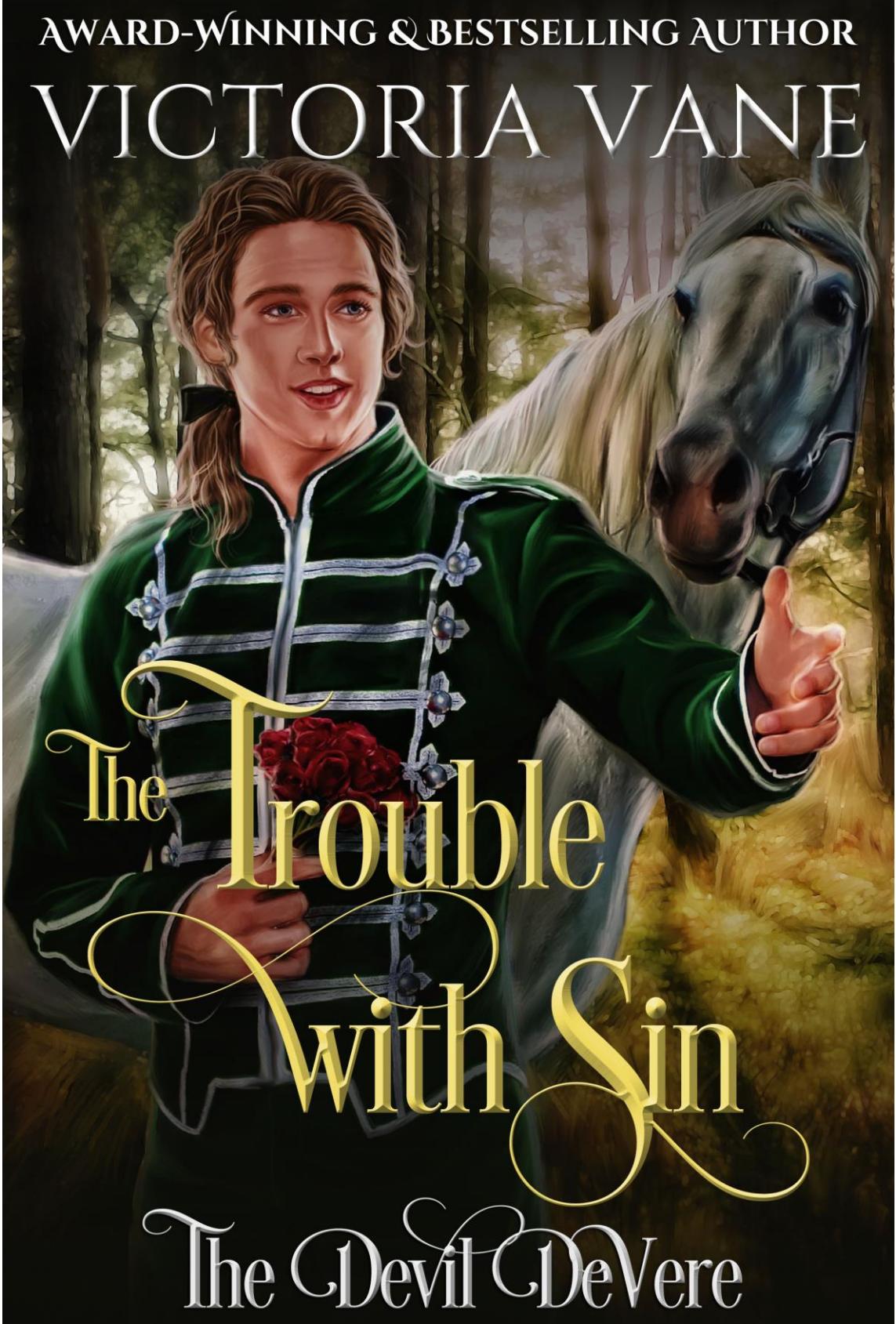


AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VICTORIA VANE



The Trouble
with Sin

The Devil DeVere

The Trouble with Sin
The Devil DeVere Series

Victoria Vane

The Trouble with Sin
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*To John, Sean, and Brandon-
three men who fill my life with love and laughter.*

*But when the morning comes at last,
And we must part, our passions cold,
You'll think of some new feather, scarf
To buy with my small piece of gold;*

- A Fleeting Passion by William Henry Davies

Chapter One

A private abode on Wigmore Street, City of Westminster – 1764

SIMON'S BORED gaze drifted over the library—his favorite room in the house—lingering on a shelf teeming with his beloved volumes of verse.

“For nigh on twenty years, we have done our best for you with only modest expectations in return. Have we not provided you with every advantage? And *this* is how you would repay us?”

His father’s fist slammed on the desk, rattling ink pots, drawing Simon’s attention to the bottles. He wondered idly if they would spill.

Lord Singleton continued his rant, “By pulling foolish and irresponsible pranks? By getting tossed out of school?”

Simon inhaled. “I’m not *expelled*, only rusticated for the term.”

“There’s bloody little difference in my book, my boy!” He threw his hands in the air. “Worse, you and your fellow malefactors have enraged the king!”

“*That* was simply an error of happenstance.”

“Happenstance?” Lord Singleton glowered. “How the devil can absconding with a *lion* be happenstance?”

“It was supposed to have been a bear,” Simon clarified with a fleeting smile.

“Bloody hell!” Baron Singleton raged on. “The species makes no difference! You stole *the king’s* property! Have you no shame, Simon?”

Knowing there was nothing he could say to appease his father, Simon fixed his gaze in perverse fascination on Lord Singleton’s quivering jowls.

“Well!” Lord Singleton demanded. “What have you to say for yourself?”

Simon’s need to compose a contrite platitude was, thankfully, forestalled by three sharp raps

on the library door. Pausing on the threshold, Lady Singleton's gaze wavered between her husband and son, and then back to Simon with obvious maternal concern. She had always doted on her youngest child. He wondered if she had purposely interrupted to save him further browbeating.

"Have you quite finished, my dear?" she asked her husband.

"Not by half!" Lord Singleton barked. "He has been spoiled and coddled his entire life and now would run wild! This ungovernable behavior shall cease and desist this very day!"

Simon kept his gaze impassive and fixed on his father's waistcoat buttons. He marveled at the strength of the buttons, wondering if a great sneeze would make them pop.

"But, my dear," said Lady Singleton, "you know this is all due to the unholy influence of that...that...that... irredeemable devil DeVere!"

"On that, my dear, we are in total accord," the baron replied. "Bad blood runs in the DeVeres. Morally corrupt, all of them." Lord Singleton's lips thinned and his gaze focused once more on his son. "Henceforth, you are to have no further association with that reprobate."

"But he and Ned are my oldest friends—" Simon protested.

"And a poor choice indeed! A man is often judged by the company he keeps."

"And not just judged by man," Lady Singleton added. "*Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?* You must study the Proverbs, Simon, lest you be damned by your association with such Godless persons."

"If that is so, Mama," Simon replied softly, "how would the sinners ever come to know Grace? Did our own Lord not keep company with tax collectors and known prostitutes?"

Lady Singleton closed her mouth with an almost audible snap.

Baron Singleton glared at his son. He then prompted his wife, "Did you need me, Albinia?"

"I do indeed. I came to remind you the Reverend William Dodd will be addressing the Magdalen Society today. You have not forgotten, I hope?" Simon's mother was an avid supporter of the charity who hoped to cleanse the city of prostitution. "Lord and Lady Hertford will also be in attendance. The marquess has committed to soliciting the patronage of Queen Charlotte to expand the Magdalen House."

Lord Singleton pulled out his timepiece and examined it with a frown. He then rose from his desk tugging at his snug waistcoat. "I'm late for an appointment at my club." It was the stock excuse for avoiding his wife's society meetings. Simon marveled at his father's lack of

imagination. “Let Simon sit in my stead. Association with such persons can only benefit his character.”

“What a wonderful idea!” Lady Singleton exclaimed. “You must meet the Reverend Dodd, Simon. He is such an eloquent young man and so well versed in the scriptures.”

Bloody hell! Simon groaned. He was consigned to perdition indeed—ceaseless hours in the company of religious fanatics and hypocrites.

“But, Mama,” he protested. “I had planned to occupy myself with meditation of the Psalms this afternoon.”

“Is that so?” Lord Singleton cast Simon a dubious look.

Simon offered his mother a beatific smile. “Yes. After much soul searching, I feel a calling to join the clergy.”

“The calling? The clergy?” Lady Singleton repeated. “But you have said nothing about joining the church.” She looked to her husband. “Is this really true?”

Lord Singleton grunted. “‘Tis the bloody first I’ve heard of it!”

“I was just about to tell you when Mama rapped upon the door,” Simon smoothly prevaricated. “I’ve seen the error of my ways and am determined to return to the straight and narrow path.”

“Simon! My dear, dear boy!” Lady Singleton’s eyes glistened. “I cannot tell you how this warms my heart! It is my fondest dream come true!”

His mother’s dream became Simon’s nightmare when he was summoned to the drawing room two hours later. Bored out of his mind, Simon drummed his fingers on his thigh, stifled yawns, and fought the urge to roll his eyes while the Reverend Dodd droned on about the evils of carnal temptation.

“Can there be any greater object of compassion than poor, young, thoughtless females plunged into ruin? Artfully ensnared by those with superior faculties, education, and fortune, what defense can an innocent maid have against such formidable fiends and seducers of virtue?”

Lady Singleton plied a handkerchief to her eyes with a sniff. “Such scoundrels!”

Dodd continued, “How can young maids living in want protect themselves against profuse promises of passion, luxury, liberty, and gaiety? Alas! Lost to virtue, they become lost to themselves. Akin to a cut blossom they wither until cast away by the very rogues who prey upon them.” The reverend paused for effect and shook his head.

“Poor wretches!” Lady Singleton choked out and then blew her nose.

“But there is hope, madam. Through the efforts of this worthy society, hundreds of penitents have already forsaken their lives of sin. Now through the honest employments of spinning, knitting, and lace-making, these miserable young women have a means to recover their character.”

Simon knew many girls who had given up lives of such domestic drudgery in *favor* of making a living on their backs. None, to his knowledge, suffered the least regret or repentance about it. Nor did they seem overly concerned about their loss of *character*. Indeed, he had always felt a particular affinity for their joyfully unabashed practice of iniquity.

His thoughts wandered to the ragged gypsy lass whom DeVere had taken under his protection. Surely she was happier in her present circumstances than in her prior life earning three shillings a week in the stench and squalor of the Royal Menagerie. According to Dodd, DeVere was the vilest of rogues for ruining the girl, but Simon doubted very much that Freddie would agree.

Nevertheless, Simon sipped tepid tea, smiled, and nodded, responding with trite and proper remarks, wishing he was anywhere else but this purgatory of prigs.

Later into the evening Simon received an unexpected missive from DeVere, or perhaps it was better described as a summons. He wondered what had brought his friend back to town so soon when he’d expected to spend several months in Kent. There was only one way to find out, and happily, that option required escape from his prison.

With the servants reporting his every move, Simon perceived the window as the only way out. Raising the sash, he cast a wary look at the earth below before throwing caution to the winds and one leg over the sill. But when his second leg followed, he found himself suspended twenty feet above ground, grappling for a foothold.

When his slick leather-soled shoes proved ineffectual, he kicked them off in hope that his stockinginged feet would allow better purchase. Simon then reached for the drain pipe, wishing he’d also thought to remove his bulky frock coat. He began his decent down the drain, but his silk stockings were even more slippery against the pipe than his shoes had been against the

stonework. He managed to shimmy and slide ten feet closer to earth before falling into the yew hedge.

With a muffled groan and an abundance of curses, Simon wrestled out of the greenery, fumbling in the increasing darkness to locate his shoes. He then hailed a sedan chair to convey him to Charing Cross.

“What took you so damned long, Sin?” DeVere demanded. “I sent the message to your house hours ago.”

Simon signaled the drawer and flung himself onto a bench. “You think it was easy to escape my parents’ watchful eye? I can hardly take a piss without permission. I had to sneak out through the damned first-story window. Thank God the hedge broke my fall.”

DeVere threw back his head with a laugh. “That explains why you look as if you were dragged through one backwards!”

Simon gave a shake of his lace cuffs. “I’m happy to be the source of your amusement,” he replied, tight-lipped. His scowl disappeared, however, upon the arrival of a buxom tavern wench with two fresh tankards. She smiled and leaned over Simon, gifting him with an intimate view of her charms. Simon made an appropriate show of appreciation.

“Where is Ned?” DeVere asked.

“Already gone home to Yorkshire,” Simon replied. Done with his slow perusal of her breasts, he cupped the barmaid’s arse.

