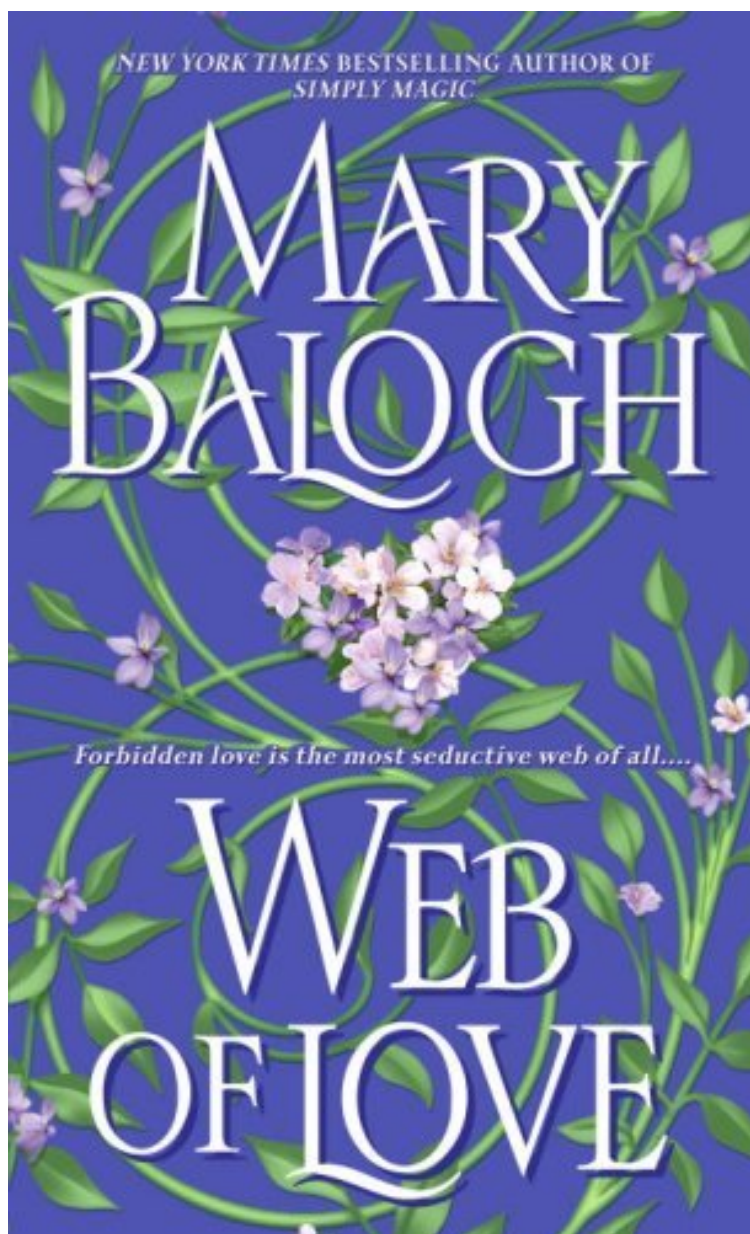


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Web of Love



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurBONUS: This edition contains an excerpt from Mary Balogh's The Secret Mistress.New York Times bestselling author Mary Balogh brilliantly captures the passionate conflict of a woman caught between two loves in this classic tale of friendship, devotion, intrigueand a love that is the most seductive trap of all. Hed served with her husband on the battlefieldand secretly desired her for years. Yet for Dominic, Lieutenant Lord Eden, Ellen Simpson has remained tantalizingly out of reachuntil she is widowed by the war. Suddenly pursued by the dangerously handsome nobleman, Ellen is stunned by the

depth of attraction he arouses in her. Soon their friendship flames into something deeper and as scandal ignites, marriage seems the only solution. But Ellen has a secret one she can share with no one that prevents her from fully opening her heart to Dominic. Until he devises his own plan for the ultimate consummation of their passion and the woman he is determined to possess at any cost.

