



VANQUISHED

HOPE TARR

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VANQUISHED
HOPE TARR

“A touching story of salvation and renewal in authentically depicted Victorian London.”

— *Best-selling author, Madeline Hunter*



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P R E S S

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DEDICATION:

To my mom, Nancy Louise Tarr, for her steadfast support and unconditional mother's love, with heartfelt appreciation.

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First Edition

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PROLOGUE

“I may first of all broadly state the somewhat self-evident proposition that prostitution exists, and flourishes, because there is a demand for the article supplied by its agency.”

—WILLIAM ACTON, *Prostitution, Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*,
Second Edition, 1870

Covent Garden, London

Winter 1875

Another sharp gust of wind knifed its way through the boy's thin woolen jacket and trousers, drawing a shiver that ran from the top of his hatless head to the tips of his thinly shod feet. The snow beating down on his cold-chapped skin didn't help matters, either. The great fat flakes might look soft as feathers, but they felt more like stinging nettles. Before the night was over, he'd be soaked through—assuming he didn't freeze to death first.

It wasn't yet seven o'clock, but for Harry Stone the misery of it all made it seem at least midnight. Taking shelter on the columned portico of Saint Paul's, he surveyed the scene through eyes watery from the cold. The square that had been bustling a few hours before was rapidly approaching deserted, the flickering gaslights casting their oily glow on the handful of porters carting away crates of left over fruit and vegetables. As soon as the last of them was on his way, Harry would steal inside the darkened market and scavenge the stalls for what leavings he might make a meal of. But that would not be for a while yet.

He slipped a cold-numbed hand inside his coat, feeling for his gin flask. His stiff fingers worked the stopper free, and he brought the bottle to his lips, draining it in one long, sweet swallow. Propping his shoulder against the column, he savored the spirit warming his insides even as he practiced his failsafe antidote to misery of any kind—taking photographic pictures in his mind. *Snowy Night in the Square* or *Venus* he would call it, this photograph he could have captured had his camera survived its angry clatter with plaster and wood. With its lodging houses and Turkish baths, playhouses and gaming dens, Covent Garden was said to boast the most whores of any quarter of the city. Being the son of one of them, Harry well believed it.

Not that he meant to walk the streets begging for long . . . or at least not forever. Someday somehow he meant to save up enough to buy a camera, a proper one this time, and set up as a real photographer. Like his idol Roger Fenton, whose documentary images of the Crimean War were known the world over, he would take big pictures, important pictures, pictures that made you feel and see things as you hadn't felt or seen them before.

But more than any static scene, it was the people he ached to capture with a camera's unerring eye. *Ode to the Shadow People*, he thought to call it, this series of photographs he couldn't seem to stop firing off in his mind. By now Harry knew them all, had heard or could piece together their stories. The ta

blonde known as Poxy Polly, so named because of the sore at the side of her mouth that never seemed to heal. ~~The pretty little Italian Maria who, with the help of a vinegar-soaked sponge, managed to grow new maidenhead every night.~~ Then there was Randy Roger, just a handful of years older than Harry but looking more forty than twenty on account of the opium he couldn't seem to smoke enough of. Like it or not, Harry was one of them now, one of the shadows.

Self-portrait of a boy leaning against a column. Head bowed, shoulders folded inward, hands shoved into pockets the subject's stance . . . everything about him said he'd rather be anywhere but there. Only it wasn't a portrait, not a real one, as you couldn't see the face beyond a forehead covered with shaggy blond hair, a suggestion of finely molded nose, the tip of a squared-off chin—features recollected from memory that seemed to grow more blurred with each passing day.

Harry hadn't looked into a mirror in more than a year.

Before glancing at his reflection hadn't been so much a daily ritual as an unavoidable occurrence. Growing up in Madame Dottie's Palace of Pleasure, mirrors had been in abundant supply unlike the sherry and champagne and fancy foods that were brought out only on special occasions or when an important client called. Great gilt-edged pier glasses covered nearly every wall; more mirrors hung from the ceilings of the bedrooms where women like his mum had entertained their "guests." And then there were the special mirrors his friend, Sally, had pointed out to him. On the outside they looked to be made of regular reflecting glass only the backs were really windows that let the people in the next room see inside. When he'd asked why anyone would want to be looking in, or have someone looking in on them, Sally had laughed and explained that people basically fell into one of three groups: performers; peepers; and those who fancied a go at both from time to time. At the time, Harry hadn't understood what she meant.

He did now.

A torque of his belly pulled him back into the present. The last of the produce wagons was just pulling off. It cleared the thoroughfare, and Harry spotted a tall man in a top hat and greatcoat cutting through the empty square.

Heart thrumming, he shoved away from the column and hurried down the slick steps to the street. Putting himself dead center of the man's path, he looked up into the blunt-featured face and forced his cold-stiffened lips into a smile. "Spare a coin so a poor lad can sup tonight?"

The man didn't smile back, only glared at him from beneath bushy eyebrows, the jutting forehead drawn into an unmistakable frown. With his fierce eyes and stone-carved features, he reminded Harry of one of those Methodist do-gooders, the sort who preached against the evils of drink on East End street corners and spooned up thin soup at the Christian Mission on Whitechapel Road. But beneath all that piety, Harry sensed an edgy hunger not unlike that he'd seen in the faces of some of his mum's best customers. Heaven and hell, saints and sinners—only the finest of lines separated the two.

He glanced at the substantial-looking cane the man wielded, at the large hand wrapped about its knob, and backed away. "Sorry, guy, my mistake. I'll just be on my way then." He turned to run, thinking to lose himself in the labyrinth of castoff crates and rubbish bins.

"Hold. Hold, I say!" From behind, a gloved hand took firm grip of his shoulder.

Equal parts terrified and furious, Harry wheeled about. "Hey leave off, I said I was sorry."

The staying hand fell away. "You mistake me, young man. I mean you no harm. I only want a word with you." The hooded eyes regarding Harry were shrewd but not unkind.

Harry ran a practiced eye over the man's broad-shouldered if slightly stooped frame. His coat and hat were both finely made, and the knob of his walking stick looked suspiciously like gold.

