can't the past keep its own secrets, and leave us in peace?*

The letters, written years before she born, before her mother and father had met and married. A bundle wrapped in oiled silk, two packets, each neatly arranged by date and tied with colorful ribbons. Tucked away inside the wide rectangular chamber above the pallet which feeds wind to the pipes, accessed by a cutaway chamber at the top. So Mr. Henry Bevington, the man who had built the organ, ponderously explained. He went on to demonstrate how he had removed the panel by applying light pressure *just so,* in order to diagnose an oddly muffled note, before beginning the process of disassembling the whole for transport to his Rose Street shop in London.

The organ which had not been played since Caro grew ill; the organ on which she used to play melodramatic pieces at odd hours of the night, insisting Lord Bulwer-Lytton attend these recitals. *All part of her carefully cultivated persona,* was Victoria's swift, uncharitable reaction. Undoubtedly
fueled by the same mental instability which cursed her son – his son – full measure, but still
instigated by a need to be thought of as interesting, unique, worthy of notice.

She had abruptly terminated Mr. Bevington's lengthy discourse on the near-blaspheme of risking
permanent damage to one of his creations by such an inexplicable action, and taken the packet before
its wrapping could come undone.

In the privacy of her bedchamber, pleading the sudden onset of female indisposition, she had held the
packet in her lap until it felt like a brick, or more aptly, like carefully wrapped and wicked black
powder primed to explode. Then she steeled herself for whatever she might find and unwrapped the
thick waterproof silk covering.

Caro was nothing if not thorough, and careful, was her first thought. And methodical in her madness.
The first folded letter was scrawled in an unfamiliar hand, signed by an entirely familiar name and
designation.

_I return these to you, rather than your poor husband, out of an abundance of concern for the_
torment you have already inflicted, with my help. I bear my share of the guilt for what destruction
we've wrought, but not even I can imagine a heart and mind so lost to all human compassion, so
consumed by cruel vanity, as to send letters written in the heart's blood of your poor betrayed
husband to the one who you claimed as your lover. Did you do so to flaunt your power over poor
William, or did you think to kindle my jealousy instead? Your cruelty disgusts me. Burn those letters
you wrote me, for I do not want them. And for the sake of all that's holy, burn his as well to spare
him further humiliation. Take pity on us both, Madam, your William and I, and forget you ever
heard my name. Byron_

Victoria saw her own hand tremble and clasped it tightly with the other.

She could guess which letters were Caroline's, written in a spidery feminine hand, although not one
which had known the rigors of penmanship lessons such as Lehzen had given.

The others – ah, that was a hand she would know anywhere, angular, with thick strokes and half-
finished cross-pieces. _Leave them tied? Burn them? Return them? No, not that, never that. But I_
must, surely I must? These are his, to do with as he chooses. But they will only reopen old wounds,
wounds from a time so long past that it cannot matter any longer. We are his life now._

The argument raged in her mind, as Victoria sat in the cool peace of her bedchamber, the mistress of
Brocket Hall. Without knowing she intended to do so, she watched her fingers work loose one letter
without disturbing the tie which bound it to the rest.

_Caro, I will hate you until I die, and I will love you until the end of time. You are cruel beyond
comprehension and I never want to lay eyes on you again. I want to steal you away to a place where
only the two of us exist in a world of our own. I want to sink myself into you and fuck you until you
scream from coming, grow hoarse with it, and then cut both our throats so we die, still joined as
one. You have ruined me for love, for life, and I cannot stomach the thought of anyone coming
between us, you and I, together for all time_ –

Victoria unfolded one after another, reading his raw pain, love and passion and hurt, terrible hurt.
Even the violence was no more than the distraught cry of a wounded animal. In others his tone
changed to one of mournful intimacy, clearly seeking to touch her heart and reawaken the early
tenderness she must have felt. She read until her eyes blurred, until her throat closed on itself with
horror and shame. Finally she gasped, dragging in air while her gorge rose. She struggled to get out
of the chair, to reach the chamber pot so she could empty herself of all the private pain she had
unwittingly glimpsed. She retched until nothing more came up, then retched again, spitting bitter bile
into the porcelain. When the spasms had stopped and her breath had steadied, Victoria carefully replaced that letter atop its fellows and looked around for some place she could conceal the packet. *Until I decide what to do with it.*

Her every feeling revolted, her mind in turmoil, she was still able to be surprised at the strongest emotion clawing at her heart. It was not jealousy – of course, there was that; to see with her own eyes proof of the deep desperate love he felt for her predecessor left fresh wounds like slash marks across her heart – but a horrible awareness of how devastating it would be for William *now*, even this many years later, to learn that Caro had shared such passionate outpourings with her lover, and that she, Victoria, had violated him anew by reading these deeply private words.

Victoria felt above all a fiercely protective outrage, on behalf of her husband. He had written these things when he was not much older than she was now, and it made her heart ache for him to imagine the torment he endured. *She* knew how much of his whimsical nonchalance was only camouflage for a tender heart which felt deeply, too deeply perhaps. To use such words to make another man jealous, to inspire passion in his rival for her affections... *Oh Caro, how could you?*

Victoria had whispered those words aloud, wondering whether in death Caro had experienced remorse. *No, it did not take that long,* was the answer. Victoria remembered William talking about her repentance at the end, those months they were separated while he was in Dublin and she stayed alone, hidden away from the world at Brocket Hall with only Susan, Augustus and the servants to keep her company. Bloated with dropsy, somnolent with brandy and opium, she had become gentle and withdrawn, writing him long letters in a tone of affectionate friendship and respect.

Oddly, Victoria was aware of a desire to protect *that* Caroline too, to spare them both the knowledge of her early perfidy.

She could not summon a servant to make a fire in the hearth now, on a sunny spring afternoon. *But I will burn them,* she decided, *for all our sakes, Caro's and mine and above all the man we both love.*
Chapter 20

Melbourne rode easily, one arm extended over the seat back. Beside him, Victoria's eyes were bright, her lips curved into an anticipatory smile. Balls such as this allowed her the freedom to enjoy herself. She was easily pleased by festive décor, music and above all, dancing. Relieved of the necessity to perform, as was required of her as hostess within palace walls, she could be simply a pretty young woman in a beautiful gown, one in a crowd of coiffed, scented women and dapper gentlemen.

Victoria glanced up in time to see him smile. Melbourne's gaze was caught in hers, the warmth in her big eyes drawing him in. *I love you*, he mouthed silently. *And you are ravishing*, he added in a low tone. Her cheeks pinked with pleasure at the compliment.

To Melbourne she had never been anything but a divine creature. Victoria would turn twenty-seven on her next birthday, and her features had lost any vestige of childish roundness. Hers was an arresting face; rather than a blandly conventional beauty, she was imbued with the strength of her character, self-assurance devoid of conceit and above all, the sense of *self* which had always attracted him. Like his own mother, vividness of personality and a *presence* which compelled attention. Some might say Victoria shared nothing except his affection with Lady Elizabeth Melbourne née Milbanke, with Caroline Ponsonby and even the woman she despised above all others, Caroline Norton, but Melbourne acknowledged the contrary was true. He had been struck dumb by the sheer force of her personality, which hit him like a lightning bolt, the very first time he'd bowed over her hand.

Engravings showing Queen Victoria's visit to Hatfield House, 1846
Victoria's cheekbones were pronounced, their width tapering to the pointed chin which lent a nearly-exotic feline quality. Her blue eyes were dark and fringed by thick lashes, spared the Hanoverian tendency to protrusion. If her little bow-shaped mouth was narrow, it was more than redeemed by the sensual fullness of her lips. A mouth begging to be kissed, was the first inappropriate thought he'd consciously entertained, when he found himself so entranced he forgot to attend to his young protégé’s words. An elegant jaw and long, swan-like neck, beautiful sloping shoulders and…when his lingering gaze reached the roundness of breasts pushed up and out by her stays, Melbourne tore his eyes away.

"Beautiful," he whispered, leaning towards her so his lips grazed an ear lobe. In truth, although he knew every inch of her, he could not see her objectively. She simply was. Victoria.

Across from them, Dowager Duchess smiled tightly. Melbourne complimented her own choice of gown and the baroque diamond necklace she wore, a trite enough thing to say but it pleased her and won him a reprieve.

"Lord Salisbury has not yet remarried," she said. "I wonder why. Was his marriage such a happy one?"

"Perhaps the prospect of mothering the six children his countess left behind consumed his full attention," Melbourne observed wryly. The Duchess shook her head at the patent foolishness of such an idea.

"Hardly. If anything, that circumstance might have compelled him to seek out a new wife. I've heard he's looking now," she added hopefully.

Melbourne understood that his mother-in-law was in an uncomfortable position, relic of a prince of the blood and mother of the queen regnant. She could not easily marry, without sacrificing her income and position. Melbourne had done what he could, to soften Victoria's autocratic possessiveness and the imagined grudges she bore. Had any gentleman of reasonable birth and character shown the least interest in that direction Melbourne would have exerted what influence he had, in persuading Victoria to sanction the match.

"Lady Canning said that he has been visiting the Earl De La Warr with some regularity," Victoria said, her voice pregnant with meaning. "He has a daughter, the Lady Mary."

They were traveling in one of the Royal coaches, emblazoned with the Crown crest, driver and postillions in Royal livery. The only coach-and-four Melbourne kept at Brocket Hall was a derelict vehicle, from the 1st Viscount's tenure. Victoria had declared they could use the Brocket Hall barouche she used to travel the few miles to Church for Sunday services, as public testament to her satisfaction with the equipage her husband provided.

Melbourne had delivered his veto with humor, opining that since Salisbury was determined to use the Queen's presence in his neighborhood to put on a show, the least they could do was satisfy his desire for pomp.

Melbourne rode in silence, half-listening as Victoria and her mother gossiped about their host's romantic prospects. She was in high spirits, readily explained by their outing, but he couldn't entirely dismiss the thought that something else fueled her slightly frenetic energy.

Whatever was on her mind, she was neither angry nor unhappy – quite the contrary, he thought, remembering little touches, the tenderness with which she had pretended to adjust his silk cravat, an unmistakable admiring light in her eyes when he presented himself in white tie and tails. He had the usual married man's tendency to assume preemptive guilt, when he suspected his wife was upset. In
this case, though…Melbourne shrugged it off, content to bask in her affectionate attentions.

"Oh, look," Victoire exclaimed, turning to look first one way, then the other. Salisbury had lined the avenue leading to his estate with lanterns, and trimmed the trees with a thousand points of light. Theirs was certainly not the first carriage to pass this way, but the road had been graded smooth and sprinkled thoroughly so no dust was thrown up to mar the shiny black finish of the Queen's coach. Footmen in Hatfield House livery saluted smartly as their retinue passed, outriders in the Household Cavalry uniform before and aft.

Victoria made mention of the original Hatfield, where Elizabeth Tudor and her younger brother had spent their childhood. Melbourne pointed out the sole remainder of that earlier structure and then the successive additions by the first Cecil and his descendants. The grand old estate had been neglected until the turn of the century – Melbourne described its ramshackle state when he'd attended bachelor routs with his Trinity College fellows.

"It's lovely now," Victoria said approvingly. "Oh, look at the fountain! And the colored lights! How charming!"

Melbourne smiled a little and reached for her hand, drawing back only when he saw the discomfort of her mama. Well enough, he conceded; being a third forced to witness such affectionate displays was not a comfortable position for anyone and he would not intentionally distress her. Instead he smiled so sweetly the Duchess returned it in kind.

As they neared the circular drive a band stationed in the portico began playing. Victoria sat back in her seat, holding her hand before her mouth to stifle a giggle.

She was swathed in the folds of a pale gold satin cloak, its raised collar framing her face. Melbourne, looking into the upturned face alight with anticipated pleasure, wanted very much to kiss her pursed lips and knew he could not. There were limits beyond which even he could not go, in the presence of his mother-in-law and an entire military marching band.

He stepped down and extended a hand first to the Dowager Duchess and then, when James Gascoyne-Cecil, 2nd Marquess of Salisbury, had appeared at the head of a queue, reached for Victoria.

She stepped out, and was instantly on, assuming the pleasant, if somewhat haughty, expression she wore like a mask. The heels on her satin slippers gave her several inches, and the curled coiffure several more, so that the top of her head came to just past his shoulder. He lent her his arm, careful to adjust his pace so that his position was never exactly equal to hers. When she reached the carpet which had been rolled out for guests, Salisbury stepped forward and genuflected. That was Melbourne's cue to step back a full pace and allow her to precede him down the receiving line.

It felt quite natural, to remain far enough behind her that he was out of the metaphorical spotlight. In this case, spotlight was not quite a metaphor. Salisbury had spared no expense in showing his Hertfordshire home to advantage, and had somehow procured a fixture similar to those used in the more extravagant playhouses. The Dowager Duchess laid her hand on his arm and they moved slowly along, greeting the adult Cecil children and fellow guests lined up in order of precedence.

Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, stood at the head of the line. He had predictably brought his daughter-in-law; his son Lord Douro was nowhere in sight and Melbourne assumed he could be found wherever the liquid refreshments were being served. Exeter and his Marchioness, Lady Isabella, stood next in line and beyond them Viscount Mahon, Phillip Stanhope. His sister Wilhelmina and her husband had accompanied Victoria as Lord and Lady in Waiting, and were in their own coach somewhere just behind. Melbourne exchanged a few words with young Stanhope,
remembering him vaguely as one of Catherine's brood.

As they made their way into Hatfield House proper, it occurred to Melbourne he had rarely seen so many prominent Tories assembled in one location. Doubtless it happened, and with some regularity, but as a cradle Whig he had been spared personal experience.

Victoria opened the dancing on the arm of her host. Melbourne was content to sip a very good, properly chilled Champagne and watch her swirl about the floor. She took such delight in dancing, giving her body over to the swaying movement – he recalled vividly the first time she had waltzed publicly, as a newly married lady safe from censure, and even more vividly her very first waltz in his arms. That was before the first, worst apoplectic stroke had deprived him of the ease of movement required to perform the steps of the dance. His deficits had gradually resolved, except for a slight drop in the foot on the affected side. He would still dance with his wife on public occasions, once, at the end of the evening when alcohol and fatigue had taken their toll and any misstep would be more easily overlooked by anyone watching their Queen and her husband.

Beside him, the Duchess of Kent swayed to the music, looking at him over the rim of her own glass. Melbourne knew his duty and sought out Wellington. After a few preliminary words, he pointedly indicated his mother-in-law with a tilt of his head. Wellington, no dolt, took the cue and marched over to do his duty.

Melbourne wandered about the perimeter of the ballroom, exchanging pleasantries with those he knew and graciously accepting introductions of those few he did not. He did not always keep Victoria in sight – in such a crush, with close to fifty couples on the floor at any point in time, it was impossible – but he always found her again, his gaze drawn like a magnet to the slender figure in glittering pale gown. She would be smiling up at the partner who held her in his arms – after Salisbury, two of his grown sons, then young Stanhope, then a fortunate country squire, each man’s posture stiff with pride of possession, however temporary, not entirely due to her rank – but always, her gaze would meet his and warm instantly.

She wore some concoction consisting of tiers of cream-colored lace shot through with golden thread over a skirt of wheat-colored crepe. Her lovely shoulders were bare, with long bell-shaped lace sleeves. A diamond necklace hung low around her neck, so the large topaz centerpiece dipped into the dark crevice between her breasts. Victoria had insisted on wearing a creamy magnolia blossom in her hair, its stem fastened into her tiara. She did not wear rings for the sake of her costume, rejecting any save the wedding band he had placed on her finger and his mother's humble garnet ring.

"You're a da-da-damned lucky m-m-an, Melbourne." A gravelly voice spoke in his ear, the stutter mild but still immediately identifiable. Melbourne looked up, unsurprised to see John Ponsonby, 4th Earl of Bessborough. "My sister would say the same, if she could. She would not begrudge your happiness, you know."

"Home from Dublin, eh?" Melbourne replied. "For a visit, or for good?"

"To s-see another quack," Ponsonby replied tersely. "Gout."

He defiantly emptied the glass he held, and set it on a tray without first ascertaining it was there. Melbourne noted the cane on which he leaned heavily.

"Old age. It happens to all of us, if we're lucky. Although I sometimes think it's otherwise, I doubt you would agree."

Ponsonby was two years younger than he himself. Melbourne's vanity nudged him to congratulate himself on appearing the more youthful, but self-doubt caused him to wonder.
"I'm fortunate indeed," he agreed mildly.

"I mean it, you know. Caroline w-w-wanted you to be h-h-happy. She knew what she threw away, and paid the price in re-regret. You stood by her until the end. She would tell me how kind you were on your visits h-h-ome, and at the end when she said send for William, he alone has never failed me, she knew you would come and hung on until you got there."

Melbourne didn't know how to respond. It seemed so long ago, the last long night he laid beside her and held her in his arms, held her poor bloated ruined body as though she were still his Ariel.

"Never mind me, old fellow. Here comes Her Majesty."

"My happiness," Melbourne murmured, so softly the other man only spared him a curious glance.

Ponsonby would have bowed like the courtier he was, but Victoria stopped him by extending her hand, sparing him the need.

"Lord Ponsonby," she smiled. "It is so good to see you!"

A small seating area apart from the rest had been established for Victoria's use. Three chairs and a low table were arranged in an alcove. Victoria laid her hand on Melbourne's arm and indicated her wish to rest.

"Please, join us, Lord Ponsonby. I do not wish to tax you with business, but I would be interested in hearing what you saw in the countryside, as you traveled."

Nicely done, Melbourne commended silently, admiring her tact. It would give the poor old fellow – old! Younger than you! – a reprieve from standing, without calling attention to his infirmity.

"Ah, that feels so good," Victoria sighed, seating herself in the center chair. Under the hem of her gown, Melbourne glimpsed silk-stockinged toes flexing, freed of confining shoes. He flicked a finger to summon one of the footmen circulating with refreshments, and took a Champagne flute for Victoria and a second for himself. Ponsonby hesitated, then waved the boy off.

"I suppose I have to follow at least some of the restrictions they give me," he grumbled. "If the doctors had their way I'd exist on bread and milk….."

"You ask me about the countryside, ma'am. I am afraid I must disappoint you. I rarely venture out of the confines of Dublin Castle, save to meet with the local dignitaries and then, it requires a full contingent of soldiers."

"Soldiers?" Victoria betrayed herself, her voice rising with shock and disapprobation. "Why? Do they hate us so?"

Lord Bessborough slid his eyes toward Melbourne. Finding no help there – Melbourne would answer as best he could later, but it was not his place to intervene now – he continued so haltingly that his stammer became worse.

"Th-th-the people are hungry, ma'am. More than hungry today, they see no f-f-future, no possibility of circumstances ch-ch-changing f-ff-for the better. A thousand a week leave for America, most of them traveling in steerage, w-w-willing to r-r-isk their lives and the lives of their ch-chi-children for a ch-ch-chance to b-b-etter their l-l-lot."

"What does America offer them, that they are willing to go so far with nothing? How do they establish themselves?"
Bessborough gave up; he shook his head.

"Th-th-at, ma'am, is a far more c-c-omplex p-p-roblem th-th-than I can address at a party. I have my own th-th-th-oughts on the matter, b-b-" he patted the perspiration from his face with a snowy handkerchief and inhaled sharply. Melbourne read the instant contrition on Victoria's face.

"I must apologize, Lord Bessborough, for taxing you so. I do understand there are no simple answers, only I am desirous of understanding and can imagine no one more qualified to enlighten me than you." The speech was delivered with a deft touch, meant to soothe and smooth over any anxiety. Good girl, Melbourne thought approvingly, warmed further by her easy transition into the sort of light banter more suitable for the place and circumstance. She soon had Ponsonby at ease once more, and Melbourne almost smiled at his old friend's expansiveness in response to a pretty young Queen's flattering attention.

Her hand was soon claimed by Uxbridge's son, a familiar face at Court. Henry Paget, 3rd Marquess of Anglesey, was a year or so junior to Victoria and had been one of the young lords privileged to attend the informal young peoples' assemblies at Kensington. With the easy familiarity such long acquaintance, the handsome heir of Melbourne's old friend bowed to him and then reached for Victoria's hand.

"You have neglected me for half the night, Your Majesty. Since I once had the honor of leading you in your first waltz, I now claim my prerogative."

"Henry, you were ordered to waltz with me by my dancing master," Victoria dimpled, teasing him. "You had eyes for no one except – oh, who was that beautiful émigré that all the boys were in love with?"

Melbourne leaned back, smiling his approval – quite a meaningless gesture, since the Paget boy already had Victoria's hand tucked firmly in his arm – and watched as she walked onto the floor with her partner. Then he took his leave of the man beside him and began making his way around the edge of the grand ballroom, pausing at intervals when hailed to exchange inconsequential small talk with friends and neighbors.

Victoria danced a polka and took her place in a quadrille, then was claimed by yet another partner for another German import, a dance they called a Schottische. He leaned his back against a pillar to turn his full attention on the dancefloor when the beginning bars of a fast-paced piece of music began. It was a variation of the Galop, which he thought was certainly a fitting designation. No one older than thirty took part and by the time it was done every dancer was breathless and flushed with exertion.

He was glad to see her enjoying herself. She had had a most atypical upbringing, natural to her station perhaps but decidedly unnatural for a gently born young woman. No coming-out into society, no opportunity to meet and mingle at will with others of her own age. There had been entertainments at Kensington, but these were stiff, awkward occasions for all concerned.

Victoria had announced, in a show of staunch solidarity, that if her husband could no longer dance, then neither would she. It is an undignified pursuit and I must remember who I am, she had pronounced and Melbourne suspected those words had been used more than once to discourage youthful exuberance.

He had refused to entertain such a ridiculous notion. Victoria was nothing if not dignified, she was a careful, generally serious young woman, and he declared her pledge of abstinence stuff and nonsense.

"You will deprive me of the pleasure I take in watching you," had finally convinced her to relent,
and take the floor once more.

It did give him pleasure, a great deal of it, to be able to watch her from the sidelines. Dancing was a young person's pastime, and his wife was a young woman. He didn't regret having an excuse to stay off the floor, except for that last waltz of the evening.

He found her at once when the final piece of music began – the maestro had announced it as such, and informed the assembly that a midnight supper awaited just beyond the ballroom – and took his time in approaching. By common understanding no other couples began to move, awaiting the Queen and her consort.

Victoria lifted her chin in a subtle gesture which told him far more than words could express. Melbourne slowed his steps as he drew near, so that he felt like some great jungle cat stalking its prey, and when he took her into his arms he felt a heady rush of sensual power at her instant response.

Waltzing had once scandalized the moralists. When Caro introduced it to the world of the ton at Brocket Hall, those who disapproved had dismissed it as one more lewd attempt by young, fast Lady Lamb to corrupt the virtue of decent people. And yet here, more than twenty years on, the privilege of waltzing was deemed a particular advantage of marriage, one which young brides never failed to exercise at the first opportunity. A bishop swirled past them, his spouse held in his arms; the stuffiest of respectable citizens proudly moved about the floor in what had once been called an embrace.

Melbourne was aware of nothing except the taut young flesh under the palm of his hand, the rounded breasts on display if he only looked down to appreciate them. His nostrils were filled with the light scent in her hair, and her skirts brushed against a growing prominence in his white silk breeches. They had been right, in assuming a waltz little more than foreplay. Its eroticism is enhanced by the formality inherent in a pose which dictated the precise distance between partners, so that senses are enflamed and yet restraint is required. A potent combination if ever there was one.

"Why do you smile so?" Victoria asked, a small knowing smile tightening her own lips.

"Oh, just thinking," he replied. "Of how very effective restraint can be. As a – er- stimulant to the senses." You know, you naughty minx, he wanted to say. You know exactly what makes me smile, and the condition you have me in.

"Then that is a good thing, is it not? If one has everything one wants, the instant one wants it, the senses can grow…fatigued. Even disinterested."

"That is not an issue, but I did hear once that restrictions on marital intimacy such as are practiced by our Jewish friends has a very substantial positive effect. Abstinence and anticipation can be powerful aphrodisiacs."

"Then perhaps I should send you away…at intervals…" Victoria's voice had a dreamy, distracted tone, and Melbourne sensed she was no longer fully engaged in their word play.

"Oh, I think that's not necessary," he said lightly. When the dance ended he bowed over her hand formally, his lips grazing the back of her knuckles.

"And what are you thinking of, ma'am?" he asked as he led her off the floor, walking at the head of a line towards the area where cold supper had been laid out on buffet tables. The Queen would not be expected to carry her own plate, naturally; Salisbury's eldest son appeared at her side and led them to a table where his father waited.
What Victoria had been thinking, at that precise moment, involved the exact location of the silk-wrapped packet of letters, hastily tucked under the cushion of a chair beside their bed.

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Despite the relative warmth of the days, the nights were seasonably chilly and damp. Many of Lord Salisbury’s guests would remain at Hatfield House. Brocket Hall was only twelve miles away, on roads their coachman knew like the back of his hand. There were no heated bricks readied, and the heavy silk cloak Victoria had worn was insufficient to the temperature. Melbourne checked on the Duchess of Kent, who had climbed into the carriage which had brought the Lord and Lady in Waiting. Then he paused long enough to requisition a heavy overcoat from one of the two Cavalry officers riding behind, the Lieutenant hastily removing the garment and handing it over with every evidence of pride.

Victoria allowed him to tuck the greatcoat, still warm from the officer who had lately worn it, around her securely. She had even raised a hand and touched his cheek, leaning forward to lay her lips on his. Then, when Melbourne had settled himself beside her, she had leaned her weight against him, her arm pressed against his, and closed her eyes.

She didn't sleep but seemed disinclined to talk, so Melbourne put his arm around her shoulders and held her close. When they'd turned into the long drive leading to Brocket Hall, she had opened her eyes and smiled – sadly, he thought, with strain shadowing her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I had a wonderful time. Did you?"

"I did," Melbourne answered carefully. "Is something wrong, my love? Do you not feel quite the thing?"

His question caused a curious response. Victoria brightened noticeably, sitting up straighter as though her mind was relieved of some burden.

"Yes – oh, I mean, no. You always understand me. It is – my courses are about to begin – if they haven't already – and I feel so bloated and uncomfortable and – "

Melbourne laughed and held up his hand. "You needn't explain further. I quite understand. At least, I can imagine – well, no, I suppose I can't. Never mind, my love, we're almost home."

"Home," Victoria repeated, once again sounding troubled. "William, would you mind terribly if I – if I go up alone? If – would you sleep in your own bedchamber tonight? We can ask Baines to have the bed linens freshened."

"Really? If you want me to, certainly. But I'd be happy to rub your head for you, or brush your hair to relax you. I promise I won't make any unwelcome advances." Melbourne laid his hand on his heart, pantomiming sincerity in hopes of winning a smile in response. For the second time, she laid her hand on his face, cupping his cheek in her little palm with almost maternal tenderness. Maternal? Absurd; she's little more than a child herself, he thought, touched.

"Really? If you want me to, certainly. But I'd be happy to rub your head for you, or brush your hair to relax you. I promise I won't make any unwelcome advances." Melbourne laid his hand on his heart, pantomiming sincerity in hopes of winning a smile in response. For the second time, she laid her hand on his face, cupping his cheek in her little palm with almost maternal tenderness. Maternal? Absurd; she's little more than a child herself, he thought, touched.

"Thank you. Perhaps – oh, if I can just be alone for a while. To – to take care of myself and – wash and –" Even in the gloom, Melbourne saw the deep blush staining her cheeks. He wondered at the excessive and quite unnecessary detail, unaccustomed to such forthrightness about feminine matters which tended to embarrass her.

"I will leave you in the hands of your maid, and read myself to sleep. If you decide you can put up with me, call out or come to me."
The carriage had stopped and a postillion was already lowering the step.

"William – I'm quite chilled. Can you have a fire lit in my chamber?"
Chapter 21

The fire went out.

Lord Melbourne had dutifully given orders that a fire be laid in the master bedchamber hearth. Since the only two servants at hand were Baines and Miss Skerrett, the request occasioned some delay while a footman was found.

Victoria had permitted her dresser to unpin her hair and give it a good brushing; she had been washed and undressed, a night dress put over her head. Finally—finally!—firewood was brought and laid in the hearth, already swept clean for the warmer months ahead. A modern coal stove stood in the corner of the room unused and she did not miss the puzzled look from the footman.

After an interminable time he succeeded in coaxing a satisfactory fire. Victoria bit her lip and pretended not to watch, only thinking of the paper with which she would feed the anticipated blaze. Melbourne tapped politely on the door at one point in the proceeding and Victoria swiftly arranged her features into the expression of one suffering some internal complaint. Her mind raced ahead, eager to send him away, while her body craved the comfort of that broad chest under her head, his strong arms around her. Time enough for that later, she scolded herself in silence.

Finally…she permitted herself to be put to bed with a hot water bottle wrapped in flannel. Her maid would know that she was not in need of her cloths, so Victoria did not bother to elaborate. Finally, finally. Victoria forced herself to lay quietly, listening to the great house settle into silence. She dared not hope William was asleep, but he was so good, so considerate, that he would not intrude after she made it clear she wanted to retire alone. That thought gave Victoria another pang of conscience, salved by the knowledge that her deception was to spare him far greater pain.

Finally…Victoria gingerly moved to the edge of the bed and swung her legs down. She was half-afraid the packet would be gone under its own power, as mysteriously as it had appeared, and exhaled sharply when her fingers touched the letters. Those she had read so feverishly were not bound with the others, and these fluttered to the ground, strewing themselves over the hardwood floor.

Victoria wanted to curse, to use the colorful invectives with which Lord M peppered his speech. Instead she dropped to her knees to retrieve them. How many? Do I have them all? Oh, why didn't I think to count? Or to tie them together again?
When she'd gathered them all and turned to the marble fireplace, Victoria did swear, using the very worst of the words no lady would say.

"Fuck all, the fire's out!"

The smaller twigs and branches had been reduced to ash but underneath, logs as big as her forearm were pristine. Victoria hurried into the upper hall, not bothering with a dressing gown, and leaned over the balustrade.

The footman who emerged in response to her summons was little more than a boy. He stumbled through the service door rubbing his eyes with one grimy hand, hastily stuffing his shirt tails into his trousers with the other.

"The fire went out," Victoria hissed, leaning over the second-floor balustrade. When he only stared, goggle-eyed at the Lady herself, barefoot and unashamed in a diaphanous gown, Victoria stamped her foot impatiently.

"You must come and start the fire in my bedchamber," she whispered hoarsely. "Now! Hurry please! I – I am freezing!"

She glared at the boy, hoping that sheer force of will might penetrate that sleep-dulled mind. Her hopes were realized when he looked up sharply and gestured for her to wait. He ducked back into the servants' hall and returned forthwith, bearing a container that sloshed as he climbed the stairs.

Victoria retreated into her bedchamber and stood so close to the boy she could see his Adam's apple rising and falling. He moved the fire screen aside and poured a liberal amount of acrid-smelling liquid over the remaining wood. When he glanced around, she guessed what he was searching for.

"Paper for kindling? Here," and she balled up some of the loose sheets in her hand. He accepted the offering without showing particular interest in the content, only splashing it with some of the odiferous fluid.

"Firestarter, ma'am, works dandy when Mr. Barrett primes the coal stove. Mrs. Barrett, she makes a rare fuss, as how it's sent special from Boston, America for –"

"Shush!" Victoria snapped. Then, "I do not want to wake Lord Melbourne. He – he is unwell, you see." One prevarication leads to another, she thought, remembering Lehzen's teachings on the subject and the many sermons on dishonesty she had heard preached.

"Spaulding's Burning Fluid" was the name of the substance, and when he set the container aside she saw that it did indeed originate in the Americas.

When the footman went for a candle, Victoria tucked the ribbon-tied bundle under the only log adequately sized to conceal it, then quickly crumpled the remaining letters and poked them between the kindling.

"Oh, ma'am, let me – " he began, then stopped at the sight of her glittering, feverish eyes. "You'll be warm soon enough now, ma'am."

He twisted the last sheet into a screw and touched it to the candle, then reached into the fireplace to ignite the rest.

For one awful second, Victoria imagined that the wood would fail to ignite a second time – too damp? Too green? William would know – and then an orange ball of flame exploded with a whoomph.
The boy jumped back, colliding with Victoria, who uttered a high-pitched little shriek. They clung to each other for a moment, before recollecting their senses and moving apart. As suddenly as it had erupted, the flame subsided to a more manageable blaze and Victoria watched, spellbound, as those damned bloody letters of Lord M's curled and turned to ash.

*It will be all right! I did it!* Victoria thought jubilantly, relief washing over her, so absorbed by the visible evidence of her success she did not notice the smoke until she heard the young footman cough.

Thick smoke was billowing out, and the fire was already so hot that her legs were –

"*Eeek!*" Victoria yelped, stomping her feet in a little dance to extinguish the tiny points of char rapidly consuming the hem of her nightgown.

"You're – yer on fire, ma'am," he stuttered, staring in horror.

"The *house* is on fire, you imbecile!" Victoria snapped. The boy dropped to his knees and began at beating her feet and legs in a furious attempt to extinguish the smoldering fabric. That done, he stood once more and looked to her for further guidance.

"Get someone!" She said in a commanding tone, forgetting the need for stealth. The room was already obscured by a light fog, but it was plain that fire itself was confined to the hearth.

"Open the flue, you fool," a voice drawled in calm tones behind her.

**

The flue had been closed, as was customary to conserve heat when a hearth was not in use. The sweeps had been down from London a fortnight ago, and all the fireplaces closed after cleaning for the warm season.

The housekeeper explained the situation matter-of-factly, arms crossed over her bosom to keep her wrapper modestly closed to the neck.

"And if you're going to start a fire in a cold chimney, it best be a big one and not using this piddling birchwood and willow. Willow's soft wood. If I might say, sir, you should have called for me or Barrett, if you wanted a fire."

Victoria stood very erect, her spine straight in defiance of the trembling which threatened to overtake her. Lord M's expression was impossible to mistake: he was amused, in his gently nonchalant fashion, but he was also carefully concealing some deeper emotion.

"And what's this -? Were you burning some-" Victoria's breath caught in her throat, when the woman moved as though to reach into the now-waterlogged remains of the fire.

"Thank you, Mrs. Barrett. We've made enough extra work for you tonight. Please don't trouble yourself further." Melbourne laid a gentle hand on her arm and steered her towards the door.

"I have the girls making up the bed in your chamber with fresh sheets, my lord. Ma'am, I'll send up your maid to get you out of that gown."

"No need, Mrs. Barrett. Good night. And – don't be too hard on this young fellow. I'm sure he meant well."

"Humph…nearly burned down the house, using Camphine to light a fire. And Her Majesty – Her
Ladyship, almost –'

Victoria felt rather than saw Melbourne's eyes on her; she kept her own gaze lowered, saying nothing.

When they were alone in the still-smoke-filled chamber, air now icy from opened windows and the draft from the chimney, she took a deep breath and squared her shoulders.

Melbourne was stirring the ashes with a poker. He lifted the corner of that packet of ribbon-tied letters, singed on the edges and water-logged but still recognizable, if not legible. He looked back at her, his brow arched quizzically, and let it drop once more so it landed with a heavy plop.

"You're cold. Let's get you to bed." Victoria heard the kindness in his voice, and winced at his gentle eyes. She allowed herself to be led into his bedchamber.

A canopied bed had been freshly made, and it stood as an oasis of order, beckoning. The rest of the small room was filled to overflowing with his books and papers on every surface, along with framed photos, an assortment of memorabilia from his life and that of his mother. Victoria felt unaccountably shy, in this space which was his and not theirs. She stood at the foot of the bed uncertainly until he smirked and beckoned her forward.

