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A Lawless Place

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CHAPTER ONE

It was the sound of loud snoring that woke Betsey Langridge. The next thing to register was a splitting headache, soon followed by the realisation she had no memory of how she had got to her bedroom, indeed no recall at all of the night before. After several seconds of confusion, Betsey was also wondering why she was fully clothed, and that included her outdoor shoes. Having hauled herself upright, she staggered round to the vacant side of the bed to find there a total stranger, a young fellow with corn-coloured hair, crumpled in a sort of foetal position, clutching an empty brandy bottle and snoring steadily.

There was a pool of bile close to his mouth, the stench of which had her swoon, the supports of the four-poster enabling her to endure the wave of nausea without falling. Betsey tried to make sense of what she was seeing, coming slowly to the conclusion there was none. Looking towards the bedroom door, it seemed not to be fixed; indeed the whole room, the walls, the fireplace and the floor appeared to be moving in and out of focus, which made the move towards it otherworldly. Each step was an effort, accompanied by a feeling that, at any moment, her legs could give way.

Opening the door revealed a house in darkness, as well as silence. The light from a near-full moon was coming through the large landing window, throwing forward a shaft strong enough to bathe

everything in a slivery glow. Tempted to go back into the room, to ring the bell by the fireplace and summon a servant, she reasoned it cruel to drag them from their beds. Betsey was also worried about stability, which made the newel post at the head of the stairs a better bet for an outstretched hand.

What followed was a slow and cautious downward progress, one step at a time, both hands on the bannister, until she made the ground floor. The same shaft of moonlight bounced off the highly polished boards, providing enough of a gleam to make further progress possible. Not that she could move on immediately; Betsey had to stop and gather herself, eyes tight shut, for, given her exertions, she felt close to a faint. Only after several deep breaths could she raise her head, opening them to look around.

Familiarity identified the outlines of the various items of furnishing in the spacious hallway: the twin settles and, in the centre of the circular table, a great silver and light-reflecting bowl, which prompted a memory. At the social gathering she had organised weeks before, it had served as a receptacle for a popular rum punch, too much so for some of the guests.

There had been gaiety, laughter, with melancholy Cottington Court and its grounds turned into a place of pleasure, brought on by numerous guests and games, a gathering of old friends and acquaintances, followed by a splendid dinner in a specially erected marquee to round off a wonderful day. How long ago that now seemed, like another world.

It was slow to dawn on Betsey, as more slivers of memory intruded. She should not be here in this house, a place she had been determined to flee. Or was that a dream? Was Edward Brazier, who had promised to come and take her to freedom and much more besides, an illusion?

A faint strip of light coming from her brother's study, leaking out from under the door, caught her eye. It needed the support of both her hands on the wainscot to make progress towards it and, once

outside, turning the handle also required effort. The catch released, she fell forward, which threw the door open, leaving her hanging on to the brass knob as her knees nearly gave way.

A multi-branch candlestick sat on Henry's desk, all the wax stems guttering and not far off vanishing. He was asleep in a chair before the fireplace, his long, spindly legs stretched out, crossed at the feet, shoes almost in the grate, hands folded corpse-like on his chest. There was little but ash now, with the odd faint hint of red, where the last of the embers retained some heat.

Hauling herself upright, Betsey made the distance between the door and Henry's huge desk to stand, hands pressed down, wondering at the disorder, highly unusual for a man so fussy about everything being orderly. There were two empty champagne bottles, used glasses and, once she turned her head, in another chair, the wild, pepper-and-salt hair of the Reverend Joshua Moyle. He lay, crown to one side, with tongue lolling out, also sound asleep.

'Elisabeth?'

Reacting too speedily to what was an urgent whisper nearly unbalanced her. One hand, clutching the edge of the desk, was required to stop her from sinking to her knees. Her Aunt Sarah stood in the doorway, looking anxious and making frantic gestures for both silence and that she should come away. Slow-witted, Betsey failed to respond, so her aunt closed the space between them, took her arm and led her back out into the hallway, softly pulling the door shut behind her.

'What is happening? I scarce know where I am.'

'My poor dear,' was all Sarah Lovell could say in response, this imparted in a voice full of misery. 'I never realised Henry could be so wicked.'

'Why? What has he done?'

'Best sit, Elisabeth,' was the reply, as Betsey was eased onto one of the hallway settles.

* * *

The scream, which rent the air a few minutes later, was enough to wake the dead, if not those too drunk to hear it. It stirred Henry Tulkington, who shuddered slightly at the unpleasant feeling of being chilled. For a moment he, too, was left to wonder where he was and why. What did register was the fur on his tongue, as well as the sour taste of stale wine on his breath.

Rising, his legs stiff from discomfort until fully erect, he laid his hands on the mantle to stare into the embers as the events of the last few hours came back to him, bringing forth a feeling of satisfaction. The crash of his door being thrown open, so violently it hit the wall, had him spin round. There stood his younger sister, glaring at him, her hands stretched out to hold herself steady on the frame. Even with a slightly woolly head, and knowing he was in for a tongue lashing, Henry forced himself to smile.

‘Elisabeth, my dear—’

‘You utter swine.’

