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Beneath the Major's Scars

Written by Sarah Mallory

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AUTHOR NOTE

Identical twins—fascinating, aren't they? And they have been used very often in plots—by Shakespeare and Georgette Heyer, amongst others.

I have identical twin boys myself, and they came as a bit of a shock. It was only after the birth that I learned there were twins on my mother's side of the family, and as she and I were both born under the star sign of Gemini—the twins—perhaps I should have been more prepared! However, I know from experience that twins are individuals, so when I decided to write about Jasper and Dominic Coale I wanted to give them very different stories. I began with Dominic, the younger brother. This is his story.

It was common practice amongst the English aristocracy for younger sons to join the army, and so it is with Dominic. He goes off to fight in the Peninsula War, but after suffering terrible injuries he finds his life takes a very different turn from that of his twin.

When Zelah (and the reader) first meets Dominic he has retired to Rooks Tower, an isolated house on Exmoor. He is irascible and a confirmed recluse, but Zelah's young nephew Nicky has seen beyond his defensive shell and considers Dominic a firm friend. It is through Nicky that Zelah and Dominic meet and discover a mutual attraction, although they are both reluctant to acknowledge it. Zelah has been hurt before, and is determined upon an independent life, while Dominic believes his scarred face and body must repel every woman. They both have lessons to learn if they are to achieve happiness.

Some time ago I wrote a Christmas story—SNOWBOUND WITH THE NOTORIOUS RAKE—which is set on Exmoor, the beautiful wild moors in the south-west of England. Ever since I have wanted to use Exmoor again, so this is where Dominic buys his property, Rooks Tower, and it is here that Zelah falls in love with the proud man behind the horrific scars.

I really enjoyed writing Dominic and Zelah's story, and I hope you have as much pleasure reading it.

BENEATH THE MAJOR'S SCARS

Sarah Mallory



All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author, and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

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For P and S, my own twin heroes.

Prologue



Cornwall—1808

The room was very quiet. The screams and cries, the frantic exertions of the past twelve hours were over. The bloodied cloths and the tiny, lifeless body had been removed and the girl lay between clean sheets, only the glow of fire-light illuminating the room. Through the window a single star twinkled in the night sky. She did not seek it out, she had no energy for such conscious effort, but it was in her line of vision and it was easier to fix her eyes on that single point of light than to move her head.

Her body felt like a dead weight, exhausted by the struggle she had endured. Part of her wondered why she was still alive, when it would be so much better for everyone if she had been allowed to die with her baby.

She heard the soft click of the opening door and closed her eyes, not wishing to hear the midwife's brisk advice or her aunt's heart-wrenching sympathy.

'Poor lamb.' Aunt Wilson's voice was hardly more than a sigh. 'Will she survive, do you think?'

'Ah, she'll live, she's a strong 'un.' From beneath her lashes the girl could see the midwife standing at the foot of the bed, wiping her hands on her bloody apron. 'Although it might be better if she didn't.'

'Ah, don't say that!' Aunt Wilson's voice cracked. 'She is still God's creature, even though she has sinned.'

The midwife sniffed.

'Then the Lord had better look out for her, poor dearie, for her life is proper blighted and that's for sure. No man will want her to wife now.'

'She must find some way to support herself. I cannot keep her indefinitely, and my poor brother and his wife have little enough: the parish of Cardinham is one of the poorest in Cornwall.'

There was a pause, then the midwife said, 'She ain't cut out to be a bal maiden.'

'To work in the mines? Never! She is too well bred for that.'

'Not too well bred to open her legs for a man—'

Aunt Wilson gasped in outrage.

‘You have said quite enough, Mrs Nore. Your work is finished here, I will look after my niece from now on. Come downstairs and I will pay you for your trouble...’

The rustle of skirts, a soft click of the door and silence. She was alone again.

It was useless to wish she had died with her baby. She had not, and the future seemed very bleak, nothing but hard work and drudgery. That was her punishment for falling in love. She would face that, and she would survive, but she would never put her trust in any man again. She opened her eyes and looked at that tiny, twinkling orb.

‘You shall be my witness,’ she whispered, her lips painfully dry and her throat aching with the effort. ‘No man shall ever do this to me again.’

Her eyes began to close and she knew now that whenever she saw that star in the evening sky, she would remember the child she had lost.