"Will this do?" Melbourne held the frilled white shirt he had worn to the ball, now laid across the back of a chair. "To sleep in? Rather than summon your maid? I think we've had enough traffic through for the night. I would like to be alone with my wife, if you please."

Victoria turned her back to him and struggled to pull her arms through the confining fabric of her own gown. Unaccustomed to dressing herself, she made a tangle of the garment and moaned with frustration.

"I am so stupid!"

Melbourne deftly coaxed the twisted material, damp from a pitcher of water thrown at the fire, until she was freed, and then lowered his shirt over her head.

Victoria smiled tentatively, keeping her eyes lowered. She sensed he wanted to make her smile, to reassure her, and distrusted the intent. There will be a reckoning, she thought. I wish he would just get it over with.

She allowed him to put her to bed like he would a child. He dropped his own dressing gown and got in from the other side, then held out his arm for her. She almost sighed with pleasure, almost sobbed with tension, when he drew her against his chest.

"Will you tell me now, Mrs. Melbourne? The truth, please."

His voice is so gentle, Victoria thought, feeling the kindness like a blow. Where to begin?

"Caroline's letters – to a lover? Of course I know that much; I know her handwriting, and if any remain of those she wrote to me…"

She hoped he would continue to speak, to fill the silence so she did not need to. Instead he waited, idly toying with a lock of her hair, smoothing the fabric of his shirt over her back, petting her as he might Lily when she needed soothing. Victoria listened to his heartbeat under her ear, to his slow even breathing.

"Yes," she said finally. "To the poet – Lord Byron."
"And -? How did you happen to find them?"

"Mr. Bevington," Victoria whispered, barely audible in the stillness.

"Who?" Melbourne's voice cracked – with laughter? Victoria wondered. Shock?

"The – the organ maker. They were concealed in a compartment, a wind chamber he called it."

"Ah, it becomes clear." There, Victoria thought with faint hope. That is most surely laughter in his voice.

"There was a – a cover letter. From Lord Byron. He returned them to her. To – to your wife. He didn't want them, or her. He said so."

"So he returned her love letters? Poor Caro, that must have stung. Twisting the knife, as if his rejection wasn't enough he must rid himself of every trace of her." Victoria heard the real compassion in his voice, and her heart was wrung anew. What a good man he was!

"He spoke kindly of you. He was sorry for his part in – things."

"You read them then? All of them?" He shifted, and Victoria knew he wanted to see her face, to read her expression and judge for himself whether she told him the truth.

"Some of them. Not all."

"I am sorry for that, but I suppose in your place I would have done the same. Was she – did she – "

"She spoke of you, in almost every one. She – she loved you, and told Lord Byron so. She praised you to him," Victoria said hastily, wanting to reassure. She pulled out of his embrace then, looking up to meet his gaze squarely. She spoke the truth; let him see it in her eyes.

Melbourne sighed deeply, then lifted her chin. He kissed her lips, a light, chaste kiss, tender and soft.

"And you burned them rather than bringing them to me." There was no question, merely a statement of fact.

"I did not want you to be hurt," Victoria said frankly. "I thought to protect your feelings."

That was the truth, as far as it went. The sight of those other letters, burnt to powder so quickly there could be nothing left, reassured her. Even if he was angry at her deception, he would be spared knowledge of Caro's ultimate betrayal.

"Thank you," he said softly. "I wish I could protect yours. This is your home now, and I would spare you these visitations from a ghost if I could."

They sat together in silence, each absorbed by their own thoughts for a time. Then Victoria picked up his hand from where it rested on her lap. She examined each finger, turned it over and traced the lines in his palm.

"There were gypsies once, camped at the side of the road near Kensington. Some of the maids went to have their fortunes told. They said the gypsies can tell the future from the lines in your hand."

Victoria bent her head, mouth poised over his hand, and pressed her lips to the skin.

"Do you think I am in there? Could a gypsy woman have told you – then – that you would have this in your future?"
She thought he understood.

"If she had, it would have…helped," he said. "During the dark times, having hope – well, I suppose I did, without knowing. Something kept me going, when the humiliation, the heartache…"

"She loved you very much," Victoria said hesitantly. "If knowing that helps at all."

He huffed a little chuckle. "I suppose I always knew that. She certainly told me often enough. But I'm not sure it helped in the moment. Even if it's true…love is not always enough. We were never compatible, not suited. The harder I tried, the more apparent it became, until I…gave up. She didn't stray until then, you know."

"What do you mean?" Victoria could not suppress her surprise. "I thought she – sought – pleasure outside of marriage, and you –"

Melbourne laughed bitterly, but tightened his arm around Victoria while he did so. Telling her, she knew, that the past had no more power over him.

"Caro never sought pleasure, in the sense I think you mean it. Not from me, and not from her lovers. I – I was a normal red-blooded young man, and I tried to…to teach her, to awaken her to that aspect of marriage. I wanted her to want – I suppose what every man hopes his wife will want. To share in – well, I tried everything I knew, everything I had learned from some estimable teachers. I always was drawn to, er, experienced women, older women, as a young man. But whatever I tried in that regard, Caro was only more horrified. She was not – she had no sense of physicality. For her, love should be the stuff of fairy tales, Ariel, Camelot. Cavaliers pursuing their lady-loves with feverish devotion devoid of – well, the more earthy ways men and women give and take pleasure. That only gave her a profound distaste. No, my darling, the wanton Lady Lamb despised that particular aspect of her affaires d'amour. By the time it came to that she lost interest in the game and moved on to a new conquest. For her, it was all about being wanted, pursued, worshiped. Never about…what we share."

He cleared his throat self-consciously, and Victoria sensed he had gotten carried away, said far more than he intended to confide. She turned into him, laid her hands on his face so he could see her clearly.

"My darling, I can't imagine not having what we share. And I am sorry for her, I suppose, that she was never happy with what you gave her. I would never want for anything else, so long as I have you."

"No, my darling, she was never happy. Not as I am, as you are, I hope. And if there are no more…discoveries you need to tell me about, rather than burning down the house, I would like to have you to myself for the rest of the night. Morning is nearly upon us."
Chapter 22

St Etheldreda’s Church, Old Hatfield, Hertfordshire

The last Sunday in March 1846 dawned sunny and unseasonably warm. Melbourne squinted in the glare of a bright azure sky and pretended to grumble for form’s sake. He and Victoria rode in a barouche drawn by two of his four prized matched bays. The shallow four-wheeled vehicle with two double seats arranged vis-à-vis, had a soft collapsible half-hood over the forward-facing seat. It was a luxurious new acquisition, its cream-colored leather upholstery still soft and new, with modern elliptical springs to ensure a smooth ride over the worst roads.

Such fine weather permitted an open conveyance, the better for those who would have already gathered for a glimpse of the Queen. The dozens of local subjects employed on the estate were stolid country folk, loyal to a fault to Melbourne himself and for his sake, to his wife. The Queen was best left in London, so it was said; in Hertfordshire she was Lady Melbourne.

Assorted aches and pains, a stiff neck and nagging dull headache did their job of reminding Melbourne he could no longer function on a few hours’ sleep. He’d raised a skeptical brow at the buff trousers and jonquil waistcoat laid out for him, more than half-convinced it was evidence of ongoing sartorial conspiracy. But rather than yellow, Victoria’s dress was seafoam green, her bonnet a straw confection trimmed with coral ribbons.

She was as full of verve and good humor as though she’d spent twelve hours in blameless slumber. There was no trace of the night on her prim, pretty features, in her creamy complexion – English rose never seemed more apt, Melbourne thought admiringly - and clear eyes. She countered each of Melbourne’s half-hearted complaints about rising at such an ungodly hour, dimpling at his bon mots, cajoling him out of what had never been a genuine distemper so that Melbourne could honestly say he was glad he had come.
In general, he approved of church attendance in moderation, and the established church was less troublesome than more zealous sects. Certainly it was right and proper for a young woman, most particularly a young Queen, to have such a moral anchor. For himself, if the sermon wasn’t especially dull or lengthy, it was bearable on occasion, if only to be seen at her side. Victoria's very obvious pleasure when he offered to accompany her had been reward enough.

_England in springtime_, surely no more beautiful place on earth. The hedgerows were lightly furred with almost incandescent green, birdsong filled the air and the surface of the River Lea was so calm it gleamed silver, seen through the budding branches of the willow trees along its banks. Lily and Liam chattered gaily, squealing with excitement at baby rabbits and newborn fawns glimpsed in the distance. The Queen's retinue followed, a carriage for her ladies-in-waiting and several riders on horseback front and rear.

Several dozen at least had turned out to catch sight of the Queen and Lord Melbourne, and these lined the road, smiling and calling out greeting. Melbourne greeted those he knew by name, and since Brocket Hall employed someone from nearly every family and was well-loved by the people, he recognized nearly everyone. Victoria answered those who wished her well, her manner natural and relaxed, with none of the stiff reserve she showed rowdier, more vociferous London mobs.

The vicar was standing in his vestments outside the door of his church, welcoming parishioners as they filed in. Melbourne stepped out and shook the hand offered in greeting, then turned to hand down Victoria. As he did so he experienced a momentary turn, his perception skewered so that, rather than clouded, his sight was imbued with surreal clarity. Colors brightened until they seemed to pulse with saturated intensity, and the tiny bows down the front of Victoria's tight bodice presented themselves with startling clarity.

Lily, in her little sprigged muslin gown and eyelet lace bonnet, was the picture of innocence, all sweetness and light, despite of – or perhaps, Melbourne mused, because of – the impish light of impending mischief in her big long-lashed eyes. She was his own darling Lily, the brown curls now tamed into coils, perfect round cheeks and Cupid's bow mouth, and yet he felt the fascination of a stranger, standing outside himself to take in details at once familiar and strange. And the boy – _Liam, our firstborn_, his addled mind protested – with soft grey eyes and aquiline nose –

He came to himself, relieved that only seconds had passed, dragged back into normalcy by Victoria leaning her weight on him when she stepped down from the carriage. Lily next, and the solid warmth of her little girl body was an anchor. He hugged her to him so tightly that she grunted in protest, and he forced himself to set her down. Liam hopped out unaided but despite that show of boyish independence Melbourne reached for his hand. He folded his fingers around the soft palm, took up Lily's hand on his other side, and followed two steps behind Victoria.

The Cecils had long been the preeminent family, since the time of Elizabeth I. The Lambs, descendants of a barrister who had earned his fortune by dint of a sharp mind and shrewd business acumen, could not compare. A ducal title, no matter how recently minted was another story, and the presence of the Queen herself left the vicar in a quandary. The Lamb family pew was situated half-way down the south side. On the north side was the Salisbury chapel, the family's front row pews testament to their preeminence. Sir Robert Cecil, adviser to Queen Elizabeth I, was entombed at St Etheldreda's Church, as were successive generations of his family.

On the Lamb side, Melbourne's parents and both Caroline and Augustus were memorialized, as was _Baby Girl Lamb_, that fragile being who only lived a day in 1809. He had brought Victoria, at her request, to pay her respects each year since even before they were married. Other than that nod to the proprieties of mourning, he had consigned his first wife and the children she gave him to the past, vaguely assuming that if an afterlife took the shape promised by religion, then surely poor tormented
Caro would have found the peace there denied her in life. With Victoria, he himself had found all the tranquility which had eluded him before.

Melbourne had no firm religious convictions, but he had never disavowed the existence of a Supreme Being. In this old familiar place he could not entirely deny the palpable sense of some spiritual dimension. Holding the warm hands of his living, breathing son and daughter, walking beside their mother, he had no qualms, no feeling of unease.

And yet…and yet, as the vicar led them past rows of parishioners, led them toward the front of the church where he would have the Queen sit, as his heels clicked against the polished stone floor, as they drew nearer the chancel, a strange buzzing in his head grew louder. No closer…no closer… the silent scream took Melbourne by surprise, along with an aversion so strong, a dread so overwhelming, that he fought with all his might to remain outwardly calm.

The pulpit loomed — loomed! Melbourne was not so lost to himself that he failed to note the ominous word his mind threw up — and all his attention was fixed on the wide stone slabs at its base. He swallowed hard, once, twice, his throat working to clear a new obstruction which made it difficult to draw a satisfactory breath. He no longer saw his surroundings, could only strain with all his might to place one foot in front of the other and remain upright. A weight compressed his chest so that it seemed impossible to draw air, as though the very flagstones he walked on were pressing down on him, as though he were under them facing up, struggling to breath. The voice of reason spoke in his mind, counterpoint to the rioting disintegration of senses taking place, seeking to subdue rising panic with some semblance of logic. And then his field of vision disintegrated into a thousand splinters of light that winked out one by one.

He was conscious of nothing, waking awareness of only absence, a lightless colorless void lacking form or substance, all-encompassing. It was by far the most nightmarish of the megrims-nightmares-visions which had plagued him over the past months and years and brought with it the most complete desolation. No fog, no familiar sights and sounds, only a blackness so complete that it rendered even the idea of life an exercise in futility. *So this is where it ends*, that voice, the voice of Melbourne, drawled, himself his only companion in this limitless expanse of nothingness. *Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, bones relegated to a forgotten hole in the ground. No one to remember, no one to mourn, posterity only a promise made to soothe the pain of dying.*

And just like that, it was over. The spell, seizure, fainting fit — whatever it was, surrendered to the bright light of day, the touch of Victoria's soft hand, the perfume of her warm living flesh enveloping him. Suddenly everything was clean and new and infinitely precious — *her* above all, but the flowers on the altar, a plump rosy-cheeked farm wife in her Sunday best, the deep-grained oak, smelling of beeswax and lemon no less than the hands of the village good-wives who had rubbed the polish in. Melbourne felt a grand, absurdly maudlin affection for everyone around him, for all the signs of human occupation. He also, most inappropriate to the time and place, felt a great surge of lust, so that he was suddenly hard and quickly clasped his hands over the evidence. It all seemed of a piece, the silk flower bobbing in a new Easter bonnet across the way, the fidgeting of one of the altar boys swinging his legs and thinking doubtless of the freedom which lay just beyond the stained-glass windows, the earnestness of the preaching and the erection straining against confinement. It was all evidence of life itself, and because of that, inestimably precious.

The recessional ended, Victoria was expected to rise first. She did so, clutching Melbourne's hand tightly in the folds of her skirt so that he could not step back and allow her to precede him. Lily skipped along beside her brother, tolerating the pats of matrons who lavished praise on such a *dear sweet thing*.

Melbourne's hand still held in hers, Victoria stopped to compliment the vicar on his sermon, and
praised the altar decorations to his wife. When her carriage was brought up, she bent to whisper in each child's ear and Melbourne saw them both smile widely.

"The children were so very good, may they be allowed to ride pillion with the soldiers, Lord M?"

Seeing the two eager faces turned up to his – three, if he counted Victoria's – Melbourne knew it was a fait accompli, his permission only sought for form's sake.

"Of course," he agreed at once. The two Household Cavalry officers chosen to bestow such a treat showed less enthusiasm, and Melbourne winked conspiratorially as he flung first Liam, then Lily into the saddle of a stalwart sergeant and saw them settled securely.

Melbourne paused before stepping into their carriage. He looked up, feeling the sun on his face like a benediction. The air was mild as milk, pregnant with new life, and he inhaled deeply, relishing the sensation of his chest expanding, rising and falling as it should without effort.

They rode in silence broken only by hoofbeats and the pleasant jingle of bridles and brass, by birdsong and the distant sound of cheerful voices. Victoria didn't speak, and Melbourne turned his attention to her. In response to his scrutiny she leaned into him and the slight pressure of her arm against his, her leg under the layers of skirt and petticoat nudging his own thrilled him with its immediacy.

"Will you tell me at least, are you – " her dulcet voice broke, and Melbourne felt his own eyes fill with sudden tears. "Will you see Dr. Holland when you return?"

He was filled with remorse, that he should have caused her concern. But he was also suddenly aware of the precariousness of life.

"Yes," he responded almost instantly. Victoria's eyes widened in surprise at his capitulation, and just as quickly darkened with concern.

"Can you tell me what happened?" She asked hesitantly. Her hand found his; he took it in both of his, looking down at the fingers curled over his. So small, he thought, so fragile and yet with such a weight of responsibility to carry. She must not carry it alone.

Not yet, the voice of caution whispered. But someday. She must be prepared. Her life cannot end with yours.

"I think I know what you're about, with Albert's posthumous title and the revisions you intend to introduce. You've been subtle, and none of the changes have been remarked upon."

"Except by you?" Victoria asked humorously. "Not so very subtle then."

"Your ultimate intention is to ensure my name is linked to yours when the histories are written, as your husband and at least de facto father of William and Elizabeth. You think – hope – that gradually, Albert will be forgotten." Melbourne deliberately kept his tone mild, wanting to avoid any impression of censure.

"Not forgotten," she protested sharply. "He was a good and moral man, who sincerely cared for the welfare of our people. He will be remembered, for his social justice concerns, his patronage of science and industry and the arts. We will name buildings for him, and bridges, and endow a – well, we can think of ways in which to memorialize Albert for his many good qualities. You know I was sincerely fond of him."

"I know." Melbourne's lips quirked into a smile that he did not try to disguise. "I was too."
"But it is you who will be remembered in a hundred years, as my husband and the father of my children, as the man who preserved our nation and our Constitution, and who made me a Queen."

They lapsed into silence, but he kept hold of her hand, turning it over, tracing the length of her fingers and tickling her palm with his thumb.

"You – you are not angry? You do not wish to dissuade me?" Victoria's voice trembled – with defiance, he thought, as much as trepidation.

"I wish to thank you," Melbourne said finally. The words were nearly lost in the thickness which filled his throat, tears unshed. "Thank you," he repeated more clearly.

She offered so much more than she knew, and he would not, could not refuse it, from modesty or self-abnegation or misplaced pride. He knew, and she knew, he was neither arrogant nor greedy for power. But he had been shown the alternative, the bleak pathos of lying forgotten in an unmarked grave, and could no longer refuse the chance at immortality she offered.

Henry Temple was waiting upon their return. He sat on a fence overlooking the pasture where Brocket horses grazed, swinging his long legs and munching on a biscuit he had cajoled from the cook.

Melbourne went out to join him, the children in tow. His own mood was still ebullient, he thrummed with energy and yearned to be out in the open, to feel his limbs move as he commanded, take satisfaction in strength and health.

"I left Emily at Panshangar. We are in session tomorrow. I'll ride back with you and Victoria, if you don't mind the company."

Melbourne shrugged his assent. "Would it make a difference if I did?"

Palmerston laughingly shook his head. "Come, man, you don't need to monopolize her attentions. You know," he paused, staring at the horizon. "If things had worked out differently, it might be me in your shoes."

"If you like to believe so, Henry, nothing I say will convince you otherwise." Melbourne permitted his annoyance to show.

"Oh, I don't say now, but early on – she was fair game for either of us. Better you or me than some unscrupulous fellow seeking only influence and favor. She quite liked me, too, you know."

"No, Henry, she didn't, not in the way you mean. She was a baby, far more naïve and inexperienced than the eighteen-year-olds you've known. Or I, for that matter."

He watched his brother-in-law arrange a blade of grass lengthwise between his thumbs, then blew a sharp whistling tune. Recalling the trick from boyhood, Melbourne bent and plucked and emulated the motion. He was unable to produce anything except a most vulgar noise, and Palmerston laughed heartily at the failed attempt. Melbourne cuffed him playfully and they scuffled like boys on holiday, full of high spirits. Then he swung Lily onto the other man's shoulders and took up Liam on his own. They made for the old racetrack, now overgrown and unkempt, but still extant for those who remembered the days when Peniston Lamb would hold hunt parties and stage private races for his cronies, away from the demands of an exacting wife.

When Victoria finally found them, they were sprawled on freshly trammeled meadow, panting and disheveled. Melbourne winced, knowing the spectacle they made, but Victoria only laughed.
"Racing? Bare-backed? No bridle, no saddle?"

"It's my fault entirely, ma'am. In my own defense, we rode only the two you see there. 'Out to pasture' and barely up to my weight." Palmerston leapt to his feet first, in a surprisingly agile movement for a man of sixty-two. He had already claimed Victoria's hand, and brought it to his lips for what Melbourne thought was an entirely unnecessary salutation.

"I hate to be the one to remind you, but we must return to London. The carriages are ready. Your Prime Minister needs you, Lord Palmerston. And your Queen needs you, Lord Melbourne."

Victoria took Melbourne's arm, and showed him such a sweet smile, even reaching on her toes to kiss him, that he did not complain when she took Palmerston's arm too. The three of them walked, arms linked, towards the waiting coaches, with the children running gaily ahead.

Suffused with contentment, at peace with the world, Melbourne thought of his happiness, such a fragile thing, entirely dependent on a single turn of fate.

"Thank you," he whispered under his breath, homage like a prayer to whatever deity might be listening. "Life is beautiful."
Sun on his face. A sweet lassitude like honey in his veins. Every sense so acute, he could feel individual hairs on his calves where they rubbed against the sheets. Victoria coiled around him, clinging like a limpet, her skin touching his at a hundred different points.

A bone-deep contentment suffused his very being. *More than contentment, perfect peace, and profound awareness, as though truly seeing for the first time. There – that fragile glass vessel – how miraculous that such beauty could exist, purely for the enjoyment of those who behold it! The rich, slightly acrid scent of coffee, the delicate golden hue of a perfectly made croissant –*

Melbourne had not lost his sense of the ridiculous, and he began laughing at his own euphoria. Laughter that made his belly shake so Victoria had opened her eyes, her head pillowed on his chest, and the love which illuminated her face was the most beautiful sight of all.

He felt fine, he'd protested weakly; better than he had in a twelvemonth or more. Energized, strong, entirely well. No need to trouble the physicians, take up their valuable time.

"Valuable time', Lord M? Hardly. *We have twelve of them drawing a salary, and their work is hardly taxing.*

Any further attempt to evade the doctors' clutches was futile, it seemed.

"William, you promised," was all she said, with the exaggerated patience one would show a recalcitrant child.

Dr. Holland had insisted on coming to him for the sake of discretion. He came attended only by a young medical student who acted as his assistant. That young man set down medical bag and a larger valise, the contents of which clanked ominously, and backed out of the room with his head bowed as though he were in the presence of the Queen herself.

Holland chose their private sitting room to perform his examination, on account of the abundant light from its tall south-facing windows. Melbourne obediently shed his dressing gown and stood only in
his drawers. He did as he was told, feeling foolish for being the cause of such fuss. Draw one deep breath after another. Feign a cough. Stand, raise his arms over his head, lean forward at to touch his toes. And answer questions, a litany of intrusive queries on distasteful subjects.

Henry Holland was a near-contemporary and social acquaintance. Whether that made it better or worse –

Bowels? Everything quite normal, thank you and no, my urine is not discolored. The last, but thankfully not the first, was put to the test. Melbourne stepped behind a screen to half-fill a small stoppered flask.

Dr. Holland kept up a steady flow of inconsequential chatter, adroitly inserting the occasional pointed question on some bodily function or another. Melbourne endured his catechism with good grace.

He admitted to occasional dyspepsia and the intermittent migraines which had plagued him since adolescence; denied any previous palpitations or chest pain. Waved a hand dismissively at a certain tightness in his lower back, which blossomed sometimes into a more insistent ache.

Holland rapped his knuckles sharply on chest and back, eliciting a hollow reverberation that seemed to satisfy, judging by the little nod of approval. He poked and prodded at Melbourne's abdomen, searching for tender spots, and then moved his exploration lower.

"No decrease in desire? No unwelcome flaccidity at inopportune moments?" Holland might have been discussing equine spavins, and Melbourne found that such a phlegmatic manner helped to avert the embarrassment of having his private parts firmly gripped by a man's hand.

"No to the latter, thank God. I don't fancy a course of strychnine, as the French recommend. The cure sounds worse than the disease." Melbourne answered easily, concealing a twinge of discomfort at the topic.

"And the former? How frequently do you engage in marital relations?" At this, Melbourne swallowed hard and was finally forced to look away. Good God, am I blushing? he asked himself furiously.

"Often enough," Melbourne answered shortly, his tone clipped. Relenting, he continued. "I – er – have found something far more efficacious than quack remedies. Warmth, affection and compatibility do more than any nostrum or device. More than the desperate stratagems to which one resorts in the absence of tenderness and contentment."

"And during the act itself, have you ever lost consciousness or experienced any pain in your chest or upper arm? Any shortness of breath?"

Melbourne smirked, remembering. He shook his head to clear it of the image which presented itself, Victoria opening herself to him, arms and legs spread wide in welcome before they tightened around him, drawing him in more deeply. That memory was replaced by one of them laying together, languid in the aftermath of lovemaking. The two of them talking in low tones, comfortable bedtime conversation, that intimacy no less cherished than the other.

"Breathlessness? Definitely, in the moment. Loss of consciousness? Only in the best possible sense. La petite mort. But no, not – not as I experienced yesterday, which is what I think you ask."

If the physician hoped to see evidence of his patient's well-being, he was not disappointed. Melbourne was offered momentary reprieve when the other man turned deliberately away, all his
attention on disassembling the brass and mahogany stethoscope. He hurriedly rearranged his clothing and tied the belt of his dressing gown.

Dr. Holland took a seat and motioned his patient to do likewise. He asked Melbourne to describe once more the unusual incident in the church which had prompted him to seek medical advice.

The man was damned thorough, Melbourne noted approvingly. He asked questions and listened to the answers, and did not rush to judgment. His questions were good ones, eliciting forgotten details, and he gave every indication of rapt concentration, jotting notes in a bound book.

"Well? Was it another apoplectic stroke? A warning of more to come? Am I – " Melbourne stopped, utterly unable to continue, to ask the question in the forefront of his mind. Not *am I going to die?*, at least not with the burning urgency of *am I on the way to becoming a demented old man who must be cared for like a child?*

Holland regarded him steadily for a long moment, then shook his head.

"Is that what worries you? That this was some sign you're ready to stick your spoon in the wall? William, William, always anticipating the worst. Let me set your mind at ease. Your heartbeat is regular, your pulses steady and strong, your lungs clear. There's no sign of impairment in any area, you experienced neither pain nor any real loss of consciousness."

"In short, you're healthy as a horse," he said, sounding almost regretful at being forced to render such an anticlimactic opinion. "Even the complaints of your middle years have abated. Clean living has much to recommend it. No more three-bottle nights, eh, William?"

While never especially close – *this* Henry Holland had not been an intimate of the other, Melbourne's oldest and dearest friend, Lord Holland - they had acquaintances in common, belonged to the same clubs and their paths had often crossed in Melbourne's free-wheeling prior life.

"No, but I find such excesses were more amusing in the reminiscence than the reality. I'm no prude, mind –" Melbourne grinned, recalling those not-so-long-ago revelries. "But I've found my place in the world and have no desire to stray."

He wanted to explode with relief and sheer *joie de vivre*, to clasp Victoria to his breast and dance her about the room. The reminder of that smothering *nothingness* waiting for him under the stone slabs of the pulpit surged up, instantly sobering. It was his own grave he'd been in, unmarked and forgotten by time itself. No Heaven, not even the flames of Hell, only an emptiness so vast even the memory made him weak-kneed with despair.

"Then what was it? What happened to me, and why? How can I be sure it won't reoccur?" Melbourne demanded, his voice dropping so that it would not travel through the single door separating him from Victoria.

"Her Majesty is waiting," Dr. Holland said, as if he needed reminding. "I have some theories, none of them particularly concerning, but I would rather not go into them twice. Shall we join your wife and alleviate her natural concern?"

Victoria had tactfully withdrawn, respectful of the need for privacy between doctor and patient. Throughout the examination, as uneventful as it was, his attention had been diverted by the sound of her voice, words indistinguishable but tenor and infinitely familiar cadence as soothing as a lullaby.

"You go ahead," Melbourne said, rising and ringing the bell which would summon his valet. "I will not shuffle into the Queen's drawing room looking like an invalid."
He surprised Baines by calling for his new suit, freshly delivered from the tailor's. Resplendent in double-breasted frock coat, crisp pleated shirt and close-fitting buff trousers, Melbourne sauntered in, determined to project the appearance of unconcern. He bent over Victoria's hand, chuffed the little dog beside her under its chin and pretended more interest than he felt in the plate of tea cakes and sandwiches laid out on a low table. Finally, almost reluctantly, he took his place on the settee.

Victoria sat up even straighter, and Melbourne saw the slight squaring of her shoulders, the stiffening of her spine and lift of her chin that meant his wife was steeling herself to deal with unpleasantness. His heart, already in her hands, clenched with tenderness and pride.

"Dr. Holland, what can you tell us? What did you find?"

Her voice was carefully modulated and she tilted her head slightly, as though awaiting the explanation of some matter of policy. Underneath the smooth delivery, the pretty pleasant expression on her face, Victoria conveyed an impression of strength and determination. A woman fit to lead an Empire, to inspire the trust and confidence of her subjects and the respect of her ministers. I had some part in that, Melbourne realized, but it was always in her to become what she is. She only needed to be shown.

Holland summarized once more the results of his examination – lungs clear, heart strong and mind sharp. No new impairments, not even those one might otherwise expect in a man of his age. Mild lumbago, not enough even to limit natural movement. Surprisingly, for a man of his generation and social standing, no gout.

"In short, ma'am, no clinical findings of any significance."

Melbourne saw that Victoria's answering smile did not reach her eyes, and could not miss the impatient tapping of her foot.

"That is all good news, Doctor. How do you explain the episode my husband experienced? He did not lose consciousness, did not even stagger, but when I looked into his eyes he was – " and suddenly the veneer of poise crumbled. Victoria's lip trembled and her eyes grew wide with something greater than fear. " – he was not there," she finished.

The shudder which wracked her slender form was answered in kind. Melbourne discreetly laid his hand over hers, wanting to reassure her and instead drew strength from her warmth.

"If neither stroke nor heart attack – you say you felt as though you could not draw breath, yet neither you nor your wife describe any obvious respiratory distress – then we can only conclude the symptoms you experienced existed in your mind."

Melbourne arched his brow skeptically; he felt on firmer ground now, able to pose a counter-argument with some semblance of lucidity.

"Indeed? And what explains that then? I was not under the influence of spirits or opium, nor was I experiencing any stressful emotions. To suggest I had an attack of – what? The vapors?"

He expected Dr. Holland to take umbrage at his deliberately provocative query, but the physician only chuckled.

"Possibly. More likely, an explanation as mundane as lack of sleep and inadequate nutrition. You went without your breakfast and ate lightly, if at all, the previous evening, you said…?"

Melbourne conceded that much was true, and felt some of the tension ebb out of Victoria at the reasonableness of such a hypothesis.
"Or," Holland continued, some slight constraint in his voice. "A distinctly unlikely possibility, but one I can't rule out entirely. You had a son, Lord Melbourne, who lived until the age of – what? 30?"

Melbourne did not bother to correct him by a year. He nodded instead, gesturing for the man to continue.

"Your boy – young man, I should say – suffered from multiple maladies. He was an imbecile – " Melbourne winced at the harsh term. "- but he was also an epileptic, from birth I believe?"

Melbourne lifted his chin, intending it as no more than a concession to hear the man out.

"This could have come from his mother, or you. If either of you had other children, born to a – to a different parent – it would help us understand which of you gave your son the disease. As it is –"

"You clearly have no understanding of an epileptic seizure, sir, if you think I could mistake what I experienced with my son's epileptic fits."

Melbourne's mind went back over the years, seeing once again the horrific episodes of spasmodic contortions which had wracked his poor boy. In adulthood, it had taken several strong men to hold Augustus down when the fits overtook him.

"Your son's affliction cursed him with grand mal seizures, the more profound and debilitating form of the disease. I speak of petit mal episodes, which are not unlike what you described to me. The perception of a loss of time – or, in some cases, visions, hallucinations which can seem quite real. An onlooker would see only the blankness your – Her Majesty just described."

Melbourne remembered then something Caroline had said, shortly before her obsession with the poet took hold. It had seemed insignificant at the time, in the light of all that soon followed.

"Lord Byron has a form of epilepsy, like our son, William. I should like to ask him what measures he takes, so that his mind is still sharp and clear. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could do likewise with Augustus?"

He dimly remembered protesting, that he would not have his son's infirmity discussed outside the family, or words to that effect. No more, and it had never come up again between them. By then, George Byron was not a subject for calm discourse between husband and wife.

"You're in fine physical shape, Melbourne. That's all I can tell you. Perhaps it's time you consulted a clergyman or philosopher, or a spiritualist for your answers." The physician looked from Victoria to Lord Melbourne, and evidently decided his visit had run its course. He withdrew, bowing to the Queen and shaking her husband's hand.

Melbourne watched and waited for Victoria to speak first. That sinister dark beast stalking him on silent paws - he'd always imagined his bouts of melancholy as an unwelcome yet entirely familiar guest - slunk away, leaving him to bask in the bright light of day.

"Good news, sweetheart. You'll have me on your hands a while longer." The sally fell flat. Victoria was unamused.

"You do have other children, and they are fine, whole and sound," Victoria said finally. "I am sorry for your poor son, but his condition has nothing to do with you. I must take better care of you, that's all there is to it."

She crouched before him, resting her forearms on his thighs and then raised both his hands to her lips. Her changeable blue eyes were wide, the pupils large and dark.
"If you think otherwise, you must tell me. But so long as you feel well – you do feel well, Lord M?"

"I do," he responded emphatically. "Very, very fine indeed."

Her dark head bowed so her face was hidden from him, so long that he thought she might be praying. When she finally looked up, her open honest face was ablaze with love and fury.

"You will stay that way. You will stay that way. I will make it so."

Victoria had a pile of work demanding her attention. Melbourne had long been in awe of her work ethic, and the diligence with which she prepared for every audience, every Council, every visit from her ministers. They might well wish it were otherwise – there were many, in both Houses and among her subjects, who thought the sovereign's role was to sign documents and open bridges – but this queen took her responsibilities seriously.

"Then I will be off, ma'am, and see you at dinner," he mumbled, his mouth pressed against hers, holding her on his knees.

Victoria's response was inaudible, but she seemed to have no immediate intention of rising. Melbourne rested his chin on her head, content in the moment. Finally, she heaved a great sigh and got to her feet.

"If you feel as well as you look, you are in superb health, Lord M."

It must be the coat. I will remember to pay my tailor on time. Discretion being the better part of valor, Melbourne refrained from any further attempt at levity and settled for planting an almost-chaste kiss on Victoria's mouth. Then he gaily took up his hat and cane and sauntered out of the room.

Melbourne rode into town, too abuzz with restless energy to content himself with a more sedate means of transportation. He pretended not to notice the brougham following at a sedate distance, but tolerated that day's protection officer so far as to invite the man to ride beside him.

The Earl of Dalhouse was to argue for the adoption of measures to limit the amount of capital used to fund construction of new railways. That bill at least had the benefit of populist appeal, a means to put the brake on the runaway speculation which had cost men of modest means their entire fortunes.

The second item on the agenda was Londonderry's, to examine the wholesale ejection of Irish tenantry from land they had farmed for generations. The newspapers had recently made much of certain tragic cases. The Queen had read those accounts much consternation, and Melbourne had decided to attend the hearings in his capacity of minister without portfolio.

A brisk wind was blowing from dockside, and the warmth of the previous day had fled. He gave some coins to the coachman and told him to take himself and the postilions to the King's Arms, where they might warm themselves with ale and meat pies. He knew better than to suggest the same to the man whose sole job it was to keep his Queen's husband safe. Instead he stepped aside and gestured for him to go first, ushering him into the antechamber where clerks gathered around a stove, near enough to be able to scurry in with whatever document or fact might be required when the House was in session.

