

AWARD-WINNING & BESTSELLING AUTHOR
VICTORIA VANE



1 Devil in the
Making

The Devil DeVere

DEVIL IN THE MAKING

Devilish Vignettes #1

VICTORIA VANE

Devil in the Making Copyright ©2015 Victoria Vane

Edited by Tara Chevrestt

Published by Victoria Vane

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your favorite ebook retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

For Becky
You will never be forgotten.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This first story in my mini series of Devilish Vignettes would never have come about without my wonderful fans and friends at Goodreads. Thank you so much for your love and support!

I would also like to thank my wonderful and talented digital artist Polina Ipatova for helping to bring my characters vividly to life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

When I first conceived of *A Wild Night's Bride*, a Georgian set, Hangover-inspired romantic comedy, I had no idea that one devilish secondary character would spawn an entire series, but Ludovic, Viscount DeVere, proved to be a dream come true. This larger than life character has captured the hearts of so many fans who have begged for more DeVere.

In response to these requests, I have decided to continue the series with a number of prequel vignettes featuring each of the main characters. These will also introduce new characters and set the stage for future books. *Devil in the Making*, a riotous Georgian romp in the tradition of Fielding's Tom Jones is the first of these shorter stories. Now, without further ado....

Here is how it all began....

CHAPTER ONE

Westminster School – 1764

“THE EPIC POETS of ancient times composed histories of Greek heroes in rhyming verse, chanted by the Rhapsodes in accompaniment by the cithara. The meter employed was dactylic hexameter...” Dr. Trasker’s droning monotone faded to the far periphery of Simon’s consciousness as he reviewed the first lines of his own poetic composition, *An Ode to a Milkmaid of St. James Park*.

*Lovely Lavinia, a comely lass,
With ripe pink teats and plump white arse,
Ha’penny paid will fill your cup*

He thoughtfully chewed the nub of his quill.
But for a shilling, she’d liefer tup...

He flourished the last line with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Master Singleton.” The stentorian voice halted the rhythmic scratch of Simon’s quill.

Simon looked up blankly.

“I await your response,” the schoolmaster intoned.

“Homer and Hesiod,” Ned coughed from behind.

“Master Chambers!” The schoolmaster’s rebuke turned upon the second offender.

“Sir?” Ned answered.

“Since you are so desirous to impart your scholarship, you shall now stand and enlighten the class on the Elegiac couplet.”

“The Elegiac couplet?” Ned repeated.

“Now, Master Chambers,” the taskmaster commanded.

Ned stood, his ears reddening with the snickers of his classmates.

“You seem unprepared, Chambers,” the pedagogue accused.

“N-no, sir. Indeed not. I only wish to understand. Is it the meter for elegy, or the couplet itself that you wish me to explain?”

“You are stalling.”

“Beware, Ned,” DeVere whispered from across the aisle, “lest you inspire him to invoke the holy name of the birch. The goddess of discipline. The handmaiden of higher learning.”

Ned cleared his throat to disguise a choke of laughter and then recited, “The Elegiac meter is customarily described as a dactylic hexameter followed by a dactylic pentameter, which together form an Elegiac couplet.”

Trasker’s beady eyes narrowed. “That is correct, Master Chambers. Now then, let us hope your benighted classmates have been equally attentive.” With visible disappointment the pedagogue took up his notes to resume his lecture.

Perceiving his chance to share his bawdy masterpiece, Simon reached across the aisle to DeVere— just as Trasker’s bespectacled gaze rose from his notes. Simultaneously, Simon and DeVere snatched back their hands, leaving the lone sheet of parchment to drift slowly to the floor with the quiet grace of an autumn leaf.

“What is this?” Trasker snapped, advancing upon them with a militant look.

“Bugger!” Simon muttered.

The sixth form collectively inhaled as Trasker retrieved the fallen parchment and scanned the brief lines. He then transfixed a sulfurous stare back upon his first victim, demanding, “Master Singleton? Are you the author of this lewd and scurrilous verse?”

Simon closed his eyes with a gulp, knowing full well what would follow his confession. He drew courage and then drew breath but another spoke before he opened his mouth.

“*Mea culpa*,” DeVere volunteered.

Trasker spun toward DeVere, his gaze narrowed to a slit. “You, my lord?” An evil smile thinned his lips. It was no secret that Trasker, who had advanced to his position by scholarly merit alone, despised the rich and indolent— and none more than the impudent heir to a viscountcy, Ludovic DeVere. *This could not be good.*

“No!” Simon protested. “The poem is mine.”

DeVere and Trasker, who were staring one another down, both scowled. Trasker broke first and turned toward his desk. “No matter. Since you are both so inordinately fond of poetry, you will equally share the punishment. Lord DeVere will now come before the class and recite the names of all of the Elegiac poets.”

“All *twenty* of them?” Simon flashed a look of panic to DeVere.

Trasker reached for the birch, tapping it rhythmically upon his palm. “Indeed, my lad, and for *every* name that fails to spring from your comrade’s memory, you *both* shall earn five strikes of the birch.”

Once more, the corporate intake of breath was audible. No prior offense at Westminster had ever occasioned more than *ten* birchings. Simon and DeVere now faced a possibility of one hundred each!

Trasker’s face contorted into a smug smile. “For your sake, Master Singleton, let us hope Lord DeVere’s retention is better than his verse. I now call forth, Masters Singleton, Chambers, and Mansfield to assist your errant comrade in his *lesson*.” Knowing DeVere’s will of iron, Simon and Ned exchanged wary looks. At their hesitation, Trasker asked if they would both care to share their comrade’s fate.

“He can beat my buttocks bloody but I won’t let the bastard win,” DeVere murmured under his breath as he rose from his seat.

“Master Chambers, you shall take your position before our *Lordling* DeVere.” The honorific rolled over Trasker’s tongue with exaggerated contempt. “Mansfield and Singleton will take their place on either side.”

The method to be employed was infamously known as “horsing,” and required two to take hold of the victims arms. As instructed, Ned knelt before his best friend to assume the position as “birch horse,” while Simon and Mansfield immobilized DeVere’s’ arms.

“Your falls, my lord.” Trasker waited with a smug look while DeVere fumbled with the buttons of his breeches. The schoolmaster then laid his book and notes on the floor at DeVere’s feet, and with a single yank, exposed DeVere’s buttocks. He then took up the rod with a gleam that made Simon shudder. “Now, my lord —the poets, if you please.” He raised his arm in preparation to deliver the inevitable blows.

DeVere cast a look of errant defiance over his shoulder. “Alphabetically or

chronologically?”

“Enough of your impudence!”

Simon winced at the first report of birch striking skin and sinew. He shut his eyes to a flash of white as he imagined the searing pain ripping through his friend’s naked flesh. Four more blows followed. With the fifth strike of the rod, DeVere grunted, “Alphabetically it shall be.”

Trasker raised the birch for another enthusiastic round, but his hand was stayed by DeVere’s rapid recitation: “Alexander, Aetolus, Agathyllus, Antimachus, and Antipater of Sidon.” DeVere took a breath. “Callimachus, Callinus, Critias, Dionysius Chalcus, and Euphorion of Chalcis.”

Trasker scowled. Simon’s jaw dropped. The class looked on agog.

DeVere paused. Trasker raised the rod with a look of triumph until DeVere drew breath and continued, “Hermesianax, Ion of Chios, Mimnermus, Moero, Parthenius of Nicaea, Phanocles, Philitas of Cos, Solon, Theognis of Megara and Tyrtaeus.”

“That is only nineteen,” Trasker said with an evil leer, birch once more at the ready.

DeVere looked over his shoulder with a smirk. “Then let us not forget dear Xenophanes,” adding, “Shall I now expound with the nine canonical muses?”

Trasker lowered his cherished tool of discipline, visibly shaking in his struggle to master his rage. “That will be quite all ... for the moment.” His reply emerged through grinding teeth.

Instantly released by his classmates, DeVere stumbled to his knees. He cast Trasker a look of pure virulence before snatching up his breeches and gingerly resuming his seat.

Simon and Ned returned to their own places knowing full well that by thwarting and humiliating Trasker, DeVere had only encouraged him to contemplate another way to exact vengeance.

The schoolmaster paced the aisles, tapping each desktop he passed with the birch. At length he spun around to address the perpetrators of his dishonor with a triumphant gleam. “My lord, following such an astounding display of erudition, I deem that the entire sixth form could benefit from your unplumbed depths. Thus, while your classmates are enjoying the Bartlemy-tide recess, you are granted the singular *privilege* of transcribing and committing to memory ten pages selected from our Greek and Latin poets.”

Simon groaned when he gestured to the display of multifarious dusty tomes lining the classroom walls. “Which you shall recite to the sixth form upon our return from holiday.”

Having passed his purgatorial penalty upon the one who had once again made a fool of him,

Trasker gestured to the class with an impatient wave. “The rest of you are now dismissed.” In an effort to recover a modicum of his lost dignity, Trasker made a great production of gathering up his books and notes and then departed with his black gown whipping about his legs.

Once safely out of earshot, Simon declaimed, “*Ode to our dear Trasker, A tyrannous form master. Beware his malevolent smirk. It forebodes only the birch. Foresooth, he is but a bastard.*”

Ned glared. “You still can’t rhyme worth a damn, Sin. Moreover, you seem to forget, ‘twas your bawdy verse that got us into this bloody mess in the first place. Now instead of cavorting at the Bartholomew Fair with the other blokes, your poetic nonsense has earned us all a holiday spent staining our hands with ink.”

“Don’t know about you ol’ chum,” Simon replied, “but I’d as lief ink my hands, as let Trasker stripe my arse.”

Ned shuddered. “One hundred lashings with the birch at Trasker’s hand, and I daresay your flesh would have been more stripped than striped.”

Simon turned to DeVere. “Why did you do it?”

DeVere lifted an aristocratic brow. “Must I have a reason?”

“Yes!” Simon insisted. “Why would you taunt him when *I* wrote the bloody verse?”

“Pray accept that it was for naught but the pure joy of antagonizing that self-important sod,” DeVere replied.