"All right then," he finally said, "but it'll cost you."

The weathered face fell at that, whether weighted by pity or disgust Harry couldn't quite say. With a sigh, the man reached inside his coat's breast pocket. "I presume this will suffice?"

He pulled a five-pound note from his money clip and held it out. *A fiver!* Harry felt his mouth drop open. Closing it, he answered with a mumbled "right-o" and pocketed the bill before anyone watching them might see.

"What is your name, young man?"

Harry hesitated. Giving up your name was a tricky affair, especially when your business with the asker wasn't yet clear. "Depends on who wants to know."

"Mine is William."

Harry wavered a moment more. "The name's Harry."

That he didn't offer up his mother's surname of "Stone" was a matter of both principle and practicality. William, if indeed that was his real name, hadn't given up his. If things got dicey, he might take it into his head to snaffle the old gent's purse and make a dash for it, in which case volunteering his surname would be pretty bleeding stupid.

Solemn eyes settled on Harry's face. "How old are you, Master Harry?"

Old enough was Harry's standard reply, but something in William's manner prompted him to give a more sober answer. "Fourteen, I think, maybe fifteen." Dragging the toe of his boot through the snow, he found himself admitting, "I'm . . . I'm not exactly sure."

Voice gentle, William asked, "Have you any parents, any relative who might give you succor?"

Harry couldn't say what "succor" was, but he felt his eyes watering in a way that had nothing to do with the cold. "Only me mum, and she's dead." He looked sharply away, ashamed by the cracking of his voice. "Of the typhus," he added because at least typhus was a respectable ailment unlike the pox, which peppered you with putrid red lesions and drove you mad as a March hare. Of course, considering what his mum had been, she might have had the pox, too. But no, Sally had assured him it was typhus that had carried her away, and Sally was the one person in the world he trusted not to lie.

You had to trust someone.

"I see," William said. Making himself meet that kind, knowing gaze, Harry could almost believe he had. "What if I were to tell you that, if you come with me now, I will help you secure employment in the country where you will receive wholesome food, clean clothing, and a warm bed?"

"Workhouse, you mean." Harry spat on the snow-covered cobbles to wash the detested word from his mouth. Everyone knew workhouses were terrible places where children were made to work all day and pray all night—and beaten soundly if they failed to do either in sufficient quantity.

A pained look crossed William's weathered face. "Roxbury House is not a workhouse, far from it.

is an orphanage established and operated by the Society of Friends—the Quakers. Commensurate with its mission of placing orphaned boys and girls in Christian homes is reaching out to those who have fallen into sin and preparing them to embark on productive, God-fearing lives.”

Harry shrugged though inside his heart was drumming his chest like a mallet. “What’s that to do with me?”

“As it happens, the orphanage finds itself in need of an able young man to serve as assistant to the groundskeeper. The position would entail plenty of fresh air and exercise while working in the garden and about the property.”

The only air Harry had ever breathed was London air, heavy with coal dust and ripe with rubbish. As for gardening, he doubted he’d know a radish from a leek. Yet when he closed his eyes at night, the vision he summoned to send him to sleep was one of rolling green fields and cobalt-blue skies; of milk thick and creamy and still warm from the cow; of groves of apple trees where a boy might make a feast of fruit plucked straight from the branches.

William bent to him, his gaze boring into Harry’s. “Might you be that able young man?”

The snow was falling faster now, feathering William’s shoulders with silver, the silver of . . . angels’ wings? Harry held his breath without knowing why.

Might you be that able young man?

Might he? Harry reached inside himself, searching his bruised soul. A chance for a new life, a chance for something clean and good—could such a chance truly be within his grasp?

Almost afraid to believe, he found his voice and mumbled, “As able as the next, I expect.”

Seemingly satisfied, William nodded. “For tonight you will come back with me to my house, where my dear wife will see to your supper. Tomorrow we shall set your feet on the path to a new start in life.”

Without another word, he turned and set off in the direction of James Street, the tip of his carriage leaving chink marks in the mounting snow. The scene reminded Harry of a story he’d once been told about a little boy and girl, lost in the wicked forest, who’d scattered a trail of breadcrumbs behind them so that they might be found.

I want to be found.

Heart pounding, Harry ran after him, thin soles skidding on the sticking snow. “Hold. *Hold!*”

Gulping down great mouthfuls of icy air, he raced on, ignoring the fiddle music, raucous laughter and occasional shriek pouring out of the doorways of the gin palaces and brothels he streaked past. He caught up with William at Long Acre as he was climbing inside his carriage, an impressive black lacquered conveyance, not unlike the ones Harry saw depositing well-heeled theatergoers at the entrance of Drury Lane.

He launched himself at the open door before the caped driver might close it in his face. Breathless, he fell back against the tufted leather seat across from William.

The older man regarded him with sober, searching eyes. “Well then, young Harry, am I right in thinking you are prepared to put your wicked ways behind you?”

Before he might answer, the carriage door slammed closed. He felt the small vibration, the finality

it, in every cell of his quivering body.

But when William reached out to him, it was only to hand him a carriage blanket and to point to the two flannel-wrapped bricks set on the floor beneath his seat. Enfolded in the warm wool, feet propped atop the heated bricks, Harry let his head drop back against the leather squab. Inhaling the comforting scents of fine leather, cigars, and bay rum, he felt his eyes drifting shut. When he opened them again, the carriage was at a standstill and a hand, firm but gentle, was shaking him to wakefulness.

He shook it off and scrambled upright, horrified he'd let himself fall asleep in the presence of a stranger. "Where . . . where are we?"

If William was offended, he gave no sign of it. Sitting back against the seat, he folded his gloved hands over the knob of his walking stick. "My house on Downing Street. Number ten, to be precise."

