

EXCERPT FROM TO TEMPT A SAINT

Prologue

London, 1816

The fight was not a fight, just a brief bloody proof that title trumps presumption. Still Xander Jones had to admit that nothing united a London crowd like shared delight in violence. Dukes and draymen roared with one voice when the champion's fist leveled the challenger. Boxing's famed Fives Court, and possibly all Leicester Square, rang with the sound.

Within minutes costermongers and Corinthians, in perfect amity, began to jostle their way into the night, oblivious of rank. Only the Marquess of Candover failed to catch London's new democratic spirit, stepping back with a contemptuous curl of his lip from a near meeting with his bastard son.

Some lines were not meant to be crossed.

Xander kept his brother Kit in front of him, his hands on the boy's shoulders, steering a path away from the marquess. No sense in spoiling a brotherly outing.

"Did you see his left, Xander?" Kit jabbed the air, mimicking the champion's trademark move. "The champion planted him a real facer."

"A facer?"

"That's what sporting men say."

"As long as you don't say it at home." Xander turned Kit's shoulders, directing an awkward but earnest blow away from the purple silk waistcoat of a stout gentleman engaged in settling a side bet. The man gave them a fixed stare.

Xander waved off friends headed for further entertainment. Their evening would likely start in the public rooms of a well-known establishment in Piccadilly and end in the private ones of a more notorious place in Covent Garden.

Xander found he preferred his plan for supper with Kit. Beef pies and porter had been mentioned. Not that Kit was ready for spirits, but Xander smiled at the idea. A year ago he would have resented having the charge of his youngest brother. Now he didn't mind their London rambles even though they inevitably ended in maternal reproaches that Xander was far too old to endure. He thought his mother a fearless woman, but lately she imagined footpads or worse, lurking in every dark lane, waiting for boys not tucked in bed by ten.

The crowd bunched up ahead of them at the pavement, where it split undemocratically into two factions—men with waiting vehicles and their inferiors. Xander steered Kit away from a pile of steaming dung, and in deference to his mother's fears, headed the boy toward a side lane that skirted more dangerous streets.

"Mother doesn't like you to take me to mills, does she?"

"Best to keep it our secret."

"May not gentlemen enjoy boxing?"

"Many do." No use denying what Kit himself could see. The cabinet could have settled the business of the nation at tonight's match.

"But not our sort of gentleman?"

"Exactly." Their sort of gentleman, the well-bred bastard, had to be a social contortionist, fitting himself to his company.

"Because our fathers did not marry our mother?"

There it was, out in the open, the reason behind Kit's new passion for boxing. In school a boy could fight till his knuckles were raw, and there would always be another sapskull to make a remark about Sophie Jones. Kit, fair-haired and small for his age, would find it rough going to defend their mother's honor.

A familiar anger gripped Xander. He shook it off as nothing more than a delayed reaction to the chance sighting of his father. Neither the gods nor the British legal system was likely to stand up for bastards. A cool head and quick left hand would be of more use to Kit than cargo holds of anger at the going rate. "A lucky thing for us that our mother doesn't marry her lovers, infant."

"Not if we can't go to mills."

"Ah, but if *my* father had married *our* mother, then she wouldn't have met *your* father, and then where would you be?" They halted to let a lumbering cart pass ahead of them in the narrow lane.

Sophie Jones had had three lovers that Xander knew of in her career as a courtesan. Each had given her a son; the “Sons of Sin” their brother Will called them. Made by wickedness for wickedness, a theory Will meant to prove among the paid-out soldiers of several armies in the most debauched hells in Paris.

Sophie’s efforts to make gentlemen of her sons were laughable, Xander supposed, when she herself knew better than most how gentlemen behaved in London. Still being a bastard son of a notorious courtesan had its advantages.

Their mother had taught them how to handle money. No banker had a surer grasp of investment. Her lovers’ gifts of jewels, carriages, horses, and extravagant gowns had become a tidy empire of investments, a comfortable house off Berkeley Square, a gentleman’s education for her sons, and now a snug cottage between the Surrey Hills and the Thames, where she meant to retire in widow-like respectability once Kit was launched in the world. A boy could do worse in a parent.

Her affair with Kit’s father had scandalized London when Xander was seventeen and making his way through university. Then somewhere in India under Wellesley, long after the man’s folly had ceased to be the latest London gossip, the poor fellow had died. Sophie Jones was doubtless the only one who still wore black for him. She had taken no new lover.

Fog as murky as the Thames itself swallowed the huge cart ahead of them. Its rumble faded, and Xander and Kit walked on, only a few stragglers in their wake. “Most fellows don’t look at it that way, do they, Xander?”

“Most fellows don’t have a pair of first-rate brothers.” A man couldn’t choose his connections, but Xander preferred his Jones brothers to his father’s lofty family. He had long ago cut short the one name his father had been willing to give him. Alexander had become Xander at school.

Kit tugged his sleeve. “You know what makes a first-rate brother?”

“Enlighten me.”

“One that’ll take a fellow to mills and teach him to use his fives.”

“That bad at school, is it, infant?” Xander hadn’t seen any marks on Kit, but he, too, had been good at concealing the evidence of his schoolmates’ assaults.

Kit kicked a loose cobble. “Not so bad. But a miller gets respect, you know.”

“Then we’ll make you a miller.”

Kit gave a leap and shot a fist into the air with a triumphant cry. The sound echoed in the fog. “You taught Will, didn’t you, Xander?”

