

Deepest, darkest, dankest Nottinghamshire, November 1816, sometime around midnight...

Joe woke with a start and blinked into the darkness. Someone was incessantly banging on his front door. His new front door sat in a prominent position in the middle of the town square. The perfect situation for his new medical practice. A central location in full view of everything to remind the reluctant residents of Retford there was a new physician in town. Not that they had thus far shown themselves to be particularly open to the idea. Nobody trusted a Warriner, even if their name now began with the lofty title of doctor.

His quest for acceptance was further hampered by Mrs Payne, whose name suited her better than any name had ever suited a person before. Chairwoman of the Retford Ladies League, all-round Luddite and devoted follower of the staunchly anti-Warriner Reverend Reeves, Mrs Payne was a thorn in Joe's side. Always ready to cast aspersions, judge and spread her maliciousness throughout the parish. It didn't help that his father had racked up huge bills in the shop she had owned for forty years. Despite the fact his eldest brother had paid her back, as he had all his father's debtors as soon as he could once he inherited the crumbling Markham estate, she still

carried a grudge. For his numerous imagined sins, Mrs Payne was also his next-door neighbour and had an uncanny knack of appearing when Joe least wanted anyone to appear. She regularly caught him talking to himself while she spied on him mixing his medicines- or as she preferred to call them to anyone who would listen, his Devil's potions. She was always there when he took delivery of the bottles of gin he used to clean his surgical instruments and had shouted from the rooftops her most assured belief that he was naught better than a drunkard like his hideous father. Joe had tried to explain the gin, as he tried to explain everything she vocally disapproved of, but his rational, reasonable words fell on deaf ears.

Her campaign of hate was bound to escalate after this evening's unfortunate incident. Who knew pea and ham soup would cause so much trouble. Joe had set it on the stove to heat and then become fully engrossed in a medical journal. Only the acrid smell of burning reminded him of his supper, by which time it was much too late to save it and the charred remnants of his evening meal were smouldering in the pot. In a panic he took it outside to the shared yard behind the building and tossed it on the ground, only to watch in abject horror as the wind took a spark to Mrs Payne's freshly laundered sheets billowing on the washing line. Because it had been a blustery day and the crisp cotton was as dry as a bone, they went up like a firework.

She dashed into the yard, arms waving, as Joe was scrambling around searching for a bucket and water to douse the flames. “What have you done! You beast!”

“Mrs Payne- I can explain...”

While it had been an unfortunate accident, Mrs Payne became hysterical the instant he attempted to regale the tale and called the constable. Fortunately, Mr Mellor was a reasonable man and agreed that Joe had not been trying to kill the woman, however Mrs Payne’s version of events would be the one the locals chose to embellish. Because the Wild Warriners were a bad lot. Always had been. It was in their tainted blood.

Joe had treated less than a handful of patients in the month since he had qualified. All of them too poor to be choosy about who would treat them. Old Dr Bentley insisted in payment up front. Joe wasn’t made that way. If someone was in need of his help, he had to give it. His philanthropic, nagging conscious wouldn’t have it any other way. If one discounted the scrawny live chicken and sack of bruised apples he had been given by two grateful patients, actual payment for any of his services was something he was yet to receive- but he was determined to change that. The people of Retford might hate him and his family, but this was his home and he was determined to be its physician.

More hammering below galvanised him and he dragged himself upright, tugged on his breeches and the shirt he had discarded before he had climbed into bed, and he

only just remember to grab his spectacles before he dashed out the door. It was probably the constable again. Summoned by Mrs Payne on more trumped-up charges while Joe had snatched a miserly hour's sleep. Or Mrs Payne herself. Good grief now there was a thought that banished all ideas of sleep from his mind. Joe would need his wits about him if he was going to go head to head with the harridan again tonight. Now that she was convinced he was intent on assassinating her.

“I'm coming!” If he didn't kill himself on the stairs first. He really needed to get in the habit of leaving a lamp burning on the off-chance he miraculously gained a patient rather than an irate neighbour.

Joe threw open the door and met the smiling face of his youngest brother Jake, who was casually leaning against the frame as if it wasn't well past midnight and hammering on a man's door during the witching hour was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. “Have you any idea what time it is!” Jake glanced up at the black sky and shrugged. “Some of us have important work to do. Sensible careers! How bloody typical of you to turn up here like a bad penny at an ungodly hour. Were you too scared to wake up Jack?”

“What happened to your legendary even temper?” His brother looked behind him as if looking for it. “Why- you are almost shouting Joe. It's most unlike you. Or has becoming thoroughly sensible destroyed all the joy in your character?”

“I’ve a good mind to shout.” Although already his reasonable, measured mind was making him reluctantly calm down. It was hardly Jake’s fault he had set the sheets on fire and temper tantrums had no place in a scientific brain. “Where have you hauled yourself from this time? A tavern wench’s bed on the Great North Road?” Jake had moved to London as soon as he had finished his own studies at Cambridge and to everyone’s consternation now lived the aimless, largely nocturnal life of a rake a hundred miles away.

“If you must know, I’ve been home since lunchtime. We had beef, in case you were wondering, and very nice it was too. But enough of this chitchat. Grab your bag Dr Sensible, you’re needed.”

“Letty?” His heavily pregnant sister-in-law was due any day now.

“No. Orange Blossom. She’s been in labour all day and Cassie is worried about her.”