“None ‘o that!” She slapped his hand away but it was all just a part of the game.

“Later, my dove? Simon flashed a raffish grin. “I’ll make it worth your while.”

“So they all say,” the wench answered with a saucy smile.

Simon transfixed on the sassy sway of her hips as she parted. He then answered DeVere as if they’d never been interrupted. “As it turns out, Ned would have had to request leave from Westminster anyway. His father has taken ill.”

“Is it serious?”

“A heart seizure. Ned got word of it right after you departed for Kent. He was quite shaken by the news.”

“He would be, model son that he is. Puts the rest of us blighters to shame.”

Simon chuckled. “Speak for yourself, old man. I am my mother’s pride and joy, bound for the clergy as I am.”

DeVere sputtered his ale. “You? A man of the cloth?”

“What better way to employ my pen than in sermon writing?”

“Between composing lewd verses, you mean?”

Simon shrugged. “All work and no play makes Simon a dull boy.”

“But the *church*, Sin? Come now!”

Simon took a long drink. “If you must know, it seemed the easiest path back into my parents’ good graces.”

Although Simon’s parents were narrow-minded and puritanical, he never doubted their affection, unlike DeVere who was born into wealth, privilege, and complete parental apathy. His parents notoriously despised each other and flaunted their infidelities. Worse yet, his father was rumored to be half mad from the pox.

“How was Kent?” Simon asked. “As bad as you expected?”

“Far worse. I must now face the penance of exile.”

“Exile?” What do you mean?”

DeVere smirked. “I am forced to go abroad and suffer all the decadent and lascivious pleasures the Continent has to offer. Come with me, Sin! This scandal is a blessing in disguise. Just think of it! Months to do as we damned please.”

“Impossible.” Simon shook his head. “Do you think my father is going to allow me to go off on the Grand Tour after this ruckus we created?”

“But that’s just it. A few months away and all will be forgotten. Besides, it won’t cost him a farthing. I’ll foot the entire bill—or better said—the Viscount DeVere shall.”

“You know I can’t.” Simon sighed. “In fact, he has expressly forbidden me any further contact with you—believes you’re a bad influence on my character.”

DeVere grinned. “Then he would be right.”

“How long will you be gone?” Simon asked.

“Six months. Mayhap a year. Longer if I can manage. Which now reminds me of why I sent for you. There are some things I need you to look after for me.” He withdrew a key from his pocket along with a card with an address written on the back. “The key is to the rooms I have let

in St. James. You must go there at your earliest convenience.”

Chapter Two

IT WAS two days before Simon could break away again. This time his escape was in the light of day, ostensibly to borrow a book of sermons from Reverend Dodd.

With access to DeVere's apartments that included a bed, Simon ventured through St. James the park, hoping to encounter a certain dairy maid. He hadn't laid eyes on the toothsome Lavinia since he'd composed the bawdy verse in her honor—the poem that had incited the chain of events leading to his current disgrace. Arriving at the grazing meadows just above St. James, he was dismayed that Lavinia was nowhere in sight.

"Cuppa milk, young sir?" asked a bent old crone holding a haltered cow.

"No milk, madam," he replied. "But perhaps you could tell me the whereabouts of a lass named Lavinia?"

She extended a gnarled hand with an expectant look. Simon dug two pennies from his pocket and handed them over. Her gaze narrowed. "Milk for tuppence. *Questions* are thruppence."

Simon retrieved the third coin from his pocket with a resigned sigh.

The crone took it and cackled with toothless triumph. "Lavinia, eh? More like lazy, lackadaisical light skirt, not fit fer an honest day's work. Don't think ye be the first randy young gent to come sniffing about *her* skirts. Nor will ye be the last."

Simon's hackles rose. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"She done took up with that rogue from the Shakespear's Head. I says good riddance to the baggage." She spat.

"The rogue from the Shakespear's Head? Do you mean Jack Harris?"

"Aye. The pimp general hisself come recruitin'. Lost half a dozen milk maids in a day. May God save 'em all from the pox." She gave a bony shrug and turned away to tend her cow.

Simon trudged away. Damn! It wasn't bad enough that DeVere had left for the Continent, and Ned was rusticated to Yorkshire. Now Livy had gone to the Shakespear's Head?

He'd sought out Livy with the fancy that a good tupping could lift him out of his doldrums. He'd even secreted in his pocket the *Ode to a Milk Maid of St. James* in hope that his poetic composition would counterweigh his lack of coin and ease his way under her skirts. Now that she'd entered the world of fleshpots, he'd never be able to afford the pleasure of her company—or any pleasure at all!

Lost in melancholy, Simon hoofed it across the park to DeVere's lodgings. He entered the chamber startled to find the remnants of a meal sitting upon the table, and various articles of clothing littering the floor. How Strange. DeVere had been gone for days. Did the house employ slatternly chambermaids? Or did someone else occupy the room? Had the avaricious landlord let it out to another in DeVere's absence?

Before he could puzzle it any further, a lump stirred in the bed and then sat up. Simon gaped. "Freddie?"

"Simon?" she returned. The gypsy girl's look of tousled, sleep-drugged petulance sent a surge of blood to Simon's groin. Damn, how he wished he'd been the one to tousle her. A frown marred her brow. "My lord said you'd come and look after me. What took you so long?"

"I-I had no idea," Simon stammered. "I thought you were some musty papers."

Her frown deepened to a scowl.

"Bugger it! Th-that's not what I meant! It's just that he never told me it was *you* I was to look after." When given the key, Simon hadn't taken into account DeVere's devilish sense of mischief.

She pouted and plucked at the counterpane. "I don't see why he couldn't have taken me with him." She gazed back up at Simon with misty eyes and quivering lips. "He's cast me off, hasn't he?"

Not tears. He could bear anything but a female in tears!

"Please, Freddie. You must understand how he is. I have never known DeVere to form any lingering romantic attachment. It just isn't his way. Did he not explain the arrangement to you?"

"The only *arrangement* was that I warmed his bed in exchange for this." She gestured to the rooms. "Now he's hied off to foreign parts." Her expression transformed from woeful to sullen in the blink of an eye. "Does he expect me to just pine away until his return?"

"I doubt that very much," Simon replied. "DeVere is not one for *pining* of any sort. He would expect you to enjoy yourself in his absence."

"Enjoy myself? How am I supposed to do that stuck alone in this place?" She gave an indignant sniff.

Simon turned up his hands with a sigh. "I don't know, Freddie. How were you used to entertaining yourself before?"

"Entertainment is all we *ever* did when I lived amongst the Romanis. We traveled the country from north to south, performing at all the fairs, but now they have long moved on, and I am here. Alone."

"Do you wish to rejoin them?"

"No," she said. "I like London."

"Then you wish to stay here?"

"Where *else* am I to go?" she huffed.

Simon raked a hand through his hair. Why were females so bloody complicated? A good meal and a tumble would suffice for any man, but obviously this situation required some finesse. He'd get nowhere near her bed, *let alone into it*, with her feathers in a ruffle as they were.

"If you are bored, I'll be happy to take you out and about. Do you wish to attend the playhouse?" He supposed he could sneak her into his parents' box. They rarely attended. His mother disapproved of the illicit tone of the theatre. "Whatever your pleasure, Freddie, I place myself at your disposal." He gave her a gallant bow.

"The playhouse? How can I go to the playhouse without any clothes?"

"Clothes? There are clothes everywhere." He gestured to the garments that littered the floor.

"Hardly the kind for a lady." Freddie rose from the bed with a snort. "He thought it a lark to keep me as a lad when we went about. The rest of the time, he said I had no need of 'em."

She kicked violently at the breeches and shirts on the floor. Garbed only in DeVere's nightshirt, the act provided Simon with a gratuitous view of slim and shapely legs.

Simon cursed DeVere in a surge of envy. Why had *he* been the one to discover Freddie? He was the luckiest blighter and thoroughly undeserving to boot. "Yes, I suppose DeVere would see it that way. Did he leave you any coin?"

"Are you daft? Do you s'pose I'd be stuck here in these rooms had milord left me any coin?"

Great. Just bloody great. DeVere had reaped all the benefits and now left Simon to deal with the upshot. But deal with it he would.

“DeVere does not lack generosity, Freddie,” he explained in his most placating tone. “No doubt, it simply didn’t occur to him because he had so much on his mind before his departure.”

“Then what’s to become of me?” The misty eyes returned. She blinked, and the first tears spilled from her black eyes to roll down her cheeks. It was nearly Simon’s undoing.

“Come now, Freddie! Please don’t weep.” He went to her and clasped her hands. “He’s hardly abandoned you. He let this lodging for you after all and asked me to look after you—albeit in a somewhat vague and circuitous fashion.”

“Then *you* will be my protector?”

“Protector? Hell, I don’t know! I’ve never kept a mistress before.”

“Then you *don’t* want me?” Freddie sniffed.

“Bloody hell! It’s not that, Freddie!” The problem wasn’t a lack of desire to keep her, but the *means* to do so. His pockets were empty and he had no means to rectify the situation. He also wasn’t certain that DeVere had meant for him to poach on his preserves. Then again, the key *had* seemed like a gift of sorts.

“I don’t believe you.” Freddie’s lips quivered. “Just like him, you are going to leave and never come back.”

“No!” Simon protested. “I promise I’ll return.”

“You swear it?” She slanted a coy look through her dewy lashes.

He crossed his heart. “Gentleman’s honor.”

Her tears abruptly ceased. She snaked one arm around his neck while her other hand toyed with the buttons of his waistcoat. She was warm, soft, and smelled like woman. God, how he loved the scent of a woman, either delicately perfumed, or wearing the heady aroma of her natural essence; it didn’t matter to Simon. He shifted in uncomfortable awareness of the tightening in his groin.

“Then you’ll keep me? As a *real* mistress?”

She darted her pink tongue over her full lips, an action that sent another rush of blood into his throbbing manhood. *Bugger!* All she had to do was look at him to incite a cockstand.

“Yes!” He groaned. “I will keep you.” The words of promise escaped before he could muzzle himself. It was his bloody prick speaking, and it had taken full control, mastering at once his mind and his mouth!

A subtle smile now supplanted her pout. “Then I will need some new clothes.”

He blinked in incomprehension, the blood that normally fed his brain having been diverted to other places. “Why do you need clothes in bed?”

She shoved him so hard his arse hit the floor. “Do you think me a simpleton? I’ve seen the high-flyers strutting about Covent Garden all in finery. I won’t be your mistress unless you treat me like one—starting with some proper lady’s clothes.”

She came to stand directly over him now, arms crossed, a position that tightened the linen over her pert breasts and clearly defined the shape of her nipples. From his vantage point on the floor, his gaze traveled up her shapely legs to the shadowy apex of her thighs. The throbbing in his balls ascended to his head, further muddling his brain. Her gaze dipped to the tented falls of his breeches.

“I’ll get you a gown,” he blurted. “Anything you need, whatever you desire, I shall lay it at your feet.” Why had he made her such an impossible promise?

“Anything?” She lowered herself to her knees and then straddled his lap.

The heat of her core was only inches away, beckoning to his straining cock, and blurring his vision. She brought his hands to her breasts. They were soft and warm and oh so delightful. His balls ached for want of her—so much he thought he would burst. He hadn’t the vaguest notion what a gown would cost, but damn if he wouldn’t cut off his left arm this very moment for one.

“If you can make it a *silk* gown, I would be *most* grateful.”

“Silk, Freddie?”

She nodded mutely. Her hands drifted southward. He sucked in a breath, and his eyes fluttered shut. He moaned as her little hand wrapped around him, firm and confident. She gave a small squeeze, and his eyes rolled back in his head. It was too much! He would explode if he didn’t have her now! He thought he would even commit murder to be inside her.

“Simon,” she whispered hotly against his mouth.

“Yes, Freddie. Anything you desire. I am your servant.”

The moment the words left his mouth she leaped off his lap with a chuckle.

“Damn it, Freddie! What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” She snatched up a waistcoat and a pair of breeches and proceeded to dress.

He shook his muddled head. “But I thought you...we...”

She cocked a brow. Her lips curved into a seductress’ smile. “*Yellow*, Simon.”

“Yellow?” he repeated.

“It’s my favorite color.”

Simon left her with a raging cockstand and in a near frenzy to locate a yellow silk gown! Aside from his mother, none of the females of his acquaintance had ever worn silk, although he’d never taken much notice of their clothing at all...other than the removal of it. He wondered if his mother favored yellow, but then shook off the notion. He was certain she never wore anything but drab colors.

He then thought of Lavinia. As one of Harris’ new recruits, she’d surely have acquired a new wardrobe. Perhaps she could assist him. But even with her help how would he pay for it?