Chapter One



Exmoor—1811

‘Nicky, Nicky! wait for me—oh!’

Zelah gave a little cry of frustration as her skirts caught on the thorny branches of an encroaching bush. She was obliged to give up her pursuit of her little nephew while she disentangled herself. How she wished now that she had put on her old dimity robe, but she had been expecting to amuse Nicky in the garden, not to be chasing him through the woods; only Nurse had come out to tell them that they must not make too much noise since the mistress was trying to get some sleep before Baby woke again and demanded to be fed.

As she carefully eased the primrose muslin off the ensnaring thorns, Zelah pondered on her sister’s determination to feed the new baby her-

self. She could quite understand it, of course: Reginald's first wife had died in childbirth and a number of wet nurses had been employed for Nicky, but each one had proved more unreliable than the last so it was a wonder that the little boy had survived at all. The thought of her sister's stepson made Zelah smile. He had not only survived, but grown into a very lively eight-year-old, who was even now leading her in a merry dance.

She had allowed him to take her 'exploring' in the wildly neglected woodland on the northern boundary of West Barton and now realised her mistake. Not only was Nicky familiar with the overgrown tracks that led through the woods, he was unhampered by *skirts*. Free at last, she pulled the folds of muslin close as she set off in search of her nephew. She had only gone a few steps when she heard him cry out, such distress and alarm in his voice that she set off at a run in the direction of his call, all concerns for snagging her gown forgotten.

The light through the trees indicated that there was a clearing ahead. She pushed her way through the remaining low tree branches and found herself standing on the lip of a steep slope. The land dropped away to form a natural bowl and the ground between the trees was dotted with early spring flowers, but it was not the beauty of the scene that made Zelah catch

her breath, it was the sight of Nicky's lifeless body stretched out at the very bottom of the dell, a red stain spreading over one leg of his nankeen pantaloons and a menacing figure bending over him.

Her first, wild thought was that it was some kind of animal attacking Nicky, but as her vision cleared she realised it was a man. A thick black beard covered his face and his shaggy hair reached to the shoulders of his dark coat. A long-handled axe lay on the ground beside him, its blade glinting wickedly in the spring sunlight.

Zelah did not hesitate. She scrambled down the bank.

'Leave him alone!' The man straightened. As he turned towards her she saw that beneath the shaggy mane of hair surrounding his face he had an ugly scar cutting through his left eyebrow and cheek. She picked up a stick. 'Get away from him, you beast!'

'Beast, is it?' he growled.

'Zelah—'

'Don't worry, Nicky, he won't hurt you again.' She kept her gaze fixed on the menacing figure. 'How dare you attack an innocent boy, you monster!'

'Beast, monster—' His teeth flashed white through the beard as he stepped over the boy and came towards her, his halting, ungainly stride adding to the menace.

Zelah raised the stick. With a savage laugh he reached out and twisted the bough effortlessly out of her grasp, then caught her wrists as she launched herself at him. She struggled against his iron grip and her assailant hissed as she kicked his shin. 'For heaven's sake, I am not your villain. The boy tripped and fell.' With a muttered oath he forced her hands down and behind her, so that she found herself pressed against his hard body. The rough wool of his jacket rubbed her cheek and her senses reeled as she breathed in the smell of him. It was not the sour odour of sweat and dirt she was expecting, but a mixture of wool and sandalwood and lemony spices combined with the earthy, masculine scent of the man himself. It was intoxicating.

He spoke again, his voice a deep rumble on her skin, for he was still holding her tight against his broad chest. 'He tripped and fell. Do you understand me?'

He is speaking as if to an imbecile! was Zelah's first thought, then the meaning of his words registered in her brain and she raised her head to meet his fierce eyes. She stopped struggling.

'That's better.' He released his iron grip but kept his hard eyes fixed upon her. 'Now, shall we take a look at the boy?'

Zelah stepped away, not sure if she trusted the man enough to turn her back on him, but a

groan from Nicky decided it. Everything else was forgotten as she fell to her knees beside him.

‘Oh, love, what have you done?’

She put her hand on his forehead, avoiding the angry red mark on his temple. His skin was very hot and his eyes had a glazed, wild look in them.

The man dropped down beside her.

‘We’ve been clearing the land, so there are several ragged tree stumps. He must have caught his leg on one when he tumbled down the bank. It’s a nasty cut, but I don’t think the bone is broken.’

