

DESIGNS
OF A
GENTLEMAN
The Darker Years

Excerpt from Chapter 12 of Designs of a Gentleman – The Darker Years

(Book 2 of the series)

Theresa knew well enough where her duty lay but it was with a heavy heart, nonetheless, that she arrived the following morning at Somerset House.

Being from the Queen's household, she had free access to the palace and she passed quite unnoticed, despite the extra precautions that were being taken in readiness for the morning's event.

Philip had procured her a page's outfit, which she had concealed in the basket of embroidery she carried on her arm, and the first thing she did was to retire into a closet to change. The clothes fitted her perfectly and a dark wig completed the transformation.

A soldier lounging on the stairs paid no attention to her but her chief fear of discovery was from the real pages. They would unmask her in an instant so she kept well clear of everyone. Or so she thought.

"What? Skulking here? Have you nothing with which to occupy yourself?"

Theresa caught her breath as she realised that the imperious voice with a faintly foreign accent was addressing her.

Looking up from the alcove where she had hidden herself, she saw the quaint form of Countess Penalva, one of Queen Catherine's Portuguese ladies. It was not likely she would be recognised by her, for Theresa had as little as possible to do with that tight circle who, though they had been in England with the Queen for sixteen years, still clung doggedly to their own customs and old-fashioned clothes.

Theresa leapt to her feet with a suitably chastened expression. "I was resting."

"Your empty moments would be more profitably spent in prayer," the Countess said. "Remember that the devil has always some employment for idle hands."

Theresa thanked her for her advice, pleased to have been let off so lightly. She decided that if she was to keep out of trouble she had better appear to be busy, so she slipped down to the kitchen and demanded a jug of cordial for the Countess Penalva. Whilst it was being prepared she helped herself to an orange from a bowl and perched upon the edge of the long kitchen table, quite enjoying this part of her masquerade.



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Now she had the perfect ruse and could go where she pleased, although she did not stray too far from the main entrance. At last she heard the sound of carriage wheels and secreted herself behind the drapes, where she could hear everything that passed.

The first voice Theresa recognised was that of Titus himself, for it was unmistakeable anywhere, and she peeped out to see him flanked by the Earl of Bridgewater and the Earl of Ossory. There was no way she could think of to make herself known to him without alerting the rest to her presence so she had kept her turquoise ring upon her finger. Shaftesbury had given her the ring and she always wore it, so she hoped that it would help Oates to recognise her, although she realised it would also increase her own danger.

Oates was not his usual cocky self. "Do not press so close, my Lords," he bleated. "You will fluster me."

Ossory regarded him severely. "Doctor Oates, let us waste no time. You have assured us that you can find these rooms in which you claim to have overheard her Majesty's words. Two large chambers with high ceilings, you said, both furnished all in red and with folding doors between."

Theresa grimaced. There were no such rooms in Somerset House. This was going to be even trickier than she'd feared.

Oates was protesting. "So I can, but you must allow me the chance to reacquaint myself with this place. It is three months since I was last here."

"Very well, we shall bear with you, only at least say in which direction we may start our search so that we can begin."

"Alas, I cannot rightly recall even that, but if we go this way then I shall soon know if I am right or wrong," Oates said, sounding desperate.

"That I must aid such a man," Theresa said bitterly to herself as she followed at a discreet distance.

"Do you think your rooms are to be found along this corridor?" Bridgewater said impatiently.

"No. I seem to think there was a staircase leading to them." Oates looked as though his spirits were sinking fast.

"A staircase, you say. There are many here. Which one?"

"How should I know until I have seen them all?" Oates said huffily.

They moved off again, with Theresa following, dodging into rooms whenever they stopped. She was still bearing a tray with the jug of cordial upon it in case any caught sight



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of her. Somerset House was a vast, rambling building and after a while Oates showed signs of wilting. Theresa had been able to think of no way to help him but she was struck suddenly by a notion so ingenious that she could have cried out for joy.

Ahead of them was flight of stairs, plain and unimposing, but beneath these stairs was a door, cunningly concealed behind a tapestry. Theresa had once been permitted to enter and had discovered that the door led to a secret little room which could be reached from other parts of the house by means of a maze of curious passageways. It was a room designed for lover's trysts, but it could equally well be used, she figured, for darker purposes.

It was true that the room did not fit Oates' description but, once inside, she trusted his loquacity to cope with the deficiencies. The problem was to ensure that he made the discovery.

"I believe," Bridgewater was saying, "that Doctor Oates makes fools of us."

"I beg your Lordships to have patience with me, for I feel we are near the place now."

"Nonsense, man! You were never in any secret rooms here. Why not admit it and have done with this?"

"Aye, that would be best," Ossory said. "Confess that you have wronged an innocent woman and throw yourself upon the mercy of their Majesties."

Theresa walked boldly past them, carrying her tray. As she drew level with the door she took a deep breath to prepare herself and then pretended to stumble. She dropped the tray and clutched at the tapestry, as though to break her fall, tugging it aside to reveal the door.