Instead of heading home, Simon made a detour for Covent Garden, determined to drown his misery in a tankard...or three. Reaching the square, he made a beeline for the Shakespear’s Head, where he sidled up to the familiar bar and ordered a stout. Draining it in a few great gulps, he promptly called for another.

“I say, sir,” he addressed the imposing tapster, “might you be acquainted with a lass named Lavinia, late of St. James dairy?”

“I be not the whoremaster here,” he replied, slamming a second frothy tankard on the counter. “If ye seek a wench, see Harris.”

Realizing he would get nothing helpful from the barkeep, Simon drained his second tankard and then reached into his pocket...to find only a crinkled piece of foolscap.

Damn! He’d given the last of his coins to the old crone! Now he hadn’t even two bits to pay his reckoning! Simon looked sheepishly to the tapster. “Er...I don’t suppose you’d accept this by way of payment?”

“What’s this?” The brute sneered. “Sommat to wipe my arse with?”

Suddenly Simon found himself suspended by his cravat. *Bloody hell! This was not good.*

Grumbling a curse, the burly barkeep signaled someone on the far side of the room. “Got a freeloader, Mr. Harris. Says he wants to pay with this!” The tapster shoved the crumpled poem across the bar to the establishment’s manager.

“I’m no freeloader,” Simon choked out. “I simply forgot my purse.”

Harris’ brows furrowed. “Do I know you, sir?”

“Singleton. Simon Singleton. I’m a friend of DeVere.”

“Ah! I recall you now.” Harris nodded to the barkeep, “Release him, Samson.’Tis surely a simple mistake as the gentleman says.”

Simon dropped like a stone. He sucked in a gasp of air and massaged his tender throat.

Harris, meanwhile, had taken up the abandoned parchment. Simon noted a twitch of his mouth as he briefly scanned the script.

“Are you perchance the author of this verse, Mister Singleton?”

“Aye,” he confessed, deciding it better to claim authorship than to be thought a plagiarist. “I dabble in poetry...among other things.”

“Do you, indeed?” Harris considered him with a sly smile. “Would you have time to join me for a brandy?”

Simon inclined his head. “I suppose so. I’ve no other place to be at the moment.”

Harris took Simon by the elbow and guided him to a small office where he gestured to an overstuffed chair. He then poured two glasses of brandy, offering the first to Simon, then taking a seat behind a worn oak desk. Simon swirled the brandy and then took an appreciative sip, wondering what this was about.

Harris sat back, crossing an ankle over his knee. “Now then, Mister Singleton, I wish to know more about this colorful verse of yours. I must say it evokes a certain image of wanton delight.” His mouth curved into a leer. “Do you often pen verse about subjects of...shall we say...dubious virtue?”

“I write whatever inspires me,” Simon replied.

“Indeed?” Harris pressed further. “What do you suppose might *inspire* you to pen an entire volume of such verse?”

“I don’t know,” Simon replied. “What are you getting at, Harris?”

Harris set his brandy down. He then unlocked the top desk drawer and retrieved a thin, worn black leather-bound book. “Do you know what this is?”

“Is it your legendary list of whores? I have heard rumors of such a book.”

Harris’ gaze narrowed. “So crude, Mister Singleton? I prefer to call it my *Directory of Covent Garden Ladies*. This book indeed contains names, addresses, and descriptions of over a hundred ladies of the town. It is a pet project begun many years ago. Since the demand has expanded well beyond my ability to supply personal service, I now intend to offer copies of this

book for private subscription.”

Simon laughed. “You are an enterprising man, Mister Harris, but how does this concern me?” The question had barely passed over his lips before Simon’s face split into a grin. “My verse! You wish me to wax poetic on their charms!”

“Precisely.” Harris returned his smile. “There are numerous ladies willing to advertise their services. The fees would subsidize the printing costs. I should like to hire you to write said advertisements—short, colorful pieces, evocative and titillating, for each of our listed Covent Garden ladies. Could you do this, Mister Singleton?”

Simon slouched back with an indolent smile. “It all depends on what you are willing to pay me.”

“I am prepared to offer you twenty-five percent of the net. The initial print run will be one thousand copies which I hope to sell at five shillings each.”

Simon performed rapid calculations. The net proceeds should be over two hundred pounds, leaving Simon with somewhere around fifty—a sum equal to his former quarterly allowance. He took up the book and thumbed through the stained and dog-eared pages.

“How soon would you need this to be completed?”

“I had planned to send it Grub Street within the fortnight. Obviously, you will need additional time to compose your odes to our votaries of Venus. How long will you require?”

“A month,” Simon said, careful not to reveal his eagerness. He could hardly believe his good luck—a healthy source of income derived solely from the fruits of his pen. With this job he could afford to keep Freddie; and with such a magnificent muse at his command, his creative juices would surely flow like a bottomless spring.

“Excellent!” Harris declared. “Have we an agreement then, Mister Singleton?”

Simon pocketed the black book and stood, offering his hand. “Indeed we have, Mister Harris.” Preoccupied with this unusual turn of fortune, Simon was three strides to the door before he recalled his original purpose in coming to the Shakespear’s Head. He paused and then turned back to Harris who regarded him expectantly.

“Is there something more, Mister Singleton?”

“Well, yes,” Simon said, massaging his chin. “Er...you see...there is something I wish to procure, but I am a bit short on funds at the moment.”

Harris laughed. “You’ve no need of my services when the book is in your very hands!”

“It’s not that kind of request. Er...I am in need of a gown.”

“A gown?” Harris’ gaze narrowed. “This is not a Molly house, Mister Singleton.”

A flare of heat invades Simon’s face “N-not for me, of c-course! It’s for my...my...sister...a gift...for her birthday. She desires something in silk.”

“Your *sister* has very expensive taste, Mister Singleton. A silk gown will cost you dearly. Are you sure some other pretty trinket won’t suffice? A new fan or a pair of gloves perhaps?”

“No, Harris. It must be a gown made of Spitalfields silk.”

Harris shrugged. “Tis no skin off my nose if you choose to be led around by yours.”

Simon bristled. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“Let me share a bit of wisdom from one with vast experience managing a stable of whores—

”

“She’s not a whore.”

“Of course not. She’s your *sister*,” Harris offered a placating smile. “But the nature of all women is the same. You would do well to exercise care, lest you spoil the creature. The fair sex is universally avaricious, and notoriously fickle.”

“I’m only in need of a gown, Harris, not advice. I would also be much obliged of a small advance to assist me in the matter of procurement. I understand it is not an uncommon practice.”

“Very well.” Harris shrugged. “I know someone who can assist you.” He retrieved his calling card and scrawled on the back, handing it to Simon. “Go to Mrs. Martin just across the Piazza. Give her this card and she will extend you credit in the amount of ten pounds. The amount should suffice for your needs.”

Simon accepted the card and tucked it into his breast pocket with a grin. “Thank you, Harris.”

He gave Simon a meaningful look. “I hope your *sister* shows you proper gratitude.”

“I am sure she will be exceedingly gratified.” Simon departed with an imagination brimming with visions of Freddie’s various and sundry manifestations of enduring appreciation.

Chapter Three

“SIMON! WHERE on earth have you been?” demanded Lady Singleton.

He winced, his hopes of slinking upstairs unnoticed, dashed. She approached with her nose twitching. He’d never considered it before, but his mother rather resembled a rabbit.

“Spirits, Simon? You smell distinctly of spirits! You have been to a tavern!” Righteous fire smoldered in her accusing eyes.

“Mother, it’s not what you think—”

“You told me you were calling upon the Reverend Dodd to borrow a book of sermons.”

The pained look in her eyes evoked a pang of guilt, if not quite contrition. He really did love his mother and hated to disappoint her, but her saintly expectations were impossible for any mortal to live up to.

“Yes, Mother,” Simon scrambled to explain the brandy. It seemed to him a greater kindness, and therefore a lesser sin, to offer up a small prevarication. “Indeed, I have a volume right here in my pocket that I intend to study most diligently.”

Her face instantly softened. “Do you, Simon? Perhaps you could read it to me. If you hope to be heard from the pulpit, you must apply yourself to the art of oration.”

He smiled. “Of course, you are right, Mama, but I would first prefer to familiarize myself and commit some key passages to memory.”

“A brilliant idea!” Lady Singleton exclaimed. “What is the theme of this sermon book?”

Damn! Damn! Bloody damn! I should have anticipated that one!

Simon searched his memory desperate to recall a well-known sermon—or any sermon at all! “The Mount,” he blurted the only one that came to mind. “The Sermon on the Mount.”

She clasped her hands with a look of rapture. “An exposition on our Lord’s great beatitudes? You must tell me who the author is? Is it Dr. Dodd?”

A reply in the affirmative might lead her to question Dodd later. “No, Mama. The discourse

was penned by that...that...traveling Methodist fellow.”

“Dr. Wesley? His sermons are well renowned!” She extended her hand. “May I see it?”

Double Damn! He closed his eyes on an inward groan. He could almost feel the individual beads of sweat popping out of his forehead. Simon reached into his pocket with a genuine prayer. “Here it is, Mama. Just a plain black sermon book. There is nothing special to see, but if you will allow me to give it my full devotion for a few hours, I’ll be happy to recite what I commit to memory.”

“That would be utterly delightful, Simon.” She cupped his cheek with a warm smile. “Shall we say later this evening? I shall be in sad want of company with your father at his club again. Will you join me for supper?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d prefer to stay in my room while I study,” he asked.

“But of course. Your dedication is admirable. I just knew all this recent ruckus had to be the wicked influence of that rogue DeVere.”

“As you say, Mama. Until this evening.” He bussed her cheek.

Once out of sight, Simon released the air from his lungs in a long, slow gush. He thanked his guardian angel for his reprieve—and promised to repent of at least *some* of his sins.

Simon retired to his room where he immersed himself in study of Harris’ book. Simon had thought it would be an effortless undertaking to pen witty homage to these birds of Paradise, but after thumbing through dozens of pages, his well of inspiration remained dry. Aside from names, addresses, and physical descriptions, there were a few crude notes written in the margin detailing attributes, talents, and preferred sexual acts. To his dismay, nothing stirred his poetic passion or ignited his imagination. In actuality, the only stirring was in his prick. Yes, *that* part of him was highly inspired. He threw down his quill and raked a hand through his hair.

He opened the book again, determined to focus more diligently on the work at hand, only to read a particularly colorful description of one plump and toothsome wench called Cherry Belle for her practice of rouging herself—cheeks, mouth, nipples, and even her nether lips.

Bugger it all!

He slammed the book down. Was this some cruel joke? Or perhaps an agonizing penance he

had to pay for his willful iniquity?

Fully aroused, Simon slumped in the chair and loosened his cravat with a resigned sigh. He then unbuttoned his falls, determined to take matters in hand. He fisted himself and shut his eyes, focusing all his frustration on visions of dear Cherry applying the rouge to her pebbled nipples. He stroked leisurely up and down his shaft as she squeezed her breasts together with a sly smile meant only for him—a dark and secretive *gypsy* smile—Freddie's smile.

He stroked harder and faster as Freddie smoothed her hands slowly over her naked belly to her glorious mound of Venus. His cadence increased to a frantic pace as she parted her nether lips with rouge-tipped fingers and delved inside with a moan of pleasure that echoed his own.

Freddie then knelt on all fours and spread her delectable arse cheeks. His bollacks tightened when she turned her head and cast a beckoning gaze over her shoulder with those fathomless dark and sultry eyes. He was nearing combustion—

“Simon?”

His gaze flew to the door. Immersed in his fantasy, he hadn't heard the light scratch until it was almost too late. Releasing himself with a quiet stream of expletives, he fumbled with his falls, barely managing to scrape his chair under the desk before the door flung open.

Lady Singleton stood in the doorway. “Simon, have you forgotten you were to recite for me?”

He blinked dumbly. “Ah, er... Is it that late already?” Sermons had been the furthest thing from his mind.

“It is past seven o'clock. You have been buried in that book for hours.” She approached with her brisk little step, wearing a look of concern. “Are you all right, Simon? You don't look well at all!” She came close enough to lay the back of her hand on his forehead. “You feel feverish. Shall I send for a posset?”

“I've come down with a bit of a headache,” he said. “It is nothing, Mama. Perhaps I'll just retire early to bed.” *Yes, precisely the place where I should have conducted my former activity.*

“Dear boy, you must have overtaxed yourself with all this study.”

Before could anticipate her actions, Lady Singleton picked up the book. She scanned one page and then another. Her gaze widening, her mouth gaping.