Ten Downing Street; why that direction should strike Harry as familiar he couldn't say, for lifting the leather window shade and peering out onto the quiet, elegant street, he could be certain he'd never been there before in his life. A plain-faced woman of middle years threw open the black-lacquered front door for them before the lion's-head knocker need be raised. When she whisked away William's wet coat and hat and then shooed him off to the library fire with dire predictions about the effect of the damp on his rheumatism, Harry knew she must be William's "dear wife." As for Harry, he soon found himself wrapped in a homey quilt and bade to sit on a bench before the kitchen fire, a bowl of savory stew and wedge of crusty bread pressed into his hands. Afterward he was placed in the care of a plump, pleasant-faced maid who ushered him up the grand staircase to his room, which smelled so wonderfully clean that for a moment he just stood breathing in the freshly laundered scent. Though he'd expected to lie awake brooding on the queer turn his life had taken, he fell into exhausted slumber the moment his head hit the goose feather pillow.

The next morning, bathed, fed to bursting, and wearing scrupulously clean if ill-fitting clothes, he stood on the train platform at Victoria Station, a coach-class ticket to Kent clenched in his fist for fear he might otherwise lose it.

"The Almighty loves the sinner as well as the saint," William told him just before he boarded. "Be a good lad, work hard, love the Lord and you will surely prosper."

In later years when Harry would recall his first and only meeting with William Ewart Gladstone, then Britain's prime minister, it would be with a mixture of amusement and awe. For it was in that unlikely encounter on a bitter winter night with the man known as the People's William that Harry Stone had begun to die . . . so that Hadrian St. Claire could be born.

CHAPTER ONE

“Your denial of my citizen’s right to vote, is the denial of my right of consent as one of the governed, the denial of my right of representation as one of the taxed, the denial of my right to a trial by a jury of my peers as an offender against the law; therefore the denial of my sacred right to life, liberty, property . . .”

—SUSAN B. ANTHONY, *United States of America v. Susan B. Anthony*, 1873

Westminster, London
February 1890

Votes for women now. Votes for women NOW!” The protestors’ voices pitched higher still, *shrill* still, or so it seemed to Hadrian as he hurried across Westminster Bridge, the wind tearing at his greatcoat and scarf and threatening to rip the bowler from his head. Stepping out onto the crowded street, he tightened his grip on his camera, a German-made Anschütz with a shutter mechanism capable of arresting motion to one-thousandth of a second. He’d put the equipment to good test that afternoon at St. Thomas Hospital photographing a newly discovered medical anomaly. The poor bastard had been born with an enormous scrotum, tumor-mottled skin, and a chronic palsy that would have rendered traditional photographs little better than a blur. Even so, using his talent to turn a fellow human being into little better than a circus freak hadn’t sat well with Hadrian, and the subject’s sad-eyed patience in holding any number of humiliating poses had made him feel like the lowest of beasts. Now frozen, footsore, and famished, he couldn’t reach his studio soon enough.

But to do so he first had to run the gauntlet of suffragists who’d overtaken Parliament Square. They’d camped out for coming on two days now, creating a bloody nuisance for pedestrians and conveyances alike. Dressed in somber grays and serious blacks, the fifty-odd females picketing beneath the gray wash of winter sky might just as easily pass for a funeral procession as a political rally were it not for the placards the women held aloft and the noise they emitted— especially the noise.

“Miss Caledonia Rivers to speak on the subject of female emancipation . . . Caxton Hall Westminster . . . tomorrow evening . . . seven o’clock sharp.”

Dodging traffic to cross to the sidewalk, Hadrian could only shake his head. That any woman fortunate enough to possess a roof and four walls would march about in the bitter air struck him as a sort of perverse self-indulgence, a foolishness on par with going slumming in the stews or touring prison yards to observe the convicts picking oakum. He had no patience for it, none at all and when one buxom-eyed female had the audacity to try and stuff a pamphlet in his already full hands, he swallowed an oath worthy of his Covent Garden days and darted inside the square’s gated entrance.

He realized his mistake at once. Apparently not content with clogging the sidewalks, the damnab females had made camp within the park proper. A platform had been erected in the center of the green

and several more dark-clad women busied themselves lighting the torches set about its perimeter. Giving them broad berth, he kept his head down and his sights trained on the opposite end of the wrought-iron gate.

The blare of a bobby's whistle from outside the park walls instinctively sent him swinging around—and barreling into a female's soft body. "Oof!"

Hadrian stared down in horror. The woman he'd knocked off her feet now sprawled at his, feathers hat askew and skirts bunched. On the frost-parched grass beside her, a leather briefcase crammed with papers stretched wide open.

He went down on his knees beside her. "Madam, are you all right?" Unleashing his grip on the camera, he slid an arm beneath her shoulders.

She jerked at his touch. Obscured by a netted hat veil and framed by wire-rimmed spectacles, her green eyes flashed fire. "It's 'miss,' actually." She elbowed her way upright and yanked down her skirts—but not before Hadrian caught sight of a pair of appealingly trim ankles. "And I would be in fine fettle indeed, had you seen fit to mind where you were going." Broken ostrich feather dangling, she got to her knees and began collecting her papers.

Courtesy toward women was deeply ingrained, one of the few values Hadrian possessed, and the only claim he could make to being a gentleman by deed if not by birth. And so, rather than point out that she had bumped into him as well, he held out his hand to help her to her feet. "Allow me."

Beneath the weight of that atrocious hat, her head snapped up. "I believe I have had quite enough of your *help* for one day."

She'd barely got the declaration out when the demon wind kicked up, scattering vellum sheets to the four winds.

She leapt to her feet. "My papers!" Hiking up her skirts, she gave chase across the park. Over her shoulder, she shouted, "Well, don't just stand there. *Do something!*"

With a muttered prayer that his camera would still be there on his return, Hadrian abandoned it and ran after her. Hell-bent on cheating the wrangling wind, he plucked one sheet from its skewer on a wrought-iron fencepost and another from the foot of the statue of the late Benjamin Disraeli. At the lady's insistence, he retrieved two more from the upper branches of one very tall, very scratchy oak tree. Breathless, bruised, and sporting a tear in his coat, he shoved the last of the papers in his pocket and climbed down. Dropping to the hard-packed ground, he scanned the square for signs of his erstwhile victim, but she appeared to have vanished.

He was on the verge of giving up and going on his way when he spotted her, down on all fours and buried shoulder-deep in the boxwood hedge. Coming up behind her, he tapped her smartly on the back. "What the devil do you think you're about?"

