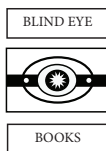


Wicked Gentlemen

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Ginn Hale



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Wicked Gentlemen
by Ginn Hale

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*This book is dedicated to Victor Trevor, because something
ought to be.*

Crowncross
the
Holy Capitol



Hopetown

also called
Hells Below



*Good Commons can be found west of Pitchfire Parish—
of course, so can a nasty case of pox.*

*Bastard Jack runs guns through Cold Heavens Tangle.
If you're looking to be murdered, that's a quick route.*

*Little biters would be wise to keep clear of St. Augustine's
School in Underchapel. The missionaries in Pitchfire aren't
any better. Nosy Bastards.*

B. R. S.

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Book One

*Mr Sykes and the
Firefly*

Chapter One

Night

The night hung in tatters. Gas streetlamps chewed at the darkness. Candles cast dull halos through the dirty windows of the tenements across the street. Heavy purple clouds pumped up from smoke stacks and patterned the sky like ugly patches on a black velvet curtain. A few fireflies blinked from what corners of blackness remained.

A pair of them invaded the darkness of my rooms. I watched them flicker, darting through their insectile courtship. They swooped past my face, circled, and then alighted inside the fold of my shirtsleeve.

They crept close to one another, brilliant desire flashing through their tiny bodies. Their antennae touched and quivered. The female firefly reached out and stroked the male. He rushed into her embrace. Holding him close, she crushed her powerful mandibles through his head. Their flickering bodies blinked in perfect unison as she devoured him.

Some romances end more badly than others.

I had to admire the firefly for her neatness. She ate every scrap of evidence and then lounged on my sleeve with an innocent ease that could have fooled an Inquisitor. At last, I flicked her off my arm and rolled up my sleeve. I had my own ruinous affair to cultivate.

Hundreds of small scars cut across the thin muscles of my bare arm. They wound up from my wrists, marking inch after inch of my body with mechanical precision. The scar tissue was as pale as the rest of my skin, but shinier and slightly sunken, like delicate embossing. The scars had faded enough over the years that, given enough darkness or drink, a man might not notice the holy verses carved into my body.

Only the flesh on the inside of my elbow stood out. The white skin and underlying blue veins were buried under a patchwork of bruises and red needle marks. The deep shadows of night could not disguise my ugliness, but beauty was hardly the point. I wanted to be undone, swallowed whole and dissipated into a thoughtless existence. I did not long to be lost in God or Glory; I just wished to be lost.

It hurt when I pushed the needle in through a half-healed scab. But the pain was momentary and it hurt less than going without the opiorium. A feeling like warmth and honey gushed through me. It spilled through my veins, flooded the black chambers of my heart, and slowly burned me away from the inside out. My arms drooped down against the armrests of my chair. The syringe and needle fell to the floor, and I closed my eyes.

For a moment I felt so warm and sweet that I could have been a different person.

I opened my eyes and watched the sky swirling outside my window. Violet ribbons and indigo wind tinted the darkness. Tiny bats swept between black chimneys. Heavy odors of magnolia and rose mingled with the scent of raw sausages. The smell reminded me of the Gold Street whores and those thick perfumes they poured over their sour bodies.

I waited to see what this summer night would bring me.

More often than not, I waited in vain. Still, there were those rare evenings when men came to me. Each had his own kind of desperation. Each had a reason for wanting to draw close to a devil from Hells Below. Some were sweet and sincere; others just couldn't do any worse. It made no difference to me, so long as they could pay.

I wasn't surprised when there was a knock at my door. I drifted from my chair and walked through the room as if I were wading through deep water. A second, far sharper knock followed the first. I didn't hurry. I took in a deep breath, drawing in the scent of my visitor. The smells of birch soap, leather, embalming fluid, and gun oil rushed into my mouth. I paused at the door. The scents entwined but never resolved into a single perfume. After the third

knock, I opened the door. Bright light poured in from the hall. I stepped back to evade the sudden illumination. Two men stood in the doorway.

The Inquisition captain caught my attention at once. Just his uniform sent a skittering rush of panic through my languid muscles. A deep desire to slam the door and bolt it shut swept through me. But even when I was drugged to a stupor, my contrary nature arose. I looked the captain over as if he were a mere curiosity. He was a lean man. His black uniform made him seem even more compressed and hard. He wore gloves, as if he did not wish to leave even a fingerprint to attest to where he might have been. His hair was hidden under his cap.

