

# **MASKED ROBBER SERIES**

4. BAIT FOR THE MASKED ROBBER



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# **BAIT FOR THE MASKED ROBBER**

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## **The Masked Robber Series**

The cover sketch has been specially designed to match the theme of the Masked Robber series. It is a new creation for the cover of the book. This book is available in e-book format for the first time.

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## SUMMARY

Mystery and adventure await in this thrilling fourth installment of The Masked Robber series. Set in nineteenth century Cape Colony, South Africa, the story follows the exploits of the enigmatic Masked Robber as he battles injustice and comes face-to-face with his greatest foe yet.

When Princess Carla von Starrenberg arrives in the Cape searching for her long-lost brother, the rightful heir to the throne of Lutzburg, she quickly becomes entangled in a web of intrigue and danger. Her carriage is attacked under cover of darkness by a band of villains, but she is miraculously rescued by the legendary Masked Robber, a mysterious figure who strikes fear into the hearts of evildoers. The Masked Robber learns that Carla's enemies are part of a conspiracy led by the cunning Arnoldt Te Kruyght to prevent her from finding her brother and restoring him to the throne. Te Kruyght and his sinister henchman, Michael Leeuwbergglanz, will stop at nothing to maintain their grip of power in Lutzburg.

A deadly game of cat and mouse ensues as the Masked Robber races to stay one step ahead of Te Kruyght and uncover the location of the hidden prince. Following a trail of clues, the Masked Robber encounters treachery and deception at every turn. Even his identity is at risk of being exposed to his foes. But Te Kruyght is equally cunning, luring princess Carla into a devious trap with a false message from her brother. The Masked Robber must uncover the ruse and rescue Carla before she falls prey to Te Kruyght's evil schemes. A harrowing showdown on a hijacked ship ensues, swords clash in the dead of night, and the Masked Robber must test his mettle against his mortal foe.

Will justice prevail over evil? Can the Masked Robber complete his mission and restore the rightful king to the throne of Lutzburg? Tension mounts as this thrilling tale races toward its stunning conclusion. With its breakneck pace, twisting plot, memorable characters, and vivid historical setting, "Bait for the Masked Robber" will leave readers on the edge of their seats. Adventure lovers and fans of classic action-

packed storytelling won't want to miss this sweeping tale of bravery, romance, and redemption. Let the adventures of the Masked Robber sweep you away to another world, set in colonial Cape during the early 1800s.

## EXTRACT

Sporadically, he looks up. It is already scorching hot. His eyes are blinded by the bright glowing flames that now fill the entire hallway. It feels to him as if the flames are creeping up from behind, and he concludes that they must already be much closer. His eyes dart towards the living room. There is a wall of flames connecting the living room and dining room. They still lick high against the walls, and a few of the crossbeams have already caught fire.

His entire body is drenched in sweat. The blood from the wound on his temple flows into his left eye, and he has to keep blinking it away.

Underneath him, the floor is hollow. He had established this fact a long time ago. The house was built on a slope. The back doors are level with the ground, but the front porch is about six feet above ground level. If he could get underneath it, he would at least be able to move.

He had already cut through two planks. He can no longer see the knife, but he presses it half under his face. Occasionally, he feels it cut into his cheek, but it does not bother him.

He stops his efforts for a moment and kicks the two loose planks as hard as he can. They give way quite a bit, but due to his uncomfortable position, he cannot exert enough pressure to break them off. Again, he cuts into the plank half under his face. He feels the knife slip.

The flames are now less than five steps away from him. It feels like his hair is starting to singe. His whole body is glowing from the terrible heat.

He pulls the knife away from his face. The tendons in his neck tighten as he pulls out all the stops to push the planks beneath him with his head.

## 4. BAIT FOR THE MASKED ROBBER

### CHAPTER 1

On the main road between Muizenberg and Cape Town, a coach is racing at full speed. The night is dark. The lights of the houses on the slopes of Constantia and on the Cape flats around Wynberg have already disappeared. The sand and gravel are flying under the hooves of the six horses. Dark tree trunks rise like shadows along the road, momentarily reflected in the animals' sweat-stained sides sparkling in the starlight, and then quickly fading away.

