



The Countess' Lucky Charm

Prologue

London - 1795

The teeming streets of the east side did not deter the shabby form of Gentry Ted in the slightest. He skirted the boisterous crowd watching the fisticuffs between two dirt-smearred boys then briefly followed a trio of gossiping young women, scullery maids by the looks of their chapped hands and grease spattered aprons.

At the next corner, he winked at the comely matron with come-hither eyes who was selling cut flowers from the basket tilted against the wall beside her. "Ha'pence," she crooned, leaning forward to display her ample cleavage.

Ted dragged away his gaze to return to the matter at hand. "Not today, luv, can't ye see I've business to attend to?"

He pointed down towards the "business", a grubby little girl of perhaps three years. He winked again and, adjusting his grimy silk cravat, strode away purposefully, toddler in tow.

"Hell's bells", he thought, thinking longingly of the woman selling flowers. "There were an opportunity missed." And he scowled down at the matted blonde curls of the girl, squeezing tighter the little hand clasped in his fist before forging on.

His pace was much too brisk for the little one. Sometimes her feet touched the ground and sometimes she dangled from his hand as her feet wind milled through the air. Finally, he just picked her up in one arm and held her against him as he continued towards his destination. She weighed nothing at all, perhaps two stone if that; his gait didn't slow.

A tipped potato cart blocked the road and he turned onto Newgate Street to avoid the confusion. The aroma of oranges drifted through the air and his stomach rumbled. Without skipping a beat, his hand snaked out to grab one. He rammed it into his pocket before the cart's proprietor turned his head, then ducked behind a passing coal wagon, keeping pace for several minutes until the orange cart was well behind him.

"The tib won't do." He mimicked his ringleader as he walked. "She's much too small to pick pockets. Get rid of 'er."

His protestations to the contrary had fallen on deaf ears, which is why he was now making his way to dispose of her. The easiest solution would be

to toss her into the Thames with the rest of the city's refuse but he couldn't bring himself to do it. He may earn his living as a thief but he wasn't a killer.

Instead, he deposited the girl on the front steps of the workhouse on Bishopsgate Street and on a whim, gave her the orange. Before he could change his mind about his uncharacteristic show of generosity, he knocked on the door then hurried down the steps to disappear into the crowds.

"Ohhhh." Mrs. Dougherty sighed as she opened the door to find a little girl on her step holding an orange in both hands. "They all think they can bring me the foundlings."

She grasped the little chin in callused fingers and lifted it to take a closer look. The girl had blue eyes. Piercing blue, as blue as the sunny September days of her own country childhood. She noticed a chain around the small neck. Carefully she lifted it off and slipped it into her pocket. She would look at it later.

"Quiet one, ain't ye?"

The girl said nothing. She stared at Mrs. Dougherty, eyes wide with fear, bottom lip wobbling with unshed tears, both hands grasping the fruit so tightly the little knuckles were white.

"Ye got nothing to fear." She pulled the girl inside. The door slammed shut and the latch dropped with a rattle and a clank. "Mrs. Dougherty will look after ye if ye do as yer told."

Chapter One Sixteen years later

Apprehension sat heavy in Lord Temple Wellington's gut. As his hackney coach slowed to take a corner, he leaned over to risk a glance through the window. With one finger, he lifted the leather shade a fraction, just enough to see that the street behind him was blessedly empty. Good. If the disreputable lot he had naively gotten himself involved with caught him, they would kill him with nary a second thought. Feeling twice his twenty six years, he sagged back into the lumpy cushions as they bumped down the laneway that led to the river Thames.

The driver pulled up beside the lone street lamp and set the brake.

"Here ye be, my lord," he grunted. "And ye just wanted a ride so I'm not helping ye with yer luggage."

"Very well, I'll just be a moment." Temple pressed several coins into the outstretched hand and jumped down to the cobblestones before pulling up his collar against the evening fog that wafted from the river. It carried the faint odor of rotting fish and human waste and he shivered with distaste. During his upcoming journey he might long for a number of things about London but the smell of the Thames would not be one of them.