‘How would you know?’ demanded Zelah, carefully lifting away the torn material and gazing in horror at the bloody mess beneath.

‘My time in the army has given me considerable experience of injuries.’ He untied his neckcloth. ‘I have sent my keeper to fetch help. I’ll bind up his leg, then we will carry him back to the house on a hurdle.’

‘Whose house?’ she asked suspiciously. ‘He should be taken to West Barton.’

‘Pray allow me to know what is best to be done!’

‘Please do not talk to me as if I were a child,’ she retorted. ‘I am quite capable of making a decision.’

He frowned, making the scar on his forehead even more ragged. He looked positively ferocious, but she refused to be intimidated and

met his gaze squarely. He seemed to be struggling to contain his anger and after a moment he raised his hand to point towards a narrow path leading away through the trees. He said curtly, 'Rooks Tower is half a mile in that direction; West Barton is at least five miles by carriage, maybe two if you go back on the footpath, the way you came.'

Zelah bit her lip. It would be impossible to carry Nicky through the dense undergrowth of the forest without causing him a great deal of pain. The boy stirred and she took his hand.

'I d-don't like it, it hurts!'

The plaintive cry tore at her heart.

'Then it must be Rooks Tower,' she said. 'Let us hope your people get here soon.'

'They will be here as soon as they can.' He pulled the muslin cravat from his neck. 'In the meantime I must stop the bleeding.' His hard eyes flickered over her. 'It will mean moving his leg.'

She nodded and squeezed Nicky's hand.

'You must be very brave, love, while we bind you up. Can you do that?'

'I'll try, Aunty.'

'Your aunt, Nicky? She's more of an Amazon, I think!'

'Well, she is not really my aunt, sir,' explained Nicky gravely. 'She is my stepmama's sister.'

Zelah stared, momentarily diverted.

‘You know each other?’

The man flicked a sardonic look towards her.

‘Of course, do you think I allow strange brats to run wild in my woods? Introduce us, Nicky.’

‘This is Major Coale.’ The boy’s voice wavered a little and his lip trembled as the major deftly wrapped the neckcloth around his leg. ‘And this, sir, is my aunt, Zelah.’

‘Celia?’

‘Zee-lah,’ she corrected him haughtily. ‘Miss Pentewan to you.’

‘Dear me, Nicholas, you should have warned me that your aunt is a veritable dragon.’

The scar cutting through his eyebrow gave him a permanent frown, but she heard the amusement in his voice. Nicky, clinging to Zelah’s hand and trying hard not to cry, managed a little chuckle.

‘There, all done.’ The major sat back, putting his hand on Nicky’s shoulder. ‘You were very brave, my boy.’

‘As brave as a soldier, sir?’

‘Braver. I’ve known men go to pieces over the veriest scratch.’

Zelah stared at the untidy, shaggy-haired figure in front of her. His tone was that of a man used to command, but beneath that faded jacket and all that hair, could he really be a soldier? She realised he was watching her and quickly returned her attention to her nephew.

‘What happened, love? How did you fall?’

‘I t-tripped at the top of the bank. There’s a lot of loose branches lying around.’

‘Aye. I’ve left them. Firewood for the villagers,’ explained the major. ‘We have been clearing the undergrowth.’

‘And about time too,’ she responded. ‘These woods have been seriously neglected.’

‘My apologies, madam, if they are not to your liking.’

Was he laughing at her? His face—the little she could see that was not covered by hair—was impassive.

‘My criticism is not aimed at you, Major. I believe Rooks Tower was only sold last winter.’

‘Yes, and I have not had time yet to make all the improvements I would wish.’

‘You are the *owner*?’

Zelah could not keep the astonishment out of her voice. Surely this ragged individual could not be rich enough to buy such a property?

‘I am. Appearances can be deceptive, Miss Pentewan.’

She flushed, knowing she deserved the coldness of his response.

‘I beg your pardon, that is, I—I am sure there is a vast amount to be done.’

‘There is, and one of my first tasks is to improve the road to the house and make it suitable for carriages again. I have men working

on it now, but until that is done everything has to come in and out by packhorse.'

'Major Coale's books had to be brought here by pack-pony,' put in Nicky. 'Dozens of boxes of them. She likes books,' he explained to the major, whose right eyebrow had risen in enquiry.

'We have an extensive library at home,' added Zelah.

'And where is that?'