Ned regarded DeVere with a puzzled look. “Just how the devil *did* you contrive to rattle off those names? I nigh couldn’t believe my ears, considering you’ve scarce cracked a book in the six years of our acquaintance.”

“‘Tis a gift from the Almighty, my friend. Nothing less.”

“What do you mean?” Simon asked.

“It was my good fortune to catch a glimpse of the page Trasker was reading before he laid the book at my feet to beat me. I closed my eyes and was able to recall it. I can barely understand a cursed word of Greek or Latin, but I can memorize pages of the gibberish at a glance. ‘Tis a freakish talent that now and again serves me in good stead—particularly at cards.”

“I suppose that does solve the immediate problem of memorizing the ten pages.” Ned gave him a rueful look. “But I shall never sit at a card table with you again unless we partner at whist.”

Still confounded by DeVere's behavior, Simon asked, "But why provoke the blighter when he's been looking for a reason to expel us all year?"

DeVere replied. "I refuse to let *anyone*, let alone a petty-minded pedagogue, run roughshod over me."

"That is entirely your prerogative, DeVere, but it seems my friendship with you has done little but put me at the cart's arse since first we met."

DeVere laughed. "That might be, Ned, but what a boring blighter you would become if left to your own devices—cloistered in your room, buried in books. Speaking of which, I suppose we can't depart without our selective implement of torture. You are the poet, Sin, what shall it be?"

"You ask me after casting aspersions on my verse?" Simon answered with mock affront as DeVere ran his hand along the teeming shelf, invoking the names of the ancients, "Homer ... Horace... Lucretius ...Naso..."

Simon grinned. "*That's* the one!"

DeVere pause with his hand on the spine. "Publius Ovidius Naso?"

"Do you not know Ovid, DeVere? Although noted for the *Metamorphoses*, a mythological hexameter poem, I much prefer his other works."

"Such as," DeVere pulled the volume from the shelf. "*Ars Amatoria*?"

"The Art of Love," Simon translated. "A poetic guide to the art of seduction."

DeVere chuckled. "Then I am doubly surprised to find it in Trasker's library, but then again, I suppose the blighter needs all the help he can get. Indeed, *instruction* is probably all he *gets*."

"No doubt." Simon grinned. "You know, he's naught but a glorified bear-leader. The sycophantic sod only secured this position here by toadying up to the Duke of Portland whose son he accompanied on the grand tour."

DeVere's brow kicked up. "A bear-leader, you say?"

Simon wasn't alone to note the disturbing glitter in DeVere's eyes.

Ned raised both hands in protest. "Whatever it is, DeVere, I want no part of it."

"But you haven't even heard me out yet," DeVere replied.

"Doesn't matter. I know that look, and it *always* bodes ill."

"Come now, Ned," DeVere cajoled. "With only weeks until matriculation, we may never get another chance to serve up some revenge on ole' Trasker."

"What have you in mind?" Simon asked.

“Since our dear pedagogue is so fond of bear-leading, why not procure one for him?”

Ned looked stunned. “You wish to buy a bear?”

“Of course not,” DeVere answered.

“Thank God,” Ned replied with a sigh of relief.

“I only wish to borrow one.”

“A bear?” Simon repeated.

“Yes. It can be a small one. As to age, size, or gender. I am not particular.”

“And how do you propose to find one?” Ned asked warily.

DeVere replied with a look of pure devilment. “I *propose* a midnight foray to the Royal Menagerie.”

CHAPTER TWO

The Tower of London

THEY ARRIVED via Tower Hill in the last hour before midnight, Ludovic's early reconnaissance having revealed the location of the Menagerie to be nearest the Lion Tower entrance at the southwest corner. In darkness broken only by the flickering flambeaus against the ancient stone walls, a baritone voice called out, "Who the blazes are you and what mischief are ye about at this hour?"

"No mischief, truly." Ludovic stepped toward the burly Beefeater and swept a bow. "I am Smith, servant of my Lord Baron Hornepipe." He inclined his head to the impressive lacquer and gilt sedan chair borne by Ned and Simon who were garbed in gold velvet livery. "His lordship is desirous of a private viewing of the animals."

The second Yeoman's bushy brows met in a scowl. "At this bloody hour? The gates are closed. Have been for hours. We would be happy to accommodate Lord Hornepipe on any other *daylight* occasion. Entrance is three shillings or a cat or dog to feed the beasts."

"But you don't understand," Ludovic insisted. "His lordship is rather ...er... eccentric and rarely ventures out in the daylight hours. Indeed, he is most desirous of spending a night in the wilds of Africa." Ludovic leaned in close and tapped a finger to his temple. "A bit touched in the head is my lord, but it often pays to humor the whims of a rich madman." Ludovic gave the two warders a knowing wink.

"Milord is a lunatic then?" asked the first guard.

"Aye," said Ludovic, "but a generous lunatic he be. I promise you would stand to gain much by gratifying his latest flight of fancy."

The burly gatekeeper's gaze narrowed. "*How much?*"

"I daresay this one small indulgence of my lord's whim might serve to double your annual wage."

“Twenty pound?” The Yeoman looked skeptical until Ludovic retrieved a coin purse from his pocket. He bounced it gently in his hand, making the coins jingle. “Tell you what, I’ll make it twenty five each if you will both turn a blind eye for a few hours, but you must also swear your continued discretion regarding the eccentricities of the old man. I would hate to lose such a bounty should a long lost relative appear to declare him *non compos mentis*.”

“Twenty five pounds each for only a few hours?” The guards exchanged a look of heightening interest.

“Aye,” Ludovic nodded. “Surely enough to keep you both in gin and whores for an entire year. What say you?”

The warders conferred with each other in low voices. “S’pose no real harm can come out o’ it.” The warders conceded.

“My lord will be delighted.” Ludovic smiled in satisfaction. “Then I pray you will be kind enough to guide us to the bears. He is particularly fascinated by the great lumbering creatures. Sometimes he imagines himself to be one. Indeed, his roar is quite convincing.”

“Bears? There be no bears in the Tower.”

Ludovic’s jaw dropped. “*No bears?*”

“Nay. We ain’t housed a bear in the Tower since the great white once sent to Henry III by the King of Norway. Not exotic enough, although the white one did draw great crowds when they let ‘im fish in the Thames.”

“But no bears at present.” Ludovic rubbed his chin with a frown. “Well, that certainly puts a damper on things. My lord quite had his heart set on bears.”

“Mayhap my lord Hornepipe would like even better the latest creatures arrived from India?”

Ludovic paused only a moment. “Be they predators?”

“Aye. In that very barbican behind ye is housed a new Asiatic lion sent by some Indian nawab when he heard King George’s African lion had died.”

“A *lion?*” Ludovic’s gaze flickered to the sedan chair. “How *large* is this lion?”

“He be a young one. Not full grown yet. I’d say he be nearing, what d’ye think Jem? Twenty stone?”

“Sommat close to that,” the second warder agreed.

“And this lion is behind that very gate?”

“Aye, in the lion tower, with his own keeper, a Gypsy lad what used to travel with

performing animals. He come to us straight from the Bartholomew Fair when their gypsy lion died.”

“Is that so? Then with such a handler, there would be little danger to my lord should he desire to spend the night in the lion’s den.” The warders looked skeptical. “Come now!” Ludovic insisted. “Surely that’s worth the fifty pounds.” Ludovic pulled a flask from his pocket and offered it to the guards. “Perhaps a further inducement? ‘Tis his lordship’s finest French brandy.”

“Brandy, ye say?” The warder named Jem licked his lips with a distinct grunt of capitulation and stepped forward with his jangling keys.

The boy scrambled to his feet from the bed of straw beside the lion pit. He regarded the three interlopers with a look of alarm. “Who are ye?”

“I am Smith, and we are come to view the lion.” Ludovic stepped forward, sizing the lad up with surprise. “*You* are the beast’s handler?” He turned to Ned and Simon with a chuckle. “It’s a mere child!”

“I’m not a child!” the boy protested with a jutted chin. “I’m an animal trainer, as was me father, and me grandfather and *his* father—”

Ludovic raised an arresting hand. “I don’t require your entire family history. I only need to know if you can control that beast. By appearances, one wonders if the creature could swallow you in a single bite.”

The boy glared at him. “Bugger your thoughts, *sir*. It only matters that I pleases the Royal Keeper of the Beasts.” Ludovic heard Simon stifle a guffaw when the pint-sized antagonist faced him. “How many lions have *you* handled?”

“I’ve never had the occasion until now,” Ludovic replied. “How much does he pay you, this Royal Keeper of the Beasts?”

The boy’s brows pulled together. “Three shilling a week— plus room and board.”

“You board here? *With* the lion?”

The lad leveled a defiant stare. “I be ‘is keeper, after all.”

“It stinks.” Ludovic cast a disparaging look over the boy. “But I suppose you wouldn’t notice that.”

The boy flushed, curled his fists, and drew himself up to his full height, which barely reached Ludovic's chin. As if fearing the boy would soon launch an attack, Simon stepped forward to intervene. "Leave off the lad, DeVere."

"DeVere?" The boy's gaze narrowed. "I thought you said your name was *Smith*?"

"Bloody hell, Sin," Ludovic groaned. "why not just shout our identities to all of London?"

"What does it matter if the boy knows?" Simon asked. "We won't get anywhere without his assistance. What do *we* know of lions?"

"That they are large and dangerous carnivores with ferocious appetites," Ludovic replied. "What more is there beyond that?"

Ned interjected, "How about the manner in which you propose to get this creature out of here undetected by two very large Yeoman Warders?"

"Both of whom are surely out cold by now," Ludovic said.

"How would you know this?" Ned asked.

Ludovic grinned. "Because I spiked the brandy with laudanum."

Two hours later, after having dined on a very large opium-laced shoulder of mutton, the giant feline was also old cold and snoring loudly. They raised it out of the pit much in the same manner they'd seen horses loaded onto ships, by means of rope and a sling fabricated out of a canvas.

"What will you do with him?" the boy asked.

"We intend naught but a harmless prank," Ludovic replied.

"A lion is hardly a harmless beast!"

"'Tis why you will accompany us. To control him."

"But—"

"But what?" Ludovic demanded.