The coachman prods the front horses with his long, thin whip. He grumbles discontentedly while the cutting wind plays through his beard. His passengers have been at sea for months, and when they land here, they are supposed to arrive in Cape Town in just a few minutes! He does not like to mistreat his horses like this.

The coach rolls dangerously. Inside, the three passengers cling to the armrests of their seats. It is so dark that they can barely see each other. At one window, facing the front of the coach, sits a young woman of about twenty. Her facial features are finely chiseled and her blue eyes peer out into the dark shadows outside. Her light, yellow hair is unadorned, and the wind blows it back against the leather-covered backrest. With one hand, she holds her coat collar closed to ward off the cold from her throat.

Across from her sit an elderly man and woman. The woman is about fifty and fairly plump. Her round, soft face shows unmistakable signs of concern. The man beside her also has a serious look on his face, and the frown on his forehead creates deep wrinkles. However, his eyes are calm, like those of someone who has endured years of suffering, and the wrinkles testify to the much pain that he has been endured.

"You are afraid of nothing, Anna," says the older woman. Her voice sounds slightly excited, but she tries to speak reassuringly because she sees how the younger woman nervously rubs her hands in her lap.

"We lingered too long on the beach," Anna replies to her statement, but more as if she is talking to herself.

"I could not find a coach sooner," the man reminds her.

"You have done it quickly enough, Rudolf," the older woman says. "It is a strange country, and we landed in False Bay."

“If the wind were not against us, we could have safely sailed to Table Bay,” Anna says again. “I will not feel at ease until we reach the Castle.”

“How do you know we will be safe there?” Rudolf calmly asks.

“Rudolf!” the young woman rebukes him.

“I am sorry, Your Highness,” he replies. “I just want to point out that we can never be completely sure where we will find shelter.”

“Do I not know it!” the older woman exclaims. “Four years of wandering, from one corner of the world to another, and every moment of the day and every second of the night, I expect to run into one of Franz van Starrenberg’s spies.”

“Do not stress so much, Anna,” the young woman comforts her, “maybe the end of our search is in this country...”

“This land?” interrupts Anna abruptly. “We arrived here in the darkness. We must hurry as if the devil is chasing us...” She leaves her sentence unfinished and sits still, listening intently. “Listen,” she says hoarsely, “I can hear horses’ hooves behind us.” Suddenly, she screams, her hands clutching at her throat.

The sound of a gunshot comes from behind. The other two can now clearly hear the horses’ hooves. The vehicle jerks as if the horses are frightened. From atop the box, the coachman exclaims in surprise.

Rudolf springs up without hesitation and looks out the window. Then he sinks back and produces a gun. “What is it, Rudolf?” Anna asks.

“There are riders behind us,” he responds calmly, turning around.

“Drive as fast as you can!” he commands the coachman through the small window above him.

“It is too dangerous,” the man shouts back. “They might shoot me.”

“I will double your reward,” Rudolf replies. “Drive faster! Leave them behind!”

They can hear the crack of the whip. The coach lurches forward and tilts dangerously. A few shots ring out from behind, and suddenly a terrifying gurgling scream echoes above their heads. A dark figure falls past the coach window. Anna screams again. “The coachman has been shot!” she exclaims fearfully.

“Then the horses are running wild now.” The young woman becomes excited again, but her voice remains controlled.



“In the darkness, they will almost find their way as easily as if there were a driver.” Meanwhile, as Rudolf speaks, he leans out the window and fires his gun.

The shot is immediately answered, and a few bullets hit the back of the coach. “Duck low!” he orders the women. He hastily reloads his gun.

The young woman pays no attention to him. She stands up and looks out the small window at the front of the coach. She holds on to both sides to prevent herself from being thrown out. She breathes quickly. “There is someone on the box!” she exclaims. “He is crouched down, but I can clearly distinguish his figure.”

