

Simone and the Scoundrel
Prologue – 1791

By mid-morning, London's streets were teeming, so much so that no one noticed the spare-framed man and his companion as they forged their way through the stinking mass of human detritus.

"Hell's bells," muttered Gentry Ted, ignoring the outstretched hand and pleas of the beggar that ran along beside them for a few steps before turning away to find another mark. "It's always me that has to deal with the dirty business." His hand clasped the hand of the "business", a little girl perhaps three years old. With the other, he adjusted his grubby silk cravat. He walked at a brisk pace through the busy street, much too fast for the little one. Sometimes her feet touched the ground and sometimes she dangled from his fist 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.

A tipped potato cart blocked the road and he turned onto Newgate Street to avoid the confusion. The aroma of oranges caught his attention. Having a sudden hankering for the colorful fruit, he stopped at the stall where they were displayed. When the proprietor's attention was turned to a paying customer he snatched one quickly and stuffed it into his pocket before continuing.

"She won't do as a pick-pocket." He mimicked his gang leader as he walked. "She's much too small. Get rid of 'er."

"Why me," he had protested but as usual to no avail which is why he was now making his way to dispose of her. He glanced down at the girl's head and frowned. The easiest solution would be to toss her into the Thames with the rest of the city's offal but he couldn't bring himself to do it.

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 ones they don't want."

She grasped the little chin in bony, calloused 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, both hands tightly grasping the fruit.

"Ye got nothing to fear," she said, pulling the girl inside. "Mrs. Dougherty will look after ye." The door slammed shut and the latch was dropped with a rattle and a clank.

Chapter 1
Seventeen years later

The driver of the wagon pulled up and set the brake. "Here ye be, my lord," he grunted to the lone passenger, a tall man of perhaps thirty years. "And ye just wanted a ride so I'm not helping ye with yer luggage."

"Very well, I'll just be a moment." The passenger jumped down to the cobblestones and pulled his collar up against the evening fog that was beginning to creep up from the river Thames. He walked around to the back of the wagon and hesitated as if deciding what to do first, then, with a nod, began unloading the wagon.

Temple Wellington grabbed the leather handle on the brass bound trunk closest to him and with a grunt, pulled. It slid, slowly at first, then gathered speed as it tipped over the edge of the wagon bed and down towards the ground. He dodged it neatly before it could catch his foot.

"OOOF!"

Ooof? Temple's black eye brows lifted and almost disappeared beneath the brim of his hat. Trunks thudded, not ooofed. He looked about to ascertain there were no jokers near by. However, all about him were occupied with their business and paid him no attention. For all intents and purposes he was invisible amongst the barrels and crates that were 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.

At first glance, it was a pile of rags where his carefully folded woolen blankets should be. To his astonishment, however, the rags moved and sat up and he was met with the bluest eyes he had ever seen. "Oy," said the ragamuffin. "Be we still in London?"

"Yes, we are at the docks near London Bridge. We set sail tomorrow." To say he was astonished was putting it mildly. He shook his head in disbelief at the sight.

"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, in his opinion, was hardly in a position to bargain. 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 blankets."

"Blankets or this?" A thin, bony hand held up a pistol.

Bloody hell, how did she find that? Better change the subject.

"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. 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 bound for New Caledonia?

"Temple. And you haven't answered my question," he demanded.

"Eh? What question might that be?" The girl stood up and shoved the pistol into her waistband then climbed out of the trunk.

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

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

"

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

Simone pushed his hand away. "None of yer damn business. It's mine, always been mine and always will be," she huffed. She put her hand on the hilt of his pistol as if 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."

"What are you doing in my trunk?"

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

"Perhaps, if I am satisfied with your answer. Oh and if you return my goods."

She shook her head. "I can't do that. Tansy and them, they need them."

"Now why do Tansy and them," he grimaced at the poor grammar, "need my blankets?"

"Because it gets cold at night." She said it 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."

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 before he stepped back, triumphant, pistol in hand.

