

EXCERPT FROM TO SAVE THE DEVIL

Chapter One

London, 1820

It was a bleeding soggy night for a man to leave his bed to buy a virgin. Will Jones looked through the fogged carriage window at the white-columned portico of a discreet townhouse in Half Moon Street. If Jack Castle's information was good, deflowering virgins was just one of the depravities available inside.

Fistfuls of hard rain rattled the glass. Will nodded to his man Harding. They had a plan. He swung open the door, and stepped down. His foot met wet cobblestones, and a sharp twinge in his ribs stopped him cold. He covered the hitch in his stride with a gentleman's small vanities, tugging white cuffs from the fine wool of his black evening clothes and tilting his hat at a jaunty angle.

The pause allowed him a moment to observe the house closely. He had spent weeks in less-secure prisons. Cleverly painted wood panels covered the upper windows, and two over-sized pugilists in footmen's attire stood guard on either side of the door. Still the place had its vulnerabilities. The top of the carriage matched the height of the portico, above which an iron railing connected with others down the block to the corner of Piccadilly, where late evening traffic still passed.

Over his shoulder Will offered his driver a few words in French, shedding his own identity as he became the *Vicomte de Villard* with a West Indian fortune, an ugly wife, and a habit of collecting erotic prints.

The over-sized footmen stared straight ahead as Will raised the door's brass knocker, but he wasn't deceived by their apparent inattention. They'd know him again.

A face as red and pitted as a brick appeared in the peephole.

"Twenty-five guineas." Brick Face had a rasp of a voice that could file metal.

"*Bien sur.* To attain a great prize, one must expect to invest one's coin." Will shoved the paper notes through the hole.

Inside, Brick Face took Will's cloak, hat, and gloves and grunted an order to wait. The entry hall gave no particular sign of vice, just the well-bred English comforts of a Turkey rug, mahogany console, and tall case clock, but somewhere in London Archibald March, the murdering maggot who owned the place, was free.

Most Londoners knew March as the city's great benefactor, a man whose charities reportedly supported widows and orphans, the lame and the blind. Only a handful of people including Will, his brother Xander, and Xander's bride Cleo, had reason to believe that March was a murderer and a blackmailer who had killed at least three people, and corrupted many more. If the authorities would not bring March down, Will would.

Coarse male laughter erupted from a room somewhere above, and quick steps sounded on the stair.

The next moment the host appeared, and Will decided that the hall was an anteroom of hell after all.

He did not care to shake hands with Guy Leary, a lean, freckle-faced felon with carrot-colored hair and a cold glance that said he was up to any viciousness. That Leary was in charge and not some well-preserved bawd with a plump bosom and an ingratiating air spoke volumes about the place. Will suspected the female employees did not enjoy Leary's style of management.

“What’s your pleasure tonight, Monsieur le Vicomte?”

“I understand an auction is about to begin.”

Leary glanced at the clock and shook his head. “Sorry, Vicomte. Auctions are by invitation only, to interested parties known to this house. We can offer you other delights, however.”

“Allow me to express my interest in participating in your auction.” Will put a stack of notes on the console next to him.

“I don’t know you.”

“You don’t know Vicomte de Villard? I thought my print collection had a certain reputation.” He handed Leary a flat package wrapped in brown paper.

With another impatient glance at the clock, Leary tore off the wrapping and regarded the print. Closely.

“How did you come to hear of our auction?” Nothing changed outwardly in the cold face, but Will caught the change in tone.

“A friend took pity on me. I faced a dull evening with my wife, and only my prints to rouse me. The prospect of your virgin lifted my spirits at once. She is the authentic article? One may examine her to be certain?”

“One may not.”

“But you do guarantee . . .”

“Do you want in or not?”

Will waved a languid hand. “Please. Lead on.”

Leary spun abruptly and led the way up a curving staircase.

“Does this exquisite have a name?”

“Helen of Troy.”

Will almost choked at the irony. Clearly Leary was a man who’d never had the benefit of a good tutor. A good grinder like old Hodge would have set him straight about naming his virgin after the most famous wanton in history.

At the top of the stairs they entered a red and gold salon filled with gentlemen of various ages but a common carnal bent. The air was stale with tobacco and lust. Three young women dressed in cream silk corsets over lawn drawers as thin as tissue circulated among the more completely clad males, keeping every glass brimmed. Their female presence in proper English undress among the fully clothed males gave a carnal kick to the gathering. It also gave new meaning to the practice of dress-lodgers, women so wholly owned by their employers they had no clothes to their names. Guy Leary summoned a dark-haired beauty with red pouting lips and empty eyes, who provided Will with a glass of brandy.