'Cornwall.'

'I guessed that much from your name. *Where* in Cornwall?'

A smile tugged at her mouth, but she responded seriously.

'My father is rector at Cardinham, near Bodmin.'

Zelah looked up as a number of men arrived carrying a willow hurdle.

She scrambled to her feet and stepped back. The major handed his axe to one of the men before directing the delicate operation of lifting Nicky on to the hurdle. When they were ready to move off she fell into step beside the major, aware of his ungainly, limping stride as they followed the hurdle and its precious burden through the woods.

'I can see you have some experience of command, Major.'

'I was several years in the army.'

Zelah glanced at him. He had been careful

to keep to the left of the path so only the right side of his face was visible to her. Whether he was protecting her sensibilities or his own she did not know.

‘And now you plan to settle at Rooks Tower?’

‘Yes.’

‘It is a little isolated,’ she remarked. ‘Even more so than West Barton.’

‘That is why I bought it. I have no wish for company.’

Zelah lapsed into silence. His curt tone made the meaning of his words quite clear. He might as well have said *I have no wish for conversation*. Very well, she had no desire to intrude upon his privacy. She would not speak again unless it was absolutely necessary.

Finally they emerged from the trees and Zelah had her first glimpse of Rooks Tower. There was a great sweep of lawn at the front of the house, enclosed by a weed-strewn drive. At the far side of the lawn stood a small orangery, but years of neglect had dulled the white lime-wash and many of its windows were broken. Zelah turned away from this forlorn object to study the main house. At its centre was an ancient stone building with an imposing arched entrance, but it had obviously been extended over the centuries and two brick-and-stone wings had been added. Everything was arranged over two floors save for

a square stone tower on the south-eastern corner that soared above the main buildings.

‘Monstrosity, isn’t it?’ drawled the major. ‘The house was remodelled in Tudor times, when the owner added the tower that gives the house its name, so that his guests could watch the hunt. It has a viewing platform on the roof, but we never use it now.’

She looked again at the house. There had been many alterations over the years, but it retained its leaded lights and stone mullions. Rooks Tower fell short of the current fashion for order and symmetry, but its very awkwardness held a certain charm.

‘The views from the tower must be magnificent.’ She cast an anxious look at him. ‘You will not change it?’

He gave a savage laugh.

‘Of course not. It is as deformed as I!’

She heard the bitterness in his tone, but could not think of a suitable response. The path had widened and she moved forwards to walk beside Nicky, reaching out to take his hand. It was hot and clammy. Zelah hid her dismay beneath a reassuring smile.

‘Nearly there, love. We shall soon make you more comfortable.’

The major strode on ahead, his lameness barely noticeable as he led the way into the great hall where an iron-haired woman in a black-

stuff gown was waiting for them. She bobbed a curtsy.

‘I have prepared the yellow room for the young master, sir, and popped a warm brick between the sheets.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Graddon.’ He did not break his stride as he answered her, crossing the hall and taking the stairs two at a time, only pausing to turn on the half-landing. ‘This way, but be careful not to tilt the litter!’

Dominic waited only to see the boy laid on the bed that had been prepared for him before striding off to his own apartments to change out of his working clothes. It was a damnable nuisance, having strangers in the house, but the boy was hurt, what else could he do? He did not object to having Nicky in the house. He was fond of the boy and would do all he could to help him, but it would mean having doctors and servants running to and fro. He could leave everything to Graddon and his wife, of course, and the aunt would look after the boy until Buckland could send someone.

The thought of Miss Zelah Pentewan made him pause. A reluctant smile touched his lips and dragged at the scarred tissue of his cheek. She was not conventionally pretty, too small and thin, with mousy brown hair and brown eyes. She reminded him of a sparrow, nothing like

the voluptuous beauties he had known. When he thought of her standing up to him, prepared to fight him to protect her nephew...by God she had spirit, for she barely came up to his shoulder!

He washed and dried his face, his fingers aware of the rough, pitted skin on his left cheek through the soft linen cloth. He remembered how she had glared at him, neither flinching nor averting her eyes once she had seen his scarred face. He gave her credit for that, but he would not subject her to the gruesome sight again. There was plenty for him to do that would keep him well away from the house for a few days.

‘Well, I have cleaned and bandaged the leg. Now we must wait. I have given him a sleeping draught which should see him through to the morning and after that it will be up to you to keep him still while the leg heals. He will be as good as new in a few weeks.’