From beneath the branches, her muffled voice answered, "Collecting my papers naturally." She crawled out, feathers hanging at half-mast and a clutch of vellum in one grubby glove.

This time she accepted his hand up without argument. Standing face to face, he saw she was tall though no match for his six-foot-four frame. The novelty of looking at a woman more or less in the eye had him peering beyond the blur of veil for a closer study. No great beauty, he decided, nor was she an old green girl. If he had to make a stab at guessing, he'd peg her at thirty-odd, perhaps a year or two older.

than himself, and a spinster judging by the “miss” as well as the dreary clothing. And yet the sagged shoulders, the deep-set eyes beneath the slash of dark brows were both expressive and arresting, and the full mouth and softly squared jaw completed a pleasing enough picture.

Caught up, it took her discreet cough to remind him of the papers bulging from his pocket. Handing them over, he said, “I think this is the lot.”

“Thank you.” She took them from him, her gloved fingertips brushing his, and improbably he felt the warm tingle of her touch shoot straight to his groin. Stuffing the papers inside her case, she spotted the mud and dried leaves festooning the front of her coat. “Oh dear, I’m a mess” she said, swiping at the muck with her soiled glove. “I never can seem to manage the trick of remembering a handkerchief.”

He fumbled in his pocket. “Here, have mine.” He pressed the square into her palm, again experiencing that peculiar surge of heat.

She accepted with a grateful smile and bent to brush away the dirt. “Thank you—again.” Straightening to her full, glorious height, she handed back his handkerchief.

Feeling in better spirits, he shook his head. “Keep it. Really, it’s the least I can do after mowing you down like so much lawn grass.”

She laughed then, a soft airy tinkling that made him think of the wind chimes his landlady insisted on hanging by his backdoor. “All right then . . . if you’re sure.” She stuffed the wadded ball of linen into her coat pocket and turned to go. Stopping in her tracks, she looked back. “Mind you don’t lose your papers.”

“My papers? Oh . . . quite.”

Good God, he’d left his best camera out in the open and, worse yet, had been on the verge of forgetting it entirely. What the devil was the matter with him? Jogging over to retrieve it, he thought of his flat, empty save for his cat, and realized he was no longer so very eager to reach it—at least not alone.

“I’m not always such an oaf, you know,” he called back, wracking his brain for something clever to say, some pretense to hold her.

From a few feet away, she cupped a hand to her ear. “Sorry?”

“I said I’m not always such an *oaf*.”

“Oh.” She paused in mid-step, appearing to consider that. “Well, I’m not usually such a harridan either, except when I’m nervous—or in this case, late.”

“I don’t think you’re a harridan.” Camera in hand, he closed the space separating them in three ridiculously long strides. “It’s these protestors, taking up the whole bloody square as if they own every brick and statue, spewing their rubbish at all hours that have everyone on edge. I only cut through the park to avoid them.”

Mouth lifting into a pretty smile of full pink lips and straight white teeth, she nodded to the park beyond them. “It would seem you’ve rather failed in that regard.”

“Yes, I suppose I have.” Looking back over his shoulder, he saw they were the object of a good many whispers and gawking stares. Their mad dash must have made an amusing spectacle indeed. Ordinarily that realization would have set him fuming but rather than care, he found himself saying, “There’s a tea shop just around the corner. Allow me to make amends by buying you a cup?”

She shook her head, looking adorably shy and far younger than she had at first when she'd still been tight-lipped and cross. "That isn't necessary. And I've an . . . engagement to keep."

Ah yes, presumably the engagement for which he had made her late already. A decent fellow would accept defeat and send her on her way. Yet the mental image of how splendid she would look freed from all those ghastly clothes and wearing only his bedsheet prompted him to press, "As you're late already, why not postpone it altogether, at least until you've thawed?"

She shook her head, causing the broken hat feathers to careen like a torn sail. "I can't. I really must be going." The firming of her mouth told him he'd been too forward, that this time she really did mean to go.

"Ah well, perhaps we'll *bump* into one another again sometime." He fished inside his coat pocket for one of his business cards as a pretense to asking her name.

"Yes, perhaps we shall," she allowed but there was no hope of it in her eyes. She turned to go and Hadrian knew there would be no more keeping her, that this really was goodbye.

Before she could take a step, a squat woman with salt-and-pepper hair and a man's plaid muffler wrapped about her short neck rushed up to intercept her. "Good Lord, Callie, are you all right? I was outside the gate and only just heard what happened."

Beneath her veil, the woman—Callie—flushed bright crimson. "Calm yourself, Harriet. I am perfectly fine. I took a bit of a tumble, and my briefcase spilled." Her shy-eyed gaze shifted to Hadrian. "The gentleman was kind enough to help me."

From behind horn-rimmed spectacles, Harriet's beady eyes dropped to the camera case in Hadrian's hand. "I don't know what rag of a newspaper you're with, sir, but if your scheme is to scare up scandal and rubbish by waylaying Miss Rivers and photographing her in disarray, then you'd best think again."

Taken off-guard, Hadrian demurred when from the vicinity of the stage someone with a bullhorn belted out, "Miss Caledonia Rivers to make her address. Five minutes, ladies. Five minutes . . ."

Callie Rivers. Caledonia Rivers. It was then that the fog inside Hadrian's head lifted. His mysterious woman was one of them, a suffragette! And not just any suffragette, but their leader! Seeing her through new eyes, he took in the spinsterish coat, the awful hat, and the leather case containing the oh-so-important papers, and asked himself how a piquant smile and a pair of pretty ankles had turned him into such an absolute idiot.

He stared at her, feeling like a Biblical figure from whose eyes the scales had just fallen. "Your pressing engagement, I take it?"

She answered with a brusque nod, at once prim and proper and utterly businesslike. "Quite."

Now that his initial shock was fading, he could at least appreciate the irony of the situation. The first woman to pique his interest in years was the celebrated champion of a cause he'd come to loathe.

"Lest we part as strangers, my name is St. Claire. Hadrian St. Claire." By this time, he had the sought-after business card in hand and his shock firmly in check. Handing her the card, he said, "I'm not a reporter. I'm a photographer. I have a studio not far from here on Great George. Portraiture is my specialty."