"Thank you," he said smugly, then continued on with their conversation as if nothing had happened. "Well, Simone, I must applaud your powers of observation. You are right, I don't spend many nights out in the cold. Although that is about to change."

"Mona, me name is Mona." She wiped her nose again, this time on her other sleeve. "Why are you going ta start sleeping in the cold now? Be ye daft?" She took a step back, as if his supposed daftness was catching.

"Not that it's any business of yours, Simone," he stressed her name and was pleased to see she scowled when he said it, "but I have become a partner in the North West Company and am going to New Caledonia to find my fortune."

"Is it cold there? Is that why ye need blankets? Why would ye go somewhere where it's colder than here?" She wrinkled her nose at him. "Aristocrats, who can make sense of them."

"I told you, to find my fortune."

"Oh." She frowned at him, then shook her head. "That's not the reason. Ye got money." She held up the sack of coins that had been in his pocket, hefting it several times. "Yer running from something." She tossed the sack of coins at his feet, almost disdainful in her dismissal of it.

Appalled at his carelessness, he picked it up quickly and stuffed it back into his pocket. She must have dipped her hand into his

pockets during the brief fight for the pistol.

"Pick pocket," he muttered.

"The best," she said, lifting her head proudly. She smiled at him and he was astonished at the transformation that came over her face. Her features were remarkably feminine beneath the street grime. And the smile made her blue eyes even bluer, if that were possible. He stared into them for an instant before dragging his attention back.

"It wasn't a compliment. It's hardly an accomplishment to be proud of."

"Maybe for me it is. It's the difference between going to bed cold and hungry instead of just cold."

Temple looked at her for a moment, scanning her up and down. It made her uncomfortable, for he could see her fidget. "Of course," he nodded. "Tell me, why can't someone with your pick-pocketing skills afford to buy clothing?"

"Oh these," Simone waved her hand down. "These are my working clothes. No one notices me in them."

Temple snorted. "I daresay they do. You look like a rag bundle with feet."

"Hmmp," she sniffed. She glared at him for a second as if offended, then shrugged. "Are ye going to take me or not?"

Right, she had asked to join him. Amused, he shook his head. "Not a chance."

"Why not?"

"I really would be daft, wouldn't I, if I took along a known thief. Someone a little more law-abiding would be more to my taste. That is," he added, "if I chose to have a companion."

"Right," she nodded. "But I wager I would be more fun than yer usual female friends. All they kin do is primp and fuss and faint. I can play games – cards, dice, chess. That would keep ye busy while we travel."

"Chess?" He was intrigued despite himself. He had to hand it to her – she had bravado.

"Chess." She bristled. "Or don't women play that in your world?"

"Well, they do, but-." He was clearly dubious about her ability to play the game. "You play chess?"

"Aye, better than most," she nodded. "And where ye go – be there cities? I can pickpocket there – no one could best a Londoner at

that. What do ye fancy – jewels, billfolds, coins, I can pick just about anything.”

“I think I would be pursuing pleasures other than games of chance if I had a female companion,” he said slyly, anticipating her reaction to his comment.

She reddened at his meaning and he laughed - he had managed to embarrass her.

“I know,” she said suddenly. “Ye could teach me to be a lady. That should keep us occupied.”

“You?” He hooted at the preposterous suggestion.

“Oy,” Simone said. “Ye really know how to hurt a girl.” Her bottom lip began to quiver and she stood silent for a moment while she gathered herself. “Sorry I bothered ye’ then,” she said slowly. “Ye may as well have this back.” She flipped him the billfold she had rifled from his jacket and turned to leave. She hesitated for a moment as if expecting him to say something, then when he didn’t, tipped her nose up in the air and started to walk away. It was an endearing pose, oddly out of character yet somehow not.

For some reason, a feeling of loss washed over Temple as he watched the girl walk down the lane back towards the warehouse buildings. He tried to shake it off but couldn’t.

The question poked his conscience - why not bring her? What could it hurt? No one knew her and where they were going, no one would know her. And she was right, it would be a long and boring trip to North America. She might be fun, an amusing diversion to pass some time.