“I don’t know anything about horses.” But he was already walking back towards his surgery to fetch supplies, knowing he had to help because he had been asked to. “I suppose the basic principles are much the same...” He’d delivered hundreds of lambs over the years on the family estate. They all had. Back in the days when Markham Manor had no staff, all four brothers had worked the land themselves, growing crops and raising sheep. It had been a while since he’d tended to an animal. Mostly, if memory served, the sheep managed to do it all

themselves although once or twice there were complications. Lambs came out breach or got stuck and human intervention was required. Nothing a firm grip and a good yank couldn't overcome. Horses were considerably bigger of course and Cassie's pretty little pony had chosen Jamie's huge and terrifying black stallion Satan as her mate.

Bag packed, he headed outside to where Jake had saddled his horse ready and the pair of them set off. Less than a quarter of a mile into the journey he realised he might be medically prepared, but he had been so distracted by mulling the differences between horses and lambs he had neglected to dress himself properly. Joe had forgotten both his hat and his greatcoat. His gloveless fingers were already frozen. The incessant rain this chilly night was the worst kind- the thin misty film so common in deepest, darkest, dankest Nottinghamshire- had effectively soaked into every fibre of his clothing that it now clung against his skin like an icy shroud. Jake, for all his many faults, was nowhere near as stupid and was tightly wrapped up against the elements. When Joe's teeth began to chatter he took pity on him and tossed him the thick, woollen scarf he had wrapped snugly around his neck and face. Joe tied it around his wet head and tucked the ends under the lapels of his coat, not caring that he resembled a washer woman. Who would see him at this hour anyway? Unless Mrs Payne had taken it upon herself to follow him. After recent events, he wouldn't put it past her.



A little before one...

Jamie greeted them in the stable with a frown. “She been lying on the floor now for hours. Her breathing is laboured.”

Poor Orange Blossom didn’t look well. Her protruding stomach quivered with the exertion but there was no sign of the foal making an appearance any time soon. Behind then Satan stamped and snorted in his stall. Joe made the mistake of turning around and staring into the animal’s jet-black eyes.

Raw, burning hatred.

It was always the same. Satan loved Orange Blossom, liked Letty and tolerated Jamie. Every other human was an enemy. Typically, despite the stallion’s tempestuous and temperamental disposition, Jake had attempted to ride him when Jamie had first brought him home. An experiment that lasted less than five minutes and culminated with his brother being thrown head-long into a ditch. It was a miracle he hadn’t broken his neck. Being naturally more cautious, Joe had always given Satan a wide birth, ostensibly because he respected the horse’s right to space. But in truth the animal terrified him. Having Satan literally breathing down his neck while he looked at Orange Blossom made Joe’s heart hammer in

his chest, however with two of his brothers looking on, he forced himself to be calm.

“Right- I suppose I’d best examine her then.” He laid one hand on the pony’s belly and swore he heard Satan growl. The foal within was moving. A good sign. He felt around trying to gauge the position but soon gave up, resigned to the unpleasantness he had been hoping to avoid. “Fetch some hot water and soap Jake.”

By the time his brother returned, Joe was stripped to the waist. He cleaned his arms and hands vigorously. Just because this was an animal didn’t mean he would compromise on his principals. At medical school Joe had experimented alongside his studies and those experiments showed that there was less risk of infection if he kept everything, including himself, scrupulously clean. His teachers had complained his obsessive fastidiousness it wasted time, but to his mind it saved it in the long run. He scrubbed himself dry with a towel. “Jamie, hold her head down. Could you hold her tail back?”

Jake’s face was a picture of disgust. “Good grief... please tell me you are not about to do what I think you are about to do?” When Joe nodded slowly, he did as he was asked and staunchly turned his face away. “This is disgusting! *You* are disgusting.”

Behind them Satan began to clomp one hoof angrily on the ground in warning.

“Oh dear.”

“What do you mean *Oh Dear?*”

“I can feel feet but no head.”

“What does that mean?”

“The foal is breach. It’s also enormous. I don’t think I’ll be able to turn it.” Joe briefly considered performing a caesarean then discounted it. It would mean almost certain death for Cassie’s beloved pony and then Satan really would have a reason to kill him. “I’m going to need some rope.”

Jamie clamped Orange Blossom down while Joe wrestled to loop the noose he had made around the foal’s slippery legs. He braced his feet apart on the stable floor and began to pull, trying and failing to ignore the racket coming from Satan’s stall. It sounded like the stallion was ramming at the door with his back legs. As the trapped foal began to inch into the world, the wooden barrier separating its bad-tempered father from the men shattered in a spray of splinters and straw. He reared up on his back legs and Joe let go of the rope only to watch the slippery legs of the infant disappear back inside.

“Whoa there boy!” Jamie did his best to soothe the savage beast with words, but being stuck on the ground holding Orange Blossom in position it had little effect. Satan paced back and forth, snorting and whinnying and randomly clomping one intimidating hoof on the ground

in warning. Joe grabbed the rope again, and keeping one eye firmly on the rampaging Satan resumed his battle.

The foal was ridiculously large. It's knobbly bones and long limbs made it an onerous process. As if sensing he needed to stay back and leave the humans to it, Satan snatched up Joe's discarded shirt with his teeth, then using one hoof to anchor it, thoroughly ripped the garment into shreds, all the while staring at Joe menacingly. His message was clear. *Hurt her and die!*

Something which would become inevitable if Joe couldn't save both mother and child.

Then all at once, something gave, and the foal shot out sending him tumbling back onto the ground into all the unmentionable things that now covered it. Jamie let go of Orange Blossom, who set to work cleaning her infant as it immediately attempted to stand on gangly, shaky legs.