‘What a lack of gratitude. I must profess myself shocked.’

‘I will not let this stand.’

‘Really? I don’t see how you can do anything to alter it.’

‘What did you put in that champagne?’

Henry picked up one of the bottles to examine it, as though it was an article unknown to him. ‘The means to make you compliant, which I see as being in the service of your best interests, as well as my own.’

A snuffing sound had Henry look towards Moyle, whose head had slipped off the back of the chair to leave him, hand outstretched towards the floor, suspended over the padded arm. ‘And here was the means to make it so.’

‘No, never . . .’

Henry moved a couple of feet towards the desk, to look down at a large open ledger, on to which he laid and drew a finger, followed by a quick glance at the wall clock. When he spoke, he did so in a voice full of faux wonder.

‘Dated yesterday, Elisabeth. Mr Harry Spafford, Groom, was joined in holy matrimony to Mrs Elisabeth Langridge, widow, service conducted by the Reverend Doctor Joshua Moyle, Vicar of the Parish of Cottington, witnessed by myself and your Aunt Sarah.’

The tone changed to icy disdain as he looked at her shaking head and heard her muttered denials.

‘You sought to defy me, Elisabeth, and that was bad enough. Yet worse was being interrogated on matters which were none of your concern. I must have failed to satisfy you, given you sank to the point of acting the spy.’

Her headshaking became more pronounced, accompanied by a tearful whimper.

‘Do you think me a fool? Did I not find you in this very room, when you thought I was absent? What were you seeking in here, something damaging to pass on to your naval captain?’ The finger jabbed the ledger. ‘You put his interests before that of your own family. This is payment for your duplicity.’

The tone lightened again, becoming almost jocose. ‘You will not be aware of it, but Brazier came for you, I suspect by arrangement, and he was not alone. Was it to help you to elope, to run away and bring disgrace upon the family? He and his band of ruffians were stood outside yonder window, just after your nuptials. I confess, I was tempted to ask him in, so he could act as an extra witness, but I doubt he would have seen the delicious irony.’

‘He will kill you.’

‘No, Sister,’ was a malevolent hiss. ‘Unless he wants to swing in Newgate. Even now, I could have him arrested, given that, in front of a crowd of witnesses, he aimed a pistol at my head. I shall pen a note to your admirer and advise him, since his purpose in coming to Deal is no longer capable of being realised, it would be best for all if he departed and went back to whichever rock he crawled from under.’

‘Well, well,’ was all he said, as Betsey fainted away, to crumple in the doorway.

A bell was rung to rouse out the servants and, once they had responded, Henry Tulkington gave them their instructions. ‘Take Mrs Spafford to her bedroom.’

Faced with a blank look at the use of the name, he shouted, which was past unusual for a man ever in tight control of his emotions, ‘That is her name now and, by damn, I hope she has good cause to regret it.’

It had taken time and eight strong arms to get Edward Brazier back to Deal, which came with many an admonishment telling him it would be impossible, whatever he thought, to bring on immediate redress. The odds they had faced, some two dozen of Tulkington’s hard and armed bargains, were too great to contest with. Even if they had shot a couple, and it had been considered, it would have ended in a beating and possibly much worse.

All five had got away from Cottington Court, exiting through the same hidden postern gate by which, with such high hopes, they had entered an hour before. They took with them, for security, the unsteady figure of one John Hawker, he being Henry Tulkington’s right-hand man and a nasty bastard to boot. Belting him had provided one of the few bright spots of an otherwise disastrous night.

The blow had been delivered by Tom ‘Dutchy’ Holland, who was more than a match in size for most men and could land a punch enough to fell an ox. When in service aboard the frigate HMS *Diomedé*, he had served as coxswain to Edward Brazier. It was he who had taken the lead in getting his one-time captain away, not that he could have succeeded on his own: it had required the combined efforts of all of his erstwhile shipmates, both physical and verbal, to move him.

Peddler Palmer had prised Brazier’s pistol from him lest, given his mood of uncontrolled fury, he shot Hawker out of hand. Every time he turned to go back and ‘sort out that bastard Tulkington’, Dutchy

had required the help of Peddler, as well as Cocky Logan and Brazier's servant, Joe Lascelles, to both restrain him and keep the head of his horse pointed in the right direction.

It was a slow ride back to Deal, made so by both the gloom and their prisoner: he was hauled along on foot, to be dragged along the ground when he fell. Hawker had been dumped as soon as they felt they were far enough off from Cottington to be secure, thrown into a muddy ditch and left to make his own way back, no mercy being shown to a man devoid of that quality in his own disreputable life.

It was a town, long asleep, to which they returned, with barely a lantern still burning in a window: even the numerous places of entertainment were closed, though a few of their customers were still about and ambulant, if barely so. Brazier was pushed through the door of his rented home as Peddler took the reins of the horses, leading them towards the nearby Navy Yard, where they would be stabled for the remainder of the night.

'Get a fire going, Joe,' Dutchy asked. 'Don't see us gettin' much sleep with the captain in such a state.'

Cocky Logan was quick to add his opinion, delivered in his strong Scots brogue. 'If we did, one ay us would have tae lay against the front door. Ye ken what the Turk's like when his dander's up.'