Two silver eyes stared forward from either side of his high black collar, silver emblems of the House of Inquisition. Their harsh metallic gaze burned with reflected light.

The captain's companion was also dressed in the color of his occupation. He wore a white physician's robe and looked nervous. His bare hands clenched together as if offering each other protection from my presence. A gold band gleamed from around one of his fingers—a wedding ring. There was something almost charming about the physician's discomfort. He had the perfect features and strong body of a man who was born with natural beauty. His nervousness made him seem easier to approach; easier to entrap. It made me feel suddenly stronger. If this man had some reason to fear me, then I still had some power, regardless of the Inquisition captain's presence.

"You are Mr. Belimai Sykes?" The captain, in his armor of black cloth and silver emblems, spoke first. He read my name from a tattered business card. The card was almost translucent from age. An edge of the paper cracked off and fluttered to the floor. It looked like a fleck of gold leaf.

I could hardly recall when I had ordered those cards. Had I truly believed that I could slip into good society with nothing more than seventy business cards, a bottle of nail bleach, and a cotton suit? I still had that suit in a drawer in my bedroom. I had been glad to forget which drawer.

I wondered where the captain had come across the card and how long he had been holding it. He carefully placed the card back into a thin silver case and slipped it into his breast pocket. He waited for my response.

“Yes, I’m Belimai Sykes,” I said at last. “And you are?”

“William Harper, captain in the Brighton Inquisition.” He turned to the physician. “This is my brother in-law, Dr. Edward Talbott.”

“How do you do.” Dr. Talbott extended his hand. There was a slight alarm in his eyes as he did so. The reflexes of his good breeding had suddenly betrayed him, forcing him to present the bare flesh of his open hand to me.

Dr. Talbott didn’t meet my gaze. Perhaps this was the first time that he had come face to face with a living descendant of a demon. Doubtless he had seen amputated limbs and withered cadavers of my kind on his dissection tables. Dr. Talbott had probably even held a Prodigal’s tiny black heart in his hands, but a living specimen was a different kind of creature. Clearly, my black nails and dead pallor did not alarm him as much as my hot breath and attentive gaze.

I smiled at Dr. Talbott. His nervousness made me want to come closer. My ancestors once entrapped the souls of men as blonde and succulent as this one.

“Won’t you come in?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. Thank you.” The physician lowered his hand and stepped into my rooms.

The Inquisition captain paused a moment and then followed his brother in-law inside. I closed the door behind the two of them, locking out the intrusive light of the hall lamps. The two men stood in the darkness of my room. I walked back to my favorite chair and watched the two of them, knowing they couldn’t see me well.

“So, what can I do for you gentlemen?” I asked.

“My wife—” Dr. Talbott began, but the captain cut him off.

“I would like your word as to the confidence of this matter.” The captain had, of course, dealt with Prodigals before. He knew how to proceed. There was an ancient history of bargains between

our two races, and an even longer history of deceptions. Times had changed, but the etiquette remained.

“I have to know what you want me to do before I can swear to do it,” I replied.

“We need you to look into a matter for us,” the captain replied.

“Just investigation?” It had been a long time since anyone had offered me that kind of work. Years.

I wondered why these two men chose me and how they had found my card. My natural fear of anything linked to the Inquisition weakly roused itself but then was lost a moment later under the pulse of curiosity and ophorium.

“All right.” I agreed just to hear what they might say. “You have my word that I will only reveal what I discover to you. So long as I am in your hire.”

“I also want your word that you will take no actions without first receiving approval.” Captain Harper took a step toward me, but only one.

At this I paused, not because he asked for something odd, but because of what it suggested. He had reason to think that I would take some action. That alone caught my interest. My heart began to beat a little more quickly, a little more deeply. My curiosity opened up like a hungry mouth.

“You have my oath on my name and blood that all I do will be with your consent,” I told them, “so long as you agree to the terms of my payment.”

“Those listed on your card?” Captain Harper asked.

“Yes.” I might have been idealistic when I was younger, but even then I had not offered myself cheaply.

“We agree,” Dr. Talbott said. He clearly did not care about money. I guessed that he was the wealthier of the two men. There was something about the scent of his cologne and the fine weave of his suit that assured me that Dr. Talbott could afford my services. The delicate flush of his skin and intensity of his voice hinted that even if he had not had money, Dr. Talbott would have paid me in other ways. I liked that sense of sacrifice and desperation in a client.

