

One Little Sin

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Extract

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Prologue

The Boxing Match

It was a sweltering afternoon in September when Sir Alasdair MacLachlan very nearly got what his Granny MacGregor had been promising him for at least the last three decades: *his come-uppance*. Nonetheless, for all its repetition, her admonishment had never been taken very seriously.

Until the age of eight, Alasdair had thought the old girl was saying "*come a pence*," which he took to be just another Scottish prayer for good fortune, since Granny was notoriously clutch-fisted. So he'd simply tucked the aphorism away, along with all her other gems, such as *Sup with the devil, bring a long spoon*, and her perennial favorite, *Pride goeth before a fall, and a haughty spirit—*

Well, he couldn't quite recall what happened to a haughty spirit, nor did he much care to think about it, because, on this particular hot afternoon, Sir Alasdair's mind was elsewhere, and he was already deep in Bliss—Bliss being the name of the village blacksmith's wife—when the first gunshot rang out, and his comeuppance edged near.

"Oh, shite!" said Bliss, shoving him off. "Me 'usband!"

Tangled awkwardly in his trousers, Alasdair rolled down the pile of straw and came up spitting dust and flailing about for his braces.

"Awright, Bliss! I knows yer in 'ere somewhere!" The grim voice echoed through the cavernous stable. "Out w'you, now! And that bloody, backstabbin' Scot, too!"

"Gawd, not again," muttered Bliss wearily. By now, she'd hitched up her drawers, and was twitching her petticoat back down her rump. "Most times, I can stall 'im a bit," she whispered. "But you'd best climb over that wall and run for it. Will won't hurt me. You, he'll kill."

Hastily jamming in his shirttails, Alasdair grinned. "Will you grieve for me, my dear?"

Bliss shrugged. Easy come easy go, apparently. And Alasdair prided himself on being easy. Along the passageway between the box stalls, doors were screeching open, then slamming shut with ruthless efficiency. "Come on out, you fancy bastard!" the smithy bellowed. "There ain't but one way in, an' one way out, and that's by way o' me!"

Alasdair gave Bliss a smacking kiss, then hefted himself halfway up the box's wall. "Ta, love," he said, winking. "You were worth it."

Bliss shot him a cynical look, then threw back the stall door. With an artful fling of his legs, Alasdair swung himself up and over the planked wall, then dropped silently into the adjoining box.

"Will Handy, are you daft?" Bliss was in the passageway now, squawking theatrically. "Set down that pistol before you go and kill yourself! Can't a woman catch a wink? Been run half to death all day, I have, toting water and ale up and down that hill like some serving girl."

"Oh, I thinks I knows 'oo you been serving, miss." The voice of doom was mere feet away now. "Where's 'e at, eh? By God, this time, I mean to kill somebody."

Alasdair gingerly inched the stall door open and peeked out. *Christ Jesus*. Alasdair was not a small man, but Bliss's husband looked like a bad-tempered dray horse, big yellow teeth and all. He was sweating like one, too.

Bare from the waist up, save for his filthy leather apron, the smithy had rivulets running down his rough, bronze skin. Sprouting black hair covered his barrel chest, his tree-trunk arms,

and most of his back. In one fist, he clutched a nasty-looking hand scythe, and in the other, a rusty old dueling pistol, its mate shoved down the bearer of his trousers.

Two guns. One shot.

Damn. Alasdair had excelled in mathematics at St. Andrews. He did not like his odds here. Christ, what a fix he'd gotten into this time. But he loved life too well to willingly give it up.

Bliss had wet one corner of her apron now, and was dabbing at a streak of soot on the big brute's face. "Shush, now, Will," she cooed. "There's no one here but me, aye?"

Alasdair eased the door open another inch, and waited until Bliss had the old boy by the arm. She was dragging him toward the door, so Alasdair waited until they'd turned the corner, then gingerly tiptoed out. And promptly stepped on a rake. A six-foot shaft of solid English oak popped out of the muck to crack him square between the eyes. Alasdair cursed, tripped over himself, and went sprawling.

"There 'e is!" roared the smithy. "Come back 'ere, you friggin' cur!"

Alasdair was reeling, but not witless. The smithy had thrown off his wife's arm and was barreling back down the length of the barn. Alasdair kicked the rake from his path, fainted left, then bolted past the brute. The smithy roared like a thwarted bull and turned, too late.

