

WIOLET WINSPEAR

forbidden rapture



"I'd enjoy melting your icy reserve!"

Nick leaned forward across the table and his eyes dominated hers.

"Your conceit must be even greater than I imagined if you think I need to be melted by you," Della declared witheringly.

"You think I could not do it?" Nick replied. "I warn you, Della Neve, that a Latin is not like an Englishman. He is less civilized and therefore less polite when it comes to dealing with puritanical little girls with more wit than wisdom. Especially those with eyes like green sapphires, gold hair and white skin."

"Save your compliments, Nick." Her eyes flashed to his mocking face.

"And stop trying to pretend that you can read my mind. If you could, you'd know how much I dislike your type, Nicholas Franquila!"

VIOLET WINSPEAR is also the author of these books in

Harlequin Presents Collection

- 1-WIFE WITHOUT KISSES
- 4-DRAGON BAY
- 7—THE LITTLE NOBODY
- 9—THE KISSES AND THE WINE
- 12—THE UNWILLING BRIDE
- 16-PILGRIM'S CASTLE
- 17—HOUSE OF STRANGERS
- 19-BRIDE OF LUCIFER

Many of these titles are available at your local bookseller.

WINSPEAR WINSPEAR

forbidden rapture

Originally published as Harlequin Presents #33





TORONTO • LONDON • LOS ANGELES • AMSTERDAM SYDNEY • HAMBURG • PARIS • STOCKHOLM • ATHENS • TOKYO Harlequin Presents edition published September 1974 ISBN 0-373-15022-9

Second printing July 1974
Third printing May 1974
Fourth printing September 1976
Fifth printing February 1977

This Harlequin Presents Collection edition published July 1981

Original hardcover edition published in 1973 by Mills & Boon Limited

Copyright ©1973 by Violet Winspear. All rights reserved. Philippine copyright 1981. Australian copyright 1981. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 225 Duncan Mill Road, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3B 3K9.

All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not even distantly inspired by any individual known or unknown to the author, and all the incidents are pure invention.

The Harlequin trademark, consisting of the word HARLEQUIN and the portrayal of a Harlequin, is registered in the United States Patent Office and in the Canada Trade Marks Office.

Printed in U.S.A.

CHAPTER ONE

The slim, fair girl came aboard alone, a mink coat draped around her shoulders with orchids on the lapel. When she reached the head of the gangway she gave her name and cabin number to the young officer on duty there, and the ready smile which he had been giving to other passengers was absent from his face as he stared a moment at Della Neve. Then a shy look came into his eyes.

'It's a pleasure to have you aboard, Miss Neve.' He gave her a smart salute. 'I once heard you sing in La Boheme at the Metropolitan and it was a memorable ex-

perience.'

'Thank you.' Her speaking voice had an attractive huskiness, and her smile lingered only a moment before it was gone. 'The Gothic Star seems a nice ship and I'm sure I'm going to enjoy the cruise.'

'I hope, Miss Neve, that you will sing for us one even-

ing?"

'I'm afraid that won't be possible.' She gazed straight at him with blue-green eyes like frozen gems, then she handed him her passport and tickets and followed a steward to her state cabin, while another followed with her handcases. They went along a wide central companionway to the main deck and along a corridor whose carpet was a deep blue colour. A door was opened for her and she entered the suite which would be hers for the next six weeks, while the Gothic Star cruised the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

Left alone in the solitary luxury of her state cabin, Della removed her mink coat and let it fall carelessly to a white velvet couch, where it draped itself like a darkfurred animal, while the orchids lay crushed beneath its weight. She wandered a moment to the porthole and could hear music drifting from the tannoy; a sentimental waltz tune which reminded her of Vienna and that wonderful evening when she had sung in the courtyard of the Ravenholtz Castle. Marsh had thought it marvellous as well, for the very next day he had taken her for a drive through the Vienna woods and there...

She sighed and glanced at her left hand. On the wrist of that hand was a slim, gleaming jade bracelet, and on the third finger was a gold ring set with a matching,

priceless jade.

There had been no way to refuse Marsh; her heart had not been proof against the diffident, almost boyish smile on his face when he had taken her hand, kissed it, and slipped on to her finger the ring set with a jade to match the bracelet he had given her on her twenty-second birthday. As in everything he had not questioned or truly asked, for it was not in the character of such a man of business to let an opportunity slip by. It was often said that he had a golden flair for picking the right moment, and there in the autumn-gold woods, in possibly the most romantic city in the world, he had chosen his moment well, and Della had drifted into their engagement as the evening before she had drifted into a waltz with him.

