

### Excerpt from "Wild Justice" by Gail Ranstrom

"*Bloody God-damned Hell!*" She was the last person Tristan expected to encounter! And that *was* Annica. Oh yes, dark curls escaping a soft workman's cap, the slight frame and easy gait, the determined set of shoulders and--had that not been enough--the familiar firmly rounded bottom revealed by the damp clinging fabric could belong to no one else. He'd committed that particular sight to memory and now he'd recognize it anywhere.

And what in the name of all that was holy was she doing in Whitefriars in the dead of night? After an hour of watching his quarry hide in an alley to watch the tavern, the quarry was about to escape. Tristan turned to see the man disappear around a corner. The Sheikh was off chasing another suspect. He had to make a quick decision. Annica, or his target? A glance around revealed that Annica was quite alone. Not even a coach.

"Bloody God-damned Hell," he muttered again. He started down the darkened street after her. As if to annoy him further, the heavy rain that had been threatening all night began to fall. Despite the pressing nature of his business, he could not allow his future wife to roam the London streets alone after midnight. Knowing Annica, some disaster would be close behind.

And there, in front of his eyes, was the next disaster. A pickpocket slipped from the shadows and fell into step behind her. His hand emerged from the folds of his coat and Tristan saw the glitter of a sharpened blade. His annoyance vanished and he launched himself toward them with grim purpose.

*Hell and damnation!* He prayed he could reach her in time.

The pickpocket seized Annica around the neck from behind. But ere he could bring the knife to her throat, Annica swung her elbow back

sharply, delivering a pointed blow to the pickpocket's diaphragm. As he doubled over, she smashed her heel down on his instep. The knife flashed as the villain slashed a semi-circle in an effort to clear an escape route. Annica yelped and leaped back, but the blade caught in the fabric of her short cape.

Tristan closed the distance to land one solid upward blow and lay the pickpocket out unconscious on the cobblestones. He barely spared a glance for the man as he stepped over his prostrate body to seize Annica by the shoulders.

The frantic look in her eyes warned him that she was still confused and did not recognize him. She tried to pull away, beating her fists against his chest and kicking at him.

"Annica! Stop! It's me," he whispered, trying to contain the small dervish.

"Auberville?" she peered through the rain and gloom.

"Are you hurt?"

She sagged against him, panting. "I think not."

He stepped back to look her over. A streak of blood slashed across the vest and white shirt covering her right rib cage beneath the cape. A tightness in his chest portended panic. "Dear Lord! How bad is it?"

She looked down. "It stings."

Tristan had seen mortally wounded men ignore their injuries and continue to fight in the heat of battle. The mere thought that she could be seriously--even mortally--wounded brought emotion welling up from his chest. He removed his cravat and pressed it against her wound. "Hold this tight!"

Thunder boomed directly overhead and rain fell in sheets. He scooped her up and hurried down a side street toward a sign proclaiming The Blue Bell Inn.

"Tristan!" she gasped. "Put me down!" But her arms encircled his neck and her cheek rested against his chest. Her relief, the way she leaned into him, astonished him with a fierce protective surge. He could have slain a dragon in that moment.

"The pickpocket," she whispered. "We must notify--"

"Confound it, Annica! Do you want to report this to the authorities?"

Do you want to explain to *them* what you're doing alone in Whitefriars in the middle of the night?" He reached the door of the Blue Bell Inn and kicked it open.

Fifteen minutes later, with a disapproving innkeeper still deceived by her disguise and muttering about the certain fate of sodomites, Annica and Tristan were safely shut away from prying eyes. A fire sprang to life when Tristan dropped a match on the kindling, and the cold, sparse chamber was instantly more inviting. Rain beat against the panes of a mullioned window, narrowing their world to this one room.

Still disoriented, she pulled her workman's cap off and shook her head. Her hair fell over her shoulders and down her back, curling from the damp air. The flat, empty feeling of loss came back to her. Harry Bouldin--a man she had known and respected--was dead because of her investigations.

Tristan removed a small silver flask from his pocket, took one glance at her, and downed a quick gulp before placing it on the table. He shrugged out of his great coat and threw it over a chair, then went to the washstand, got the pitcher and bowl, and placed them on the hearth to warm. "Come here," he ordered.