The men turned, startled by the noise, but still, it seemed Oates did not perceive his opportunity. In desperation Theresa held up her hand, showing him plainly the ring upon her finger.

His countenance was suddenly lit with a flash of insight. "The door," he cried, "there is the secret door, and near a staircase too, just as I said."

"Seize that blasted boy," Ossory ordered, and two guards rushed forward to obey but, as luck would have it, one slipped on the sticky liquid that Theresa had spilt on the floor. He crashed down, delaying the other sufficiently for Theresa to dart away.

Oates quickly took advantage of the confusion and hurried their Lordships toward the hidden door, his memory miraculously returned to him, and he succeeded in distracting the soldiers long enough for Theresa to escape.

She managed to reach the comparative



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safety of her closet and dressed quickly in her own clothes. She hid the pageboy's garb and wig inside a chest and then sat upon it and waited.

She remained there a long while, her heart racing as she thought of what she had done. Shaftesbury would be pleased with her, she knew. Philip would be pleased too and, for some reason, his approval seemed to matter to her even more.

Although her mission had been successful she was still in danger of discovery but, when no more footsteps sounded outside and all voices had faded away, Theresa deemed it safe to emerge. With her basket, now containing only embroidery, on her arm she stepped out and began to walk briskly along the circular gallery. When she looked over the balcony she could see, four floors below, the main doors, and her freedom.

Alas her luck had finally deserted her. Ahead of her stood a guard.

"What is your business here?" he demanded.

Theresa swallowed nervously. "I am Theresa Fairfield, one of the Queen's ladies."

"And what is in that basket?"

"Only some sewing. What should it be?"

"I will be plain with you, Mistress Fairfield; we have been set to watch for an intruder."

"A criminal? Here?" Theresa feigned alarm. "Glory! Is nowhere safe for a poor girl?"

"It is a page we seek," the guard frowned and looked her up and down, "or, at least, someone who could pass for a page."

Theresa laughed. "You think I am your boy? That is a fine jest, sir."

"Is it not, though? Come closer, if you please, so that I might see if your pretty basket holds anything but sewing."

Theresa thrust it at him and tapped her foot, as if much vexed, whilst he sorted through it. "Well?" she asked when he had done. "Are you satisfied?"

"Perfectly. My apologies, I was mistaken," the guard admitted.

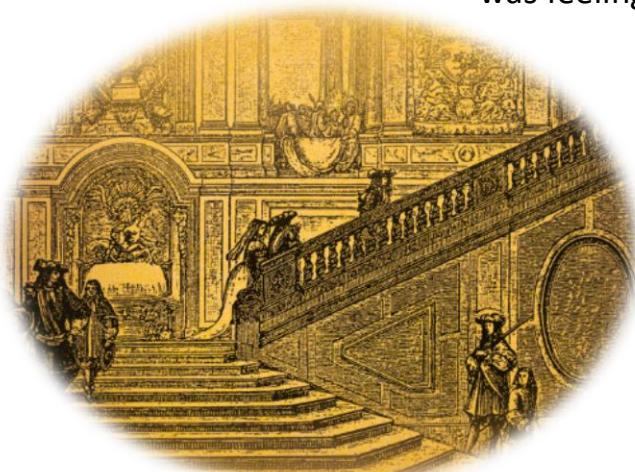
"May I go then?" Theresa asked him, her voice sounding steadier than she was feeling.

"Surely. I will escort you down myself."

"That will not be necessary," she said, but he waved aside her protests.

"I insist. Until this fellow-me-lad is caught we take no chances with the safety of the Queen's ladies."

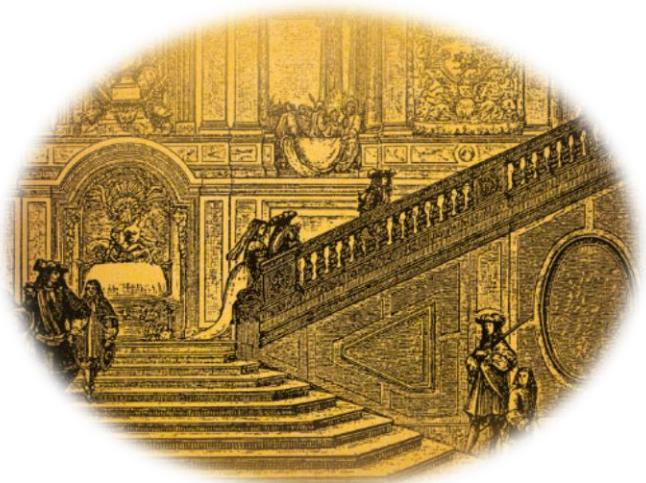
He offered his arm and Theresa



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unthinkingly took it. Too late she realised what she had done and she tried to withdraw her hand, but it was too late. He had already spotted the Earl's ring on her finger.



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