Though he was often referred to as 'face of stone' by his business rivals and his many employees, Della alone knew the reverse side of the million-dollar coin. She owed everything to Marsh Graham; her life and her education:

her career and this cruise.

This blue-water cruise which was meant to unlock the band of nerves which had taken possession of her throat, so that singing a mere chanson was a torment, and the singing of an aria an impossibility. Marsh, ever concerned for her, had rushed her off in his Blue-Cloud Rolls to see his specialist in Harley Street. 'Nerves!' Sheer nerves and the natural, accumulative anxieties of the star performer.

A star, in fact, who had risen in the firmament of opera with a brilliant, breathtaking speed, accelerated by the will and fortune of her guardian, the formidable Marsh Graham who on a wet and stormy evening, when she was only ten years old, had pulled her from the wreckage of her parents' car and taken charge of her life from that time onwards.

Discovering that she had an ear for music and a sweet voice, he had set about at once having her trained in all the arts of being a real singer. She had been taught to know about Bach and Wagner before she was twelve years old. By the time she was seventeen she was in the hands of one of the best Italian teachers of singing in the world, a true maestro who had firmly told Marsh that she would sing like an angel in the Italian operas, but since she was not built on the lines of Kundry and Brunnhilde, he must not expect her to bring down the roof. Her voice was angelic, her face was lovely and she would make a divine Mimi, and a touching Madam Butterfly.

Marsh, ever shrewd and authoritative, had arranged for her debut on the eve of her nineteenth birthday, when in his opinion she was a rose in the bud and would be the most appealing Mimi to appear on the opera stage for years. Again he had picked his golden moment, and Della had sung in the arms of Rodolfo with all the lilting, innocent pleading of a girl desiring love and being fearful of it

at the same time.

Perhaps she alone knew that her interpretation of the role sprang from her own inward awareness that Marsh

planned to be her demanding and possessive lover.

Now, as the engines of the Gothic Star began to beat like a great heart, and the music changed to Beyond the Blue Horizon, Della did something that was unplanned and wholly instinctive ... she tore from her finger the ring which Marsh had put there and glanced round wildly for some place to hide it. On the vanity table stood

a tall vase of exquisite white roses, and knowing Marsh had sent these to the ship, as he had sent the big circular box of Austrian chocolates and the small pile of the very latest novels, she winced at her own act of betrayal, but she could not return the ring to her finger, and snatching up her handbag she swiftly opened it and dropped the ring inside, out of sight.

Later on, when she was feeling calmer, she would replace the ring and resume her sense of belonging, body and soul, to Marsh. For twelve years she had been his 'property', for he was intensely aware of what he owned and directed, but for six weeks, cut off from him by the

blue water, she would be her own person.

She snapped shut her bag and before leaving her cabin to walk for a while on deck she touched a finger to the white roses. Always white, flooding her dressing-room when she sang, scenting her bedroom at Cascades, the house which Marsh owned at Richmond, named not for a waterfall, he said, but for the cascades of notes which her

warm soprano voice could produce.

Her fingers clenched about the roses, and then she winced again as a thorn stabbed her finger and left a drop of blood on a white bud. Snatching up her mink coat, for it would be cool on deck until the ship steamed into warmer waters, she flung it around her shoulders and left her cabin, not forgetting to lock the door behind her. Everything she owned had been given her by Marsh, therefore she owned a lot of pretty but expensive things. She followed the long sweep of blue carpet to a flight of steps leading up to the promenade deck. The evocative music was still playing, and now all visitors had gone ashore and were waving from the wharfside, while passengers leaned from the rails of the ship and waved back, calling good-bye.

'Bon voyage!' The voices blended below to carry the

words. 'Bon voyage!'

Della stood by the rails gazing downwards at the upturned faces and the waving handkerchiefs, while here and there on the deck a handkerchief was pressed to a woman's eyes as the ship moved away from the wharf in a swirl of muddy green water, while the tugs hooted and heaved and guided the great ship on the start of her voyage. The music faded away and there was a silence filled with the crying of sea-birds as the wharf and the customs shed and the fluttering flags grew smaller and smaller.

There had been no one to see Della off on her voyage, for Marsh had left London on business two days ago, and as she stood alone on the deck she felt an aching amazement at her own sense of relief. She felt almost like a truant child who had escaped for a while a too watchful parent.