“That is impossible,” says Rudolf. He sticks his head out of the window again and pulls the trigger of his weapon. When he sits back down, he says, concerned. “They are very close. They will be beside us in a few minutes.”

As he reloads, he turns around and looks through the small window. “There is no one on the box, Your Highness,” he tells her as if he is not surprised. “It is so dark that you must have mistaken a shadow for a man.” Without hesitation, he leans out and shoots again towards the back.

On the other side of the coach, Anna hides her face in her hands. Meanwhile, the girl has stood up and looked out of the window. The box is empty. Surprised, she sits back.

Then a spasm runs through Rudolf’s body. He utters a cry of pain and falls to the floor of the coach. Anna screams, but quickly moves from her seat and cradles his head on her lap. The woman leans forward.

“Rudolf,” she asks hoarsely, “what is wrong?”

Almost inaudibly, he replies. “They caught up with us. I thank God that I could lay down my life for the both of you.”

“Do not talk like that, Rudolf! Where are you hit?” Anna sobs hysterically. Her body rocks back and forth. “They will kill us all!” she gasps.

“In the name of our fathers, Anna,” the younger woman called out to her, “calm down! Come, we must help Rudolf.”

“Nothing can help me anymore,” the man replied softly. “And I had hoped that when the people of Lutzburg are finally freed from the yoke of Franz von Starrenberg, the name of Rudolf Kaltner would also be

mentioned as one of the liberators.”

“Of course, it will be mentioned,” the young woman said impulsively.

“Who contributed more than you, Rudolf?”

“That is not enough. I wish I could go on...” His voice trailed off. He sighed deeply.

“Do not talk about that now, Rudolf,” Anna ordered him. “We must first see where you are wounded.” But then Anna screamed again. She sat back slowly, realizing that Rudolf Kaltner was dead.

And for the first time, the realization that she herself was also in danger, dawned on her. She only now realized that the coach had come to a standstill. At the same time, she became aware of a rider just outside the coach door.

Someone pulled the door open. For just a moment, the young woman closest to the door saw his face and the black mask over his eyes. Then the man backed away as if he expected resistance from inside.

Slowly, he reappeared. He stared quietly into the darkness inside the carriage. Suddenly, he laughed cheerfully.

“It is all quiet here,” he called over his shoulder to someone behind him.

His voice sounded refined. “I told you I hit the man.”

The young woman shuddered at the casually spoken words. She could not see the other man, but she heard him give an abrupt command.

“Get the girl out!”

The man at the coach door stepped aside slightly. He made a slight bow, but even in the darkness, she could clearly feel the mockery.

“Will you please get out?” he asked.

For a moment, she hesitated. Then a thought shot through her mind. Maybe they were just bandits interested in loot. She stood up and climbed down with the leather strap he had lowered for her.

She glanced around quickly and saw seven horsemen around her. In front of her sat the rider who apparently gave the command for her to come out. Instinctively, she looked at him.

“I am sorry I have to thwart your plans, Princess Carla von Starrenberg,” he said slowly, without trying to conceal the triumphant glee in his voice.

Although she suspected that her attackers might be her uncle’s followers, she was still shocked. She looked at the man carefully, but

he was unknown to her, especially since his face was also covered with a mask.

“We are in a foreign land,” she said haughtily, “and you dare not...”

“We are not interested in your opinions,” he replied rudely. “We are in a hurry because someone may have heard the gunshots. Speak quickly. Who are your spies?”

She looked at him defiantly and did not answer.

The man in front of her dismounts his horse. “Our time is limited,” he continued, “and I do not intend to play with you.

“Come on, Michael, get her to talk,” he orders the man next to her.

Michael turned to her. “He will kill you,” he says with the same levity as before. “I advise you to talk.”

She turns her head away from him.

“Listen, Arnoldt!” he suddenly exclaims. “She is a beautiful woman?”

“And what does that have to do with the price of eggs?” Arnoldt snaps at him.

“There are other, much easier ways to make her talk.”

“Like what?”

“She will not like it if we hurt the old lady in the carriage a little.”