‘Thank you, Doctor.’

Zelah stared down at the motionless little figure in the middle of the bed. Nicky had fainted away when the doctor began to work on his leg and now he looked so fragile and uncharacteristically still that tears started to her eyes.

‘Now, now, Miss Pentewan, no need for this. The boy has a strong constitution—by heaven, no one knows that better than I, for I have been

calling at West Barton since he was a sickly little scrap of a baby that no one expected to survive. I'm hoping that bruise on his head is nothing serious. I haven't bled him, but if he begins to show a fever then I will do so tomorrow. For now keep him calm and rested and I will call again in the morning.'

The doctor's gruff kindness made her swallow hard.

'Thank you, Dr Pannell. And if he wakes in pain...?'

'A little laudanum and water will do him no harm.'

There was a knock at the door and the housekeeper peeped in.

'Here's the little lad's papa come to see him, Doctor.' She flattened herself against the door as Reginald Buckland swept in, hat, gloves and riding whip clutched in one hand and an anxious look upon his jovial features.

'I came as soon as I heard. How is he?'

Zelah allowed the doctor to repeat his prognosis.

'Can he be moved?' asked Reginald, staring at his son. 'Can I take him home?'

'I would not advise it. The wound is quite deep and any jolting at this stage could start it bleeding again.'

'But he cannot stay here, in the house of a man I hardly know!'

Doctor Pannell's bushy eyebrows drew together.

'I understood the major was some sort of relative of yours, Mr Buckland.'

Reginald shrugged.

'Very distant. Oh, I admit it was through my letters to a cousin that he heard about Rooks Tower being vacant, but I had never met him until he moved here, and since then we have exchanged barely a dozen words. He has never once come to West Barton.'

A grim little smile hovered on the doctor's lips.

'No, Major Coale has not gone out of his way to make himself known to his neighbours.'

'I think Nicky must stay here, Reginald.' Zelah touched his arm. 'Major Coale has put his house and servants at our disposal.'

'Aye, he must, at least until the wound begins to heal,' averred Dr Pannell, picking up his hat. 'Now, I shall be away and will return tomorrow to see how my patient does.'

Reginald remained by the bed, staring down at his son and heir. He rubbed his chin. 'If only I knew what to do. If only his mama could be with him!'

'Impossible, when she is confined with little Reginald.'

'Or Nurse.'

'Yes, she would be ideal, but my sister and

the new baby need her skill and attentions,' said Zelah. 'I have considered all these possibilities, Reginald, and I think there is only one solution. You must leave Nicky to my care.'

'But that's just it,' exclaimed Reginald. 'I cannot leave you here.'

'And *I* cannot leave Nicky.'

'Then I had best stay, too.'

Zelah laughed.

'Now why should you do that? You know nothing about nursing. And besides, what will poor Maria do if both you and I are away from home? I know how my sister suffers with her nerves when she is alone for too long.'

'Aye, she does.' Reginald took a turn about the room, torn by indecision.

Nicky stirred and muttered something in his sleep.

'Go home, Reginald. These fidgets will disturb Nicky.'

'But this is a bachelor household.'

'That is unfortunate, of course, but it cannot be helped.' She dipped a cloth in the bowl of lavender water and gently wiped the boy's brow. 'If it is any comfort, Reginald, Major Coale has informed me—via his housekeeper—that he will not come into this wing of the house while we are here. Indeed, once he had seen Nicky safely into bed he disappeared, giving his housekeeper orders to supply us with everything necessary.'

I shall sleep in the anteroom here, so that I may be on hand should Nicky wake in the night, and I will take my meals here. So you see there can be no danger of impropriety.'

Reginald did not look completely reassured.

'Would you like me to send over our maid?'

'Unnecessary, and it would give offence to Mrs Graddon.' Zelah smiled at him. 'We shall go on very comfortably, believe me, if you will arrange for some clothes to be sent over for us. And perhaps you will come again tomorrow and bring some games for Nicky. Then we shall do very well.'

'But it will not do! You are a gently bred young lady—'

'I am soon to be a governess and must learn to deal with situations such as this.' She squeezed his arm. 'Trust me, Reginald. Nicky must stay here and I shall remain to look after him until he can be moved to West Barton. Now go and reassure Maria that all is well here.'

