

CONTINUITY: A Love Story

By Nikki Basuk

Continuity

"Ask her to join us, James, please."

"But, Mother, I..."

"Now, James. She's earned the right to stand with us. After all, she was part of your father's life for a long time."

The young man glared at his mother, then turned on his heels. He started towards the slender figure silhouetted in black against the sky. She was standing alone on a parapet overlooking the cemetery, wearing a widow's veils. Below her, a small group of mourners was gathered around a freshly dug grave.

"My mother would like you to join us."

She stood motionless. The young man started again.

"Won't you join us, please. It is my mother's wish."

She extended a small black clad hand. She took his arm. They walked down together.

"Come with me, my dear. You may go ahead now, Parson."

The pinched mouth of the minister shouted disapproval, as James led the woman to his mother's side.

"Ashes to ashes..."

James tuned out the words. He stood just behind his mother and the other woman. Today was the first time he had ever seen her. He wondered about what she looked like without the swaddling veils. He had known about her for so long. He remembered the servants' snickering remarks still, spoken well out of his mother's earshot. His mother was such a commanding figure. How could she have allowed his father to behave that way, to disgrace them all? In so many years, not a word, not so much as a clue that she knew of her husband's double life. And now he was dead. James just did not understand

his mother today. Why did she ask him to fetch the woman? What was on her mind?

"Amen."

James was jolted out of his reverie. The mourners were filing past his mother, murmuring condolences.

"You may go on ahead to the house, James. Make sure people have enough to eat and drink. We're walking back. Go on, now, I'll be fine."

She turned to the woman clothed in black just like her.

"Constance, It's all right if I call you Constance, isn't it? I've known of you for so long. I feel we are just like sisters. Call me Blanche. Not a name I would have chosen for myself. Too tame. Come my dear, let's go home."

She cast one more look at the grave, turned, threw back her hat and veils and peeled off her gloves. She undid the black ribbons disciplining her hair.

A cascade of red curls swirled around her face. She was tall and slim. Her face was strong, with a straight nose and green eyes slanted in perpetual amusement.

The other woman was still. She had not uttered a word. Blanche turned to her, removed the widow's hat and veils, revealing a pretty face framed by long blond hair.

"Constance. He's dead. I'm your family now. I'm all you have left of him. You loved him. I don't hold it against you. I'll love you too."

She took Constance's hand and started to walk towards the carriage hidden behind the foliage.

"You may take us home now."

She took the manservant's hand and climbed in.

"I said, you may take us home now. Both of us, now."

They rode in silence. Blanche helped Constance down and led her into the house.

Two maids rushed forth and stopped dead in their tracks at the sight of the younger woman.

"Take Mademoiselle de Venne upstairs and help her with her bath. Don't gawk, girls, move. And you, my dear, go with them. They will look after you. I'll join you in a while, after you have rested and have had a bite to eat."

Constance followed the maids, silent, her head bowed.

In no time it seemed, she had been helped to undress, bathe, and was nibbling on the remains of a very good meal. She felt mellow from the wine and the emotions of the day.

Blanche entered Constance's room. She took her hand and led her to the bed.

She stroked her face gently and let the wrap loose. She traced the sweet line of one buttock and tasted the hollow of her neck.

"Sit next to me for a while. You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"He did not like me to speak. He said I was foolish."

"Foolish...For all these years, I managed his estates, raised his children and provided for you too, my dear. Do not fear me. I will not force you. There's no need. You will love me. You will speak with me. You've come home. I'll meet you at breakfast tomorrow.

Blanche rose and left the room.

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