“I don't know what kind of book this is, but it's *not* a volume of sermons!”

“It's not what it appears, Mama!”

Her voice quivered. “It *appears* to be a directory of harlots! What is *my son* doing with such a book? Who put this...this...wickedness into your hands? It was that devil DeVere, wasn’t it?”

“DeVere is in France, Mama. He’s quite innocent...this time.”

“Where then, Simon?” she demanded. “Was it in the same place where you imbibed *spirits*? I cannot bear it!” She pressed her hand against her heart. “This work of Satan must be consigned to the purifying flames!”

“No!” Simon almost leaped from his chair, but stopped himself in the nick of time. With his falls still unbuttoned and his prick hanging out, he could only clutch the desk in dread as his mother marched to the hearth. “Please, Mama! Don’t,” he begged.

“Much better the book go to the fiery furnace than you!”

“Just let me explain!”

“Explain? How? How can you explain this?”

“It’s...it’s my work,” he blurted. My mission on behalf of the Magdalen House.”

She fixed him with an incredulous stare. “*Your work?*”

“Yes. I had intended to surprise you. The book is why I went to the tavern. That volume contains the names and addresses of hundreds of poor, lost wretches in need of salvation.”

Brilliant, Sin. Utterly inspired!

“Simon!” She gasped. “You are right! This is all the proof we need to petition Queen Charlotte for funding a larger domicile.” She rushed back to clasp his head against her bosom. “You dear, dear boy! How could I ever have doubted you?”

Moments later Simon offered a second prayer of thanks to his guardian angel for another blessed escape.

Chapter Four

SIMON AWOKE early the next morning with one thought that he dispatched through manual means. It was but a temporary palliative for his fever. Freddie remained the only panacea, but thanks to Harris, he now had the means to affect his cure.

Simon knocked on Freddie's door, impatient to see the elation alighting in her eyes when she opened to her new lover. To his dismay, the door parted only far enough to glimpse the tip of her nose and one dark eye. "You again."

"Of course it's me! Who else were you expecting?"

He thought he heard a mumbled expletive. The door swung into the chamber. She raked him with an insolent stare. "If you've come empty handed you might as well leave now. I meant what I said."

"But, Freddie—"

"No, Simon! I won't let you bed me. I'll have a *real* protector or none at all."

Simon clutched his heart. "You cut me to the quick, Freddie. Did I not make you a promise?"

"Men are known to make false promises."

Simon puffed in affront. "You measure me with the wrong staff, Freddie. I am a gentleman of my word. I promised you Spitalfields silk, and that is what you will have."

"Where is it then?" She asked with biting sarcasm, "Have you a gown in your pocket?"

"It is yet to be made," he replied. "I am here to take you to the shop of Mrs. Martin of Covent Garden Square, a maker of fine *ladies'* attire where you will be custom fitted."

"A *custom* gown?" She speared him with a disbelieving look.

"Of whatever color and mode delights you most. You didn't suppose I would give you some ill-fitting second-handed rag, did you?"

Her flickering eyes told him she had presumed precisely that. *Bugger!* A pawned gown

hadn't even occurred to him! He sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound...or ten.

Simon spent the next few hours in total tedium sipping tea in the mantua maker's tiny reception room, while Freddie had her fitting. Mrs. Martin had a number of half-finished gowns that caught Freddie's eye. She'd settled on an outrageously gaudy confection in yellow and pink. Although close to her size the alterations took up the entire day. But when Freddie, or *Frederica*, as she now insisted upon, finally emerged, the vision fairly stole his breath.

Her modest breasts were thrust together and upward, almost out of the gown, like choice fruit ripe for plucking. She spread her arms and spun in a circle, swirling and delighting in the novelty of her voluminous, panniered petticoats. "What do you think, Simon?" Freddie giggled.

"I think my new muse shall be universally admired."

Her forehead crinkled. "Muse? What's a muse?"

"The original muses were nine goddesses who inspired the great artists and poets of antiquity. Now it refers to one who rouses a man's soul to create."

"You expect me to rouse your soul, Simon? My Lord DeVere only expected me to rouse his—"

He put a finger to her lips. "Yes, Freddie, but pray let us keep DeVere out of this, shall we?"

"You never mentioned soul-rousing, Simon. It seems to me rousing a man's soul should command a premium." She gave him a calculating look and then cast her gaze around the shop. She fingered a lace fan, picked it up, and fluttered it before her face.

"You desire the fan as well?"

She smiled and dropped it in his lap, only to caress a pair of kid gloves. She arched a brow and those, too, landed in Simon's lap. His inner dread increased with every object that caught Freddie's eye

Mrs. Martin entered with a smile. "The gown suits the young lady well, does it not? Of course we had to provide the proper foundations for it. Shall I put these on your account as well, Mister Singleton?"

"Yes, of course. As well as these." He indicated the fan and gloves.

She added the items and then handed him the account book to sign.

Blood hell! Nine pounds, six shillings.

Simon signed his name with a wince and a flourish.

“There is a fine cobbler across the square,” Mrs. Martin volunteered.

“Cobbler?” Freddie raised her hem to reveal tiny feet encased in a pair of sensible brown leather shoes.

“Yes, surely such a fine gown requires slippers. Masters, across the square, can surely fabricate a pair to match.”

Freddie eyed Simon.

“*Silk* slippers?” He swallowed hard and forced a smile while performing calculations that made his heart drop.

He reminded himself that he was far from ruined. Harris owed him another forty pounds for his labor. Yet within a few hours, Simon found himself almost twenty pounds poorer. He’d spent a princely sum granting her every whim, including a hearty meal at the Rose Tavern complete with French wine. Nearly half of his earnings were already spent, and he’d yet to write a single verse. He consoled told himself that Freddie’s show of gratitude would surely inspire the full volume of verses.

Of course Freddie then demanded a hackney coach for fear of ruining her slippers—another shilling dropped into the Freddie bucket. When he attempted to sit beside her, she insisted he take the seat opposite to avoid crushing her new mantua.

“Bugger the gown, Freddie! It can be pressed. Don’t you see how I burn for you?”

He flung himself from his seat to kneel at her feet. Taking her hand in his, he plied passionate kisses to each of her nail-bitten fingers. “Your lush lips make my pulse thunder. I could drown in the fathomless black pools of your eyes. Verily, you set me aflame! If I don’t have you soon, I surely will perish!”

She chortled. “Which way shall you perish, Simon? Will you drown or burn? It certainly can’t be both at once.”

“Heartless jade!” he cried, ready to rent his hair in vexation. “Do you delight in tormenting me?”

The coach jerked to a halt. When the driver flung open the door, Simon swept her up into his arms, eager to get her someplace private but the landlord barred their entrance with a glower.

“No doxies allowed here! ‘Tis a respectable house!”

“Doxys? You are quite mistaken. The young lady resides here. I was merely keeping her shoes from ruin,” Simon explained.

"There ain't no *ladies* of any kind in this house. I lets only to respectable gents."

"But my Lord DeVere has a set of rooms. This is his sister come to visit. Surely you see the resemblance?"

The landlord crossed his arms and widened his stance. "No females allowed. Be they *relatives* or no."

Bugger! What now?

It seemed Simon's only recourse was to turn Frederica back into Freddie, but she'd cast away her male attire, refusing to wear it again. Where the devil could he get more clothes?

"Perhaps I can just leave a note upstairs?"

The landlord grunted assent. "The doxy stays here."

Simon set her down with a groan and took the stairs by twos. He packed a few garments into a sack and returned to Freddie. "We'll go back to Covent Garden and I'll hire you a room for the night. Tomorrow, however, you must return here as DeVere's valet."

"But I don't want to," she protested.

"You must, Freddie."

She sulked in silence until they arrived at the Shakespear's Head.

"Ah, Mister Singleton, my poet laureate!" Harris greeted him with a smile. "How goes our mutual endeavor?" His gaze flickered over Freddie. "This must be your lovely *sister*."

"Er, yes," Simon replied. "She is up from the country for some shopping and has missed her return coach. I seek lodging for her. A modest room is all we...she...requires."

"But of course. We can accommodate you for ten shillings."

"Could you please put it on my account," Simon asked.

Harris' brows pulled together. "*Another* advance? I have yet to see even a page of your verse."

"Very well, Harris." Simon plucked out his gold cravat pin and handed it to Harris. "You may accept this as surety until I deliver the promised work."

"I never had the least doubt." Harris accepted the pin and then conducted them to a modest but clean chamber.

The moment the door closed, Simon turned the key and took Freddie into his arms. "Freddie, my dearest Freddie," he murmured, plying kisses to her cheeks, her throat, and finally her lips. Rather than melting into his arms, she remained stiff and unresponsive. "What is it

now?" he cried.

"You said you'd take me to the theatre."

"And I shall, dearest," he appeased. "But it's been a very long day, and I desire to be alone with you now. Have I not treated you well? I bought your gown, your slippers, the dinner, the wine. I have kept my promise Freddie...and then some."

"You also said I wouldn't have to wear breeches again."

"But, my dear, you must understand you cannot live in the house at St. James as a woman."

"Then maybe I need another house," she said.

"Freddie, please be reasonable. The rooms at St. James have been paid up for six months. It makes little difference if you must pretend to be a valet for a while longer. Your life will not change from what it was. You will be comfortably housed and well fed. You had no prior complaint, did you?"

"But that was before I came here. I like this place better with all the fine ladies and gents."

"But it's a damned bawdy house! You can't *live* here!"

She gave an indignant sniff. "Others do. And they don't have to dress like boys."

"Enough, Freddie!" Simon groaned. "I have done all in my power to delight you, yet nothing seems to satisfy you. And I certainly am far from *satisfied*."

She regarded him with wide misty eyes and quivering lips. "You are vexed."

This time Simon was unmoved by her tearful display. "Damned right, I'm vexed! What have I received for my largesse but complaints and ingratitude?"

"All right, Simon." She threw down her lace fan with a sigh. "I'll let you take me to bed."

She turned her back to him and reached for her laces. "I need help with these."

Simon watched her struggle with the gown, making no move to assist. He should have been elated after days of torturous anticipation, but in these last moments something had changed. "You needn't bother, Freddie."

Her dark eyes flashed. "What do you mean?"

"It has been a long day for both of us. I'm going to leave now."

"But—I want you to stay," she insisted.

"You should have thought of that before."

She clutched at his arm with panicked look. "You are not coming back, are you?"

He pried her fingers from his sleeve one by one. "The clothes are yours to keep or to pawn

as you see fit. The lodging in St. James will remain yours if you desire it, but no, Freddie, I shall not return. Perhaps I'll suffer remorse later, but at present I have no desire for you."

Like the calm after a storm, his passion for her had spent.

Simon awoke the next morning without regret—at least not for leaving. His only remorse was that he'd allowed her to play him for a fool. Nevertheless, he recalled his promise to DeVere to look after her. Unable to break faith with his best friend, he returned to Covent Garden, resolved only to see Freddie safely returned to St. James.

To his surprise, the room was empty when he lifted the latch and entered. All was in perfect order as if it hadn't been slept in. Had something happened to her? He rapidly descended the stairs in search of Harris. "Have you seen my sister?" he anxiously inquired.

"Indeed I have, Mister Singleton. Last evening after you departed."

"Last evening? But she was in her room when I left."

"That may be, but the wen...er...lady... appeared in the late hours in the gaming rooms. She was in the company of Ensign Browning who won five hundred guineas at hazard. He kissed her and called her his good luck charm after his lucky cast. He later announced he was taking the wench to Gretna Green. Of course our good Ensign was quite disguised at that point. The stupid sod will sober up in a few days to find himself leg-shackled."

Simon glowered. It was bad enough to have lost his head over her, but far worse to learn he was tossed aside for the very first pigeon with plumper pockets.

"Look, lad," Harris consoled. "There's no cause to mourn the loss. You should thank the gods to be rid of the baggage."

Harris remark was little balm to his bruised pride. He'd sought more than a lover in Freddie. Perhaps he'd expected too much. He'd been convinced that with her as his muse, he would surely ascend to hitherto unknown poetic heights. He'd dreamed of finding the woman with the key to unlock his passions and open his creative floodgates. Perhaps he'd expected too much. Maybe his longed-for muse was like the mythical chimera... and simply did not exist.

Chapter Five

Covent Garden, Westminster – six months later

WITH A voluptuous, raven-haired beauty draped on either arm, Simon entered the crowded taproom of the Shakespear's Head. He exchanged pleasantries with several acquaintances before catching the eye of the establishment's headwaiter.

"Ah, my darlings!" he exclaimed. "There is just the gent I promised you to find."