"Tristan, I--"

He had a grim, determined look on his face. "I will not be diverted, Annica. What are you doing in Whitefriars in the middle of the night? Where is your coach? Your footman? Miss Wardlow? Hodgeson? A companion or chaperone of any kind?"

She sighed, knowing she would have to give him some sort of answer. "I had to meet someone, and I knew Hodgeson would not approve."

"Hodgeson? What of your Uncle Thomas?"

"He would not have approved, either," she tried a smile.

"Do not jolly me," he warned. "Who did you meet?"

"A Bow Street Runner," she admitted. Her mind worked quickly, trying to find a way to redirect him before he got too close to the truth.

"Why? For God's sake, Annica, what business could you have with a runner? And in the middle of the night, no less?"

Thinking of Sarah and Mr. Bouldin, she blinked back fresh tears and cleared her throat. "Something was lost, Auberville."

"What loss could warrant the risks you've taken?"

"Tristan--"

"You should have come to me. I'd have handled it for you."

"We no longer have that sort of friendship, Auberville. I am quite capable, after all, and this is a private matter."

"Capable! I'm growing to loathe that word," he muttered under his breath. "What have you done? Pawned your jewelry for a gambling

debt? Are you paying hush-money to someone? Are you plotting some reformationist rebellion? Where have you planted the bomb, Annica?"

"Something was lost and I hired a runner to find it. He sent a message saying he had got information."

"He found your lost object?" Tristan looked doubtful.

"He . . . he never came," she said, looking down at her feet to hide her sudden tears.

Tristan shook his head. He came to her and cupped her shoulders, holding her immobile. "Promise me that you will never do this again."

Acutely aware of the warmth of his touch, her heart took a sudden lurch. "I cannot make such a promise, Auberville."

"You must," he insisted. "'Tis too bloody dangerous! You cannot even imagine what sort of deeds are done in this part of town in the dead of night. You could have been killed. And, damn it, Annica, this sort of stunt could ruin you forever! It is one thing to have a reputation as an eccentric or an original, and quite another to be ruined."

"I understand *'ruined'* better than you, Tristan," she snapped, looking up into the handsome face etched with concern. "Every woman I know is aware of how little it would take to achieve it. Furthermore, if I decide to risk ruination, you may rest assured that the cause will be worth it, and you will not be able to stop me." She broke away and took two steps backward.

One eyebrow shot up. "Will I not?"

"Who are you to say me nay?"

"Tristan Sinclair, Lord Auberville! The one man who is man enough to

do it," he told her through gritted teeth.

"Then, if you would protect me, you'd best remove yourself before we are discovered, Auberville. Being in this room as we are now is enough to ruin me, and well you know it."

"I shall cure that little ill tomorrow," he snapped.

"*That* will be a fancy trick! And whilst we're on it, what were you doing outside the Bear and Bull tonight? Have you been following me?"

"It would appear I should have been. 'Twas one of life's little ironies that placed me there. I recognized your charming little *derrière* as you came out of the tavern--lucky for you--."

"Lucky? I swear, you are rather too full of yourself. I had vanquished the pickpocket ere you interfered."

"You have a talent for disaster, madam. You are wounded! Thank God 'twas no worse. You could be dead!"

The thought sobered her and the memory of Mr. Bouldin returned full force. Tears filled her eyes and she wiped impatiently at them with the back of her hand.

Tristan's attitude changed in an instant from indignation to concern. "What is it? Do you hurt? Tell me, damn it."

"I thought we agreed to be friends. Would you deal with a friend as you are dealing with me now? Leave me alone, Tristan. I guarantee, you cannot help me out of this."

He regarded her unflinchingly for one long moment. Annica knew he was struggling with a difficult decision, and she was closer to being afraid in that moment than ever before--of what plan he might be

hatching. His jaw tightened and a muscle jumped as he clenched his teeth. He took a deep breath and let it out, clearly mastering his temper and coming to a decision.

"Leaving you alone will not be possible now," he said in a quiet voice. "Shall we see your wound? No more delays," he held a hand up to silence her, "and no diversions."