Londonderry already had the floor, and was in fine fettle, Melbourne observed as he settled himself in a seat to one side. He realized as he did so how very much he missed the busyness of government, the sense of urgency and immediacy found among men of strong will and sense of purpose doing the nation's business. Not such a bad thing after all, having this appointment. She knows me better than I know myself, to put me here and give me work to do. I am not cut out to be only a man of leisure,
however much I pretend otherwise.

"I do not mean to dispute the right of landed proprietors manage their estates as they pleased," the Marquess was saying, although his sweeping gesture and firm shake of the head indicated the contrary was true.

Melbourne held no firm views on the subject, save those which cautioned against such excess that it would rouse the populace to open revolt. When he thought about it, he supposed that to uphold property rights and enforce contracts were the primary job of government. That, and to prevent disorder. He determined to listen with an open mind, and allow himself to be persuaded one way or the other.

"These landholders must not forget that they are responsible to society as a whole," Londonderry went on, in the low ringing tones of an evangelist. *If they wanted to clear their estates of any portion of their tenantry, they might have gone to work by degrees, encouraging them to emigration, or giving them some assistance to remove and establish themselves elsewhere. In the present instance these unfortunate people had their rents actually ready, and that year after year they offered them to their landlord, and implored that they should be received.*

Melbourne's attention was piqued by this accusation, and he saw several peers paying close attention, with every evidence of having their interest fully engaged.

The request was refused, and the unhappy people were driven out of their holdings, and an entire village depopulated. *If such scenes as these occurred was it to be wondered at, however it might be deplored, that deeds of outrage and violence should occasionally be attempted, and that the law was not respected as it ought to be?*

The Earl of St. Germans stood, and called upon the honorable gentlemen to demand an accounting from the Secretary. Why had Lord Duncannon not previously brought such abuses to Her Majesty's attention? O'Connell had letters in his possession attesting to such abuses, that it was no hyperbole to compare this treatment of the Irish peasantry with the horrific acts of violent suppression perpetuated in Russia.

"Oh come now, that's a bit over the top," Melbourne muttered under his breath, ignoring the sharp looks in his direction. He despised exaggeration or any overzealous fervor, but conceded privately that Duncannon, if he had not yet returned to Dublin, must be called to give an account.

Who the devil was the fellow Londonderry named as the worst offender? He belatedly became aware that he'd been overheard, only when a young clerk slid the length of the bench between them and whispered a brief account of the particulars. *Mr. and Mrs. Gerrard were the parties on whose estates those sad ejectments had taken place. Seventy-six families, comprising in all no less than 300 individuals, had not only been turned out of their houses, but had even—the unfortunate wretches—been mercilessly driven from the ditches to which they had betaken themselves for shelter.*

"Damned shame, of course; damned shame," he muttered, nodding his thanks and then sighing. Victoria would want to know; better she be informed by her minister without portfolio, than by Mr. Dickens and his ilk.

Irish accents were in evidence when the House adjourned at two o'clock. The large open area which served as gathering space for those not entitled to take a seat in the chamber itself was packed with so many bodies that the air was quite stuffy. Amidst the din of many voices, Melbourne looked around impatiently for the officer who had accompanied him. He wanted to get away before he could be accosted by those with some petition to press on him. When he heard his name called in a thick brogue, his first intention was to feign deafness and keep walking. One of O'Connell's cronies, he
guessed. When he turned to see who hailed him, it was with the greatest reluctance.

A tall man, his shoulders made even broader by a many-caped traveling cloak, was making his way through the crowd. Melbourne was so certain that whoever he was, the fellow intended to harangue him on one side or another of the Irish matter, that recognition was delayed. It was only when he found himself looking past a long curtain of brown hair, to the half-hidden handsome face, that he realized at whom he was staring.

"This is a surprise," he drawled slowly. "Welcome back to England, Lord Cameron."

William Cameron
Chapter 24

The Lord Chamberlain had once stipulated that Court uniform coats could be black, brown, dark green, blue or even purple. Lord Melbourne had introduced a new style of court dress, comprised of a dark, frequently black silk-velvet single-breasted dress coat lined with black silk, except for the tail, which was white, with a stand collar. He wore this with a white satin or black silk collarless waistcoat, and white neckcloth. For levées, this went with trousers, to the great relief of all gentlemen in attendance. For drawing rooms, breeches with white silk stockings were still de rigueur but the sheer quantity of heavy gold embroidery had been gradually diminished over time. He complained of the heat and the weight of metallic thread, and pretended to grumble each time protocol required the full Court uniform.

Victoria, watching him from the doorway, grinned at her suspicion that natural vanity prevailed. *How could he think mere comfort mattered, when he made such a spectacularly handsome figure? Surely he did not fail to notice the sidelong glances from female admirers, the infuriating way they flirted with fans and otherwise intelligent creatures resorted to simpering and much fluttering of lashes?*

Tonight he wore midnight blue. His waistcoat was white satin, also embroidered, and his knee-breeches – another style he despised as hopelessly out of fashion except for these formal receptions – were precisely tailored to his excellent physique.

He had only just returned and she had no opportunity to greet him privately. He’d gone directly to the children and then to bathe and dress for the evening, only sending word by way of a page that His Grace the Duke of Melbourne was returned to the palace.

When Victoria reached him she stopped short, reminded of decorum by the impassive face of his valet. Her hand went up, fingers twirched a fold of the white silk cravat for something to do, and then she allowed her fingers to trace the intricate filigree workings of the oak leaf pattern.

"I always imagined what it would be like," Victoria whispered, so softly he had to bend his head to hear her. Then he arched a thick brow quizzically.

Slightly embarrassed by the memory of that own long-ago girlish infatuation, Victoria looked up at
her husband from under her lashes.

"To be able to do this. When I was just a girl and you were my Prime Minister."

She had been surprised and not well pleased when he'd returned from a visit to Parliament with the intention of traveling to Tattersall's auction the following morning. The Duke of Norfolk, Master of the Horse, was going for the Spring Meet.

"Now?" Victoria had squawked. "But – you didn't say anything –"

Knowing how foolish she sounded – like the worst sort of harpy – Victoria had swallowed further protests and smiled encouragingly instead. She hadn't needed her mother's unsolicited advice to realize that to keep a man like Lord M too close was to dim the exciting sense of worldly masculinity that made him such a fascinating creature.

He took trips to see his brother in Derbyshire, dined with friends at his clubs and even put in occasional appearances at a few elite political salons, although not as frequently as before they were wed and never at that Norton creature's. He had accepted diplomatic missions to France and the Low Countries over the years. Normally these jaunts were discussed well beforehand, but of course Newmarket was only a half-day's ride away, and Tattersall's auction and Race Day revelries were a fixture on every well-born gentleman's calendar. Only, why had he said nothing beforehand? The niggling unease in the back of her mind would unsettle her if she allowed it, so Victoria determinedly pushed it away.

Victoria laid her hand on the arm he offered and they walked together, down a long corridor bisecting the wing containing the private apartments.

"How did you find Newmarket?" she asked, breaking their companionable silence. "Did you enjoy yourself or was it a tedious crush?"

Melbourne grunted some inarticulate response, then cleared his throat and began again. "If I say 'yes, very' you can interpret as you wish." He grinned suddenly and tightened his arm where her hand rested.

"I found I missed sleeping in my own bed," he said, telling her without saying the words what she wanted to hear.

"But I confess it was somewhat enjoyable, to escape the confines of the city." Victoria knew that too referred to much more than the boroughs of her capital.

"I suppose that includes sitting up late and drinking to excess? Gambling and er – talking about horses and whatever else gentlemen do when away from their wives."

"Quite certainly, all of that," Melbourne answered agreeably. The laughter in his voice warmed Victoria.

"And you, ma'am? What did you do while I was gone to keep yourself busy? Who did you receive?"

Victoria shrugged, making a little moue of distaste. "A tea for some shipowner's wives, and one for the ladies of Dorset."

"What, all the ladies of Dorset?" Melbourne teased.

"No, silly. I'm sure they were being honored for – something. I knew at the time, or at least who was who. I just didn't retain it afterward."
"That sounds very uneventful. Any other visitors who might have slipped your mind?"

They had nearly reached the small picture gallery where guests assembled. A footman had already spied them approaching. Victoria steered Melbourne into a shallow curtained alcove. As soon as they were hidden by the velvet draperies, she turned her face up to his and licked her lower lip coquettishly.

*How handsome he is!* she marveled, admiring the light golden tan acquired on the road, the way in which gold trimmed collar and snowy linen framed his distinguished features. Victoria sniffed, her nostrils twitching, and blushed furiously when she realized what she'd done.

"I missed you, Lord M," she whispered, laying a hand on his cheek. "I love how you smell…and look…and feel. Now please kiss me properly, before we go in."

Good weather had followed them to Newmarket, and nearly all the way back. Warm balmy spring air, the countryside newly green and bursting with life, and convivial companions made the trip a pleasant enough diversion.

When he'd told the Queen of his intention, she was surprised but uncomplaining. Henry Howard, her newly appointed Master of the Horse, had discussed his planned trip to Newmarket.

Howard, the Duke of Norfolk, was a fellow cradle Whig and acquaintance of long standing. He was immediately agreeable when Melbourne suggested riding along. Lord Norfolk's second son Edward went with them, as did Uxbridge's younger son Henry and his nephew Alfred, son of Henry Paget. It was a merry party who set out, and the pike road was crowded with others bound for the races.

*Tattersall's Spring Auction* coincided with the first meet of the year, and the town was full to overflowing. Money alone was not enough to find accommodations; nor was a title, when the most prominent families in the country had representatives filling every available space. By prearrangement Lord Norfolk's man had rented the entire second story of a prominent inn.

They sat up late in a private dining room, drinking deep with the succession of callers who caught wind of their presence. Lord George Bentinck was the first and lingered the longest, speaking at length about the next day's race card. No more a gambler than was required of a gentleman, Melbourne carelessly threw down £100 on a three-year-old nobody else wanted when the brothers Stebbing passed round the betting book. Pyrrhus the First had bad legs, they told him, and no prior wins of note. Bentinck almost took offense that his own Crozier, the favorite by all odds, was so neglected.

Melbourne was surprised to find he enjoyed himself more than anticipated, enjoyed the freedom from stifling court protocol and fellowship of old friends, even – were he honest with himself – a taste of the bachelor freedom he'd so willingly traded for marriage. Not, he'd hastily amended the renegade thought, that he had any regrets on that score; only, it was good to get away for a night or two. No different in that case than most of the men who filled the taverns all around, determined to enjoy their holiday free of the constraints of age and station in life.

In that crowded back parlor, extravagant anecdotes, bon mots, recitations and even songs met with roars of laughter, as they vied to impress the younger gentlemen with tales of their own past debauchery. Lord George Bentinck, still smarting from Melbourne's disinterest in the pride of his stables, engaged Melbourne in a storytelling game for the express purpose of seeing which of the two could clothe the greater number of untruths in the pleasing semblance of reality. At the end of the evening, taking great pains to avoid the appearance of smugness, Melbourne pocketed his winnings and retired with honors.
His sides still aching from laughter, he left to get what sleep he could manage in the hours remaining until dawn. Head reeling only slightly, Melbourne got into bed and resolutely refused to dwell on the cold expanse of empty bed. Refused likewise to examine his own reasons for making the trip.

At her end of the table, Lord Clarendon and the Home Secretary, Lord George Grey, entertained the Queen with their conversation. Victoria had become acquainted with them both during his own tenure in office, and Melbourne felt tolerably confident that neither would steer the conversation towards matters of policy. As polished and poised as she had grown, Victoria was still essentially unable to conceal her thoughts and under Peel's influence she had become an ardent free trader. That matter had been decided for better or worse – privately, Melbourne considered it the latter – when Peel's ministry fell after he abandoned the principals of his own Conservative Party. There were still those on both sides of the issue who felt strongly enough to take offense at any sign of Crown interference and Victoria must, at all costs, avoid controversy.

Melbourne could only admire the principals which shaped his queen's conscience, the sense of duty which propelled her and the soft heart which made her susceptible to the suffering of the least of her subjects. His admiration of all those traits which made Victoria the entirely splendid young sovereign she was, was not dimmed by his own pragmatism. A young woman who was Head of the Church, born to lead an Empire, could only afford to nurture such abstract idealism insofar as it was practical and above all, safe to do so.

He knew himself to have been shaped by the brutal realities of the '90s, when England was overrun with French émigrés. Every family housed refugees from the Terror, and his own mother was no exception. The tales they told in his mother's drawing room, delivered in tones of such abject terror it could not be feigned for sympathy, had toppled his boy's idealism and those notions of rebellion against authority which those born a decade earlier, or a decade later, still embraced. To maintain order, that was the paramount, truly the only, role of government, and for the most part stability was maintained by a careful, constant reading of the political climate. So Melbourne tried, with great gentleness, to guide his Queen away from controversy. To survive as a monarchy – a constitutional monarchy – and preserve their way of life, those ruling England must walk a careful middle path, providing modest, measured reforms when the status quo was unsustainable in hopes of averting wholesale upheaval. And Victoria, as Queen, must appear entirely above the fray, a benign figurehead inspiring loyalty and devotion equally from every faction.

Satisfied that she was happily engaged in harmless equine chatter – Norfolk nearly, but not quite, spoiling the surprise they had waiting in the stables – Melbourne turned his attention properly back to his own dinner partners. He delivered a bon mot that sent young Lady Constance Paget, seated several heads distant, into a charming fit of giggles, and bent his head to hear the latest on dit that Lady Emily Hardinge murmured behind her raised hand.

After Victoria led the ladies out, Melbourne lingered only a short time at table with the gentlemen. The Queen's preferences were well-established, and no cigarillos were lit indoors, nor was brandy and Madeira poured with an overly generous hand.

When Melbourne sauntered into the drawing room, he found it sparsely populated. Victoria had the doors to the East Terrace thrown open, and she and most of her lady guests had meandered outside to enjoy the fresh air. After earlier showers, the rich scent of loam forked into planting beds was nearly overpowering, the fragrance of grass after its first cropping sweet and strangely nostalgic.

Nostalgic, Melbourne mused. That's not quite right. What describes this feeling of longing for something not yet lost?
His eyes found Victoria without searching; his gaze rested fondly on beautiful sloping shoulders and
dark head held proudly erect under the incalculable weight of the crown. Not literally, of course;
only a slender tiara was wound through artfully careless curls, sparkling fairy-like against her hair.

Melbourne took a glass of champagne from the footman bowing before him, impressed by the man's
dexterity in holding the silver tray aloft without spoiling its burden of elegant crystal. He sipped and
meandered slowly in her general direction, pausing to exchange a few words here and there so as not
to make it painfully obvious he preferred his own wife's company.

He found Lady Dacre, the woman of the bedchamber on duty, and made a quiet request. When she
returned he took the featherweight cashmere shawl out of her hands and draped it over Victoria's
shoulders. She had been listening to Charles Villiers, and Melbourne felt a transient pang of
resentment for the look of rapt attention on her face. He pushed the notion away as unworthy.
Villiers was a brilliant conversationalist and ardent reformer, and if there was reason for concern, it
was because of his dangerous rhetoric and even more dangerous zeal to meddle with the poor.

Still, he allowed his hand to linger longer than was strictly proper, claiming pride of possession by
his right to touch the creamy skin just there, where her long elegant neck rose from the hollow of her
collarbone.

"Lord M, Charles has told me about an influx of Irish peasantry. Travelers, they call themselves,
turned out of their homes and off the land they farmed for generations. They have nothing, and no
way to feed their families. They come to England seeking work in our cities, and are forced to rely
on the parishes."

Melbourne felt his lips tighten briefly, in reflexive annoyance. He arranged his features into a gentle
bemused expression.

"Indeed? How curious. If they are indigent, how do they afford passage from Ireland to our shores?
Surely ship's captains are not transporting them out of charitable impulse alone."

"Your Grace, where do you suppose they go, those tenants who are evicted from their homes by
absentee landlords who would rather turn agricultural land to pasture for horse breeding?" Villiers
gazed blandly at Melbourne out of remarkably womanish liquid eyes. He felt more than a twinge of
annoyance then.

"Oh, I suppose they must be absorbed somehow," he drawled in retort, waving a hand nonchalantly.
Victoria laughed a little, out of sudden nervousness, he surmised. Melbourne felt instantly remorseful
for allowing his irritation to prompt such a flippant response. Villiers might be a polished society wit,
but the man had little humor where his pet passions were concerned, and as the Queen's husband he
no longer had the freedom to express outrageous opinions only to cause a stir.

Sighing inwardly, Melbourne smoothed over the awkward moment and was relieved when Sidney
Herbert joined them. He had recently wed, after three years caught in the toils of Caroline Norton,
and Melbourne lost no time in congratulating him. His wife Elizabeth had been formerly presented
earlier. She was a lovely young woman with a pretty naturalness of manner and forthrightness that,
in Melbourne's estimation, made her the antithesis of her husband's former mistress. Former, we can
only hope, Melbourne thought, knowing Caroline's contempt for the bonds of matrimony.

When they found themselves as alone as was possible amidst thirty-odd guests, Melbourne sighed
deeply and stood as close as decency allowed to his wife. They looked out over the rolling grounds,
indistinct shapes in the shadows of deepening night.

"Can we sneak away, Mrs. Melbourne? I would like to walk with you under the moon and hear
nothing but your heartbeat."

Victoria was pleased, and her pleasure warmed him.

"Are you flirting, Lord M? With your queen? With your wife? I'm not sure which would be considered more improper."

"Oh, without a doubt, the latter, ma'am. No couple of any consequence shows the least interest in their own spouse. It's simply not done."

He stood so close that she had to lean back only slightly, to rest her shoulders and hips swathed in layers of rustling taffeta against him.

"It's such a beautiful night." Victoria's voice had a vibrating note of intimacy that sent a shiver up his spine. "You can just make out the cherry blossoms in the moonlight."

"It is." Melbourne glanced over his shoulder to assure himself of their temporary solitude, then caressed her arm gently from wrist to shoulder. He bent forward and pressed his lips into the soft hollow space behind her ear.

"I'd like to lay naked with you, with the windows open. To feel the night breezes against my skin."

Her words thrilled him, delivered so daringly out in the open where they might – though assuredly were not – be overheard. Melbourne opened his mouth to speak without thinking, and his response surprised them both, coming when it did.

"Cameron is back in town."

True to her word, Victoria had the windows opened before dismissing her maid. Melbourne reclined against the pillows, lazily studying his wife. She stood in the moonlight so he saw her in profile, shape outlined under a diaphanous white gown, hair brushed smooth and streaming down her back. The dark of a nipple, the rise of a breast, firm and upright, the exact size of his cupped palm. The rounded slope of her plump perfect backside. Melbourne felt himself stir, his body ready itself.

"William?" She spoke so softly it took him a moment to realize his name was spoken with the lilt of a question.

"Yes, my love?"

"Why did you tell me Billy had returned?"

The question left him nonplussed, unsure how to answer. He swung his feet to the floor and joined her at the window.

"I thought it might interest you," he finally said.

Victoria inclined her head to acknowledge his reply, and in that small gesture Melbourne recognized a queen, and a woman fully grown. No longer a green girl.

"I suppose it interests us equally, if he's newly back from the East and from Jind Kaur's court. After all, none of our ministers and official envoys can help us understand what the woman is really like, this rebel queen who causes so much difficulty."

"Certainly. Shall we arrange an audience?" Melbourne had intended his response to convey the polished neutrality suitable to the queen's advisor, but he saw her lips twist into a wry grin. He
backed away from the window and threw himself down in the armchair, pulling Victoria onto his lap.

"I suppose with Billy, there's no need to stand on ceremony," he said, his voice quaking with relieved laughter. "But I do think we should hear him out first, informally. We'll need to bring John, and Henry and Grey afterward."

"You'll see to it, Lord M? Send him a note asking him to dine with us privately, if you wish. Or not. I am anxious to know more about the rebel queen, and I'm sure the children would like to see him."

Melbourne shifted to find a comfortable position in the big chair and settled her into his arms. Victoria curled her legs up and nestled against his chest.

"Why did you tell me when you did? Why not before your trip to Newmarket? You must have seen him at Westminster."

"I did, briefly. I suppose I would have mentioned it that night, except I was leaving the next morning and –"

"Oh, stop, please. You left the next morning because Billy was back. Because you – you thought he would come rushing to me, and I would receive him in your absence? Oh, William! That is so – so..."

Victoria stomped her little foot in frustration. His perfect little fairy queen, this one, not the other, truly Ariel.

"Well, he didn't, and I didn't, so you went all that way for nothing. I hope you enjoyed your holiday."

"Oh, I did. I particularly enjoyed anticipating my return. Absence, they say, makes the cock grow harder."

He ran his hand appreciatively over the curve of her thigh, enjoying the sensation of filmy gown and smooth skin.

"They do not say that!" Victoria snorted, her giggles causing her backside to jiggle pleasurably against his groin.

"Really? Then I think they should – say that, I mean." Melbourne took her face in both hands and studied it before bringing her mouth to his. He nibbled on her full bottom lip.

"I brought you a present," he whispered. "Purchased with my ill-gotten gambling profits."

Victoria's backside squirmed deliciously as she struggled to sit upright.

"A present? Oh, where is it?"

"In the stables, Lady Melbourne. Where she belongs."
Chapter 25

She had never felt so regal, so queenly, so tall. Victoria rode beside Lord M as she had so many times before, but on the new mare – the entirely splendid gift he had brought back from Tattersall's – she was suddenly at eye level to her much-taller husband.

When he had led her to the stables earlier and she'd seen the surprise gift he'd brought home, Victoria was struck dumb with wonder. She had loved horses since she was a little girl. Riding gave her a sense of both absolute freedom and ultimate control little else did. The stables were filled with fine stock, those she had chosen and those chosen for her. But none were like this magnificent animal.

She was a Prussian princess, a Trakehnen descended from the royal line established on order of King Friedrich Wilhelm in the last century.

"What is her name, Lord M?" Victoria asked softly, wanting to gentle this magnificent creature with her voice alone. Melbourne looked at the groom.

The Prussian groom who insisted on accompanying Melbourne back to London stepped forward and bowed.

"Adagio," he said. "Her name is Adagio, out of Cascara by a great-grandson of Parsival the Great." Had his sovereign known Her Majesty would value such a gift, he would have most certainly presented her the mare as a gift, the man added pompously.

Victoria waved off this flood of German-accented English, eager to be rid of the man. This beauty standing before her was doubly precious because she was a gift from her husband rather than a foreign monarch.

At more than 16 hands, the top of Victoria's head did not reach the mare's withers. She knew she risked looking absurdly tiny, and didn't care. Adagio was slender and elegantly built, and her stance
was as graceful as any dancer Victoria had ever seen on a stage. She held her head high without haughtiness or ill temper, and her eye was both gentle and attentive, aware of Victoria's every movement.

Trakehnen horses were rarely sold on the open market, and never outside of East Prussia, or to commoners. Victoria had heard of the famed royal stables at Trakehnen from her German uncles and cousins, and dimly recalled something of the pedigree of this original breed. King Friedrich and his Prussian generals had wanted a faster, lighter cavalry horse that also possessed power and endurance, agility and intelligence. He'd bred the finest mares in his stable with English and Arabian thoroughbreds, developing the new line he named after the stables which birthed them.

The horse Lord Melbourne brought back for her had been bought from an old crony, Lord Bentinck. Victoria had little regard for the man – he had few social graces to recommend him, despite an impeccable pedigree and distinguished connections – but knew that the Hon. William George Frederick Cavendish Bentinck maintained a large string of credible racers and won and lost startling sums.

Melbourne assured Victoria, in his usual self-deprecating manner, that he had only laid the bet he had out of winnings from a silly gentleman’s parlor game. Beyond that, he knew no more than he necessarily overheard from everyone clamoring to advise him at the Spring Meet. Laying down his £1000 on the same three-year-old unknown he'd bet £100 on the evening before, he had endured good-natured hazing from his companions.

"I'll cover that bet and see it doubled," Bentinck had said genially, pushing forward to lay his draught down. "I don't mind taking some of your money. Not like you need it, old boy."

His own horse was deemed to be a sure thing. Crozier had a series of wins behind him and would be coming out of winter pasture fresh and hale, while Pyrrhus had notoriously bad legs and an unstable gait.

At day's end, as Lord George scrabbled to liquidate those assets he could and scuttle out of Newmarket to lick his wounds in private, he'd privately offered Melbourne the horse in exchange for a wager he could not readily repay.

"For Her Majesty," he'd emphasized as though it were a pre-condition, clinging to what dignity he could.

"Certainly, George, for Her Majesty."

And so the silver mare was brought forward. She had not entered the lists; fast, Bentinck assured him, and the smartest gal he'd ever had in his stable.

"I'd hoped to breed her and get my own line started." He shrugged fatalistically. "But there will be others."

Melbourne had explained how it had come about, dismissing Victoria's effusive thanks, but she saw a glimpse of the sheepish eager-to-please boy in his beautiful eyes.

"My darling, she's perfect! I never imagined a horse so beautiful."

Under a bright sun and clear blue sky her coat was a soft silvery gray, dappled in places with patches of slightly darker hue. Her mane was brushed and braided – someone had fastened pale blue satin ribbons, which delighted Princess Elizabeth – and her tail held proudly arched, as though she took feminine pride in her appearance.
"I ride, Mama. I ride!" Victoria picked her daughter up before she could launch herself at the mare's legs, disregarding the mud from tiny boots leaving streaks on her habit.

"Not today, Lily. Today Papa and I will try Adagio. You may stay here and have your lesson on your pony."

Victoria avoided smiling at her daughter's frown, knowing that would set Lily off. She wanted nothing to mar the beauty of the morning, of her pleasure in this exquisite, perfectly chosen gift.

She looked up at Melbourne over their daughter's bonnet. He lifted the child into his own arms and went off to deliver her to the riding master who would be working with Liam.

Prince William was walking his own gift around the indoor ring, led by the trainer who would give the boy equestrian lessons. The boy looked impossibly small atop his first proper mount. Finding Liam a horse to replace the scruffy old pony he treated as a pet had been Melbourne's primary aim. Lord Norfolk, Master of the Horse, had agreed and contributed his expertise. The result was this bay gelding, just over 13 hands, seven years old, gentle and supposedly good with children, yet not such a poor-spirited creature that the Prince of Wales would feel obligated to pamper and pet him.

At a nod from Melbourne, the groom let go the leading rein and stepped aside, allowing his young charge to continue alone. Like Victoria, her children had naturally good posture – enhanced, of course, by Baroness Lehzen's exacting demands. Liam held the reins well, neither too taut nor too loose, and guided the horse around the ring. He brought him to a stop – or the animal had sense enough to halt, Melbourne thought – and looked at his father proudly.

The next few minutes were spent sorting out the children's conflicting demands, Lily's urgent wish to be mounted so she, too, could ride, and without the constraints of an indoor ring and groom, and her brother's protective tenderness towards the shaggy sway-backed geriatric pony he'd been given by Billy Cameron. Lord Norfolk came in just as their bickering was growing heated. Henry Fitzalan-Howard, 14th Duke of Norfolk, was on terms of friendship with the Queen's husband, but the antiquity of his own house and title posed a quandary. Bow to a newly-made duke with a courtesy title, two generations out of trade? Norfolk was punctilious to a fault, and Melbourne knew he might well have done so. He preemptively greeted the other man with a nod and handed off the princess before Norfolk could react.

"Lily, His Grace is Master of the Horse. He will see you suitably mounted," Melbourne said, grinning and winking at his old Whig compatriot. Then he turned on his heel and strode quickly away, whistling a cheerful tune.

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"She rides like a dream, William. Her gait is so smooth she might be gliding, and she seems to know what I want before I do."

Melbourne's lips twitched as he bit back a smile. She hadn't stopped chattering, and her face was as prettily flushed as a girl's. *She is but a girl,* he reminded himself.

Victoria would be twenty-seven on her next birthday, but wealth, position and above all, avoidance of the ravages of constant pregnancy had allowed her to retain the glow of youth and health. There were methods anyone could use, with reasonable expectation of success and a modicum of restraint. Why religion and morality should come into it, he had no idea. but it did. Even the lowest of the low, poorest of the poor, were indoctrinated by the church, and Methodist do-gooders would sooner hand out bread than the prophylactics every whorehouse kept in stock.
"Oh, let's stop," Victoria said, bringing her mare to a stop by no means he could see, save the wish to do so. They were almost to the bridge, and off to the side, the branches of the cherry trees drooped under their flowery burden. The air was sweet with their perfume.

Melbourne dismounted and wrapped his reins around a convenient branch. His own horse was a normally a sedate creature, well into his middle years, but had perked up noticeably in the presence of a ravishing female companion. He went to stand at the mare's side while Victoria disengaged her leg, then took her left hand in his own and put his right on her waist. Once, he might have lifted her bodily out of the saddle and swung her to the ground but where early on etiquette prohibited such intimate contact, now it was his back Victoria sought to spare. She bent her knees and sprang down, using him only for balance and the added security of his careful arms.

Her little gloved hand reached high, to catch a sprig of fragrant bloom, but even her little jump did not add inches enough to reach the branch. Melbourne used his pen knife to clip a twig and tucked it behind her ear.

"Another, please," Victoria asked pertly. When he complied she fastened it through his buttonhole. "Let's walk."

She held the reins loosely in her hand, but it would not have been necessary. The silver mare followed as might a dog raised from birth beside its master's bed. Melbourne chuckled and looked over his shoulder pointedly, at his own chestnut tossing its head and sniggering flirtatiously. The mare seemed almost amused by such masculine shenanigans. Her long lashes fluttered and velvet nostrils quivered.

"Our daughter will need a horse of her own, I think." Melbourne told her of leaving the Duke to deal with Lily's importunate demands, and Victoria laughed appreciatively.

"So that's what a Master of the Horse does. I'd wondered long since…"

"Liam won't abandon Cameron's pony. The gelding is no match for a boy's first horse, no matter how pitiable a creature."

"Oh, stop, Lord M. You never liked the poor thing, because Billy brought her for Liam."

Melbourne hooked his gloved fingers through Victoria's and they strolled along beneath the trees. It was a fine day and other riders were on the bridle path. Carriages carrying ladies in their spring hats and floral gowns drove slowly past. Nearly everyone raised a hand or tipped a hat in greeting, and smiles wreathed each face at the sight of their queen and her universally popular husband walking together hand-in-hand.

*It might have been otherwise,* Melbourne reflected. *But I was a fool to assume so. The English love an underdog, and I was certainly that, and they are a sentimental people. And…I wasn't German, and came without a baker's dozen of uncles and cousins expecting a share of the public purse. I should have said 'yes' then…"

"So why do you think he didn't present himself? Billy? Did you warn him off when you saw him?"

"I?" Melbourne's voice cracked a bit, protesting his innocence. "I did no such thing. I believe I said that the queen would be pleased to receive him, at his earliest opportunity."

"Perhaps he's forgotten all about us. He's spent months at the beck and call of a new queen, one who is by all reports both very beautiful and very exotic."

*Was that pique in her voice?* Melbourne wondered idly, finding he cared little. *Oh, I care, all right,
only not about such inconsequential matters. Let the fool pine for what he can never have, so long as he's useful. And devoted. We can't have too many friends. The world is a dangerous place.

"Ah, but his first duty is to this queen. And his country, I might add. I will send word to South Street. Surely if he's not staying there, they know where he is. I suppose I can send a note round to his brother as well. Have him for dinner?"

"Neither of the Camerons are congenial dinner guests, Lord M. They are too rough for civilized company. If anything, Billy can dine with us privately. I'm sure the stories he will tell are not fit for the ears of my ladies."

They strolled around the near perimeter of the park, until they reached the fountain. Victoria stepped onto the low granite wall, using it as a mounting block so Melbourne could boost her the rest of the way.

Street vendors with their pushcarts lined the circle outside the great Wellington Arch, positioned there to take advantage of the tourists who flocked nearby in hopes of catching a glimpse of the queen.

"Oh, look, William. It all smells so good. Can we buy something?" Melbourne patted his pockets, coming up empty. He glanced over his shoulder at the agent riding behind them at a discrete distance. Heretofore ignored, the man saw he was wanted and nudged his horse forward.

"Will you get us something, Mr. Barrow? What do they have?"

The man reddened at being addressed directly, then grinned.

"Nothing I'm thinking you would like, mum. Shouldn't you have a taster anyways?"

"We haven't had a royal taster in, oh, three hundred years or so. Perhaps you might mention that oversight to your charge officer. In the meantime…please go and ask what they have Her Majesty might want."

Melbourne and the Queen hung back, unnoticed by the very crowds who had come to see them. When the protection officer returned, he listed the foods on offer: Sheep's Trotters, hot eels, saloop, plum duff, pickled oysters, periwinkles, donkey's milk, bloaters, meat pies, ginger beer…

Victoria's eyes widened and she looked to Melbourne for guidance.

"I think we'll pass, ma'am. Saloop is perhaps the most harmless. It's a nauseatingly sweet beverage made from ground orchid roots, but nothing too objectionable or liable to go off. Meat pies – say, Barrow, do they still use cat meat in Dockside when the pubs close?"

"Hardly ever, Your Grace. That was the old days, when I was just up from the south."

"I admire your sense of adventure, ma'am," Melbourne teased. "But those street vendors aren't known for their hygiene. Without the safeguard of a food taster, I think we'd do better to trot on up Constitution Hill and have tea sent round."

They had lingered overlong, and one sharp-eyed purveyor of questionable seafood caught sight of Her Majesty and His Grace. He bellowed out a loud greeting and swept the ground with his lopsided top hat, making a credible if exaggerated bow.

Victoria's horse stood admirably still, as they were surrounded by pedestrians pressing close for a moment of connection with their sovereign. Melbourne felt a tingle of apprehension which soon
flowered into full-fledged anxiety, watching the solo protection officer attempt to insert himself between Queen and crowd. He couldn't see farther than less-than-clean hands, mouths gaping open to show missing teeth as they shouted over one another to be heard.

The new iron fencing around Green Park kept them from riding around the Arch, and the way ahead was congested. Melbourne saw the bright blue of the Household Cavalry, two soldiers stationed ceremoniously at the Arch, too far away and too oblivious.

Melbourne thought quickly, and pressed his heels into his own horse's side so the animal was forced forward, butting into the silver mare's backside. He leaned forward and smacked her rump lightly, then kneed his horse, hoping his own would comply and communicate his wishes to Victoria's mount. The strategy worked better than he'd dared hope; the dainty thoroughbred intuited his wish and started smartly forward, her long legs and shapely head clearing a path before them.

"Lord M," Victoria protested, stopping as soon as they were safely past the gate and the guards. "Why did you do that? Those poor people were waiting to see me."

"And see you they did, ma'am. Ask Mr. Barrow here; it was hardly safe for you to be surrounded by an unruly crowd, no matter how friendly they appeared to be."

"His Grace is right, ma'am, absolutely," Barrow concurred. He'd lost his hat along the way, and thinning sandy hair was damp with perspiration. He was breathing more heavily than any exertion could account for.

"I shouldn't a let you go that way back, when I saw the crowds gathered. The Major will have my head handed to me."

"Better you than the Queen," Melbourne drawled, knowing his own eyes were cold and unamused, understanding that he only deflected the blame which should fall squarely on his own shoulders.

