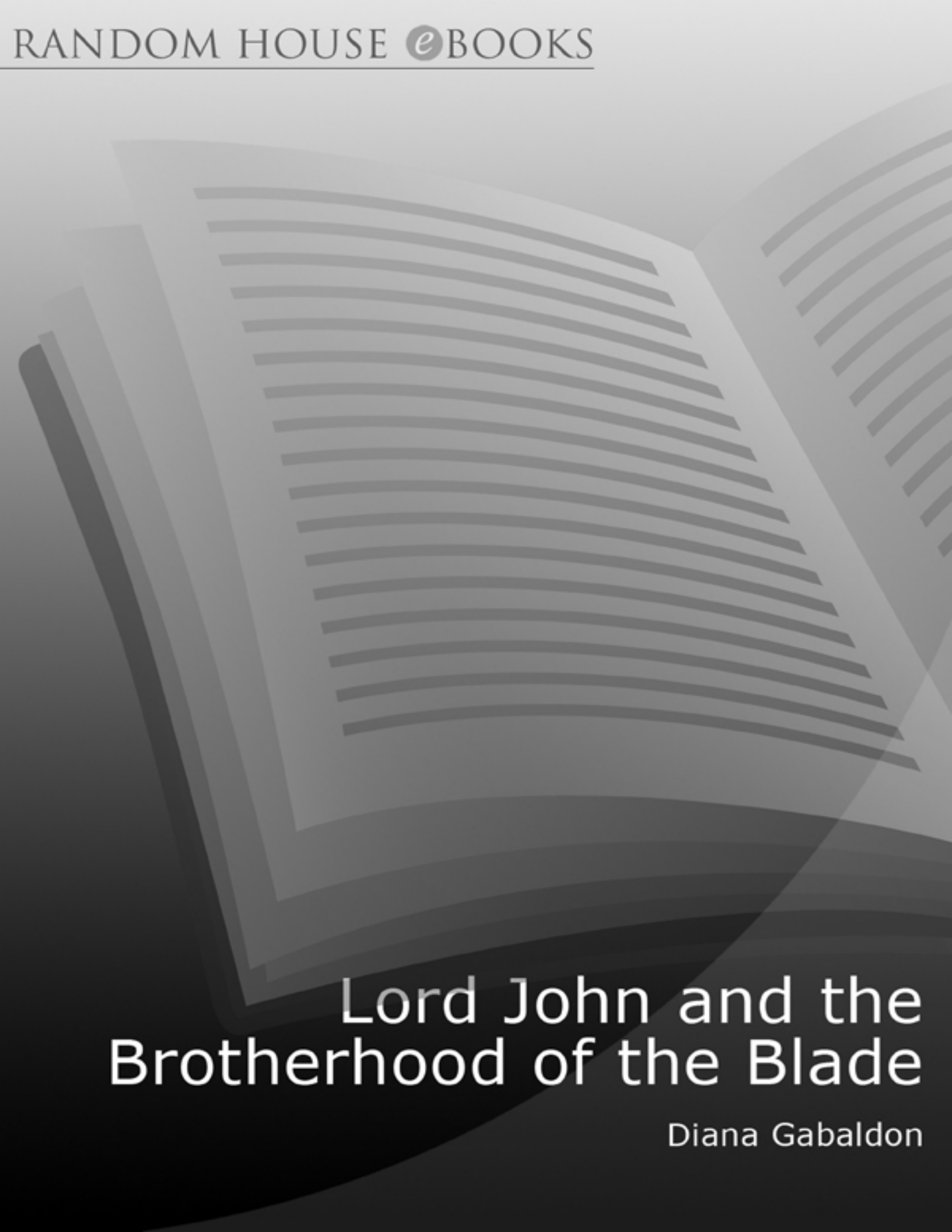


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade

Diana Gabaldon

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About the Book

THE SECRET OF LORD JOHN'S PAST LIES IN JAMIE FRASER'S HANDS

It's 1758 and Europe is in turmoil – the Seven Years War is taking hold and London is ripe with deceit. The enigmatic Lord John Grey, a nobleman and high-ranking officer in His Majesty's Army, pursues a clandestine love affair and a deadly family secret.