He waited until she reached the end of the lane before he shouted. “Wait! Simone!”

She stopped in her tracks, back ramrod straight. “Mona.” Her rebellious voice drifted over her shoulder.

“Nay, Simone,” he said firmly. “If you are to come with me, you will be Simone.”

“Why?” Her back was still turned to him.

“Because I can’t abide the name Mona – it reminds me of someone I used to know.”

Her shoulders moved as if heaving a sigh then slowly she turned around. “All right then, Simone, it is.” A brilliant smile lit up her face and again he was struck by how oddly feminine she really was. Maybe it wouldn’t be that difficult to turn her into a proper lady after all. And wouldn’t London be a-twitter if they found out? Not to mention the reaction of his parents.

Aye, it was a perfect setup.

He watched as she walked back to him.

"Ye were telling me the truth, aye?" she asked. "Ye'll take me with ye?"

"Yes, although sailors can be a suspicious lot so we may have to disguise you a bit."

"Oy," she shrugged. "That's easy enough. I've done that a few times just for a lark. But why do I need to?"

"Sailors don't like women on board," he explained. "They think it can bring bad luck."

"Oh." Simone said nothing more although Temple half expected a rebuttal.

"Is everything all right here, sir?"

Temple started at the unknown voice. The shape of a burly constable loomed out of the evening fog that had thickened during his conversation with the rag girl. Bloody hell, he had been so involved with Simone that he hadn't noticed the man walk up.

"What? Oh, of course," he said.

The constable was clearly not convinced. He cast an appraising glance at Temple and then at Simone, looking her up and down thoroughly, then glanced back to Temple. "She doesn't seem your type," he said. "She seems more fit for Newgate Prison."

"I can assure you, she is my type. As a matter of fact," he said as he grabbed Simone's wrist and pulled her beside him, "She's coming with me to New Caledonia." He kept a steely grip on her wrist – he had seen her glancing about for possible escape routes when the constable was talking. She must have thought he would turn her in for her thieving ways.

The constable seemed unwilling to let matters be. He shook his head. "I don't know, sir, I've seen her kind a hundred times. Sweet as pudding to your face but the minute your back is turned.." He swiped his finger across his throat.

Temple looked at Simone. Her face was mutinous, lower lip jutted out. He gave her a warning look then turned back to the other man.

"Truly, my good man," he said in his best upper crust voice, "your services are not needed here."

"Well, my lord, if you say so." The constable stood there a moment longer, glaring at Simone, tapping his nightstick against his leg. He tipped his hat to Temple. "It's good night to you then and if she sticks you, don't say I didn't warn you."

"Thank you for the warning but I swear," he placed his hand over his heart, "I shall be fine."

"It's your skin." The constable shrugged then walked past them.

Temple waited until the constable had turned the corner before letting go of Simone's wrist.

"Ow," she said, rubbing her wrist. "That wasn't necessary, was it?"

"I saw you eyeing your possibilities. I didn't want you running off. It would have made you look guilty."

"Oh." She stood back and crossed her arms to look at him. "So it's true, then, ye really are going to take me with ye. Otherwise, why would ye have cared?"

"It's true," he said, wondering what madness possessed him that he would even consider the preposterous notion, let alone go along with it. "You are coming with me."

He really had no explanation for it but he had made up his mind to bring Simone along and that was that. Odd? Of course it was odd. A thousand others of his class would not have even considered the whole absurd situation. But then, he was not like the others of his class.

"Let's go," he said, holding out his arm to her.

She looked at it, then him, suspiciously before latching onto it with one grubby hand.

"Phew, you smell," he said. Immediately she pulled her hand away and took a step back.

"Can't help it," she said, bottom lip jutting out.

He was beginning to recognize that mutinous look and held up his hands to placate her. "Well, actually, you can and we'll look after that once we get on board the ship."

"I don't like to bathe."

"Simone."

"Mona."