Over its rim Will surveyed the mixed lot of pleasure seekers. He recognized two members of Parliament, not of the Reform Party, one octogenarian lord, and where the talk was loudest and bawdiest, one of the Earl of Oxley’s other sons, a man with whom he shared a sire but nothing else. His luck held. There were no officers present and no one who knew either Villard or Will Jones. Certainly his Oxley half-brother would not recognize the family bastard.

The crowd was the sort he’d known in Paris after Waterloo and before the disappearance of Kit, his youngest brother. Some had lost a sense of the boundaries of civilized men, hooked on debauchery the way a man could be hooked on opium. Others merely came to be titillated. They would go home and pump their wives heartily while images of erotic excess danced in their heads.

For a moment Will felt Villard’s identity slip away from him, and his old identity as a Bow Street Runner assert itself, but he was not here in an official police capacity. He straightened the diamond stickpin in the folds of his cravat to recover his disguise as Villard, refined connoisseur of decadence, a man superior to ordinary brutes with their vulgar zest for pinching bottoms and ogling breasts.

Chairs and sofas had been arranged to view a stage draped in red velvet curtains at the far end of the room. One of the hulking footmen brought Will a chair as Leary mounted the stage and tapped a glass.

Conversation died, and men sat. The three corset-clad women, nearly indistinguishable in round-limbed, vacant appearance, took positions behind Leary. Most of the room's occupants watched them as Leary explained the auction rules.

Will studied the competition. They'd been invited, so they knew the girl behind the curtain was a virgin, not a professional, and they'd paid a steep fee to participate as he had, so he had to assume that he was up against men with deep pockets and shallow consciences. Still, a lot would depend on the girl herself.

Leary paused. "Gentlemen, what am I bid for a night with Helen of Troy?"

At his signal the women drew back the velvet curtains to reveal a girl with tawny golden hair in a blue-sashed gown of virginal white, lolling on a rose-and-gold-striped sofa, her head resting on one slim arm, dark lashes against flushed cheeks. She had the look of a schoolroom miss who had stayed up too late and just closed her eyes for a moment. Leary would have done better to advertise her as the Sleeping Beauty.

It was hard to tell her age, but at least she was not fifteen as Will had feared. Except for bare feet, unbound hair, and rouged breasts, she looked respectable enough for a ball, innocence and sensuality combined. That wanton innocence hit him with an erotic jolt that could raise a cock stand in a corpse. He reminded himself that in such a place, the girl's appearance could all be a show. She could be a professional after all.

Then her eyes fluttered open, deep brown and instantly panicked. Not a professional, but a trapped, frightened girl. How had she fallen into March's net?

Her attendants helped her to stand. Their efforts had the look of guards restraining a prisoner rather than the three graces attending a goddess, but she would have done well for one of those Italian painters. Tall and lithely built, like a young Amazon, she was fighting the influence of some drug. He could see it in her dilated pupils. The narcotic would take hold and make her head sag on her slender neck, or she would shake it off and look frantically about. He wondered that she didn't scream or protest.

Men began shouting. A flurry of bids quickly reduced the competition to a pair of young bloods--a ruddy, flat-faced blond and a long-nosed brunet. On their feet, facing one another, the pair swayed from drink. Others in the crowd immediately made side bets on the outcome.

The flat-faced blond gave his opponent a shove. "Bow out, Milsing, you've been sailing on river tick for months."

"I've got twice the blunt you've got, any day, Cowley." Long-nose shoved back.

Cowley staggered, righted himself, and giggled. "Here's a thought, man." He waved a finger in the air. "We could share her."

There was a general mumble from the crowd, not an actual protest, just a sense of grievance.

Milsing frowned. "Well, we could all buy shares, Cowley, but only one man goes first, you know."

It was time to act. Will Jones would pick up a table or a chair and break it over someone's head, but as Villard, he needed a more subtle approach. He rose slowly and hurled his brandy glass against the mantle.

Glass shattered with a satisfying ring. All heads turned his way. The sound seemed to penetrate even the girl's fogged brain. She lifted her chin, and her dark gaze met Will's in a brief moment of lucid consciousness.

That's right, sweetheart, you're leaving with me.