Alasdair burst out into the blinding sunlight just as a roar went up from the crowd in the meadow far below. An illegal and much-touted boxing match had drawn half the rascals in London to this little Surrey village, and the sight of a bleeding aristocrat being chased by a scythe-wielding blacksmith did not occasion so much as a glance.

Alasdair could hear the smithy pounding down the grassy hill behind him. Frantically, he searched the meadow for his companions. The smithy was grunting with exertion. Alasdair considered standing his ground. What he lacked in size, he just might make up in speed and skill. Still, old Will did have a loaded gun and a just cause. God mightn't be on Alasdair's side.

Alasdair reached the foot of the hill and began darting between the parked carriages. Fast footwork was not the smithy's forte, and

he quickly fell behind. Alasdair circled half the meadow, dashing from carriage to carriage, urgently searching the sea of faces beneath the baking sun. The scents of damp grass, spilt ale, and fresh manure made for a sour miasma in the heat.

The jeers and groans of the crowd were audible now, punctuated by the rapid smack of flesh on flesh. One of the boxers staggered back, another roaring cheer went up, and in that instant, Alasdair saw his brother pushing his way out of the crowd, with Quin on his heels, still sipping a tankard of ale.

Merrick met him near a big, old-fashioned town coach. "What the devil's got into you?" he asked, as Alasdair dragged him behind it.

"And who was that Goliath on your heels?" added Quin. "Looks like he laid one right between your eyes, old boy."

Alasdair leaned against the carriage to catch his breath. "Let's just say it's time to go, gents," he answered. "*Now.*"

"Go?" said Quin incredulously. "I've got twenty pounds on this fight!"

Merrick's expression tightened. "Why? What's happened?"

"Petticoat trouble again!" complained Quin. "Couldn't you cuckold someone smaller?"

Alasdair pushed away from the carriage, his gaze scanning the edge of the meadow. Merrick grabbed him firmly by the arm. "*You didn't.*"

Alasdair shrugged. "It was Bliss, the girl who brought the ale," he said. "She looked as though she could use a few moments off her feet. A purely humanitarian act, I assure you."

"Good God, Alasdair," said his brother. "I knew better than to come along on this escapade wi—"

"Bugger all!" interjected Quin, hurling aside his tankard. "Here he comes."

Just then, a wall of sweating, grunting flesh came pounding toward them from the opposite side of the meadow, still waving the gun and scythe, which was glistening wickedly in the sun. "We'd best run for it," said Alasdair.

"I'll be damned if I'm running anywhere," said Merrick coldly. "Besides, I left the carriage at the King's Arms."

"One of his pistols is still loaded," cautioned Alasdair. "Perhaps

I deserve it, Merrick, but do you really want the village idiot to kill some bystander?"

"Better to live and fight another day, old chaps," said Quin.

"Oh, to hell with it," snapped Merrick.

The three of them bolted toward the footpath. It snaked around the summit of the hill and up to the back side of the village. Here, people lingered all along the path, where shrewd tavern keepers had set up wagons and tents to sell meat pies and ale. Itinerant tradesmen and Gypsies had staked out ground, too, and were hawking all manner of handmade goods, tonics, and charms while, from the village above, the lively strains of a fiddle carried on the breeze.

Quin pushed on until the crowd thinned. Alasdair and his brother followed. In the next sharp turn, Quin was obliged to jump from the path of a thin man balancing a keg on one shoulder. Merrick followed suit. Unfortunately, Alasdair clipped the man's jutting elbow with his shoulder. The man stumbled, cursed, and dropped the keg, which went thundering down the path.

"Impressive footwork!" said Merrick snidely.

Alasdair cut a glance back down the hill to see that the smithy was gaining ground. A mere three feet ahead of him, the keg bounced off the path, exploding into beer and foam. The man who'd been carrying it apparently decided to throw in his lot with the smithy, and turned to join in the chase.

Around the path's next bend, a wagon painted in brilliant shades of green came into view. Beside it sat a large tent of stained and patched canvas. Quin leapt off the path and threw up the flap. "Quick," he ordered. "In here."