From barracks and parade-grounds to the bloody battlefields of Prussia, Grey faces danger and forbidden passions in his search for the truth. But it is in the stony fells of the Lake District that he finds the man who may hold the key to his quest: the enigmatic Jacobite prisoner Jamie Fraser.

Eighteenth-century Europe is brought startlingly to life in this compelling adventure mystery.

About the Author

DIANA GABALDON is the internationally bestselling author of eight genre-bending, prize-winning historical novels. *A Breath of Snow and Ashes* was a No. 1 bestseller in four countries and won both a Corine international literary prize for fiction and a Quill Award in 2006. She has also written one work of non-fiction, a companion volume to the novels entitled *Through the Stones*. She lives with her family and other assorted wildlife in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Also by Diana Gabaldon
(in order of publication)

Cross Stitch
Dragonfly in Amber
Voyager
Drums of Autumn
The Fiery Cross
A Breath of Snow and Ashes

THE LORD JOHN GREY SERIES

Lord John and the Private Matter
Lord John and the Hand of Devils

DIANA
GABALDON

*Lord John and the
Brotherhood of the Blade*



arrow books

*This book is for Barbara Schnell,
my dear friend and German voice*

Acknowledgments



The author would like to thank all the kind people who have given me information and help in the course of this novel, particularly –

... Mr. Richard Jacobs, Krefeld local historian, and his wife Monika, who walked the battlefield at Krefeld ('Crefeld' is the older, eighteenth-century spelling) and the *Landwehr* with me, explaining the local geography.

... the staff of the small museum at Hückelsmay – where cannonballs from the battle of Crefeld are still embedded in the walls of the house – for their kind reception and useful information.

... Barbara Schnell and her family, without whom I would probably never have heard of Crefeld.

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... Mr. Horace Walpole, that inveterate correspondent whose witty and detailed letters provided me with a vivid window into eighteenth-century society.

... Project Gutenberg, for providing me with excellent access to the complete correspondence of Mr. Walpole.

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... Christine Reynolds, Assistant Keeper of the Muniments of the Parish Church of St. Margaret's, for extremely useful information regarding the history and structures of the church, including a very useful organ loft under which to give birth, and Catherine MacGregor for suggesting St. Margaret's and for finding Ms. Reynolds.

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... Isaac Trion, whose hand-drawn watercolor map of the battle of Crefeld, drawn in 1758, adorns my wall, and whose painstaking details adorn the story.

... The assorted gentlemen (and ladies) who were kind enough to read and comment on sex scenes. (As a matter of public interest, a poll regarding one such scene came back with the following results: 'Positive: I want to know more - 82%; Negative: This makes me uncomfortable - 4%; Slightly shocked, but not put off - 10%; Neutral - 4%.)

SECTION I

As Kinsmen Met

Chapter 1



All in the Family

London, January 1758
The Society for Appreciation of
the English Beefsteak, A Gentlemen's Club

TO THE BEST of Lord John Grey's knowledge, stepmothers as depicted in fiction tended to be venal, evil, cunning, homicidal, and occasionally cannibalistic. Stepfathers, by contrast, seemed negligible, if not completely innocuous.

'Squire Allworthy, do you think?' he said to his brother. 'Or Claudius?'

Hal stood restlessly twirling the club's terrestrial globe, looking elegant, urbane, and thoroughly indigestible. He left off performing this activity, and gave Grey a look of incomprehension.

'What?'

'Stepfathers,' Grey explained. 'There seem remarkably few of them among the pages of novels, by contrast to the maternal variety. I merely wondered where Mother's new acquisition might fall, along the spectrum of character.'

Hal's nostrils flared. His own reading tended to be confined to Tacitus and the more detailed Greek and Roman histories of military endeavor. The practice of reading novels he regarded as a form of moral weakness; forgivable, and in fact, quite understandable in their mother, who was, after all, a woman. That his younger

brother should share in this vice was somewhat less acceptable.

However, he merely said, 'Claudius? From *Hamlet*? Surely not, John, unless you happen to know something about Mother that I do not.'

Grey was reasonably sure that he knew a number of things about their mother that Hal did not, but this was neither the time nor place to mention them.