A moment of silence follows. Carla von Starrenberg feels the blood in her veins freeze. Anna, her faithful maid! The woman who raised her, at whose knee she learned to pray!

“What are you going to do with us?” she asks anxiously.

“Does it matter?” Arnoldt replies. “Whatever your fate may be, you surely would not want us to torture her first, would you?”

“I repeat that you have no right to attack me here in a foreign land.”

Arnoldt laughs harshly. “Who will ever know?” he sneers.

“I will, of course.”

Arnoldt looks annoyed. “Shut up now, Michael!” he barks. “Stop fooling around.”

“I did not say anything,” Michael replies, and his voice suddenly turns deadly cold. “Someone had spoken behind us.”

A deathly silence descends. The two men standing next to her are now motionless. The five riders sit on their horses like black statues at night. One of the animals in front of the carriage nervously shuffles its feet. The piercing wind has died down and there is no movement in the

leaves above them.

From the carriage comes only the soft, plaintive wailing of faithful Anna, sitting next to Rudolf Kaltner's corpse.

"Who spoke then?" Arnoldt slowly but firmly utters the words.

"I would not consider this the most opportune time to make an acquaintance," the voice replies casually.

Carla can hear that it comes from the trees, a short distance away from them. "Indeed, there is no need for you to know who I am... Stop!" The command cuts unrelentingly through the darkness as Michael quickly moves to his horse. He stops immediately.

"Can you see them clearly from all sides?" the voice resumes sharply.

"Yes." The single word echoes out between the trees and instinctively Arnoldt and Michael turn their heads. It sounds as if the answer comes from different directions, and for Carla, it feels as if someone here among the horses in front of the carriage also answered. Then she suddenly remembers the crouched figure she saw on top of the coffin after the coachman was shot.

"You have surely heard that you are surrounded?" asks the voice that spoke first.

"I would be glad to learn the purpose of this interference," Arnoldt replies, who by that time has regained his composure.

"The purpose, my friend, is to prevent you from carrying out the plans you revealed to the young lady a few moments ago."

"How can you see here in the darkness?" There is suddenly a degree of awe in Arnoldt's voice.

"How can an owl see at night?" came the counter-question calmly. "But enough of this idle talk. Mount your horses and ride. Do not look back until you are a few miles away from here. We will stay on your heels, and at the first suspicious movement, you will announce your death."

A few of the horsemen shift nervously in the room. Inside the carriage, Anna remains completely still, but Arnoldt does not move either.

"It is easy to hide behind the trees and shout commands," Michael suddenly calls out.

Someone laughs softly among the trees.

"You sound reckless, my little friend. However, I do not have time to play. Make your escape, now!"

“I do not like to flee from an enemy I have not even met yet,” Michael retorts.

“I admire your attitude, youngster, but unfortunately, it goes against my principles to hurt children.”

“Children?!” Michael bellows indignantly. “You apparently do not realize who you are dealing with.”

“Do not go too far, Michael,” Arnoldt sternly interrupts him.

“I will not let myself be insulted by a foreign colonial like this. Michael Leeuwbergglanz is not for nothing the best swordsman in Europe!”

“The second-best, Michael,” Arnoldt replies. “You apparently do not consider Arnoldt te Kruyght.”

“Now, why should I keep quiet then?” Michael asks.

“Is it necessary to proclaim our names to the world?”

“Who will recognize us as a result? And besides, where will we encounter this bunch of bush robbers again?”

“As soon as you two finish mumbling,” they again hear the voice from the unknown person between the trees. “I will be happy to hear what you have decided.”

“We have decided to find out what caliber steel your sword is made of,” Michael snaps at him.

There is a moment of silence. The other riders around the carriage apparently do not share their masters’ confidence, and even Arnoldt feels slightly hesitant about his friend’s recklessness.

“How does it sound?” the voice calls out loudly. “Do you feel like loosening your limbs a bit? We have not had a good sword fight in a while.”

“Yes.” The hollow echo of the single answer reverberates through the trees.

“Then charge!”

When Carla hears the unexpected order, she retreats and stands stiffly against the carriage. Before her, Michael hesitates for just a moment, then he jumps onto his horse.