The boy twitched nervously. "What if he needs to be fed again?"

"Then you will tend him as required until his return. I promise you'll be exceedingly well compensated."

Having squelched any further protest from the handler, the foursome loaded the heavily snoozing animal into the sedan chair. Ludovic then nodded to the poles. "It'll surely take all four of us to carry it this time, though I daresay with the lad on his end, poor Ned will do the lion's share of the work."

Simon rolled his eyes at the bad pun and with a groan, they lifted the chair, and carried it with intrepidity through the gates, setting forth for Fleet Street where a hired cart awaited to convey their cargo.

“Ah! There’s the dog cart. Just in time,” Ludovic pronounced. “We’ll tie the chair to the back.” All seemed to pass without incident until arriving at Little Deans’ Yard when the sedan chair began to rock violently, nearly unbalancing on the cart. “Damn!” Ludovic cursed. “I thought I’d given the thing enough opium to lay out an elephant!”

“You’d best give it some more!” Ned said in hushed tones. “God forbid the beast breaks out of the thing. How long do you think that pane of glass will hold back his great paws?”

For the first time DeVere looked worried. “There may be a problem.”

“Aye?” Ned glared. “And what is that?”

“I haven’t any more laudanum.”

“Good God, DeVere!” Simon exclaimed with horror. “What if the thing gets out? Can you imagine a lion prowling about Mayfair?”

“Not Mayfair, Sin,” Ludovic protested. “It’ll surely head straight to St. James Park where the sheep and cattle graze.”

“Is that supposed to set us at ease?” Ned retorted dryly. “I say we turn about right now and take the bloody thing back whence it came.”

“And admit defeat?” Ludovic said. “Never.”

“Damn it, man! Listen to yourself!” Ned cried. “Your injured pride is interfering with all good sense!”

“Bugger you, Ned!” Ludovic said. “We’re near the Strand. There’s sure to be an apothecary. I’ll get some laudanum to pour down its throat.”

“It’s four in the morning,” Simon pointed out.

“Then I’ll *wake* the damned apothecary. What is money for, if not to smooth the wrinkles for the rich and privileged?”

“Even if you get the drug, how do you think to administer it without getting your throat ripped out?” Ned asked.

Ludovic shrugged. “How should I know? That’s what we have the handler for.”

All eyes turned to the boy. “You would let that lad risk his life for this prank?” Ned protested.

“That *lad* was hired for such things,” Ludovic retorted. “You heard him say so yourself, Ned.”

The boy kicked the dirt and mumbled. “But ours didn’t have teeth.”

Ludovic leveled him a steely stare. “*What* the devil did you say?”

The boy fidgeted and refused to look up. “Our Romani lion, he was old and didn’t have any teeth—least not in the front of his mouth.”

Ludovic muttered another curse.

“See!” Ned cried. “We should return the animal before this misadventure takes another turn for the worse.”

“There’s only one problem.” Ludovic gestured to the first lights of dawn streaking the sky. “Do you really suppose we can just carry it back in full light of day? Look, instead of wasting any more valuable time bickering, let’s take the chair inside, secure it in a room, and then procure some more mutton and laudanum. And once he is peacefully asleep, we will find some creative ruse to draw Trasker away from his quarters long enough to install it inside his chambers.”

“You think to hide a lion in our rooms? Are you mad, DeVere?” Ned demanded.

“You worry like an old woman, Ned. There should be few about to take any notice of it, given the holiday. Now, I suggest we get the bloody thing inside where at least we can contain it in a room.” The sedan rocked again with a low growl sounding from within. “Mayhap some laudanum from the school infirmary would be more expeditious. I’ll stalk the infirmary. Ned will go for the mutton.”

“And Sin?” Ned asked.

“Sin and the boy will stand guard.”

“No, DeVere,” Ned glowered, hands on hips. “Sin will go for the laudanum and *you* will guard the beast, for if it’s discovered, I’ll not allow Sin to shoulder the blame. This well-bungled imbroglio was *your* design, after all.

“I concede your point, Ned.”

After squeezing the sedan chair through the narrow doorway to Ned and Simon’s shared chambers, the pair hastily departed on their respective errands, leaving Ludovic and the Gypsy boy to guard the lion. By this time, the full light of day began flooding through the tall stained-glass windows, allowing him his first good look at the lion handler. Ludovic cast him a slow and

scrutinizing appraisal. Something was most definitely not right about his would-be lion tamer. His ragged clothing hung too large and loose from narrow shoulders, and his overly large black eyes were set in a too delicate and remarkably hairless, albeit grime-smeared, face.

“What is your deuced name, anyway?” Ludovic demanded.

“I go by Freddie.”

“Come then, Freddie.” Ludovic beckoned in a kinder tone. “It’s been a long night. Let us go to my chamber across the hall where I’ve some bread and small beer to break our fast.”

The boy licked his lips—surprisingly full lips—Ludovic observed—but still looked uncertain.

“I assure you, the beast is going nowhere,” Ludovic insisted, propelling Freddie to his room.

As soon as the door was closed, Ludovic stripped down to his small clothes and pulled his shirt over his head. Pouring water into a wash basin, he proceeded to scrub face, neck, and torso with cold water and lye soap, but all the while he washed, he tracked the boy in the looking glass. Freddie watched his every move with nervous fidgets and hint of pink infusing his dirty little face. His suspicions were growing by the second, but his greater desire being to clean the creature; Ludovic turned about and handed the cloth to the boy with an inclination of his head toward the basin. “There’s more soap and water. Pray make use of it while I scrounge us some victuals.”

The boy regarded him wide-eyed and gave a vehement head shake.

“Sorry lad, but I must insist. You positively reek of the animal dens. Here, I shall even provide you with a nice clean shirt to don when you are finished. We’ll just burn the rag you wear.”

Ludovic retrieved a garment of snowy-white linen from the wardrobe but when he turned back the boy still had made no move toward the basin. Instead, he stood as if rooted, breathing a bit too fast and looking much like a deer preparing to take flight.

“Come now! Soap and water never hurt anyone,” Ludovic insisted.

Slowly but ominously, he advanced. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way, my lad—but you *will* strip down and wash.”

“No.” Freddie backed toward the door. “I won’t, and you can’t make me.” The protest seemed sincere but his gaze betrayed an unsettling interest in Ludovic’s half-naked body. It was a look that made Ludovic’s flesh tingle with awareness. Damn but he was almost positive now.

No way in hell would any *boy* have such an effect on him. It was all the more reason to strip the dirty creature down.

“The devil you say! The filthy, stinking rags must go!” Before he could escape, Ludovic lunged and grabbed him by the ear with one hand while the other jerked the neck of the dirty shirt, renting it straight down the middle. Freddie gasped, clutching the rags, but it was too late.

Ludovic’s mouth spread into a slow and wolfish grin. While he’d already harbored suspicions, the sudden vision of delectably pert breasts with perfect pink rosebud nipples sent a shocking surge of blood straight to his groin.

“*Freddie*, eh?” In a move, he caged her between his arms.

Her black eyes grew impossibly wider. “*Fredericka*, if you *must* know,” she replied indignantly.

Her demeanor brought to mind a feral cat that had been cornered. He decided to proceed with care. He stroked a finger down her pert little nose to rest on lush and softly parted lips. No, it wasn’t fear he detected in her eyes, of that he was now certain. Her rapid puffs of breath and luminous eyes belied growing excitement, and his body responded in kind. He leaned in closer. “Well, *Fredericka*. It seems you have a secret...I wonder what you would give me to keep it.”

Ludovic shifted in growing awareness of his burgeoning erection as her black gaze slid down his body to linger on his crotch. With a slow, knowing smile spreading over her face, she darted out her tongue to lick the finger that he held pressed against her mouth. His cock jumped in response to the coy invitation.

“A better question would be what would *you give me?*” she answered him in a voice as sultry as a caress.

Ludovic chuckled. “My dear enterprising girl, rest assured that we are of the same mind and shall surely come to a mutually satisfying arrangement. For now, however,” he removed the tattered shirt and stroked her taut nipples, murmuring low and husky, “pray permit me to assist with your ablutions.

Ned and Simon opened the door of their chamber to the splintered remains of Viscount DeVere’s sedan chair and a reverberating window-rattling roar of a loose lion. With his heart in his throat, Simon slammed the door and threw his body against it. “The bastard broke out!”

He and Ned exchanged panicked looks, as a horrific thought descended. “DeVere!” they exclaimed at once.

“My sword!” Simon cried but Ned stayed him. “What do you think to do with that? Skewer the beast?”

“I will b’gad if he’s eaten DeVere!”

“You’re no match for him, Sin.”

“You’re right, Ned. We’ll need a blunderbuss to take that thing down.”

“A blunderbuss?” a familiar voice echoed from behind. “Where do you think to find one?”

They turned in unison to find DeVere standing in the doorway of his chamber, wearing only his breeches and a stupid grin.”

Simon and Ned both groaned in relief, but then Ned’s brow wrinkled. “Sleeping DeVere? What the hell are you doing sleeping when there’s a bloody beast of prey on the loose in my chamber?”

“There’s little I could have done about that,” Ludovic replied.

“You could have at least kept one eye on it since you were the one who insisted on keeping it,” Simon retorted.

“Where’s the boy?” Ned demanded. “We’ve the mutton and the laudanum. We need his assistance to get that beast under control.”

“I’m afraid we’ll just have to deal with that dilemma ourselves, ole’ chum. I fear Freddie is a bit...er... indisposed... at the moment.”

“Sleeping too?” Simon accused. “Or has the buggering little bastard taken flight?”

DeVere raked his rumpled hair with a sheepish look. “Ah, not exactly.”

“Then what? *Exactly?*” Ned made to push his way past, but Ludovic barred his path. “I won’t stand for your harassment, Ned. Freddie is now under my protection.”

Ned’s brows pulled together in befuddlement. “What the devil do you mean? Protection from what? No one intends the boy harm.”

“That’s not quite what I meant.” DeVere smirked.

“Then quit speaking in bloody riddles! Hand over the boy before that creature of prey announces its presence to the entire world.” Ned’s growl was echoed by a much louder one from the lion. “Bloody hell!” He shoved DeVere aside and barged into the room.