The muted glow of burning oil formed a golden circle on the damp, mud-rimmed stones and he looked about to get his bearings in the subdued light. He strode to the back of the coach, dragging on his gloves as he did so. He reached in to snag his carpet bag with one hand and the smaller of two matching brass bound trunks in the other. They swung easily to the ground. He grabbed the leather handle of the larger trunk and tugged. It was heavier than he remembered and, with a grunt, he tugged harder, this time with both hands. It slid, slowly at first, then gathered speed as it tipped over the edge of the coach bed and down towards the ground. He dodged it neatly before it could catch his foot.
"OOOF!"

Ooof? Temple's black eye brows shot up to the brim of his beaver top hat. Trunks thudded, not ooofed. Was this a jest of some sort? Had the driver heard? Alas, he couldn't ask, for, the instant the second trunk had hit the ground the driver had ridden off in a clatter of hooves.

He looked around but the few stevedores were occupied with their business and paid him no attention. For all intents and purposes he was invisible amongst the barrels and crates being ferried to the ships that lay anchored mid-river.

He turned his attention back to the trunk. With some trepidation, he opened the catch and lifted the lid. Light spilled inside, feathering across its contents.

At first glance, it was a pile of rags where his carefully arranged belongings should be. To his astonishment, however, the rags moved and sat up and he was met with the bluest eyes he had ever seen. Eyes so blue, even in the weak light they glowed like sapphires trapped in a ray of sun. He caught his breath. Stunning, simply stunning.

"Oy," said the ragamuffin girl. "Be we still in London?"

"Yes," he replied without thinking, still caught in the sapphire gaze. To say he was astonished was putting it mildly. He shook his head and closed his eyes to right his tumbled thoughts. "We are at the docks near London Bridge. We set sail for New Caledonia tomorrow."

"Ye going ta report me ta the constables?" The scrawny shoulders jutted forward.

The gesture was defiant, which rather tweaked Temple's funny bone. The ragamuffin was hardly in a position to bargain although he had to admire her boldness. Of course, as a Wellington, he was much too well brought-up and polite to laugh. He kept his lips from twitching before he answered. "No, not if you tell me what happened to my things."

"Yer things or this?" A thin, bony hand held up his favorite pistol, a gift from his grandfather.

Bloody hell, how did she find that? More to the point, how was he going to retrieve it?

"What is your name?" He grabbed for the pistol but the ragamuffin pulled it back before he could snag it. He eyed it, then her, suspiciously. The urchin let it dangle far too casually from skinny fingers for his liking.

"Simone Dougherty. Only me friends thought that too 'oity-toity and call me Mona. And who are ye?"

Temple was appalled. A girl. How did a raggedy girl get into his trunk? He squinted at her – between the dim light and the grime on her face, it was difficult to determine her age. Fourteen, perhaps fifteen? A twinge of sympathy pierced him at her undernourished figure but he pushed it away. It was his own skin he sought to save at this moment.

"Temple. And you haven't answered my question," he demanded. Ordinarily he would have introduced himself by his title, Lord Temple Wellington, but he didn't want to overwhelm the girl, let alone give her any ideas about what sort of monetary compensation she might wangle from him for the return of his pistol.

"Eh? What question might that be?" The girl stood up and shoved the firearm into her waistband then climbed out of the trunk to stand before him unafraid. Her head reached his chin, no mean feat considering he was six feet plus. She tilted her head and the lamp light glimmered on her face revealing her to be several years older than he had previously thought. A grey bonnet, its ribbons frayed and filthy from years of use, perched jauntily on dirty blonde curls that framed her heart shaped face with its full lipped mouth, pert nose and softly rounded cheeks. Those blue, blue eyes stared at him accusingly and again he was struck by their startling cerulean intensity.

"My things, what did you do with them?" Temple tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. No point in scaring her.

"Oy, I gave them ta them that really needed them." She wiped a runny nose on a grubby sleeve.

"What's this?" he asked suddenly, reaching towards the gold chain about her neck. "Something else you stole?"

The girl pushed his hand away. "None of yer damn business. It's mine, always been mine and always will be." She folded her fist around the hilt of his pistol in warning.