Chapter One WILL WE REACH BRUSSELS SOON, ELLEN? I must say, Belgium is a disappointment so far. It is so flat and uninteresting.

Will Brussels be more exciting? I have dreamed about it all through the dreary winter at school. Is it as magical a place as they say?" Miss Jennifer Simpson sat with her nose almost touching the glass of the carriage in which she traveled with her stepmother. She was clearly not intent on waiting for answers to her questions. She had asked the same ones a dozen times since they had left Antwerp. "It is just an ordinary city," Ellen Simpson said, "made extraordinary by the presence of so many allied troops at present and so many different uniforms. We will be there soon enough. You will feel better once you have seen your papa again. I know he can scarce wait to see you." "Oh," Jennifer said, withdrawing her gaze for a moment from the passing scenery, "I still cannot quite believe that I am finished with school forever and ever, Ellen. I am eighteen years old, and this time I will stay with you and Papa, not be packed off back to school almost before I have started to enjoy myself." Ellen smiled. "I know your papa is rather concerned about bringing you here," she said. "It was really too bad that Bonaparte was allowed to escape from Elba and that the King of France has fled to Ghent. I had hoped that the wars were over. But it appears that they are not. You may not be here for long after all, Jennifer. But I know your papa wanted you with him for a while." "Oh, but the Duke of Wellington is here now," Jennifer said. "You told me so, and Helen West's sister wrote her that all would be safe once the duke arrived. And she also wrote that there are so many entertainments in Brussels that it is sometimes hard to choose among them. That is true, is it not, Ellen? And you helped me buy all those gorgeous clothes. And the city is full of officers and scarlet uniforms. It is a pity that Papa's uniform is green. It is not near as dashing as the Guards' uniforms." "I am quite sure you will be here quite long enough to enjoy yourself," Ellen said. "I hope so. I know your papa wants to spend some time with you before he has to go into battle again." "I suppose he thinks he might die," the girl said indignantly. "He should not be so gloomy. Papa has always come through safely." "But there is always a grave danger that he might not," Ellen said quietly. "You do not know, Jennifer. Your papa always kept you away from the army, which was as well. You were never in Spain and did not see the battlefields after battles." She shuddered. "If you had seen, you would have marveled that anyone survived at all. Your papa has lived through so many battles. It does not seem fair that he must face yet another." "I forgot." Jennifer laid a hand on her stepmother's arm, her pretty face contrite. "Your own papa was killed in one of those battles. And you were there with him. It must have been dreadful." "Yes." Ellen patted the girl's hand. "It was. But at least he was killed instantly. That is a blessing one learns to be thankful for when one has lived close to battle." Jennifer squeezed her stepmother's arm before removing her hand. "And you and Papa married," she said. "He is fond of you, is he not? I used to be jealous for a while. I think I even hated you until I met you. Do you think I will find a husband here, Ellen? Am I pretty enough, do you think?" Ellen smiled into the anxious face turned to her own. "You know you are," she said. "But I would not be in too much of a hurry to fix your choice if I were you, Jennifer. Not with the times so uncertain. There is no point in inviting heartache." They lapsed into silence while Jennifer gazed with renewed eagerness and impatience from the window. Indeed, the girl was very pretty, Ellen thought. She was small and shapely, with masses of shining dark ringlets peeping from beneath her bonnet, and an eager, dark-eyed, rosy-cheeked face. She would doubtless be a great favorite with the officers who thronged the drawing rooms and ballrooms of Brussels. And she would have all the entertainments and activities she dreamed of. Even before Ellen had left for England three weeks before, there had been an almost desperate gaiety about social life in Brussels. There was a great battle looming. She could feel it in her bones. And though she looked with amused indulgence at the openly impatient girl turned to the window beside her, she found herself too looking eagerly from the window, trying to recognize landmarks, hoping to see one that would indicate they were close to Brussels at last. Close to home. Not that Brussels was home, of course. But then, nowhere else was home either. She had not had a static home for ten years. Home was Charlie. And Charlie was in Brussels. She would see him soon. Three weeks she had been away from him. An eternity! She had never been away from him for so long, not since their marriage five years before. She felt tears prick at her eyelids as she gazed from the window. Charlie was fifteen years her senior, forty to her five-and-twenty years. He was not at all the sort of man she would have expected to love, but she did love him with a fierceness that was almost a pain. He looked perhaps even older than his years. He was balding and portly, though not with soft living. He had been a soldier since he was sixteen, and had been hardened

