

THE SCOUNDREL WHO LOVED ME

Four-book collection of new novellas by best-selling authors
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Excerpt from the first story
HIS WICKED EMBRACE
by USA Today Bestselling Author Lauren Smith

“You belong to me now.”

The whispered words echoed in Zehra Darzi’s head as she jolted awake. Somehow in the last twenty-four hours she’d managed to sleep a little inside her gilded prison. Those words that haunted her still made her head throb as a fresh wave of fear swept through her. The man who had spoken them had murdered her parents and kidnapped her from her palace in Persia three weeks ago.

Al-Zahrani. His name was like bitter poison upon her tongue, and she fought the urge to throw up. She’d spent only a few days as his prisoner—listening to him boast of capturing her and his plans of using her as a concubine—before she’d had a chance to flee.

She curled her hands into fists and winced as her nails dug into her palms. Cuts, somewhat healed, still stung from when she’d scaled a low-branched tree near Al-Zahrani’s walls to break free. She’d been so close to freedom, had felt it with every step as she stumbled and ran through the desert hills.

Then, after two days without food or water, she’d collapsed on the dunes, lips parched and cracked, eyes burning. She’d glimpsed men upon the horizon, on horseback in dark clothes. At first she’d thought they were her salvation, but she soon learned they were anything but.

Slavers.

Now she was imprisoned in an English brothel thousands of miles from her home.

Zehra’s gaze darted around the room for the hundredth time, and she wished the women who had seen to her care, such as it was, had brought a fresh pitcher of water. Her throat was parched and she would have done almost anything for a sip of water. It was dark outside, and she hadn’t been visited by anyone since early that morning, when the slavers had sold her to the madam who ran this wretched place. She licked her dry lips and refused to cry.

You are strong. You are the daughter of a shah and an English lady. No one owns you—no matter what happens tonight.

It was the mantra she had spoken again and again as the slavers had mocked her during their long days at sea. She hadn’t been the only woman they’d captured, but she’d been one of the few they had left unspoiled. Her father’s name had carried weight enough to give her that protection, at least so far as the greed of the men was concerned.

“Sell a Persian princess and turn a tidy profit.”

She could still hear the sneering voice of the captain as he’d coiled a lock of her hair around his fingers and crushed her breasts with his exploring hands before they’d thrown her in a tiny chamber, where she’d spent the next two weeks of their voyage.

Now Zehra Darzi stared at the locked door that kept her trapped in her new prison. Through the thin walls of the gaudy bedchamber she could hear the sounds of passion, of men grunting and women moaning along with the heavy sounds of furniture moving rhythmically. Bile rose in her mouth again. She tried not to think of how this tiny room was so different from the colorful, open rooms and rose gardens she’d once called home.

At least you escaped Al-Zahrani. He cannot find you here.

She hoped that was true. He had bragged during her brief captivity that he engaged in slavery, like many powerful men in the area, and he'd once told her that the Western countries paid handsomely for foreign beauties. He'd assured her that he would never sell her, however, because he wanted the pleasure of breaking her spirit himself.

No man would *ever* break her spirit.

Zehra glared at the blasted door handle, wishing it would magically unlock, but even then, she knew escape would be impossible. When she'd been escorted to this room, two strong men had stood guard outside, their expressionless faces frightening. She doubted they had moved since.

For the tenth time since she'd been cast into this bedchamber, she eased down on the bed and tried to calm the fear that rolled through her. She couldn't sit still while her life and freedom hung in the balance. Zehra ran through her options. She had attempted bribery, but the madam and her gaggle of whores had laughed when Zehra had promised riches beyond their wildest dreams. She was coldly informed that her only value was the money she would bring at a private auction tonight. When Zehra had told her she was half-English, with relatives in the peerage, they had laughed again, clearly disbelieving. Her skin was too olive in color, her hair raven black, and her features more exotic. She was no English rose in their eyes.

I may be a woman, but I will fight before I surrender to despair.

Her one last hope—a dim, if not impossible one—was to find a gentleman from tonight's auction who would listen to her and believe her when she told him she was here against her will. She could not be a slave, for slavery was outlawed in England. Of course, the madam had reminded her that even the English kept their dark secrets, like slaves, but surely there would be one man tonight who would have mercy and set her free.

The door handle clicked as the lock turned. Zehra braced herself against the bedpost, fingers digging into the wood. She blew out a breath in relief as a woman in a curly blonde wig sauntered inside. The rouge coloring over the white paste on her cheeks matched the beautiful red dress she held.