Merrick dived into the darkness. Alasdair followed. For a moment, there was nothing but the sound of their gasping breath. Alasdair's eyes were still adjusting to the light when a dusky voice came out of the gloom.

"Cross my palm with silver, Englishman."

He peered into the depths of the tent to see a Gypsy woman seated before a rickety deal table, one slender, long-fingered hand outstretched. "I—I'm not English," he blurted, for no particular reason.

She eyed him up and down, as if he were horseflesh on the block. "That is not entirely true," she said.

Alasdair was a quarter English on his father's side. He grew inexplicably uneasy.

"Cross my palm with silver," she repeated, snapping her elegant fingers. "Or perhaps you would prefer to leave? This is place of business, not a sanctuary."

"Oh, for God's sake, pay the woman," ordered Merrick, still looking through the flap. Beyond, Alasdair could hear the smithy arguing with someone—the chap who'd been carrying the keg, most likely—about what their strategy ought to be. Alasdair dug deep into his coat pocket, extracted his purse, and laid a coin in the woman's hand.

"Three," she said with another impatient snap. "One for each."

Alasdair dug into the purse again.

"Sit," she ordered, after examining the coins. "All three sit. Those foolish men will not follow. They do not dare."

Quin and Merrick turned to stare at her.

She lifted one shoulder, and a curtain of shimmering black hair slid forward to shadow her face. "What?" she challenged. "You have somewhere else to go?"

Quin, by far the more tractable of the two, seized a couple of three-legged stools and did as she commanded. "Be a sporting chap, Merrick," he said. "What else have we to do for the nonce?"

Merrick approached the table and sat, still looking daggers at Alasdair.

"Your hand," she demanded.

Obediently, Alasdair extended it. The woman held it, palm open, and gazed at it for a time. As if to clear her vision, she rubbed at the lines with her thumb. Beyond the quiet of the tent, the world and all its clamor seemed to fade away. The woman pulled a tiny lamp nearer, and turned up the wick, flooding the tent with yellow light. She was, Alasdair suddenly realized, quite breathtakingly beautiful.

"You have a name, Englishman?" she murmured, still staring at his palm.

"MacLachlan."

"MacLachlan," she echoed. "I think you are a bad man, MacLachlan."

Alasdair drew back. "But I'm not," he protested. "I'm a decent sort of chap, really. Ask—why, ask anyone. I have no enemies."

She looked up from his hand and lifted one thin, inky brow. "Like those men outside?" she asked. "They were your friends?"

Alasdair felt his face flush with heat. "A misunderstanding," he said. "Of sorts."

Her brows snapped together. "There are many kinds of bad, MacLachlan," she said, her voice low and throaty. "You have committed a multitude of sins."

"Ah, a priest now, are you?" It was Alasdair's turn to be sardonic. "Fine, I confess. Now tell my fortune, my lovely, and have done with it."

But instead, she laid his hand down and motioned for his brother's. Merrick narrowed his gaze. The Gypsy faltered. With his scarred face and cold blue gaze, Alasdair's brother presented a less than welcoming picture. In the end, however, he relented.

Again, she smoothed her thumb over the lines and mounds of his hand. "Another MacLachlan," she murmured. "With the devil's luck. And the devil's eyes."

Merrick laughed harshly. "Twice cursed, am I?"

She nodded slowly. "I see it here—" She touched a spot below his index finger. "And here." She stroked the very center, and despite his outward composure, Merrick shuddered.

"You possess a creative spirit," she said simply. "You are an artist."

Merrick hesitated. "Of a sort," he agreed.

"And like many artists, you have the sin of pride," she went on. "You have known great success, but no happiness. Excessive pride and a bitter heart have hardened you."

"Is that my future?" asked Merrick cynically.

She looked at him openly, and nodded. "Almost certainly," she said. "It has assuredly been your past." She pushed his hand away and motioned for Quin's.

"I've committed more than a few sins," Quin admitted, extending it. "I rather doubt there's room enough on my palm for all of them."

She bent over it, and made a *tch-tching* sound in her throat.

"Impulsive," she said. "You act rashly. You speak before thinking."

Quin laughed nervously. "I can't say you're wrong there," he agreed.

"You will pay for it," she warned.

Quin said nothing for a moment. "Perhaps I already have," he finally answered.

"You will pay for it again," she said calmly. "In the worst way, if you cannot right the wrong you have done."