'Can you think of any other examples? Notable stepfathers of history, perhaps?'

Hal pursed his lips, frowning a bit in thought. Absently, he touched the watch pocket at his waist.

Grey touched his own watch pocket, where the gold and crystal of his chiming timepiece – the twin of Hal's – made a reassuring weight.

'He's not late yet.'

Hal gave him a sideways look, not a smile – Hal was not in a mood that would permit such an expression – but tinged with humor, nonetheless.

'He is at least a soldier.'

In Grey's experience, membership in the brotherhood of the blade did not necessarily impute punctuality – their friend Harry Quarry was a colonel and habitually late – but he nodded equably. Hal was sufficiently on edge already. Grey didn't want to start a foolish argument that might color the imminent meeting with their mother's intended third husband.

'It could be worse, I suppose,' Hal said, returning to his moody examination of the globe. 'At least he's not a bloody merchant. Or a tradesman.' His voice dripped loathing at the thought.

In fact, General Sir George Stanley was a knight, granted that distinction by reason of service of arms, rather than birth. His family had dealt in trade, though in the reasonably respectable venues of banking and shipping. Benedicta Grey, however, was a duchess. Or had been.

So far reasonably calm in the face of his mother's impending nuptials, Grey felt a sudden drop of the stomach, a visceral reaction to the realization that his mother would no longer be a Grey, but would become Lady Stanley – someone quite foreign. This was, of course, ridiculous. At the same time, he found himself suddenly in greater sympathy with Hal.

The watch in his pocket began to chime noon. Hal's timepiece sounded no more than half a second later, and the brothers smiled at each other, hands on their pockets, suddenly united.

The watches were identical, gifts from their father upon the occasion of each son's twelfth birthday. The duke had died the day after Grey's twelfth birthday, endowing this small recognition of manhood with a particular poignancy. Grey drew breath to say something, but the sound of voices came from the corridor.

'There he is.' Hal lifted his head, evidently undecided whether to go out to meet Sir George or remain in the library to receive him.

'Saint Joseph,' Grey said suddenly. 'There's another notable stepfather.'

'Quite,' said his brother, with a sidelong glance. 'And which of us are you suggesting ...?'

A shadow fell across the Turkey carpet, cast by the form of a bowing servant who stood in the doorway.

'Sir George Stanley, my lord. And party.'



General Sir George Stanley was a surprise. While Grey had consciously expected neither Claudius nor Saint Joseph, the reality was a trifle ... rounder than anticipated.

His mother's first husband had been tall and dashing, by report, while her second, his own father, had been possessed of the same slight stature, fairness, and tidy

muscularity which he had bequeathed to both his sons. Sir George rather restored one's faith in the law of averages, Grey thought, amused.

A bit taller than himself or Hal, and quite stout, the general had a face that was round, cheerful, and rosily guileless beneath a rather shabby wig. His features were nondescript in the extreme, bar a pair of wide brown eyes that gave him an air of pleasant expectation, as though he could think of nothing so delightful as a meeting with the person he addressed.

He bowed in greeting, but then shook hands firmly with both Greys, leaving Lord John with an impression of warmth and sincerity.

'It is kind of you to invite me to luncheon,' he said, smiling from one brother to the other. 'I cannot say how greatly I appreciate your welcome. I feel most awkward, then, to begin at once with an apology - but I am afraid I have imposed upon you by bringing my stepson. He arrived unexpectedly this morning from the country, just as I was setting out. Seeing that you will in some sense be brothers ... I, er, thought perhaps you would pardon my liberty in bringing him along to be introduced.' He laughed, a little awkwardly, and blushed; an odd mannerism in a man of his age and rank, but rather endearing, Grey thought, smiling back despite himself.

'Of course,' Hal said, managing to sound cordial.

'Most certainly,' Grey echoed. He was standing closest to Sir George, and now turned to the general's companion, hand extended in greeting, and found himself face to face with a tall, slender, dark-eyed young man.

'My Lord Melton, Lord John,' the general was saying, a hand on the young man's shoulder. 'May I present Mr. Percival Wainwright?'

Hal was a trifle put out; Grey could feel the vibrations of annoyance from his direction - Hal hated surprises, particularly those of a social nature - but he himself had

little attention to spare for his brother's quirks at the moment.