“Very well,” said the captain. He dropped three gold coins onto the tabletop. It was a small gesture, but binding. Captain Harper did not trust me, which was just as well. I am not a good person. I am naturally inclined to lie. Even my mother had thought so. It was wise of the captain to put his trust in the value of his gold and not in my good faith. Still, I resented him for such insight into my character.

“Come, sit down, and tell me what I can do for the two of you,” I said.

They would be clumsy in the dark, but I didn’t light a lamp. It was my petty revenge for the hundreds of times bright lights and sunshine had blinded me as I struggled through an appointment in some respectable office.

Dr. Talbott stumbled down onto my old green couch. Captain Harper seated himself in my oak chair. He navigated the room with irritating ease. He must have memorized the furniture arrangement while the light from the hall had illuminated the room. I suppressed my alarm at how observant the man seemed to be.

“A day ago,” Dr. Talbott said, “my wife was abducted.”

“Certainly the Inquisition is well suited to pursue any criminal matter,” I began.

“I would rather not start an official investigation,” Captain Harper said. “It is a matter of some delicacy.”

“I see.” I leaned back in my seat. “If you want my help, it would be best if you were honest with me, even if it does involve a crime.” I addressed Dr. Talbott. I liked looking at his wide eyes as he gazed into the shadows, not knowing exactly where I was.

“It’s nothing like that.” Dr. Talbott clenched his hands together. “No one has done anything wrong. It’s just that we want to protect Joan. If anyone were to become aware of her involvements, it could ruin her.”

“Involvements?” I prompted.

“Yes.” The captain sighed. I could tell from his tone that he disliked revealing information. “My sister has always been inclined toward suffrage for both women and Prodigals. Before she married, Joan was a member of the Good Commons Advocacy

Association. She wrote pamphlets and flyers—nothing of any importance. She left the group five years ago, but she remained in contact with one of the members.”

“I see,” I said.

“It’s quite dark in here, isn’t it?” Dr. Talbott said suddenly.

I shrugged, though I doubted that either man could see me well enough to tell. The darkness made me feel so much more powerful than either of them, but I knew I shouldn’t add to the physician’s discomfort. Not if I wanted him to speak openly to me.

I moved silently from my chair and went to the flint lamp beside Dr. Talbott. He gazed blindly in the direction of my empty seat. With a quick snap of my black nail, I scraped the flint. A tiny spark skipped up into the chamber of the lamp, and the wick burst into flames. Dr. Talbott was almost jolted off the couch.

Captain Harper simply watched me. The pupils of his eyes were still adjusting to the burst of light, so I doubted that he had been able to make out my form in the dark. Somehow he had known where I was. He must have been listening intently. I thought that instead of two eyes emblazoned upon his collar, perhaps Captain Harper should have had an ear. I smiled at the thought.

“You quite startled me.” Dr. Talbott laughed nervously.

“I’m sorry, I thought that you’d be more comfortable if there were a little more light.” I returned to my seat.

“Oh. Well, thank you. This is better actually.” Dr. Talbott glanced around the room. “This is an interesting residence you have. Quite a few books. Do you have a particular area of study?”

Clearly, he hadn’t expected that a Prodigal’s rooms would contain the same pathetic souvenirs of a life spent in restless solitude that any natural man’s might. My shelves overflowed with sheaves of drawing papers, newspaper clippings, broken quills, and stacks of books.

“None at all.” I disliked the turn the conversation had taken. “Perhaps you could describe the circumstances of your wife’s abduction.”

For a moment, Dr. Talbott looked overwhelmed by sorrow. I could taste it. He wanted to talk about anything else.

Dr. Talbott gazed down at his hands mutely. Captain Harper took over.

“Yesterday, Joan and Edward arrived at the Church Banks just a little past two. They went in and set up an investment fund.” From Captain Harper’s cold tone I would never have thought that he knew either of the people he mentioned. “An acolyte at the Bank recalled that they left the premises less than an hour later. When they reached their carriage, they discovered that someone had used a knife to pry open the door. Joan’s silk vanity purse had been stolen. Edward then decided to send Joan home while he walked to the nearest Inquisition House and reported the break in—”

“Mrs. Talbott rode home in the carriage that had been broken into?” I asked.

“Yes,” Dr. Talbott said softly. “She insisted that she go immediately and that I report the incident. I was worried about the latch of the door being broken, so I locked it from the outside. Joan had the spare key with her. I thought that she would be fine...” Talbott trailed off and closed his eyes miserably.