The use of Brazier's soubriquet got sage nods from the others. Given to him as a fresh-faced midshipman, many years previously, it had stuck. It went with his saturnine looks as well as his temperament, that of a fighting sailor ever eager for action; one – man or boy – who would bear no condescension from anyone.

Right now, he was sat in the parlour, staring at an empty inglenook, lost in his own thoughts. All of them were circled around ways to reverse what had occurred, for he had no doubt the claimed 'marriage' of Betsey Langridge to this Spafford creature was illegal. Even as he ruminated on this, he could not bring himself to believe Henry Tulkington had gone so far to prevent him marrying his sister.

He had only known of the man for a number of weeks, but to say they had not hit it off, on first meeting, was an understatement. At first, Brazier could not pin down a reason. Tulkington, for no discernible motive, seemed dead set against his widowed sister remarrying anyone and that extended especially to him. He had sought deflection by implying Brazier was a fortune-hunter, given that Betsey, over two years widowed, was in possession of several highly profitable sugar plantations.

That was easy to prove as nonsense: a successful post captain in King George's Navy, Edward Brazier was prosperous in his own right. In addition to his rank and pay, he had, in the Caribbean, taken a Spanish vessel carrying a cargo of silver. The Spaniard having been captured and in French possession for over two days, it could legitimately be claimed as a prize when the French privateer was sunk. Madrid had complained vigorously, only to be ignored by Whitehall.

Both ship and cargo had been bought in through the Prize Court, and that included head and gun money for the crew and the armaments, the proceeds to be distributed to the crew of HMS *Diomedé*. As the ship's captain, he had been in receipt of an eighth of the money, with a further tranche of the same size coming to him as the senior officer on a station which, due to an untimely death, lacked a commanding admiral.

The truth had finally emerged when he had been told of Tulkington's true colours, which were dark and menacing. Far from merely being a highly successful man of business, he had control of smuggling on the East Kent coast, near to an industry, as well as a firm grip on the trade in the town of Deal, where he was feared and admired in equal measure.

The prospect of an upright naval officer as a brother-in-law seriously alarmed him. This was enough to take an apparent disinclination to approve of his intentions on to a violent reaction. The severe beating to which Brazier had been subjected, mystifying at the time and within days of his arrival in Deal, stemmed from that source. Unaware of the cause at that point, and given a misleading

name to chew on, had caused Brazier to send for some old shipmates to guard against repetition.

Joe Lascelles apart, the trio of Dutchy, Peddler and Cocky were all handy in a fight. They had been the reliable men of his barge crew, always by his side when action was called for. Often they formed a boarding party, seeking to get a foothold on an opposed deck, with never a hesitation at the prospect of hurt. With them around, he felt his back was safe from the still-mysterious threat. When the truth about Tulkington emerged, he was doubly grateful for their presence.

‘I fetched a bottle of brandy, your honour. Thought you might need it.’

Brazier glanced up at Dutchy, a man who could look down on him stood upright. The bottle in his hand appeared tiny, the crystal goblet even more so. Joe Lascelles slipped by, flashing one of those smiles that always lit up his dark-skinned face, his arms laden with kindling with which to get going the fire.

‘What I need right now, Dutchy, is the whole of the crew of *Diomedé*, armed and ready for a cutting out.’

‘Wouldn’t serve, your honour.’

‘It would serve to satisfy me.’

Holland gave no reply; he knew himself to be right, just as he knew Brazier would see the sense when his mind cleared. This was not like being at sea in wartime, contesting control of the oceans with the French and Spaniards, or dealing with ex-colonists running contraband into the sugar islands from America. It was on land, at a time of peace, and there was the law to contend with.

‘I can’t let it go.’

‘Didn’t reckon you could.’

‘Did you see her, Dutchy?’

‘Not as plain as you, Capt’n.’

Brazier was back at the large sash window of Henry Tulkington’s study. With John Hawker’s men threatening his back and the well-lit

room before him, Betsey's brother had come to and opened the window. He stood grinning as he looked down the barrel of Brazier's pistol, no doubt reckoning the man his sister had planned to run away with would not shoot. He had no idea how close he had come to being mistaken.

'Betsey was looking straight at me, Dutchy, but with no recognition in her eyes. It was as if I was not there. The priest was drunk and so was what I assume to be the one named Harry Spafford.'

Brazier recalled Betsey's aunt as well, her eyes red with weeping while clutching a handkerchief, which looked as if it had been much employed. Sarah Lovell had never given any indication of liking him, obvious from the first time he had come across her in Jamaica. As Betsey's chaperone, sent out by her nephew after her being widowed, it had been her task to ward off the attentions of eager suitors and, given her niece's evident beauty added to her known affluence, they had been many. But there had been real sadness when their eyes met. Surely she would not have just stood by and let this happen?

'Your lady is likely a fighter, Capt'n, and will sort matters out, without you go seekin' blood. Happen things will look better once you've had a chance to pass a word with her.'

'I hope you're right, Dutchy. And since you brought that brandy, you'd best fetch another four goblets. I have no desire, this night, to drink alone.'