Jack Harris came forward at once, greeting Simon with a broad smile while his glittering gaze appraised the two young women. "Well, well, Mister Singleton. What have we here?"

"Jack, my friend, these delightful daughters of Erin are Brigid and Bronaugh O'Malley, just arrived from the fine city of Dublin." Simon completed the introduction, "Ladies, I make known to you Jack Harris, a gentleman who could be highly instrumental in your successful establishment in our fine metropolis."

"A pleasure, sar," the twins replied almost in unison and bobbed a giggling curtsey.

Harris swept a return bow. "I am doubly enchanted, ladies."

"Rightly so." Simon laughed. "And you are also much indebted to me."

"Is that right?" Harris raised a brow.

"'Tis, indeed! 'Twas quite a coup stealing these two Hibernian nymphs from under Charlotte Hayes' nose."

"I commend you, Singleton. Mrs. Hayes is not a woman to be trifled with. However did you accomplish such a feat?"

"It was a stroke of blind luck, actually. I happened through Charing Cross just as the Chester-wagons arrived from the north. Knowing her practice of impressing innocent maids into

her den of iniquity, I swooped in as swiftly as any peregrine to snatch this most perfect pair of doves out of her grasp. Bold as brass, I embraced my dearest Irish cousins, whom I had come especially to meet.”

“With a most un-cousinly kiss!” Brigid tittered.

Simon winked. “I assure you, our blood connection is the thinnest.”

Harris gifted the sisters with his most disarming smile. “I welcome you to London, Miss Brigid and Miss Bronaugh. Might I buy you ladies a tankard?” Signaling the drawer, he led them to a corner table, where shortly a trio of frothy mugs swiftly appeared. “I presume you came south seeking employment?”

“Aye, sar,” Bronaugh replied. “Thar be nothin’ fer an honest lass in Dooblin.”

Harris’ smile hardened. “*Honest* lasses, are ye? So ye desire nothing better than to empty some nobleman’s chamber pot?”

The sisters exchanged a wide-eyed look. Brigid then protested, “Mayhap not *quite* so honest, sar.”

“Nay,” Bronaugh chimed in. “But a Dooblin doxy chances a beatin’ with every trick and is looky if she turns enou’ coin to buy her meat. ‘Tis why we come ta Loondon.”

“Then you are not averse to keeping company with some of the fine gentlemen who habit this upstanding establishment?” Harris swept an arm to encompass the crowded tavern.

Simon raised his tankard. “Here buskin’d Beaus in rich lac’d Cloathes. Like Lords and Squires do bluster; Bards, quacks and cits, knaves, fools and wits, an odd, surprising cluster”

“That was lovely, Simon,” Brigid gushed. “Be ye a poet?”

“I do my poor best. Which recalls me to my original purpose in coming here.” Simon retrieved a bundle of bound pages from the capacious pockets of his frock coat. He handed them to Harris. “I’ve just returned from the Grub Street printer with the proofs for the new and improved edition of our infamous guidebook. Since I’m already late in meeting my friends, you may settle up with me later.”

Harris nodded. “Demand is increasing. I may even request a second print run this time.”

“All the better for both of us.” Simon grinned. “Now as to my dear *cousins*...”

Harris raised a hand. “While one cannot deny their natural charms, sadly, my stables are quite full.”

“Come now, Harris!” Simon chided.

"I am a man of business," Harris argued. "Taking them in as they are will cost me considerable upfront expense. Not only are they in need of clothes, they are in dire want of town polish. It would be weeks or even *months* before I could turn them out."

Brigid looked affronted. "The gents ne'er complained afore!"

"You are no longer in *Dooblin*," Harris mocked. "The standards are quite different in this establishment. Just look about you."

Twin pairs of wide blue eyes scanned the room, taking in the painted and powdered actresses, mistresses, and other women of pleasure, all begowned in silks and lace.

"Aye," Brigid replied. "There be a number of foin ladies and gents." The color deepened in her cheeks. She self-consciously smoothed her rough-spun petticoat.

"Every wench here is turned out in high style, yet they are all actresses and whores," Harris added, " albeit little separates the two. It is what the well-heeled now expect, a harlot who can mimic the manners of a duchess, but who conducts herself in private like the lewdest whore."

Bronaugh jutted her generous bosom and raised her chin. "Put us in such foinery and there be none to outshine me and me sister."

"You would soon become the reigning beauties," Simon agreed.

"But all comes at a price," Harris argued. "Outfitting you would require more than just painting your pretty faces and replacing your fustian and homespun with silk and lace. You require training in elocution and deportment."

"Locushun?" Brigid looked to Simon.

"You see, Simon? She demonstrates my point. Without town polish, they may as well walk the streets."

"Damn it all, Harris!" Simon furrowed a hand through his hair. "You know I can't keep a mistress—let alone two! But I won't leave them without any protection. Surely you can make *some* accommodation."

Harris shook his head. "It would require far too much time and effort before I would see any return on my investment."

Knowing he'd been played, Simon groaned. "Bloody hell! Just take their initial expenses out of what you owe me. Must you exploit me at every turn?"

"Ye would do that fer us, Simon?" Brigid asked.

"Aye. I could hardly leave you to the vultures." Unfortunately, by the time Harris added his

premium to all that the girls would need, he'd find himself once more with pockets to let. Simon looped an arm around each voluptuous feminine bundle. "Mister Harris runs an exceptionally orderly 'disorderly house'. He has more than adequate accommodations above stairs and will furnish all of your needs. As to the town polish you require, I would be more than happy to engage my own services."

"What do ye mean?" Brigid asked.

"I shall tutor you both in speech and deportment."

"You?" Bronaugh giggled.

"Aye, me! Don't look so surprised. God knows I've spent far more time in the company of women than with my own gender." He didn't add that it would also save him considerable coin. "Will the arrangement suit?"

"Aye!" they answered in a delighted chorus. "'Ye'll soon eat them wards, Mister Harris," said Bronaugh. "With Simon's help, we'll not be common hars fer long. You just see if some foin gent don't take us into high keepin'."

"Any man would be a fool to pass you up," Simon gallantly replied.

Harris shook his head. "Always the gentleman, eh, Singleton? Even to the commonest whore."

"All women are deserving of gentle treatment, Harris, no matter their circumstances."

Simon's suspected his soft heart for women would be his ruin, but the fair sex provided his greatest joy and delight. Simon worshipped women, exalting in soft, feminine curves that molded perfectly to a man's body, in the silkiness of their hair, in the lushness of a knowledgeable mouth. The tantalizing scent of feminine musk...their taste.... drove him to distraction.

Simon rose and took possession of each of their hands, raising them in turn to his lips. "But why to one man should woman be possessed? Is it not better she should the numbers bless? For all smell the rose, but is its scent any less? Adieu, my pets. As I am late to meet some companions, I commend you darlings unto Harris' gentle keeping."

Simon departed the tavern with a raffish grin stretching his mouth. *Twins, begad!* 'Twas a wet dream come true!

"So, you grace us with your presence at last!" remarked DeVere. "We expected you an hour ago, Sin."

“I had some business that required my immediate attention.” Simon flipped back his coat skirts, spun the chair around to straddle it backward, and then pilfered Ned’s tankard. Draining it dry, he wiped his grinning mouth with the back of his hand.

DeVere smirked. “I must say I admire the manner in which you’ve managed to employ your talents.”

“I only seek to raise a low and much-despised vocation to a higher level,” Simon replied.

Ned signaled the drawer to replace the drink Simon had pinched. “And what vocation would that be?”

“Has Sin not told you, Ned? He’s taken Harris’ directory of Covent Garden whores to poetic heights.”

Ned sat back, appraising Simon from beneath furrowed brows. “So, you’ve become a *pimp*?”

“My dear Ned, Harris provides a valuable service,” Simon protested.

“By vetting whores like racehorses? Bollacks!” Ned exclaimed.

“Come now, Ned,” DeVere protested. “Don’t be such a prig!”

Ned shook his head and took a pull on his drink. “A spade is a bloody spade—and a pimp, *however poetically inclined*, is still a pimp. Does Harris present this list of his right alongside the supper menu?”

“One should always contemplate desert.” DeVere quipped. “Have you perchance a copy, Sin? I am intrigued to see this infamous book.”

“As a matter of fact, I have the proof sheets.” Simon retrieved a bound bundle from his coat pocket and handed it to his friend.

DeVere slumped in his chair, gnawing his lower lip as he perused the pages. “*Polly Nimblewrist?*” He regarded Simon with a raised brow. “Really, Sin?”

Simon chuckled. “Some ladies prefer to adopt a colorful moniker to highlight their particular talents.”

DeVere flipped idly to another page. “Her gaze belies the flame within, and her mouth would tempt a saint to sin?”

“A well-earned accolade.” Simon winked.

DeVere’s mouth twitched. “It appears this so-called *literary* endeavor includes some perquisites?” DeVere continued to another page. “Do not venture where such danger lies, but

shun the sight of her victorious eyes?" His gaze shot up.

"I should think that one is self-explanatory. At last report, she was frothing black saliva."

DeVere shuddered and closed the book. "Mercury treatment is not a guaranteed cure for the pox."

Ned asked, "Are you not still bound for the clergy, Sin?"

Simon heaved a deep sigh. "It is my dear Mama's fondest wish for me to join the church, but I fear my nature is quite incompatible with a theological vocation. I have searched deeply, and cannot seem to summon an inkling of pious sentiment, which makes me an exceedingly poor candidate for the clergy."

"Even so, why would you wish to dirty your hands with something like this?"

"The answer is simple, Ned—I need the money."

"But you receive a more than adequate allowance."

"That he mostly squanders on women of easy virtue," DeVere drawled.

"Admittedly," Simon confessed, unabashed. "But now my father has reduced my quarterly and demands a full account of every ha'penny. I tell you, it is humiliating in the extreme! Unless I wish to live under such a yoke for the next three years—which I positively do not—I must make my own living. If I must travail for my bread, how better than by the fruits of my pen?"

"So you seek to combine your love of poetry and lewd women by writing poetry *about* lewd women?" Ned replied dryly.

Simon clapped Ned on the back. "Precisely! Don't you see the ironic beauty of it?"

"What do you suppose will happen when your dear, devout mama gets wind of this?" Ned asked.

"I have taken every precaution to ensure my anonymity." Simon retrieved the book from DeVere. "My contribution to this little work is, and shall forever remain, a well-kept secret."

"Speaking of secrets...I was waiting for the right moment...." Ned's gaze dropped to the contents of his tankard. "Hang it all."

"What the devil is it, Ned?" Simon asked.

"Out with it!" DeVere demanded.

Ned drew a great breath, then blurted, "Wish me happy, my friends—for I'm to be wed."

DeVere hissed. "The devil you say!"

"It's true," Ned replied. "I have been blessed with the hand of Miss Annalee Marsdale."

“Bloody Hell!” DeVere scrubbed his face. “I can’t believe I’m even hearing this! The three of us were to go on the Grand Tour together. You would give that up? I have to question the judgment of any man who *willingly* subjects himself to such an affliction.”

“Love is not a choice one makes, DeVere,” Ned protested. “It is a force of nature and not of our will.”

DeVere looked to Simon. “Mayhap you can interpret this poetic babble for surely I can’t comprehend his language!”

Simon smirked. “You only scoff because you’re a stonehearted rogue who has never experienced the rapture of true love’s embrace.”

DeVere opened his snuff box with a flip of his thumb. “Being the debauched creature that I am, I’d much prefer the magic of her mouth.” He took a pinch. “That’s precisely the cure for this affliction, Ned. Just tumble the chit and purge yourself.”

Ned’s jaw twitched dangerously. “She’s a virtuous girl, DeVere, not some Covent Garden strumpet.”

“There’s much to be said for a good strumpet.” Simon said.

“Indeed,” DeVere agreed. “And I think our friend here might be sadly in need of a thorough *strumping* to re-order his mind.”

“Enough!” Ned pounded a fist on the table. “It is *done* already. The first of the banns are to be called on Sunday. I only delayed my departure from town to tell you sods in person.”

“Begad!” DeVere cried. “I still can’t believe you’re serious!”

“As I live and breathe.” Ned rose to his feet with a thunderous look. “And I fear neither of you will *remain* living and breathing if I don’t excuse myself.”

DeVere held his silence until Ned was out of earshot. “We can’t let him do it, Sin.”

Simon shrugged and tossed back his drink. “Apart from locking him away, *perhaps at Bedlam*, I see little we can do to prevent it.”

“That’s it!” DeVere cried.

“What diabolical notion have you in mind?” Simon asked.

“All in due time, my friend, but the first order of business is to get the poor misguided fool foxed to the gills.”