"Nobody needs their heads handed to them," Victoria said lightly. "Of course, I would have liked to stay and speak longer to those dear people. They were all so very excited to see us. But, oh, Lord M, wasn't it wonderful how Adagio knew just what to do? I was afraid she might trample someone underfoot but she stepped ever so lightly!"

He complimented the horse, and rightly so, as they traveled the half mile distance from Arch to palace. Victoria would have taken the horse to the stable yard herself, but Melbourne wanted her inside. He was still quaking from the sudden surge of unwashed humanity surrounding them, and the realization of how entirely vulnerable she was.

She sensed that when he brushed aside the footman who rushed out to assist, lifting her down from the saddle himself. Back be damned. A few pale petals still clung to her habit and he brushed them off one by one, taking his time.

"Please don't worry, William. Nothing happened. You're thinking of those men who tried to – to do me harm. They didn't succeed. You see, darling, here I am."

"Your safety is my only concern, Victoria. Four times – four. And only chance saved you each time. You are not an ordinary woman. They don't know you. To them – to the mobs, the deranged, the socialists, the anarchists – you are the symbol of all that is wrong with their miserable little lives."

"Then I must show myself more, not less, so that the majority of the people understand that I am real. Didn't you say once that a sovereign must be seen to be believed?"

"I say quite a lot of foolish things, ma'am. And even if there is some truth to that, you can be seen at
a distance. You are a figurehead, so give them a figurehead, a beautiful glittering idol they can bow before. My flesh-and-blood wife must remain safely apart."

Reluctant to relinquish his hold, knowing he must, Melbourne tucked her hand in his arm and composed his features. They strolled together past guards stationed at the portico, past two more uniformed Household Cavalry just outside the side door and still more at the foot of the Grand Staircase. Only then did Melbourne draw a breath.

Albert and George, with their interest in architecture and construction, had substantially improved the lax infrastructure which had permitted intruders to wander at will during Victoria's first years at Buckingham. While still an open, airy modern palace rather than the ancient fortification at Windsor, their London home was as impregnable as a careful husband and a bright young architect could make it.

When Victoria took off her riding hat she dislodged the cherry blossom. Melbourne stooped to retrieve it, and when he rose she was rubbing her back. A grimace twisted her pretty face.

"My back aches so," she complained. "But Adagio has such a very nice step. I must be getting old."

Melbourne huffed a laugh at the absurdity of such a statement, but stopped when he glimpsed the uncertain tremulous smile on Victoria's face. She froze for a long moment, as though lost in thought, then smiled brightly and squeezed his arm.

"I'm sorry you were worried. I had a wonderful ride and I love Adagio. She was meant to be mine and you found her for me. Thank you." Victoria lifted his free hand to her lips and kissed it, ignoring the quickly averted eyes of chambermaids and footmen. Then she laid her head against his arm while they walked.

Melbourne pondered the series of events which allowed him to gift her with such a splendid animal. He had a Dukedom with no revenue, an estate which must house a queen and her retinue with no additional income, and a paltry £10,000 a year to pay for it all. Less, as his man of business reminded him, each time he was forced to sell stock on the 'Change. A spur-of-the-moment trip, a careless bet laid down in all ignorance. *Maybe luck is smiling on me*, he thought and decided he liked the idea far. *How could it be otherwise? Look at where I am and what I have, despite all odds.*

"Let us write those letters summoning Lord Cameron, and ask for the most recent dispatches from Hardinge," he said decisively. "If you agree, ma'am."

"Yes, and please send a separate note asking Lord Ponsonby to pay us another visit before he returns to Dublin. I want to make it clear that I expect to understand the meaning of those baseless evictions. If there are Englishmen displacing Irish farmers only to build homes and horse farms, I might not be able to stop them but surely there is a way to exert some social pressure all the same."

"As you say, ma'am."

They entered their apartment together, pausing before giving themselves over to their respective body servants.

"Tomorrow is Easter Sunday, William. I will of course attend services, but please don't think you need to accompany me."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Melbourne retorted, arching a brow to temper his mild sarcasm. "The spell which overtook me was unique to that time and place. Perhaps I was more affected than I knew, by the dismal reminder of all those crypts about me, Lambs and Cecils alike. I will certainly
make my appearance at religious services. Once a week is only orthodoxy. More than that is positively puritanical."
Chapter 26

In the back of his mind throughout a late luncheon and reviewing the dispatches Victoria passed to him, an idea simmering. A period of time he wanted to address in the memoirs he worked on in fits and starts.

Setting personal reminiscences down was an unpleasant process at best. Opining on some philosophical tract or rebutting another editorial in the Review or Times, abstract arguments flowed from his pen, so prolifically that a finished piece ran to 10,000 words or more and had to be ruthlessly trimmed to fit allotted column inches.

The memoirs, as Victoria had loosely described her vision and Bulwer-Lytton more energetically outlined, must be more subjective; must open up his feelings and expose them to view. There were limits, of course, but even within those parameters reticence resisted and rebelled so the net effect were those sheets which came back filled with bold challenging questions. Everyone knows the facts, William. What were you thinking? Feeling? His last attempt at authorship, a commission to write Sheridan's biography, had fizzled; after much delay, he'd surrendered the project to Tom Moore. Indolence had played its part in that abrotive effort, he conceded now, but so had his inability to find his own voice. Too much reading, paradoxically, could be as great a handicap as too little.

Now, with the memory of that unpleasant interlude outside the Wellington Arch still fresh, Melbourne was motivated to get words on paper. The tumult of the ’30s, the riots which had to be suppressed – some said brutally – and why, and his own unusually firm hand in dealing with the unrest. Not an apologia, he didn't give a damn for the forgiveness of do-gooder liberal reformers, but a more comprehensive explanation. The hard realities no one considered when they bemoaned the men hanged under his Home ministry and those of his predecessor Henry Addington during the earlier Manchester riots. The rioting and rick-burnings which had disturbed the countryside roused his fear of revolution; and he had agreed in 1816 to become a member of the committee appointed to devise means of repressing disorder. He had voted against his own party in favor of suspending Habeas Corpus. On the other hand, unlike the Tories, he had been in favour of an enquiry into the
Peterloo massacre – not because he was horrified by the lives lost in suppressing the riots, but because the spectacle of 80,000 angry men assembled in Manchester that day was all too horrifying a reminder of the late Terror. Once such public passion was ignited, no man could control the outcome so the key, he firmly believed – one of the few beliefs he was unwaveringly supported – that defusing such public dissent was paramount, and no grievance justified civil disobedience.

Victoria teased him as she worked over her papers, for his absent-mindedness. He would have talked it over with her – her natural directness could be refreshing, cutting through the myriad subtle ideas which tended to obscure his original thesis – but so far he saw only the cloudy general shape of the chapter he intended to write.

The boxes were hers, sacrosanct until and unless she handed him something or other. That was Melbourne's steadfast rule, not hers – Victoria, he knew, would deny him nothing and it would have been far too simple a thing to gradually relieve her of the burden of her station, exercising the prerogatives of age, experience and the male sex. That he would not consider. Insofar as her confidence and understanding grew from any source other than her own innate devotion to duty and the diligence with which she applied herself, that was the accomplishment of which he was proudest. As first mentor and then something far more, Melbourne had encouraged her to trust her own native abilities and gently discouraged a latent tendency toward dependency.

There was nothing much of note – a thick stack of ledger copies from Treasury, several say-nothing dispatches from State and a summary of the coming week's bills to be heard in the House.

When she closed the lid of the third red box, turning her key in the lock, Victoria rose and once more laid a hand on her lower back. She pulled her shoulders back and drew herself up, then caught him watching and smiled winsomely.

"I think I am going to nap for a short time," she announced, looking almost sheepish at the notion. "Will you join me?"

Melbourne demurred, using as his excuse the intention of writing for a time while his thoughts were fresh. The prospect caused Victoria to look inordinately pleased. He knew she was uncomfortable imposing her will, and struggled mightily to avoid pestering him with questions on his progress.

Thanks to the organizational miracle wrought by his clerks, he was able to lay hands on the copy of a letter he'd written to Wilberforce in '20 on the matter of Queen Caroline's divorce, and scrawled observations in his own hand on the margins of that gentleman's published memoirs - “I believe he has good motives,” he'd said, “but they are very uncomfortable for those he has to act with” – but the very documents which would flesh out his recollections defied discovery.

He recalled with perfect clarity his own reluctance to take the Home Office. The country was in domestic turmoil and he himself preferred a less visible post, less subject to scrutiny and criticism from all sides. He'd known he'd lacked the experience other men had in abundance, but Grey, as Premier, had prevailed nonetheless. Melbourne absolved himself utterly of any pretension, and despised pomp. As Lyndhurst had put it, in a letter to the new Premier its subject was copied on, Lamb didn't issue decrees to deputations, he talked to them, man to man; he made no promises, but listened and offered to do what he could. Well enough, if being myself is all that's required, Melbourne had answered them, I'll give it a try. No sooner had he taken office, than the rural counties exploded. Wellington had written him of a mob of hundreds, rampaging through the Winchester countryside.

"Ahah, there it is," Melbourne muttered, finding the letters he'd sent the Duke of Wellington, advising him by order of the King to put down the rioters with 'promptitude, vigor and decision.'
He pulled an entire portfolio of correspondence from the box – improbably labeled 1840 and not 1830 – and settled into his armchair to relive the events of that tumultuous year.

Sometime later, without pen yet put to paper, Melbourne shook his head to clear it and bring himself once more into the present. He had forgotten, and been forcibly reminded, how very exhilarating it had felt to be in the epicenter of events shaking the nation. He had not thought so at the time, at least not whole-heartedly, but in hindsight it had been restorative to go from being no more than Caroline Lamb’s poor husband to the man who quelled the riots, nursed the Reform Bill through both Houses and been surrounded by those clamoring for his attention.

Satisfied that he knew what he would write, when he wrote it, Melbourne found himself meandering in the direction of the Queen’s bedchamber. He would just look in on her, he decided, and if she still slept he would come back and get the gist of it written down before he was sidetracked.

Drapes drawn against the afternoon light, save for dust motes dancing in one errant sunbeam, Elizabeth slept beside her mother, and Melbourne stared spellbound at the picture they made. Mother and daughter slept on their sides. In repose the little princess was exactly her mother in miniature, flushed cheeks, full rosy lips and a creamy complexion. Each had one hand pillowing their cheek. Victoria’s other hand was splayed protectively over her abdomen.

He had a lump in his throat and his eyes welled with tears, at the sweet perfection he beheld. Victoria…Victoria who had given him everything, given him life itself, his precious Gloriana. And Elizabeth, his Lily, no longer a frail babe born too soon, past the precariously first week when each hour, then each day, was a hard-fought battle for survival. No longer a chubby toddler staggering on adorably wobbly legs, now an indomitable three and a half, with the same strong will and fierce determination that had brought her through the traumatic day of her birth. Seeing her still, breathing deeply, eyes fluttering behind closed lids, she was not the terror of the nursery, the bane of her governesses, but the embodiment of a miracle, impossibly exquisite, perfectly made. Love incarnate.

For the second time Melbourne shook his head to clear it, this time so that he might pull himself away from the foot of the bed and leave his girls to their rest. Unable to entirely resist the impulse to do something, he gingerly pulled up the lightweight cashmere shawl so that it covered Victoria’s shoulder, bare where her chemise strap slid down, then retreated as quietly as he could manage so that they could continue dreaming.

Rioters…Lord Lieutenant of Hants, 25 November 1830… his eyes scanned the lines of a letter he had written, forcefully directing the action to be taken. Melbourne picked up his pen and studied the nib thoughtfully, hand hovering over the blank sheet on his desk. Finally he began to write.

Time passed without notice as his mind travelled back in time, to those heady days when the domestic tranquility of the nation was shattered and all looked to him to restore the peace. Finally, drained, he laid down the pen, satisfied by the thin stack of closely written pages.

Melbourne’s thoughts ran forward in time, over all the intervening years to the present, the miracle of his present life. To the young woman whose love made all things new. Whether queen or scullery maid, it was the inexplicable adoration with which she’d given herself to him, body and soul, at the very cusp of womanhood that was the wonder of wonders. And to the miniature version of herself, woven together in her womb from their passion. To that hot August day when their world imploded. To Prince Albert had almost roughly placing a blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms. Your daughter, Lord Melbourne. She will not live, they say, so if you want to see her –

He remembered little else of that day, either before or after, but he would never forget the sense of déjà vu, yet again being given a near-lifeless baby girl. That other one had only lived a day and this one was scarcely larger. A face the size of an apple, translucent skin tinted milky blue. Ah but she’d
moved, had seemed to see him, to know him when she fixed her unblinking gaze on his face. Whether by intent or happenstance that little person had laid a starfish hand on the back of his own. The baby touching him, her warmth and solidity was a fixed point of light in a world gone mad. Above all, the life he'd felt through the layers of swaddling. That little hand finding his, reassuring him that this daughter was a fighter who would not give up easily, in the days and weeks to follow.

The moment had passed – his apoplectic seizure had felled him, and days passed before his next clearly formed memory – but she had waited, both she and her mother. Neither had left him.

Left to his own inclinations, Melbourne knew without a doubt he would have spent every hour hovering over his daughter's cradle, never leaving her side while her new life hung in the balance. He knew, he felt, that each time he was allowed to hold her, baby Elizabeth took strength from the contact. And he himself, despite well-intended warnings not to become too attached, drew strength from the fragile infant.

But he was not allowed. Albert had intervened for all their sakes, and Melbourne understood he was wise to do so. It would cause too much comment, should he show too much interest in the newborn princess. Albert had chastised him kindly, for putting his emotions on display. People gossiped, gossip anathema to them all and the arrangement they shared. Rumors which would necessarily bring attention to his separate household and the effeminate young gentlemen whose company he preferred. Sodomy was still a capital offense.

If only was a dangerous path to tread, Melbourne knew, and one which he earnestly avoided, except when melancholy reflections overtook him. Then, he would look back and imagine if only I had said yes when she came to me; if only I hadn't allowed baseless fears of public ridicule to outweigh the love she offered. If only I had agreed with her intention to offer Albert the English title and income which would have freed him of the need to marry in order to escape his father's threats. If only the ghosts of my past had not held more power than the living, breathing young Queen who offered hand and heart.

What would it have been like, he mused, to be able to claim the children we created? To spend our son's first months at his side, to hear him say his first words, see him take his first steps? To have been free to hold our little princess against my chest, my heartbeat strengthening hers while she fought for life?

"May I see what you've written, Lord M?"

He startled at the sound of that infinitely familiar voice close to his ear. Victoria, dressed for dinner, stood behind him and Melbourne defensively laid a new blank sheet over the ink-stained pages. Her hands came to rest on his shoulders, thumbs finding and kneading just the right spot.

"May I?" she persisted.

"Mmmm…. more, please." He exposed his neck, gratified when she responded by massaging the corded tendons. "I'm trying to describe the why's and wherefores of the decisions I made, during the civil unrest of '30."

Lily clambered up his legs and planted herself on his lap. Elizabeth, he told himself firmly. Using the diminutive Liam had bestowed always gave Melbourne a qualm. What would Victoria's reaction be, if she learned of that other Lily, the Branden girl? Perhaps only amusement, or no reaction at all, yet he preferred she not make the association anytime soon.

"Lehzen came to fetch her. She had escaped the nursery again, to nap with me. I don't know why the staff we provide is inadequate to the care of one small girl. How on earth can they lose her?"
"What is the current cousin-count?" Melbourne asked, laughter in his voice as he deftly plucked the pen from his daughter's clutches before she could obliterate his day's work. "Here, sweetheart, write on this page for Papa."

Easter, and the London social season which would kick off in earnest immediately afterward, was one more reason – excuse – for her relatives from the Continent to find their way to London.

"If you mean my cousins, then three. Plus Aunt Adelaide and Aunt Beatrix. If you count the Austrian and Salzburg contingent…"

Melbourne chuckled and pushed back his chair. He rose, carrying the princess with him. She proudly twined both arms around his neck and straddled his torso with surprisingly strong, if chubby, legs.

"We dine early tonight. I will observe the Easter Vigil with Mama and Aunt Adelaide."

The vigil explained the solemnity of her purple watered-silk gown, devoid of lace. Melbourne experienced quiet relief, that he was not expected to accompany her. Sunday's festive procession to St Margaret's would be quite enough religion for the week.

"I stay with Papa?" Lily shrewdly eyed her mother, clearly hoping she would not be required to attend religious services. Melbourne suppressed his own amusement at the idea of the rambunctious three-year-old confined for hours during a solemn ritual enlivened only by the near-pagan pageantry of fire. He briefly calculated his own odds of escaping even an abbreviated evening meal with whatever array of relatives-by-marriage would assemble to look down their collective noses at him.

"You, my darling, will allow Lehzen to present you in Mama's drawing room, and then retire to the nursery," Victoria said firmly, her tone at odds with the smile dancing at the corners of her mouth.

"And you, my love, may dress for dinner now."

Melbourne shifted his daughter to a one arm and used the other to encircle Victoria's waist. He bent to kiss her, taking his time, intent on making a thorough job of it. Her lips parted under his, soft yet firm, plump and inviting, he marveled at how exactly their mouths fit together. Such a simple thing, a kiss, but perfect in its simplicity. Neither prelude nor formality, a flawless connection complete in itself. Time seemed to stop during that silent communion, until Lily's patience reached an end. Lifting his head, slow to release her, Melbourne and Victoria both laughed as their daughter's grimace of distaste.

"Ewwww," she exclaimed. "'nuff kissing, Papa."

Some five hours later, at a half past ten o'clock, Lord Melbourne was comfortably ensconced in his own sitting room. Beside him, face-down on a table, lay the book he had set out to read in the peace and privacy of this rare solitude. A treatise on Lycurgus and his reform of Spartan society, it had signally failed to hold his attention and had been replaced, albeit sheepishly, by The Corsican Brothers.

Dinner had been predictably uncomfortable. Queen Adelaide was a pious, charitable woman, and a good soul, Melbourne had no doubt. She was also an ardent Conservative and had done her best to influence King William IV against the Whigs. It was universally assumed that she had instigated Melbourne's dismissal from office in 1834, vocally blaming him for the Reform Bill, declaring the fire which destroyed the ancient building housing Parliament to be God's judgement for those reforms which threatened to upend the social order. The Dowager Queen likewise despised Victoria's mother, laying the blame squarely on her for withholding the Heir Apparent, during Victoria's formative years.
As soon as he could decently do so, Melbourne excused himself from the sparse post-prandial company. Most of her ladies had either gone to their own homes for the holiday, or retired claiming a desire to rise with the dawn rather than spend the evening on their knees in a cold dark chapel.

The palace of Buckingham was thereby unusually quiet, until the little dog curled up at Melbourne's side began to bark. Dragged back to reality from immersion in the lives of Louis and Lucien, he was belatedly aware of a determined pounding on his door.

A captain of the Household Guard stood on his threshold, hastily fastening the top button of a bright blue uniform jacket.

Melbourne listened with patient courtesy.

"I admit it's a rather peculiar hour for such a visit, but you may send him up. I'll see him in Her Majesty's office."

"Sir – Your Grace – the man is…well, he's quite inebriated. He fought my men and broken at least one of their noses if I'm not mistaken. Now he's – well, sir, he's singing, at the top of his lungs. I did not mean to suggest that Your Grace should see him – I only sought your permission to – your direction, I mean to say – should we have him confined to Hyde Park Barracks? Or send him under guard to the constables?"

Melbourne dragged in a long breath, irritation rising along with a damnable appreciation of irony which tended to arise at the most inopportune times. He saw, truly he did, the conundrum: Allow the founding head of the Queen's protection service, the man he himself had charged with protecting the lives of his wife and children, to be hauled off to gaol as a common drunk and rabble rouser? But dammit, no matter how much latitude they allowed the big Irishman, he had to push the boundaries of all tolerance.

"I will see the Viscount Cameron –" the Queen had granted him an English title to augment the near-meaningless Irish barony, and discretion was in order. "- and then please offer him the hospitality of officer's quarters at Hyde Park overnight."

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Chapter 27

Victoria felt the weariness leave her as she hurried from the chapel. Her knees were sore and the ache at the small of her back might have been unpleasant, except for the flickering hope it represented. Hope she was afraid to fully entertain, or yet relinquish. There was another almost-ache, a fullness that might mean one thing, or another quite opposite – but that, she decided, she would not think of just now. Now, she could think only of being released from hairpins and stays and stiff taffeta gown, of having her slippers unlaced, stockings untied, and then the comfort of climbing into the big feather bed and her husband's embrace.

Too tired even for pillow play, should he be so inclined – Victoria felt a pang of remorse at that thought, readily dismissed. If he were so inclined, he would either rouse her to a desire that would exceed his own, or dismiss his own inclination, stroking her hair and petting her to sleep instead.

The Easter vigil had long been more than a solemn obligation. Even as a child, she had been entranced by the elements of mystery and rich symbolism. It still moved her, when the fire appeared and light passed from candle to candle. The chanting refrains and all the ancient ritual might be disdained as Papist by the Protestant Nonconformists sects, but she was the Head of the Church of England, and the primacy of High Church rites were only one area in which Victoria found herself naturally aligned with conservatives.

Duty done, observances complete, it was now time to return to the secular world. And the very center of that world, for Victoria Regina, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, was her husband, William Lamb, Lord Melbourne.
Billy Cameron was one of those men who could drink himself sober. Melbourne observed that faculty firsthand. He had passed the singing stage, and the combative phase which had earlier persuaded him to assault the officers of the Household Cavalry, bellowing out his demand to see Lord Melbourne.

Melbourne was still not entirely certain how much of that outrageous conduct had been a ruse. The most expedient means of avoiding the sort of backstairs gossip further disturbance would bring, had been to accede to Cameron's demand that he accompany him back to the City.

None of the carriages Melbourne used were marked with any crest, but all were neat well-maintained equipages and the very evidence of careful maintenance – not to mention that of the pair pulling them – occasioned much gawking and some ribald salutes in the part of town to which Cameron directed them. He couldn't very well dismiss Melbourne's bodyguard, a man he himself had recruited and trained, but had insisted they otherwise travel unescorted save for the driver and a single armed postilion. No outriders, Cameron had slurred, throwing that long thatch of hair out of his eyes yet again. They traveled in silence, leaving Melbourne free to entertain fantasies of grabbing that outrageous head of hair by the bound tail and hacking it off by any means necessary.

They were put down in front of a seedy-looking establishment on lower Dudley Street. This far into the slums, no gas lights were evident but the front of the building was illuminated by a red lantern affixed to the clapboard siding.

"I've taken a room here. We can drink undisturbed. The grub's not bad either, if you're feeling peckish." Those were the first words Cameron had spoken since they passed the palace gates, and to Melbourne's surprise they were delivered in a subdued, defensive tone.

Melbourne only cocked an eyebrow and stepped out of the carriage, following behind the other man, followed in turn by the agent charged with his physical safety. You'll be earning your wage tonight, Melbourne remarked silently. He smiled reassuringly at the fellow, who reacted with a nervous facial twitch.

Of course Melbourne wondered why Cameron chose to stay here, in such unappetizing
surroundings, rather than return to the house at 39 South Street Melbourne had given him to use as domicile and working office. He was curious about the man's inexplicable delay in presenting himself after what was, arguably, a quasi-diplomatic mission to a contentious rebel province, and even more intrigued by the very peculiar manner in which he had seen fit to storm the most securely guarded location in England in order to see…Melbourne. Not the Queen herself, but Melbourne.

A blowsy middle-aged woman, hair a frizzy yellow halo around her square unprepossessing face, greeted them matter-of-factly and led them through the taproom to a private parlor. Cameron waved off the gin on offer and called for whiskey instead, along with three glasses. Melbourne looked closely at his, withdrew a handkerchief from his coat and polished it free of any obvious fingerprints and smudges. Then he poured a careful two inches.

"To you, my lord." Billy raised glass. Melbourne felt his own mouth twitch with suppressed humor at the archaic my lord. Wondering if the gesture was intended to be mocking – a logical assumption – and deciding on balance it was at least partly sincere.

As soon as the first flush of annoyance had passed, Melbourne was reminded why he had never managed to dislike the man despite ample cause. Bold, brash and irreverent, Cameron was damned likeable, amusing, perceptive and engaging. It wasn't charm, Melbourne mused while he listened to another ribald story, at least not in any deliberate sense. Rather, beneath all the faces he showed the world – outlaw, crusader, knight errant and rowdy, brawling drunkard – there was a fundamental decency. And loyalty – not a quality to be casually dismissed, rare enough in the political world of shifting alliances. Offset all that, the fact that he's in love with my wife. Which counts for more, on balance? But to be perfectly fair, Melbourne decided, Cameron had never set himself up as a rival, had never made a mistep which would require action on the part of even the most possessive and controlling of husbands.

In the hours which followed, the first bottle was emptied and another replaced it. The air was rank with the sweetish odor of Cameron's cigarillos. The man was a good storyteller, as the Irish were wont to be, despite his Scottish surname, and it was impossible to remain detached. He made the camps come alive, the men falling exhausted onto their pallets, the grievous casualties sustained on both sides during Gough's December advance, the desperate gaiety that permeated the lines. There was, in his telling, no passionate final speeches, no nostalgic reminiscences of loved ones waiting at home. Men facing battle, Cameron explained, couldn't afford to indulge in the luxury of any emotion which might weaken them. They fought, in the end, not for Queen or country or a girl they loved, but only for each other.

Melbourne only listened, fascinated by this glimpse of the world of soldiers, of the men whose blood was the ink of every dry dispatch, whose sweat and tears of pain stained the antiseptic speeches of arguments for or against some government policy, the minutiae of budgets and policy documents.

"You want to know about her, dontcha?" Cameron asked, his eyes narrowed to slits under that curtain of hair as he studied Melbourne through blue haze.

"Doesn't everyone? Jind Kaur is the name on everyone's tongue, when they speak of the trouble we're having subduing the province."

"She has a sort of presence that demands notice. And this, in a tribal region where wives are plentiful. Every Sikh has five or six. She herself was the youngest consort of her maharaja, just a girl, but she outmaneuvered them all and rose to the top." Cameron filled his cup and drank deep, then filled it again and topped off Melbourne's.

"She's ambitious and determined to rule through her son. And avenge her brother. He was murdered in front of her. If they thought to intimidate her, they thought wrong. She's beautiful –" he waved a
hand vaguely and Melbourne understood. "With some...some damn essence about her that makes every male react like a stag in rut. Oh —" he shook his head laughing. "She's no strumpet, she takes her own worth seriously, but she knows the effect she has and calls men to her bed when it pleases her."

"And were you so honored?"

Cameron laughed easily, leaning back and stretching his long legs out so he could study the scuffed toes of his boots. "A gentleman wouldn't answer that, but then I'm no gentleman, am I? I was privileged to know the lady intimately a time or two. My size, she told me, and that I'm the only Englishman she was liable to meet, except for whatever wrinkled old ministers we send to make terms."

It took another bottle before Cameron lapsed into the sort of detail which, indeed, no gentleman would indulge. Melbourne, amused and no less interested than any man might be, was able to reflect that Billy, while boastful and cocksure, remained unaffected overall. Another notch on his bedpost, then. Or would be, if he had a fixed bedpost anywhere in his itinerant life.

"She's resolved to accept whatever terms they offer, in order to remain at his side, as regent," Cameron announced, reverting suddenly from the personal to the political once more.

"Gough's not about to trust her. And on this end, the Foreign Office will demand that a man of ours be at her side. What's your opinion on that? Will she honor a treaty, if we appoint her regent?"

"She will never recognize our right to appoint her as regent. But she's a pragmatist and will do what it takes to stay in the game. She's surrounded by enemies, you know. We're the least worst of them. She asked me to promise I would return if — if a satisfactory resolution was not forthcoming. Asked me to protect her son and bring him back to England, if they killed her."

Melbourne raised an eyebrow at that, knowing better than to interrupt Cameron's garrulousness and bring him back to self-awareness. He became aware that the whiskey was going to his head, that and the tobacco fumes.

"But in the end, she was just one more beautiful woman. I've had plenty and will have plenty more before I'm done." Cameron shrugged his broad shoulders. "Politics, diplomacy, empire building — those are matters for men a lot smarter than me. And women. I reckon Her Majesty will have some say in it. Two powerful women — what are the odds?"

"So what will you do next? What do you want?"

Melbourne saw the oddly boyish look on the big man's face, the longing, almost a hunger and felt his own shoulders grow rigid with sudden tension.

"It doesn't matter what I want, I'll never have it... I'll do the next best thing and serve you, and the queen, as best I can. If you'll have me back. I expect they can use me on South Street. There have been a few lapses lately, so I've heard."

"We'll have you. Why haven't you answered the note we sent around to South Street, inviting you to court? It's considered impolite to keep your queen waiting when she summons you."

"I haven't been there yet. To South Street. Although I've heard they've not been able to manage as well as I'd hoped. That new intelligence unit, used to be concerned with codebreaking and no more — you've been setting them up to take over domestic intelligence as well?"

"Not the sort of thing I care to discuss in a public place. Come around on Monday or Tuesday,
before we travel to Althorp. We'd like you to take up the reins again, oversee the protection unit you set up."

Cameron glanced at the bodyguard, seated at a table by the window, not entirely out of earshot. "I need some time. That's why I've taken lodgings here, far enough from the old crew to give me some privacy."

Cameron lit another of the twisted cheroots, and Melbourne couldn't help but grimace at the peculiar, acrid odor. "They know that it takes time when a man returns to – to give up the habits of the Army."

Melbourne frowned, puzzled, and Cameron smirked at his expression. "You mean there's something the great Lord Melbourne doesn't know?" He chortled, inordinately pleased with himself. "Opium, William. There isn't one man in ten who doesn't smoke the stuff in India. That's where the poppy grows, and as much as we ship back here, plenty falls off the docks and makes its way back to the troops. The commanders turn a blind eye, so long as it keeps'em in fighting trim and able to cope."

Victoria had taken the book Lord M had been reading to bed with her, intending to stay up and read until he returned. The clock struck one, then two, and finally she lost her struggle to remain awake. Some small sound from the dressing room made its way into her dreams and she awakened with a start.

William was fumbling about when she approached. He bent over, swaying, clearly hoping to remove his footwear and failing in the attempt. Victoria pushed her hair back and padded forward on bare feet. She gently pushed against his shoulder, so that he sat down suddenly on the bench before his dressing table.

"Let me help you," she said, kneeling before him to coax off shoes and stockings. Melbourne tried feebly to resist, then settled for stroking the side of her head. Victoria rested her forearms on his thighs and looked up at him with a wry smile.

"I do believe you're tipsy, darling." And it made him especially adorable, Victoria thought. Wise, wonderful, formidable Lord M, sweetly vulnerable, needing to lean on her for a change, almost as much as she always needed him.
"I do believe you're right, ma'am," he pronounced, so deliberately that Victoria giggled.

She quickly dispatched the rest of his clothing and helped him with his nightshirt, then gently steered him to the bed. A single candle burned, giving their chamber a warm amber glow. She pulled up the bedcovers, then she brushed a lock of his wonderful curling hair from his forehead and kissed him. The last thing Victoria did before joining him in bed was to set a basin on the night table.

"I wouldn't!" Melbourne protested weakly, already looking suspiciously pale.

To take his mind from his roiling stomach, Melbourne turned his attention towards the night he'd passed. Drinking abominable whiskey in a Seven Dials tavern, engrossed despite himself by Billy Cameron, intrepid, devil-may-care rogue – everything he himself was not. Thirty years younger, taller, more rugged, with an animal vitality that Melbourne knew he himself had never possessed, and admittedly infatuated with Victoria. And Cameron's very peculiar confession, after he'd already crossed a line no man could be expected to tolerate, crossed it with blunt disregard for propriety and discretion. Even that damn poet had been a gentleman about it, and at least spared the husband he cuckolded such offhand honesty.

"It doesn't matter what I want, I'll never have it," Cameron had said, with a beguiling grin. "I want what you have, sir."

When Melbourne had clenchd his fists, knowing even as he felt his muscles tense that he stood no chance of landing a single blow, Cameron had grinned even more broadly, then chuckled.

"And I can't ever have that, can I? Oh, not her body – not that alone. Now I can say I've had a queen, so there's not even the allure of forbidden fruit. But that look. The first time I saw it, and every time after – she adores you, sees no one but you, and that's what I want and can never have. A woman – and such a woman, a woman who could have any man in the world – and you the center of her life, the mainspring of her existence. Her bloody true north.

"Even that ponce Albert went on and on about you, when we'd all sit around of a night. He worshipped you, to the point the rest of us began to question that three-way marriage." Billy giggled foolishly as Melbourne felt his cheeks warm at the implication. "The damn fool's drunk, but that's no excuse. He pushed back his chair and stood abruptly.

"Oh, do sit down. I have no golden tongue and am probably making a muddle of it. What I'm trying to say is I respect you, and admire you – hell, I want to be you – but failing that...I want to serve you and maybe in the process, understand what it is that makes you tick. You see? I didn't come back for her alone. I came back for you too. Well," and his face creased once more in that wide grin. "and for the princess. Someday your little Lily will rule the world."

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Melbourne lurched to his feet and managed to make it to the water closet in time to empty his stomach of the night's intake. Afterward he splashed water on his face and rinsed his mouth, then made his way gingerly back to bed. Thankfully, his head had stopped spinning and he was able to savor the cool of the pillow against his cheek. Victoria's eyes fluttered open and her hand reached for him.

"Poor love," she crooned. "See? I don't even say it serves you right for carousing until all hours. I do hope you enjoyed yourself enough to make up for how you will feel in the morning."

"You shock me, Victoria. What does a sheltered, virtuous young woman know about the aftereffects
of carousing?" Melbourne kept his voice low, as befitted the hour. Victoria made a muffled little sound, something between a sigh and a snort, and burrowed her cheek in the folds of his nightshirt. She had one hand on his chest and the other was splayed, palm down, on her abdomen. In the aftermath of heavy drinking, his thoughts assembled themselves slowly but one presented itself with such awful clarity it could not be ignored.

"Victoria..." He didn't want to ask; putting it into words might have an unintended potency. Melbourne cleared his throat and began again. "Victoria, is there anything you have to tell me?"

Her voice was thick with sleep. "Mmm? Not yet, Lord M. Too soon."

Melbourne's heart sank, remembering the dire warnings of her physicians, the miscarriage of their last failure to prevent a pregnancy. Would she, had she – his headstrong, willful royal girl – tricked him into getting her with child despite their precautions? Only so he could have one openly proclaimed as his own? He tried to recall each time in the past months they had forgone use of the condoms she despised, saying it was a non-fertile time by the reckoning of her irregular courses.

"Oh, Victoria..." Melbourne only realized he'd spoken aloud when she stirred, raising her head to look up at him curiously.

"Shhh, sweetheart, it's nothing. Go to sleep." He tightened his arm around her, pulling her close. For now, at this moment, she was safely in his arms and he in their bed where nothing unpleasant could touch them. This warm, living, breathing woman, his precious girl, his anchor to a world fully capable of spinning out of control.
“You have a busy few months ahead, Your Majesty.”

Frederick Spencer, 4th Earl Spencer, recently appointed Lord Chamberlain of the Queen’s Household, was a big ruddy prototypical Englishman. His Comptroller, a thin wizened man seemingly half his size, stood just behind him, clutching the leather portfolio.

The Lord Chamberlain, as most senior official of the Royal Household, and oversaw its business. He liaisoned with other senior officers of the Household, chaired interminable Department meetings, and organized all the details of the Court calendar. Ceremonial activities, appearances, investitures…and the Queen’s rare trips abroad.