"The madam says you're ta wear this tonight. I'm ta help ya." The woman set the gown on the bed and placed her hands on her hips. "No funny business, mind. The guards are outside, and they'll catch ya right quick if ya try ta run."

Zehra studied the woman's pale face. Her scraggly blonde wig was pulled back into a messy coiffure, and her arms were thin. Her body was slim, but in a sickly sort of way. Zehra was a strong, full-figured woman. It would be easy to overpower her, but not the guards outside.

"I *said* no funny business," the woman snapped. "I see you lookin' toward the door. Gowan, get on with it." She waved at the dress, which she'd tossed on the bed.

"Very well." Zehra reached for the buttons on the front of her dress and began to slip them out of the little slits. The woman waited until Zehra had stepped out of her pale-blue traveling dress before helping her into the red satin evening gown. It fit well enough on Zehra's curvy figure, but the moment it was on, a wave of nausea overtook her. She closed her eyes, taking slow deep breaths until the sick feeling had passed.

"At'll do, won't it?" The woman nodded at Zehra.

Zehra studied her reflection in the mirror in the corner by the locked window. The red silk set off the light-olive tint of her skin, but the bodice was scandalously low. She had been raised in a land where women did not dress like this, and she knew from her mother that English women did not wear necklines this low, either.

“The shoes will have to do.” The blonde woman stared down at Zehra’s sensible black boots. “And your hair—ain’t nobody here can style it like them fine ladies do.”

Though she had her mother’s bright-blue eyes and full lips, Zehra’s Persian features and raven-black hair had been inherited from her father. She had pulled her hair up with pins in a loose tumble days ago while still confined to the cabin aboard the ship, and she hadn’t touched it since. She hastily adjusted the pins now.

“Tis fine. Won’t matter in a few hours. Not when you’ll be on your back giving it up to some fine gent. Probably goin’ to be that dark-skinned fella.” The woman was prattling on, and Zehra was barely listening until she heard the words “dark-skinned.”

She grasped the woman’s arm. “What? What man?”

The prostitute scowled, and Zehra released her. “Some man was talking to the madam about you. He’s darker than you are. Found out you’d been sold here, and he tried to buy you straightaway. Said you belonged to him.”

You belong to me. Al-Zahrani’s words knifed through that thin veil of hope she’d been clinging to.

“What did he say, exactly? Did he mention his name?”

“Name? I didn’t ’ear that. Something foreign, funny, you know.” The woman plucked at her gown, but the wrinkled fabric was beyond saving. “He’s come before, that one. Sells girls like you all the time. Doesn’t usually buy, though. He was right mad someone else had sold you to us. The madam told him he had to bid at the auction like everyone else.”

No...oh, heavens no. It was Al-Zahrani. It had to be. A strange rust taste filled her mouth, and sweat coated her palms. He was going to buy her tonight. He would pay anything for her. And then...

“Right, come with me.” The woman started for the door, and Zehra followed behind, touching the small gold locket around her throat. It was the only thing of value she had left, and it held her parents’ portraits inside. Al-Zahrani had seen no advantage in taking it from her when he’d kidnapped her, and the slavers on the ship hadn’t known she’d hidden it away in her skirts. The gold was warm upon her skin, and she traced the intricate floral patterns, wishing more than anything that her parents were still alive, that she was still asleep in her bed, having an awful nightmare.

The brothel was decorated with red satin wallpaper. Gilded sconces illuminated the hall as the prostitute led Zehra to a door at the end of the corridor. Three tall, muscled servants stood behind her, preventing any chance of escape. Zehra fisted her hands in the folds of her skirts to keep them from shaking. The door opened, and a flood of sound hit her. Men were laughing and talking in the dark interior of the room beyond. There was a small stage with a chair on it. Somewhere in the darkness, Al-Zahrani was likely waiting, like a wolf preparing to pounce.

The blonde-haired woman nudged her toward the stage. “Go and sit down.” Zehra kept her head down, even though she couldn’t see any of the men because of the lighting on the stage.

“Well, we start tonight’s auction with a treat for you gentlemen.” An Englishman spoke, then chuckled. “Feast your eyes upon this Persian princess. What pleasures might this virginal beauty know in your bed? Bidding starts at five hundred pounds.”