Simon awoke with the evil glare of sunlight striking his face and the throbbing awareness of an exploding head. Brigid, or was it Bronaugh, God love them both, lay blessedly naked on top of him. But weren't the twins supposed to have been with Ned?

Where the devil was Ned? Simon turned his head to discover a particularly ugly foot beside his left ear. It was attached to an equally unappealing and hairy leg. Dear God, how much royal punch had they consumed?

The plan, of course, had been to hinder Ned's departure long enough to convince him of his folly, but Ned had more than proven his head for drink. Simon and DeVere had raised so many cups extolling the various virtues of the bride-to-be that Simon feared he'd run out of lyrical allegories of her charms. He and DeVere had finally begun pouring their own glasses under the table for fear they'd pass out before getting Ned upstairs, where Brigid and Bronaugh awaited.

The twins had been easily conscripted into the game even before they got a vision of the strapping Ned Chambers. But the moment they'd got him into the chamber, the giant idiot had gone crashing to the floor like some great felled oak. At least they'd got him upstairs first.

The rest of the night was now a bit of a blur, but judging by the battered feeling of Simon's body and his exploding head, it must have involved a great deal of physical exertion...and noise.

As Simon deliberated how best to extricate himself from the octopus-like tangle of four sets of limbs, a great shadow came over him. He looked up with a grimace.

"Ah, Ned. I was just wondering at your absence, though I doubt this bed could contain yet another."

"Where are my clothes, Sin?" Ned demanded, his gaze a mere slit.

"Clothes?" Simon repeated blankly.

"Yes. Clothes." He crossed his arms crossed over his broad chest. "I seem to be devoid of any."

Simon smirked. "However did you lose them?"

"I'm not in a humor for humor," Ned replied. "Don't make me drag your arse from the bed."

"It would be a wasted effort, for you'll find I have no clothes either." Simon chuckled. He raised the sheet that only partially covered the four bodies. "Indeed, none of us seem to have any clothes."

"Pox on you and DeVere both!"

Ned took hold of the sheet and gave a great tug that sent DeVere and Bronaugh—or was it *Brigid*?—tumbling to the floor with a respective thump, groan, and shriek.

Ned replied with a murderous look, “I need my clothes. I must be off to Yorkshire at once!”

DeVere sat up. “Still about that business, eh? Have you truly taken leave of all good sense?”

“My good sense tells me to take my leave of you!” Ned growled. “I will not humiliate Annalee by failing to appear for our betrothal announcement. For the *last time*, send for my clothes or you will both suffer the consequences.”

DeVere’s stony gaze flickered to Simon and then to the fists balled at Ned’s side. “I’m sorry, Ned. We just can’t do that.”

One of the twins cried out as Ned’s fist smashed into DeVere’s jaw, crumpling him to the floor. “I gave you fair warning, DeVere. I won’t say *I’m* sorry.” Ned massaged his fist and then turned his attention to Simon, who raised his hands in surrender. Ned, however, ignored him, proceeding to snatch up the bed sheet and wrap it about himself toga-style. “I’m going to leave now, Sin. There is nothing more you can do to stop me.”

“Think of what you do, man!” Simon cried.

“I know precisely what I do. I’m abiding by the code of a gentleman and upholding the honor of a lady.”

“Codes? Honor?” Simon repeated. “I don’t follow you.”

“Damn it all, Sin! If you two misguided miscreants must bloody well know everything, I wed because Annalee could be carrying my child.”

Simon broke into a chuckle. “Damn me, DeVere, mayhap we’ve misjudged him. It appears Ned’s not such a dull dog after all!”

DeVere sat up, massaging his jaw. “Mayhap not, but he’s a damnably careless one! How could you let it happen, Chambers? Surely you have been long enough in my sphere to understand there are ways and means to prevent such *mishaps*.”

“It just happened!” Ned replied with an impatient noise.

“So you lost your head in a moment of passion,” DeVere interjected, “and will now pay dearly for the rest of your natural life.”

“It’s not like that! I love her. Have neither of you worthless sods, any notion of deeper feeling?” Ned asked. “Any concept of tender devotion?”

Simon chuckled. “I fear our Ned has truly been struck by cupid’s dart.”

A clamor outside their chamber followed by a pounding on the door interrupted the exchange. Simon groaned, clutching his aching head. “Tell them to go away! Very. Far. Away!”

Ned strode to the door, jerked it open, and then slammed it shut again. He turned to his comrades, grim-faced, and braced his large body against it. “It seems we have some uninvited guests.”

The pounding grew more insistent. A voice boomed, “Open up in the name of the Westminster Magistrate!”

“Bloody hell!” Simon cried. “Can it get any worse?”

“Open or we’ll remove the door,” another voice echoed the first.

Ned stepped aside with a shrug of defeat and the door burst open.

DeVere responded with a stream of colorful epithets, while with twin cries, Brigid and Bronaugh scrambled to hide behind the bed.

“Repent of thy iniquity and be saved!” proclaimed a horrifyingly familiar voice.

His sins had finally caught up with him. Simon groaned as the tiny woman marched into the center of the room in a militant manner. He made no effort to hide his nakedness when her gaze froze on him.

He smiled. “Good morning, Mama.”

“Simon?” Lady Singleton gasped and then fell directly into a swoon.

“Drunken debauchery and cavorting with prostitutes? The atrocity of your conduct beggars all description! Simon’s father continued the harangue. “Where is your sense of decency? Of discretion?”

“Technically speaking,” Simon said, “one cannot call them prostitutes as there was no coin exchanged.”

Lord Singleton silenced his son with a cold stare. “You have publicly humiliated your family.”

“But it was only a harmless lark.” Simon groaned.

“Enough, Simon! Your entire *life* has been naught but a lark—a circumstance that ends here and now.”

“You’re cutting me off?”

His father glowered. “Oh no, my boy. That tack seems to have proven singularly ineffectual

in curbing your debauchery. It's time for far more drastic measures."

"What do you mean?" Simon felt a growing sense of alarm. With all the pranks he'd pulled over the years, he'd never seen this particular look in his father's eyes.

"You have not only shamed your family, you have also utterly destroyed any chance of gaining a living by the church. Thus, it appears only one option remains."

"But I can think of any number of alternatives," Simon argued. "Indeed, I am even now in the process of compiling a volume of my work—"

"Your lewd and lascivious scribbles merit not the least attention in this discussion," Lord Singleton cut him off. "No offspring of *mine* is going to earn his bread as some ha'penny hack living in Grub Street squalor. No, my boy! You *will* give up your libertine leanings to earn a respectable living. Indeed, your mother has already posted a letter to your Uncle Thomas."

Simon's mouth went instantly dry. "Uncle Thomas?"

"Now that he is appointed Commander-in-Chief of his Majesty's North American forces, the time is nigh to purchase you a commission. Your latest escapade has made this all but a necessity."

Simon's stomach clenched. The room began to spin. "God, no! Not the army! Anything but the army!"

"Indeed the army! I only await Thomas' response as to which unit he would place you in."

"Surely you cannot mean to ship me off to that godforsaken wilderness!"

"I mean to do precisely that. You will set sail immediately for New York, where you will join one of General Thomas Gage's fine regiments."

"But I am no soldier!" Simon cried.

"Not now, perhaps, but you will be soon enough," his father replied icily.

Simon stared dumbly at his father's mouth, watching it work, but barely comprehending the utterances that continued to spew forth. It was all too surreal. For years Simon had managed to elude, defy, and flout all manner of authority, making larks, laughter, and love the very heart of his existence. The army and all it represented with its rules, regulations, and regimentalism was the antithesis of all he believed in. His very soul would be crushed beneath their marching feet. Verily, to Simon, it was a fate worse than death.

*"Thou shalt not laugh, thou shalt not romp,
Let's grimly kiss with bated breath;
As quietly and solemnly
As Life when it is kissing Death."*

- A Fleeting Passion by William Henry Davies

Epilogue

A battlefield near Saratoga, New York -1777

HE JERKED awake at the sound of approaching voices, stifling first his groan and then the urge to call out. They were enemy voices. Or looters. Albeit present circumstances made them much the same. He attempted to bring his muddled thoughts into cohesion with a violent shake of his head that only created an excruciating scintillation of sparks behind his eyes.

He recalled all now with visual flashes behind closed lids. He'd been part of a vanguard that had ridden straight into an ambush. With saber in one hand and pistol in the other, his weapons had been of little affect against an exploding cannon—a cannon the enemy wasn't supposed to possess, a fatal blunder of the recon team. He'd been struck in the temple by a jolt of molten lightning and blinded by his own blood. His horse had gone down, trapping him beneath, the horse that *still* held him captive with its rapidly decomposing body.

He re-opened his eyes and looked wildly about. Dear God, how long had it been? Was it only hours, or had it been days that he'd lain here half buried? The maggots feeding on his horse indicated the latter. Now as full consciousness assailed him, so did the stench. His stomach lurched with dry heaves from the sickly sweet perfume of death that surrounded him.

The enemy had drawn near enough that he could now hear other sounds—the crunch of boots on bone and the grunt of exertion, followed by the sickly popping sound of air escaping bloated bodies as enemy bayonets penetrated the corpses.

They were *much* closer.

Panic raced through his veins as he groped blindly for his sidearm. He didn't know how long he had until they discovered him, but there was no escape. Even if he could dig his way out, he'd lost all feeling in his legs. Perhaps he no longer had any legs and only the crushing weight of an equine carcass had prevented him from hemorrhaging to death.

Fumbling with his left hand, he located the familiar cold metal cylinder that was the barrel of his pistol. A single shot was all he needed. He prayed to God it was still loaded, for his right hand was mangled beyond redemption and useless.

Bloody hell! The weapon was caked with dirt and dried blood. He rubbed it against his coat in an attempt to clear away the bits of debris. He had only one chance. He couldn't afford for it to jam, and time was growing short.

They were almost upon him.

His fingers trembled as he cocked the hammer. He attempted to raise the pistol, but even this small exertion proved too draining of his already exhausted reserves. His hand dropped lifelessly to his side.

Captain Simon Singleton's eyes fluttered shut to the lovely apparition of two laughing Irish nymphs. A bawdy verse came to mind, painting a ghost of a smile across parched and bloodied lips. *As I draw my last breath and sigh my last sigh, I wish I was lost between dear Brigid's thighs...*

PREVIEW: JEWEL OF THE EAST

*"A 'woman with a past. What happier omen
Could heart desire for mistress or for friend?
Phoenix of friends and most divine of women
Skilled in all fence to venture or defend
And with love's science at your finger's end."*

— Wilfrid Scawen Blunt

King's Place, an elite brothel in St. James, Westminster – 1784

"ARE YOU QUITE certain, Mustafa?" Salime repeated in astonishment. The mute servant replied with a confident nod of his giant beturbaned head. With an exclamation of mixed anger and dismay, Salime resumed her fitful pacing of her chamber, kicking at the silk-tasseled cushions that littered the floor.

This was the *third time* in a week that one of her clients had failed to keep his scheduled appointment. It made no sense when she'd always been in such high demand. Known as the exotic and mysterious Jewel of the East, Salime was the most sought-after courtesan in all of London. She now wondered if after nearly five years of reigning supreme, her star had begun to fade.

No, it was unthinkable! No woman in all of England could equal her skills in the erotic arts. She had taken meticulous measures to ensure no man would *ever* become bored with her. Just as a concubine only had one night to couch with the sultan, Salime had adopted a policy of never accepting the same gentleman into her bed twice. By offering her clients an erotic experience that would never be repeated, she also guaranteed she would never be forgotten.

Given the exorbitant rates clients paid for Salime, she had always benefitted from preferential treatment. Until now. Change had come with Mrs. Hayes' retirement, and none of it to Salime's benefit.

To her misfortune, the famous bawd had passed the baton to Salime's greatest rival, Kitty Matthews. As the number *two* courtesan of King's Place, Kitty made no secret of her resentment of the one she called "*the heathen whore.*"

Kitty's first act of retaliation was to demand a higher percentage, raising the procuress' poundage from five shillings per guinea to ten. It was unfair in the extreme, but Salime had little choice but to remain at King's Place. In truth, life in the brothel was little different from that of the Imperial Harem, a place where rivalry for favor was a way of life. The only difference was now, thanks to *Efendi*, Salime had the benefit of Mustafa to defend her person, even if he could do nothing to protect her livelihood. For that, she had only herself.

"Come, Mustafa," she ordered her eunuch. "I have need of answers."

Snatching up a veil to conceal her face, Salime departed her private domain for the more public areas where, unlike the others who had to seek out their clients, Salime rarely had cause to appear. At the entrance to the opulent reception rooms, she accosted the first wooden-faced servant she encountered.