The transformation in Satan was spectacular. The tattered remains of Joe's shirt fell from his mouth as he practically tiptoed towards his family, Joe blessedly forgotten. Then the proud parents nuzzled the foal as it stood between them.

It was a beautiful sight.

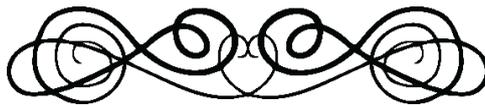
Touching even.

All three Warriners became instantly afflicted with the sudden profusion of dust in the air, rubbing it from their eyes and coughing manfully.

“A dash of port I think. To celebrate,” said Jake tossing Joe his soggy coat.

“Yes. Port would be...” The stable door flew open to reveal a servant with a lantern.

“Dr Warriner! Thank goodness you are here! The Countess is having her baby!”



Just after two...

The butler, Chivers, opened the door to Markham Manor and sagged with relief. “There you are! His Lordship is at his wits end.” Joe started up the stairs. “They are in the kitchen sir.”

The kitchen? That couldn’t be good. He swiftly changed direction and barrelled down the ancient Tudor hallway before skidding to a bemused stop at the scene in front of him. Letty was stood at the table, nose and cheeks dusted with flour, making what looked like pastry. Sat at the other end, arms folded, and scowling was his eldest brother. Their eyes locked and Jack’s rolled. Letty

greeted him with a sunny grin. “What are you doing here Joe? It’s very late. We’re you out on a call?”

“I sent for him. I was hoping he could talk some sense into you.”

Letty grabbed a handful of flour and tossed it angrily into the bowl. “After I expressly told you *not* to disturb anyone yet, when I have *hours* and *hours* still to go? Last time, I was chained to the bed for forty-six hours because of your fussing before Jonathan came. Forty-six hours of nothing!” Refusing to look at her husband Letty smiled tightly at Joe. “As always, your brother thinks he knows best, when clearly in this instance he does not.”

The pair of them were both as stubborn as each other. Taking either side in their little spat wasn’t likely to end well, yet the physician in him knew that Jack would not have summoned him unless he was worried. His big brother wasn’t keen on asking for help. “Seeing as I am here now, perhaps I should check that you do still have hours to go. Second babies often come more swiftly than the first.”

“As you can see, I am perfectly fine.” As she said that, she gripped the edge of the table and attempted to disguise the obvious strong contraction she was having. It didn’t fool either Joe or Jack, who shot to his feet and rushed to her side. Letty leaned heavily against him and gritted her teeth against the pain.

“How long has she been in labour?”

“Less than two hours. We went to bed around ten and she didn’t appear to be in any discomfort, but when I woke up at midnight she was gone. I found her in here determined to use the time productively.” And where no doubt words had been said.

“And the contractions?”

“I’ve been timing them like you told me. They are coming every five minutes now.”

“But they are short and don’t last long.” Letty took a deep breath then blew it out slowly. “Look. See. I am perfectly well again!” She went back to her pastry intent on ignoring them both, even though Jack had wrapped his arms protectively around her protruding middle. “Why don’t you do something useful Jack and set the kettle to boil? Your poor brother deserves some tea after being dragged from his bed under false pretences.”

Joe interrupted before his brother had time to argue. “Tea would be lovely.” He shot Jack a pointed look, which he hoped spoke volumes. “And if the latest Warriner does decide to make an appearance, we’ll need some boiling water.”

Joe did his best to pour oil on troubled water by changing the subject, telling the pair of them about Orange Blossom as his brother stomped around making the most reluctant pot of tea ever made, all the while keeping his beady eye possessively on his wife. Jack had been more relaxed about this second pregnancy, but still despaired

of his wife's reluctance to be mollycoddled even slightly. Yet Joe wasn't the least bit surprised to find her here in the kitchen. Letty enjoyed cooking despite their recent house full of servants and he could sympathise with her desire to take her mind off things. It was typical of Letty. Fiercely independent and more than a match for his mule-headed brother, she would ultimately do as she saw fit regardless. The pair of them adored each other and butted heads frequently, although all their many spats ended quickly. It had been the same since the first moment they clapped eyes on one another.

A teacup was plonked in front of him unceremoniously, the steaming contents sloshing over the table. "I've made him tea, now will you get off your feet woman! You should be in bed!" And just like that all Joe's careful diplomacy was unravelled.

"I am not lying in bed for another forty hours! The last time was pure torture! I want to stand up and move around!"

Jack's hands went to his hips. "Joseph- tell her to go to bed."

He was only ever called Joseph when trouble was brewing. "Actually..." Joe took off his spectacles and slowly polished them on a tea towel, hoping his nonchalance would soften his words. "In this instance, I suspect Letty might be right."

“You *suspect*? What sort of an answer is that? My wife is about to give birth and every medical book I have read says the woman should rest in bed during labour!”

“Yes, well I’m sure staid and set in their ways physicians like dear old Dr Bentley prefer the woman to be in bed because it makes their job so much easier, but basic common sense and science contradicts those crusty, old-fashioned texts.” His elder brother’s head looked about to explode, so Joe held up his hands to forestall the explosion. “Hear me out before you start shouting. It makes sense that gravity has a bearing on this. Being upright for as long as possible might well make the labour easier and faster.”

“You are speculating...”