Spencer, Melbourne reflected, might appear from his resume to be the least likely of incumbents. He’d had a respectable naval career – improbably, the man had been born at the Admiralty Building in London – and then took his place in the House as a Member. He had the air of command and booming voice of a Vice-Admiral, but the natural bonhomie of a cradle Whig aristocrat and an easy manner which had persuaded the Duchess of Kent to keep him as her personal equerry for the past five years. Whatever that entailed, Melbourne thought with a smirk he quickly subdued. The man knows how to make himself pleasing to Royalty, respectful without servility, and is a courtier born and bred.

“You’ll be visiting Althorp first.” His own stately home, of course. His first act, upon Russell’s appointing him to office, was to neatly usurp Devonshire’s claim to the first Royal visit to any of her subject’s homes in more than a year.

Melbourne got along well with both and avoided any appearance of favoring one or the other. His own lineage might be inferior to that of the great families, but thanks to his mother’s considerable social maneuvering, it had ceased to be an issue even before he was born. The very fact that his family was only two generations out of the law courts – only a step above tradesmen - had paradoxically made his marriage to the queen less controversial, than had she aligned herself with
one or another of the rival houses and in doing so made enemies of the others.

“Your Majesty and – “Spencer nodded his head to Melbourne. “- Your Grace will then progress to
Chatsworth. I will go ahead to make certain all is in order for your arrival. The Duke, being a
bachelor, may have overlooked some detail essential to Your Majesty’s comfort.”

That, of course, was a slight toward Devonshire. Victoria recognized it as such, and her eyes
sparkled with amusement when they met Melbourne’s.

Althorp, Chatsworth, and Melbourne Hall on Her Majesty’s Spring Progress, as Melbourne
laughingly called it. There would be ample time afterward to enjoy the first part of summer at
Brocket Hall. They would then travel by the Royal Yacht, landing on the Belgian shore, and endure
a visit with Leopold and his wife before taking a specially outfitted train southward. Italy, chosen for
Rome’s art and architecture, and its historic appeal, the romance of Venice…and the Italians’ relative
neutrality. At summer’s end they would return to England, staying at Arundel Castle and then at
Petworth.

That last, by invitation of Colonel George Wyndam, would be Victoria’s first visit to a private home.
As such, it could not be considered a State visit but one which had great meaning nonetheless.
Petworth had been the unentailed but favorite home of the 3rd Earl of Egremont and was now
owned by one of the 3rd Earl’s 40-odd illegitimate children. None of them ever addressed the rumors
swirling about Melbourne’s own parentage, but he had been fond of the old man and sincerely
mourned his passing. It felt right to bring Victoria and the children, in a nod to his own family
history.

“…and then, you will – ”

“Goodness, Lord Spencer, your Comptroller has every hour of every day for a year planned out for
me,” Victoria interrupted. She was laughing but Melbourne heard the edge in her voice.

“I thank you both, gentleman. The Queen has other matters to which she must attend, and entrusts
the details of these arrangements to you,” Melbourne said smoothly, rising to indicate the meeting
was at an end.

“If anything poses a problem, come see me, Fred. But please don’t bring that droning bean counter
along.” He murmured the words in a low confiding tone and won a hearty laugh from the Earl.

“We will make every effort to ensure that at Althorp at least, the Queen is suitably entertained. I can’t
speak for the Duke of Devonshire’s intention.”

Melbourne made an agreeable, if noncommittal sound, and closed the door firmly behind them. He
had no sooner turned back than he found himself toe to toe with the Queen.

“Oh, Lord M, what have we done?” She wound her arms around his waist and looked up
appealingly. “It all sounds like so very much effort. I want to spend the summer at Brocket Hall. I
want our swimming park rebuilt so that we can sneak away even from our own household. I want to
walk with you, with my hair down and my shoes off. I just want to be.”

Melbourne rested his forehead against hers.

“That sounds quite lovely, and we can do all of that too. But some of the visits at least – those to the
great estates of your lords – are long overdue and I fear they cannot be put off. We can – “ he
hesitated only for an instant, before continuing. “- eliminate Melbourne Hall and Petworth but not
Norfolk’s seat, or Devonshire’s or God knows, Spencer’s.”
"No, we will not eliminate your family's seat. Or – or the Egremont estate. You must show Liam where you played as a boy, and show, well, everyone, that the first visit their new Prince of Wales makes, is to his father's seat and…"

Melbourne saw the hint of pink high on her cheeks and understood there was still enough of the prim pious German girl in his wife to rouse some inherent embarrassment at any allusion to his relationship with the Wyndhams. Another reason, then, to regret the circumstances which had led to her own children being born in similar state.

"Then we will travel as planned and make the best of it. Every place we go will have grass to walk in – even shoeless, from time to time – and a bedchamber for us to retreat and close out the world when it all becomes tiresome. You'll take Adagio and continue to ride, so you and she become fast friends. And if any one of our stops is too stuffy or crammed with appearances and receiving lines then we will let our formidable vice admiral make what adjustments you require. You are," and Melbourne allowed a smile to quirk up his lips. "the Queen, madame."

"Mmmm, nice," she groaned, squirming against him in response to the gentle circles he made with his hands on her back. "The prospect of all those receiving lines, and hostesses trying to outdo Buckingham Palace in grandeur and ceremony, make me imagine what it would be like bringing Billy in our retinue. Why shouldn't we, after all? He's our friend, and a good and faithful servant."

"And he can throw cold water on pretension?" Melbourne laughed. Even Devonshire, as agreeable as he was, never forgot the dignity of his lineage. "Put his boots on the table? Clean his teeth with a dagger at dinner?"

"No, silly, Billy isn't that uncouth. But he can disrupt tedium merely by stalking into a room like some great cat looking for a juicy mouse." Victoria pulled away and straightened. "Come, let's walk outside. That is, if you're up to it?"

Melbourne tilted his head reprovingly at her teasing. "'Up to it?' Ma'am, I protest. What am I, enfeebled?"

"No, merely suffering from a sore head and upset stomach, I'd imagine. After your night out with Billy." He smirked, looking down at her. Victoria wearing her wife's expression, teasing and faintly reproving both, was irresistible.

Purging himself of the whiskey might have branded him a lightweight in some circles – Billy Cameron's military cronies would surely disdain a man who couldn't match them ounce for ounce – but it had helped to lessen the inevitable morning-after penalty. In his case, the morning after had been Easter Sunday, with the great bells of St. Paul's Cathedral pealing in his ears. Melbourne had bathed and shaved and presented himself to the Queen resplendent in a new cream silk suit and pale blue embossed waistcoat, all the while forcing his mind away from the bile churning up at the back of his throat.

By the time services had ended, his endurance had outlasted the pain in his head. His mood had matched the triumphant sound of the recessional. Walking his usual two long paces behind the Queen, holding the hands of his son and his daughter, Melbourne was suffused with a profound sense of well-being. When he stepped out into a hazy April sun, the light bathed his face like a benediction from the Almighty.

The rest of the day passed in as wholesome a manner as the most solemn churchman might decree. Melbourne entertained the assemblage of royal relatives and assorted hangers-on, conversing on a variety of trivial subjects, listening to a Sussex cousin opine on the competing virtues of military regalia at home and on the Continent, answering another at some length on the particular strain of
begonia cultivar he was assumed to know something about – making a mental note to ask his own horticulturist what the devil the difference in begonias were, at his next visit to Brocket Hall – and even winning a small grudging smile from the Dowager Queen. He'd earned more than a smile from the Dowager Duchess, jovially agreeing with her that she might make a trip to Paris at Victoria's expense, capping that coup by enduring several hands of whist to make up a fourth at Victoire's request.

And all the while he kept glancing at his wife, forcing his gaze from her waistline – which in truth appeared as trim as usual, accentuated by a broad grosgrain ribbon – and only permitting himself occasional smiles in her direction. Observing the societal standard which decreed there was hardly a greater faux pas than to be seen mooning after one's own wife in such elevated company.

"No longer, my little innocent. You impugn my manhood to suggest that I need more than a day to recover from one night of heavy drinking. In my own defense, my sin was a lack of discernment. Irish whiskey is an acquired taste, I daresay."

It had been a strangely entertaining night, when all was said and done. Downing glass after glass of what tasted like turpentine, exchanging the sort of masculine confidences which were only possible when one's normal inhibitions were lowered. There was even something to be said for the tawdry environment, a Seven Dials taproom frequented by soldiers and merchant seamen. Not an experience he was in any hurry to repeat, but an experience nonetheless.

Melbourne offered Victoria his arm but she clasped his hand instead, lacing her fingers through his own in a childlike gesture. They left the palace, crossed the terrace and followed a neat gravel path lined by tulip beds in full bloom. The sun was bright, the air fresh and the sky impossibly blue. All around them, the grounds of Buckingham Palace were a mosaic of color and it made for an enchanting backdrop. While they walked they talked, talked as they had always done, words coming easily between them. Melbourne momentarily marveled that in nine years they had not run out of things to say. Communication, not sex, was the real and lasting intercourse between husband and wife, and he pitied those for whom the former lost its appeal even more than the latter. He would never run out of things to say to this remarkable woman beside him, and the thought made him wish he were Papist, so he might bless himself with the sign of the cross.

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," Melbourne said smoothly, and so contritely that Victoria rolled her eyes. "I do tend to run on. You must not encourage me." Her hand concealed – he hoped – by his coattails, she pinched his posterior sharply.

"Do not say that. And do not humor me. I do not underestimate the need for discipline, process, standards and order. But there is a time to know when to break the rules, or at least operate outside the system. And Billy has proven that he and the men and women he chose are able to do that. Their instincts are keen – do you know once Billy said he can smell something amiss, and feel it even before he himself recognizes what the danger might be?"

"I don't expect that it's any sort of supernatural ability," Melbourne said drily. "Only experience gained in some unsavory back alleys. Most cats have the same talent."

The path they followed turned a corner and opened onto the large lawns where tents would be erected for summer receptions. Chairs had been carried out and blankets spread on the grass, for the comfort of spectators watching a game in progress.

"Oh, look, Lord M! Liam is-" Melbourne shushed her with a wink and steered towards the group clustered well out of range of any errant balls.

Their small son clutched a bat, squinting with concentration as he prepared to hit. The fielding team –
Melbourne thought he recognized the head gardener's grandson, several of the youngest footmen and
an urchin who carried firewood and was suspected by the housekeepers of pocketing unattended
trinkets – was not eleven strong, or even eight, but neither was the team at bat. Master Abraham,
stood to one side of the pitch. He had been lured away from College, the oldest boarding school at
Eton, to serve as Elizabeth's primary instructor.

Francis Hodgson, Provost of Eton, was the first Governor to a royal prince who was himself a
commoner without patronage. Lily, predictably, had taken umbrage at the attention paid her elder
brother when his education commenced in earnest. Hodgson suggested they take advantage of her
refusal to be excluded from her brother's schoolroom on the basis of age or sex. He chose young C.J.
Abraham, a King's Scholar in his senior scholarship term, for the prestigious – and decidedly
challenging – appointment to the Royal household.

At this moment the Princess Elizabeth stood behind the bowler, her expression fierce and
determined. Melbourne was relieved to see several bigger boys standing between his daughter's
pretty face and the batsman's shot. Not, he thought, that Liam will swing with any force but –

The sound of the bat striking the ball startled him. Melbourne found himself shouting out
encouragement to his son as Liam's small form wove in and out between the legs of the fielding
team's players. When he reached the other end of the pitch before they could hit either his legs or the
wicket, Victoria took her cue from her husband and clapped excitedly.

"Well done!" she called out. When Liam saw his parents, his face pinked with pride and pleasure.
Rather than run to them, he walked back to his team mates while they slapped his shoulders
approvingly. All Melbourne could do was feign a cough, as an excuse to avert his face before
anyone saw the emotion which threatened to overtake him. My son.

Half a dozen of the ladies of the Household sat on wicker chairs brought down from the terrace, and
a handful of younger maids-of-honor reposed on the lawn. At a safe distance some of the Palace
servants – housemaids in their caps and aprons, a stout grandmotherly housekeeper, a pastry chef in
whites – watched the game in progress as well, while keeping a sharp eye on their betters for any
sign of censure.

They all rose in unison when the queen approached, sweeping curtseys of varying degrees as befit
their station. Victoria made a vague gesture of acknowledgement and accepted a chair recently
vacated by Lady Douro, then waited until the disruption of her arrival dissipated and the game
commenced.

The smaller children were included in several more innings, and then rushed to the sidelines to
partake of refreshments while teams reformed with the older boys. Melbourne just managed to save
his trousers and coat when Lily began to climb onto his lap while balancing a cup full to overflowing
with lemonade. Liam stood before them, his white linen shirt half-untucked, and manfully dismissed
the scrapes on his shins and a large grass stain on his chin. Both Victoria and Melbourne spared
some praise for each of the children present, stalwart commoners reduced to blushing and fidgeting at
the queen's attention as well as the more socially adept offspring of aristocratic mothers on duty
rotation as ladies-in-waiting.

Baroness Lehzen ended their idyll, appearing to reclaim her charges with two of her assistants in
tow, and Victoria rose as well.

"You may stay and watch the game if you wish, Lord M," she murmured in his ear. "I must go and
change…for dinner."

Melbourne glanced up sharply when something in her tone caught his attention.
"I'll do the same. I've had all the cricket I can manage for one afternoon. I'm afraid I wasn't terribly
good at it when I was up at Eton, and these fellows bring back some memories I'd as soon forget."
He spoke lightly, his eyes fixed on her face. What spoiled her good humor? he wondered, knowing
as soon as the thought occurred that he wasn't the first man, and certainly wouldn't be the last, to be
mystified by a wife's mercurial mood swings.

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"...and thus lost both: that which he grasped at in the water, because it was a shadow; and his own,
because the stream swept it away."

One of Aesop's shorter tales, but the children had requested it because they were attached to the
illustrations. Only Liam was old enough to remember his mother's black and white spaniel, and the
animal on the cover more resembled a hunting breed, but Melbourne knew better than to suggest
such a literal interpretation. It was a favorite bedtime story, and perhaps because of its brevity, both
children had the words by heart long before they were able to read. They would take turns
pretending to read aloud to their father.

His son, in nightshirt and dressing gown, leaned against Melbourne's side and Lily, her lids heavy,
rested her head on his chest. She had one thumb in her mouth, the fingers of her chubby hand curled
protectively around her nose in a gesture she'd adopted as a newborn babe. Lehzen threatened
various strategies to discourage thumb-sucking, warning of deformed teeth and jaws, but Melbourne
firmly rejected every attempt. His daughter's hair was still damp and smelled sweetly of shampoo,
and her sturdy little body gave him as much comfort as it drew from his embrace.

Victoria was curled up on one end of the long sofa in their small private sitting room, watching him
with misty eyes.

"I will carry them to the nursery," he said softly, adjusting his burden to stand.

When he returned, Victoria had not moved from her place on the sofa. She still wore her dressing
gown and he looked at her questioningly.

"I don't feel quite well, Lord M. You go to dinner. I'll have some soup sent up. I – I think I will rest
alone tonight, if you don't mind." Her voice was timid, and broke with the last words, and he thought
he understood.

"Ah…I see," he said, sitting beside her and picking up her hand. He brought it to his lips and kissed
the back of each finger. "And you thought – otherwise? Are you disappointed?"

She bit her lip and looked down, swiping at her cheek to catch a single fat tear.

"You must think I'm stupid. But my courses are so irregular, and when they do come they – the – the
fullness, and the aching and – well, it can feel as though –" Victoria spoke with her face averted,
suffused with embarrassment.

"Never mind that, my love. I can't pretend to understand everything, but I've been around women my
entire life. Tell me, did you hope otherwise, or were you concerned by the prospect?"

"Concerned? No!" Victoria turned back to face him, her unbound hair lashing her face as she shook
her head violently.

"I was," he responded quietly. "And I do think I have something to say about the matter?"

He thought he did understand, at least partially.
"Tell me, my love – and be truthful. Look at me." Gently, Melbourne lifted her chin so he could see her expression clearly. "Do you want another child, or do you want to give me a legitimate child because you think that's what I want?"

"Both!" Victoria answered defiantly. "I want to stand beside you, big with your child, and let the world see you put it there. No hiding, no subterfuge, this time. I want to have a child that can be a Lamb, will be a Viscount Melbourne. Someday, when you are –"

"Fred will be disappointed to hear that. He counts on being a Viscount someday. It's his prime motivation in surviving me." Melbourne spoke lightly, hoping to tease her out of the sadness which threatened to overtake her.

"I will make Fred a Viscount. I will make him a Marquess. I want another Lord M."

"We needn't measure me for burial clothes quite yet," Melbourne quipped, smirking. "As for being a Lamb, I've never been quite certain I am one so it hardly matters to me whether our children use that surname."

"And you don't long for a baby of your own? I mean, one for whom you are Father from the moment he draws breath? One to whom you can go in the night, without having to sneak? One you can see come into this world, while the Council waits on the other side of the door as you had to do, when Liam and Lily were born? A babe that is laid in your arms, and not another man's?"

Melbourne was taken aback by the precision with which she stated every thought that haunted him, when he indulged in regret. It was his turn to wipe away sudden tears.

"Be truthful with me, William, as you asked me to be." Her small hand rested on his cheek, compelling him to meet her eyes.

"All of that, sometimes. But then I remember to be grateful for what I have. Two beautiful children to love, and above all, you. Alive, well and healthy."

"What if – what if there is no residual damage from my injuries? What if physicians examine me, as many as you wish, from America, from Paris, from Geneva and the University of Bonn, and they say I face no more risk than any other woman? Then – could we try for another child?"

Melbourne looked into the blue eyes before him, blazing with love, with that look of adoration which was air and water and life itself to him. That look Billy coveted and would never have, not from her. Victoria was his, and his alone.

"I cannot see how that could be. It would only be opinions, learned opinions, but still…no certainty. And I cannot risk losing you."

"Can I at least ask them to examine me and offer their opinions? We don't have to decide anything until after. I don't want to risk my own life either, silly."

Brightening, Victoria leaned forward until her face was scant inches from his own. He cupped that little face in both hands and slowly leaned forward. His lips hovered over her own, so closely that he inhaled her breath as his own, so closely that he could feel a tingle from her nearness.

"I can deny you nothing, it seems. You may see however many physicians you choose, and endure whatever examinations they propose. But, ma'am, until such time as we decide otherwise, we will use precautions every time and you will keep accurate records of your courses in your journal. If you try to take matters into your own hands, I will deny you. Do we understand each other?"
Victoria's hand went to the back of his head and she pulled him to her, biting his bottom lip, giggling.

"I understand. I will do as you say. I still want to sleep alone tonight, I think. It's all such nasty unpleasant business, and if I can't carry a child what on earth is it all for?" She made such a twisted grimace of distaste that Melbourne laughed out loud.

"I daresay it bothers you more than it does me, but of course I will resign myself to a cold lonely bed."

"Thank you, William," Victoria said primly, drawing her dressing gown more tightly around her. "But you may read to me first, if you would. Anything but The Dog and His Reflection. I don't want to hear any more about greed and the consequences of not being satisfied."
Chapter 29

Althorp, Daventry District, Northamptonshire

Victoria strolled through the expansive Althorp gardens with Lady Georgiana Spencer. Everywhere she looked, Victoria saw signs of recent rehabilitation – fresh paint and mended fences, neglected hedges ruthlessly pruned and perennial beds thinned.

The estate had been all but abandoned for much of a decade, while the 3rd Earl, Melbourne's Chancellor of the Exchequer, applied principles of strict economy to the reduction of debt he had inherited. The 4th Earl, Frederick Spencer, Victoria's Lord Chamberlain, had begun the process of bringing Althorp back to life and the occasion of the Queen's visit marked its rebirth.

When they reached the end of the neatly edged path, Lady Spencer hesitated. She explained apologetically that the last section was still in a natural state, awaiting reclamation at some future date. *Only fit for the gentlemen to tramp down to the lake,* she laughed. *The path is quite overgrown.*

The warm May air was redolent with the heady fragrance of lilacs in peak bloom. Bushes grew together, their branches bowed down by their burden of white flowers. Victoria inhaled the wonderful scent.

"I adore lilacs. White lilacs, most of all. They smell heavenly. May we cut some to bring back?"

Once, she might have been embarrassed by her own enthusiasm. Now, at seven-and-twenty, her inner self-confidence had grown to be the equal of her dignity. The former had been far longer in coming than the latter, and that it came at all was all due to Lord M.

Lilacs, considered no more than a nuisance fit only for edging country lanes to hide grazing livestock from view, were no gardener's pride. They had long been a favorite of Victoria's nonetheless, and their sweet perfume reminded Victoria of that May they had spent at Melbourne Hall.
No sooner had she expressed partiality for the humble shrub, than a chorus of female voices echoed her sentiments. Victoria suppressed a grin, wishing for the hundredth time that Lord M was at her side, so they might exchange humorous glances at such blatant sycophancy. She lifted her skirts and walked quickly through long grass to the nearest bush, and reached for a sprig of blossoms.

A decade had passed since her last visit to Althorp, during that summer of 1836 when the Duchess of Kent and her Comptroller had infuriated King William IV by taking Princess Alexandrina on progress, as much preening herself before cheering crowds as showing off the Heir Apparent.

The estate itself had impressed a young girl as far more agreeable than dark, Spartan Kensington, damp grim Windsor and even the gilded grandeur that was Buckingham House. Victoria had been fascinated by the portrait of young Lady Jane Grey, who had been put to death when she was just 17, Victoria's own age. The winsome young girl had been a pawn, subject to the machinations of ambitious schemers not so very different than John Conroy.

Lord and Lady Spencer had left nothing to chance, in their careful planning. Victoria had been, if not surprised, then disappointed all the same, at the strict segregation of the sexes. Men and women only came together for a few brief hours in the evening, and by unspoken design, sleeping accommodations ensured that husbands and wives were placed at a discreet distance.

"To facilitate romantic liaisons," had been Lord M's drawled explanation, delivered sotto voce during a few stolen moments while they pretended to admire a portrait of Lavinia, Countess Spencer by Joshua Reynolds. Victoria only belatedly realized she ought to have shown disapproval of such immoral custom; in the moment, all her attention had been on the delicious shivering sensation aroused by his warm breath in her ear.

An undergardener was hurriedly beckoned by Lady Spencer, and Victoria was assured that her chamber would be filled with as many lilacs as she liked. She permitted her hostess to lead her on, and as they made a complete second circuit of the grounds Victoria was forced to acknowledge that she was excruciatingly, unbearably bored. Conversation in her presence was constrained, and she was forced to pretend interest in such bland, banal topics as these wellborn women deemed suitable for their sovereign's ears. Sermons were discussed in minute detail, and from that topic they segued to a dissertation on scripture that she was willing to bet had been hurriedly memorized the night before by some ambitious husband determined his wife make a good impression. Do they imagine I am so pious? Victoria wondered crossly. Or so simple-minded or naïve?

She much preferred the salty wit of her sister-in-law, who shared a dry sense of humor and appreciation of the ridiculous with Lord M, and – in her heart of hearts, unacknowledged – sometimes sorely missed Lady Portman's blunt appraisals and knack for summing up some particularly nonsensical affectation in a few well-chosen words. Lady Canning's conversation was always sparkling, and Lady Douro was able to discuss politics and military campaigns as well as any man, thanks to her father-in-law's friendship. Most of all, of course, Victoria preferred her own
husband's company, his whimsical humor and irreverence, but in general she preferred the company of gentlemen to that of her own sex. Men talked of ideas, of things which mattered; most females tended to natter on and on about things which might be a necessary part of life – servants, children, clothing – but were hardly intellectually stimulating.

At least, she thought, if they had brought Cameron as one of their attendants, he would have found a way to liven up the stultifying tedium. If nothing else, his appearance and the effect it had on ladies – inspiring desperate flirtation or its opposite, an elaborate show of raised-nose disapproval – would have been amusing.

When they completed several more circuits of the pleasure garden at a walking pace so slow it seemed as though she must lose her balance and topple sideways, Victoria was relieved to hear the clatter and bustle of gentlemen in the gunroom. She nearly held her breath, listening for the pitch and cadence of a familiar drawling voice, and was rewarded for her efforts.

*How foolish!* She thought waspishly. *We are guests, not prisoners. Why can't I simply walk in and speak to my own husband?* But Victoria knew that such a simple, natural act would be remarked upon, and cause the sort of tittle tattle Melbourne loathed. For his sake, then, she would pretend the same remote disinterest that the other women considered appropriate to their station.

Certainly, he could share her bed at night – but Victoria was keenly aware of the close attention paid her every move, and the fanatical dedication to gossip in aristocratic circles. Already, her longtime dresser had confided that she had been offered bribes. Intimate knowledge was currency, and Skerrett had assured her it was common practice for valets and lady's maids to augment their income by providing salacious tidbits and even – Victoria gasped when she was told – pilfered undergarments. On their first night under the Spencers' roof, Lord M had found his way to Victoria's bedchamber in the darkest hour of the morning, only to wish her a good night. It felt so good to have the comfort of his arms around her, to hear his heart beat when she laid her head on his chest, that neither of them had contemplated more. And on that occasion, when he opened the door to depart, he had surprised a footman in the very act of listening at the keyhole.

Melbourne accepted it all as part of the social life of the haut ton, but even he, Victoria perceived, was unusually reticent about showing any open signs of affection. Stolen kisses, caresses behind the draperies and middle-of-the-night comings and goings were considered *de rigueur* – except between husbands and wives, or between the queen and her lawfully wedded spouse.

She had nearly resigned herself to another hour of tedium, nibbling cream cakes and listening to each lady present feign rejection of all forms of sustenance. *As though they exist on potatoes and vinegar, too ethereal to consume the sweets and savories set out in tempting abundance.* Reprieve entered on felt-soled slippers, when the Althorp butler bowed and extended a note on silver salver to his mistress.

"The dispatches. I am sorry, Lady Spencer, but I must attend." Victoria rose with such alacrity that she was already moving past while the other women were still finding their feet.

She had turned down Lord Spencer's suggestion she use his private study. The tiny sitting area which served as anteroom to her bedchamber served well enough and offered considerably more privacy than could be hoped for elsewhere.

Two arm chairs positioned at such an angle that their legs nearly touched – and did, each time Victoria playfully nudged him with her slipper. One elegant little writing desk with turned gilt legs, more suitable for her nightly journal entries than any substantive work. The accoutrements had been chosen to suit feminine tastes, flowered chintz covers, and needlework cushions, the silk threads so vivid and new it had probably been completed just in time for the Queen's visit.
"Lord Beaumont presented a petition from the Vakeel of the Rajah of Sattara, praying for inquiry into the circumstances under which that Sovereign had been deposed and deprived of his liberty. He would not state any more on that occasion than this—that from 1818 to 1839, the Rajah was considered a loyal subject, and strictly maintained his engagements with the East India Company. Shortly after the last of these years a charge of conspiracy was brought against him by the Supreme Court of Bengal; but the accusations against him had never been proved, though he had repeatedly sought to be put on his trial with respect to them. With regard to another charge, he was treated in the same way; but instead of being allowed the trial which he courted, in order that he might prove his innocence, he was carried off in the dead of the night and committed to prison, where he was at present confined. The whole of his personal property had been since secured. He also presented another petition from a servant of the Rajah, declaring that his master had always been a loyal subject, and that he himself had been placed over a powder magazine, and imprisoned, before he consented to sign a paper, containing charges against the Rajah."

"Please write to Lord Palmerston, and ask him to prepare an inquiry into—oh, half a dozen or so similar cases. If the Rajah's trial was not fair, it doesn't set a good example for Crown justice. And if it was, I don't wish to single him out or appear to overrule our Governor."

Melbourne nodded and laid aside that paper in favor of another. His hand strayed to the vase of white lilacs placed on a small table between their chairs. He twisted a sprig loose from the stem and tucked it gently behind Victoria's ear, then began reading once more.

"A Better Observance of the Sabbath. Sir William Clay, from Secular Clergymen and 176 Laymen of the Parish of All Saints, Poplar, in the Borough of the Tower Hamlets, in favour of the Roman Catholic Relief Bill. Churchwardens, and Parishioners of Mold, for preventing the Union of the Sees of St. Asaph and Bangor and providing for the Immediate Appointment of a Bishop to the See of Manchester.

Here's one - by Sir George Grey, and the Committee for the Adoption of Measures for promoting the Establishment of Baths and Washhouses. No? How about a bill proposing the extension of education in Wales?"

The dispatch box had included the minutes of each sitting in both Houses. Parliament had labored for five full days of the week just ended, and covered much business that Melbourne laughingly dismissed as noise not worthy of royal attention. Victoria understood his manner, and the seriousness which lay just beneath that very charming insouciance. Noise it might be, but he did not fail to scrutinize each entry in the daily agenda even now, when he was no longer in government. His vast repository of knowledge on the minutiae of every issue, every pleading, every matter no matter how obscure, was no less comprehensive because he could make her laugh while she worked.

The time passed quickly—far too quickly—while Victoria read over every document and made neat notes in the margins. It all could have waited until she returned to the capital, but she would have missed both the sense of connectedness to her realm the prompt delivery of daily dispatches provided, and the invigorating, stabilizing nature of this brief working time alone with Lord M.

"Who would we be, if we weren't the Queen and her advisor?" Victoria asked, apropos of nothing and her head still bent over a particularly cryptic line in Lord Ripon's hand.

"Why, we would still be us, my dear. Perhaps...perhaps I would be a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and you, my research assistant and secretary. Or perhaps you would head a large banking conglomerate, and I your late father's business partner. I would have known you since you were a babe in arms. I would have watched you grow, and you would have thought of me as an uncle. My feelings for you would have evolved into something quite different, and I would have found myself
in the depths of despair when you appeared on the brink of marriage to…oh, one of the Paris Rothschilds, I imagine. A merchant princeling…"

It was a game they sometimes played. Victoria could imagine herself many things, had she not been heir to the Throne, had she been fathered by a merchant or shipbuilder or even a Jewish banker. She could imagine William using that brilliant mind and charming manner in a multitude of ways. But she could not see a life's path in which he was not her wise, entirely wonderful and always older lover and friend, nor one in which they did not share some common endeavor. And she could she envision any life at all without the ineffable bond which linked their hearts and minds and made them one.

"Why shouldn't the smallpox vaccination be compulsory for everyone, rather than only workhouse inhabitants? I think the gentlemen arguing on behalf of the Banbury Union make quite reasonable points. Variolation carries a substantially higher risk of unintended harm."

"You know I'm a great believer in nothing being compulsory, ma'am. We inflict our social experiments on the poor and expect their gratitude. But if we set aside my personal inclinations and look only at the science, then certainly you have it right. The vaccine is already available free of charge through every parish, and there are those who advocate for a comprehensive national vaccination law. This is one measure upon which you will see the Methodists and reformers allied with the Conservatives, while my own party – my own previous party – stands alone in proclaiming what amounts to an individual right to sicken and die, and allow one's children to sicken and die, unhindered. But the flaw in their argument is plain. No individual right can supersede the right of the many."

Victoria had been listening to him, rapt with admiration and an even warmer emotion. When he stopped talking abruptly and looked at her with a quizzical expression, she felt her cheeks pinken and looked down in confusion.

"There is no one else on earth to whom I can talk, as we talk. Whatever I say, wherever my mind goes, you keep up with me. Lehzen and my tutors would scold me for allowing my attention to be diverted and insist that I stay on a single subject. Lehzen once told me my mind was like a squirrel, running back and forth and leaping from topic to topic."

"And does that remind you of anyone?" Melbourne's lips tightened in a fond smile, and Victoria knew he was thinking of their daughter. Liam was far more like his father in that regard, able to dwell at length on all the permutations of a single subject.

They continued going through the red box, with a long-established rhythm. Victoria would not have demurred, had Lord M examined her documents and passed her only those which required a decision or signature. But he was gently adamant in his insistence that his role was only to advise and assist, never substitute his judgment for hers on any State matter.

*Everything matters*, he sometimes murmured in that gentle Whig drawl faintly reminiscent of Devonshire House. *Only the degree might be variable*. They worked together, diligent and playful, studious and entertaining, sharing humorous asides, levity giving way to serious discourse and back again. When an hour had passed she regretfully shuffled together the remaining papers and laid them back in the box.

"I needed this!" she exclaimed, rising to stretch languorously. Remembering her earlier petulance, Victoria turned her face up to Melbourne's and invited his kiss.

"They aren't so bad, I suppose. And Althorp is magnificent! I will ask Lady Georgiana to show me the rest of the gallery and compliment her on the work they've done."
"That will please her extremely, I am sure," he replied, stepping back just out of reach. "I daresay we will be forced to visit Blenheim Palace, if you praise humble Althorp too extravagantly."

Melbourne rubbed his chin once more. "I really do need to bathe and shave. And I should have summoned the barber sometime this past month. That I didn't, is only due to my fear of your wrath, ma'am."

Victoria stretched herself up to reach his head and stroked the soft silver curls she so loved.

"I don't care. Kiss me. I feel so much better now. I was quite surly earlier, forced to endure those silly women. Miss Flower is – well, the best I can say is, she is a very young woman with no opinions of her own and scarcely any personality."

"Ah, but she has the eye of a Duke, and her maidenhead to give him. Viscount Ashbrook is congratulating himself on that match, and clearly expects us all to do likewise."

"What does Marlborough say? Is it a love match?" Victoria kept hold of Melbourne's hand, unwilling to relinquish it – and his attention – quite yet.

"Love match for the ages, no doubt," he responded drily. "My dear, gentlemen do not speak that way amongst themselves. But knowing George's propensity for getting females with child, it's just as well he confine himself to those to whom he can offer his name."

"Does she know, do you think?" Victoria narrowed her eyes, recalling her own early misapprehension when she discovered the existence of Susan Churchill. How would things have evolved differently, if what she had assumed – that the mysterious girl William and Caroline Lamb raised in their home as a foster sister to Augustus was his own illegitimate daughter – had been true? Melbourne had hastened to explain that Susan was the unacknowledged result of a Gretna Green union between George Spencer-Churchill and Harriet Spencer, a sham marriage later dissolved.

"I doubt it, although her father surely does. That's all in the past." Melbourne shrugged. "Susan's well-married and happy. I did little enough."

"You raised his daughter, William. You provided her a home, and an education and a dowry. She's quite fond of you, whether you admit it or not."

"I suppose." Once again, he shrugged dismissively. "It was a long time ago. I suppose I'm fond enough of the girl. She was no simpering little miss, at least. If Caro and I gave her anything beyond simple affection and a home, it was the freedom to develop into a headstrong young woman who kowtows to no one."

"It will come as a shock to Miss Flowers, when she learns she is stepmother to a daughter older than she is."

"Those things happen. And now," Melbourne stepped neatly around Victoria and grasped the doorknob. "I must leave you to your toilette and put myself in Mr. Baines' hands. Your favorite, Herr Mendelssohn, will be favoring us with his music later. I believe he was invited to please you. Does Baines know what you are wearing?"

Victoria was puzzled by the question, and might have asked what he meant, except her dresser chose that moment to tap at the door. When she saw Melbourne's arched brow and the small smile tugging at his mouth, she understood. For the longest time, his valet would serendipitously lay out some article of clothing – waistcoat, neckcloth, pocket square – which perfectly matched whichever gown Victoria had chosen for the evening. It was Melbourne's theory that their two body servants
conspired together, a part of some below stairs May-December flirtation. A silly conceit, faintly ridiculous, those small complementary touches to their costumes, but not one which either the Queen or her husband had been moved to halt.