“A man after my heart!” he exclaims admiringly.

Arnoldt te Kruyght does not share the young daredevil’s optimism. He is unaware of the numbers of their opponents and realizes all too well the seriousness of such an unknown attack. Nevertheless, he

immediately follows his friend's example and jumps into the saddle. The next movement Carla sees is that of a pitch-black shadow flying through the air between the two rear horses in front of the carriage. It slides over the coffin of the coachman and lands on the roof of the carriage. From there, without hesitation, it dives through the air, and the next moment, one of the five riders who were circling the carriage tumbles to the ground.

Then her attention is drawn away. A figure bursts out between the trees right in front of her. It is as if it makes no sound, but she can see a flash where the starlight shines on exposed steel."

"I cannot see them!" Arnoldt shouts, and Carla imagines that she hears fear in his voice.

"Here is one in front of us!" Michael exclaims joyfully. He digs his spurs into his horse's sides, and the animal springs towards the pitch-black figure before him.

Carla looks around. She hears the exclamations of Te Kruyght's men. Their horses are jumping around in terror. It seems to her as if there are other riders moving among them, but she cannot distinguish one from the other. Twice she sees men fall from their horses. Already, three figures lie motionless on the ground.

In front of her resounds the clash of steel on steel. Michael and one of the attackers' horses are practically side by side. The sword swings through the air and sparks fly left and right. Then she sees Arnoldt moving behind the jet-black figure. Unconsciously, her hand goes to her mouth. She wants to warn him, but at the same time a shadow shoot past her. He is on foot, but she can clearly see the naked sword in his hand.

"Behind you, m'sieur!" the man shouts as he rushes towards the three horse riders.

Carla recognizes the language as French. She speaks it well. She also realizes that the man who has confronted Michael and Arnoldt must be the leader of her rescuers. It suddenly flashes through her mind that this revolution may land her in a new predicament. Yet, she fervently prays that the unknown intruders will prevail, for she knows that there can be no heavier fate for her than to fall into the hands of Franz von Starrenberg's men. Perhaps, and suddenly new hope ignites in her heart,

perhaps it is Karel Stach, the man who sent her the message to Batavia, that he has information, and that her brother may possibly be found here. Therefore, it might be Karel and his men who have come to her rescue.

Arnoldt te Kruyght turns around when he hears the shout of the approaching attacker. He turns his horse around, but already the black figure has swiftly dived under the animal. He grabs Arnoldt by his leg and pulls him out of the saddle. Te Kruyght lets go of the reins. He shoots himself off the horse and lands on his feet. As he turns around, he is just in time to ward off the first sword thrust. For a moment, he is pushed back, but then he realizes that he will be able to easily overcome his opponent under normal circumstances, for suddenly a few disadvantages become clear to him. The man he is facing is dressed in black from head to toe. His feet move soundlessly over the ground. Moreover, it seems to Arnoldt that the man can clearly see every movement he makes. In turn, he can barely see the point of his opponent's sword before it is a few inches away from him. Nevertheless, he does not take another step. His right arm grows tired, for every thrust of his opponent he gives two or three to ensure that his sword always remains protective in front of him.

A few steps away from them, Michael Leeuwbergglanz's horse prances nervously. His opponent, on the pitch-black animal, inches closer and closer, and Michael is obliged to occasionally rein in the reins to make his horse step back in the direction of the carriage. Sweat beads on his forehead. His sword swipes through the air.

"This is a pleasure," he said, "it is an absolute marvel to come across an opponent like you in these corners of the world."

"You are not too clumsy yourself," the other man replied calmly.

Michael's eyes widened a bit. It is as if the man was extremely calm and composed on his horse, not exerting any effort whatsoever!

"It is just a bit dark," Michael exclaimed. "I would like to meet you on equal ground in broad daylight."

"Even that would be a pleasure," the man replied. "It is clear your eyes are not accustomed to the darkness."

"Let us schedule an appointment." Michael had already concluded that he would not get out of this situation unscathed.