He unfastened her short cape and let it drop to the floor, focusing his attention on her right side where she still pressed his cravat. He took the embroidered silk from her and worked quickly to unbutton her vest and drop that, too, to the floor.

She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt and sniffed. When he tugged her white linen shirt from the waistband of her trousers, she put her hands over his to stop him. She could not expose herself with Tristan in the room. In fact, she doubted that she should expose herself with Tristan anywhere in the vicinity. She looked at him, her mouth suddenly dry.

"You must not," she whispered, fearing what his touch would do to her resolve.

"Your wound needs attention," he said in a husky voice.

"You are not a physician, Auberville."

"I have patched wounds before, Lady Annica. This needs to be seen to *now*." He retrieved the silver flask from the table and placed it on the hearth beside the water bowl.

She glanced down and was surprised to see a red slash staining her shirt. Convinced, she dropped her hands to her sides. She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks, but she bit her lower lip and nodded her consent.

Kneeling, Tristan lifted the fabric just enough to bare her lower right rib cage. She was amazed to see his fingers tremble as he traced the line of her wound. She was more aware of the tingling caused by his touch than any discomfort from the cut. Dizzy, she shuddered, closed her eyes, and placed her hand on the top of his head to steady herself.

When he looked up from her wound, his face was pale and the scar beneath his left eye stood out in stark contrast. "'Tis no more than a deep scratch. It will not require stitching."

A guarded look shadowed his eyes as he stood and backed away from her. He turned toward the fire as if looking for an answer there, then back to her. There was a lean, hungry look about him. The heat of that steady gaze held her entranced. She could not have moved had she caught fire. Nor did she want to.

He unbuttoned his vest and then his shirt, revealing his strongly muscled chest. His gaze never left hers. Her heart leaped into her throat and her knees went weak. She prayed he would not guess the effect he was having on her rioting emotions. Still watching her, he rent his shirt into several long strips and dipped one sleeve in the wash bowl. Kneeling before her, and with a touch so gentle she could barely feel it, he cleaned the cut and nodded his satisfaction. A fresh strip of cloth was doused with brandy from the flask, and that, too, was pressed to her wound. The alcohol stung she gasped in surprise.

Tristan looked up at her. "That should keep you until you are home." He stood, skimming along the length of her as he did. The move was seductive . . . deliberate.

She dropped her shirttails and held his shoulders to keep her balance. She had never touched a man's naked flesh before and the heat and firmness left her short of breath. Curious, she dropped her head back to look up into the unreadable face.

His mouth lowered reluctantly, as if drawn against his will. "We've

gone too far to pretend nothing is happening here," he murmured against her lips.

Diversion was an absurd waste of time. In a flash of clarity, she knew she had been waiting for him to claim her since he had first smiled at her. And she knew, too, that she had been considering surrender ever since Madam Marie had said, . . . *not every romance must end in marriage.*

His arms tightened, crushing her against his bare chest, and he deepened the kiss--a kiss unlike his others. This one did not ask, it demanded, seizing control of her senses. She yielded, powerless to control whatever savage forces were raging inside her, and glad of it. When his tongue invaded her mouth, little shock waves rippled along her spine.

He blazed a trail of hot kisses down the column of her throat. Bending her backward over one steady arm, he used the other to open her shirt. One gentle hand began a breathtaking stroking of the soft flesh of her breast. His mouth stopped in its downward progress from her ear to cherish the hollow of her throat and she gasped when her pulse leaped to meet his lips.

Tristan's responding moan vibrated along her every nerve and she shivered at the sensation. Lord! She was tingling in the most amazing places!

He swept her up and carried her to the narrow bed, covering her face and neck with small eager kisses. He had her boots off in two short tugs and her trousers unfastened before she could protest. Her shirt, already undone, was quickly discarded.

"Annica . . . Annica . . . you overwhelm me. I cannot even think when you sigh," he murmured against her heated flesh.

She was past dissembling, past modesty. She fumbled with the waistband of his trousers, urgent to discover this unknown territory.

He was the model of masculine beauty, like a nude statue of a Greek god she had seen in a museum. Lord! Was the rest of Tristan like that statue?