"Rose-pink silk," Victoria said softly, so Miss Skerrett would not hear.

"He wouldn't dare...." Melbourne growled, tossing the words over his shoulder as he left. Victoria rested against the door, relishing the sense of exhilaration and ease left in his wake.

She pondered the words her mind offered up to describe what she was feeling, what she always felt in his presence. How could exhilaration and ease co-exist? Weren't they the very opposite of one another? One would think they should be, but in her case, they perfectly described the way he made her feel, never more alive, every nerve end quivering. Colors were more vivid, sensations more intense – and not just those sensations, Victoria told herself with a little giggle. Flowers smelled sweeter, silk felt softer to the touch, the nap of the sofa rougher under her fingertips as though each impression was magnified a thousand-fold. Such hyperawareness might be quite fatiguing by itself, but when she was with Lord M her entire being sighed with relief. Life itself. He brings me to life. I think, I hope, that I do the same for him.

Her earlier peevishness had quite dissipated, replaced by benevolent good humor. That silly Miss Flower, betrothed to the Duke of Marlborough, who couldn't string three sensible words together, was a gently nurtured young girl she had judged too harshly. A sweet child, no doubt, innocuous, giving no offense. Lady Spencer was a gracious hostess and understandably proud of the great estate she had brought back from the brink of ruin. Those chattering women who followed them like a flock of pea hens – if they concerned themselves with only households and children, why, that was the very purpose of a fair and just sovereign – to provide a safe and secure society so that ladies like these need not concern themselves with weighty matters. It was up to her, their queen, to accept their obsequiousness and return kindness and courtesy.

Still smiling, Victoria entered her bedchamber just in time to glimpse a garment her maid had been holding up beside the dressmaker's mannequin swathed in the pink gown. It was a waistcoat, white satin lavishly embroidered with rose pink roses set against green leaves and vines. Lord M had quoted enough of his old friend George Brummel's dictums to tell her what he would think of such a flamboyant piece of clothing. Victoria held her hand before her mouth and erupted into a fit of giggles. It wouldn't do, but she need not spoil the surprise.
The last evening at Althorp. Daytime tedium gave way to a delightfully festive celebration. Georgiana, Lady Spencer, had devised a pagan faerie theme which entailed hundreds of specially potted trees and blooming plants augmented by masses of cut blossoms. Mechanical birds chirped and twittered overhead and long-suffering footmen and serving maids appeared in vaguely elfin costume, scalloped tunics over tight green leggings that ended mid-calf.

The Saloon sparkled, the gilt on picture frames reflecting the light from great crystal chandeliers. Once an open courtyard before being enclosed by the widow of the first Earl of Sunderland, it retained an airy feel. The long wall of French doors had been thrown open to permit ease of movement between inside and out, where trees bedecked by a thousand points of light gave the illusion of a fairy park.
In Wootton Hall a lady harpist and small orchestra were set to provided music for dancing later but first, Herr Mendelssohn himself, an honored guest, played his pièce de résistance, Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream. A troupe of gossamer-winged dancers frolicked about in their gauzy costumes, and Madame Vestris herself joined the tableau in Oberon's attire, albeit briefly, before rejoining the guests more conventionally gowned.

Melbourne had worn the waistcoat, finding a great deal of amusement in the reactions of his fellow guests. He had gone his valet one better, in demanding pink silk be obtained and pressed into service as a cravat. Careful ironing and starch applied with a light hand provided the desired effect, not without considerable distress from his nervous valet.

His little joke had the desired effect on the male guests. Looks of momentary surprise were followed swiftly by overly sober expressions, as they worked out in their own minds whether Lord Melbourne should be taken seriously.

Apparently, he decided, females of all ages found a gentleman irresistible, who felt no compunction in donning what some might consider androgynous finery. The Macaronis had gone out of fashion when he was still a lad in short pants, but Melbourne recalled with a shudder some of the Prince Regent's more alarming sartorial excesses.

He had held his champagne glass out as a rather ineffective shield, in hope of discouraging the soft white hands reaching for the folds of shell-pink satin at his throat, the well-coiffed heads brought close to admire the fine stitchery of those rose-pink petals on his waistcoat.

Each time he met her eyes, Victoria's were on him. She might be at the center of a group or attending to some movement of the dance executed only for her, but her gaze would always follow him as he moved around the gallery. As it has always been, went through his mind.

Once the comments had been mocking, spoken derisively when onlookers observed their new queen's infatuation with her Prime Minister, more than one wit observing that she appeared to be in love with Lord Melbourne. It had always been repeated in a way that made the idea seem ridiculous, that it was Lord Melbourne who couldn't possibly be interested in a gauche, not particularly attractive eighteen-year-old, she who couldn't compete with the poised, polished society beauties he had previously favored.

The scorn and ridicule had reached her – of course it had, it was supposed to - delivered with a display of sham sympathy by the very beauties who served her at Court. Even before that, her stature had been mocked by John Conroy and she had been conditioned by her mother and half-sister to believe that her unprepossessing appearance must be compensated for with an excess of dignity and careful inhibition of a natural exuberance.

All of which Melbourne had to undo, gently and lovingly untangling that web of feminine insecurity. As a monarch, Victoria was all dignity, full of majesty, always sure of her divine birthright. As a girl, then a woman, she had been less certain, privately painfully shy and eager to avoid any situation in which she might be at a disadvantage.

If she watched him from love, Melbourne knew that was not the only reason. Love him she did – her frank adoration was a gift from the gods he accepted numb and dumb with gratitude – but he understood that even as she matured and lost some of that early insecurity, he was her touchstone, the source of her emotional equilibrium.

The presence of dancers down from London signaled an entirely different sort of revelry in store later that night. Melbourne only smiled, his expression vague and noncommittal, as young women flitted about in scanty costumes far more revealing up close than when seen from afar on the London stage.
One paid him particular attention, until he was sure it was a jest arranged by one or the other of the Ultra Tory peers, scions of ancient houses who made a great show of bonhomie. The young woman costumed as Titania lacked the abundant curves of her fellow dancers. She had been selected, he understood, for her narrow boyish hips and nearly flat chest, as much as for her streaming auburn hair. She wore the requisite gauze fairy wings, and little more under a diaphanous gown.

It was no ballet, the sinuous movements which had her twining her limbs around his as though she were a living vine. Melbourne maintained a faintly amused expression, holding himself aloof but not so stiff that he would be the butt of further bawdy jokes. He only drew back, frowning, when she purred soft words.

"I'll be your Ariel, if you will play Prospero, my lord."

Had it been merely the offer of some actress or dancer for variety's sake, for passing bed sport, Melbourne would have been mildly aroused – he was only a man, after all – and decidedly uninterested. After more than six decades of living, variety had lost its appeal. It was his wife he wanted in his bed, and the prospect of a few minutes' fumbling in some dark alcove, quick release by means of mouth and hands, didn't tempt him.

Someone had put her up to this, of course. If he succumbed, it might be considered a bonus, but the intimate familiarity of the message was the purpose. Ariel. Did I write that down somewhere, a margin note perhaps, the way I speak my thoughts aloud? The dancer's expression told him he was doing that very thing now.

"You have it backwards, my girl," Melbourne said lightly. "It was 'If you would play Prospero, I will be your Ariel.' Tell whomever sent you that I am not interested in playing. And if you would be so kind," he looked down at his arm pointedly. "Please remove your hand. I wish to scratch my nose."

Melbourne did not wait to see which way the girl went, and he spared only a brief glance at the men who watched him expectantly. He found Victoria surrounded by a small group, some of them fellow house-guests and others local gentry, while a tumbler dressed in leafy sprite's costume performed for them. The look when she slid her eyes sideways was stern and measuring, but the slightest twitch of her bowed upper lip reassured. Melbourne sketched the briefest of bows toward those who surrounded her.

"I am going to steal my wife way, sirs, mesdames. Ma'am, walk with me on the terrace if you would. We won't see a sky like this in London. Lady Spencer, you have outdone yourself."

The night was mild and clear, the sky a vast expanse of diamond-studded darkness and the air smelled almost unbearably sweet, perfumed by dozens of pot-planted magnolias brought up from the conservatory.

He still had hold of her elbow, and slid his hand down her forearm. They stood in silence, Victoria half-turned toward him.

"Victoria, I don't need to tell you I –"

"Lord M, you don't have to explain—"

They'd begun speaking at precisely the same moment, then stopped together. Melbourne looked down at her sweet face and pulled her to him, damning the proprieties as he did so. *Let them gossip,* he thought viciously. *Let them accuse me of being besotted by my own wife, this girl less than half my age. And her, of being too much under my influence.* That last thought made him laugh aloud. Any one of the ministers called to account, standing speechless and trembling before Queen
Victoria's displeasure, could attest to her independence and firm convictions.

"You saw, of course."

"Of course," Victoria responded promptly. Melbourne almost sighed audibly with relief. She had trusted him then; her precarious confidence had not been shaken.

"And if I had not, Lady Ashbrook informed me that the gentlemen intended to divvy up the troupe amongst themselves later. Baroness Crofton whispered to Lord de Ramsey's wife that you would slip out with the striking red-haired creature who played Titania. 'To show her the gardens by moonlight', she said in such a tone. Julia de Ramsey made sure I heard her plainly, when she said she had it on good authority – her husband, no doubt – that you intended to steal a march on the other gentlemen. Droit du seigneur, she said Lord de Ramsey had called it, now that you consider yourself king in all but name."

Melbourne huffed a soft laugh devoid of real humor.

"Charming conversation. Women are vicious creatures, far more so than men. To say it in your hearing was cruel, even if it had been accurate. Now you may tell her that my wife is the only woman with whom I want to enjoy the gardens by moonlight."

"Pfft," Victoria made a sound signifying contempt. "I told her we were not in France, and as a good Englishwoman she surely meant jus prae noctis."

She surprised Melbourne further by looping her arms around his waist, clasping one wrist in the opposing hand so he could not easily disengage.

"I did not remind her of the fate of Rosamund Clifford. Although it would seem apt, if they want to dredge up ancient tales." Melbourne looked into her eyes, enigmatic dark pools reflecting the stars overhead.

"Feisty, aren't we?" he murmured so softly he doubted she could understand the words.

"Kiss me, Lord M. Kiss me now like you should have then, when I first knew I wanted you."

"We will be seen," Melbourne cautioned, indicating with a tilt of his head the other couples strolling slowly about the terrace. Young Lady So-and-so with Lord Such-and-Such, while the lady's husband amused himself with the wife of a local squire. Human nature would not change, Melbourne knew; people would find love, or a brief approximation, wherever they could. He had not changed either. If the woman in his arms was married to someone else, he would still follow her to the ends of the earth for a chance to see the light in her eyes when she looked up at him.

"They are determined to have scandal, then let them make what they will of this. You are mine, all mine, and I am yours. Forever." Her hand on the back of his head, fingers tangled in his hair, Victoria pulled his lips down to meet hers.

She clung to his hand the rest of the night, defying any who looked askance at such a public display of affection. There was nothing submissive or timid in her manner, no hint of the wronged wife, else the gossips would have pounced with a certainty. Victoria's demeanor was proud, even slightly daring. Her pink gown was modest, baring only shoulders and the merest hint of cleavage, but she exuded an air of such sensuality Melbourne veered between masculine pride and a strong vein of possessiveness.

Lady Spencer, in keeping with her overall design, had arranged for informal dancing in lieu of a ball. The difference was one of degree, and in taking advantage of the warm weather to keep the doors
flung open. Melbourne did not take part in the country dances, the reels and polkas, and contented himself with lounging on one of the two-person sofas positioned at intervals for use by the elderly and infirm. When the small orchestra signaled an end to the merriment, Melbourne was not entirely sorry. *Not even slightly*, and conspiratorial grin.

"You must not do that when I am not with you, Lord M," she chided affectionately.

"Else people will say I am in my dotage?" Melbourne grinned.

A cold supper had been laid out in one of the secondary State rooms. Georgiana Spencer and her husband stood at the head of two columns of guests, waiting expectantly for the Queen to enter first. Victoria briefly rested her damp forehead against Melbourne's arm to conceal a yawn, then squared her shoulders and moved resolutely forward.

Cold lobster, iced champagne and a few raspberries were all the food she would take. Melbourne wanted more – one never really *ate* at formal dinners, he told himself – but knew he would pay for it later with the stomach pains that troubled him when he deviated from dietary vigilance. He knew Victoria's energy was flagging by the way in which she leaned her slight weight against him at every opportunity.

"Tonight I sleep with my wife," he said in her ear, loudly enough that several matrons stared in shock. "But first – ma'am, there is someone I need to speak with. Will you excuse me?"

He noted Victoria's puzzlement and he lifted his chin to indicate a handsome, well-built woman of middle years. Madame Vestris, the actress who managed this troupe of entertainers, had begun as so many others, devoting long hours to her craft on stage and even longer hours to securing and satisfying a succession of well-born patrons. No longer in the first blush of youth, Melbourne had known her since she was Lucia Elizabeth Mathew. He and his brothers had shared some memorable experiences with Lucia once upon a time– not something, he told himself, which would endear him to her if he spoke of it aloud, and not conducive to his purpose in seeking her out.

It was nearly two o'clock by the time the last door clicked shut. Melbourne, cursing the custom which placed spouses as far from each other as any self-respecting hostess could manage, went from waiting impatiently to struggling to stay awake. He had given his valet instructions to come to him in the morning the Queen's chamber – King William's Suite, it was still called, although he had no doubt in future it would be known as Queen Victoria's.

When he slipped inside there was only an indistinct shape under the thick down coverlet, any ambient light blocked by the canopy overhead and half-closed hangings beneath. For one awful moment Melbourne recalled the outcry when his brother-in-law, ostensibly in search of Emily's bed, had turned the wrong knob in Buckingham. *What if?* He shook off the specter of *Lord Melbourne observed entering the bedchamber of some Viscountess or Marchioness* and cynically decided that if such a thing happened, the outraged husband would most likely take advantage of the situation to improve his own fortunes. It had happened before, twice…

He shucked off slippers and trousers and lowered himself gingerly to the edge of the bed, torn between a reluctance to disturb her sleep and hope she would awaken.

"You came!" Voice thick with sleep, her eyes only slits, Victoria smiled drowsily and he slid beneath the covers she held up for him. She turned onto her side and wound herself around him, a knee over his legs and her hand tantalizingly warm at his waist.

"Of course. Why should I be the only man consigned to sleeping alone?" It was good, so very good, to be beside her again. To have the right and the privilege of doing so, and closing out the rest of the
world for a few blessed hours.

They did not make love in the night. She found him under the covers and began to fondle him to readiness – out of duty, he thought, rather than desire - until he gently nudged her hand away and enfolded her in his arms.

Melbourne pushed back the hair from her face to kiss her, and was content to hold her and surrender to sleep. He did not relate the curious speech of that bold Titiana, reciting the lines Ariel once spoke, nor did he have the opportunity to tell her the reason he had approached Madame Vestris.

Morning would come soon enough, and before they traveled back there would be an outing on horseback, a ride across Althorp's vast acreage. Victoria would be on her magnificent Adagio, and he at her side rather than relegated to the company of malcontent husbands. And then they would return to London, and on the way perhaps he would tell her the meaning of that Prospero reference, and who Ariel had once been to him.

Lucia Elizabeth Vestris
"My goodness, if homecoming after only six days is this tumultuous, I shudder to think what would happen if we were gone for six weeks."

Melbourne did not remark on her use of the conditional would. As the prospect of their trip to Italy loomed nearer, Victoria's early excitement paled noticeably. He had mixed feelings. It would be more pleasant to show her some of the sights she might otherwise never see, or at any rate never see with him at her side, to travel as private citizens, or as much so as could reasonably be managed. And she herself had been nearly giddy at the prospect when it was no more than an abstraction. Melbourne had understood and accepted that she had seen the trip to Rome and Venice as her chance to recreate an experience, supplant a memory, that he had once shared with Caro.

That reflection put him in mind of what had occurred their last evening at Althorp, the very curious encounter with Titania speaking the lines of his Ariel.

"Darling, I will leave you to sort out matters with your ladies. There is something I must see to, and coward that I am, I will attend to it now." He bent over her shoulder and kissed her lightly, then fled as several of her ladies-in-waiting were admitted. He didn't try to make out their words, but from the tone, they were vying to express some complaint which had united them in outrage.

His study remained as he had left it. There were no signs of disturbance that he could see, although Melbourne acknowledged that it would be nearly impossible to be certain. His habits were far from methodical; a stack of blank workbooks on one side of the blotter and on the other, those he'd filled with scrawled reminiscences which spanned half a century. He jumped about at random, filling six or seven consecutive pages on the circumstances surrounding passage of the Reform Bill and then another two, describing his first impressions of Eton and his later acclimation. One completely filled notebook, in Bulwer-Lytton's hands, had discussed – as much as any gentleman could – the circumstance of his courtship, that first lightning-bolt recognition of his feelings for Lady Bessborough's tomboyish sixteen-year-old in her breeches, a wild creature who veered from child to seductress to pious moralist and back again. He had described Caroline fairly, he hoped, for there was no malice in her, either then or later, and none of the corruption which hypocrites were so quick to ascribe. Did I write it down, if for no other reason than because I am wont to speak my thoughts aloud, or in this case jot them down?

If that was the case – and he was determined to be certain – then he would have to extricate himself from Edward Bulwer-Lytton as gracefully as possible, and seek the return of all the materials he'd
already surrendered. They'd offer him a respectable sum for time already invested, which Melbourne had no doubt was considerable, and some prestigious office. Poet Laureate? A bishopric?

Above all, when he agreed to embark on this business of capturing the essence of a life – his life – in written form, Melbourne had been adamant that the messy business of putting his memories on paper would be properly sanitized before anything saw the light of day. Bulwer-Lytton was a gadfly, and like most scribblers, was in love with his own voice, but would he go so far as to violate the very basis of their agreement? Or, for that matter, the respect they both owed Caro's memory? The man had been in love with her, and one of her most ardent admirers.

He was still standing, hands in his trouser pockets, staring absently at the overflowing boxes of old letters and journals when the children came in. Baroness Lehzen had brought them herself, so they were slightly less exuberant than they might have otherwise been. Lily held the hem of her little gown pinched in two fingers and performed a credible curtsy, and her brother executed an elegant little bow.

Melbourne met the Baroness's steady gaze, and did as was expected. He bowed first to Liam and then to the Princess Elizabeth, and brought her hand to his lips. That was all the formality any of them could bear; both children attacked him, hugging ferociously, so that Melbourne had to sit down and haul them onto his lap. He looked at Lehzen apologetically, his face damp from their kisses, and saw that she was smiling broadly. Melbourne felt inordinately proud and pleased with himself, at the hard-won approval and even affection on her stern face.

"...it was curious, her choice of words. Someone put her up to it, and I hope Lucia can find out who."

Victoria had learned to guard her expression as she matured, but not with him – rarely with him, Melbourne amended mentally. When he'd told her that the dancer had parroted a phrase only he and Caro knew, he saw Victoria wince, and a shadow cloud her clear blue eyes. That was no more than he'd expected. She was not the first woman he had loved, and he would in all likelihood not be the last man she loved. Neither thought came without pain, but it was the price of loving.

She didn't pull away, or draw down that invisible shutter behind which she would hide when seriously wounded, and for that he was grateful. Nor did she withdraw the hand which he held in his own, absently stroking the edge of his thumb across her palm.

"It's more than curious, Lord M. It's an invasion of your privacy. Was it – was it meant as an attempt to seduce you, do you think?" Victoria's clear sweet voice hesitated only briefly, at the word. Melbourne made no attempt to look away; he had nothing to hide, and wanted to be sure she saw that.

"Hardly. Nobody could be stupid enough to imagine that hearing some trollop recite a phrase my wife once used would have that effect. It annoyed me, no more. There might have been no deeper purpose, than this girl imagining to pique my interest, but that still begs the question, where did she hear – or read – it?"

"I'm sorry for it," Victoria said, and Melbourne knew she meant it. He shrugged, and brought her hand to his lips.

"It doesn't matter, except for the sense of violation. Every husband and wife have private words, phrases, customs, only they know. It's unsettling to think that forty years on, something that was never used in any letters, never spoken outside of – well, never mind." He felt his ears warm and realized he was on the verge of blushing. Time to change the subject, he decided.
Victoria leaned forward and picked up a triangle of bread layered with cucumber and ham. She offered it to him, and he opened his mouth compliantly. She took a second sandwich for herself and ate it in silence.

"My ladies are united in insisting that I remove Lady Beth from the household. They never liked her, because she's not one of them."

"Is she Lady Beth? I thought her antecedents weren't known."

"Well, we know something of her background and it's not – she's not – she and her sister were wards of a respectable enough spinster in Bath. She – the sister, I mean – died just after Beth finished her classes at Bath Academy, and with her inheritance she came up to London. They despise her because she is not attractive, and doesn't have their airs and graces, and I know what that's like."

Melbourne frowned impatiently.

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way. You are not unattractive. Good God, Victoria, do you really think the bucks who hovered about you ten deep before your marriage – and more than a few after – did so because they thought they could wear the crown? Really?"

Victoria's face softened, and instead of merely pretty, she became beautiful. She was beautiful to him all the time, of course, but when she allowed herself to relax her naturally guarded, even severe countenance, she was undeniably lovely.

Creamy skin, deep blue eyes fringed with thick lashes, wide cheekbones tapering to a kittenish pointed chin and full kissable red lips – oh, yes, a beauty. Why on earth had they worked so hard to convince her otherwise? He knew the answer.

Victoire loved her daughter deeply, but was the sort of woman who must be the object – the sole object – of every man's attention. Having a daughter who would be Queen was hard enough, but surrendering the last vestiges of her own youth while that daughter blossomed into young womanhood had proved intolerable.

And the sister, well, all that helpful guidance in person and by letter had further ravaged the young Princess Alexandrina's self-esteem. It may have been well-intentioned, although Melbourne had his doubts, but Feodora's constant improving suggestions, warning an impressionable young girl to cover her mouth when she laughed, to moderate a natural exuberance, even to anticipate a tendency to plumpness, had the net effect of extinguishing the very animation and fresh prettiness which were such appealing traits.

"They suspect her of pilfering," Victoria continued. "But can't prove anything. An earbob lost – who would steal just one, pray tell? – and a few shillings, Lady Douro's kid glove and umbrella turning up under her bed, after such an outcry. Even the servants are involved. The housekeeper complains endlessly, and says that the cats cause such a stench none of the chambermaids will clean her rooms. Why, she brings one or the other into my office nearly every day and they are always clean and well-brushed. She bathes Deckel for me, whether or not I ask."

"If your ladies are in agreement on anything, it's a signal event. Perhaps you'd best keep the peace and find her another position," Melbourne said. Reasonable, he thought, already disinterested in the matter of Lady Beth. Miss Beth – and what the devil was her surname anyway?

He tried to be fair, to weigh in his own mind the vague distaste which he felt for the woman. She was large – not big-boned, or stout, or plump, but obese. For all that, she was always neatly dressed, her hair pulled severely back, and if she wore more powder and paint than most respectable females,
well, he was no one to censure. Certainly, it was more pleasant to be surrounded by attractive people, men and women alike. The Queen's other ladies ranged in age from barely twenty-one to fifty or better, in appearance from stunners like Willie, Lady Dalmeny, reputed to be the most beautiful women in England, to downright plain, like waspish Emma Portman.

Melbourne had no lascivious interest in any of them, but he admitted to himself that he appreciated pretty women, and even more, witty, intelligent women able to banter and be amused.

Beth, setting aside any consideration of physical appearance, should meet that criteria readily. Each time he encountered her, she had some sally ready, and her sarcastic humor was just the sort he normally appreciated. She certainly wasn't a stupid woman, and had surprised him with pithy observations that neatly coincided with his own opinion. And yet...he didn't like her, he realized.

"She has no one in the world, Lord M. Except that sister, who I think is ill or...perhaps crippled? I'm not precisely sure. We could give her exemplary references, of course, and even find her another situation but she's not exactly suited for domestic work. She dislikes children, so being a governess or educator wouldn't suit and..." Victoria stopped, her lips pursing in annoyance. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

Melbourne had been watching her speak, engrossed by the movement of her lips, the glimpse of teeth so white they were nearly luminescent. He caught a tantalizing aroma of the fragrance she favored, something with lily-of-the-valley and iris notes, and underneath that, a sweet musky essence that made the blood rush from his head. He kissed her.

Victoria's lips parted under his, and the hand she laid gently on his face reassured Melbourne that she wasn't entirely displeased by his distraction. He found it pleasurable in the extreme, to kiss his wife in the drawing room, tea things set out on a low table and late afternoon sunlight streaming through the window. Despite – or perhaps because of – the impossibility of matters progressing further, he was almost painfully hard, aching for her touch. Like a boy, he wanted to beg for that much favor – just touch it, please, only touch it – and the idea of uttering such a plea out loud no sooner occurred to him, than he huffed a laugh, his mouth still locked on hers.

As though reading his mind, certainly knowing his need, Victoria laid her hand just there and stroked him lightly. The sensation was unbearably tantalizing, her nails scraping lightly over the fabric of his trousers, and he felt himself surge, contract, throb.

"Do you like that?" Victoria whispered. Her eyes were laughing, her expression saucy. He wanted to press her hand down against him hard, and growled, the sound coming from the very back of his throat.

"Naughty minx," he managed. "Stop – don't stop – oh, damnation, you had better stop. We are certain to be interrupted at any moment."

"'Stop'? Are you sure you want me to stop?" she asked, and stroked his length with firm, sure pressure. Then she withdrew her hand and smiled prettily. "Would you like another cucumber sandwich, Lord M?"

Melbourne leaned his head back against the sofa cushion and stared at the ceiling mural until his breathing calmed, while Victoria examined the selection of sweets on the tray. Then he sat up again, his mouth twisted into a rueful smile.

"I think I'd prefer the salmon, thank you," he drawled. She wore a light blue gown, perfectly molded to her trim figure, and the little silver necklace he'd given her so long ago. The white lace collar and cuffs lent a virginal look, he thought. She had been a virgin when he first took her, had given him her
maidenhead, and he cherished that secret knowledge as he did everything else about their improbable romance.

"What are you thinking, Lord M? You look so serious suddenly."

"I'm thinking that I once imagined I didn't like blue on a woman. If I could be wrong about that, what else have I been wrong about?"

Victoria laughed, her sweet voice sounding like silvery bells, and that ridiculously poetic notion made him laugh with her.

They both heard footsteps on the marble outside their door. Melbourne glanced hurriedly down to be sure he was not in disarray just as a footman threw open the door. One of his own equerries stepped in. The fellow bowed to the Queen, then turned to Melbourne.

"Sir, a Mr. Dickens is here to see you. Shall I bring him up?"

None of them spoke, for as long as it took Melbourne to read the newspaper. The ink was still damp enough to leave dark traces on his hands and even his cuffs.

"Is there any way to stop this?" he asked, when he'd finished and slapped it down on the table so hard tea sloshed from abandoned cups.

"They've printed five thousand copies for their first run, so they say. No publisher is going to waste this on a weekday, would have been my guess, but look at the date."
Tuesday, 12 May 1846. And it was now nearly 6 o'clock on Sunday night. His mind ran over the alternatives, none of them good, to successfully prevent distribution until they could request and receive an injunction. And even if they prevailed, what would happen to the newspapers already printed? Five thousand newspapers couldn't just disappear. There would be no guarantee they were all destroyed, and single copies would be in greater demand because of the scarcity.

"And the frenzy that would result, from the Palace demanding an injunction," Dickens said aloud what Melbourne had been thinking.

"Did you find out who their informant is?"

"I have a single name. Middleton. Probably a pseudonym, of course. A member of your household, a servant, a clerk perhaps? No, that wouldn't explain how they got hold of the drawings. Someone you trust, obviously. And someone with ambitions of authorship. This was no mere informant. Whoever stole your drawings and spied on your private lives insisted that they write each article. It will be serialized over the next few months, and then go into a private printing house for publication as a book. His agent came to us first, thinking I suppose that since we expose injustice where we find it, and puncture the vanity of those who consider themselves above those who labor, we would be interested in publishing this – this – sacrilege. Any decent person who believes in the sanctity of home and family would be – should be – as offended by the very notion as I am. I am sorry to say that voyeurism – for I can call it nothing less – will overrule decency. The public has a prurient interest in the private lives of others. Fiction succeeds where it satisfies that desire to peek into others' lives. If it's any consolation, this first piece pretends to be celebrating the virtues of Your Majesty's domestic arrangements."

"I am gratified to hear it," Melbourne said drily. "But I think our sleeping arrangements need not be part of public discourse. Nor, for my wife's sake and that of my children, that the old scandals need to be recited again, from some pretense of commending my rehabilitation."

Victoria had not spoken since Dickens' arrival. Her silence concerned Melbourne more than if she had already erupted with outrage. Her complexion was as pale as marble, her visage as still as a statute.

"Send for Billy," she said, in a voice so low Melbourne understood Dickens was not meant to hear. "And Edward as well. I want Billy here when Mr. Bulwer-Lytton arrives. And...whomever else you think can help us stop this...this travesty. This invasion of the privacy of my home and family."
Chapter 32

Melbourne had chosen to cover the 16 miles on horseback, rare enough an occurrence.

While the Household moved to Windsor, he had gone in the other direction. It hadn't surprised him that Victoria would suddenly decide to leave London, and it caused no comment beyond mild grumbling from those ladies whose turn on the duty roster coincided with a week spent in what passed for dreary isolation after Buckingham's centrality.

The servants, well-managed by a stern steward, made no complaint, of course. There was nothing for Victoria to do, save quell her own restless urge to ride rather than sit sedately in the closed carriage which was customary.

"We'll ride out in the Great Park," he had whispered in her ear while postillions stared blankly ahead. "You can take ride astride if you like, and allow her to show you her paces."

Normally, Victoria only permitted herself the freedom to ride astride, with breeches under her habit, and sometimes even foregoing skirts altogether, at Brocket Hall. Dressing in the cumbersome costume deemed appropriate to a female was a minor annoyance, but part and parcel of maintaining her image as archetype of virtuous womanhood and beyond all reproach.

_Damnable weather for mid-May_, Melbourne muttered, nudging his horse around a deep puddle. The animal's sudden swerve sent a great splash of muddy rainwater up, drenching the rider on his left. He glanced at the protection officer and was met with a flash of annoyance. It relieved him; Melbourne had grown accustomed to the need of protection, and vastly preferred those men – and women – of the squad who unbent enough to show their personality, to the sphinxes who stared stonily ahead and had no conversation. _Now that Billy's back he can undo the changes of the last six months_.

An inquisitive glance from his companion told Melbourne that he had spoken aloud. Talking to himself was an old habit, but one which was gradually becoming more noticeable. Companionship would do that to one, he thought. After the long solitary years, alone in a crowd and at the end of the day, simply alone with his thoughts, the young queen had swiftly become friend and confidante, well before she became more. Ah, yes – _having someone to talk to, who hangs on one's every word and laughs at every sally – she spoiled me for everyone who came before, and spoiled me for solitude as well_. He was hopeful he hadn't spoken _that_ reflection aloud.
Monday morning had dawned cold and wet, with dank fog rising from Thames and Serpentine to lend a foul stench to the air. It was reason enough to travel to Windsor, far from the stench of London and its blanket of fog, smoke and overburdened sewers. Not the only reason, he knew. Victoria despised Windsor and what she called its oppressive atmosphere, until she didn’t. The venerable old fortress offered the illusion of security, in the face of whatever might threaten the queen and her family. That the Conqueror's battlements and turrets and walls within walls could not protect her from modern threats no absolute monarch ever envisioned, made no difference. When his girl wanted to retreat from the world, she went to ground in Windsor Castle.

Mr. Dickens had spoken rather more freely than he might otherwise have done in the Queen's presence. Her white-lipped silence and Melbourne's astute questioning emboldened the journalist and his perspective was well-considered and to the point.

"This is the 19th century, ma'am. I fancy I understand the perils of modernity, insofar as they apply to the matter under discussion. You know my observations of the poorest amongst us, and the conditions under which they suffer. Yet even they, and most certainly the working and middle classes, have more free time than any medieval serf. They are better educated – why, sweeps and pickpockets read and can write their letters – and the middle class we celebrate in particular have a voracious interest in the lives of their betters.

I don't believe you, Lord Melbourne, are more refined in your tastes than the bulk of our readers, only more honest. You say you have no desire to read about guttersnipes, thieves and pickpockets and I say that the majority of those who feverishly subscribe to every new serial, who throng to buy the silver fork novels of Mr. Disraeli, such as Vivian Grey and The Young Duke, and Miss Charlotte Brontë's works and others with a similar theme, are your audience. They are also your subjects and – "

Victoria had been staring at Dickens with a look of amazement, and it belatedly served to remind him that he had been speaking as freely as he would to anyone else. Anyone who wasn't the queen.

Melbourne indicated with a nod that he was to continue. He laid his hand over Victoria's and patted it reassuringly.

"- and it is they who will decide whether the monarchy survives as an institution," Dickens cleared his throat self-consciously and fell silent.

"Now is no time to stop, sir," Victoria said icily. "Pray continue. Explain how permitting our privacy to be exploited for the profit of some – some – how allowing our home life to become the subject of scandal-mongers and pamphleteers could possibly be beneficial. Are we now to perform like a troupe of actors for the pleasure of our audience?"

After the meeting with Charles Dickens, who agreed with obvious reluctance to make himself available for further discussion if needed, Victoria had been stiff, trembling with the effort she put forth to maintain her dignity. Melbourne had hesitated, wanting to offer reassurance, not wanting to break down the barriers she relied upon for strength. He only watched her for some sign of what she needed.

"William," she said finally, after several long uncomfortable minutes. "Tell me how you feel."

Melbourne had, even as he attempted to focus on her feelings and reactions, attempted to sort it out in his own mind. The single article was not so very bad. The tone cloying, some might say it painted him as a rather pathetic figure, a doddering old fool who had gratefully accepted the leavings of a dashing young prince. On the other hand, it would certainly eliminate any residual suspicion of his
motives – a manipulative, even Machiavellian politician doomed to lose his position at the very pinnacle of government, seducing the newly widowed young queen was one thing; a shadow of his former self relegated to the faintly comic role of child-minder and font of grandfatherly wisdom and tenderness was entirely another.

Oh yes, it made him the hapless fool once more, but that was nothing new. When Caro wrote Glenavon she had introduced the figure of a mild-mannered, gullible fool; the journalists who helped him win the popular verdict portrayed him as another sort of fool, manipulated by the wiles of Caroline Norton, who had victimized him as much as her witless husband George.

Whoever had written the piece was privy to knowledge of their most intimate affairs. Even the sharing of a bedchamber – something no female in a position to do otherwise would endure – was colored as evidence that their marriage was sexless. In the most tactfully disguised prose, the writer opined that if the queen shared her bed with her husband in a palace with 900 rooms, it was only because he made no demands. In conjunction with the lack of a child, when she had borne Albert two in three years, that detail was particularly galling. It stemmed, Melbourne knew, from the popular bourgeois belief that no decent woman of any station enjoyed sexual relations, and only did their duty in order to satisfy a husband's baser needs and provide him with an heir. But still…it galled.