"Simone," he said firmly, exasperation beginning to color his words. "You want me to bring you along, then you are going to have to abide by a few of my rules. And the first one is," he said, holding his nose. "Any cabin mate of mine is going to bathe."

"We'll discuss that one," she replied.

"We will absolutely discuss it. Now wait here while I arrange for one of the ferrymen to take my luggage."

"Right-o, guv'nor," she said flippantly. "I'll wait for ye right over there." She pointed to the trunk that she had so recently vacated and marched over to it, closing the lid with a solid slam before seating herself upon it. She crossed her arms and looked at him, smug as anything. "Is this good?" She began to swing her legs, thumping them against the trunk.

"Aye, that works very well," he replied. He was hard pressed to keep the smile from his lips. Really, she was too droll.

Behind him, he could hear the scrape of a boat as it bumped into the landing area followed by a muffled curse and then footsteps. The hair on the back of his neck stood up – the fog distorted the sound and it was ghostly. He turned to see a short, stocky man approach him, a sailor judging by his jersey and pants.

"Lord Wellington?" The man came up to him.

"Yes?"

"I am Thomas Becker. The captain knew you would be arriving this evening – he sent me to fetch you." He inclined his head. "At your service."

"Very well, that saves me the trouble of hiring someone, I thank you."

"Have ye much to bring? I could take two trips if need be."

"No, I don't believe it's necessary. Two trunks and a carpet bag is all I have." Temple waved the sailor over to the wagon.

Thomas nodded and walked towards the rear of the wagon and stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Simone sitting there.

"Hello," she said and smiled at him pertly.

"Er, my lord? Does she belong to you?" Thomas was clearly not impressed.

"Alas, yes. Don't mind her, she's harmless."

"She looks like a street urchin to me," Thomas growled.

"Be that as it may, she is my companion." Again Temple had to use his best aristocratic voice. It worked every time and sure enough, the sailor nodded and pushed aside Simone to grab the other trunk and pull it down.

"Simone Dougherty." She extended a callused hand, fingernails broken and dirty.

Thomas shook his head but then deigned to give her a little nod.

"Thomas Becker."

She pulled her hand back. "Nice to meet you." Her voice was bland but Temple could see her eyes flash fire. She was clearly unimpressed with Thomas' manners but really, what did she expect? She looked like what she was – a London pickpocket.

"Sure." Thomas hefted the trunk onto his back and, staggering slightly, made his way down the steps to the landing. He put it down and came back for the other one, waving Simone off of it,

"As ye wish," she said, jumping down. Thomas hoisted the second trunk onto his back and tottered away. Simone looked at Temple and pointed over to the carpetbag. "This is coming?"

At his nod, she reached into the wagon and pulled it out. She managed to wrestle it to the ground and then grabbed the handles. It was so big that when she lifted it up it only cleared the ground by a few inches. She began to waddle after Thomas, bumping the bag against her legs with every step.

Temple stood back and watched her. It did cross his mind to offer her a hand but he knew enough about her already to know that she would decline.

She wasn't all that tall but she was strong for she managed quite well until she reached the stairs that led down to the water's edge. Here she put the bag down and started to slide it forward.

"Give it a little push and let it go," Thomas instructed, standing at the bottom with arms outstretched.

She did and it bumped down the steps towards the landing. Thomas grabbed it and swung it deftly into the rowboat.

"Come on." Simone turned around and motioned to Temple. Excited, she hopped from foot to foot.

"

Just a moment," he replied. He paid the driver of the wagon, who, long used to the vagaries of the upper class, had discreetly ignored everything. Instead, that one had calmly smoked his pipe as if it were an everyday occurrence for a rag girl to stowaway in a trunk. It made no matter to him as long as he was paid.

"On my way," Temple said. He joined Simone and the two made their way down the stairs to the landing. Thomas gave them both a hand into the boat and soon they were seated on the plank that served as bench.

The sailor pushed off and sat down to row, putting his shoulders to the oars. The boat drifted for a few seconds with the current and

then they started to move towards their ship.

In no time, the two were deposited on the deck of the ship, the "Annabelle".