Captain Harper leaned forward and patted the other man’s shoulder. The gesture did not look quite natural. It seemed like something Captain Harper had seen once in a play and stiffly emulated.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Talbott said. He cleared his throat and sat up straighter. “When I returned home, Thomas, our driver, met me at the gate. He told me that Joan hadn’t responded when he called to her. He and the groom, Rollins, thought that she must have fallen ill. They pried the door off, but Joan wasn’t inside. She had just vanished from inside the locked carriage.”

“Did the driver stop anywhere along the way?” I asked.

“No.” Dr. Talbott shook his head. “He took her straight home. It was only a few minutes ride. Our house is just across St. Christopher’s Park from the Church Banks. Fifteen minutes at the most.”

“Have you received a ransom notice?” I asked. A giddy interest bubbled through me.

“No,” Dr. Talbott said. “All we have are the letters from Mr. Roffcale.”

“Mr. Roffcale?” The name sounded like a Prodigal’s. “He would be the member of Good Commons that your wife kept in contact with?”

“Yes.” Dr. Talbott looked surprised that I would guess as much.

“Mr. Roffcale had been sending Joan letters.” Dr. Talbott frowned as he said this. “She said they were nothing, just news about her old friends at Good Commons. I never thought anything of them. But after she disappeared, William and I went through them.” He seemed unable to go on.

Captain Harper again took up where Talbott left off. “The letters could be seen as incriminating. We discovered warnings that she might be abducted in transport. Another letter described tortures inflicted upon women in graphic detail. Roffcale wanted Joan to return to Good Commons. He claimed that they would protect her.”

Harper stood and opened his long black coat. I caught sight of the white priest’s collar at his throat as well as the pistol holstered beneath his left arm.

That pairing fit the Inquisition perfectly. The white band proclaimed the captain’s authority to judge and redeem the souls of those awash with sin. The pistol embodied the very earthly duty of each man of the Inquisition to enforce and uphold the law. Salvation became far more appealing when damnation was faced at gunpoint.

Captain Harper withdrew a bundle of letters from the inner pocket of his coat and handed them to me. His leather gloves brushed against my fingers, and I felt the slight sting of the holy oils used to cure the hide.

Captain Harper was close enough that I could see his eyes and smell his breath. His eyes were dark brown with deep blue shadows beneath them. His breath was nothing but tobacco smoke and coffee. I guessed that he had not eaten recently, nor had he slept.

“These are the letters.” Captain Harper stepped back from me before I could catch a deeper impression of him.

“Do you have any idea where Mr. Roffcale might be now?” I turned the bundle of letters over, checking the postmarks and return addresses. All of the letters came from Hells Below.

“He’s in custody at the Brighton Inquisition House,” Captain Harper said.

I frowned at the thought. It was an unpleasant place to be for anyone, but the worst tortures were reserved for Prodigals. The prayer engines were a particular horror. The scars on my chest and arms burned from just the memory.

“I’m not sure what you could need me for, then. If he’s in your power already, I’m sure you’ll be able to extract all the information you’d like to have.”

“Right now, I’m just holding him. If I have him taken in for a confession, then everything he says goes down in the confessor’s records. I would rather not have his name mixed with Joan’s if it can be helped,” Captain Harper said.

“If it can’t be helped?” I asked.

“We will do anything that is required to see that Joan is returned unharmed.” Dr. Talbott’s low voice trembled with conviction.

Captain Harper gazed out the open window behind me. He studied the empty blackness for several moments and then turned his attention back to me.

“All we want is for you to go in and talk with Roffcale. He’s more likely to relax with one of his own. Hopefully, he’ll let something slip to you that he wouldn’t tell me.”

“You’re paying quite a bit, just to have me chat a man up,” I replied.

“I’m sure I can find more for you to do if that isn’t enough,” the captain replied.

I glanced up at him. I had no doubt that there was more he would have me do. I glanced out the window. Pairs of fireflies flashed and chased each other across the darkness.

“I suppose that you’ll want me to go to the Inquisition House to speak to this Roffcale?” I knew that would be the case but still asked, hoping that somehow I’d be wrong.

“Tonight would be best.” Captain Harper buttoned up his coat.

“Yes, I suppose it would,” I said.

“Thank you so much.” Dr. Talbott stood quickly.

I nodded and picked my coat up off the back of my chair. As I pulled it on, I remembered my fallen hypodermic. I glanced down quickly, wondering if the captain might have caught sight of it. Fortunately, it had rolled under my chair. The only thing on the floor that the captain might have seen was a single, tattered insect wing.