She tucked his card into her pocket with nary a glance. "I'm afraid I'm not terribly fond of havin

my photograph taken.”

“Pity. You’d make for a most intriguing subject.” And because he had absolutely nothing to lose—now that he knew who and what she was, what possible interest in her could he have—he looked directly into Caledonia Rivers’s beautiful, mortified eyes and added, “I should have recognized you from the newspaper etchings, but they hardly did you justice. You’re far prettier, and far younger, than I would have supposed.”

Beneath the veil, the stain on her cheeks darkened from pale pink to dusky rose but, to her credit, she didn’t look away. “I think you mock me, sir.”

“On the contrary, miss, if either of us is the subject of mockery, I rather think it is me.” He nodded toward a clutch of young women watching them and giggling behind their gloves.

Harriet skewered him with a sharp look before giving him her back. “Callie, we really must be on our way.” She hooked her plump arm through her friend’s and began leading her away.

“Ladies.” He tipped his bowler to them both, but it was Caledonia Rivers whom he followed with his eyes as she hurried toward the platform, creased and muddied skirts trailing the pavement, broken hair and feathers caught up in the fingers of the wind.

So that was Caledonia Rivers, the celebrated suffragette spokeswoman making headlines in all the newspapers. What was it the press was calling her these days? Ah yes, The Maid of Mayfair. Unlike so many of her suffragette sisters whose reputations skirted the fringe of respectability, Caledonia Rivers was said to be so very good and virtuous—and yet not too good or too virtuous to indulge in a bit of a flirt in a public park, the little hypocrite.

He’d only paid her the compliment to torture her, and yet in his roundabout way he’d spoken nothing but the truth. The flesh-and-blood woman with whom he’d passed the last delightful few minutes scarcely resembled the stern-faced amazon the newspapers made her out to be.

As for the “maid” part, he was deucedly sorry he wouldn’t have the opportunity to test that out for himself.



“Harriet, you’ve missed your calling entirely. Why, you should have been a detective,” Callie teased after they’d mounted the platform, her crumpled speech clutched in one hand. “I just supposed that case of his held business papers.”

Harriet shrugged. “I know a thing or two about cameras is all, but if I’d been thinking straight, I would have known that fancy German model would be beyond the touch of the Fleet Street boys.”

By now Callie was well acquainted with most of the press photographers by face if not by name. She was quite confident she’d never seen Mr. St. Claire before today. No, him she would have remembered most particularly.

“I still don’t trust him,” Harriet went on, face screwed into a frown. “He had lecherous eyes.”

Remembering how that blue-eyed gaze had seemed to peel away her layers of clothing to expose the curves she took such pains to harness and hide, Callie dropped her eyes to the papers she was supposed to be collating. “Really, and I thought him a rather pleasant young man.”

Pleasant although admittedly forward and possessed of enough wicked charm for ten men but ~~with those striking looks, he was likely accustomed to getting what he wanted from women.~~ But look and charm aside, she'd had no business dallying with him—and in plain view in the midst of the rally no less. Such behavior, although entirely innocent on her part, was dangerous indeed, fodder for the scandal sheets, and the surest way to set tongues to wagging within the Movement as well. With the new Parliamentary suffrage bill slated to come before the Commons by the month's end, now was the very worst of times for her to take foolish risks. Ever since the press had branded her with that absurd sobriquet, Maid of Mayfair, her enemies in the Conservative opposition had kept even closer watch than before, determined to catch her up in some scandal or embarrassment. Certainly they'd all come too far, fought too hard, to have some selfish slip-up on her part bring their collective hopes and dreams crashing down like the proverbial house of cards. Her mentor, Mrs. Fawcett, the members of the London Society for Women's Suffrage of which Fawcett was president, the women braving the cold within the park's ironwork gates—everyone was counting on her to see them through to victory.

She would not, must not, let them down.

Yet it had been a long time since someone, a man, had told her she was pretty.



Humming a dance hall tune beneath his breath, Hadrian walked westward to where Bridge Street became Great George. Preoccupied with mentally fleshing out the details of Caledonia Rivers's veiled, blurred visage, he took his customary shortcut through the alley behind his studio. By the time the sound of two sets of heavy footfalls reached his ears, it was too late. He looked back over his shoulder at the pair of familiar hulking figures closing in and felt his mouth go dry. Sam Sykes and his fellow dealer and collector, Jimmie Deans. *Damn!*

Trapped, the best he could do was plant his camera behind the nearest rubbish bin and turn about to face them while hoping his legendary luck would hold. “Don't tell me you lads have come to have photographic portraits made?” He forced a smile even as he wondered how many teeth they intended on leaving him.

Thumbs in their pockets, Sykes and Deans drew up before him. “Best wipe that shite grin from your face, St. Claire before I'm minded to wipe it off for you,” Sykes warned. “Your account is three months past due, and Bull wants his four hundred pounds, or else.” Expression dour, he shook his shaved head. “You know Bull's terms as well as I do.”

Bull was Bull Boyle, former pugilist and now proprietor of the Mad Hare Gaming Emporium in Bow, an establishment Hadrian heartily wished he'd never stepped inside. As for his “terms,” the basic code was a pound of flesh for every hundred pounds past due. A code which, in retrospect, Hadrian really ought to have considered more carefully before playing not one or two, not three, but four hands of baccarat against the house at one hundred pounds per match—on credit. Only there'd been fresh drinks, plates and a new tripod to purchase and the rent on his studio to pay, not to mention his friend, Sally, two orphans relying on him to carry them through to the spring.

Stalling, Hadrian said, “Tell Bull I need more time, another two weeks, and then I'll pay him whatever I owe him at double his rate.”

Sykes spat onto the cobbles at Hadrian's feet. “Talk, St. Claire. It's always talk with you. I'd just as

soon cut out that clever tongue of yours as waste me time hearing any more of your lies.” He reached inside his open coat and drew a carving knife from his belt. “Jimmie, time to get to work.”

