

Chapter One

The sound reverberated round the room, filling each corner and growing in intensity as it did so. It was an infectious noise, the sort that one wanted to join in with. So much so that John Rawlings put back his head and laughed, loud and clear, delighted to blend his humour with that of the Blind Beak himself, Sir John Fielding.

The two men were sitting in Sir John's upstairs salon, the shutters back and the noises and stinks of the street rising undaunted into the room above, yet unable to dispel the atmosphere of bonhomie which seemed to pervade the entire building.

Eventually, Sir John raised his black bandage and wiped his sightless eyes with a large handkerchief, saying, 'Damme, Mr Rawlings, I haven't had such a chuckle in an age. 'Tis a fine thing that you have returned to London. Indeed it is.'

'I was away too long, sir. Far too long.'

'But now you have returned to us. And most welcome you are. Tell me, how is Rose?'

'I sent her to Kensington for a fortnight but she is back with me at the moment and blooming like her namesake.'

'I presume she was with Sir Gabriel?'

'Indeed she was.'

Sir Gabriel Kent, John's adopted father had become an almost legendary figure, partly because of his habit of dressing in stunning ensembles of black and white – black and silver for high days and festivities – and partly because of his great age. The man whom John regarded more highly than any other person alive was now in his eighty-third year and as lively and spry as ever, his great delight being when his five-year-old granddaughter came to stay with him. Picturing them together in Sir Gabriel's garden in Kensington as they examined a flower, Rose's red head leaning close to that of her grandfather, who insisted on wearing an extremely old-fashioned three-storey wig, made John smile. Fortunately the Blind Beak could not see him and busied himself with pouring out two glasses of summer punch. He handed one to John as deftly as if he were sighted.

'Here, my friend, drink deep. I've a favour to ask of you.'

'Oh?'

'A favour that might appeal to you.'

John smiled to himself. He was back in London and the month was July, the year 1767, and despite the fact that he was now parted from Elizabeth di Lorenzi – perhaps permanently – he felt happily resigned to his fate. It was good to have returned to his old way of life.

The Blind Beak rumbled another laugh. 'I hear from your silence that you are not enthusiastic.'

'I'd hardly say that, Sir John. I was waiting to hear what the favour was.'

There was a pause while John Fielding drank a goodly draught. Then he said, 'You know that last year a new Postmaster General was appointed?'

‘Sir Francis Dashwood? A friend of Wilkes’s I believe.’

‘Indeed he is. And that is one of the reasons why I want you to investigate him.’

‘Investigate, eh? Is it your opinion that he is up to no good, sir?’

Sir John paused. ‘That I don’t know. But certain rumours have reached my ears.’

‘Of what kind?’

‘Of a most profligate nature. Apparently Sir Francis runs some kind of club close to his home at West Wycombe.’

‘Is that harmful?’

‘That is what I have to find out. But I believe it to be a place of orgy and sexual excess. And, worse, Wilkes was a member until, for some reason or another, he was expelled.’

John sat silently, thinking. John Wilkes had been a thorn in the side of the established order since he had first appeared on the political scene several years previously. Born in 1727, the man had been elected a member of parliament for Aylesbury at the age of thirty, having previously served as High Sheriff of the county of Buckinghamshire. Violently opposed to the monarch-ridden government, he produced a paper called the *North Briton* in which he flayed them with scurrilous attacks. In issue Number 17, published on 25th September 1762, Wilkes launched a broadside at the painter William Hogarth, who had been appointed sergeant-painter to George III, using the words, ‘I think that this term means what is vulgarly called housepainter.’ Hogarth, by way of revenge, produced a cartoon of Wilkes with his wig shaped like the Devil’s horns and a saturnine expression on his face. On seeing the cartoon, George III exclaimed, ‘That devil Wilkes’, a description which had been made of the man ever since.

Eventually, nothing daunted, in 1763 Wilkes produced a blasphemous and pornographic publication entitled *Essay on Woman* which Lord Sandwich, himself a rake of notoriety, insisted on reading aloud to the House of Lords in a tone of pious horror. After each stanza he paused dramatically and apologised to their lordships for scandalising their sensibilities. To which the assembled peers cried out, 'Go on! Go on!' The upshot was that at Christmas of that same year Wilkes travelled to France – some said to see his daughter, others that he had gone to recover from a duelling wound, perhaps a combination of both – and had stayed there ever since. The thorn had been removed though nobody knew for how long. Now, though, it seemed that his former friend, Sir Francis Dashwood, was giving cause for concern.