“Using sound and reasonable fact. On other continents, women don’t tend to have their children flat on their back. It does seem to be a very British practice. They do it very differently elsewhere. And if one compares a contraction to a leg cramp...” Now it was Letty’s face that was outraged. “Albeit a significantly lesser type of pain, you wouldn’t lie still if you had a leg cramp. You would shake the limb. Rub the muscle. Put weight on it. Move. As neither you or I fully understand Letty’s current discomfort, I’m not entirely sure we should advise her on how best to relieve it.” Joe scrunched up his face, prepared for the explosion and when none came risked meeting his eldest brother’s gaze. “We are both

here. I'm not leaving until the baby is born, so let's just keep Letty company and see how things go."

Taking his silence as agreement, Joe took a sip of his tea. "What are you making Letty?"

"Jam tarts. We have a glut of strawberry jam in the pantry and we both have a sweet tooth."

Marital harmony restored, they spent the next few minutes drinking their tea while Letty busied herself with her dough and Jack bit his tongue. His older brother might not be very good at asking for help, but he was good at listening to advice and clearly accepted Joe's logic even if he didn't entirely agree with it.

Joe surreptitiously timed the spacing of her contractions. They were short but very close together. He had been in medical school when his first nephew had arrived, so had nothing but hearsay about the last labour to compare things with. There had been no complications and his sister-in-law had made a rapid recovery, so he wasn't worried. Not unduly. Nor did he bother announcing his belief that this particular Warriner was due sooner rather than later.

"Could you pass me the rolling pin?" Letty held out one hand while simultaneously using the other to dust the table generously with flour. "Achoo!" Her fingers went to her nose as another violent sneeze erupted. "Oh dear. I've got flour up my nose... Achoo! Achoo! *Ooooh!*"

Instantly she bent over the table clutching her stomach. “Ooooh!” Both men shot to their feet as her waters broke.

“Let’s get her upstairs!” Jack was about to pick her up, when she gripped his arm and bent double again.

“Ooooooh!” Her breath was sawing in and out as she tried to pant through the pain. “I think the baby is coming!”

“I know sweetheart. I’m going to carry you upstairs...”

Letty’s eyes were wide as she shook her head. “I think it’s coming now Jack!”

It wasn’t often Joe saw his brother panic, but it was obvious somebody else now needed to take charge. With one sweep of his arm, he sent the utensils and bowls flying off the table and dusted off the flour. “Help me lift her on here!”

“I’ll need towels, lots of them, and hot water.” As Jack ran off to issue instructions to Chivers, Joe ripped off his still damp coat, rolled it up and stuffed it behind her back as a support until something better arrived. Then he snatched up his medical bag. “I’m just going to scrub my hands Letty.” She nodded, oddly calm although still panting.

Joe tipped an entire bottle of gin into the steaming water on the stove, then almost burned off his skin hastily scrubbing himself down. By the time he returned to the table, Jack was back and he was glaring.

“Where’s your bloody shirt!”

“Satan destroyed it. Lie back Letty, I just need to quickly examine you...”

“You are not examining my wife with no shirt on!”

“*Ooooooh!*” Letty’s fingers were like claws in Joe’s arm. The contractions coming thick and fast.

“Go and get a shirt this instant!”

“I don’t have time to grab a shirt you idiot!” Nor did Joe have the time for his brother’s irrational behaviour. Jack, on the other hand, wouldn’t be appeased and began to yank off his own shirt while Joe examined Letty.

“Put it on! You’re practically naked.”

What was it about expectant fathers that made them lose all sense of reason? It was a peculiar phenomenon he had witnessed many times since he started training as a doctor. They could be perfectly reasonable one minute, then raving lunatics the next. Jack wasn’t normally so daft, but like Satan with Orange Blossom less than an hour ago, something about watching their beloved in clearly pain sent rational men quite mad. Not that Satan was rational. Or remotely human.

“You need to calm down Jack. You’re being ridiculous. I doubt Letty cares either way.” Because, like Joe, right at this minute she had better things to concern herself with. The baby’s head was already crowning.

“The only naked man my wife has ever laid eyes on is me! And I intend to keep it that way!”

“I never want to see you naked again Jack Warriner! You naked is what got me into this mess!” Letty scrunched her eyes shut and blew rapidly, her nails digging into Joe’s skin so hard he winced. He happily passed the offending hand to her husband and promptly put an arm’s distance between them. Letty was correct. Technically this was all Jack’s doing, so he could endure the pain alongside his wife. “You are never sleeping in my bed again!”

“You don’t mean that sweetheart.” Jack stroked her hair and glared at Joe. “Now look. You’ve upset my wife!”

“I do mean it. In fact, once this is over I want separate rooms. Separate houses.... Oooh!” She clung to her husband’s hand so tightly, Joe could see the tips of his fingers turn purple. Then she shuffled awkwardly off the table and began to pace in aimless circles while Jack did his level best to support her. Neither one capable of conjuring a rational thought between them.

“Put on that blasted shirt NOW!”

Joe snatched up the garment and wriggled in to it, his own temper close to the surface. “Are you happy now? I’m sure Letty is thrilled that you are now half naked instead of me.”

The presence of a layer of linen did seem to appease him, which was just as well, because what followed happened

so fast none of them expected it. Letty suddenly lunged for the table and bent over it. Sensing it was necessary, Joe dived onto the floor and less than a minute later baby found himself cradling a wailing new-born.

At the sight of his new son, Jack's lip began to quiver, and he and Letty hugged and kissed one another while Joe dealt with all the medicinal things. The latest Warriner was very pink and very noisy. Like all the Warriner men he had jet black hair. Joe didn't need to see them to know the eyes would be blue- not the usual blue of newborns- but Warriner blue. It was an enduring trait which seemed determined to continue in perpetuity. He cleaned the child and swaddled him in a blanket, then handed him reverently to his now soppily grinning parents.