Deans stepped forward and with impressive swiftness for one so bulky, seized Hadrian, pinning him against the stone wall. “Should we start with his ears or his nose?” He shoved his bulldog face up to Hadrian’s, so close that Hadrian could count the black hairs sprouting from each nostril and all but taste the leeks on his breath.

Holding the knife so that the metal caught the glimmer of waning light, Sykes considered the question. “Oh, I dunno mate, you decide.”

Good God but they meant to carve him up like a Christmas goose. Sweat trickling down his back, Hadrian said, “I can get the blunt, but I need more time.” Inspiration struck and he added, “I’ve a big commission about to come in.”

Sykes cocked a bushy brow and jabbed the point of the blade into Hadrian’s Adam’s apple. “How big?”

Hadrian sucked in his breath as sticky warmth trickled down his collar. “What would you say if I told you I was to photograph the Prince of Wales?” As lies went this one was a corker and yet he was counting on Sykes and Deans to be too ignorant to know that the London firm of John Mayall held the exclusive rights to photographing members of the royal family.

“I’d say you were a bloody liar, that’s what.”

“Suit yourself, but I can’t very well take the photograph if I’m in hospital, now can I? Who knows but Bertie might be minded to ask why I’ve had to beg off, and in my delirium I might accidentally whisper a name or two in the royal ear, if you take my meaning.”

Deans, the slower-witted of the two, looked to Sykes for reassurance. “He’s bluffing, ain’t he Sam? I don’t really know the Prince of Wales . . . do he?”

Hadrian shrugged, the movement possible now that Sykes had withdrawn the knife. “Who’s to say that I don’t? Either way, it’s your call, mates. Of course if I do, I doubt Bull will thank you for being the ones responsible for having the police pay him a little impromptu call. Why, there’s no telling what the bobbies might find if they turn over the place, now, is there? And Bull, well, I wouldn’t be surprised if he took it in his head to collect his own pound of flesh— or two.” He punctuated the latter statement by dividing a knowing look between the henchmen.

Sykes spat again and then wiped his mouth on his sleeve, considering. “All right, St. Claire. You win—for now. You can have your two weeks but after that . . .” He sliced a finger across his throat in the age-old gesture.

Expression grim, Deans fingered the scar slashing his stubbled jaw. “Bull ain’t going to like it.”

An eye on Hadrian, Sykes shrugged. “Two more weeks and then it’ll be five hundred pounds in your pocket, not four. In the meantime, we’ll let him keep his eyes and ears. Bull has plenty o’ trophies in the pickle jar as it is.” He poked a thick stump of forefinger in the vicinity of Hadrian’s face. “But mark me, St. Claire, we’ll be back to collect and, fancy friends or no, you’ll pay up or we’ll finish you.”

Hadrian watched them back out of the alley. Once they’d disappeared into the encroaching twilight, he took off his hat and swiped a gloved hand across his sweating brow. In the distance, he could make

out bits and pieces of a speech in progress.

“Distinguished colleagues . . . guests, sisters . . . brothers.”

Despite the tunnel-like echo of the bullhorn, the female voice rang out full and rich, confident and strong. A feminine voice—yet the voice of a natural leader.

Caledonia Rivers’s voice. Who could have guessed that bumping into the suffragette would prove to be the nicest part of his day?



It was coming on twilight when Callie stepped up to the makeshift podium amidst the flash fire of press photographers’ cameras. As always when she was about to speak, her stomach fluttered and skipped though an entire brigade of butterflies had taken residence within. Inside her fur-lined leather gloves, her palms were damp with perspiration.

Yet she also knew that as soon as she began, any nervousness would melt away as her gaze and hearing connected with the collective of the crowd. In this case it wasn’t much of a turnout as rallies went, just about fifty-odd, and most of them recognizable as LWSS members and representatives from the other member organizations comprising Millicent Fawcett’s newly formed National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. But then again, after standing about in plummeting temperatures and rain-soaked for two days now, perhaps the already converted were more in need of inspiration than anyone.

Before beginning, she took a moment to push her borrowed spectacles higher on the bridge of her nose. The eyewear was an accessory, a crutch of sorts, the corrective glass replaced with clear. It was foolish, she knew, but for whatever reason looking out at the world from behind the barricade and spectacles bolstered her self-confidence.

“Distinguished colleagues, guests, sisters. And brothers,” she added, nodding toward her friend Theodore—Teddy—Cavendish, who smiled and saluted her from the back of the crowd.

Looking out onto the green, she took note of the running noses and cold-pinched faces and decided on the spot to cut her speech by half. The bullhorn proved to be more encumbrance than boon. Halfway through, she handed it to Harriet and made do with her own raised voice.

Afterward, she spent a good quarter of an hour shaking hands with women who came up to meet her, society ladies and tradesmen’s wives, women of independent means and women who hadn’t a penny apart from what their husbands gave them in allowance. Women who had never known a day of toil in the whole of their lives and others who had known little but. By the end of it, her fingers felt numb she could barely feel the eager hands pumping hers and she was keenly aware that her nose had begun to run. Without thinking, she reached into her coat pocket for her handkerchief, but the rumpled linen square she retrieved wasn’t hers. Seeing the “H.S.” embroidered on an upper corner, she stuffed it back into her pocket unused, a flush working its way across her wind-chapped face.

Her vice president, Lydia Witherspoon, was the first to greet her when she stepped down. “Well done as always, Callie. But are you quite sure you’re well? You look a bit feverish.”

“Do I? It must be the effects of the wind, not to mention the coffee Harriet has plied me with for fear I’d fall asleep mid-sentence.” Eager to change the subject, she turned to her secretary, already busy gathering up their things. As soon as Lydia had moved on, she leaned in to Harriet and confided, “I’ll

afraid I may have no voice left for tomorrow night.”

Harriet paused from her packing. Looking up, she grinned broadly. “I hope you find it because we’re expecting two hundred or more.”