“Everything he knows.” *About boxing.*

They left the thinning crowd behind, turning up a narrow street of cook shops, cheap stationers, and secondhand clothes dealers. Watchful proprietors pulled in goods hanging from doorways and canvas awnings and put up shop shutters, cutting off what light illumined the way. No oil lamps had been lit, and darkness closed off all the adjoining lanes and courts. This was the edge of the London their mother feared—crumbling, stinking, disease-ridden, and vermin-infested—where gin was the purest substance a body could find and survival meant preying on others.

Elsewhere in London, Xander’s London, the London of the future, the Gas Light and Coke Company was lighting up the night with miles of gas lines and new streetlights. Xander had joined the admiring crowds at each new illumination, caught by the Promethean promise of banishing darkness. He counted himself among the new breed of men who envisioned a city with wide thoroughfares to replace narrow, stinking lanes, and efficient channels of commerce flowing with clean air and water. He had staked his small fortune on that vision of a new London.

Here was a reminder of the work to be done. Decaying buildings sagged against one another, and the dark felt coal-bin close and heavy. They were far from the boxing crowd now, but for a moment Xander thought footsteps trailed them. He steered Kit northward. Rumbling wheels on stones and a confused murmur of sound, distorted in the fog, told them they were nearing one of London’s main east-west thoroughfares.

They turned a corner and stepped into chaos. A mob of men with blackened faces and ragged sailors uniforms rained stones and offal on a pale yellow carriage at the center of a milling detachment of Life Guards, their scarlet coats lurid in the light of flaring torches. Giant shadows of the combatants writhed on walls and shuttered shop windows.

Xander needed only one glance to know the carriage with the royal crest on the door panel. *Popularity was never the prince regent’s strong suit.*

A pole wedged in the spokes of the coach's rear wheel had disabled the vehicle. Its windows were cracked. The liveried driver held his hands up to ward off stones while the horses reared and backed, tangling their traces.

Xander yanked Kit back against the shop fronts. This was not their fight.

The guards, outnumbered three to one by Xander's count, drove their mounts into the mob, swords drawn, flailing at the circling men while the officer in charge fumbled with his shining helmet. A bloody gash on his cheek showed where the strap had been cut. *Bloody hell! Men were going to be skewered or trampled because the damned idiot couldn't get his hat on.*

Three men reached the prince's coach. It rocked viciously on its springs as they scrambled aboard. A hatless scarecrow with a beak of a nose drew a pistol from the band of his trousers and waved it in the air, swaying with the violent motion of the coach. Xander decided he had had enough of being a bystander. Riot was a fine London tradition, but regicide was too French for Xander's taste.

He pressed Kit deep into a shadowed doorway. "Don't move," he ordered. He shoved his hat on Kit's head and flung himself into the mad surge.

The gun had his undivided attention.

Churning knots of men and soldiers blocked his path. He plunged forward, dodging elbows and feet, knocking skulls together, and pulling men off the struggling guardsmen. He reached the carriage just as Scarecrow cocked the gun and tapped the dark barrel against the cracked window. Xander heaved a last man out of his way and leapt, knocking Scarecrow's pistol arm skyward.

The gun went off next to Xander's ear, and the crowd roared. Scarecrow howled and struck Xander's temple a glancing blow with the discharged weapon. Xander seized the man's pistol arm, twisting it back and up. His ear rang painfully, and the sharp scent of powder burned his throat. Hands pulled at him from behind. He held his writhing victim until the gun fell from the man's grip.

With a splintering crunch the carriage jolted forward, and Xander grabbed for the top rail. Released, Scarecrow dropped to the street. As if a signal had been given, torches hit the pavement. Men scattered down a half dozen dark streets. The guards at last formed a circle around the prince's vehicle. Xander leapt down, turning for Kit, slapping the rump of a riderless horse to clear his path.

He could see the doorway. *Empty.* He glanced at doorways to the left and right. Nothing. His gaze swung back to the first doorway. His upended hat lay on the pavement. *Where was Kit? Hell, he had not joined in, had he?* Xander spun, looking for a downed body. Two soldiers had been unhorsed. Not one rioter had fallen. He shouted and couldn't hear his own voice.

From somewhere in the dark came a wavering cry that made his gut twist. He spun toward the sound.

In front of him were fog and shadows and the hiss of expiring torches. His ragged breath roared in his head. Only his left ear seemed to be working properly, filled with shouts and pounding footsteps and jingling harness. Xander wanted to demand light and silence. He edged toward the lane where he thought he'd heard the frightened cry.

"Halt," a voice shouted. He ignored it, moving toward the vanished cry. Behind him a pistol fired. A bullet grazed his right ear in a fiery streak of pain that made him turn. The helmetless officer covered him, a weapon in each hand.

Warm blood caught on Xander's collar. He forced himself to speak slowly and clearly. "They've taken my brother."

The idiot officer scowled.

Xander swore. The man's incomprehension was costing him time. He backed away, hands raised. *He'd made a grave mistake, a wrong turn down the wrong street. This moment should not be happening. He and Kit should be having beef pies and porter.*

Maddening voices filled his good ear. His senses strained toward the dark while a knot of soldiers surrounded the royal carriage. One opened the crested door. Men came to stiff attention. From inside Xander heard the regent's voice, "Where's the fellow who saved my life?"

A soldier broke from the ranks around the coach, hastening toward them, and Xander's hatless officer glanced away. Xander whirled and sprang toward the dark.

"Kit," he shouted. He hit his stride when something caught him hard in the back of the head. His knees crumpled, and darkness took him.