'Your servant, sir,' he said, taking Mr. Wainwright's hand, with an odd sense of previous meeting.

The other felt it, too; Grey could see the faint expression of puzzlement on the young man's face, a faint inturning of fine dark brows, as though wondering where ...

Realization struck them simultaneously. His hand tightened involuntarily on the other's, just as Wainwright's grip clutched his.

'Yours, sir,' murmured Wainwright, and stepped back with a slight cough. He reached to shake Hal's hand, but glanced briefly back at Grey. His eyes were also brown, but not at all like his stepfather's, Grey thought, the momentary shock of recognition fading.

They were a soft, vivid brown, like sherry sack, and most expressive. At the moment, they were dancing with mirth at the situation - and filled with the same intensely personal interest Grey had seen in them once before, at their first meeting ... in the library of Lavender House.

Percy Wainwright had given him his name - and his hand - upon that occasion, too. But Grey had been an anonymous stranger then, and the encounter had been necessarily brief.

Hal was expressing polite welcome to the newcomer, though giving him the sort of coolly professional appraisal he would use to sum up an officer new to the regiment.

Grey thought Wainwright stood up well to such scrutiny; he was well built, dressed neatly and with taste, clear-skinned and clean-featured, with an attitude that spoke of both humor and imagination. Both traits could be dangerous in an officer, but on a personal level ...

Wainwright seemed to be discreetly exercising his own curiosity with regard to Grey, flicking brief glances his way - and little wonder. Grey smiled at him, now rather enjoying the surprise of this new 'brother.'

‘I thank you,’ Wainwright said, as Hal concluded his welcome. He pulled his lingering attention away from Grey, and bowed to Hal. ‘Your Grace is most ... gracious.’

There was an instant of stricken silence following that last, half-strangled word, spoken as Wainwright realized, a moment too late, what he had said.

Hal froze, for the briefest instant, before recovering himself and bowing in return.

‘Not at all,’ he said, with impeccable politeness. ‘Shall we dine, gentlemen?’

Hal turned at once for the door, not looking back. And just as well, Grey thought, seeing the hasty exchange of gestures and glances between the general and his stepson – horrified annoyance from the former, exemplified by rolling of the eyes and a brief clutching of the shabby wig; agonized apology by the latter – an apology extended wordlessly to Grey, as Percy Wainwright turned to him with a grimace.

Grey lifted one shoulder in dismissal. Hal was used to it – and it was his own fault, after all.

‘We are fortunate in our timing,’ he said, and smiled at Percy. He touched Wainwright’s back, lightly encouraging him toward the door. ‘It’s Thursday. The Beefsteak’s cook does an excellent ragout of beef on Thursdays. With oysters.’



Sir George was wise enough to make no apology for his stepson’s gaffe, instead engaging both the Greys in conversation regarding the campaigns of the previous autumn. Percy Wainwright appeared a trifle flustered, but quickly regained his composure, listening with every evidence of absorption.

‘You were in Prussia?’ he asked, hearing Grey’s mention of maneuvers near the Oder. ‘But surely the Forty-sixth has

been stationed in France recently – or am I mistaken?’

‘No, not at all,’ Grey replied. ‘I was temporarily seconded to a Prussian regiment, as liaison with British troops there, after Kloster-Zeven.’ He raised a brow at Wainwright. ‘You seem well informed.’

Wainwright smiled.

‘My stepfather thinks of buying me a commission,’ he admitted frankly. ‘I have heard a great deal of military conversation of late.’

‘I daresay you have. And have you formed any notions, any preferences?’

‘I had not,’ Wainwright said, his vivid eyes intent on Grey’s face. He smiled. ‘Until today.’

Grey’s heart gave a small hop. He had been trying to forget the last time he had seen Percy Wainwright, soft dark curls disheveled and his stock undone. Today, his hair was brushed smooth, bound and powdered like Grey’s own; he wore a sober blue, and they met as proper gentlemen. But the scent of Lavender House seemed to linger in the air between them – a smell of wine and leather, and the sharp, deep musk of masculine desire.