Temple backed away and held two hands up. "I must beg pardon, I merely wish to determine what kind of creature I'm dealing with." He was relieved to see her pull her hand away from the pistol. "Cree-chur? Ye calling me an animal?"

"Well, you hardly resemble a girl. In fact," he said thoughtfully,

resting his chin on one hand while propping the elbow in the other, "you remind me of nothing more than a raggedy bundle. Which brings me to another question."

"Yer awfully nosy," she interrupted.

"What are you doing in my trunk?"

"If I tell, will ye take me with ye?"

He stared at her. The question was ridiculous - he had no intention of taking her with him. However, until he retrieved his pistol, he did not wish to antagonize her. "Perhaps," he said grudgingly. "But first, I should like you to return my goods."

She shook her head. "I can't do that 'cause I gave them away already. Mrs. Dougherty and them, they need them."

"Now why do Mrs. Dougherty and them," he grimaced at the poor grammar, "need what clearly are mine?"

She began to tick off on her fingers. "The boys need new shirts, Mrs. Dougherty needs a new jacket and Pamela needs a blanket because she gets cold at night." She spoke slowly, as if explaining to an idiot. "But then by the looks of ye, ye don't spend many nights in the cold."

"Why would you say that?" For some reason, her comment made him defensive and he deliberately made his voice brusque.

"Because," the girl pointed at his coat, "only them that are rich have fur collars." Then she pointed to his feet. "And boots like them." And finally, she pointed to his head. "And beaver hats. Only gentlemen wear beaver top hats. Well, Gentry Ted wears a beaver hat," she corrected, more to herself, "but only because he nicked one."

Temple made a sudden lunge towards her and grabbed for his pistol. Simone, anticipating his move, managed to get both hands on it. They wrestled for several seconds, long enough for him to realize that although thin, she was stronger than she looked.

He tightened one hand about a slender wrist, forcing her to loosen her grip on the pistol. She cursed him but he ignored it. The last thing he fancied was his gun discharging and wounding someone. Like himself.

He grappled with her several seconds more before stepping back, triumphant, pistol in hand.

"Thank you," he said smugly, although he tempered his tone. Without the pistol, she was hardly a threat.

And then the bottom dropped from his stomach as he remembered what she had said.

The blanket. She had stolen the blanket.

Or rather, the rectangular packet hidden in its woolen folds.

The packet containing his future.

He jammed the pistol in his waistband and leaned forward to grip her shoulders with steel fingers. "Where is it?" he demanded.

"Where is what?" Her voice was innocent but the look on her face said otherwise; her gaze slithered away. She knew very well what he meant, he thought, anger churning within him at her obstinacy. "Miss Dougherty," he warned, resisting the urge to shake her very flesh from her bones. "The packet wrapped in the blanket. What have you done with it?" He leaned his face in close to hers, so close he could feel the puffs of her breath on his cheeks.

"Mona, me name is Mona." She tried to step back but the hands clamped on her shoulders wouldn't allow it. She tugged at his wrists. "Yer hurting me, let go."

"I shan't let go until you tell me what you've done with it."

"I hid it." She tugged again at his wrists. "Now let go."

"Hid it?" Panic mingled with the anger and his voice raised an octave. "Hid it? Where, damn it, tell me where?" This time he gave her a little shake; her head bobbed reminding him of their disparate sizes and he loosened his grip. He did not wish to hurt the girl but he needed that packet.

"Somewhere safe. I'll show ye where but only if ye take me with ye. I -er, I'm in a spot of trouble."

He gazed at her, breathing hard, sucking air like a hungry babe sucks its mother's teat. Could he trust her? What kind of trouble was she in?

Reluctantly, he dropped his hands. "Very well." He glanced at his watch. "But we shall have to hurry, my ship sails at half past nine."

"Follow me," she said, "it's not far." She turned to go then turned back. "Yer taking me with ye, right?"

"Yes," he lied smoothly, "a deal is a deal." Not a chance, he thought. First he would retrieve the package he had carefully wrapped in oiled cloth only this morning. Then he would turn her into the first constable he could find.