Two paces into the chamber, DeVere and Simon slammed into his back. “What the devil!”

The thin white linen shirt revealed an entirely different version of the Gypsy lad, who gave a decidedly feminine shriek before scrambling under the covers of DeVere's bed.

"Bugger me," Ned murmured. "*He's a bloody she!*"

"It was a fascinating revelation," DeVere volunteered.

Simon said, "I can only conclude it was exceeding dark in the Tower for us to have made such a colossal error."

DeVere grinned ear-to-ear. "An error that has become my good fortune."

"What will we do with her?" Ned demanded.

"I intend to keep her."

Ned gaped. "You think to keep a wench in your rooms! Here at Westminster?"

"She made a convincing enough lad—when properly clothed. She can pose as my valet. Indeed I shall have the best of both worlds—a valet by day and a mistress by night."

"You are mad!" Ned cried. "You can't possibly—" An earth-shaking roar followed by an army of shouts and heavy footfalls brought the antagonistic exchange to an abrupt end. "Bollacks!" DeVere groaned as the door burst open to the livid faces of Phineas Trasker and Headmaster Dr. Markham.

Hours later after the lion had been drugged and carried off by an entire troupe of Yeoman Warders from the Tower, Ludovic was the first to suffer the Headmaster's inquisition.

"Do you have any idea what you have done?" demanded Dr. Markham "The damage you have caused by this reckless and criminal act? The scandal sheets are feasting on this!"

DeVere fought the urge to roll his eyes. "It was naught but a lark."

"A lark, you say?" Markham's glare burned through his spectacles. "You have stolen the king's property! Were you not the heir to a peerage, you would be facing a hanging offense!"

Trasker was eager, almost frothing to expound. "Your so-called lark is being suggested by some as an act of sedition. And treason is not protected by peers' privilege." He sneered. "Mayhap you will hang yet."

"Bloody hell!" DeVere cursed. "They've blown it all out of proportion."

"Out of proportion? I think not!" Markham slammed his fist on the desk. "What is a lion but the *king* of beasts? Moreover, given that this particular lion was an especial gift to His Majesty

from Nawab Mir Jafar Ali Khan, you may well have caused a diplomatic incident!”

“Let us not forget consorting with a prostitute in his chambers,” Trasker added.

“Indeed.” Markham glowered. “My Lord DeVere’s antics and acts of debauchery have made a mockery of this institution for far too long. Thus, as the architect of this nefarious escapade, you shall incur the maximum penalty—and *that* is expulsion.”

Trasker regarded DeVere with a malevolent smirk. “It would appear that your villainous misdeeds have finally come to an inevitable conclusion.” He added smugly, “One wonders how your noble sire will react to the shame and disgrace you have brought upon your family.”

Ludovic threw his head back in an uncontrollable howl of laughter. “My *noble sire*? Shame and disgrace? My family name is *synonymous* with shame and disgrace!”

Dr. Markham scowled at the sudden outburst. “Your humor is entirely inappropriate to this occasion. I daresay Masters Singleton and Chambers will not share your hilarity.”

The image of Ned’s stricken expression when called to the Headmaster’s office obliterated DeVere’s laughter. “What of Ned and Sin?” he asked, sobering even more at the realization his friends would more than likely suffer the same consequences for their co-conspiracy.

“Masters Chambers and Singleton will be dealt with summarily,” Markham replied.

“But they had nothing to do with this,” Ludovic protested. “I alone absconded with the lion.”

“Alone? Impossible!” Trasker spat. “You could not have done it alone. Besides, the witnesses claimed you had two others with you.”

“They described *servants* in gold livery, did they not? They were hired men.”

“You lie!” Trasker leaped to his feet, spittle flying out of his mouth. “The lion was found in *their* chamber!”

“Circumstantial evidence that holds no water. The lion was there because *I* put it there,” Ludovic said blandly. “My chamber was a bit crowded at the time. You can hardly expect me to keep an eye on a beast of prey while entertaining a female companion. I add that my sexual predilections do not extend to bestiality.” Ludovic slanted his head in a thoughtful pose. “Not yet anyway.”

Markham flung out his arm with eyes bulging and jowls aquiver. His voice emerged as a choking sound. “Out! Now! And may you be struck by lightning before you *ever* set foot at this institution again!”

Ludovic awaited word from Ned and Simon with a growing sense of guilt as he restlessly paced outside Dr. Markham's office. Since their first meeting at Westminster, Ned, Simon, and DeVere had forged an iron-clad bond that had maintained them through nearly six years. From the outset, Ludovic's scandalous family secrets had set him apart from the other aristocratic scions as an "untouchable".

Akin to a dark shadow, his parents' scandals had relentlessly followed him, hanging ruthlessly as a perpetual cloud over his head. Within the first week he'd lost count of how many duels he'd fought with flailing fists defending the honor of Lady "Whore-o-my-own" DeVere, the lascivious play on his mother, Lady Hermione's name, until he'd finally given up and learned to shrug off the calumny. Deny it as he tried, the ugly truth remained that his mother was indeed the biggest whore in England, and his *presumed* father, the viscount, no less than a pox-ridden madman.

Likewise, Simon Singleton's poetic proclivities had instantly made him the bullies' mark, and even Edward Chambers' great size had served as little deterrent for the upper classmen's taunts when accompanied by adolescent awkwardness and a broad North Country drawl.

By the end of the first form, however, DeVere's finely honed shell of arrogance, Ned's increasing brawn, and Sin's rapier wit, had given birth to an unholy triumvirate that came to wreak perpetual and unchallenged havoc upon Westminster School. Now, it appeared their illustrious reign had come to an inglorious end.

When they finally emerged, Sin's face was ashen, while Ned's hands were clenched at his sides. His eyes held a look Ludovic could only describe as devastated.

"Hell, Ned," Ludovic groaned, "I'll gladly offer up my arse for a true flaying if it would mitigate your sentence."

"While your offer of martyrdom is appreciated, it's not as bad as all that. We're not expelled, but only rusticated for the remainder of the term." Ned grimaced.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry to have dragged you both into this."

"In truth, DeVere, you only suffer remorse because we got caught," Simon accused.

"Well that goes without saying," Ludovic replied. "Had things not gone astray..." He shrugged.

“It *was* an interesting night,” Ned chuckled. “As you say, DeVere, what a boring blighter I would surely become without you.”

“What of you, DeVere?” Sin asked.

Ludovic gave a fateful shake of his head.

“Expulsion? But surely your father the viscount—”

“No good, Sin. It is already a *fait accompli*. Besides, the mad viscount would do nothing in my favor, of that you can be certain. I had rather hoped he’d forgotten my existence altogether, but Markham’s notice will surely serve as an agonizing reminder.”

“What will you do now?” Ned asked.

“I don’t yet know,” Ludovic replied. “I suppose I have little choice but to take on a bedamned tutor if I expect to attend Oxford next year. In the meantime, I shall do all possible to absent myself from my lord’s presence. I am naught to him but a constant reminder of sins past and present.” He grimaced. “You may be certain my return to Kent will not be a pleasant one.”

CHAPTER THREE

Medford Abbey, Kent

AFTER SPENDING hours confined in a closed carriage jarring over what barely passed as roads, Ludovic should have been relieved to reach his destination, but nothing could have been further from the truth. Instead, Ludovic Henri Maximilian Montfort DeVere, eldest son and heir apparent to Richard, Baron Southby and Fifth Viscount DeVere, arrived at his family's seat with an ever tightening knot in his stomach.

He had made his best effort to put the meeting out of his mind, and had briefly managed to do so, but the first sight of the ancient and imposing estate sent unbidden and unwanted memories flooding his consciousness. When the carriage halted in the circular drive, his closer inspection of the façade revealed marks of neglect, as if the deterioration of the house foreshadowed that of its master.

A skeleton staff greeted him, a single groom to look after the post horses, and a lone and unrecognizable footman attending the door. Almost from the moment of entry into the palatial manor, every chamber echoed the unhappiness and familial discord that had plagued the house from his earliest memories.

His booted feet echoed eerily on the ancient flagstones as he made his way through once familiar passageways. He paused in the gallery, where with a twisted mix of rage and wistfulness he searched the family portraits, the work of centuries of Dutch and English masters who endeavored to capture the likeness and character of DeVeres from generations past. It was a slow and deliberate perusal performed with a sense of perfect detachment— until lighting upon the blank space where his mother's image had once gazed down upon her two sons.

He closed his eyes and her visage appeared, for her celebrated beauty was as ingrained upon his brain as her fickle faithlessness on his heart. At least she'd waited until her eldest son was of an age to look after the younger before she'd absconded with her last lover. Hew, only five and

still under the care of a nursemaid, had hardly noticed her absence. Ludovic, however, had felt the betrayal deeply—especially when subjected to the viscount’s fits of rage.

Verily, there was not another boy in all of England who looked forward to going off to school more than Ludovic De Vere had. Yet, it had proven a futile escape. Such was the dubious heritage that clung to him like feathers to tar.

Six years had since passed with his only contact with his father being through the viscount’s man of business. Now with leaden feet and a heart equally weighted with dread, Ludovic dragged himself up the marble staircase leading to his lordship’s private apartments—the rooms the viscount rarely departed due to his progressive debilitation from a ghastly and scurrilous disease.

Ludovic knocked softly and entered to find his lordship’s manservant looking distressed as he conferred in an animated fashion with an unknown gentleman. Ludovic presumed by his old-fashioned bob wig, black dress, and gold-topped cane, that the latter was the quack *du jour*.

The servant, the first one Ludovic recognized, looked up immediately upon his entrance wearing an expression of great relief. “Is it Master Ludovic?” the aged retainer exclaimed.

Ludovic inclined his head. “*Lord* Ludovic if you please, Combes. I have adopted the courtesy title. In case you have not noticed, I am long retired from leading strings. Am I to assume by your look of surprise that my appearance has preceded the notice sent by Dr. Markham?”

“His lordship received the notice. We just didn’t expect you so soon.”