‘Now then, Percy,’ the general said, slightly reproving. ‘Not so hasty, my boy! We have still to speak with Colonel Bonham, and Pickering, too, you know.’

‘Indeed,’ Grey said lightly. ‘Well, you must allow me to give you a tour of the Forty-sixth’s quarters, near Cavendish Square. If we are to compete with some other regiment for the honor of your company, we must be allowed to exhibit our finer points.’

Percy’s smile deepened.

‘I should be most obliged to you, my lord,’ he said. And with that, some small, indefinable shift occurred in the air between them.

The conversation continued, but now as a minuet of manners, precise and delicate. And just as a courting couple might exchange worlds of meaning with a touch, so

they did the same, with no touch at all, their unspoken conversation flowing unhindered beneath the disguise of routine courtesies.

‘Are you fond of dogs, Lord John?’

‘Very much so, though I am afraid I have none myself at present. I am seldom at home, you see.’

‘Ah. You make your home with your brother, when in England?’ Percy glanced in Hal’s direction, then brought his eyes back to Grey’s, the question plain in them.

Does your brother know?

Grey shook his head, attention ostensibly on the bread roll he was tearing. The question of what Hal knew was a good deal too complex to deal with here. Leave it that Hal did not know about Lavender House, nor his brother’s association with it. That was enough for now.

‘No,’ he said casually. ‘I stay at my mother’s house in Jermyn Street.’ He looked up, meeting Percy’s eyes directly. ‘Though perhaps I shall seek lodgings elsewhere, now that her domestic arrangements will be altered.’

Percy’s mouth lifted in a slight smile, but Sir George, pausing in his own conversation to chew a morsel of beef, had caught this remark, and now leaned across the table, his round face reflecting earnest goodwill.

‘My dear Lord John! You certainly must not alter your arrangements on my account! Benedicta desires to keep her house in Jermyn Street, and I should be most distressed to feel that my presence had deprived her of her son’s company.’

Grey noticed his brother’s lips press thin at the notion of Sir George’s occupation of Jermyn Street. Hal glanced sharply at his brother, admonition plain in his face.

Oh, no, you don’t! I want you there, keeping an eye on this fellow.

‘You are too kind, sir,’ Grey replied to Sir George. ‘But the matter is not pressing. I shall rejoin the regiment shortly, after all.’

'Ah, yes.' Sir George looked interested at that, and turned to Hal. 'Have you fresh orders for the spring, my lord?'

Hal nodded, a plump oyster poised on his fork. 'Back to France as soon as the weather permits. And your troops ...'

'Oh, it's the West Indies for us,' Sir George replied, beckoning for more wine. 'Seasickness, mosquitoes, and malaria. Though I will say that at my age, that prospect is somewhat less daunting than mud and frostbite. And the rations are less difficult to manage, of course.'

Hal relaxed a bit at the revelation that Sir George would not be remaining long in England. Benedicta's money was her own, and safe, for the most part – or as safe as law and Hal could make it. It was his mother's physical welfare with which he was mostly concerned at the moment. That was, presumably, the point of this luncheon: to indicate firmly to Sir George that Benedicta Grey's sons took a close interest in her affairs, and intended to continue doing so after her marriage.

Surely you don't suppose he would beat her? Grey inquired silently of his brother, brows raised. Or install a mistress at Jermyn Street?

Hal adopted a po-faced expression, indicating that Grey was an innocent in the wicked ways of men. Fortunately, Hal himself was not so trusting!

Grey rolled his eyes briefly and averted his gaze from his brother as the steward brought in a dish of hot prunes to accompany the mutton.

Sir George and Hal went off into an intense discussion of the problems of recruitment and supply, leaving Grey and Percy Wainwright once more to their own devices.

'Lord John?' Wainwright spoke low-voiced, brows raised. 'It is Lord John?'

'Lord John,' Grey agreed, with a brief sigh.

'But –' Percy glanced again at Hal, who had put down his fork and was drawing up a complicated pattern of troop

movements upon the linen tablecloth, using the silver pencil he always kept to hand. The steward was observing this, looking rather bleak.

Is he not a duke, then? 'Lord John' was the proper address for the younger son of a duke, while the younger son of an earl would be simply 'the Honorable John Grey.' But if Grey's father had been a duke, then ...