"Baron Winthrop, has he not arrived? He was appointed to see me this evening but has not appeared in my chambers. Perhaps he has taken to cards or other entertainments?" she asked.

"No, Madam Salime. He is not at cards." The servant's gaze shifted away from her face to focus somewhere over her left shoulder.

Perhaps it was not precisely a perjury, but something was not right. She knew it in her bones. "Then you have *seen* Lord Winthrop?"

The footman's gaze darted about the lavish room and then to the soaring frescoed ceiling with its massive Venetian crystal chandelier. "Aye. I seen him," he confessed.

"That is all you have to say?" Salime placed her hands on her hips. "It seems you would make me draw the truth from you in slow agony, much like a bad tooth? Perhaps Mustafa would be a more effective tooth drawer than myself?"

She half-turned to the giant eunuch who stood behind her with arms crossed over his massive chest. Her threat was not without effect. The footman's formerly deadpan eyes widened.

"His lordship came as appointed, Madam Salime, but I was instructed to conduct him to Madam Kitty's chambers."

"To Kitty?" Salime frowned. "And there he remained?"

"To the best of me knowledge."

Salime's frown deepened to a full-blown scowl. "And the evening last," she continued, "did you also conduct Sir Phineas Weatherby to *Kitty's* chamber?"

"Those were my instructions, madam." He added apologetically, "I only follow the orders of the one what pays my wages."

And that was *Kitty*.

It would do little good to castigate the servant any further. He was not to blame for following orders. Hiding her increasing distress behind a tight smile, Salime slipped a few coins into his palm. "You will tell no one we have spoken." With gold bracelets clanging, and silver bells on her slippers jangling, Salime spun away.

Kitty was poaching her clients! It was unconscionable. But how, when these patrons specifically requested Salime? Her mind whirled with this puzzle. Kitty was attractive enough in the common *English* way, but she had never come close to challenging the allure of the exotic Jewel of the East. *Now there were three in one week?*

Suddenly the pieces began falling into place.

They were small things at first, trifles hardly worth mentioning, that had disappeared from her rooms—a bracelet, a couple of silver bells, a scarf. But over the past few weeks, Salime had noticed items of her clothing had also gone missing. At first she had suspected one of the chambermaids of theft but then wondered what a simple English girl would do with a pair of Turkish trousers or a bejeweled girdle.

How stupid she had been. The answer was now so obvious. Her adversary intended to usurp her place. It was not the first time a rival had attempted to destroy her, but she swore it would be the last.

Armed with this resolution, Salime marched to Kitty's apartments where a burly servant guarded the entrance—a servant who wore distinctly Eastern clothing. Her certainty was increasing by the second.

The servant's brows furrowed. "Madam Kitty is occupied with a guest."

"Is it Lord Winthrop she entertains?"

"I am not at liberty to say."

"Then I will see for myself. Stand aside," Salime commanded.

The servant puffed his chest, refusing to budge.

"You would hinder my entrance?" Salime lifted a disdainful brow. "You may oppose me if you wish, but I warn you that Mustafa has crushed the life out of three men with his bare hands." She turned to her eunuch. "Mustafa, open the door."

Mustafa stepped forward to place his huge paws on the smaller man's shoulders, easily lifting him into the air and depositing him none too gently several feet away. A single kick followed, splintering the door within its frame.

Mustafa then stepped aside with a salaam and a gap-toothed smile for his mistress.

Returning a nod of approval, Salime stalked into the apartment to a scene that stole her breath. Brass lanterns provided a low glow of light. Countless yards of silk draped from the ceiling and covered the walls. Turkish rugs and cushions littered the colorfully carpeted floor. Kitty's chamber had been transformed into a near duplication of her own. The situation was far worse than she'd thought.

Kitty had not stolen only her clients but her very identity!

"How dare you interrupt us!" Kitty screeched.

"How dare I?" Salime repeated softly. "I am not the brazen imposter." She speared her rival with a look of pure contempt, taking in the black wig that topped Kitty's head to the Turkish trousers encasing her legs.

"Who is this woman?" Baron Winthrop bolted up from the bed with a look of outrage. His wig was askew, and his falls were open, displaying his puny specimen of manhood.

"She is of no account." Kitty sneered.

"She lies, my lord." Salime advanced to the pedestal bed, her bells jangling with her stiff movements. "I am Salime, perhaps better known to you as Jewel of the East. It seems we are both victims of a great fraud. If you doubt me, here is your proof." Salime snatched the wig from Kitty's blond head, tossing it to the puzzled nobleman.

In retaliation, Kitty grappled for the silk veil that draped across Salime's face, yanking it away.

Salime gasped, desperately grabbing at the wispy shield that concealed her disfigurement but it was too late. It was like Topkapi Palace all over again! Her secret was revealed to the one who would not hesitate to destroy her.

Kitty erupted in a chortle of delight. "So *that's* why you hide behind your veils? No wonder! Who would wish to bed such a hag? You see what I have saved you from, my lord?"

Kitty turned back to Salime with a vicious smile. "There is no room for such hideousness at King's Place. Remove yourself at once, you heathen whore!"

"As you wish."

Salime snatched up her veil with an outward hauteur, though her hands shook and her head reeled. She had come to Kitty's apartment prepared to fight, but she had failed. Once more she would be cast

out onto the street. There was nothing to do now but accept her fate with quiet dignity. Her reign at King's Place had come to an end.

Her steps slowed as she returned to her chamber to pack her belongings. She pondered her remaining options with a growing sense of despair. Private keeping as a gentleman's mistress was not an option for her. There was a time that she had hoped differently, but her hopes had proven futile.

He had chosen another.

Yet she knew she could still turn to him, the only one aside from her mute Mustafa who knew all of her secrets—the only one she could trust.

*I would to God! And yet to God I would
That we had never met. To see you this
Is grief and wounds and poison to my blood
Oh, this is sacrilege and foul abuse
You were a thing for honor not vile use*

— Wilfrid Scawen Blunt

Medford Abbey, Kent - 1784

A SHARP RAP soon sounded on the door. Ludovic, Viscount DeVere glanced up from his periodical to the entrance of a liveried footman. "A message for you, my lord."

The servant offered the wax-sealed missive on a silver salver. "It was delivered by a most...unusual...courier." The footman gave a sniff of disdain.

"Indeed? What do you mean?" Ludovic asked in a bored drawl.

"'Tis a behemoth blackamoor, my lord."

"Mustafa?" Ludovic threw down his periodical and snatched up the missive. "What the devil?"

"He awaits in the kitchen. Insufferable rude creature he be. Just stands all akimbo. Refuses even to speak."

"The man cannot speak. He has no tongue. They took it when they castrated the poor devil."

The footman's eyes bulged. He involuntarily crossed his legs. Ludovic broke the seal and scanned the contents with a deepening frown.

Most honored Efendi,

It is with the greatest humility that I appeal to he who once safeguarded my life. It is with exceeding distress that I must entreat you once more, being much in need of a friend and protector.

Your most devoted and obedient servant,

Salime

Ludovic read the cryptic note once more. Salime in want of a protector? What a sticky situation *that*

created. But given their shared history, he would never deny her aid. Beyond that, Salime had been instrumental in helping him to achieve his present state of connubial bliss. For that alone he owed her his undying gratitude.

"Tell him I shall be in touch with his mistress shortly...and that she should notify me at once should her circumstances become any more...distressed."

"Aye, my lord." The much-chagrinned footman departed.

Ludovic glowered after the departing servant. Salime had never been in want since coming to London. He wondered what could be behind her request, but then abandoned both letter and the dilemma the moment another surprise came bursting into his library.

"Ned?" Ludovic leaped up to greet his best friend. "What the devil has brought you all the way from Yorkshire to Kent?"

"I have most portentous news, DeVere," Ned sputtered with excitement. "News I could hardly relay by messenger. So I came down myself."

"What kind of news? Out with it, Chambers," Ludovic commanded.

"Mayhap you should pour us a drink first."

Ludovic lifted a sardonic brow. "A drink? Not so urgent after all?"

"'Tis fortification you'll need for the shock you're about to receive."

"Shock? Me? You know I am not easily shocked, Ned." Ludovic paused with his hand on the brandy decanter and a slight frown marring his face. "Come to think of it, I'm damned if I can recall a single occasion that has wrought from me such a profound reaction as *shock*."

Ned flung himself into Ludovic's favorite chair. "There's a first for everything, DeVere. Now that drink?"

Ludovic sloshed amber liquid into two glasses, handing one to the would-be herald, who downed it in one draught. Ludovic quirked a brow.

"It was a devilish long ride," Ned explained.

"All to deliver this *shocking* report of yours?" Ludovic perched a hip on the corner of his mahogany desk.

"Yes! It's Lazarus all over again!"

"Lazarus? Am I to surmise that someone has been miraculously raised from the dead?"

"Actually, he might as well have been," Ned declared. "I can hardly countenance it after all this time."

"You are trying my patience, Ned."

"It's Simon. He's returned."

"Good God!" The glass slipped from Ludovic's hand to shatter at his feet. "You can't mean Sin is *alive* after all this time? He was pronounced killed in action six years ago."

"I mean exactly that!" Ned exclaimed. "He is indeed alive and may even be in London as we speak. I have the news straight from Baron Singleton. His ship was expected to arrive several days ago."

"Why am I only hearing of this *now*? I see the bloody Singleton regularly at Parliament."

"Probably because the good baron doesn't like you, DeVere. He believes you were an abominable influence on his son."

"Then he would be right." Ludovic smirked and then stared at the shattered glass at his feet.

"Looking a bit white there, my friend. This is known as shock."

"Admittedly, I am incredulous. How can this be? Where the devil has he been?"

"Interned as a prisoner of war, I am told."

"For *six years*? In all that time there were no exchanges?"

"Very few. The colonials refused to give up ours when they claimed their men were only released on the point of death. I daresay 'tis no exaggeration. I've seen a number of reports on the deplorable conditions of our prison hulks. It's said that the Colonial prisoners set fire to the *Whitby*, choosing to go down in flames, rather than die of starvation and disease." Ned shook his head. "What a hellish business war is."

"But still, if Sin was a prisoner, he should have been released nigh on a year ago when the treaty was signed."

"Apparently he was too ill to travel. Only made it as far as Bermuda before he was struck with the bloody flux or some such and required months of convalescence...poor sod."

"We must go to him, Ned. At once."

"He'll not be the same man," Ned voiced what they were both thinking.

"No." Ludovic shook his head. "Likely never again."

*Oh who would live again to suffer loss?
Once in my youth I battled with my fate,
Grudging my days to death. I would have won
A place by violence beneath the sun...
But see, now time has struck me on the hip.

I cannot hate nor love. My senses are
Struck silent with the silence of my lip.
No courage kindles in my heart to dare,
No strength to do. The world's last phantom's slip
Out of my grasp, and naught is left but pain.
Love, life, vain strength- Oh who would live again?*

– Wilfrid Scawen Blunt

Wigmore Street, Westminster

SIMON SINGLETON, former Captain of his Majesty's 47th Foot, sat alone in a lofty chamber devoid of any furnishings, save a teeming bookcase and a rosewood writing desk. From behind said desk, he stared blankly at the equally blank piece of foolscap glaring back at him... taunting him with its emptiness. He wanted desperately to write. Penning verse was once not only his great joy, but his catharsis. For six horrific years his poet's soul had been deprived of light and sustenance. But even now, months after his release, darkness remained.

With a ragged breath Simon picked up the quill in his uninjured left hand, and dipped it awkwardly into the inkwell, mumbling a curse when it nearly toppled over. With brows furrowed in concentration and hand poised inches from the sheet, he watched the splatters of ink drip one by one from the nib,

marring the once-pristine whiteness of the paper with ugly and shapeless black blotches. Emotion-laden lava boiled inside him ready to spew forth in streams of volcanic force, but now that he most needed purging, his pen remained paralyzed. The words would not come out. Filled with frustration and self-disgust, Simon tunneled his claw-like crippled right hand through his disheveled hair and threw his quill onto the ink-smeared paper.

It was not enough.

Growling an ugly epithet that echoed off the walls of the barren chamber, he made a violent sweep of his arm, clearing the entire desk of ink pots and parchment. Shaking in fury, he shoved his chair back, toppling it with a resounding crash. The table soon joined the chair.

He closed his eyes for long and labored moments, concentrating only on quelling his rage. Once he'd somewhat recovered from his impassioned outburst, Simon strode to the naked window to gaze at the peaceful life scene below.