“If one discounts the fact he looks exactly like Jack, he's perfect. Congratulations.”

Joe turned away and made himself scarce as he packed his bag, feeling a little overwhelmed himself yet supremely conscious that the tender moment behind him was Jack and Letty's. In a few minutes, he would help get her upstairs and settle her into bed, until then tea was probably called for. Preferably with a large tot of brandy in it as his nerves were a little fraught. Two births in one night was about as much as he could handle. He'd probably sleep for days now.

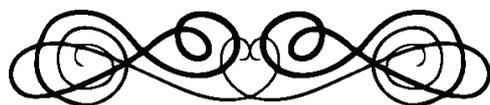
“Boy or girl?” Jake sauntered into the kitchen soaking wet and smiling, kissing first Letty then the child and patting his elder brother on the back.

“Another boy.” Joe held out his hand and watched amused as Jake groaned and pulled money out of his pocket to slap in his outstretched palm.

“I was certain this one would be a girl. Never mind. I’m equally certain I shall earn it back by the morning.” He grinned and patted Joe’s arm sympathetically. “Apparently, there is no rest for the sensible. You’re needed again Dr Warriner.”

“Cassie?” Joe’s voice came out high-pitched in panic. “But she’s not due for weeks yet!”

“Well she’s quietly been in labour for six hours and didn’t tell Jamie because she didn’t want to worry him. Which makes her eminently sensible too. Cassie is dealing with it all swimmingly, taking it all in her stride. Jamie is a wreck though. You’ll have your work cut out there, Big Brother. I’ve never seen him in such a state.”



Five minutes to four...

Joe dashed through the rain towards the stables for his horse, but when lightening split the sky above he skidded

to a halt. His horse was a nervous animal and wouldn't cope with the weather. Jamie's new house had been built within the grounds of Markham Manor and was less than twenty minutes' walk away. Ten if he ran. Clutching his bag, he set off across the lawn and into the sheep pasture, his boots slipping on the sodden mud beneath his feet. Away from the light of the manor house, the darkness and weather made navigating the distance impossible. Twice he almost hit a sheep, veering at the last minute, his eyes fixed firmly on the twinkling windows of his brother's house in the distance.

His foot found a shallow pothole filled with rainwater, making his step falter momentarily, but as he lurched forward the sticky mud on the bottom formed a suction against the sole of his boot. Joe tugged his leg away violently and while his foot followed, the boot did not.

Cold mud squelched between his toes as Joe rummaged around in the darkness for his missing boot.

“Baaaaaaa!”

He heard the sheep a split second before he barrelled into it. Or perhaps it was the sheep which barrelled into him, because the next thing he knew his legs had flown out from under him and he was flying through the air at speed. In a bizarre moment of complete lucidity, Joe wrapped both his arms tightly around his medical bag, realising that if he lost that in the dark then he would have nothing to help Cassie if she experienced difficulties.

It was a selfless act in homage to his complete and dedicated professionalism, but it did nothing to lessen the impact. Joe landed face down in the stinging mud; the rigid leather bag winding him as thunder, or fate, rumbled in amusement above.

Because he couldn't breathe, he allowed himself a brief moment of pity before he scrambled to sit, threw his head back towards the Heavens and did his best to use the now ferocious sheets of iced rain to clear away most of the muck from his eyes. Nottinghamshire mud was a tenacious beast. Thick and viscous, and with a distinctly farm-yard smell, it coated every inch of him. His borrowed shirt was ruined, as were his breaches. A cold trickle of the stuff dripped out of his ear and disappeared down his collar. Joe sincerely hoped one of Jamie's servants had the wherewithal to have plenty of water boiling. He could hardly deliver a baby dipped in sheep dung.

Resolutely he trudged onwards towards his brother's house, his pace slower now that he had one frozen, slippery, bare foot to contend with and mindful of the unpredictable nature of sheep in a thunderstorm. Inexplicably, as he got to the house, Joe stopped and smoothed down his hair, as if that would somehow make him seem more presentable. Inevitably it failed. The house keeper had a brief moment of terror upon seeing him at the door, then ushered him inside once she heard his voice and realised he was not a monster.

His muddy eyes had barely time to adjust to the light when he found his upper arms gripped firmly and his body was roughly shaken by a wild-eyed Jamie.

“She’s in pain! Make it stop!”

Joe didn’t bother replying. After Jack and Satan, what was the point? Whatever he said would fall on deaf ears. Jamie was obviously many miles past rational. “Mrs Hobson- can you prepare a tub in the kitchen? I will be back presently to wash.” He took the stairs two at a time with Jamie limping behind him ranting incoherently and poked his head around the bedchamber door.

“Oh Joe- what happened to you?” Cassie was sat on the bed, flushed but otherwise looking quite well.

“Rain. Sheep. Long story. How are you doing?”

“Not too bad. The labour pains are coming every ten minutes or so. I’m sorry *he* dragged you here early, but as you can see...” she glanced pointedly at her pacing husband, “Things are a little fractious.”

As Jamie was waving his arms around and repeating ‘*This is all my fault*’ over and over again, fractious was an understatement.

“He’s a first-time father. They do tend to take it badly. I thought Satan was going to kill me earlier.”

“Jake says the new foal is lovely. Thank-you for tending to Orange Blossom.”

“No thanks are required. Did Jamie tell you Letty also went into labour as well tonight? She had another boy less than half an hour ago.”