'Yes,' Grey said, casting his own eyes up toward the ceiling in token of helplessness.

Apparently, Sir George had not had time to brief his stepson on the matter, beyond warning him not to address Hal as 'Your Grace' – the proper address for a duke.

Grey made a slight gesture, not quite a shrug, indicating that he would explain the intricacies of the situation later. The simple fact of the matter, he reflected, was that he was quite as stubborn as his brother. The thought gave him an obscure feeling of pleasure.

'So you think of purchasing a commission in the Forty-sixth?' Grey asked, using his bread to soak up the juices on his plate.

'Perhaps. If that should be agreeable to ... all parties,' Wainwright said, glancing at his stepfather and Hal, then back at Grey.

And would it be agreeable to you?

'I should think it an ideal arrangement,' Grey replied. He smiled at Wainwright, a slow smile. 'We should be brothers-in-arms, then, as well as brothers by marriage.' He picked up his wineglass in toast to the idea, then took a sip of wine, which he rolled round his mouth, enjoying the feeling of Percy's eyes fixed on his face.

Percy drank, too, and licked his lips. They were soft and full, stained red with wine.

'Lord John – tell me, please, how did you find our Prussian allies? Was it an artillery regiment with which you were placed, or foot? I confess, I am not so familiar as I should be with arrangements on the eastern front.'

Sir George's question pulled Grey's attention momentarily away from Percy, and the conversation became general again. Hal was relaxing by degrees, though Grey could see that he was still a long way from succumbing entirely to Sir George's charm.

You are a suspicious bastard, you know, he said with a glance at his brother after one particularly probing question.

Yes, and a good thing, too, Hal's dark look at him replied, before turning to Percy Wainwright with a courteous renewal of Grey's invitation to visit the regimental quarters.

By the time the pudding arrived, though, cordial relations appeared to have been established on all fronts. Sir George had replied satisfactorily to all Hal's questions, seeming quite untroubled by the intrusive nature of some of them. In fact, Grey had the feeling that Sir George was privately rather amused by his brother, though taking great care to ensure that Hal was not aware of it.

Meanwhile, he and Percy Wainwright had discovered a mutual enthusiasm for horse-racing, the theater, and French novelists – a discussion of this last subject causing his brother to mutter, 'Oh, God!' beneath his breath and order a fresh round of brandy.

Snow had begun to fall outside; in a momentary lull in the conversation, Grey heard the whisper of it against the window, though the heavy drapes were closed against the winter's chill, and candles lit the room. A pleasant shiver ran down his back at the sound.

'Do you find the room cold, Lord John?' Wainwright asked, noticing.

He did not; there was an excellent fire, roaring away in the hearth and constantly kept up by the ministrations of the Beefsteak's servants. Beyond that, a plentitude of hot food, wine, and brandy ensured sufficient warmth. Even

now, the steward was bringing in cups of mulled wine, and a Caribbean hint of cinnamon spiced the air.

'No,' he replied, taking his cup from the proffered tray. 'But there is nothing so pleasant as being inside, warm and well fed, when the elements are hostile without. Do you not agree?'

'Oh, yes.' Wainwright's eyelids had gone heavy, and he leaned back in his chair, his clear skin flushed in the candlelight. 'Most ... pleasant.' Long fingers touched his neckcloth briefly, as though finding it a little tight.

Awareness floated warm in the air between them, heady as the scents of cinnamon and wine. Hal and Sir George were beginning to make noises indicative of leave-taking, with many expressions of mutual regard.

Percy's long dark lashes rested for a moment on his cheek, and then swept up, so that his eyes met Grey's.

'Perhaps you would be interested to come with me to Lady Jonas's salon - Diderot will be there. Saturday afternoon, if you are at liberty?'

So, shall we be lovers, then?

'Oh, yes,' said Grey, and touched the linen napkin to his mouth. His pulse throbbed in his fingertips. 'I think so.'

Well, he thought, I don't suppose it's really incest, and pushed his chair back to arise.



Tom Byrd, Grey's valet, was rubbing at the gold lace on Grey's dress uniform with a lump of bread to brighten it, and listening with a lively interest to Grey's account of the luncheon with General Stanley and his stepson.