He took his leave at last and Zelah found herself alone in the sickroom for the first time. Nicky was still sleeping soundly, which she knew was a good thing, but it left her with little to do, except rearrange the room to her satisfaction.

Zelah took dinner in the room, but the soup the housekeeper brought up for Nicky remained untouched, for he showed no signs of waking.

* * *

‘Poor little lamb, sleep’s the best thing for him,’ said Mrs Graddon when she came to remove the dishes. ‘Tomorrow I shall make some lemon jelly, to tempt his appetite. I know he’s very fond of that.’

‘Oh?’ Zelah looked up. ‘Is my nephew in the habit of calling here?’

‘Aye, bless his heart. If he finds an injured animal or bird in the woods he often brings it here for the master to mend, and afore he goes he always comes down to the kitchens to find me.’

Zelah put her hands to her cheeks, mortified.

‘Oh dear, he really should not be bothering Major Coale with such things, or you.’

‘Lord love ’ee, mistress, the boy ain’t doin’ no ’arm,’ exclaimed Mrs Graddon. ‘In fact, I think ’e does the master good.’ She paused, slanting a sidelong glance at Zelah. ‘You’ve probably noticed that the major shuns company, but that’s because o’ this.’ She rubbed her finger over her left temple. ‘Right across his chest, it goes, though thankfully it never touched his vital organs. Took a cut to his thigh, too, but the saw-bones stitched him up before he ever came home, so his leg’s as good as new.’

‘But when he walks...’

The housekeeper tutted, smoothing down her apron.

‘He’s had the very finest doctors look at ’im

and they can find nothing wrong with his leg. They say 'tis all in his head. For the master don't always limp, as I've noticed, often and often.' She sighed. 'Before he went off to war and got that nasty scar he was a great one for society—him and his brother both. Twins they are and such handsome young men, they captured so many hearts I can't tell you!'

'You've known the family for a long time?'

'Aye, miss, I started as a housemaid at Markham, that's the family home, where the master's brother, the viscount, now lives. Then when the master decided to set up his own house here, Graddon and I was only too pleased to come with him. But he don't go into company, nor does he invite anyone here, and I can understand that. I've seen 'em—when people meets the master, they look everywhere but at his face and that do hurt him, you see. But Master Nick, well, he treats the major no different from the rest.'

Zelah was silent. In her mind she was running over her meeting with Major Coale. Had she avoided looking at his terrible scarred face? She thought not, but when she had first seen him she believed he was attacking Nicky and she had been in no mood for polite evasions.

The housekeeper went off and Zelah settled down to keep watch upon her patient.

* * *

As the hours passed the house grew silent. She had a sudden yearning for company and was tempted to go down to the kitchen in the hope of meeting the housekeeper, or even a kitchen maid. She would do no such thing, of course, and was just wondering how she could occupy herself when there was a knock at the door. It was Mrs Graddon.

‘The major asked me to bring you these, since you likes reading.’ She held out a basket full of books. ‘He says to apologise, but they’s all he has at the moment, most of his books being still in the crates they arrived in, but he hopes you’ll find something here to suit.’

‘Thank you.’ Zelah took the basket and retreated to her chair by the fire, picking up the books one by one from the basket. Richardson, Smollett, Defoe, even Mrs Radcliffe. She smiled. If she could not amuse herself with these, then she did not deserve to be pleased. She was comforted by the major’s thoughtfulness. Feeling much less lonely, she settled down, surrounded by books.

It was after midnight when Nicky began to grow restless. Zelah was stretched out on the bed prepared for her when she heard him mutter. Immediately she was at his side, feeling his brow, trying to squeeze a little water through

his parched lips. He batted aside her hand and turned his head away, muttering angrily. Zelah checked the bandages. They were still in place, but if he continued to toss and turn he might well open the wound and set it bleeding again.

She wished she had not refused Mrs Gradon's offer to have a truckle bed made up in the room for a maid, but rather than wring her hands in an agony of regret she picked up her bedroom candle and set off to find some help.

Zelah had not ventured from the yellow bedroom since she had followed Nicky there earlier in the day. She retraced her steps back to the great hall, too anxious about her nephew to feel menaced by the flickering shadows that danced around her. There was a thin strip of light showing beneath one of the doors off the hall and she did not hesitate. She crossed to the door and knocked softly before entering.