Her left hand, freed of his ring, gripped the rail and her heart seemed to beat in unison with the deep pulsing of the ship's engines. The long trail of foamy bubbles that the ship was whipping up with the propellers seemed to be expressive of the excitement that was starting to

bubble in her veins.

Marsh was generous and protective, but – Della flung back her head in a gesture of freedom and welcomed the coolness of the wind through her hair – but she had begun to feel as smothered as a gem in a velvet box. For years she had been cushioned against the buffs of life, ever since that awful night when she had lost both mother and father and the tall stranger with the silver-gilt hair had swept her up in his arms and cared for her ever since.

With all her heart she was grateful to Marsh, but she couldn't help but wonder what it felt like to feel the wild and glorious abandon of Mimi, or the sensuous surrender of Butterfly. Deep in her heart she hungered for romance; she longed to feel wholly alive and not merely the cosseted singing ward of a very rich man. She wanted the

excitement, the peril, the aching joy of being romanced and not owned – owned by a man to whom she owed everything, the silk on her body, the shine on her hair, the polish on her speech. Her real name had been Dolly Neve, but Marsh had changed that to the glamour of Della. Her father had been a car-assembly worker, taking his wife and child to the seaside for a holiday. Her home had been in the suburbs of London, and from out of a leggy scrap of a schoolgirl Marsh had fashioned a lovely, slim, talented creature who wore her expensive clothes with élan and who could read a music score at a glance and speak four langages. He had moulded her as if she were Galatea, and she knew with what gallantry and patience he had waited to claim his reward.

At the finale of this cruise she and Marsh were to be married, and nothing on earth would stop her from marrying him – but right now, right this moment she was free and afloat on the ocean, with no ring on her finger, and no personal maid to watch her every movement. She had left Rose at the house, against the orders of Marsh, and that was why today her fair hair was free about her face instead of beautifully coiffured to suggest a more sophisticated Della Neve than the one she looked at this precise moment.

Despite the rich darkness of her mink coat there was a certain youth and loneliness about her, and sensing this in herself she turned from the ship's rail to survey the promenade deck and those travellers who still lingered, as she did, though the wharf was now lost to sight and that trail

of foam was already a few miles long.

The Gothic Star had cast her lines, and the wide, hungry, unpredictable waters were pulling her into a powerful embrace. She had surrendered to the sea, and her heart, deep down inside the graceful body of steel, thumped with powerful energy.

In that moment, as excitement coursed through Della

and lit her blue-green eyes, she became aware that she and one other person shared this rather solitary end of the deck and with the heightened curiosity which being at sea brings to a traveller she took a glance at the man ... he stood by the ship's rail, tall and dark in a perfectly tailored suit, quietly smoking a cigar with a self-contained ease and enjoyment. Della had meant to look away after satisfying her curiosity, but there was something about that dark, arresting silhouette against the deepening dusk of the sky that held her attention, and held it beyond that moment when she could have withdrawn her gaze and not been caught staring at him.

Too late ... he suddenly turned his head in her direction and their glances interlocked and the shock of it went through Della like a knife. There was an ageless, almost pagan beauty about the set of his head, and the strong slanting cheekbones. The darkness of his hair was matched by his eyes, and there was a cleft in the centre of his firm, dark chin. Every detail of the man was arresting, from the perfect fit of his grey-blue suit down to his hand-crafted shoes, but what gripped and held Della was the scar on his left cheekbone, for it had the exact shape of a diamond, branded there in the olive darkness of his

Abruptly she was confused and she turned away from him before he could see the colour that stormed into her cheeks. She hastened along the deck to the stairs, and the strangest thing of all was that her knees were trembling and she felt the exact sensation of fright that she had felt on her first appearance on the stage. Her heart was thumping and her skin was hot and cold at the same time.

'Signorina.'

The word arrested her and she had glanced round before she could stop herself. His long stride had brought him almost at her heels and she had a sensation of being towered over. She stopped walking, as if instinct warned her that he would reach out and stop her. Yes, what is it? she asked, and once again her blue-green eyes were fixed upon that diamond-shaped scar that somehow set the seal on his striking difference from other men she had seen.

Your orchids.' He held them out to her, with an air of a suave politeness. She glanced swiftly at her lapel and saw that they had become unpinned and had dropped from her coat to the deck.