'So the general means to make his home here, me lord?' Grey could see Tom calculating what this change might mean to his own world; the general would doubtless bring some of his own servants, including a valet or orderly. 'Will the son come, too, this Mr. Wainwright?'

‘Oh, I shouldn’t think so.’ In fact, the notion had not occurred to Grey, and he took a moment to examine it. Wainwright had said he had his own rooms, somewhere in Westminster. Having seen the cordial relations that appeared to exist between Sir George and his stepson, though, he had assumed that this state of things was either to do with the cramped nature of the general’s present lodgings – or with Wainwright’s desire for privacy.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps he would.’ It was an unsettling thought, though not necessarily unpleasant. Grey smiled at Tom, and pulled his banyan close for warmth; despite the fire, the room was cold. ‘I shouldn’t think he will bring a valet with him if he does come, though.’

‘Ho,’ Byrd said thoughtfully. ‘Would you want me to do for him as well, me lord? I wouldn’t mind,’ he added quickly. ‘Is he a dandy, though, would you say?’

There was such a hopeful tone to this last question that Grey laughed.

‘Very kind of you, Tom. He dresses decently, but is no macaroni. I believe he means to take up a commission, though. Nothing but more uniforms for you, I’m afraid.’

Byrd made no audible reply to this, but his glance at Grey’s boots, standing caked with mud, straw, and manure by the hearth, was eloquent. He shook his head, squinted at the coat he was holding, decided it would do, and stood up, brushing bread crumbs into the fire.

‘Very good, me lord,’ he said, resigned. ‘You’ll look decent for the wedding, though, if I die for it. Come to that, if we’re a-going back to France in March, you’d best be calling on your tailor this week.’

‘Oh? All right. Make me a list, then, of what’s needed. Small-clothes, certainly.’ Both of them grimaced, in joint memory of what passed for drawers on the Continent.

‘Yes, me lord.’ Tom bent to shovel embers into the warming pan. ‘And a pair of doeskin breeches.’

‘Don’t I have a pair?’ Grey asked, surprised.

‘You do,’ Byrd said, straightening, ‘and Lord only knows what you sat on whilst wearing ‘em.’ He gave Grey a disapproving look; Tom was eighteen, and round-faced as a pie, but his disapproving looks would have done credit to an old gaffer of eighty.

‘I’ve done me best, me lord, but bear in mind, if you go out in those breeches, don’t be taking your coat off, or folk will be sure you’ve beshit yourself.’

Grey laughed, and stood aside for Tom to warm the bed. He shucked his banyan and slippers and slid between the sheets, the heat grateful on his chilly feet.

‘You have several brothers, don’t you, Tom?’

‘Five, me lord. I’d never had a bed to meself until I came to work for you.’ Tom shook his head, marveling at his luck, then grinned at Grey. ‘Don’t suppose you’ll need to share your bed with this Mr. Wainwright, though, will you?’

Grey had a sudden vision of Percy Wainwright, stretched solid beside him in the bed, and an extraordinary sense of warmth pulsed through him, quite incommensurate with the heat provided by the warming pan.

‘I doubt it,’ he said, remembering to smile. ‘You can put out the candle, Tom, thank you.’

‘Good night, me lord.’

The door closed behind Tom Byrd, and Grey lay watching the firelight play over the furnishings of the room. He was not particularly attached to places – a soldier couldn’t be – nor was this house a great part of his past; the countess had bought it only a few years before. And yet he felt a sudden peculiar nostalgia – for what, he couldn’t have said.

The night was still and cold, and yet seemed full of restless movement. The flicker of the fire; the flicker of arousal that burned in his flesh. He felt things shift and stir, unseen, and had the odd feeling that nothing would ever again be the same. This was nonsense, of course; it never was.

Still, he lay a long time sleepless, wishing time to stay; the night, the house, and himself to remain as they were, just a little longer. And yet the fire died, and he slept, conscious in his dreams of the rising wind outside.