"I'll bring your things below," Thomas said. "You're in the last cabin on the left."

"Thank you," Temple replied. He pressed a coin into Thomas' hand.

"For your trouble."

"No trouble at all, Lord Wellington." Thomas bowed. "Any time." Temple was amused to see he bit the coin before he tucked it away. "Who is this?" A voice boomed from the quarterdeck.

"Captain Featherstone, my travelling companion Simone," Temple answered smoothly, pulling Simone up beside him. He was pleased to see her drop a curtsy, albeit a little shaky. Thankfully, she kept her mouth shut.

"I don't have passage for her. And I don't like taking unexpected passengers." The captain's voice was harsh, unyielding and for an instant, Temple doubted his decision to bring Simone along.

Ah well, everything had its price. Temple pulled the sack of coins from his pocket. "See," he said under his breath to Simone, "it's a good thing you didn't keep this. Wait here while I straighten this out." He marched over to the captain.

"I am sure we can come to an agreement, Captain. Name your figure." He dangled the sack in front of the captain's face, giving it a little shake so that the clink of coins could be heard.

Captain Featherstone said nothing but looked greedily at the sack that Temple held. He rubbed his chin then named an outrageous sum.

"What?" Temple was appalled. "She is going to share my cabin." "Share your food too?" the captain asked.

Temple groaned inwardly. Captain Featherstone promised to be a shrewd negotiator – this was going to be more difficult than he thought. "She's little," he replied, mentally girding himself for a lengthy session. "She doesn't eat much."

And as he suspected, the bargaining was brisk. Eventually, however, the captain succumbed to Temple's persuasive ways. Or rather, pocketbook.

"See that she behaves or it's to the brig with her," the captain warned as Temple turned away, tucking what was left of his coinage into his pocket.

"Yes, Captain," Temple said. Scowling, he made his way back to

Simone. "Come on." He crooked a finger at her. "We had better go below before the captain changes his mind."

"Do ye think he will? Ye paid him, didn't' ye?"

"Never mind, just follow me." He didn't wait to see if she was behind him but strode away and ducked through the hatch that led below. He continued down the narrow hallway and pushed open the door to what he presumed to be their cabin. Sure enough, there were his trunks and carpetbag. Just behind him, he heard Simone latch the door.

"You cost me a pretty penny," he growled at her, swinging around to look at her. She ignored him and sat down on the bunk.

"What's a brig?" she asked brightly.

"Jail. Like Newgate only a lot smaller."

"Oh." She looked frightened for a moment. "But so long as I behave, I ain't going there, right?"

"Right," he nodded.

"I can do that," she said earnestly, hands clasped in supplication. "I can behave, ye'll see."

"Aye, we'll see." Maybe Captain Featherstone had done him a favor. Maybe the threat of going to the brig would be enough to keep Simone out of trouble. His eyes narrowed as he looked at the ragamuffin seated only a few feet away from him.

Somehow he doubted that.

Somehow he knew Simone was going to turn the entire ship on its ears. And he couldn't deny it, the thought of it brought a smile to his face.

It promised to be an interesting voyage indeed.

The exact same thought crossed Simone's mind. Seated in such close proximity to Temple, it was hard to miss the air of command carried by him. This was a man accustomed to getting his way, a powerful man, a man comfortable with wielding his authority.

She studied him closely as he sorted through the carpetbag, seemingly unaware of her presence. He was darkly handsome and tall, so tall that his hair almost brushed the ceiling of the tiny cabin. And what hair it was, dark brown shot through with mahogany, longer than the current mode so that it curled over his collar. Mocha brown eyes set beneath a wide forehead and framed by brows sharp and black. His jaw, shadowed by the beginnings of a beard, was bordered with long side burns that extended well below his ears. Laugh lines radiated from his eyes. He was a man of strength but also a man who knew how to enjoy the lighter side of life.

She wondered anew what he was running from. This was a man favored by birth who should have everything.

He had secrets, of that she was certain.

Aye, it promised to be an interesting voyage.