John looked at the Blind Beak, who had relapsed into one of his customary silences.

'You were saying, sir?' he prompted politely.

'Yes, indeed. I was wondering exactly what goes on in this club in West Wycombe. Whether sedition is preached. Or whether, as seems more likely, it is merely a place for sexual pastimes. But take a look at this, if you would. It is a previous list of members which has come into my keeping.'

John glanced at the piece of paper which had been handed to him.

'Sir Francis Dashwood, Lord le Despencer,' he read. 'The Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty; Thomas Potter, son of the Archbishop of Canterbury.' His eye flicked to the bottom of the list and saw, 'John Wilkes, MP; William Hogarth, Painter.'

One of the Apothecary's eloquent eyebrows rose. 'A motley crew indeed.'

John Fielding raised an expressive shoulder. 'But also the cream of society, wouldn't you agree?'

'Indeed I would. But the list must be fairly old. Hogarth is dead and Wilkes is in exile.'

'Certainly. But nevertheless it shows the calibre of the people who joined the wretched organisation.'

John looked thoughtful. 'And you want me to find out all I can about it.'

'I do. If that is agreeable to you, of course.'

The Apothecary appeared momentarily weary. 'I was just about to release Nicholas Dawkins from the shop and send him to Kensington.'

The Blind Beak looked magnanimous. 'Dear Nick. That was a good day when I asked you to take him as an apprentice.'

John Rawlings smiled, remembering. The Muscovite – as Nicholas was known because of his exotic Russian ancestry – had been a thin, pale youth when the Magistrate had suggested that John might like him as an apprentice. Somewhat reluctantly, the Apothecary had agreed. But his doubts had been totally allayed. Nicholas, now no longer under indentures but a qualified apothecary in his own right, had proved himself both a worthy pupil and also a staunch and loyal friend.

Sir John spoke again. 'I hear the doubt in your voice, Mr Rawlings. Would you rather that I ask someone else?'

John hesitated, part of him longing for time at home with his daughter, the other more than aware of the adventure that such an enterprise could involve. After a few moments of silence, he said, 'No, sir, I would like to discover more about the Hellfire Club on a personal level. You have

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intrigued me with what you have to say about it. I shall go.'

'Then it's settled?'

'It is.'

'Obliged to you, my friend. I shall inform Jago of your decision.'

'And give him my kindest regards when you do so.'

'That I most certainly will do.'

Walking home through the crowded and noisome streets, John Rawlings wondered whether he had done the right thing. Much as the thought of attempting to infiltrate the circle of Sir Francis Dashwood – a politician who had long intrigued him – appealed to the Apothecary, the idea of leaving Rose at so interesting a time of her life, frankly did not. Even as he approached his house in Nassau Street he felt his heart lift and running up the steps to the front door, he hastened inside. Rose was nowhere to be seen and John turned to one of the footmen who came hurrying up.

'Where is Miss Rose, Frederick?'

'She's gone out to Leicester Fields with her grandfather, sir. They are taking the air.'

'Then I'll go and find them.'

And as quickly as he had come in, John turned and made his way back down Gerrard Street, into Princes Street, left into Lisle Street, sharp right into Leicester Street, then into the Fields themselves.

Behind him lay Leicester House, formerly the residence of Frederick, Prince of Wales, father of the present King, George III. To John's left was the former home of William Hogarth, who had died three years previously. The sign of The Golden Head, which had hung outside for so many years, had been

taken down and the place had a somewhat desolate air. John stared with interest, wondering exactly what had been the painter's connection with Sir Francis Dashwood. But his thoughts were distracted by his glimpse of a tall figure leaning heavily on its great stick, but for all that walking well and still upright, holding the hand of a little redhead.

'Father,' he shouted, 'Rose. I'm here.'

The child heard him, for truth to tell Sir Gabriel had grown somewhat deaf with the passing years, and turned in John's direction, waving her free hand enthusiastically.

'Hello, Papa. Come and join us.'

John ran forward, suddenly immensely happy, feeling that life was good, given point and meaning by the advent of Rose. Coming up to the pair, he bowed swiftly to Sir Gabriel then scooped his daughter up, lifting her high to his shoulder.