Melbourne was grateful for long practice in ignoring unpleasantness. He'd held his head high and kept a pleasant, vague smile in place through far worse scandals than this. In point of fact, he reminded himself, this was no scandal at all. The real concern was that there was a spy in their household, positioned to glean far more damaging information than the queen's sleeping arrangements. Footmen, maids, equerries – all upstairs servants – were omnipresent and thus entirely able to hear discussion of troop movements and treaty negotiations. Palmerston had taken the blame for the fiasco when Victoria's private opinion of the Spanish marriages, entirely removed from official Crown and Government policy, was trumpeted abroad in the worst possible circles for such information. She had denied it, of course, and in that case their French counterparts had no choice save accept her denial – but what if?

No, Dickens made some valid points, and suggested a course of action which deserved further consideration, but first and foremost they must make a harsh example of the culprit and thoroughly cleanse the Household of any whose loyalty and discretion were suspect.

He had said as much when he answered Victoria's query.

"It infuriates me that anyone should think you – we – you are – " Victoria's words tumbled over themselves and her breast heaved with renewed outrage. Melbourne took the meaning from her disjointed phrases.

"Far better that I occasionally seek the favors of one or the other of your ladies? Or a housemaid, perhaps on the billiard table where we can be interrupted by a footman and one or two of the Guard? Just so we have impeccable witnesses to my virility?"

Melbourne had spoken lightly, his eyes dancing with humor, and his words had the desired effect. Victoria bit her lip to ward off the ready laughter, lost her struggle and giggled. The sound was music to his ears, her silvery girlish laughter, the little hand over her mouth in that adolescent gesture of self-consciousness.

"Ask Mr. Dickens to attend us on Tuesday, please. We will have the Chancellor set attorneys to work blocking publication, and demanding the return of my sketches. I'd like Greville, and oh, of course, your friend Mr. Bulwer-Lytton, and –" Victoria ticked off the names of those with whom she wanted to confer.
"And please, have Billy come down to Windsor. He can dine there tomorrow and spend the night."

Melbourne was faintly reassured by Cameron being named last. Victoria's first reaction, when Dickens had laid the paper before her and she realized the scope of the breach, had been to send for the Irishman. It had irked him, that her mind went first to the fellow.

"So he can beat the truth out of the publisher? Perhaps rack and thumbscrews?"

"You joke, William but – yes, something like that."

He rolled his eyes comically and allowed her to see, at the risk of further inflaming her quick temper.

"You realize, ma'am, you are not that Gloriana? This is 1846, and our press has a great deal of freedom to publish what they will. I think the scandal from Your Majesty sending a hired bully to one of our newspapers might outweigh the shocking information that I read to the children from time to time."

"William, be serious!" Victoria stamped her foot, to no great effect since she was wearing satin slippers.

"You talk to Billy. I would like him to use some of his sources, the females who are at home in drinking establishments, the – the gentlemen, for lack of a better word, who might induce some employee of that printing firm to reveal the author."

Melbourne knew he could go no further with levity, and nodded briskly.

"Very well, ma'am. I will go into London tomorrow morning and seek Billy out. He's been under the weather and asked for some time to himself, but I think it's not asking too much of him to marshal his resources on this task. Did you still want him to come to Windsor tomorrow night?"

Placated, Victoria only shrugged. "If he has something to report."

Melbourne was up at dawn, intent on his errands. Victoria had only peered up at him drowsily when he stood over her, unable to resist smiling at the picture she made. Her long brown hair was a tangled halo and her pretty little face pink with sleep, a crease mark across one cheek from the pillow. He sat beside her and cupped that face in his palms.

"I'm off to do your bidding, ma'am," he whispered huskily. "Else I would not be able to resist this very tempting sight."

One small breast was visible to the nipple through a gap in her nightgown, and he slipped his hand in to squeeze it gently. When she squirmed under his touch with that familiar and oh-so-sweet melting sensation Melbourne was nearly undone, wanting nothing more than to strip his clothing off and slide into the bed beside her, slide into her. She shifted her hips, pushing towards him insistently and he found her with one finger under the bedcovers. It took only a few flicks of that fingertip for her to let her thighs drop open, and she pressed his hand against her.

"Ah, I must ask you to forgive me," he sighed, removing his hand and tucking the coverlet neatly under her chin. "I have places to go and things to do."

The memory of her warmth, her yielding under his touch, remained in the back of his mind even as he planned his first stop. Cameron would wait – Cameron would not be trying to avoid him. The other man he was bent on cornering might very well hope to do that very thing.
Riding through Windsor Town at mid-afternoon, Melbourne and the officer by his side attracted to special notice. Those pedestrians who were about, dodging gusts of wind-driven rain, huddled under shop awnings, did not spare a glance for two more riders. They each of them were swathed in greatcoats with collars turned up and hat brims pulled low. Not that I would deserve attention by any means, he thought ruefully. Just one more elderly gentleman, riding with a man young enough to be son or even grandson on nondescript horses. The most that could be said was that I am too stupid to come in out of the rain.

Earlier that day the rain had fortunately stopped while he covered the length and breadth of Pall Mall, visiting Brook's, Athenaeum and even Boodles – far too staid for the likes of the man he sought, but one could rule nothing out – before finding success at the Reform Club. William Lamb was well enough known in the gentlemen's clubs to be challenged at any. He smiled courteously at each maître d'hôtel and sauntered past, buttonholing a concierge here, a boot boy there.

Despite his deliberately cavalier attitude and relaxed demeanor, Melbourne's temper was hot by the time he encountered his prey. His behavior had not been that of a gentleman. A century earlier he might have slapped his gloves across that well-fed face and called the man out, but all that was left to him was to jerk him out of his chair by the lapels.

Ten minutes sufficed to nearly persuade Melbourne that he was mistaken in his assumption, but paradoxically that realization only exacerbated his temper. No one likes to be made a fool of, and in this case at least he had – probably- only himself to blame, for rashly jumping to an unfounded conclusion.

Ned swore that his only indiscretion was in certain observations written to his friend Lady Blessington, and those were quite contrary in tone and substance to those written in the offending article. He offered to request that lady to return his letters so Melbourne could read for himself.

"Yes, I believe I did – and I am ashamed to admit it – confide the matter of a shared bedchamber. Even worse, although it goes to defense of my innocence in this scurrilous garbage, I…I probably confided that you and Her Majesty share a most marked physical affection, going about like young lovers…you understand, Lady Blessington is an intimate friend of mine, herself entangled in a most unhappy marriage and –"

He was telling the truth, Melbourne decided abruptly. Not so much because of his observations, which went far to mollify Melbourne's bruised ego, but because dammit, the man had literary pretensions. He wrote for the Edinburgh review and aspired to write the sort of eminently respectable long-form poetry and scholarly prose, aspirations which would receive a death blow from association with the sort of scandal-rag Dickens had shown him. Then who? Was the last question they jointly addressed before Melbourne begged his old friend's pardon and withdrew with the assurance that their friendship remained intact. Whether I go forward with him as a collaborator in writing my memoirs – whether there will be memoirs written now, when everything worth knowing would soon be in the public domain – was far from certain.

The great stone walls of Windsor loomed ahead, and Melbourne kneed his horse faster to cover the remaining distance. The guard at the gatehouse required him to raise his hat and lower his collar, and even then seemed uncertain whether he truly beheld the Queen's own husband, but eventually they were waved through. The Long Approach was well-drained, carefully combed paving stones recently filled in after winter's damage, and he made good time up the gradual incline. They made for the Upper Ward by way of George IV's Gate, and Melbourne tossed his reins to a tall Guardsman who appeared impervious to the rain beating down on his oilskin cape.

Victoria was vaguely perturbed when she found Baroness Lehzen taking tea with her mother and
Charlotte Canning, and learned from the chief governess that the children were with Lord Melbourne. She could not immediately go in search of him, but instead was forced to endure minutes full of Mama discussing what new couture she hoped to find in Paris. While her mother raved about the genius of an emigree Englishman, Charles Frederick Worth, who had just opened a studio on the right bank near the Palais Royal galleries, Lady Canning made tactful attempts to dissuade the Duchess from her penchant for exaggerated sleeves and excess embellishment.

When she could decently do so, Victoria excused herself and walked quickly through the private apartments to the nursery. When the door was thrown open for her, Victoria shook her head at the page who would have announced her and instead stepped quietly inside. Lord M and her daughter sat together on a small, almost threadbare chenille sofa relegated to nursery duty, and they made such a charming tableau she was loathe to interrupt. Lily's chubby bare foot was in her father's hand and he was making up silly stories about each toe in turn, a game which never lost its appeal for either child. Lord M's thick head of overlong, curling hair was damp, bearing evidence of hasty rubbing with a towel, and his own feet were bare as well. His shirtsleeves were turned back over sturdy forearms, and his cravat had been discarded so that she could just glimpse dark hair curling where his shirtfront opened. Lamplight accentuated the angles and plains of his handsome face and its golden glow lent him a slightly rakish air.

Her earlier annoyance, that he had not come directly to her, that he had not explained precisely what his business in London was, that he must leave her still abed and craving his attention, fled as she watched father and daughter together. The old familiar wave of jealousy passed easily, with only a bittersweet wish her own father had lived long enough to show her what that bond could be, and then she only felt love for this man fill her to overflowing.

"Come, sweetheart, sit with us and let's see what your little piggies are up to," Melbourne drawled, causing the child to laugh uproariously at the prospect of Mother removing shoes and stockings. Such behavior, in Lily's considered opinion, was so outlandish as to be impossible in that more formal parent.

"And where are your shoes, William?" Victoria asked instead, pretending asperity she did not feel. "I suppose you came back soaked to the skin, and haven't even gotten out of those wet clothes."

"You are so very right, ma'am. Lily, if we call Nurse, we will find it past the time for your brother to join you for tea. And I must go with Mama so she can make certain I get out of my wet clothes."
Chapter 33

Victoria's surging sense of outrage and offended dignity distracted her so completely she forgot to glance at her husband to ascertain his reaction. Feeling her face burn with humiliation, only the presence of Mr. Dickens inhibited an outpouring of grievance.

The journalist, whom she had quite liked until recently — whose novels I enjoyed, she amended severely — had devised this solution, yet the cure just now seemed worse than the complaint.

Forgotten in an instant was the equal, even superior, outrage and sense of betrayal that some trusted member of her inner circle had been watching and documenting their least action for months. Forgotten even, the fact that somewhere out there in the boroughs of London, another tabloid with headlines as bad or worse than the one Mr. Dickens now held was being hawked for sale to every washerwoman and dock worker to be found on the streets with three pence to spare.

Victoria forced herself to control her breathing and bring down the temperature of her anger lest she lose all control.

"We agreed to this, ma'am, as the only possible recourse," Dickens said in his plummy voice. A man who enjoyed the sound of his own words, whether voiced or in print, had been Melbourne's whimsical description, once upon a time. But not a bad fellow, certainly no worse than most of his ilk and better than some.

She did look at him then, and was taken aback by the scarcely suppressed look of amusement on her husband's handsome face. One of his brows was arched, and his lips thinned as they so often were when he was hiding his ready smile.

It calmed her, as Lord M could always calm her and bring her back to her senses. Victoria recalled that Lehzen had once remarked upon Melbourne's effortless ability in that regard, observing somewhat dryly that he would have had far greater success in averting the little Princess Alexandrina's raging tantrums than she herself had. Had I only known, ma'am, I would
have hastened to Kensington to offer my services, he had jested in return, winning one of the severe German spinster's rare smiles.

"You might not agree with all of my opinions, ma'am, sir, but as agreed, you had full approval of the content insofar as it concerns your privacy."

"Do you mean this part, where you fault Lord M for failing to – what? Control? Guide me? I am as concerned as any Christian woman, more than any of my predecessors, over the plight of the poor. How dare you suggest that Lord Melbourne errs in not –"

"Ma'am," Melbourne intervened, his voice gentle. "I think, from a purely pragmatic perspective, the sole means by which this series of features will capture and hold the public's attention in a way that other will not, is that he demonstrates some independence."

"Quite right," Dickens hastened to add. "If it appears I am no more than a tool by which Your Majesty feeds information to the public – some might even call it propaganda – why, the socialists won't be the only ones demanding a rawer, less tactful approach. Lord Melbourne knows I pull no punches when it comes to what I believe. And what I believe is that, politics and social conscience aside, the public has no more of a right to know what you eat for breakfast or how often you take exercise, than you choose to share."

"And yet it's necessary that we share those details?" Victoria asked sharply. It was, in her own mind, no more than rhetorical. They had been over this before and Melbourne, rather than Dickens himself, had persuaded her to accept that the world had changed. And even in decades long past, Melbourne reminded her, the gutter press was full of the details of marital infidelity, and intimate customs, unflattering depictions of her forebears at their worst, riddled with illness, prone to excess.

"The Fitzherberts appeared regularly in some of our papers, ma'am – not for their activities, but for the circumstances of their birth and their presence in Queen Adelaide's corridors," he had said, in a droll tone which didn't belie the veracity of his words. "As for Prinny, why, the world knew his corset size."

And now, with republicanism and open revolution sweeping through Europe, monarchy had to serve some purpose in order to survive. A distant unseen figurehead Queen would have more than a few people asking why they needed her at all.

"Yes, I know. We now exist for the amusement and edification of the masses," Victoria said, resigned to the inevitable.

"You may call it that, ma'am. I would not put it so severely. We English have a growing middle class, and that is where the power of the purse and the poll now reside."

"Prudes and hypocrites all," Melbourne interjected.

"You may say so. The English middle class, those whose taxes fill the public coffers, and those worthy self-made men whose manufactories subsidize both Crown and State, would no longer tolerate the profligate behavior of your predecessors, ma'am. I speak bluntly and I hope you understand it is to emphasize my point. A fresh young girl, straight out of the isolation of Kensington, was viewed with cautious optimism by many, but with frank skepticism by as many more. There were those who viewed the death of your uncle, King William, as a natural opportunity for bloodless revolution, to eliminate the monarchy without the frightening example set by the French.

Now – well, your tale is a romantic one, and appeals to subjects of all ages and stations. The middle
class I speak of rejoiced at an English marriage where they grumbled at - I mean no disrespect, ma'am - another German prince to support. There is poetry in the figure you make, sir -" and he bowed mockingly toward Melbourne. "A distinguished elder statesman casting the cloak of his protection over a newly widowed young woman. That she clearly adores you only adds to the appeal of this saga, and you, sir, having overcome the pathos of your unhappy past, finding love..."

Melbourne choked out a bark of laughter.

"Good God, man, is this our lives you speak of, or are you writing a stage play?" Dickens ignored the interruption and went on.

"Like any proper morality play, your story has a happy ending, virtue rewarded, suffering consoled and all that. And that appeals to the same banker's wives and bishop's relics who would loudly condemn a return to the open scandals of the past. A sovereign flaunting illegitimate children, putting them on the public dole with made-up titles and positions, members of the royal family maintaining Covent Garden Cypriots and actresses would not be tolerated now that all power is vested in the sober, hard-working middle class and their values. Showing yourself and your family to the people, and persuading them that you are just like them, allowing them to entertain the illusion that they are part of your life, is going to be a part of the new bargain you make for the continuation of the Crown. So – in short, ma'am, call it playacting if you will, for no one suggests genuine unfettered access, but yes, the Royal Family must provide a wholesome example of virtue and good Christian values."

He does go on! Victoria marveled, resisting a nearly overpowering urge to exchange glances with Lord M. He would make me laugh by giving just such a look.

"The only complaint I have to make, Charles, is this engraving on the front page. I – uh – am hard pressed to recognize myself in that family portrait. Are you sure your artist got the right husband here?"

Dickens' cocksure demeanor evaporated, and he looked suspiciously sheepish. Melbourne held out the paper for Victoria to see. It was not a terribly accurate likeness, she conceded, merely a pen-and-ink sketch of the four of them and a woman she supposed was her mother. Then she peered more closely, holding it out toward the daylight streaming from the East Terrace. What was it about that drawing...? She wondered, studying it. Victoria had seen her own image so often, on everything from pound notes to postage stamps, that she no longer expected a recognizable likeness. Lord M could be identified by his distinctive curly hair, still as much dark as it was silver. The features –

"Albert?" Victoria exclaimed. "William, is that you or is it Albert?"

Melbourne laughed. "That is the question. I doubt I ever resembled that fresh-faced young man, certainly not in the past thirty years."

The sketch did show a much-younger man with features both more blandly nondescript and less distinguished than Melbourne's.

"We didn't have much time," Dickens said defensively. "I wrote all night the past two nights, and my sub-editor was charged with finding at least one usable image. All we had which might suit was – well, an old etching of Her Majesty and His Royal Highness seated in their box at Ascot. They dashed off a sketch from that and added in the children – the Dowager Duchess was already present in the original and – well, made what modifications they could to transform the drawing from one consort to another."

The explanation triggered Melbourne's hearty laughter and Victoria could not resist joining in. The whole matter was suddenly no more than farcical, and somehow the idea that they had drawn Lord M's soft curling hair on Albert's narrow face and balding pate seemed perfectly logical in context.
"Catch me if you can!" Victoria tightened her thighs and that slight pressure was enough to send the silver mare into graceful flight.

The Home Park turf was just right for a full-on gallop, neither hard-packed from extended dry weather nor too sodden for adequate footing. She loved riding astride, a rare indulgence, and she briefly speculated on the reaction of Mr. Dickens' subscribers, if they could see their prim, proper Queen clasping the flanks of a horse in such unladylike fashion. Then she forgot to think at all in the sheer exhilaration of speed and the feeling of communion with such a splendid animal.

They came around the last curve before bridle path met old growth forest and regretfully Victoria drew back on the reins. Adagio had such a gentle mouth, it took no more than a twitch and they slowed to a canter and then a walk. Victoria nudged her mount toward the low split-rail fence, and debated attempting to dismount unaided. Just as she was about to gingerly attempt the maneuver she heard hoof beats signaling the imminent arrival of Lord M.

"Let's get down and walk for a while," she sang out when he was near.

Melbourne swung down easily from his own bay gelding. Then he reached up and Victoria leaned forward, falling into his embrace. Together they stepped through the opening in the fence and onto a narrow bridle path cut through the trees.

"It was good to hear you laugh again," she said, tightening her grip on his hand.

"I could say the same for you," Melbourne responded lightly.

"You were – you seemed…distracted, or distant. You didn't come to bed last night." Victoria heard her own voice drop to a near-whisper, although they were alone and unobserved far from Windsor proper. It was true, she realized, although she hadn't allowed herself to worry before. Now that he was back, it seemed safe to mention.

*Back? Why did I think 'back'? she asked herself. He did not leave. But he had, she knew, in some mysterious way. They were so attuned to one another that Victoria immediately sensed any withdrawal, no matter how slight.*

"I stayed up late reading, my love. I checked on you, but you were fast asleep."
perfectly understand, but some instinct told her to give him the right to withdraw. On some level it felt devastatingly wrong, as though her very existence was threatened. On another level – one which, she thought, was a tentative groping toward the maturity to love well enough to surrender her own hunger for constant reassurance – Victoria had tempered her own longing and only treasured that brief kiss, stirring as if in sleep to his touch.

Melbourne had been looking down at her from his much greater height, with a small cryptic smile. "My precious girl," he murmured. "You are growing up, aren't you?"

"I am quite grown up. It will be my birthday soon. I will be seven-and-twenty and if I'm not a woman now, when will I be?"

"You are all woman, Victoria. But I admit I never want you to be so completely grown that you are no longer my girl."

"I will always be your girl, Lord M. Can we talk about what I would like for my birthday?"

"Certainly. What does the girl who has everything want for a birthday gift? Name it and it's yours."

Victoria looked down at her boots, kicking them through the forest carpet of deciduous leaves. She swung Melbourne's hand playfully as Lily was wont to do when the little girl walked between them.

"Dr. Semmelweis will arrive shortly before we visit Chatsworth, and you know that Dr. Fordyce Baker saw me this morning."

Melbourne lifted a brow, questioning, but from the quirk of his lips Victoria saw that he already understood.

"Ah…I see."

"Is that all you have to say? 'I see'?

"I think that is the most I can say. Or, how about 'we'll see'? Is that more to your liking?"

Victoria grasped that the conversation could go no further. Some things should not be discussed in graphic detail, she decided. It would be counter-productive to make the whole endeavor some sort of project to embark upon. *Enough that we do nothing to avoid contraception, if I get the third doctor to agree that there is no risk to my health greater than other women face.*

The May air was warm even under an overarching canopy of newly-greened trees. The rich fragrances of earth and trees, of growth and new life, warm horseflesh and *him,* Lord M, the sharp citrus tang of his cologne and his skin and musky maleness all blended together in a wonderful perfume which made Victoria suddenly giddy as a girl.

"I love you!" she announced, tugging at his lapels and lifting herself on tiptoes.

"I am glad to hear it, ma'am," Melbourne replied mildly. Victoria heard his intake of breath and myriad small clues which told her he was not indifferent to her nearness.

"Make love to me," she demanded, rocking her pelvis against him and licking her lips.

"With the greatest pleasure in the world…only not here, I think."

"Oh, why not? It's glorious, and we are quite alone far from anyone."
"I think you must not have considered the logistics, ma'am," Melbourne drawled, smirking. "If you haven't previously made such an attempt, you cannot be expected to anticipate all the difficulties."

"Oh, you!" Victoria laughed, knowing he was right. Just then she heard a deep, full-throated barking behind them. "Oh, Deckel! How on earth did you find us? You silly dog, you could have gotten lost out here all alone."

The little sausage dog loped up the narrow forest path, all four legs pumping comically. Melbourne's normally sanguine bay whinnied nervously and began dancing about, while Adagio stood as sedately as any fine lady.

"That rules out the possibility of – ah – dalliance, no matter how pleasant the prospect of knees sunk in the mud and last autumn's leaves finding their way into uncomfortable places," Melbourne quipped, stooping to pick up the dog before he entangled his angular body under the horses' hooves.

"Must you be so – so practical?" Victoria stomped her foot, pretending annoyance. "Have you no sense of the romantic? Making love in a forest, the spontaneity, the –"

"- the insects, and the dirt and the need for one or another of us to get down on the ground while another – undoubtedly me – exposes their posterior to the elements, in full view of the horses and this creature here? Yes, indeed, very romantic."

They were both laughing, and the silliness of the moment was compounded by Melbourne's efforts to subdue the squirming bundle of indignation in his arms. The little Dachshund nipped at his captor and Melbourne surrendered, setting him on the ground.

"Don't blame me when Defiance kicks at you, Herr Deckel," he warned. Then, to Victoria's surprise and delight, Melbourne gripped her by both elbows and backed her against the trunk of a tree. He leaned his weight into her, pinning her in place, and tipped her chin up with one gloved hand.

Victoria held her breath in anticipation. He began gently, his lips soft, mouth closed, but when he deepened the pressure her own lips opened under his. He kissed her so long that their exhalations mingled, his tongue probing, exploring. They kissed so long that she lost track of time, perfectly at home in the moment, of a kiss which felt as intimate and fulfilling as that other joining she sought.

When Melbourne finally raised his mouth from hers he leaned his forehead against hers, panting slightly.

"Dear God, woman, you give me life," he mumbled, breathing heavily still. "I wasn't living until I lived for you, do you know that?"
Melbourne leaned against the door jam. He slid a finger between his neck and the intricate folds of a cravat which did little to alleviate the discomfort of his high stiff color. The question of his attire at official Court functions was only one of the conundrums he posed for successive Lord Chamberlains.

No longer a serving Prime Minister, he was not required to wear the court uniform of those holding office in government and the Civil Service, but without it only earned him the very attention he hoped to avoid. The Lord Chamberlain had him fitted for a variation of the officeholder's uniform he himself wore. It had a dark blue single-breasted tail coat lined with black silk, the stand collar and gauntlet cuffs having scarlet velvet facings, gilt buttons, waistcoat, breeches or trousers. Members of the Royal Household wore scarlet cloth facings; all others were black or blue and decorated with gold oak-leaf embroidery. The coat was fastened by hooks and eyes, with dummy buttons bearing the Royal coat of arms of the United Kingdom. 5 full inches of gold oak-leaf embroidery marked his 1st class rank.

William, if you wish to escape comment and speculation then for Heaven's sake, hide in plain sight. Let them deck you out in as much gold braid and ribbon as you can carry. It's a role, and since you accepted the part, you must play it or have your arrogant disregard for appearance attract more attention than your wife's performance.

Melbourne wore the only two medals, both conferred by the Queen. One was the Royal Victorian
order, given for extraordinary personal service to the sovereign. Victoria had devised this honor for him several years before and had informed those present at the investiture ceremony it would henceforth be known as the Melbourne Cross, given for extraordinary personal service to the sovereign. Wits had quipped, never in the Queen's hearing but certainly in Melbourne's, that the same honor should be posthumously conferred upon the late Maria Fitzherbert. The second beribboned medal was the Order of Merit, a dynastic order in the personal gift of the Queen.

Levée dress would have been simpler still, but while technically the presentation ritual was a daylight affair, it entailed greater pomp and formality than all but the most important public occasions. This annual presentation of the flower of the nobility launched young women into what Lord Byron had once called a marriage mart.

They parted ways, Victoria to receive the young ladies and their sponsors in the Throne room while Lord Melbourne enacted a modified version of the same ritual in the Picture Gallery. There was a chair set upon the hastily-assembled dais, gilt with an embroidered ducal coronet and the Melbourne coat of arms. At his insistence it was not as imposing as a throne, really only one of the chairs set about the perimeter of the ballroom for the elderly and infirm. Not so very bad, I suppose, was Melbourne's thought. If I'm mistaken for a jumped-up commoner, well, I suppose I am.

A senior equerry, several of his Gentlemen-in-Waiting and the Lord Steward of the Household – the Lord Chamberlain would be with the Queen - ringed the dais. Melbourne felt faintly ridiculous, an impostor playing at Castles and Kings, until he chanced to look toward the anteroom. Young men were launched into society much as their sisters, with only slightly less pomp. His own mother had used all her social capital to ensure her sons a memorable experience. Melbourne clearly recalled the nervous anticipation just under a veneer of indifference when he bowed before Farmer George. Part of him had known the King was only reciting remarks which had been prepared for him, memorized bits of trivia. Yet it mattered, and more than many other firsts in a young man's life, truly initiated him into the society where a place had been prepared for him.

And now I am to perform that office for young gentlemen who might well have been my sons or grandsons. How extraordinary! Melbourne felt sudden regret for his tendency to gently mock all pretension and determined to put on as good a show as they deserved. He settled himself and nodded to Hugh Fortescue, standing at the ready in his scarlet coat.

"Shall we commence, my Lord Steward?"

"George Henry, Earl of Mount Charles, presented by his father the Marquess Conyngham."

"Lady Constance Henrietta, presented by Lady Caroline, Duchess of Argyll."

The girl's brother had been a palace page and was now an equerry to the Queen. Victoria made some
mild comment on his service and asked a question which required little more than a smiling response. The debutantes ranged from out-and-outers who radiated self-confidence, to blushing, stammering misses gobbling like a fish out of water. Melbourne watched approvingly from his vantage point as Victoria deftly ended the girl's sixty seconds in the spotlight.

Melbourne knew something about the family of each. A father, uncle or, discouragingly often, grandfather with whom he had hunted or dined, mothers and grandmothers with whom he had flirted and danced. The guests were given an opportunity to mingle amongst themselves in the East Gallery and refresh themselves in the Supper Room. At exactly 8 o'clock - untypically early by any normal reckoning but planned to accommodate the many private affairs held all over London – the orchestra began playing.

"How did your end of the thing go? Can you tell them all apart now?" Melbourne whispered in Victoria's ear. He had led her into the ballroom and ceremoniously onto the floor to open the dancing with a stately polonaise.

Even a year ago such a thing would have been unthinkable in the presence of higher-ranking peers and royal cousins present. Along with his Dukedom, Victoria had rewritten the Orders of Precedence so that on all occasions upon which she herself was present, Melbourne could be superseded only by a Prince of the Blood Royal. So long as Liam was tucked into bed in the nursery, Ernest was safely ensconced in his Herrenhausen palace and Adolphus nursed his gout at Cambridge House in Piccadilly, Victoria would keep him at her side.

After that first dance he surrendered Victoria to her cousin George and retreated to the sidelines. He did not return to claim his wife until a brief period of respite was announced at ten o'clock.

"Would you care for some air, ma'am?" he asked, noting the becoming rosy flush on her cheeks. Her eyes sparkled with pleasure and her breasts heaved quite enticingly from the exertion of a mazurka.

"Yes, please."

Melbourne walked with Victoria onto a small balcony overlooking the mews. Victoria turned her face up to catch any errant breeze, fanning herself. Even with hair piled high in a mass of dark curls, the top of her head scarcely reached his shoulders and Melbourne was reminded anew what a petite, doll-like figure she had. His Gloriana was such a larger-than-life presence it was easy to forget, even for him, that she did not loom over them all physically as she did in spirit.

With a lingering remnant of awe at his own daring, he folded his arms around her and laced his fingers together at her waist.

"Mmm, nice," Victoria murmured. She never permitted her own excellent posture to sag, but Melbourne felt her yield against his chest.

That's right, my darling. I am right here for you to lean on. He wanted to voice the words aloud, croon them in her ear, send them on a warm breath to make her shiver with arousal. Instead he only pressed his palms flat where one day another child might grow.

"I feel so alive! I think I will remember this night forever, the dancing, that sky with stars like diamonds against blue velvet…being here with you…"

Melbourne understood what she meant. There was nothing remarkable about the evening, or the ball, or even the sweetness of their companionship, and yet it was as if time itself stood still, the universe held its collective breath for one perfect moment in time. Melbourne understood because he felt it too.
The moment passed, forgotten except for the golden glow of contentment left in its wake. Melbourne flirted with dowagers and pretended interest in the crowing of proud mamas, sympathized with fathers bearing the expense of a daughter's coming out. Victoria danced the polka with a young Viscount who trampled on her feet and wrinkled her nose so only Melbourne could see when she gave herself into the hands of a sweating, red-faced Earl. At evening's end they closed the ball together. The hour was still shy of midnight, but the young people present would be expected at other balls held in their honor, dancing until dawn on this, the first night of their adult life. Her Majesty the Queen and Lord Melbourne likewise had places to go and things to do before dawn.

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They had arrived past three in the morning, met by butler, head housekeeper and footman. Victoria was bleary-eyed and groggy and Melbourne felt every joint creak as he stepped from the carriage. Billy Cameron, having deposited his charges safely inside, had gone off to the old hunting lodge, shrugging off dire warnings that he would find unmade beds and unaired rooms.

Clean sheets smelling of sunshine on a feather bed felt as good as only a bed could feel, at the end of a long tiring day. Victoria climbing in beside him, squirming into a comfortable position with her head on his chest and her feet tangled between his ankles felt even better. Sometime near dawn, birdsong already filling the air, he had found her in the dark warm and willing and their lovemaking was tender, tentative and dreamlike. When she rolled on top of him and pushed herself up, she was pale and ghostly in her gossamer white gown.

"I want to see you," he managed to mutter, tugging at the hem of her dress. When she pulled it over her head and tossed it aside, the vision was splendid. Narrow hips and thin, muscled thighs, taut belly and the place where they joined.

"Why do you smile?" Victoria had asked, breathless and damp with the pleasure of her exertions.

"I laugh because I am happy," came the answer. "You make me very, very happy."

They had slept again then, falling asleep with skin touching skin. She must have risen before him, later, because when he awoke trembling and sick, heart pounding from the dreamworld he escaped, he was alone. He forced himself to lay perfectly still, indexing his surroundings as proof of life, and fought to forget.

It was a reception at Buckingham Palace, surely it was, and there he stood at the end of a long line, people queuing. Far down the rectangular gallery – surely it was the same East Gallery where he had formally received wellborn young gentleman only the night before? – the Queen walked slowly along, pausing to exchange greetings with each honored guest. Behind her, Albert stood, not the gregarious young man he remembered, but an older prince, sullen and sour-faced under a high balding forehead. Neither of them looked happy, was his first startled thought. She doesn't know I'm here, doesn't wonder, doesn't care, was his next. That knowledge was so disorienting, so sickening, that he had stepped back before she could see him and hurried away. Write her a letter, then – explain why you had to leave without saying goodbye – flee to the sad safety of South Street. And there, the house looked as it once had, a bachelor's quarters but without the loud friendly disarray of Cameron's officers, as it had been for the past four years. Only the sad, faded home of a sad, faded old man.

Worse even than the bleak forlorn dreamworld, was his question on waking – which is real? Am I dreaming now, or was I dreaming then? It was all too hard to bear, and he forced himself to dive back down into sleep, hoping for no more than oblivion.

When Melbourne awoke for the last time that morning, he felt completely drained, the blood in his
veins as thick as honey. The sun was high in the sky, and he was alone in the bed.

He could hear Cameron's lilting accent and caught the whiff of tobacco smoke rising from the balustrade below. Feminine laughter served as a counterpoint to Cameron's low tones.

Moving the Queen safely with a minimum of fuss and without engaging the cumbersome Palace machinery was no easy matter. They had left the children behind at Lehzen's insistence. Rousing them from their beds would have defeated the overall goal of an unnoticed departure, Lehzen had said. The prim, pious spinster had unsmilingly told Melbourne to take her darling Drina and just go. And so Melbourne had sent off an equerry to run Billy to earth, delivering a summons to the palace.

He slid his feet to the floor and reached for his dressing gown, belting it in place while he walked to the terrace. Victoria wore a simple cotton frock, and her feet were bare. Mismatched buttons told him she had dressed herself unaided.

"I know you want coffee, darling," Victoria cooed. Cameron had gotten to his feet when Melbourne approached, and his towering height and broad shoulders was suddenly unbearably annoying.

"Oh, sit down, do. You're here already, might as well." He waved at the chair Cameron had vacated, and took another for himself on the Irishman's far side. Victoria set china cup and saucer on a low table and hesitated, standing before him.

Melbourne swallowed hard past a sudden lump in his throat. She was quite naked under that thin flowered cotton fabric. To divert himself Melbourne turned his attention back to Cameron.

"How did you find the lodge? An improvement on those lodgings of yours?" Melbourne nearly winced at his own curmudgeonly tone.

"I've slept in worse, sir. Far, far worse. There's a reason soldiers sleep under canvas, when every hovel is ours to commandeer. No lice, for one."

Victoria wrinkled her nose with distaste, making both men laugh, and she gazed as warmly at Melbourne as though they alone. He glanced down and saw bare toes peeking from under the hem of her gown.

At mid-morning the surface of the Broadwater gleamed like polished silver. Only the swans making their majestic way across made wake enough to mar the smooth surface of the water. Melbourne wished they were alone, so he could pick up one small foot and trace its delicate arch.

As if intuiting his redundancy, Cameron stood again.

"I came up to let you know, sir, that Baroness Lehzen will be here with the children by mid-afternoon. Otherwise, if you don't need me, I'm going to go fishing."

Melbourne knew he should, for the sake of courtesy, invite the man to linger. Instead he only nodded his approval of the arrangements.

"Stop at the kitchen, they'll pack you a lunch," he said only.

"Lord M, please tell Billy that he must stay in the house. There is no need to stay alone in the Lodge."

"Actually, ma'am, I prefer it. Although a housemaid up there wouldn't go amiss, I admit."

"Well," Victoria said doubtfully. "If you insist, although I think it's silly. But you will dine with us."
You are not a servant. Not an ordinary servant, at least."

"I'm like your Lady Beth, eh? Neither fish nor fowl?" Cameron laughed easily and gave them a mocking half-salute as he departed.

Melbourne drank his coffee in silence, content to bask in the warmth of her presence. They had no appointments to keep and – for a while, at least - no attendants to hover about, demanding as much as they provided in time and attention. Instead, only each other amidst the verdant warmth of late May.