Chapter 2



Not a Betting Man

GREY SPENT THE next morning in a drafty room in Whitehall, enduring the necessary tedium of a colonels' meeting with the Ordnance Office, featuring a long-winded address by Mr. Adams, First Secretary of the Ministry of Ordnance. Hal, pleading press of business, had dispatched Grey in his place - meaning, Grey thought, manfully swallowing a yawn, that Hal was likely either still at home enjoying breakfast, or at White's Chocolate House, wallowing in sugared buns and gossip, whilst Grey sat through bum-numbing hours of argument over powder allocations. Well, rank had its privileges.

He found his situation not unpleasant, though. The 46th was fortunately provided for with regards to gunpowder; his half brother Edgar owned one of the largest powder mills in the country. And as Grey was junior to most of the other officers present, he was seldom required to say anything, and thus free to allow his thoughts to drift into speculation regarding Percy Wainwright.

Had he mistaken the attraction? No. He could still feel the extraordinary warmth of Wainwright's eyes - and the warmth of his touch, when they had shaken hands in farewell.

The notion of Percy Wainwright's joining the regiment was intriguing. Considered in the sober light of day, it might also be dangerous.

He knew nothing of the man. True, the fact that he was General Stanley's stepson argued that he must be at least discreet – but Grey knew several discreet villains. And he must not forget that his first meeting with Wainwright had been at Lavender House, a place whose polished surfaces hid many secrets.

Had Wainwright been with anyone on that occasion? Grey frowned, trying to recall the scene, but in fact, his attention had been so distracted at the time that he had noticed only a few faces. He *thought* that Percy had been alone, but ... yes. He must have been, for he had not only introduced himself – he had kissed Grey's hand.

He'd forgotten that, and his hand closed involuntarily, a small jolt running up his arm as though he had touched something hot.

'Yes, I'd like to throttle him, too,' muttered the man beside him. 'Bloody windbag.' Startled, Grey glanced at the officer, an infantry colonel named Jones-Osborn, who nodded, glowering, at Mr. Adams, whose rather high-pitched voice had been going on for some time.

Grey had no idea what Adams had been saying, but grunted agreement and glowered in sympathy. This provoked the man on his other side, who, encouraged by this show of support, shouted a contradiction at Adams, liberally laced with epithet.

The secretary, Irish by birth and no mean hand at confrontation, replied in kind with spirit, and within moments, the meeting had degenerated into something more resembling a session of Parliament than the sober deliberations of military strategists.

Drawn perforce into the ensuing melee, this followed by a cordial luncheon with Jones-Osborn and the rest of the anti-Adams faction, Grey thought no more of Percy Wainwright until he found himself at mid-afternoon in his brother's office at regimental headquarters.

‘Jesus,’ Hal said, laughing over Grey’s account of the morning’s events. ‘Better you than me. Was Twelvetrees there?’

‘Don’t know him.’

‘Then he wasn’t there.’ Hal flipped a hand in dismissal. ‘You’d have noticed him slipping a dagger in Jones-Osborn’s back. Adams’s lap-wolf. What did you think of the new brother? Shall we have him?’

Familiar as he was with Hal’s quick-change methods of conversation, it took Grey only an instant to catch his brother’s meaning.

‘Wainwright? Seems a decent fellow,’ he said, affecting casualness. ‘Have you heard anything of him?’

‘No more than we learned yesterday. I asked Quarry, but neither he nor Joffrey knew anything of the man.’

That said much; between them, Harry Quarry, one of the two regimental colonels, and his half brother, Lord Joffrey, knew everyone of note in both military and political circles.

‘You liked him?’ Grey asked. Hal frowned a little, considering.

‘Yes,’ he said slowly. ‘And it would be awkward to refuse him, should he desire to take a commission with us.’

‘No experience, of course,’ Grey observed. This was not a stumbling block, but it was a consideration. Commissions were normally purchased, and many officers had never seen a soldier nor held a weapon prior to taking up their office. On the other hand, most of the 46th’s senior officers were veterans of considerable battlefield experience, and Hal chose new additions carefully.

‘True. I should suggest his beginning at second lieutenant, perhaps – or even ensign. To learn his business before moving higher.’

Grey considered this, then nodded.

‘Second lieutenant,’ he said. ‘Or even first. There will be the family connexion. It wouldn’t be fitting, I think, that he