Her heart pounded as the men began to bid. The numbers climbed higher and higher. The heavy scents of tobacco and spirits hung in the air, filling her nose with a stench she couldn’t bear. She saw the shadows of men just behind the reach of the chandelier’s glow. They prowled at the edges of her vision like creatures born of shadows. Harsh laughter echoed around the

room, providing a ghoulish symphony to the sounds of the brothel. She focused on the bidding, trying to fight off her panic by reciting the numbers in her head over and over.

“Two thousand pounds!” Al-Zahrani’s voice carried across the room. There was no mistaking it. Zehra didn’t move, didn’t flinch, even though part of her had turned to ice.

Please, let someone bid against him. The devil himself would be preferable.

“Two thousand?” A silken voice from nearby chuckled. “Heavens, this beauty is worth more than that! Seven thousand!”

She almost looked up, wondering who would spend so much to be her master, but she didn’t. She would only stare out into darkness and see nothing. Would Al-Zahrani bid against this other man?

Please, let this devil win, whoever he is. I would rather him be my master.

There was a hush in the room as the man who’d bid seven thousand pounds laughed. “No one brave enough to bid higher, eh?” That voice, like a warm fire in winter, made her skin flush.

The man running the auction stepped closer to the stage. “Any other bids? Seven thousand going once...” He paused for an eternity. “Going twice...”

Zehra couldn’t breathe. “Sold to the gentleman bidder for seven thousand pounds. Once you have paid for your lady, you may take her with you.”

Zehra finally looked up, peering hopelessly into the darkness around her, but she saw only dim shapes.

“This way.” The auctioneer gripped her arm cruelly and dragged her from the stage, ignoring her cry. She stumbled.

“Stop that!” a man snarled from close beside her as a hand gripped her other arm, firm but gentle, trying to steady her.

“You harm her again and I will cut you down, you understand? I don’t want my property damaged.”

“Of course.” The auctioneer hastily loosened his grip. Zehra knew she would have bruises on the morrow.

“Are you all right, my dear?” the man asked. She squinted in the darkness, her eyes slowly adjusting. She caught sight of a tall handsome man with red hair. She’d prayed for a devil to rescue her, and she’d found one. She glanced around, afraid she would spy Al-Zahrani waiting to steal her away.

“Yes...I...” She swallowed, unsure what else to say.

“Good. Wait for me. I won’t be long. I promise not to let anyone hurt you.” The man turned and vanished into the crowd.

He wouldn’t let anyone hurt her? She felt a surge of hope inside her so strong that she almost smiled. He had mercy, this beautiful stranger. He could be the one to set her free, and then she might find her mother’s family.

“Come, this way,” the auctioneer growled and once more took her arm, though less rough than before, and escorted her back to her chamber. Zehra barely heard the man’s grumbling—all she could think about was that tonight might not be as awful as she’d feared. If she could just convince the man who’d bought her to help her, she might yet survive.

“He’ll come for you once he’s paid.” The man chuckled. “Assuming he has that much money. No gent’s ever paid that much for a pretty bird like you. I hope you’re worth it, because the madam won’t be giving anyone their money back.” The auctioneer laughed softly, the sound grating on her ears as he shut the chamber door in her face.

Zehra swallowed hard. The finality of the sound of the lock clicking into place still filled her with dread, but she clung to the hope her rescuer had given her. Zehra pressed her forehead against the wood, catching her breath and trying not to cry. She was afraid and hopeful and so exhausted, but perhaps tonight everything would be all right.

Please... Let him be a man of mercy and save me from Al-Zahrani.

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Lawrence Russell despised the White House in Soho. It was one of the less reputable brothels in London, and it had a dark side that made even a seasoned rogue such as himself shudder in revulsion. His tastes ran more toward the Midnight Garden, which catered less to hired pleasure workers and more toward matching aristocratic ladies and gentlemen with similar needs.

When I seduce a woman, it is out of mutual desire, not a monetary transaction.

No mistress he'd ever had demanded fine clothes or jewels—they'd only begged him never to leave their beds. He'd been quite happy to oblige for as long as he could.

He stared around at the crowd in the dimly lit card room. The tables had been pushed back half a dozen feet to make room for a small stage, large enough to accommodate a person in the chair that had been placed in the center. The room was filled with men, smoke drifting lazily from lit cigars as they talked and drank. There were quite a few faces he recognized. Thankfully, none whom he considered to be close friends. Tonight's auction and the very idea of it turned Lawrence's stomach.

He wouldn't be here at all except for the letter he'd received from his younger brother, Avery, telling him to go tonight and take note of which men bought the merchandise from tonight's private auction.