"Which wrong?" he said on an uneasy laugh. "The list is long."

She lifted her gaze and held his. "You know," she said. "Yes, you know."

Quin twisted uncomfortably on the stool. "I—I am not sure."

The Gypsy woman shrugged, and stroked her index finger across the base of his thumb. "I see you have suffered a great loss recently."

"My father," Quin admitted. "He—he passed away."

"Ah," said the Gypsy. "What is your name?"

"Quin," he said. "Quinten Hewitt—or Wynwood, I should say. Lord Wynwood."

She made the noise in her throat again. "So many names, you English," she murmured, dropping the hand as if she had grown weary. "Go now, all of you. Go to your carriage and leave this place. I can say nothing which will stop you from wasting your lives. Your fate is sealed."

Alasdair cut his eyes toward the tent flap.

"Go," said the Gypsy again. "The men have gone. They will not return. It is fate which will punish you for your sins this day, MacLachlan, not those bumbling idiots."

Merrick jerked to his feet. Quin gave an uneasy laugh. "Sorry, Alasdair," he said. "At least Merrick and I seem to have gotten off rather easily." He smiled at the woman, whose exotic beauty was decidedly growing on Alasdair.

"Easily?" she echoed. She lifted her eyes to Quin's and held his gaze. "But I have not told you your future."

It was true, Alasdair realized. She had said much, but portended little.

Merrick had turned his back to them and was again peering through the tent flap.

"Well, go on then," Quin encouraged. "What have we to look forward to, ma'am? Great riches? Exotic travel? What?"

She hesitated briefly. "This is no foolish parlor game, my lord," she answered. "Do you really wish to know?"

Quin faltered. "I—yes, why not?"

The Gypsy's gaze was distant. "What is the phrase you English say, Lord Wynwood?" she murmured. "Ah, yes, I recall it. *Your chicks are coming home to roost.*"

"Chickens," corrected Quin. "I believe it's usually said to be chickens."

"Are you quite sure?" Her voice was suddenly sharp. "In any case, none of you shall continue to evade the consequences of your iniquities. None of you can continue to take and use and exploit, whilst paying no price. You must begin to pay for your sins. Fate will make this so."

"Iniquities?" said Alasdair. "Sins? Ma'am, those are harsh words."

"Call them what you will," said the Gypsy, with a shrug that set her long earrings jangling. "But you will pay, MacLachlan. And you will learn. And you will suffer in the doing of it. What is to come will be as real and as painful as that bruise between your eyes."

Merrick cursed softly, but did not turn around. "I grow weary of this Cheltenham tragedy," he snapped. "Let's be off."

"Wait a moment, Merrick." Quin was studying the woman warily. "Is this one of those Gypsy curses?"

At that the woman's eyes flashed. "Lord Wynwood, you are such a fool," she said. "You have read too many novels. The three of you have cursed yourself, with no help needed from me. Now you must make restitution. You must make it right."

Merrick looked over his shoulder. "Utter balderdash," he snapped.

"Nonetheless, it shall be so," she said quietly.

An ill wind suddenly blew through the tent, chilling Alasdair despite the summer heat. He spun around to see that his brother had thrown open the flap and was striding back down the path. Quin shrugged, and followed.

Never one easily daunted—even, perhaps, when he should have been—Alasdair smiled, and slid onto the middle stool. “My dear girl,” he said, leaning half-across the table. “Now that those Philistines have gone, I really must ask you—has anyone ever told you that your eyes are the color of fine cognac? Your lips like blushing rose petals?”

“Yes, and my arse is like two orbs of Carrera marble,” she answered dryly. “Trust me, MacLachlan. I have heard them all.”

Alasdair’s smile melted. “Ah, a pity!”

The Gypsy woman gave him a bemused look and stood. “Begone with you,” she said. “Get out of my tent, MacLachlan, and put away your well-worn charms. They do you no good here and have caused trouble enough already.”

Alasdair hung his head and laughed. “It *has* been rather a bad day,” he admitted.

For a moment, the Gypsy said nothing. “Oh, my poor, poor MacLachlan,” she finally whispered. “Oh, I fear you do not know the half.”

The chilling breeze touched the back of his neck again. But this time, when Alasdair looked up, his beautiful prophetess had vanished.