“Fortunately, or perhaps in my case unfortunately,” he added dryly, “the roads were quite passable.”

“I am pleased you arrived without mishap, my lord. Shall I see you to your rooms? All should be in readiness.”

“Not yet, Combes. I would much prefer to get this unpleasantness out of the way. Might I inquire if this is a “good day” or a “bad day” for the audience I require with his lordship?”

“My lord appears unusually lucid today,” the servant replied.

“Very well, then I shall speak with him now and get this nasty obligation over with.”

“But, my lord,” Combes protested with an anxious look to the man in black.

Ludovic raised a hand to squelch the servant’s remonstrance. “We shall speak anon, Combes. For now, pray see to my things.” Ludovic’s tone indicated he would brook no

objections.

“As you wish,” the elderly servant conceded with a stiff bow.

“And Combes,” Ludovic added in after thought, “my valet is presently in the kitchens awaiting my pleasure. He is to be housed in the chamber adjacent mine.” Ludovic fought the smile that threatened to break over his face. *Freddie*, eager to please... in every possible way... had indeed proven a most satisfactory valet. Her presence alone would certainly serve to ameliorate the monotony and make his sojourn at this bleak abode more tolerable.

Ludovic strode to the door leading to Viscount DeVere’s bedchamber, squaring up to present himself for the inevitable harangue, a verbal onslaught that would undoubtedly cast aspersions on his dubious paternity and chronicle his every shortcoming. But as much as the viscount despised his offspring, the fact remained that he was dying a slow and agonizing death, and Ludovic was his lawful heir.

“Wait! I must insist—”

Ludovic spun to face the man in black, summoning the full hauteur of his aristocratic stare. “And *you are*, sir?”

“B-blackstone,” the man sputtered. “Dr. Sidney Blackstone. The viscount is presently under my care and I can permit no audience.”

Ludovic’s brows rose. “You may *insist* whatever you like, my good doctor, but I *shall indeed* pass.”

“Please!” the physician protested “You mustn’t agitate him! He is prone to fits of violence, and we have yet to complete his new treatment.”

Ludovic emitted a bitter laugh. “I fear there’s no avoiding it, for the moment I step foot over that threshold, my lord will become *most* agitated. If that prospect alarms you, then I suggest you mix something by way of a sedative.”

“But his lordship has already had his medicaments.”

Ludovic smirked over his shoulder. “In that case, you may wish to mix it for yourself.”

The physician’s gaze flitted between Ludovic and the door with what appeared to be a growing unease. “Perhaps ‘twould be best if I return to treat his lordship another day.”

Ludovic looked on in bemusement, even wondering if he had overstepped his lord of the manor act just a notch, as the doctor hastily packed up various bottles and tins, cramming them into his black bag. Although this was peculiar enough, he was truly puzzled when a little girl

peeked her head out from behind the portly gentleman's coat.

"Blackstone," Ludovic said. "if this is *your* child, I warn that my lord has a great abhorrence of all children—including his own."

"I will keep that in mind for my future calls," Blackstone answered vaguely and then took the girl's hand. "Come now...er...child."

"But you promised sweetmeats," the girl whined.

"And you shall have them," Blackstone insisted with a forced smile. "Now come along like a good girl."

Something peculiar about the interplay between father and child made the hairs stand up at the back of Ludovic's neck. He stepped in front of the departing physician, effectively blocking his path. "What's her name?" he inquired with a bland smile.

"M-mary," Blackstone replied and jerked the girl's hand.

"No, it's not! I told you it's Maggie," the girl insisted.

"Mary Margaret is her full name," the man hastily amended. "She only *prefers* Maggie. It's a pet name."

"Is it indeed?" Ludovic squatted down on his heels to address the child at eye level. "Now then, *Maggie*. I am certain we can produce some sweets for you and your father. This man *is* your father, isn't he?"

Her nose wrinkled. She mutely shook her head.

Ludovic's gaze flew to the man's flushed face. Surely this could not be what he thought, but his deepest instincts and the quickening in his chest told him otherwise. He noted the perspiration that now beaded Blackstone's forehead and all doubt dissipated. "What precisely is this infant to you, Blackstone?" Ludovic demanded.

"She's of no account, naught but an orphan from the Foundling Hospital."

With a steely gaze that never left Blackstone's face, Ludovic separated the hands of man and child. Taking the girl with him, he crossed the room and rang for a chambermaid. "Take her to cook," he instructed, "and give the child whatever she likes, but under no circumstances is she to leave the kitchen until you hear from me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, my lord." The maid bobbed.

"Then off you go, Maggie." He forced a soothing smile for the frightened girl, who departed with the maid.

With blood boiling, Ludovic turned ominously back to Blackstone. “Virgin cleansing? What kind of depraved creature offers an innocent infant to a diseased madman? Had I even a dress sword, I would spit you like the disgusting swine that you are!”

Blackstone’s eyes bulged in their sockets. “But you must understand that this was only a last resort! We have tried everything else to no avail—countless cuppings, innumerable mercury treatments, a strict diet of parsnips and ass’ milk, yet the disease is relentless, ravaging him mind and body. His lordship has demanded a new cure!”

“And you would listen to the ravings of a desperate lunatic?”

Blackstone opened his mouth and shut it again.

“Don’t even try to defend your actions! You shall *never* convince me that this mythical treatment is the method of a professional healer. Get out of my sight, you buggering blackguard!” He flung the door open. “If I ever lay eyes on you again, I shall do the world a service and wrap my hands about your accursed throat.” As the man stumbled out the door, he plied a booted foot to Blackstone’s arse. The man flew to his knees with a grunt. Ludovic made another move toward him, and the doctor scrambled out of reach on all fours with the dubious grace of a frightened pig.

Far too shaken with rage to face the viscount, Ludovic left his apartments to seek something palliative, stalking every room until he found a bottle with which to calm his shattered nerves. The situation had grown worse than he thought. Much worse.

“Combes!” he bellowed at the top of his lungs after eschewing a glass to down a great draught of brandy strait from the decanter.

The beleaguered servant promptly appeared. “My lord?” he spoke timorously.

“Did you have any foreknowledge of it?” Ludovic demanded without preamble.

“No, my lord, but I feared the worst the moment I saw the child. Thank heaven you arrived when you did.”

“Good God man! We cannot have the Viscount DeVere debauching children! Has it really come to this?”

The servant averted his gaze. “It grows more difficult to look upon him, and his rages are such that it is more often than not we must lock his chamber door.”

“Then something must be done at once.” Ludovic took another swig of brandy and slammed the decanter back onto the sideboard. He turned to the door.

“Where are you going, my lord?” Combes asked.

He answered grimly, “To assess the situation for myself.”

Ludovic’s hand shook on the latch, yet, he forged on. Following a cleansing breath, he lifted it and entered, his footfalls muffled by the richly woven Aubusson carpet. The dark velvet drapes were drawn closed with the only illumination stemming from the newly banked fire and a single candelabrum gracing the mantle. Other than the darkness and sickly sweet stench of rotting flesh, the room itself was unchanged from his last memory. Fighting his gag reflex, Ludovic cast a searching gaze about the dimly lit room.

“Who the devil is it?” a gravelly voiced called out from the shadows of the heavy bed-hangings.

“It is me, Ludovic, my lord.”

“And that damned sodomite quack?”

“I sent him on his way.”

“The hell you did!”

“It was for your own good, my lord. I fear that particular cure would be most taxing on your limited reserves.”

“What would you know of physic? You only desire to speed my death. Ungrateful whoreson that you are!”

“Not true, my lord.”

“Save it! And don’t stalk about like a damned thief. Show yourself!”

With candelabrum in hand, Ludovic advanced toward the bed, stifling the gasp that threatened to erupt when the lit tapers illuminated the man who commanded it. Little could have prepared him to face the misshapen monster that lurked in the beshrouded bed.

A ghastly specter of his former self, Lord DeVere’s body was emaciated to near skeletal, and the exposed portions covered with oozing syphilitic lesions. Hardest of all to ignore was the false nose he wore, fabricated of silver, and attached to his head with incongruous blue satin ribbons.

Ludovic averted his face, ostensibly to set the tapers on the night table, but in truth to compose himself. Shuttering his expression, he turned back to the bed with a bow. “It has been a

long time.”

“Perhaps not long enough, for I am still quite alive, as you see.”

Barely. “I am happy to know it, my lord.”

“Save me from hypocrisy and any inane inquiries after my health,” Lord DeVere snapped.

“Very well,” Ludovic said. “I suppose you know why I am come.”

“Expelled from Westminster. An inevitability. ‘Tis a miracle you made it as far as the sixth form before they booted you. And now it seems your latest antics have enraged the king. My heir is naught but another curse to my blighted existence.”

Refusing to apologize for the circumstances of his birth, Ludovic said nothing.

“You will go abroad,” Lord DeVere stated. “Out of my sight.”

Out of sight and out of mind. That suited Ludovic perfectly.

“And when you return, you shall take a wife.”

“What!” Ludovic choked.

“You heard me! It is your onus to ensure the continuation of my name, and I shall see it done before I die. You will wed the Capheaton girl. It was all arranged, and my solicitor was working on the settlements, but no respectable family would have you at present. You will go abroad until the scandal dies down. Six months should do, but should I hear even a defamatory whisper during the interim, I shall cut you off without a bloody groat!”

In truth, to go abroad was Ludovic’s wish come true. He, Ned, and Sin had talked for years of taking the grand tour together. If only they could convince their respective parents to permit them to accompany him.

“And you, my lord?” Ludovic asked. “Might I inquire after another physician?”

“One you could bribe to poison me? I think not! I shall remain in Blackstone’s care.”

The hell you will. “As you wish, my lord. Is there anything more you require?”

“From you? Nothing aside from your prompt departure.”

Ludovic backed away with a flourishing bow. “I live to gratify you, my lord.”

“Be gone, you insolent whoreson!”

“There is no need to unpack my belongings after all, Combes. I depart at once.”

“You only just arrived! Would you not wait until morning?”

“No. I have no desire to spend even a single night in this godforsaken place.”

“As you wish, my lord. But what shall we do with the child?” the servant asked.