What Lawrence hadn't realized was that the merchandise was to be *slaves*. He'd hoped it might have been some other disreputable activity he was helping to stop, but slavery? Not just any slavery, but that of an intimate nature.

Slavery had been outlawed in England, at least publicly. Yet women would be sold to the highest bidder here tonight like horses at Tattersall's, and no doubt treated less kindly. His blood boiled at the very thought of women facing such a fate. He *adored* women. Women were lovely, delicate creatures who deserved kind, playful, and rewarding lovers in bed. Not this injustice.

From the moment he'd heard the whispers from other men in this room, his heart had begun to fill with dread. Avery was supposed to arrive just after the auction to stop the men who purchased these women and have them arrested.

But what if Avery arrived too late? What if some of the men were able to leave before the auction concluded and the women weren't able to be saved? A hundred new fears rose up inside him as he tried to focus and remain calm. He had to catalogue every man in this room who bid, not only those who purchased a slave.

One of the men who ran the White House approached the stage and adjusted the small but elegant chair on the stage. A hush settled over the crowd, and a tension built in the air so thick that Lawrence could feel it choking him.

"We will be starting shortly, gentlemen. Please be patient." The hum of the conversations around him returned. He had time yet before the auction began. Lawrence leaned back against the wall, next to the closest door that would give him a quick exit. He wanted to leave the moment this dreadful scene was over.

The door beside him creaked open, and a dirty blonde-haired woman led a woman dressed in red into the room. They passed close to him as they approached the stage. Satin whispered

against his boots as the second woman brushed past him. A hint of rosewater teased his nose. He watched her progress toward the stage, following her movements, hating that this woman faced the fate that she did. It was enough to make any decent man sick.

Lawrence sucked in a breath as the light bathed the woman when she drew near the small dais. Men leered and several called out cruel suggestions of what they'd like to do to her. Lawrence moved toward her and the stage as if in a dream. Her raven-black hair and light-olive skin were exquisite, even beneath the glare of the single chandelier over her head. The red satin dress she wore clung to every curve, leaving little to the imagination. Rather than looking cheap, the woman looked irresistible.

Whispers stirred in the men around him as they stared hungrily at the item they soon planned to bid for. Lawrence fought the urge to run for the woman, grab her, and flee after he'd shoved every man in the room off a very high cliff.

As she lifted her skirts to climb the dais, he caught sight of sensible black boots that covered her slender ankles. His body flared to life, and he was ashamed at his own arousal.

Don't look at her—look at the men. It's them you must remember.

He began to turn his focus away from the woman, but then he saw her face. His heart stilled in his chest. It was as though everything around him had frozen, locked between one breath and the next as his gaze became transfixed on the woman's face. There was something about her feminine, exotic features that drew him in. She had slightly softened high cheekbones, a sensual mouth, winged brows, and shocking blue eyes that were so bright they gleamed like sapphires in the light that illuminated her face.

Something stirred deep in his mind like fragments of a long-forgotten dream, or perhaps the strands of a partially unbound tapestry. Was it possible to recognize someone he'd never met? The queer feeling didn't subside, and that puzzled him. He'd never met her—he was sure of it—but why then did he feel as though he had? Or *hadn't*...

Damnation, he couldn't make sense of what his mind and memory were trying to tell him.

One of the White House employees stood close to the stage. "We start tonight's auction with a treat for you gentlemen." His words and the luscious beauty on the stage captured every man's attention.

"Feast your eyes upon this Persian princess. What pleasures might this virginal beauty know in your bed? Bidding starts at five hundred pounds."

Lawrence swallowed hard as men around him began to bid.

You must not interfere. You must not.

It was all too familiar. He realized he wasn't recognizing the woman, but the feelings surrounding this travesty. The fear, the panic, his own impotence to do anything to stop it. He'd been too young then, too young and too late to save a woman who had needed someone's help. Anyone's help. *His* help.

I won't let it happen again.

He stared at the woman on the stage, taking in her pale, stoic face as she listened to the sounds of men who would claim her. Her hands, clutching her skirts, shook ever so slightly. She had to be terrified yet was hiding it well. He couldn't help but admire her. In that moment he made a decision.

I can't leave her to these wolves. I won't let the past repeat itself.

He had to act. His brother's warnings to only watch and observe be damned. Lawrence glanced at the woman, forcing himself to hide his anxiety and become the relaxed scandalous

rogue the rest of the world knew. He had to play the part convincingly, or else he risked losing her to another man.

Hold on, darling. I'll save you.