She was in Major Coale's study, and the man himself was sitting before the dying fire, reading by the light of a branched candelabra on the table beside him.

'I beg your pardon, I need to find Mrs Gradon. It's Nicky...'

He had put down his book and was out of the chair even as she spoke. He was not wearing his coat and the billowing shirt-sleeves made him look even bigger than she remembered.

'What is wrong with him?'

‘He is feverish and I c-cannot hold him...’

‘Let me see.’ He added, observing her hesitation, ‘I have some knowledge of these matters.’

Zelah nodded, impatient to return to Nicky. They hurried upstairs, the major’s dragging leg causing his shoe to scuff at each step. It was no louder than a whisper, but it echoed through the darkness. Nicky’s fretful crying could be heard even as they entered the anteroom. Zelah flew to his side.

‘Hush now, Nicky. Keep still, love, or you will hurt your leg again.’

‘It hurts now! I want Mama!’

The major put a gentle hand on his forehead.

‘She is looking after your little brother, sir. You have your aunt and me to take care of you.’ He inspected the bottles ranged on the side table and quickly mixed a few drops of laudanum into a glass of water.

The calm, male voice had its effect. Nicky blinked and fixed his eyes on Zelah, who smiled at him.

‘You are a guest in the major’s house, Nicky.’

‘Oh.’ The little fingers curled around her hand. ‘And are you staying here too, Aunt Zelah?’

‘She is,’ said the major, ‘for as long as you need her. Now, sir, let me help you sit up a little and you must take your medicine.’

‘No, no, it hurts when I move.’

'We will lift you very carefully,' Zelah assured him.

'I don't want to...'

'Come, sir, it is only a little drink and it will take the pain away.'

The major slipped an arm about the boy's shoulders and held the glass to his lips. Nicky took a little sip and shuddered.

'It is best taken in one go,' the major advised him.

The little boy's mouth twisted in distaste.

'Did you take this when you were wounded?'

'Gallons of it,' said the major cheerfully.

'Now, one, two, three.' He ruthlessly tipped the mixture down the boy's throat. Nicky swallowed, shuddered and his lip trembled. 'There, it is done and you were very brave. Miss Pentewan will turn your pillows and you will soon feel much more comfortable.'

'Will you stay, 'til I go to sleep again?'

'You have your aunt here.'

Please.

Zelah responded with a nod to the major's quick glance of enquiry.

'Very well.' He sat down at the side of the bed and took the little hand that reached out for him.

'Would you like me to tell you a story?' asked Zelah, but Nicky ignored her. He fixed his eyes upon the major.

'Will you tell me how you got your scar?'

Zelah stopped breathing. She glanced at the major. He did not look to be offended.

‘I have told you that a dozen times. You cannot want to hear it again.’

‘Yes, I do, if you please, sir. *All* of it.’

‘Very well.’

He pulled his chair closer to the bed and Zelah drew back into the shadows.

‘New Year’s Day ’09 and we were struggling through the mountains back towards Corunna, with the French hot on our heels. The weather was appalling. During the day the roads were rivers of mud and by night they were frozen solid. When we reached Cacabelos—’

‘You missed something,’ Nicky interrupted him. ‘The man with the pigtail.’

‘Ah, yes.’ Major Coale’s eyes softened in amusement. In the shadows Zelah smiled. She had read Nicky enough stories to know he expected the same tale, word for word, each time. The major continued. ‘One Highlander woke to find he couldn’t get up because his powdered pigtail was frozen to the ground. A couple of days later we reached the village of Cacabelos and the little stone bridge over the River Cua. Unfortunately discipline had become a problem during that long retreat to Corunna and General Edward Paget was obliged to make an example of those guilty of robbery. He was about to execute two of the men when he heard that

the French were upon us. The general was extremely vexed at this, and after cursing roundly he turned to his men. "If I spare the lives of these men," he said, "do I have your word of honour as soldiers that you will reform?" The men shouted "Yes!" and the convicted men were cut down.'

'Huzza!' Nicky gave a sleepy cheer.

Major Coale continued, his voice soft and low.

'And just in time, for the enemy were already in sight. They were upon us in an instant, the French 15th Chasseurs and the 3rd Hussars, all thundering down to the bridge. All was confusion—our men could not withdraw because the way was blocked with fighting men and horses. Fortunately the chasseurs were in disarray and drew back to regroup, giving us time to get back across the bridge. We fixed bayonets and waited below the six guns of the horse artillery, which opened fire as the French charged again. The 52nd and the 95th delivered a furious crossfire on their flanks, killing two generals and I don't know how many men, but still they came on and fell upon us.'