“The child? Bloody hell! I’d forgotten all about her.” Ludovic pinched the bridge of his nose with a groan. He already had Freddie’s welfare to attend to, for he had no intention of taking her abroad with him. It would imply a commitment he was unwilling to make. Now he was saddled with another bloody female and this one completely helpless to fend for herself. “What the devil am I to do?”

“She cannot remain here, my lord.”

“Freddie?” Ludovic said.

“The child, my lord,” Combes answered with a befuddled look.

“My apologies. I am rather distracted at the moment.”

“Understandably so, my lord. This has been a most unsettling day.”

“More like a fucking nightmare,” Ludovic mumbled. “The girl must go at once. She would not be safe; moreover no female servant should go near the viscount’s chambers. You will ensure it, Combes?”

“Indeed, my lord, but as to the child?”

“Bugger it all! Can you think of *anyone* who might give her a home? If you know of such a family, I will gladly see to her financial maintenance as soon as I return to London.”

Combes stroked his chin. “I have a nephew in the north, my lord. In Westmoreland, near the Lake District. He and his wife are childless. Perhaps they would be inclined to take her?”

“You are a godsend, Combes. I insist you take a short holiday to the Lake District. Take the girl with you, and if they accept her, send the family’s name and direction to Mr. Phelps at Gray’s Inn. I will leave instructions for a monthly allowance to take care of her needs. As to the viscount’s care, I will immediately inquire after a reputable private physician, one to remain in residence here for the duration of his lordship’s illness.”

“What of you, my lord? When shall we see you again?”

“That’s a very good question,” Ludovic answered enigmatically.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Red Boar Inn at Charing Cross

“WHAT TOOK you so damned long, Sin? I sent the message to your house hours ago.”

Simon signaled the drawer and flung himself onto the bench across from Ludovic. “You think it was easy to escape my parents’ watchful eye? I can hardly take a piss without permission anymore. I’ll have you know I had to sneak out through the damned first story window. Thank God the yew hedge broke my fall, although now I have first hand knowledge of what it feels like to be dragged through one backwards!”

Raking over his normally fastidious friend’s rumpled appearance, Ludovic threw back his head with a laugh.

Simon’s lips thinned. “I’m happy to be the source of your amusement,” he said dryly and shook out his lace cuffs. His scowl, however, transformed to a broad smile the moment the buxom tavern wench appeared with two fresh tankards.

“Where is Ned?” Ludovic interrupted Simon’s slow and appreciative appraisal of her bosom.

“Already gone home to Yorkshire,” Sin answered, abstractly. His gaze still lingered on the girl. He cupped her arse and she slapped his hand away. “Later, my dove?” Simon flashed a raffish grin. “I’ll make it worth your while. I’m very generous... in more ways than one.”

“So they all say,” the wench answered back with a saucy smile but cast an inquiring look at his crotch. She pursed her lips. “Mayhap I’ll put *yer* boast to the test.”

Simon chuckled and watched her departure, answering as if uninterrupted. “As it turns out, Ned would have had to request leave from Westminster anyway, as his father has taken ill.”

“Has he, indeed? Is it serious?” Ludovic asked.

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

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

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

Ludovic almost choked on his ale. “You? A man of the cloth?”

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

“In between your lewd verse, you mean?”

Simon shrugged. “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, after all.”

“But the *church*, Sin? Come now!”

Simon took a long drink and then confessed. “If you must know, given my mother’s religious bent and her soft spot for her youngest son, it seemed the easiest path back into their good graces. Speaking of which, how was Kent? As bad as you expected?”

“Far worse.” Ludovic affected a solemn demeanor. “I must suffer the grave penance of exile abroad where I will be forced to fully indulge in all the decadent delights and lascivious pleasures the Continent has to offer.” He smirked. “Come with me, Sin! This scandal is a blessing in disguise. Just think of it! Months to do as we damned-well please. The arrangements have all been made.”

“Impossible.” Simon shook his head. “Do you actually think my father is going to allow me to go off on the Grand Tour after this last 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, for I will foot the entire bill—or better said—the Viscount De Vere shall.”

“You know I can’t.” Simon sighed. “How long will you be gone?”

“Six months. Mayhap a year. For certain I’ll stay abroad as long as I can manage to avoid a marriage. I forgot to mention that *he* has a mind to arrange it—even has the blasted chit picked out.”

“Marriage!” Simon spat ale all over himself. He wiped his chin on his lace sleeve.

“Precisely my reaction. He’s obsessed with the continuation of his name...if not his actual blood,” Ludovic added dryly. He took a drink. “No Sin, I have no intention of falling into that trap. With any luck, the poxy bastard will pass from this world before I return.”

“If he doesn’t?”

“I suppose I’ll cross that bridge to hell when I come to it.”

“So Kent was that bad, eh?”

“Far worse,” Ludovic replied. “Although he was surprising lucid for my brief tenure, his mind is clearly disordered. I have already consulted the family solicitor. He advised me to seek a declaration of *non compos mentis*.”

“Will you do it?” Simon asked.

“I have little choice, Sin. Something must be done for the protection of others as well as to safeguard his vulnerability to quacks.” Ludovic shuddered at the remembrance of the child. “Since he is a peer, the process requires a private act of parliament. But since my minority status prevents me from acting on my own, I must find someone in the House of Lords willing to act on my behalf—preferably someone influential with the king.” He paused. “You don’t suppose your father—”

“My father?” Simon raised his hand with a laugh. “He’s a king’s man alright, but you are barking up the wrong tree if you expect any assistance from *that* quarter. In fact, he has expressly forbidden me any further contact with you—believes you’re a bad influence on my character.”

Ludovic flashed a shameless grin. “Then he would be right. By the way, Sin, I am now reminded of one of the reasons I sent for you.” He withdrew a key from his pocket along with a card with an address written on the back. “It’s to some rooms I have let in St. James. You must go there at your earliest convenience.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I am leaving behind an item I need you to look after in my absence.”

“Of course.” Sin took the key. “When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow, Sin. I’ll send my direction in Paris as soon as I settle myself.”

They stared at each other for a long moment. For six years the three of them had been as brothers, but now everything was about to change. “It will never be the same again, will it?” Sin voiced what they both were thinking.

“I must go now.” Ludovic rose abruptly with burning eyes and a constricted chest. He only made it three paces, however, before he spun back to clasp Simon’s shoulders in a rough fraternal embrace. “How I wish you were coming along! If you or Ned can break away for a while... if only for a few weeks... Damn but I shall miss you two blighters!”

He travelled alone to the coast, lost for hours in his solitary reflections, yet it was not in Ludovic's nature to dwell on remorse or regret, but to enjoy the pleasures of the moment—and in Paris, such pleasures would be plentiful indeed.

To Ludovic's immense good fortune, he made the acquaintance of another young gentleman bound for Paris on his packet from Dover to Calais. The Right Honourable Charles James Fox, second son of Baron Holland, was Ludovic's junior by almost two years, but already a well-seasoned traveler whose worldly wisdom well exceeded his tender years.

"Have you been to Paris before, my lord?" Mister Fox inquired as they strolled the deck.

"Not yet," Ludovic answered. "Although my two best friends and I had planned to embark on the Grand Tour prior to entering university next year."

"Will your friends soon be joining you then?" Mister Fox asked.

"Sadly no," Ludovic replied ruefully. "There was a bit of a ruckus at school—"

"Say no more, my lord!" Charles raised a hand and laughed. "I am no stranger to such troubles! I have been much chastised, having been raised by what many perceive as an overly indulgent father who heartily despises our antediluvian English system of raising up gentlemen! Although I have completed my first year at Hertford College, I doubt if I shall persist to take my degree." He shrugged. "It hardly matters, however, as my father intends to secure me a place in Parliament at the next election."

"Indeed? But you are so young."

"Yet I have been trained for politics from my cradle," Charles replied. "Happily my personal interest is quite in harmony with my father's desire for my future, unlike many young fellows."

Ludovic could hardly disagree. "What is your purpose in Paris?"

"Pleasure, of course! Now the damnable war is done, Paris is the only place for proper amusement—unless, of course, one has time to travel farther south to Florence."

"You seem much enamored of the Continent."

"Yes." Charles laughed. "Although they did their best to exorcise my inner Francophile at Eton."

Ludovic cocked a brow. "Do tell."

"I returned from my Grand Tour much impressed by my travels, but my staunchly English form master was far less impressed by me! He took great affront at my adopted mode of dress and even more at my affected speech, a Castilian lisp being much the fashion," he explained.

“Yet I was promptly removed of my costly red-heel French shoes, my elaborate and very Italianate blue-powdered wig, and birched besides!”

Ludovic laughed. “Remind me, dear Charles, to tell you a story about three young men and a lion...”

“A lion? That was you, DeVere?” Charles chortled. “They say the king was livid! How positively divine!”

Having taken up with Fox, Ludovic now enjoyed not only the company of a highly diverting companion, but had in Charles a personal guide to the best amusements of Paris as well.

“Where are we going tonight?” Ludovic lounged in Charles’ dressing room drinking champagne while the French valet applied copious amounts of powder to Charles’s new perruque.

Ignoring the question, Charles instructed his valet, “Henri, I shall wear the fuchsia and violet embroidered waistcoat with the turquoise-and-silver-laced frock coat.”

Ludovic scowled. “You are an Englishman, Charles, not a damned peacock!”

Charles smirked. “When in Paris...” He examined Ludovic with a frown that wrinkled his mouse-skin brows and bemoaned, “Have you no fashion sense at all, DeVere? Pray at least don one of my waistcoats! I refuse to go out this evening in the company of a clergyman.”

“It’s midnight-blue, not black,” Ludovic protested.

“It’s dull. Somber. Staid.”

“Good God!” Ludovic exclaimed, truly affronted that any such adjectives would ever apply to him.

“Exactly,” Charles declared. “You see! You even talk like a clergyman now. That does it! Tomorrow I take you to my Parisian tailor. In the interim, I shall have Henri produce something more suitable for you.”

“Why so concerned about my dress?” Ludovic asked.

Charles grinned. “Because, my lord, I have an especial surprise to commemorate your first week in Paris for I fully intend that it shall be one you never forget!”