Two hundred or more. Callie suppressed a sigh. Now that her address was concluded, she felt profound weariness tugging at her, an exhaustion that went beyond mere physical fatigue. How lovely would be to go home and curl up beneath the covers with a cup of tea and a book, perhaps one of those sweetly foolish penny dreadfuls she hadn’t picked up since her schoolgirl years, when she’d still believe in fictions like *True Love* and *Happily Ever After*. But these days leisure was beyond her reach, a self-indulgence for which she simply hadn’t the time. She had any number of tasks to attend to before she could seek out her bed, and neither novel reading nor daydreaming about handsome young photographers could be counted among them.

Yet when Harriet groaned and announced, “Oh no, here he comes,” Callie’s heart leapt into her throat. Hadrian St. Claire, he’d come back! She turned about eagerly. But instead of the handsome photographer, it was Teddy walking briskly toward them, his bottle green coat and plaid trousers making him easy to track in the twilight.

Swallowing her disappointment, Callie fixed on a smile. “Teddy, I spotted you earlier. How good of you to come.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the riches of the world.” All smiles, he reached for her hands, planting a kiss atop each in turn. “By Jove, that bit about ‘uniting to break the yoke of patriarchal serfdom’ really had them going.”

From the corner of her eye, Callie caught Harriet rolling her eyes. “If you’ll excuse me, those placards won’t jump back into the boxes by themselves.”

As soon as Harriet was out of earshot, Teddy said, “She’s warming to me, I can tell.”

Callie couldn’t help but smile. “I shouldn’t hold my breath if I were you.”

“Why not, what the deuce’s wrong with me?”

Callie allowed herself a brief disloyal glance at his mustache, the tips waxed so that they stood out like handlebars. Every time she’d tried imagining kissing the small pink mouth beneath, she found she simply couldn’t. Kissing Hadrian St. Claire, however, required no imagination at all. Thinking of what the press of those firm lips upon hers might feel like, she felt a wave of warmth roll through her in spite of the sharp air.

Thoroughly ashamed, she reached up to check that her veil was still in place. “Not a thing. It’s only that our Harriet is a very serious sort and prefers those about her to behave in kind.”

“Be serious, so that’s the way to win over the old harridan. But what I’d much rather hear is the way to win *you* over. I don’t suppose you’ve any hints in that department, hmm?”

“Oh, Teddy, you have won me—as a *friend*,” Callie said, not bothering to keep the exasperation from her voice for as many times as he’d asked her to be his wife, she still wished she might give him a different answer.

In spite of his garish clothes and effete ways, Teddy was in so many ways the perfect companion—steady and uncomplicated and, she suspected, easily as lonely as she was. Most importantly, he didn’t

have a cruel bone in his body. And though she suspected what he liked most about involvement in the suffragist cause was that his participation in it irked his straight-laced father to no end, his support of her was as ungrudging as it was unconditional.

As always, he took her refusal with good grace. “Then as a *friend*, I trust you’ll allow me to see you home before you catch your death.” Turning serious, he added, “Really old girl, you look fit to drop, and Harriet can manage without our help, mine especially.”

Relieved to have the awkward moment past, she allowed herself to be persuaded. “In that case, yes.”

She hooked her arm through his and together they walked out to the street corner where in short time Teddy hailed a hansom. Leaning back against the cracked leather seat, Callie let her eyes drift closed, vaguely aware of him giving the driver her directions and settling a carriage blanket across her lap.

“You’re so good to me, Teddy,” she said, yawning into her glove, even as the part of her that could never quite settle down to contentment demanded that surely there must be more to life than that.

Unbidden, an image of warm blue eyes pushed to the forefront of her thoughts, joined in short order by a fine strong nose, molded jaw glistening with a hint of golden stubble, and a firm, masculine mouth.

Oh, Callie. Always wanting more, hasn’t that ever been your fatal failing?

She forced her attention back to Teddy, settled into the seat across from her. Gazing into his dead plain face, she chided herself for acting the part of a perfect idiot.

Steady, uncomplicated, and kind—what more could there possibly be?

CHAPTER TWO

“A *free* man is a noble being; a *free* woman is a contemptible being. Freedom for a man is emancipation from degrading conditions which prevent the expansion of his soul into godlike grandeur and nobility, which it is assumed is his natural tendency in freedom. Freedom for a woman is, on the contrary, escape from those necessary restraining conditions which prevent the sinking of her soul into degradation and vice, which it is all unconsciously assumed is her natural tendency.”

—VICTORIA WOODHULL and TENNESSEE CLAFLIN, *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*, 1871

Later that evening Hadrian stood at his washstand, scouring the silver nitrate solution from his hands. Drying in his studio's dark room were the photographs of the medical anomaly. Looking past the misshapen features to the man's eyes, Hadrian had felt an eerie kinship. Reflected in their dark depths was the very same expression he'd seen when he'd peered into his shaving mirror to bathe the dried blood from his throat.

Hunted, didn't he know just how that felt?

While he'd processed the pictures, he'd reviewed his options for raising the five hundred pounds needed to settle his debt with Boyle. Short of robbing a bank, the only possibility he could come up with was to ask his barrister friend, Gavin Carmichael for another loan. When he'd shown up on Gavin's doorstep a year ago, Gavin had greeted him like a long-lost brother rather than an old orphanage chum he hadn't seen in fifteen years. It was Gavin who'd helped him settle on his new name, Hadrian after the great Roman emperor who'd started out life as an orphan, and St. Claire because they'd both agreed it had a certain cachet—a solid, old-money ring certain to put people with real money at their ease. He'd ferried Hadrian around to soirees and theater receptions, to rich old biddy's “at-homes” and to his gentlemen's club, putting him in the path of every well-heeled friend and acquaintance he could come up with. While Gavin made do with letting a shabby suite of rooms at the Inns of Court, he'd fronted Hadrian the money to set up in Parliament Square. How then could he ask such a friend for five hundred pounds more, a sum that as a junior barrister Gavin likely didn't have anyway, to bail him out of a situation brought on by nothing more than his own recklessness? No, he'd let Sykes and Deans flaunt him alive before he'd stoop so low as to take advantage of his friend any further.