He paused, his brow darkening. Nicky stirred and the major drew a breath before going on.

'I found myself caught between two chasseurs. I wounded one of them, but the other closed in. His sabre slashed down across my face and chest. I managed to unseat him and he

crashed to the ground. He made another wild slash and caught my leg, but I had the satisfaction of knowing he was taken prisoner and his comrades were in full retreat before I lost consciousness.'

'Don't stop, sir. What happened then?' Nicky's eyes were beginning to close.

'I was patched up and put on to a baggage wagon. Luckily I had no serious internal injuries, for I fear it would have been fatal to be so shaken and jarred as we continued to Villafraanca. I remember very little after that until we reached England. Someone had sent word to Markham, and my brother came to collect me from Falmouth and take me home. There I received the best treatment available, but alas, even money cannot buy me a new face.'

He lapsed into silence. Nicky was at last in a deep sleep, his little hand still clasped in the major's long lean fingers. Silence enveloped them. At length the major became aware of Zelah's presence and turned to look at her. She realised then her cheeks were wet with tears.

'I—I beg your pardon.' Quickly she turned away, pulling out her handkerchief. 'You have been most obliging, Major Coale, more than we had any right to expect.' She wiped her eyes, trying to speak normally. 'Nicky is sleeping now. We do not need to trouble you any longer.'

'And what will you do?'

'I shall sit with him...'

He shook his head.

'You cannot sit up all night. I will watch over him for a few hours while you get some sleep.'

Zelah wavered. She was bone-weary, but she was loath to put herself even deeper in this man's debt. He gave an exasperated sigh.

'Go and lie down,' he ordered her. 'You will not be fit to look after the boy in the morning if you do not get some sleep.'

He was right. Zelah retired to the little ante-room. She did not undress, merely removed her shoes and stretched out on the bed, pulling a single blanket over her. Her last waking thought was that it would be impossible to sleep with Major Coale sitting in the next room.

Zelah was awoken by a cock crowing. It was light, but the sun had not yet risen. She stared at the unfamiliar surroundings, then, as memory returned, she slipped off the bed and crept into the next room. Nicky was still sleeping soundly and the major was slumped forwards over the bed, his shaggy dark head on his arms.

The fire had died and the morning air was very chill. Noiselessly Zelah crossed the room and knelt down by the hearth.

'What are you doing?'

The major's deep voice made her jump.

'I am going to rescue the fire.'

‘Oh, no, you are not. I will send up a servant to see to that.’

He towered over her, hand outstretched. She allowed him to help her up, trying to ignore the tingle that shot through her at his touch. It frightened her. His presence filled the room, it was disturbing, suffocating, and she stepped away, searching for something to break the uneasy silence.

‘I—um—the story you told Nicky, about your wound. It was very...violent for a little boy. He seemed quite familiar with it.’

‘Yes. He asked me about my face the very first time he saw me and has wanted me to recount the story regularly ever since.’ He was watching the sleeping boy, the smile tugging at his lips just visible through the black beard. ‘I was working in the woods and he came up, offered to help me finish off the game pie Mrs Graddon had packed into my bag to sustain me through the day.’

‘You must have thought him very impertinent.’

‘Not at all. His honesty was very refreshing. Most people look away, embarrassed by my disfigurement.’

‘Oh, I beg your pardon. I hope you did not think that I—’

The smile turned into a grin.

‘You, madam, seemed intent upon inflicting even more damage upon me.’

The amusement in his eyes drew a reluctant smile from Zelah.

‘You did—do—look rather savage. Although I know now that you are very kind,’ she added in a rush. She felt herself blushing. ‘You have been sitting here all night and must be desperate for sleep. I can manage now, thank you, Major. You had best go...’

‘I should, of course. I will send someone up to see to the fire and order Mrs Graddon to bring your breakfast to you.’

‘Thank you.’ He gave her a clipped little bow and turned to leave.

‘Major! The chasseur—the one who injured you—was he really taken prisoner?’

He stopped and looked back.

‘Yes, he was.’ His eyes narrowed. ‘I may *look* like a monster, Miss Pentewan, but I assure you I am not.’