Ludovic raised his glass in salute. “Then consider me at your complete disposal, Mr. Fox.”

Hours later, after a lengthy supper and copious amounts of wine, Ludovic and Charles arrived by coach and four at an opulent *hôtel particulier* whose entrance was almost hidden within the boundaries of the Bois de Boulogne.

“What place is this?” Ludovic inquired, remarking upon the number of lavish equipages and liveried servants in the coach yard.

“This place, my friend, is the *Hôtel Aphrodisias*. Best known to its exclusive patrons as the gateway to paradise,” Charles added with a wink.

“Is it indeed?” Ludovic asked. “One wonders if it shall live up to such a lofty reputation.”

“I promise you it is no embellishment,” Charles replied. “My father brought me here on my fifteenth birthday for the sole purpose of initiating me to manhood. It was a most momentous event that I relive in my fondest dreams.”

“Impressive indeed, Mr. Fox. I confess I lost my own virginity in a far less auspicious manner—to a bar wench behind the Bedford Coffee House. Happily, I conducted myself with sufficient restraint that she offered me a second romp for free.”

The carriage came to a halt under the portico and the door swung open to reveal a virtual army of footmen catering to the new arrivals. They advanced into the receiving rooms, through an entry of polished marble and gleaming gilt, illuminated by Venetian crystal chandeliers. The chambers all had soaring ceilings depicting classical gods and goddesses, a compliment to the residents of the house, numerous beautiful women attired as nymphs and goddesses from classical mythology.

Ludovic noted the great number of courtiers, but his gaze lingered far longer on their various consorts. There was Diana with flowing golden locks and her bow of gilt strapped across blatantly exposed breasts. The nine canonical muses with various instruments and implements surrounded a particular nobleman who Charles explained was a royal duke. “They will perform for us before retiring with the gentleman of their choosing,” Charles said.

“The women choose the men?”

“They do indeed,” Charles explained. “It is precisely this policy that is responsible for the cachet of exclusivity. To be chosen by a goddess of *Hôtel Aphrodisias* is considered a bragging right.”

“However did *you* contrive it?” Ludovic teased.

Charles returned a good-natured grin. “My most indulgent father offered Madame la

Comtesse a very great deal of money to ensure I was properly trained in *les affaires d'amors*. He considers this an integral part of a gentleman's education."

"Your father holds most unconventional beliefs."

"Indeed he does. He even considered it his paternal duty to teach me to gamble like a gentleman. Unfortunately, in my case, tuition and luck appear to be mutually exclusive." Charles laughed. His attention suddenly fixed on the landing above the dual stairway. "Ah, there is the proprietess, Madame la Comtesse! The exquisite creature deigns to join us at last. She always waits to make her dramatic entrance."

Ludovic's gaze swept upward to discover a woman who could have been Aphrodite herself. With shining black curls unpowered and upswept and gowned in the mode of the classical Greeks, her eyes shone bright as cobalt above the chiton of iridescent and body-clinging sapphire silk that left little to the imagination.

"No one knows her true name," Charles said, "Our hostess is simply called *La Comtesse Incomparable*. She came to Paris a half dozen years ago, but Madame de Pompadour refused to receive her, perceiving a potential rival for the king's affections. Fortunately for the lady, one of the Royal Dukes took her into keeping for a few years and then rewarded her with this house. Since that time, the entertainments of this establishment have far surpassed any of the salons of La Pompadour."

Charles' elbow in his side awoke Ludovic from his state of astonishment. "Have you ever beheld such a vision DeVere?"

Her lips curved in a secretive manner, a smile of self-satisfaction as she surveyed the reception room from her pedestal above. Her remarkable beauty was further enhanced by the dazzling smile she gifted to the room as she made her slow descent to receive her guests.

"Come, I shall introduce you," Charles eagerly clutched his friend's elbow.

With his mind and pulse racing, Ludovic balked. It took a supreme effort to recover his composure and steady his hammering heart. "That will be quite unnecessary, Charles." He spoke slowly, taking care to moderate his tone. "The Comtesse and I are already acquainted."

Charles looked befuddled. "But how can that be when you have never been to Paris?"

Ludovic ignored the question, advancing toward the lady with purposeful deliberation. When she fixed upon his face, her progress faltered and her blue eyes widened in a look of disbelief. Ludovic noted with satisfaction the sudden pallor of her unpainted face, and the

trembling of her hand as she reached for the balustrade. She stood frozen as a marble sculpture when their gazes met, and then inhaled sharply when Ludovic inclined his head to her, an action that sent her right hand to rest on her left breast over her heart.

A most dramatic gesture, he noted cynically. Halting at the foot of the stairs, directly below her, Ludovic doffed his hat and swept her an elaborate and mocking salute.

“Bonsoir Maman.”

CHAPTER FIVE

LUDOVIC'S GESTURE had a most profound affect, for *Madame La Comtesse* was properly dumbstruck.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she croaked when she recovered her voice. "*C'est impossible!*"

"Not at all," he replied blandly as he ascended the stairs, pausing one step below to face her at eye level. "For here I stand in the flesh."

"*Ludovic! Mon chère fils, vraiment c'est toi?*" She moved to take him into her embrace, but he stiffened. "Pray let us take this joyful reunion in incremental steps, shall we?"

Her face fell. Her lips trembled. "You are heartless, just like *him!*"

"*I am nothing like him!*" Ludovic spat, struggling to suppress six years of resentment and rage that threatened to boil to the surface. He added in an undertone at Charles' mincing approach, "This is neither the time nor place to discuss family history."

"*Vraiment,*" she agreed. "You will come to me in the morning, *mon fils*, to my *levée*, where we can be private."

While part of him wanted to reject her olive branch, hoping the snub would cause her even a modicum of the pain he had experienced at her abandonment, another part of him desperately craved the closure only *she* could provide. He inclined his head with a thin-lipped smile. "I will be there."

"Eleven of the clock," she instructed before turning to greet her already bedazzled swain who swept her a ridiculously flourishing bow. She returned a brilliant smile and extended her still tremulous hand for his kiss before presenting both cheeks.

"*Mon chère renard!* Is your father with you?"

"Sadly, no, *Madame la Comtesse*. His cabinet duties keep him much occupied these days."

"A charming man is my Lord Holland. And exceedingly generous with his purse, *oui?*"

"I could not agree more, Madame. He is a most indulgent parent."

"I am honored with your visit and only hope the humble entertainments of my house will serve to divert you and your companion." She flicked a deceptively dispassionate gaze over Ludovic.

“There is no better entertainment in all of Paris, my lady,” Charles gushed. “Might I share that this is an especial occasion? It is *mon ami* Lord DeVere’s first visit to this charming capital.”

“Is it so? Then we must make it an especial treat, *non*?” She gestured to the occupants of the receiving chamber. “You may take your pick, my dear fox. You may have any of my *filles de joie* that you think will most please our mutual friend.”

“You are too generous, Madame. Might I ask how you and my friend Lord DeVere are acquainted?”

“Through his father, the viscount, *mon chère*,” she replied evasively. “Now you must pardon me while I attend my other guests.”

Both of their gazes tracked her progress about the room until Ludovic broke the silence. “I find I am in particular need of distraction this night, Charles.”

“Are you indeed, my friend? Then let us take full advantage of Madame’s offer. Which of the delectables on display most strikes your fancy?”

Ludovic scanned the room and let loose a wolfish grin. “What say you to the nine canonical muses?”

Bloody hell! His gut still roiled with emotions even his singular night of debauchery had failed to quell. With a gait made unsteady from overindulgence of wine and legs furthered weakened by the favors of several different women, Ludovic followed the liveried retainer to Madame’s private apartments in the south wing. He told himself he cared nothing of the interview or its outcome, but his body betrayed him for even his damned palms were sweating as the double doors swung open to a lavish ante chamber of bronze and beige with rose accents.

A woman’s domain. He advanced into the adjoining room. The boudoir.

Several tittering maids eyed him boldly up and down upon his entrance. On any other day, he might have exchanged flirtatious banter, or at least a fleeting pleasantry, but today was not like any other day—at least no other since he last entered his Maman’s chambers at age thirteen. Then, she had bussed both of his cheeks, made him promise to look after Hew, and departed with not a single bloody word since!

That was nearly six years ago, a day forever imprinted upon his brain, though he had done all possible to banish the memory. Even now he craved some manner of explanation for her

actions, and resolved not to depart until he had his answers.

She sat at her dressing table, a vision of loveliness still in her dishabille. Her hair was a sable cascade down her back, pulled away from her face by a single blue ribbon. Even in his great resentment he could not deny her beauty. Although the light of day revealed what candlelight had concealed, the faint lines around her eyes and mouth, the years had been unduly kind to her. He cursed whatever gods looked so favorably upon such a woman. Shouldn't her sins mar her perfect complexion like pock marks? Shouldn't such wicked waywardness show? The faithlessness to her marriage vows? The abandonment of her children?

Children! She rose to greet him and his gaze flew in bewilderment to the two blue-eyed cherubs who clung to her dressing gown. Realizing his shock, Lady Hermione DeVere flashed a tremulous smile accompanied by a look near panic. "*Alors, mon fils! Vous êtes en avance!* You are early!"

"How discourteous of me. I beg your forgiveness." His gaze never left the two children. Twins by appearances. One female. One male, though it was difficult to determine the latter by garb alone. "Are these yours, Madame?" Ludovic asked icily.

"Although, it is not how I wished to present them, yes. This is your brother and sister, Lucien and Lisette."

He felt his jaw tighten. "My *brother* is Hewett Philippe Montfort DeVere."

"As are these who also share your blood," she insisted. "*Mes enfants!*" she addressed the children. "This fine gentleman is your eldest brother, Ludovic. Go and do your honors."

The little girl approached first, batting her long lashes, dipping into a curtsy and offering her tiny hand with the grace of a born courtier. "*C'est un plaisir de faire votre connaissance, mon frère.*"

Still stunned at this new revelation, Ludovic nevertheless took her hand in his and knelt to air brush her pudgy knuckles, but while his sister practiced her coquetry, the boy held back, regarding him with the evil eye. In the moment Ludovic released the girl and rose to extend a hand to the boy, the child lunged forth with a battle cry. "*Usurpateur!*" and butted his head straight into Ludovic's groin.