Cassie’s eyes lit up. “No he didn’t. How wonderful! He should have told me.” She shot an exasperated glance at her still-pacing husband.

“I’m sure it went clean out of his mind the moment he realised you were in labour. The poor man is besotted with you. And rightly so. He only wants what’s best.”

“You should be with Letty now, Joe. not me. I’ve got hours still to go.” A sentence he had already heard once tonight, and which had dramatically proved to be hopelessly wrong.

“No need. Mother and baby are in fine fettle and Jake is there to help. He will send word if I’m needed.”

“What have I done! What have I done!” Jamie was apparently now addressing the ceiling, a picture of abject torment. His big hands clutching at his hair in despair. They both shook their heads at the pathetic sight of him.

“He doesn’t like to see me in pain. He’s been inconsolable for an hour now. There is no reasoning with him.”

“Leave him to me. You rest between contractions while I get cleaned up.” Joe walked towards his brother and laid a calming hand on his shoulder. “Jamie...”

His brother's fingers clawed at his muddy lapels. "Save my wife Joe! Don't let her die!"

"She's not dying Jamie."

"You promise?"

"I promise. She is doing really well, in fact. Positively splendid."

"She is?"

"Of course she is. You've taken such good care of her throughout her pregnancy, how could she not be?"

"But she's in pain Joe and that's *my* fault!"

"There is always pain in labour, that's why it's called labour. It's inevitable and perfectly natural. In a little while, all her pain will be gone, and you will finally get to meet your child. However, right now she needs her rest and she needs your support. *You* need to calm down."

"I'm perfectly calm!"

Lord save him from thick-headed men! "I say this with love, Big Brother, so don't hit me- but right this minute you are more *deranged* than calm- and you are not *helping* Cassie. Tonight, she needs brave Jamie not this alien incarnation which appears to have taken over your body. You need to breathe." Joe demonstrated with some deep inhalations and as Jamie stared desperately into his eyes, he began to copy. Only when the maniacal

expression began to subside did Joe risk speaking again. Slowly. “I need *you* to help me. Can you do that?”

His brother’s head bobbed as if in a trance.

“I need to wash all this mud off and then I will need some clean clothes.” Jamie’s eyes narrowed as he noticed the thick, smelly mud coating Joe from head to foot for the first time. “Can you find me some clean clothes?”

“Yes.”

“Once you’ve found them, I need you to bring them to me downstairs. I’ll be in the kitchen.” Where Joe intended to brew up a soothing draft of something potent to force-feed to his brother.

It seemed prudent to strip off outside in the rain and sluice himself thoroughly from the cold pump before he allowed himself the luxury of washing in the steaming hot water Mrs Hobson had prepared in the kitchen. Not a stitch of his clothing could be salvaged, the mud had even seeped into his drawers, so Joe was stood in nothing but a towel when Jamie finally came to find him with some clothes. He shimmied into the breaches first and then grabbed the shirt, pulling it over his head before he noticed the pristine white linen wasn’t in fact a shirt. It was one of Cassie’s nightgowns. And the front was covered in Letty’s trademark embroidery. Bright, intertwined roses and carnations decorated the edge of the neckline, the sleeves and the lacy hem which hung mid-calf. He considered tearing it off and yelling at his

brother, but with poor Jamie was in such a tortured state and the memory of Jack's irrational behaviour still fresh in his mind, Joe decided against it. He would find a proper shirt when he went back upstairs. The ridiculous garment was hardly the worst fate had thrown at him tonight. At least Jamie was rational enough to have brought clothes.

“Drink this.”

“What is it?”

“Camomile tea. It's renowned for its soothing properties.” Joe couldn't help smirking when he watched Jamie pick it up and sniff it suspiciously.

“It smells like brandy.”

“There might be smidgen of brandy in there as well. To relax you a little. For everyone's sake.”

“You're enjoying this aren't you?”

“Immensely. It's a bit like watching the mighty Roman Empire crumble. I've never seen you so...”

“Worried?”

Delusional was more like it but Joe let it slide. “There's a second cup for Cassie- minus the brandy of course. Perhaps now that you are back to being Jamie again you can take it up to her? I'm sure she would appreciate the conversation and company rather than the ranting and raving. And while you are up there, I don't suppose you

could sort me out a proper shirt?” He daintily held out the edges of the nightdress and twirled, making Jamie smile. “Whilst I think this ensemble compliments my beautiful blue eyes, I’m not sure I have the figure to carry it off.”

They took the stairs at a more leisurely pace and paused outside the bedchamber door, where his brother took a deep breath. “Are you ready?”

“I was born ready.” Jamie opened the door and the delicate china cup of camomile tea slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor. Joe pushed past him and took in the scene. Cassie was on her feet gripping the bed post, her pretty face contorted in agony while the housekeeper was on her hands and knees swabbing the floor with a towel.

“I think my waters just broke!” Waters Jamie’s horrified eyes were latched on. What was needed now was a physician’s dose of reassurance.

“Excellent news. Things are progressing nicely. Let me help you back on the bed. Jamie...” Joe clicked his fingers summoning his brother out of his latest trance. Jamie rushed to his wife’s side and gently lifted her back on to the mattress, then stood watching like a petrified statue in the grip of a nightmare while Joe examined her.

“There’s blood...” All the colour had blanched out of his face.

“A tiny bit- all *perfectly natural*.” Cassie started to pant as a massive contraction ripped through her. She grabbed Jamie’s hand lifeless hand and squeezed.