by rough living conditions, especially the almost indescribably harsh conditions of life in Spain during the Peninsular wars. She had met him in Spain when she had gone there with her father, and he had always been kind to her. She had been fifteen years old at the time, and she had been bewildered, distraught over the events that had taken her there with a father who was a stranger to her, and unable for a long time to adjust to life lived in the tail of a vast army. When her father had been killed in battle, Charlie had been the one to break the news to her, the one to comfort her, though by that time she had made a wide circle of friends. And they had married soon after. Perhaps it had seemed to some that it was a marriage of convenience on her part. And perhaps it was in a way. She certainly had not seemed to have anywhere else to go. But she had loved him even then, and her love had grown daily since. There was not a kinder man in the world than Charlie Simpson. He treated her always as if she were a precious and treasured possession. Ellen closed her eyes. She would not get there sooner by willing the miles to pass. Soon now she would see him again. She would feel his arms around her again. She would be safe again. And once more she would begin the wait for yet another battle. Another battle that might take him away from her forever. They had talked of a home in the country in England when Napoleon had been finally defeated and exiled to the island of Elba. She might finally have had a life free of anxiety. It did not seem fair. Oh, it was not fair! But for all that, life lived with an army was something that somehow got into one's blood. Charlie had not wanted her to come to Brussels with him. He had wanted her to stay in England. But how could she have done that? She would have been away from the only person in the world who really mattered to her. And she would have been away from her friends--Charlie's friends, and a few of their wives. She liked to bring some of the comforts of home to those men who did not have wives. She was particularly fond of Lord Eden--Lieutenant Lord Eden--her husband's closest friend, and as different from him as night is from day. Lord Eden was her age; he was a baron, the younger brother of the Earl of Amberley; he was very handsome. He was tall, broad-shouldered, well-muscled, agile; and he had fair, wavy hair, distinctive green eyes, and a laughing, handsome face. He was wealthy, well-educated, and charming. So different from Charlie, whose father was titled, it was true--he was Sir Jasper Simpson--but who had been estranged from his family nineteen years before and had known nothing in his life beyond the army. Lord Eden had spent a great deal of his time with them since his arrival in Spain three years before. Many was the time he had sat in their tent or in their rooms, talking with Charlie, often about army matters that were of no great interest to her, while she quietly sewed or made them tea. She had always enjoyed those times. She looked forward to seeing all her friends again. She looked forward to seeing Lord Eden and to entertaining him again, just as she and Charlie had always done. And perhaps--who knew?--he would take a fancy to Jennifer. She could hardly wait. Would they never be home? Had Charlie missed her as much as she had missed him? "Will we be there soon?" Jennifer asked, turning from the window, a frown of impatience between her brows. "Not long now," Ellen said with a smile. "Oh, Jennifer, I can scarce sit still here. I am so longing to see your papa again." CAPTAIN CHARLES SIMPSON was on his way home through the park in Brussels with his friend Lieutenant Lord Eden after a tiring day of work. "They do have a distinct advantage over us poor riflemen, don't they?" Captain Simpson said, nodding in the direction of a cluster of scarlet-coated officers gathered around two young ladies who were feeding the swans on the lake. "Why did you choose the green, Eden? You have the rank and wealth. Why did you not choose one of the more glamorous cavalry regiments?" Lord Eden smiled. "I did not join the army for the glamour of it," he said. "I joined because I had to, Charlie. I would sooner not have done so, you know. I fair broke my mother's heart, and my twin sister threw every cushion in the house at me when I broke the news to her, and refused to speak to me for a whole day afterward. But I had to join. And finally, at the advanced age of two-and-twenty, I did. I wanted to fight where the main action always is. With the infantry." "Well," the captain said with a hearty laugh as one of the young ladies caught sight of Lord Eden and looked a second time, blushing, "it is doubtless just as well you are in green rather than scarlet, lad, or you would be so busy fighting duels with all the other young officers that you would have no time for old Boney. You're a handsome devil, and no denying the fact. You will stop in for tea?" "I am quite sure it would not be at all the thing," Lord Eden said. "If Mrs. Simpson has arrived with your daughter, none of you will want the added presence of a stranger. Some other time, Charlie." "A stranger!" Captain Simpson looked quite offended for a moment. "You? Ellen will scold me all evening if I fail to bring you with me. Besides, I want to show off my Jennifer. A fetching little thing, Eden, even if I do say so myself. You would not think to look at me, would you, that I have a pretty little thing for a daughter?" He roared with laughter, turning not a few heads in their direction. "She favors her mother, fortunately for her." "I will look in for a few minutes, then," his friend said. "But only for a few minutes if they have arrived, mind. They will be tired from the journey. If they