Lights flashed before his eyes. Ludovic sank once more to his knees, the breath rushing from his lungs in an anguished groan. "Devil spawn!"

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried the countess and shouted for the children's maid, ordering their return to

the nursery.

“*Mais Maman!*” they protested in unison.

“*Je vais vous visiter plus tard,*” Madame promised a later visit as the maid dragged them away. “*Va-t’en! tout le monde!*” She shooed the remaining servants out the door and closed it behind them.

“Such a tender scene that was,” Ludovic scoffed once he had regained his breath. “Was it staged just for my benefit?”

“Don’t be cruel, Ludovic. You judge unfairly. There is much you do not know of the past, much you cannot possibly understand.”

He crossed his arms over his chest with a scowl. “Since I am so benighted, pray enlighten me.”

“Indeed I shall. What do you know of my marriage to your father?” she asked.

“I was not aware that you were ever wed to my father, so I must presume you refer to the viscount.”

“Yes!” she snapped. “The Viscount De Vere.”

“It was a notorious marriage rife with scandal from the start, the disgrace of which has clung to me like a foul odor my entire life.”

“Because the marriage itself was forged in dishonor and betrayal, Ludovic!” she cried. “Let me tell you the history for you are now a man grown, not a child to be sheltered.” His gaze trailed her as she paced the room. “I was already betrothed to another, to a man I loved, when the viscount presented his offer to my father, an offer he could not refuse. When I would not have Lord De Vere under any circumstances, they forced the marriage upon me.”

“How?” he demanded.

“My father did the unthinkable and let the viscount into my bedchamber one night, allowing the pox ridden *bâtard* to rape me as I slept! I was ruined beyond hope and nearly took my own life for fear of the dreaded disease, but thank God no symptoms ever came upon me. I had no choice then but to wed the man I despised above any other, but I vowed to make him pay, to suffer the same shame and disgrace I had suffered. So, I took lovers. Many lovers, with little discrimination, until once more I fell in love and eloped to Paris.”

“Thus choosing your lover over your children,” he stated bitterly.

“I had hoped to settle myself and send for my children.” She failed to meet his gaze.

“You lie, madam,” he said coldly. “You know as well as I that English law permits a mother no such rights. Thus the fact remains that you forsook your children.”

“You would have been taken from me anyway, don’t you see? For the English schools raise the noble scions, not the mothers. Besides, I was a young and beautiful woman wed to a diseased old man! Had I no right to seek my own happiness after all I had suffered?” She threw herself onto a Turkish divan and buried her face within her arms.

“Did you ever once think of us?” Ludovic struggled with the tightness in his chest.

She looked up with glistening eyes. His mother was truly born for the stage. “Of course I did! But life goes on, *hein?*”

“Indeed,” he replied stiffly. *Hers certainly had.* “And these new children of yours?” he prompted.

“Lucien and Lisette?” she sniffed. “They are the offspring of a French nobleman, one who was once mad for me, and would have wed me but the *bâtard* refused my petition of divorcement. Thus he still exercises control, barring me from remarriage, at least until his death, *may he rot in hell.*”

“That wish will likely be granted soon, unless of course he is paying that particular penance prematurely,” Ludovic remarked dryly.

“Please. Come and sit with me, *mon fils,*” she pleaded, patting the place beside her.

He hesitated but found his resentment had somewhat dimmed, allowing him to view the situation with a pragmatism and emotional detachment he’d formerly lacked. He fully recognized he was also devoid of any spirit of martyrdom that a life with the viscount would have required. Would he not have followed the same course had he been faced with similar choices? He had also avoided unnecessary contact with the man for six years, after all.

“Tell me of yourself,” she interrupted his musings. “I presume the viscount yet lives, but no doubt you will soon come into the title. Though you accuse me of being a poor mother, have I not ensured your future? Richard is an immensely wealthy man. You will be very rich one day, Ludovic. Such wealth that allows you to live as you please, heedless of others’ scorn.”

“He is a raving lunatic,” Ludovic remarked as if commenting on the weather.

“The disease? It has now affected his mind? Then you must act without haste to secure the title,” she insisted.

“It is not so simple. I can do nothing without patronage from someone in the House of

Lords.”

“You speak as though such a triviality is a problem for you?”

“It is not so trivial when I have displeased the king,” he said. “Any man who speaks for me is also likely to incur his displeasure.”

“Any man, *hein?* I doubt that, for every king has advisors, do they not? Men whom they trust? But also men who can be bought.”

“I have not the ear of any such man, or the funds to buy it, Madame.”

“But *mon chère*, I do.”

“You?”

“But of course. I refer to the father of our own dear renard.”

“Fox? You refer to Charles’ father, Baron Holland?”

“Indeed, *mon fils*. He has spent a lifetime in government office and has recently gained a patent of nobility. Does this not mark great favor with the king? Henri will speak for you.”

“Why should he?”

“Because I ask it,” she said. “He was once a *cher ami* of your *maman*.”

“You were lovers?”

She smiled coyly. “One does not kiss and tell, *mon cher*, but Henri will grant any such favor as I ask.”

“You are certain of this?”

“*Absolument*. You will give me but a day or two to compose such a letter and I will send it with Charles. No doubt he will lose all of his money at my tables within the week and be pressed to return home for more. A very poor gambler is our *cher renard*.”

“All right, Madame. I accept your offer of assistance.” Ludovic stood to take his leave of her. She rose as well and offered her cheek. “No good-bye kiss for your *maman*?”

After a moment of hesitation he obediently kissed both of her cheeks and turned to depart.

“Ludovic,” her voiced arrested his progress at the door.

“Yes?” He turned to face her again.

“When you come into your title and all that glorious wealth, you must not forget your dear *maman*.”

So, opportunism ran in the family? He smiled despite himself. “I promise to show you proper gratitude, Madame.”

“Then all is forgiven?” she asked clutching a handkerchief with misty eyes and a tremulous smile.

“But of course,” he replied smoothly.

Forgiven perhaps, but never forgotten.

CHAPTER SIX

A Private abode in Grosvenor Square- six months later

WITH COATS and cravats discarded, and Charles' famed blue-powdered wig askew, three young gentlemen slumped in their chairs at the massive dining table while liveried retainers removed the final covers. With a well practiced flick of his wrist, Ludovic signaled a footman for the port.

"It occurs to me, Sin, that with the flurry of my recent return I have failed to inquire after my former valet."

"You refer to Freddie?" Simon flushed.

"I do indeed," Ludovic said.

"You can't have her back, DeVere."

"No?" he cocked a brow. "And why is that?"

"Because the wench is gone, that's why!"

"I detect a story here, Sin."

"There is little to say. I looked after her as you requested. Wined and dined and made love to her in the manner prescribed by Ovid himself. Indeed, I would have forsaken all for her. I even considered joining her band of roaming Romanis to train toothless lions, but as soon as my money was gone, so was she! The fickle jade ran off with a half-pay officer!"

Ludovic shrugged. "I suppose I shall have to hire a new valet."

Simon sighed. "'Tis all for the best I suppose, for I might otherwise have come to blows with you over her."

Ludovic scowled. "Sin, it seems you were unduly attached to the creature. You must break this damnable habit of falling in love with every female you bed. "

"DeVere's right," said Charles Fox.

"Neither of you can understand," Simon replied sullenly, "for you have yet to experience the

grand passion, the all consuming power of love.”

“Sin, listen to me closely,” Ludovic said. “You must accept that sometimes a *fuck*, no matter how rapturous, is only a *fuck*. No more. No less.”

Their quasi-philosophic meanderings were interrupted by a late arrival. Ludovic rose with a cry of delight to greet his long lost friend. “B’gad if it isn’t Ned!”

Ned entered the dining chamber with a broad grin. “I see you are returned from exile at last, DeVere.”

“Returned less than a fortnight ago,” Ludovic replied. “What’s kept you away so long, Ned? Sin and I had nigh given you up for dead— bored to death of course, by life in Yorkshire.”

“Good to see you too, DeVere. My father has made an amazingly recovery. Thank you for asking,” Ned remarked dryly before joining the others at the table.

Ludovic was only mildly abashed. “So you do not return to us a baronet as expected?”

“No. Thankfully that reward will come at a later time.”

DeVere raised his tankard. “Then I shall drink to the continued good health of Sir Timothy Chambers.”

“I should also like to offer up a toast to friends old and new,” Simon interjected, looking from Ned to Charles Fox.

“Hear, hear,” the others echoed the salute before upending their glasses.

Ludovic beckoned the footman for more port, while Charles pushed back from the table with a well-satisfied belch. “Speaking of titles, DeVere, how goes your progress toward the viscountcy? I understand my father has spoken on your behalf.”

Ludovic grimaced. “A gesture that is greatly appreciated on my part, but one that has proven somewhat ineffectual.”

“And how is that?”

“I am told that while parliament approved, the king had reservations about granting my request and refused to sign the petition as written. Instead, the insufferable prig has deemed that the title be held in abeyance until my twenty-fifth year.”

“That’s what? Six years away!” Charles exclaimed.

“Indeed. It seems His Majesty is still piqued about a certain incident.” Ludovic glanced to Simon and Ned. “But justice has now been *served*,” he added with a smirk.

“Whatever do you mean?” Ned asked.

“How was your dinner, Charles?” Ludovic idly inquired.

“In truth, I found the meat a bit gamey for my taste,” Charles replied. “What was it anyway?”

“An experimental creation by my newly acquired French chef. He has named the dish ‘*bête de proie*.’”

“Beast of prey?” Charles translated with a puzzled look.

Three sets of eyes riveted to DeVere.

“No!” Ned cried.

“Yes indeed!” DeVere answered and raised his glass again with a huge grin. “You are quite right, Charles. Roasted lion does have a decidedly gamey taste.”

~End~

Are You Curious About DeVere?

Read A WILD NIGHT’S BRIDE

Book #1 in the Award-Winning DEVIL DEVERE SERIES

For Free!