The streets teemed with sedan chairs, hacks, and emblazoned carriages conveying their aristocratic burdens. He noted the working class pedestrians navigating past the burly street vendors hawking wares from their barrows. He watched two female servants carrying shopping baskets picking their way through the mud and muck, doing their best to shield themselves from the spattering refuse raining down from the upper-story windows.

With a sense of deep despair, Simon viewed the familiar hustle and bustle that had made up his former life—the life he still dreamt about between night terrors. He watched people of all stations with growing envy. All from the lowest chimney sweep to the duke in his crested carriage were just going about their daily business—living their normal lives.

Simon had once been as much a part of this thriving city as it had been part of him. But now, although physically freed, his fear continued to imprison him—both mind and body.

Terror ruled him, a tyrannous master, governing his every thought and action, crippling his mind as effectively as the shrapnel had mangled his right hand. Although he would have preferred death to this purgatory, he was denied that honor when he'd most craved it.

For six years, while others perished of dysentery and starvation, Simon had clung to the feeble thread of hope that one day he'd return home to reclaim the lost dreams of his youth, that he would somehow reassemble the fragments of his life. But now, he was himself a shattered shambles of a man. Feeling neither alive nor dead, he was doomed to this horrific half-existence, destined to be a mere observer. Life as he remembered it—the one he had desperately hoped to resume—was over.

He stepped back from his window with a dull ache in his chest.

His youthful exploits now seemed like someone else's life. An epoch ended. A chapter closed. Eight hundred pounds and a familial connection to the commander in chief had bought a captaincy he neither wanted nor deserved. The experience had left many scars, but the invisible ones were the deepest.

"Simon!" His mother rapped upon the closed door. "I heard a crash. Are you all right?"

"It was nothing!" he bellowed. "For God's sake, just leave me in peace!"

"Please, Simon, unlock the door," she pleaded. "You have visitors."

Vistors? Bloody hell!

"There is no one I wish to see!" he growled.

It was an untruth. In reality he wished for no one to see *him*. They would only stare in pity at his gaunt form, his mangled hand, and his dull and unfocused grey eyes. They would not understand. No one could comprehend his irrational fear and the bitter and heart-sundering loneliness of his self-imposed isolation.

"Open the bloody door, Sin!"

Sin? He froze. No one had called him *that* old sobriquet for years. He tentatively approached the portal, placing both hands on the smooth surface that separated him from the voice.

"DeVere?" he called out in a strangled tone.

"It is indeed the devil himself come to call." His oldest friend chuckled. "Chambers is with me. Now will you open the door, or will you force us to remove it?"

Simon leaned his back against it, at war with his irrational fears. He squeezed his eyes shut and thumped his head. Once. Twice. *Thrice* against the door. "You don't understand, DeVere. I can't see anyone. I can't be with anyone. Not yet." He cupped his face in his hands with an anguished groan. Three more head thumps punctuated each word. "I." *Thud.* "Just." *Thud.* "Can't." *Thud.*

"That's right, Sin, I *don't* understand. So open the bloody door." The voice was DeVere at his most autocratic, the DeVere Simon *knew* would never back down until his will prevailed.

Although his entire body shook with the effort, Simon turned the key in the lock, leaping back the moment the tumblers turned. He rapidly retreated several paces into the center of the room the moment DeVere and Ned burst into the chamber.

Simon watched their twin expressions of shock—two pairs of widening eyes beneath raised brows—as they took in their first sight of him in almost a decade. He knew what they saw, could see his own reflection in their eyes—the long, lank hair, the too-angular body. The prominent cheekbones that

dominated a once boyishly handsome face, now haggard and heavily bearded. The shadows that continued to haunt his blue-grey eyes.

DeVere was first to recover, advancing with open arms. "My God, Sin! You cannot know how glad I am to see you alive. Words cannot express—"

In a surge of panic, Simon backed away, hands raised. "Please, DeVere! Don't!"

His friend halted in his tracks, studying Simon with a puzzled expression.

Simon scrambled to explain his peculiar behavior...and failed. Averting his face, he drew a great lungful of air and blurted his humiliating secret. "I cannot stand to be touched."

"What?" DeVere gaped.

"I-I can't stomach physical contact...of any kind," Simon said.

Entering behind DeVere, Ned's gaze roamed the empty room. "Does that also include furniture?" he asked with a hint of irony.

Simon scrubbed his face. "The room was too cluttered. I had it all removed." In truth it was the most spacious chamber in the house and had once even functioned as a provisional ballroom, but no matter how large the room, at times the walls still closed in.

"I have heard of an aversion to being confined," Ned remarked, "yet you *prefer* to remain behind a closed door?"

"Yes. I know it makes little sense, but I cannot be with people."

"How did you travel?" Ned finally asked.

"While on ship, I stayed above deck and as far away from others as I could. The rest of the time I endured it in a perpetual state of drunkenness—aided by opiates. Highly addictive, however, which explains the shocking sight that greets you."

Ned looked like he would protest.

Simon raised his hand. "No need to deny it, Ned. I saw your expression and I see myself in the mirror every day. But now my dear, pious mother has taken it upon herself to restrict my attempts at self-medication. Hence, the cause of my ghastly appearance and worse temper."

The heat of acute embarrassment washed over Simon as Ned's gaze lingered on the overturned table and chair and the dozens of crumpled pages that littered the floor. Simon began righting the furniture. "I'll do it!" he snarled at Ned when his friend moved to assist.

Ned and DeVere exchanged looks.

An awkward stillness followed.

"Sit. Please," Simon insisted at last.

Ned took the chair, crossing a booted ankle over his knee. DeVere perched his hip on the corner of the table. Simon paced.

"Are you writing again, Sin?" DeVere's gaze darted over the crumpled sheets of parchment and scattered writing implements.

"With this?" Simon displayed his mangled right hand with a bitter laugh.

"When did you return?" Ned broke the lengthening silence.

"Five days ago," Simon answered.

It was a benign enough question but Ned's next query invoked his defensive shield. "Have you not ventured out at all?"

"No. I told you already. I cannot *be* with people. Even now, my pulse races and my palms sweat even to be in the presence of my oldest and dearest friends. Paradoxically," Simon laughed, sounding half-crazed to his own ears, "I can't stand my own company either."

"Perhaps you need some time in the country?" DeVere suggested. "I have a number of estates, any of which I'd eagerly place at your disposal."

"And confirm the rumors that I've lost my mind?" Simon sneered. "No. I shan't slink off to the country, though perhaps my parents might wish it. Out of sight and out of mind... I'm an embarrassment to my father, you know, especially now that Stephen is gone. He was their pride and joy."

"I was sorry to hear about your brother," Ned said. "You have my sincere condolences."

"'Twas two years ago... of lung fever, I am told," Simon replied. "It's a double tragedy as they lost one son only to gain a lunatic. He was the beloved *heir*, and I remain their *despair*," Simon added with a twisted smile.

"You are too hard on yourself, Sin," Ned said. "I have no clue what you've been through, but your survival demonstrates a remarkable strength of character."

"There's no question of it," DeVere agreed, flipping open his jeweled snuff box. "You only need time and proper care to recuperate."

"*Care?*" Simon spun on DeVere, his gaze narrowed. "You think I should be committed to Bedlam?"

"Don't twist my meaning, Sin. I think nothing of the sort! I meant it's only natural that you would require a period of adjustment."

"I'll *never* be fit for company again."

DeVere made a frustrated sound. "Come now. Don't be ridiculous. You just need to come out from

under your dear mama's meddlesome wings."

"I couldn't wish it more," Sin confessed. "Her hovering is smothering me, and her intentions, while good, are—"

"Paving the road to Hell?" DeVere supplied.

"Yes," Simon confessed with his first genuine smile.

"Then allow me to make arrangements for your liberty. I have a house in town that will suit you well. There is a skeleton staff, enough to supply your needs without obtrusiveness. Moreover, their loyalty and discretion are unquestionable after serving me during my epoch of debauchery."

"You omitted *unsurpassed*," Ned said.

"*Legendary*," Ludovic corrected him with a grin. "I won't take no for an answer, Sin. You will repair to DeVere House at once. It's the perfect place as it will meet your needs for both freedom and privacy. I'll attend to preparations at once."

Simon commenced pacing the room, pausing wistfully at the window, lost once more in self-absorption and pity. "Your efforts are wasted on me, my friends."

"Don't think you can drive us away," DeVere persisted.

"No, Sin." Ned reached out a hand and then let it drop again. "We won't allow you to languish in loneliness."

Simon spun around with a derisive snort. "How can a man be lonely who has not been *alone* in six years? I was a prisoner with fifty other men, for Christ's sake! Never a moment of solitude, never a moment of peace, not even to take a piss."

"You are right," Ned agreed. "We can never have an inkling of what you suffered, but unlike thousands of others, your life was preserved. You cannot just throw it away. You must learn to *live* it again."

"You think it is as easy as all that?" Quivering with fury, he studied his oldest friends. They were the only people he'd ever implicitly trusted, but his fears and humiliation threatened to sever even that quarter-century bond.

"Just tell us what you need, Sin," said DeVere. "Ned and I are both willing to offer any resource at our disposal to help ease your way back. There must be *something* we can do for you."

Simon opened his mouth only to close it again. It was pointless. Hopeless.

DeVere's gaze narrowed perceptively. "There *is* something."

"I only wish...No. It's impossible." Simon closed his eyes on a curse and shook his head. He

couldn't even voice his humiliating secret.

"*Impossible?*" DeVere's bows knit. "You forget to whom you speak. Out with it."

Simon should have known better. DeVere loved nothing more than a seemingly unachievable challenge.

DeVere waited, forcing Simon's confession.

"It's been so long. So bloody long... since..."

"Since what?" DeVere prompted.

"Damn it, DeVere!" He slammed his fist on the writing table. "Since I've had a woman!"

"A woman? Is that all?" DeVere gave a devilish laugh. "*That* wish, my friend, is *easily* accommodated. If the mountain will not come to Mohammed..."

"You think to bring a woman of pleasure to me? No, DeVere. I won't defile this house. I have caused my mother enough pain... enough shame. A bottle of brandy is one thing, a doxy is quite another. Besides, I doubt that there is any amount of spirit or opiate that will allow me to function again."

DeVere looked aghast. "It cannot be as bad as all that!"

"It is! And damn you for making me say it! I cannot write. I cannot fuck. I'm completely unmanned!"

Unlike DeVere, who'd always maintained emotional distance from women, the act of love was far more to Simon than the joining of bodies. It was akin to the merging of souls. Simon's lovers had been his inspiration, his inner light. How could he ever explain his feelings of impotence ...his sense of complete emasculation?

"Sin, it's like riding a horse," Ned said. "It's all instinct. One does not forget. Hell, I know of what I speak. I suffered three years of self-inflicted celibacy following Annalee's passing."

"It's not the same, Ned! It's not that I haven't *tried*. In Bermuda there was this beautiful mulatto, a servant in the governor's house where I convalesced. She was willing, but I couldn't touch her, nor could I allow her to touch me." Simon ground his teeth in frustration. "I could only look upon her and gratify myself."

"Perhaps, you only need more time and the *right* woman to stir your passions again."

Simon looked away with a murmur, "My passions...are dead."

"No, Sin," Ned argued, "your rather unique circumstances only require the *right* touch." He looked to DeVere.

"You may never hear this from my lips again, but for once, I agree with Ned. Stop fighting us, Sin," DeVere said. "You know you cannot win."

"But how can I leave here?" The mere thought had his palms sweating. "I told you how badly I travel."

"Brandy." DeVere retrieved a silver flask from his pocket and offered it. "As much as you need."

"But—" Simon made to protest.

DeVere raised a staying hand. "Do you truly *wish* to cloister yourself like this, Sin?"

"The pox on you, DeVere!" Simon snapped. "Do you think I have a choice?"

"Bloody right, you do," DeVere retorted. "My home is entirely yours for as long as you desire it. I shall take you there tomorrow. And after a suitable period of adjustment, you will begin to receive people. Just Ned and me at first, but in time, our wives and families."

"*Wives? Families?*" Simon repeated dumbly. "Even *you*, DeVere?"

"Yes, Sin. I have a bride of three months...and she's expecting."

"After only three months? You made bloody short work of it!" Simon retorted.

"I had to make up for lost time."

"I still can't believe this." Simon shook his head. "So much has changed. So many years lost."

"It is never too late, Sin," DeVere said.

Ned nodded in agreement. "Indeed, DeVere's reform alone should be tangible proof that *nothing* is impossible.

We won't allow you to languish in loneliness.

Their compassion and sheer doggedness had finally worn him down. Simon raised his hands in surrender. "All right. You win. I'll go to Bloomsbury."