“*Oh my God! What have I done to you?*” Rational Jamie had clearly upped and left again.

“Why don’t you go and wait downstairs. Have a glass of brandy...”

“I am not leaving her side!” His skin was changing colour yet again. A green hue seemed to grow from his thick neck and over his face, replacing the grey pallor of a moment ago. It was quite specular. Even poor Cassie noticed it.

“Your brother is right Jamie. Go downstairs. You are no use to me or Joe like this! When you are calm...”

“I’m perfectly calm woman...” Jamie tottered left then right. “I am here for you my darling...” Then he began to list to the right looking ready to vomit. “This is all my fault...”

For a big man, Captain James Warriner dissolved on the floor with impressive grace. Cassie, Mrs Hobson and Joe both stared at his prone form on the carpet silently for several seconds. He was breathing deeply like a man sound asleep, his mouth wide open. The mother-to-be spoke first. “Has he fainted?”

Joe crouched down, checked his brother’s pulse and clammy forehead and nodded. “I believe so. Let’s leave

him lie still for a minute and equilibrate. He was a little overwrought.” He gently lifted his brother’s head and placed a pillow beneath it. “Probably for the best all things considered.”

“Probably...” Cassie gazed at her husband with affection on the floor before her eyes wandered to Joe’s big, bare feet. “Is there a good reason you are wearing my nightdress?”

“All good physicians wear a nightrail during a birthing. It’s all the rage nowadays.” Joe executed a few lunges to make her laugh. “Much less restricting than a coat, I find. *So* much freedom of movement. *So* much refreshing, cooling air around the nethers.” Cassie giggled then groaned, and the pair of them got to work.

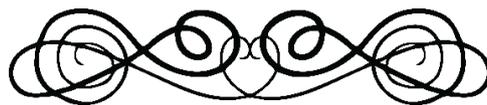
“It’s a girl!” For some reason, that surprised Joe despite the fact he had bet Jake five pounds that it would be. His youngest brother would be furious to have lost two wagers in the space of an hour. Furious and delighted. Jake was a doting uncle, as was Joe, but a wager was a wager and all four of them were fiercely competitive.

The first female Warriner in over a century had hair as black as pitch and eyes as blue as the ocean. “Look Jamie- you have a daughter!”

“She’s perfect.” Stood pale and shaky at his wife’s side, still a bit green beneath the cold flannel on his head, Jamie gazed at the tiny bundle in wonder for a moment before awkwardly taking her into his arms and handing

her to Cassie. He kissed his wife and daughter, then turned to Joe sheepishly. “Thank goodness you were here to save the day. I apologise for earlier. I’m not entirely sure what came over me...”

Joe held up his hand. He didn’t want Jamie to feel bad about loving his wife to distraction or for displaying the sensitive real nature he kept hidden. “If its any consolation, Jack was a raving lunatic tonight too. And you saw Satan. Temporary insanity is perfectly reasonable when you have to watch the thing you love most in pain. But you rallied, and you were there for Cassie.” Who had very nearly broken his fingers in the final stages of the labour and the stoic Jamie had not complained a bit. “I’m sure one of these days, you’ll get to witness me in the same state or worse. Probably worse.”



A little after five...

Once he was certain everything was well, Joe packed up his things wearily. Jake had sent word that all was well at Markham Manor. Cassie was sleeping peacefully. Jamie was cradling his baby as if she was the most precious thing in the world, father and daughter had spent a good half an hour staring at each other in bemusement

as if trying to figure the other out. Both appeared to be still none the wiser but content to continue staring.

Neither noticed when Joe tiptoed out. Outside the rain had stopped and the night sky was waning. In another hour it would be daylight and he was exhausted. The short walk across the mud to Markham Manor to fetch his horse seemed a hundred miles away in the borrowed boots and dry greatcoat he had found in the hallway, but the walk to his house on the market square was further and he needed to go home in case somebody else urgently needed the services of a physician.

Resigned he set off, keeping his drooping eyes focussed for both wayward sheep and muddy potholes. Joe had just reached the pasture when the hairs at the back of his neck prickled. At first he thought it was the cold that caused it. The rain had shrouded the ground in freezing mist and once again he had forgotten a hat. But then then he heard a menacing snort. His head whipped around in time to see the wisps of mist part like the Red Sea and the menacing shape of a large black stallion loomed ever closer.

Satan's cold, black eyes locked with Joe's and he snorted again, sending clouds of his frozen breath into the air. Joe stopped dead and the stallion stamped the ground with one powerful hoof. Joe didn't speak horse, but Satan's usual message was as clear as crystal.

Raw, burning hatred.

Joe considered running then squared his shoulders. Running was futile. Satan was as quick as he was mean. There was no point calling for help. He was too far from either house for his anguished cries to be heard. An eerie calm settled over him, making Joe look towards the purple ribboned sky.

So this was how it ended? Was fate that cruel? That twisted? He had delivered three new souls into the world and his reward was to be doomed to be pummelled to mush in the sticky Nottinghamshire mud by a vengeful horse, while wearing a floral nightdress and borrowed boots. So be it. Joe didn't have the strength to argue with fate anymore tonight. He stood, shoulders slumped and closed his eyes, preparing himself for the inevitable impact, hoping his death was quick or that someone capable found his battered and broken body and he could miraculously be nursed back to healthy after the onslaught. He felt the beast's hot breath on his face, his muzzle against his ear, then with a sigh, Satan simply rested his giant head on Joe's shoulder and nuzzled his neck.