Brave sentiment that and yet the clang of the shop bell below gave him such a start that he've nearly knocked the washbasin from its stand. *Get hold of yourself, man. When Boyle and company come for you, it won't be through the front door.*

But it was late, past six o'clock, and with the exception of the Parliament, which would reconvene at nine for the evening session, the government offices and area shops would be dark by now as his to should be if only he'd remembered to turn his sign over to CLOSED. Heart drumming, he stripped off his apron and hurried down the stairs. Seeing neither Boyle nor his henchmen but a well-dressed man in late middle age pacing his shop floor, he let his lungs expand with relief. “May I help you, sir?” he asked, stepping forward.

“That depends.” The gentleman turned about and Hadrian saw that this was no apple-cheeked shopkeeper or government clerk but a senior statesman or government official of rank, the very sort of well-heeled client he’d set up shop hoping to attract.

“Are you St. Claire?” he asked, gaze flickering over Hadrian in such a way that he was reminded he hadn’t taken time to roll down his shirtsleeves or put back on his tie.

“I am.”

Like a phrenologist feeling the bumps on a skull to infer mental faculties and character, Hadrian examined the gaunt, weathered face for the clues housed within flesh and bone. A high forehead etched with deep lines almost always meant the subject was a worrier. The long, thin nose and flared nostrils bespoke of arrogance, an absolute belief in his superiority to others. The down-turned mouth betrayed bitterness—life might owe him everything, but so far the rewards received had been less than satisfactory. But as always it was the eyes more so than any other feature that gave away the subject and meeting those icy gray orbs, so pale they appeared opaque, Hadrian read—merciless.

“Josiah Dandridge, MP for Horsham.” The introduction was not accompanied by the customary extension of hand.

Glancing down, Hadrian saw that the attaché case Dandridge carried was covered in Moroccan leather and embossed with the Parliamentary seal. “And how may I assist you, Mr. Dandridge?”

“How, indeed?” Dandridge strolled over to the display case where Hadrian set out samples of his most popular item, the pocket-sized portrait photographs known as *cartes de visites*. Tapping on the glass, he asked, “This portrait is the same displayed in your shop window, is it not?”

Coming up beside him, Hadrian glanced down at the portrait card of Lady Katherine Lindsey and nodded. “Lady Katherine is my bestselling ‘PB’ at the moment.”

The PBs, or Professional Beauties, were society ladies who consented to have their portraits displayed for sale in shop windows all over London. Only in Lady Katherine’s case, in return for Hadrian’s turning over to her half of the money from every copy sold, she’d agreed to sit for him exclusively. What she did with her share he’d never asked, although she would hardly be the first highborn woman to have secret money troubles.

“You show a remarkable talent for bringing out your subject’s underlying vulnerability.”

Hadrian looked away from Lady Katherine’s striking visage, the dark intelligent eyes openly defiant and subtly sad, and thought, *you, sir, could be a very dangerous man*. “I doubt the lady in question would take kindly to hearing herself described as vulnerable. Lady Katherine is one of the most independent-minded women I’ve ever known.”

Beneath the overhang of salt-and-pepper brows, Dandridge’s wintry eyes hardened to chips of ice. “You speak of female independence as though it is some sort of virtue. Pray do not tell me you are one of those dewy-eyed idealists who would see the vote handed over to a pack of hysterical, ranting women?”

So Hadrian wasn’t the only one set on edge by the suffragist protest in the square. Hoping to steer their interchange toward a possible commission, he shrugged and said, “Politics have never interested me.”

“Yet you must have some convictions, some principles you wish to see advanced?”

Why a man such as Dandridge should care about the state of his conscience was a mystery Hadrian but regardless he answered honestly, “I leave principles and convictions to men with the money and time to pursue them. For those of us who must work for a living, the only interest we can afford to serve is our own.”

The lined face relaxed measurably. “So, St. Claire, you are a pragmatist at heart. How refreshing.”

The MP resumed walking about the room, pausing to examine the framed photographs lining the studio walls. Tempted as Hadrian was to inform the arrogant bastard he was closed for the night, he strained for patience. He needed money, he needed it desperately, and if a potential patron with influence and tin-lined pockets had a mind to keep him standing about after hours, there was nothing to be done but bite back his ire, smooth the scowl from his face, and await his pleasure like the lackey he had sworn never again to be.

Dandridge stopped before an eight-by-seven-inch platinum print of a female nude lying supine atop a bed of fringed pillows and Oriental carpeting, a cone of chiaroscuro light playing with the shadows, framing the curve of one alabaster breast.

“Very fine,” he said at length, his back to Hadrian. “The clarity of the foreground is impressive and the setting shows a far greater attention to detail than one normally sees.”

At least there was no faulting the fellow’s taste. The classically inspired scene had been a true labor of love, the fruit of a fortnight of experimenting with various props and lighting effects and poses until he finally hit upon the composition that matched the mental picture he’d been carrying about in his mind. At one time he’d thought to enter it in the Photographic Society’s annual exhibition, but now it occurred to him that the picture might be put to a more practical purpose.

Biting back his pride, he ventured, “If you’d care to purchase it . . .”

With a shake of his head, Dandridge dispelled any hope of that. Turning to Hadrian, he remarked, “I can’t help but notice that your subjects are all females.”

Hadrian shrugged but inside he was wary. “I like working with women for many reasons, not the least of which is that they are generally better disciplined about keeping still.”

“I see. And do they, in turn, like *working* with you?” When Hadrian didn’t immediately answer, Dandridge turned back to the nude, his gloved finger stabbing the spot where her drape dipped to reveal that perfect breast. “That woman must have liked you very much indeed to allow you to photograph her in such a . . . vulnerable state.”

“Justine is a professional model and accustomed to posing for painters.”

“Yet I wonder, has any portraitist before managed to elicit from her such a sweetly dreamy countenance, such unaffected sensuality?”

Hadrian folded his arms across his chest. “I wouldn’t know.” He had, in fact, taken the girl to bed on any number of occasions, but he’d be damned before he’d expose his private life to satisfy a stranger’s prurient curiosity. At the end of his patience, he added, “It’s late, Mr. Dandridge. Perhaps you should tell me how I can be of service.”

“Very well, then. What I have in mind is for you to make me a photograph such as this only I’ve a very particular model in mind.”

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