"Happy birthday, Mrs. Melbourne," he said finally.

"We didn't – you know, use anything," Victoria replied slowly.

"Such things rarely happen when you will them, but – it is your birthday." Melbourne's heart clenched when he saw her face, glowing with hope and happiness. *We might not have many more chances, ma'am,* was the dark unwanted thought which remained unspoken.

*For how much longer?* The thought came like cold water dashed in his face, leaving Melbourne breathless with the pain.

*She will love you none the less,* was the judicious reply. That was no consolation. The idea of this glorious young creature condemned to a life without the passion he had awakened in her suddenly nauseated him with shame.

*You knew this, and she knew it.* The age difference and what that inevitably meant for the future.

Old, infirm, impotent – the prospect had once seemed, if not impossible, then improbable. How much more likely they would have a few good years and then he would perish, without fuss and fanfare. She would mourn, for she did love him deeply, and then go on with her own life, thirty, forty, even fifty years in which to love and marry again.

*But sit in a wheeled chair with a blanket on my lap, unable to do anything except watch her waste away? Never! Victoria was made to be loved and to love, a warm-blooded vibrant woman who would wither and die.*

The old nagging guilt was countered by new realization. *In that world, the dreamworld which haunts me, I made another choice for us both and she did go on, but she didn't look happy. Perhaps this was the better path for both of us, the one which was always meant to be. We have happiness now, and tomorrow is guaranteed to no one.*

"I have something for you – not a proper gift, you understand, and it seems unbearably pretentious to pretend otherwise but…you asked me to do this and in ways, it's been brutal beyond belief." Melbourne felt in the pocket of his dressing gown, for the small leather-bound book he'd meant to give her when they arrived.

Victoria accepted it, turning the book over in her hand.

"The first volume of those memoirs you insisted I write. Only the easy part. The rest is not yet suitable for printing, even in a private edition."

"'The easy part?' She looked at him curiously. "Of your life, do you mean?"

"Of our life, ma'am. The story of us."
"It certainly did appear somewhat strange that a staff of 20 should be necessary for one district."

"20 generals, William. Figure at least six adjutants for each in various support capacities."

"And their aides de camp, and a full complement of men-at-arms to lend them consequence."

"They hunker down in the home counties to spare us any risk of their loss." Cameron delivered that last sentiment in a tone heavy with mocking sarcasm to which Melbourne responded with only a smirk.

"And all the while we are footing the bill to maintain them we are deprived of their services elsewhere."

The three of them, in the library at Brocket Hall. The air outside was still and warm, heavy with the promise of thunderstorms, filled with the sweet heady fragrance of lilacs in bloom. All along the Georgian brick façade on the south wall bushes were in full bloom and their scent permeated every room on that side of the house.

At a half-past one by the clock, the rest of the day stretched out before them. Two days at Brocket without a single demand on her time and attention, not even the dispatches unless some matter arose deemed too urgent to await her return. Victoria ignored the embroidery work on her lap, there only as a nod to the appearance of industry.

The children had traveled with only two nursery assistants and a female protection officer, their carriage escorted by a pair of Household Cavalry officers in everyday clothing. Brocket Hall staff consisted of no more than two footmen, some housemaids who came and went from nearby farms, the butler and housekeeper. *Like simple folk.* Victoria turned the image over in her mind, twisting it this way and that with childish glee. *I can pretend I am an ordinary woman.*

"Billy, I do wonder – and perhaps you could enlighten me - if Irish gentlemen were so anxious to sit in parliament that they cut up their properties into forty-shilling freeholds to create votes, and thereby
surrounded themselves with paupers, how were the legislature or the government of this country to blame?” Lord M's question was eminently reasonable, his pleasant cultured tone courteous.

"I'm afraid I can't answer that, sir. I left when I was eighteen and never looked back. M'mother had enough put by from her previous – from the sale of her business interests – to buy Danny and me our colours and let us know we were on our own from there. The old man never looked up from his flask long enough to notice we were gone."

A lazy smile creased Billy's big face and Victoria was struck by how appealing his rugged countenance could be. She knew from the comments her ladies made when they thought she was not listening that they found him quite attractive, but she so rarely noticed Billy's appearance at all that the discovery came as a mild shock.

"Why the devil does O'Connell go on as if he believes expanding the vote would solve Ireland's woes? They need work, fields to plow and harvest, and a stable home to tie them to the land. The answer isn't in the ballot, but in eliminating the middlemen and absentee landlords."

"You'll get no argument from me. I've served with the sort of men some say should have a say in the laws of this country…"

Victoria only half-listened, lulled by the sound of their voices and the cozy intimacy of their surroundings.

The children had been taken to pick wildflowers in the long meadow that morning and their nursemaid had walked almost all the way to the village before turning back. They had returned overtired, sunburnt and squabbling.

Lehzen had failed to arrive, sending word only that she must deal with some household disruption, and Lady Lyttleton had not been invited in her place. Only two silly girls who devoted more attention to the footmen and stable boys than to their charges, Victoria had noted, and were quite useless at doing more than the bare minimum.

Liam sat on Cameron's knee, his eyes following the adult conversation. He held a cup of lemonade in one hand and buttered bread in the other, both threatening to slide out of his grasp as he struggled to stay awake.

His sister had abandoned resistance and succumbed to sleep in her father's arms. She slept with her thumb in her mouth and clutched at a fold of her father's shirt with a chubby fist. Victoria had reached for the bell several times, intending to summon someone to take the children away. Each time she did her movement was arrested by the sweet sight.

Victoria envied him his easy way with the children. She loved her children because they were his and tangible proof that against all odds she'd won the love of this extraordinary man. Maternal affection was duty and expectation but until she saw William as a father she'd never imagined such a natural, all-consuming affection.

Victoria consciously modeled her own interactions on his, but it was never easy. She welcomed their afternoon visit, listening attentively as they recited their lessons, and heard their evening prayers. She smiled approvingly at good reports and frowned at poor ones, but she was never quite certain she was doing it all correctly. William, on the other hand, always knew just what to say and what they were saying to him, Liam with his slight lisp and Lily's words tumbling over one another with her customarily excitement. He entered into their enthusiasms and threw himself into their games of make-believe as though he were a child himself. Victoria never quite knew how to play.
"It will be different with a new baby," she told herself often. *I am older and surer of myself and things will be simpler the next time.*

"The Treaty of Lahore that was signed on 9 March," Melbourne said. "Forced them to surrender all the land between the two rivers. They will never pay the indemnity, so we'll get Kashmir, Hazarah, all the forts and mineral rights. In return, your maharini remains regent until her son comes of age. A fair trade, when we could have wiped her troops off the face of the earth."

It was a harsher assessment than she was accustomed to hearing, and Victoria looked curiously at Melbourne.

"I suppose…" Cameron drew out the word slowly, taking the time to push his long hair back. "The Company will be sure their man in residence has all the power, and even with her pension I can't see Jind Kaur ever relinquishing control. Of her power or her son. Would you, ma'am? At any odds?"

Victoria thought about her answer. It was unimaginable, of course, to compare a primitive culture to the great British Empire, or her thousand-year throne to that of that woman who began as a kennel-keeper's daughter and youngest wife of a polygamous Sikh Maharaja.

"For the sake of argument, if London were occupied by foreign troops who were superior in every way to the regiments I still commanded, and if there was no chance of successfully resisting…. then I suppose I would relinquish control. There would be no other choice."

Billy grinned as if her answer had been foolishly naïve, and felt inordinately relieved when Lord M agreed with her.

"It's a false equivalency, Billy, yet she gives the only reasonable answer. Without allies, she will do the only reasonable thing and bow to the inevitable. If not," Melbourne shrugged. "She will be put aside in favor of a more amenable regent and her son will be brought to England."

"I cannot answer such a ridiculous hypothetical, Lord Cameron. There is no society on earth more advanced than ours, no form of government more perfectly evolved to balance the Throne and civil government."

"Ah, so the fix is in. How much did it cost? Oh, never mind. But do try, ma'am, to imagine yourself in her shoes. Not for sympathy or compassion, but to anticipate what she might do next. What *you* would do. Know your enemy, ma'am, and there is no one in England more suitable to understand a strong female ruler, mother of a young son, than you."

Liam had been attending closely, Victoria saw, intrigued by the notion of another royal boy. He asked Cameron about Prince Duleep, who was so was nearly his contemporary and whose lives were lived in strange parallel.

"He is a boy like you – two years older – and listens far more than he talks, like you. I think he understands he is the king now Liam but of course looks to his mother for guidance. He has great dignity, more than is good for any boy of eight. Perhaps you'll meet him when he comes to England. They hoped he would marry your sister someday."

Liam's eyes widened as he glanced at his sleeping sister.

"Of course, it's not to be," Victoria said hurriedly, before her husband's ire overcame the peace of the afternoon. "She's only a baby and this is not the middle ages. However they might manage such things in primitive cultures, England is a modern Christian nation."

"She has to marry someone, ma'am. Are you sayin' you'd allow a minx of sixteen or seventeen to
choose her own husband?"

Cameron's lilting brogue could not hide his skepticism and Victoria felt inordinately pleased. Billy Cameron played the provocateur and cultivated a rough-edged rakish demeanor, but he was a gentleman by birth and sentiment.

"Of course not, Billy. She will have a chance to become acquainted with all suitable candidates, and will express a preference, of course."

"Any stripling will have a way to go, to impress this one. She's got eyes for no one but her father and girls generally follow in their mother's footsteps."

Victoria was suddenly struck by a notion as revelatory as it was ridiculous. Her eyes went to her sleeping daughter.

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Melbourne leaned against the mantle, waiting while Victoria finished her toilette. She had been dressed in a simple, well-fitted gown and wore the tiara and earrings he had designed for her birthday. It was modest but unique – the jewelers had eyed his drawing skeptically – and consisted of leaves wrought in gold, with twin clusters of small diamonds in the shape of grapes, sapphire and lapis flowers and emerald leaves. The stones were modestly sized and placed sparingly but even so had cost more than he could readily afford.

Her eyes met his in the mirror and he took that as his cue to step forward.

"Well?" she asked, awaiting his approval. He resisted the urge to smile, and played the game instead. Victoria's insecurity was waning, and as she grew more confident in her own choices and opinions his pride in the woman she was becoming only grew.

"Lovely," he murmured, bowing over her extended hand. "Like a forest queen."

"I have nothing more lovely than this," she said, touching the tiara nestled in her dark hair.

"I have nothing more lovely than this," Melbourne parroted whimsically as he stroked her cheek.

"There's trouble brewing back in London," she said, switching to a more prosaic tone. "That's why Lehzen was delayed. More pilfering, and my ladies accusing each other. They're even bringing the staff into it, or vice versa. Lehzen told me the steward told her that the housekeeper told him one of the housemaids saw something suspicious and – oh, I do go on, but it's all so silly. I have a country to run, and they can't resolve among themselves how to settle this constant turmoil."
"Perhaps that's the first thing Emma can address upon her return. As I recall, she was rather good at
cutting through such hysteria and bringing everyone to order."

"At least Charlotte will be relieved. And I'm sure Emma will see how unfairly poor Beth has been
treated."

"Your Beth – for I can't call her lady and she can't make up her own mind if she's a Miss or Mrs. –
might meet her match in Emma."

"Oh! You are as bad as the rest. Poor Beth is neither fish nor fowl, neither below stairs nor above. It
was her heart's desire to be chosen preceptress for our Elizabeth – that's why she left her position in
Bath, you know – yet she has settled in well as my secretary. She anticipates my every need."

Melbourne's only interest in the matter was that of keeping the household peace, but he could not
deny there was something off-putting about the woman. Her background and even the manner in
which she received an invitation to join the Queen's household was cloudy and suspiciously vague,
and she herself was vaguely reptilian. He did not expect subservience, far from it, and certainly was
no fan of milquetoast misses of any age. Baroness Lehzen, for all her spinster primness, was no
shrinking violet and the women of his own station to whom he found himself most drawn were all
bold, distinct characters. But this companion and self-appointed female secretary fell into a different
category, her bold outspokenness seemingly as much a charade as someone else's elaborate self-effacement might be. Her small eyes were like polished black stone, watchful and blank at the same
time.

Emma Portman's return to court might help resolve that situation, and would set the overall balance
to rights. He had no particular partiality to her any more than he did to the wives of other Whig
ministers – well, all right, he corrected himself mentally, any more than I now allow myself – but in
Emma's case, bold acerbic outspokenness was entirely unfeigned. For better or for worse, Lady
Portman could not dissemble if she tried – which she never did, Lord knows.

Victoria had raised the subject more than once, lately more often in wistful tones than her prior
outrage and offended dignity. Melbourne had sought the intercession of his sister to broach the
subject, and Emily dutifully sent round a card inviting the Portmans to dine.

As he'd hoped, Emma was overjoyed at the idea of returning to Court and resuming her post as Chief
Lady of the Bedchamber. She had been on sabbatical since the winter past, and would happily forgo
any further ruralizing and take her place in the Queen's household once more if dear Lady
Palmerston could only arrange it. Melbourne permitted Emily the honor of speaking to Victoria, who
gave cool assent. There would be no Cheltenham tragedies enacted, no Drury Lane dramas of
remorse and reconciliation. The very idea would offend Victoria's sense of her own dignity, and
Emma would be no more appreciative of an excess of sensibility.

The Portmans would dine at Brocket Hall that evening, accompanying Lord and Lady Palmerston
from town for the occasion. If Victoria felt any nervous qualms, recalling the fiery dressing-down she
had given Lady Portman at their last meeting, it was not apparent. While he watched, she squared her
shoulders and drew herself up to her full five-foot height.

"Ma'am?" Melbourne said, his mouth quirking up at the corner, holding out his arm.

"Why do you want to smile?" Victoria teased, laying her gloved hand on his sleeve.

"Because I'm looking at you, of course. And because, while there was never any doubt in my mind
you would be a great Queen, you've become a great lady as well. And above all, Mrs. Melbourne,
because you're mine."
Dinner had passed in a surfeit of civility; table talk consisting of lighthearted commonplaces between the ladies and bantering from Melbourne and his brother-in-law to enliven the conversation. When the ladies went through, Palmerston had lit one of his Cuban cigarillos and poured port for them both.

"Quite the series of articles in the Daily News," Henry had said, dragging the sentence out for effect. "Our parliamentary reporter friend is laying his credibility on the line for you."

"For his readership, you mean. That paper of his wouldn't have lasted a year before going under, until now. There's only so much people can stomach over their breakfasts of starving urchins and the poor benighted souls in the workhouses."

"Still, it's quite the flattering portrait he paints overall, of your family life. Not that I've seen any out-and-out falsehoods, but really, old boy, do you want to be held up as a paragon for every middle-class Lutheran?"

Melbourne only shrugged, but he felt his stomach twist unpleasantly at the word picture Henry Temple painted. No, dammit, the middle classes are censorious, judgmental hypocrites who want to suck all the enjoyment out of life and I most emphatically do not want to pander to their prejudices. He thought it but did not say it aloud. He didn't have to; on many matters, he and Henry had always thought alike. It was only their methods which differed, Palmerston bold, brash and in everyone's face braying out his most controversial contentions.

"I don't dispute the need or the efficacy. And I suppose this exhaustive three-page expose on Victoria's churchgoing and the charities she patronizes, and your service on a dozen boards and commissions devoted to the public welfare is meant to overshadow this in the public mind."

He took a tattered pamphlet out of his pocket and tossed it neatly onto the tablecloth in front of Melbourne.

It was a crudely done thing, little better than the most scurrilous depictions of the Flora Hastings debacle, showing a buxom young woman with a man who was unmistakably intended to be himself. No more or less than other such filth circulating for the past two decades. It was only the dialogue in caption which turned his stomach, that and the familiar excerpts from a letter he himself had thrown in the fire several months before. One of the Branden letters he had once paid dearly to retrieve.

"Who the fuck is doing this? I burned these, all of them, in winter. They turned up in one of the boxes Emily sent over from Pashangar when I began working on my memoirs."

"Does Victoria know? Not about this –" Palmerston slapped his hand down on the offending cartoon. ":but about the contents of the letters and the circumstances under which they were written and then used?"

"Yes. No, not specifically. We didn't read each one aloud in bed at night, of course. But she knew that Elizabeth Branden's husband had used them to extort a substantial sum of money, knew that they were…incriminating. We made the decision then and there to burn them."

"And were they burned? All of them?"

Melbourne recalled clearly throwing the packet into the hearth and watching the flames lick at them with a feeling of satisfaction and relief, as a metaphor for destroying all the sins of his past. What had they done then? Had he and Victoria watched the fire consume them, reduce them to ash? No; they
had not, of course they hadn't. They had gone off to bed together, leaving the fire to do its work.

"Blast it!" Melbourne swore and pushed himself back from the table. "Take this filth with you and destroy it tonight, Henry. Please. I don't want to look at it again."

"She knows about –?"

"Yes, dammit, I told you. We talked about everything that might ever arise to cast a shadow over the present."

"Someone knows enough about you and Victoria and your family to grasp the one thing you probably didn't tell her, the one thing that would cut deep and serve to outweigh all Dickens' laudatory puff pieces."

Melbourne stared down at the single name captioning that young woman. A single sentence abstracted from a letter to his mistress, written when Victoria was a mere toddler herself. 

But the context, his mind raged, the fucking context! And no, of course Victoria doesn't know when I first used that name. It meant nothing, absolutely nothing – why, Elizabeth Branden herself would testify to that. What's more, he had had nothing to do with his own daughter's pet name. That was given her by Liam when he was little more than a baby himself and unable to pronounce his new sister's polysyllabic Christian name. Lily.

"Don't worry, my dear fellow. I employ my own Tom Young – you persuaded me of the wisdom of maintaining that pipeline to the lower orders – and he brought me this filth. Even the Tatler wouldn't touch it – there was nothing in their pages this week, so I must assume their informant was sent packing. I'll get rid of it and that'll be that. I just thought you should know. It's high time you discover the spy under your roof, if you have to purge the lot of them."

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"You've been very quiet since we came up."

Melbourne started when Victoria's hand slid around his waist. She was barefoot in a loose white bedgown and her hair streamed loose down her back. A sliver of new moon was not nearly enough to illuminate the grounds beyond, but its reflection lent the surface of the Broadwaters a metallic sheen.

He lifted his arm and Victoria moved under it so they stood together, looking out over the gently undulating lawns.

"Have I?" he said softly. "I didn't mean to be. How was it with Emma? Are you going to be comfortable with her?"

"Very. She was just...Emma. No great to-do, no tears and thank God no excess. So yes, very comfortable. I have missed her. Only Charlotte has any conversation. The others only curtsy and say 'yes ma'am' and 'no, ma'am' and laugh in such a false way it quite grates on my nerves."

"Good," Melbourne said absently.

"Tomorrow let's ride out over the countryside. Take me to your tenants and let me be Lady Melbourne."

"They would like that. I would like that."

"Good, it's settled then. We return tomorrow night and it will be a very busy week. The Trooping of
the Colors, and the Portuguese ambassador to dine, and Ernst and Alix and…I forget all of it. Will you read to me?"

Unprepared for her change of subject, Melbourne hesitated.

"Of course you don't have to. But if you wouldn't mind terribly, would you begin reading from the book you had bound for me? The first part of your memoir? I would so like to hear the words in your voice."

"Of course, darling. I'm not sure how long I can last. I have a headache brewing. But I will read at least a few pages."

Melbourne gathered her long hair into a thick bunch and wound it around his hand. It was silky soft and smelled of flowers from the Indian shampoo her maid used, and she purred with pleasure as he toyed with it.

"Victoria," he whispered, tasting the name on his tongue. Then he picked up the slim volume and turned to the first page. When Victoria had arranged herself comfortably, head pillowed on his chest, he began reading.

Cool watchful blue eyes, and a mantle of dignity no man could mistake. After a lifetime in service to kings, the scales fell from my eyes and all cynicism fled. This was our Queen, the sovereign we needed to lead us into the future. Gloriana.
They had secured a table in the bow window of Peele's Coffee House, located at 179 Fleet, which commanded an excellent view of the street. They lingered over mediocre chops and watery coffee for much of the afternoon. When the covers were cleared it took adding bill after bill to the growing pile of currency to soften the waiter's glare and persuade him to leave the men to their own devices. The proprietor, Mr. Austin, turned a speculative gaze in their direction from time to time but did not give any sign if he recognized at least one of the four.

The Fleet Street establishment began arriving en masse at late afternoon, and by five o'clock there wasn't a table to be had. Clerks, draughtsmen, engravers and press operators from the printing houses rubbed elbows with the aristocrats of the newspaper world. Those reporters who churned out daily reports on ineptitude in the ranks of the Metropolitan Police, rampant greed and ambition run amok in the City and ever-present scandals in the rarefied atmosphere of Piccadilly considered themselves the lords of Fleet Street and moral defenders of the Empire.

Charles Dickens, long time Parliamentary reporter, acclaimed novelist, editor of his own daily newspaper since January of 1846, was perhaps the dean of the press establishment. In his absence some good-natured mockery might be overheard but in general he was well-liked by his fellows. He had agreed to meet with the scribbler who produced The Private Life of the Queen for a rival publication. The mysterious author should have leapt at the chance to interview for a post with Dickens' paper, but instead displayed an abundance of caution. He – or she, to be fair – refused to go to the offices of the Daily News and insisted on meeting in a public space. After consulting with Tom Young, Melbourne's man on the street, it was agreed with the provision the author bring with him the source of his inside information and any documentation which would prove his veracity.

Melbourne might have lost patience while they waited, except he found it oddly pleasant to sit and idly observe the habitual chaotic energy of the greatest city on earth. Fleet Street and the surrounding area lacked the leisurely, measured pace to be found on more exclusive thoroughfares, but neither did it have the disreputable, slightly naughty vigor of the Covent Garden district or the sullen sloe-eyed
desperation of the East End slums. These men – and women, there were more than a few – went about their business with an attitude of industry and purpose which was fascinating to behold.

Tom gave the impression of knowing something about everyone and entertained his tablemates with his running commentary.

That fellow there, in the threadbare suit – he tracked MacGregor down to his rented rooms in Edinburgh in ’38. Didn't make a penny out of it, either, except for seeing his byline on an article no one wanted to read.

And that natty-looking gentleman, I don't have to tell you who he is. Probably best he doesn't look this way, he'll be sure to recognize you. Melbourne would not have recognized the individual Tom pointed out, except by his cautionary tone. Of course, the man who covered the trial gavel to gavel, he realized with a grimace of distaste.

Those gals just coming in, they'll be ending a day shift working in the press rooms.

Melbourne stored up these bits and pieces, to add color to the description he would provide later. Sharing his experiences with Victoria and seeing them through her young, unjaded eyes had become the main touchpoint of his life. He reflected on that contentedly while Tom continued his monologue.

"Plenty of women work in the back end, feeding sheets into the presses and taking them off. It might be called women's work, but I wouldn't want to stand hours on end only to lose a finger. The unions want to push them out but back in the ’80s and ’90s there were whole training schools teaching females to set type and they aren't going to go quietly."

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Despite the glorious weather, they had returned to London in a closed carriage. Even on a relatively
little-traveled market road the risk was too great for the Queen to ride protected by such a small escort, making a target for any lunatic with a weapon who might jump out of the hedgerows.

It had taken less than an hour to reach the more heavily-travelled thoroughfare and by then both children dozed. Melbourne and Victoria had talked sporadically of inconsequential things, he of the warm-season projects that his estate manager recommended and she already planning for their next visit to the country.

It was an interlude of such homely domesticity that Melbourne had been struck by the achingly sweet contentment he felt. That short ride from rural Hertfordshire to London perfectly encapsulated everything he cherished most in this life. Life with Victoria had its challenges, no doubt, but those stemmed from the unavoidably public nature of her position and nothing at all to do with her. If she tended to be somewhat needy, well, he was a man who had longed to be needed. If she could be strong-willed, then there could be no man more suited than one reared by a determined, strong-willed mother and ever after drawn to females with just that trait. Her youth and inexperience - some might say naïveté – might have been rudely shattered by one kind of man or encouraged as a means of keeping her subservient by another. He himself found no greater satisfaction in life than playing mentor while she memorized every aphorism and anecdote, preserved each flippant saying in her diary for posterity, hung on his words with rapt attention.

Melbourne had choked with sudden laughter at the self-congratulatory nature of his musings and Victoria's face softened with an answering grin before she began giggling too. Liam lifted his head sleepily, looking from one to the other, and without knowing why except his parents were happy, laughed with them. He knew it for one of those moments he would never forget.

Monday morning dawned, another perfect summer day. Victoria was already up and about when Melbourne opened his eyes, and it took him a moment to remember why that was so. Of course, it was the annual Trooping of the Colors in honor of the sovereign's birthday. She was already outfitted in a red and blue military habit, and her dresser was twisting her hair into a smooth chignon.

"I do wish you would ride with me," she asked once more, already resigned to the answer. Such ceremonial occasions demanded that Melbourne step back, husband to the queen but not officially Consort with capital "C", one of the minor annoyances which chafed Victoria. She would ride at the head of her troops while he would escort his mother-in-law, the children and other members of the royal household to a reviewing stand at the end of the Mall.

Nothing he could say convinced Victoria that he preferred it thus and was acutely uncomfortable in the spotlight. Nevertheless, she accepted it with grudging good grace. From his place in the stands he was able to see her as others did, divinely regal despite her small stature, sure of herself, acknowledging the regiments with a fixed salute as they paraded before her. The foot-guards regiment selected that year to troop its colour through the ranks of guards passed in an impressively choreographed swirl of color and motion, followed by mounted cavalry and the hundreds of musicians playing as they marched.

Liam stood of his own accord, copying his mother as she returned the salute of the Household Division. Lily – Elizabeth – was not to be outdone, and the crowd erupted in rapturous appreciation when the tiny princess stood and raised a hand to her bonnet brim.

The rest of the day passed swiftly, Victoria receiving the colonels and later hosting an afternoon reception for regimental commanders and their wives. She only just found the time to slip away and go through the accumulated dispatches awaiting her attention, relying on Melbourne to flag those which demanded her immediate attention.

"Wasn't it glorious?" Victoria exclaimed, cheeks flushed and eyes bright with exhilaration. She had
already changed for dinner and looked fresh and pretty in swirling chiffon as she closed the door behind them.

"It was an impressive tribute to a very impressive sovereign," Melbourne said, already reaching for her.

The girl in his arms was not the glittering figurehead to whom a thousand soldiers paid obeisance; this girl was all satin and lace, soft and yielding, lips pursed expectantly awaiting his kiss. The juxtaposition was dizzying. Only I see her this way. The realization always came anew, with a pleasant shiver of delight.

"The dispatches, Lord M," she said, stepping deftly out of his embrace.

They worked through the contents quickly, finding their old efficient rhythm. Melbourne scanned each document, setting aside those which required further scrutiny. Victoria jotted notes in the margins of some, and occasionally interrupted herself to write in her working diary. One thick sheaf of papers to which neither spared more than a desultory glance turned out to be Lord Dalhousie's preemptive response to certain whispered allegations impugning his integrity. Reading through the heated rebuttal, Melbourne reflected that there were times he did not entirely miss the oversized egos doing battle on the floor of the House.

"How odd!" Victoria exclaimed, her surprised tone causing him to look up. She held a small envelope. "Did you see this?"

Melbourne recognized the handwriting before he saw the smudged stamp indicating its origin on the Continent.

"Ah, Susan," he murmured. "Shall we see what she has to say?"

His former ward, the girl he and Caroline had raised as foster sister to their own son, wrote of her plans for the proceeds from their sale of the stock Melbourne had tied up as part of her marriage settlement. Aimé wishes to pay off the vineyards, she wrote, and then loan out sums at interest to landed worthies. Her husband had offered the vineyards and mortgages as security against the capital she would loan him. Melbourne had no reason to doubt Monsieur Cuénod but had approved the transaction with some misgivings. Susan was a strong-willed young woman and would not take no for an answer, alternately cajoling and asserting herself.

"Their family is expanding again," he continued. "That makes – goodness, six, no seven children in ten years. The foundling's revenge, I suppose."

"Nonsense, Susan was no foundling. You and Caro gave her the security and self-confidence to know her own mind. It sounds like Monsieur Cuénod has an equal partner in that relationship, business and otherwise."

"She has some intention of opening a bank with him. They will call it Churchill-Cuénod, the same as their vineyard consortium."

"Susan is to be admired. Why, she is only a year older than I am and what do I have to equal her accomplishments?" Melbourne swallowed his ready laughter with some difficulty, seeing that she was sincere. Victoria accurately interpreted his expression.

"I am quite serious. I've done the duty that was set before me, that is all. What do I really do? I smile and wave and utter inane commonplaces. Susan went to live among strangers and made a life for herself, found a husband all on her own at a masked ball of all places, and now talks of mortgages
and investments and opening a bank. I am quite in awe of her."

He wasn't quite sure what he could say that wouldn't sound needlessly patronizing. He only handed her the letter, so she could read the rest of it for herself. Susan's tone was always informal, as girlishly buoyant as when she would sprawl on the sofa in the drawing room at Brocket Hall and answer him with spirited defiance. It was good for Victoria to see that the tone was lacking any hint of cloying affection or lasciviousness – as some of the most vituperous scandal-mongers had once hinted – and always included salutations to the queen. Victoria had received Susan and her party privately when she visited London, and they had met on the Continent the previous spring.

"Susan writes that your – Lady Branden has been unwell. Her tone seems to imply some cause for concern. She fears Lady Branden has been in a decline since – William, who is Lilly?"

"And here we go!"

Melbourne had been rudely jolted out of reverie. He hastened to rise and kept close on Tom's heels as they shouldered a path through the supper crowd, out a side door and into the relative quiet of St. Dunstan's Court.

Ahead of them by no more than ten feet, was the unmistakable rotund shape of their palace spy. She moved quickly for such a large woman, leading them further into the shadows. He wanted to confrontation, only to confirm their suspicions and reclaim what pilfered documentation remained in her possession. Mr. Dickens, wanting no part of the eventual denouement, had stayed inside and apart from the fray.

Miss Ehlers had no hope of outrunning pursuit, any more than he intended to engage in a foot race. As he anticipated, she stopped well before emerging onto a busy thoroughfare. When she turned to face them, her round face was no longer wreathed in ingratiating smiles. Her sneer now perfectly matched the reptilian expression in those black eyes.

Cameron had sent one of the females under his command to accompany them, and as arranged it was she– a voluptuous, flamboyantly titian-haired woman – who stepped forward to do the talking.

Melbourne had little interest in the whens, whys and wherefores, substantially more in the how. He was content to confirm the woman's identity and had already turned away when her torrent of self-righteous wrath was abruptly cut short by Billy Cameron's brogue-inflected drawl.

He was back at Buckingham Palace by half past ten, intending to join Victoria and her companions on the south terrace. When he found her, she formed the centerpiece of a pretty tableau, surrounded by several of her ladies and a few lounging young lords. Melbourne paused in the doorway to admire the woman she had become. The graceful set of her head on a long neck, that elegant jawline and the defined features emerged from the rounded contours of extreme youth gave Victoria a striking appearance which went far beyond mere prettiness. Hers was a face which would always be difficult to capture on canvas, a mere two-dimensional image devoid of the intelligence, animation and vivacity which made her so captivating.

He withdrew before she could see him, retreating to their apartment and calling for his valet. The vile words that creature had flung, the open derision on her grotesquely swollen features, had left him feeling in need of a bath.
Melbourne made Victoria laugh recounting the silent chase, the woman ahead of them moving with all the speed and deliberation of a great ship in the harbor, but he skimmed over the particulars. Victoria didn't need to hear the ugliness which spewed forth, the note of self-pity underlying all the slurs flung at his head or the contemptuous scorn which was heaped on them all.

"At least she confessed so we can be sure. And I suppose that letter from Susan in amongst the dispatches was her parting gift. But why would she think that was so remarkable? Certainly it's no secret that Susan Churchill was your ward, and we correspond with her."

He had not shown her, and would not, the most vile of the lampoons which owed their insinuations to the pilfered Branden letters. Melbourne assumed, and both Tom and Billy agreed, that the Ehlers woman must have snatched the whole packet from the hearth where he'd tossed it. How they would secure their return and destruction was out of his hands. Enough to let it end here; the worst had been done and ironically, no one cared nearly as much as he feared. Readers were more concerned with what the Queen ate for breakfast and which cosmetics she used, than with the misinterpretation of a decades-old letter.

"I don't know, darling. The coincidence of the name perhaps? Or, she hoped you would jump to the conclusion that Lady Branden's daughter was mine? I took an interest in the girl, certainly, but no more than I did Mrs. Norton's sons when their custody was at issue. It's ridiculous to suppose I could have fathered a child who was in the schoolroom when I first met the mother." His answer was disingenuous, but he could not, would not, allude to the more spurious rumors.

Victoria's bare shoulders lifted in the hint of a shrug. Dismissive, he thought. Good; she must not dwell on things she cannot change, and I will not permit her to be disturbed by all that lies beneath the surface. That much I can always do, God willing.

Victoria's interest was piqued by Tom's description of the role females played in the printing business.

"It would be quite unfair for trade unionists to push them out. Can we prevent that from happening?"

"Ma'am, if we could prevent unions from forming we would have done so long since. Unfortunately…” and he briefly told her of the unrest caused by such assemblies in the ’20s and early
'30s.

She sat cross-legged in front of him, listening with that rapt attention which had always been balm to his battered ego. In that pose she still looked more child than woman, despite the clearly outlined contours of breast and hip under her white lawn night dress. He had not dressed after his bath, and a silk dressing gown did little to conceal his burgeoning interest in matters unrelated to Fleet Street.

"Will you take me someday? Perhaps Mr. Dickens would arrange a visit to his firm. I would like to see these women printers. They are doing an honest day's work that takes a great deal of skill to perform."

"I'm sure he would be honored, ma'am," Melbourne replied smoothly, not at all sure. Charles Dickens could be a contrary fellow, not a bad man but a reformer and sometimes the line blurred.

"But not yet, I think. We won't be home much this summer, will we?" Victoria unfolded her legs and crawled up to lay against him. Melbourne raised his arm and enveloped her securely.

"'Home' is wherever we are, sweetheart. Here, or Brocket Hall or the great Chatsworth – for a weekend, I could bear no more – or at sea, for a month. We have Venice and Lisbon to visit before summer's end."

The royal yacht had been commissioned in 1841, unfortunately christened the Victoria and Albert, then renamed the Victoria and William. Neither of them liked that name and Melbourne had the happy thought of offering in its place the name by which she finally set sail, the H.M.S. Gloriana.

"That was very prettily said, Lord M. Home is in your arms, for me. And where is home for you?" Victoria turned her face up coquettishly.

Melbourne slid his hand between firm young thighs, enjoying the feel of her taut muscle and the warmth which beckoned. He lifted a brow and smirked.

"Here, my love. Wherever we might travel, home for me is here."

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To be continued. In the meantime, here is a link to the Chronological List of Works and look below for some interesting references.

* Private Life of the Queen by a Member of the Royal Household was published in 1897, not 1846, but it is otherwise as described, a tell-all of the mundane details of daily living as seen from within the palace. While containing only benign, albeit embarrassing, details, it was still considered a gross violation of trust and decency. Albert had set into motion the first palace public relations machine half a century before, creating and feeding a sense of entitlement to every intimate detail of family life which swiftly became insatiable.

** Click here and here for a little light reading between installments for those who are interested in the concept of parallel worlds as described in Many Mansions, a stand-alone piece, and perhaps as seen in those dreams which plague Lord M.
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