They stood like that for the longest time, until the horse stepped back and slowly lowered his front legs in invitation. A little dazed and a lot confused, Joe hoisted up the nightdress and climbed on the stallion's back. With no reins or saddle, all he could do was hold on to the mane and trust. Only once the horse was sure Joe was secure, did he move. Thankfully he didn't gallop like the wind or even cantor. Instead, at a leisurely pace and

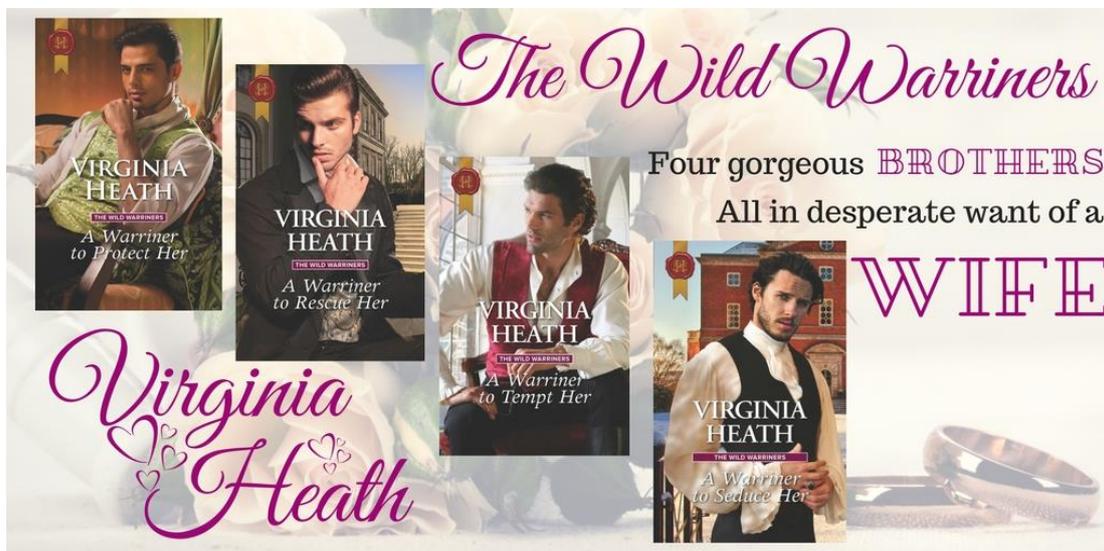
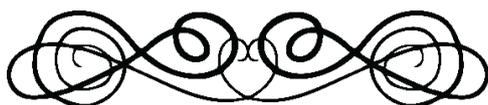
without any direction from Joe, Satan took him back to the deserted market square and deposited him safely outside his front door well before the sun or any of the judgemental residents of Retford made an appearance.

And then, because he was Satan, the horse reared, whinnied and galloped away. Joe watched him awestruck. It had been a surreal night from start to finish. Challenging, unexpected but wholly wonderful. There were two new Warriners and a beautiful black foal and Joe had delivered all three. How amazing was that?

Smiling, he reached into his pocket for his key only to remember he wasn't wearing his coat. *His* key was at Jack's house or Jamie's. In the grand scheme of things, such a triviality hardly mattered. Joe made his way around to the back yard and tested the window to his kitchen. The small sash opened easily, so he shrugged out of the greatcoat and laid it across the window sill to prevent the lock injuring his skin as he crawled through it, then he bent down to retrieve his medical bag only to jump out of his skin at the piercing female scream mere inches from his left ear.

“Dr Warriner!” Mrs Payne’s eyes were wide as she swept them up and down his nightdress. “What ungodly perversion is this? Does your depravity know no bounds?”

Somewhere in the distance he heard fate having the last laugh but ploughed on regardless. “Mrs Payne- I can explain...”



A Warriner to Protect Her:

An heiress in distress and an earl in disgrace...

When heiress Violet Dunston escapes from an abduction, she finds an unlikely protector in Jack Warriner--a member of one of England's most infamous families. Ensnared with mysterious Jack behind his manor's walls, soon escape is the *last thing on Letty's mind!* Jack may be an earl, but his father's exploits have left him with nothing to offer except a tarnished name. He's turned his back on the *ton*, but with *Letty tempting him day and night, he finds himself contemplating the unthinkable--a society marriage!*

A Warriner to Rescue Her:

Tempted by the damsel in distress!

Captain James Warriner is startled to find a curvaceous beauty caught up a tree in his orchard! Despite his shattered leg, he rescues Miss Cassandra Reeves, then is determined to have nothing more to do with the enticing vicar's daughter. Except when Cassie seeks Jamie out to apologise, they find themselves persuaded to work together on her storybook. Secret liaisons with the dashing soldier make Cassie wish Jamie would rescue her once more...by making her his wife!

A Warriner to Tempt Her:

A shy innocent- She's wary of all men.

Shy Lady Isabella Beaumont is perfectly happy to stay in the background and let her sister get all the attention from handsome suitors following a shocking incident. However working with Dr Joseph Warriner to help the sick and needy pushes her closer to a man than she's ever been before. Is this a man worth trusting with her deepest of desires...?

A Warriner to Seduce Her:

A sensible schoolmistress...

Awakened by the notorious rake!

In this *The Wild Warriners* story, schoolmistress Felicity Blunt feels old beyond her years--and desperately dull. Meeting confirmed rake Jacob Warriner brings her gloriously alive, and yet no matter his allure she must remain immune to his obvious charms and unashamed flirtation. But is Jacob merely a mischievous scoundrel? Or is there much more to this Warriner than meets the eye...?