haven't come yet, I'll share some brandy with you, Charlie, and put my feet up for a while. You have been like a coiled spring all day." "One thing is for sure," the captain said. "I'm not letting Ellen go away from me again. We haven't been apart in five years, you know, since our marriage. You get used to having a woman around. You should try it sometime, Eden." His friend grinned. "I would have to be awfully fond of her," he said. "I have a habit of falling out of love as fast as I fall in. You are fortunate in Mrs. Simpson, Charlie. A nice quiet, loyal wife." The captain laughed again. "Your tone of voice says that you would be bored silly with such a wife in a fortnight, Eden," he said. "You wait, my boy. You will fall in love to stay one of these days. And you couldn't do better than someone like Ellen. She's a treasure. Here we are." He had stopped outside the house on the Rue de la Montagne where he was billeted. And his beaming face grew even brighter after he had climbed the stairs to his rooms to discover that his wife and daughter were indeed home before him. Though only just. Both still wore traveling dress, and one trunk with a hat box perched precariously on top still stood in the middle of the living room. His wife's maid whisked the latter into a bedchamber as his daughter came rushing across the room shrieking and hurled herself into his arms. "Papa!" she cried. "Oh, Papa. I thought the journey would take forever. And I was dreadfully sick on the boat. And Ellen says that there is bound to be a great battle soon, but it is not so, is it? Not now that the duke is here. Oh, Papa, I am so happy to be free of school at last. You cannot imagine!" Her father held her at arm's length and chuckled. "Hello, puss," he said. "You are looking as fine as fivepence. Can this really be my little girl all grown up so soon? Welcome home, sweetheart." He hugged her to him. Ellen curtsied to Lord Eden and held out a hand to him. He took it in both of his and raised it to his lips. "I am pleased to see you safe at home, ma'am," he said, smiling warmly down at her. "Charlie has been like a fish out of water, and it has not been the same here in your rooms without you. Have you had a tedious journey? You look tired." "I am a little," she said. "But only because I could not wait to be home. It is so good to be back again." She withdrew her hand after he had squeezed it between both his own. And he watched as she turned from him, and as Charlie turned from his daughter. And he felt as he felt frequently in the presence of these two friends--an amused sort of affection as it became obvious that if he fell through a hole in the ground and disappeared forever, they would not even notice. "Ellen," Charlie said, opening up his arms to her, "you are home." "Yes, Charlie," she said. "At last." She did hesitate a moment, feeling the presence of the other two, but the pull of those extended arms was obviously too strong for her. She went into them and hid her face against her husband's shoulder as he hugged her close and rocked her.

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