She squealed joyfully, full of the sunshine that only a five-year-old can know. 'You are so funny, Pa.' Then she removed John's hat and placed it on her own head, concealing almost all of her face in the so doing.

The Apothecary tickled his daughter under the chin, the only part of her features visible. 'You think so, eh?'

'Yes, I do.' She raised the hat which fell to the ground. 'Oh sorry, Papa. I'll pick it up.' She wriggled downwards and rushed to retrieve the headgear while John and Sir Gabriel looked at one another and laughed.

'A most engaging child,' said the older man. 'It is always a pleasure when she comes to stay.'

John cleared his throat. 'Talking of that, I'm afraid I have to ask you a favour, sir.'

'Oh?'

'You know that I went to see Sir John today?'

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Sir Gabriel's golden eyes lit with inner amusement. 'He presumably wants you to work on some affair of his? And you would like me to take Rose to Kensington while you do so? Am I right?'

'As usual, perfectly.' John sighed. 'How have you mastered the art of knowing exactly what I am about to say?'

Sir Gabriel smiled and said, 'I have known you since you were a small boy, remember. I would be a poor creature indeed if I was not aware by now of how your mind works.'

The Apothecary gave his adopted father a swift kiss on the cheek. 'What an amazing being you are.'

The older man responded with a deprecatory wave of his hand. 'Think nothing of it my child. But tell me, are you going out of London? Is that why you want me to care for Rose?'

'Yes, indeed I am, sir. I am off to West Wycombe, the reason why, I feel I should keep confidential.'

Sir Gabriel bent to take Rose's hand once more. 'Investigating the wicked Sir Francis, no doubt?'

'Perhaps.'

'I see you will not be drawn and for that Sir John Fielding should be proud of you. Of course I will care for my granddaughter. It will give me infinite pleasure to do so. But may I ask you a favour in return?'

'Name it, sir.'

'I would prefer to spend a month in town, staying in my old house in Nassau Street. Indeed that is the reason why I brought Rose back personally from Kensington. Occasionally I get an urge to see London once more. And this is one of those times.'

John put his hat – offered to him by an anxious Rose – back on his head. 'But, Father, that would be an ideal solution. I

can't think of anything better than you keeping an eye on the place in my absence.'

'And what about your shop?' asked Sir Gabriel with a touch of acerbity.

His son pulled a face. 'Alas, I have to leave it in the hands of Nicholas Dawkins – again.'

The older man sighed. 'Poor young man. One of these days you will have to release him.'

'But Father, he doesn't want to go. He swears he is greatly attached to me – and to Shug Lane.'

'Nevertheless he is of an age now when he should have his own premises.'

'I know,' said John, looking miserable.

'I rather imagine him in Kensington.'

'So do I,' the Apothecary answered heavily, and thought of the apothecary's shop that he and Sir Gabriel had bought between them which had mostly been managed ever since by apothecaries seeking experience before they went on to premises of their own.

Rose interrupted. 'Papa, can I climb a tree?'

'No, sweetheart, only boys do that.'

'How unfair. Why can't girls?'

'Because of their attire,' Sir Gabriel answered succinctly.

'I could wear trousers,' Rose protested.

'Like Lady Elizabeth,' said John, and instantly had a vision of the woman he had fallen in love with, her supple body encased in men's clothes, her dark hair pulled back and hidden beneath a concealing hat, her beautiful face intent on the task she had set herself.

He must have made a small involuntary movement because Sir Gabriel said, 'How I would love to meet that

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lady. You speak of her with much fondness, my son.'

'Perhaps one day you will, sir. As for the second part of your sentence, let us say I have developed a certain *tendresse*.'

'And held it for quite some while, I believe.'

John merely smiled ruefully, aware that his father could read him like a book. He changed the subject. 'How do you think I should present myself at West Wycombe?'

'As a dissolute young rogue I would imagine.'

'Doing what precisely?'

Sir Gabriel paused. 'That I'm not certain about. Allow me to give it some thought.'

Rose interrupted. 'Pa, please can I climb a tree? I promise to dress like Mrs Elizabeth if I do.'

'We'll have to see about that,' answered John, and thought he sounded exactly like Emilia used to before her terrible and tragic end.