'Oh – thank you.' She took them with her left hand, for she was holding her bag with the other hand, and she was aware that his eyes skimmed her fingers and she thought guiltily of the ring that she had thrust into her bag, out of sight but not out of mind.

'So I was right to address you as signorina.' His voice was deep, with many subtle shadings to it. It was also cultured, with just enough of an accent to increase its resonant appeal. 'We appear, you and I, to be solitary travellers, or have you a family down below in a cabin?'

Della almost caught her breath aloud, for she knew that in the suavest way possible she was being 'picked up' and there was no Marsh, hovering tall and stern, to protect her from this Italian stranger whose face played such odd tricks with her usual good sense. What should she do? Rake out her engagement ring and put it on, or invent a whole parcel of relatives?

Then, as she hesitated in her reply, he inclined his head and his heels came together in a whisper of a click. 'Let me introduce myself, signorina. I am Nicholas Franquila, and I prefer to be called Nick by those I am hopeful of knowing a little better. Perhaps you would join me in the bar for a glass of champagne and a sandwich? To stay the pangs of hunger until dinner, eh?'

'No - thank you.' Della made her eyes look cool and

disinterested, for he was obviously a Latin wolf who sensed that she was all alone and therefore vulnerable. 'I have to see the Purser, and then I have some unpacking to do. Good-bye—'

'It can hardly be good-bye on a ship,' he broke in, sardonically. 'Fate may see to it that I sit next to you at dinner; who can tell, when Fate is also female and there-

fore unpredictable.'

'I assure you, signore, that I am very predictable.' Della spoke in her coolest voice, and she looked at him with all the hauteur of the young diva. 'I never drink champagne with a stranger, nor do I play any of the usual cosmopolitan games of chance. I don't doubt that you are an expert, and at the moment you are all alone in need of a satellite and I chanced to come into your orbit. But this ship is a fairly large one and I'm sure you will shortly find much more dazzling company than I—'

But you are a star, Miss Neve, and what could be more

dazzling than that?'

Della stared at him. 'So you knew all along who I was?'

'Not right away,' he corrected her. 'On stage you appear to be more self-assured, and your hair is always more soignée. You suit your name – Lady of Snow.'

'And you suit yours,' she flashed back at him. 'Nick the

Devil!

Never ... never had Della been so impertinent to anyone, and he seemed to make things worse by laughing softly and deeply in his throat and looking at her with a dark sort of threat in his eyes. She turned hastily away from him and ran down the stairs to the main deck, and still with a sense of flight she found her stateroom and unlocked the door with a hand that trembled slightly. Oh, this was ridiculous! She felt highly annoyed with herself for allowing that Latin wolf to ruffle her composure in this silly way. It was what he had set out to do,

and she, forgetful of all she had learned from Marsh, had

fallen into his suave and mocking trap.

Making an effort to forget the dark and arresting face of the man, she unlocked her pigskin cases and her trunk and began to hang her dresses, for day and evening wear, in the capacious closet, with a shelf for shoes and another for scarves and other accessories. She placed all her diaphanous lingerie in the chest of drawers, and then stood gazing at her jewel-case for several moments before unlocking it. There in the tiny drawers all velvet-lined lay the various levely presents from Marsh. The set of turquoise jewellery, the pearls and the sapphire cross, the brooches that sparkled with all the soft lustre of real worth, and the matching diamond bracelets. She drew a little sigh, and with a curious effort she imposed the face of her fiancé upon that of the patrician yet slightly wicked face of the man she had so recently encountered on the promenade deck.

Marsh could not be called handsome, but he was distinguished, with one of those slightly tired and clever faces, aged before its time by the many responsibilities of the successful business man. Gradually over the years Della had seen his gilt hair become more and more silver, and this added to his distinction. And he always dressed in the dark greys and blues of the English tycoon. He was repected and a little feared wherever he went, and his only real form of relaxation was the opera. Marsh knew almost everything there was to know about superb music, yet he couldn't play a note on any instrument, nor

could he sing in key.

Della smiled a little and fingered the tiny jewelled fan which Marsh had given her after she had sung in that operatic adaptation of Lady Windermere's Fan by the composer everyone referred to as Cavaltivani. It was well known that this was a pseudonym, and even in musical circles no one had been successful in tracking down the

owner of the invented name. But everyone agreed that he had a remarkable talent, and opera producers and singers alike awaited with eagerness the next piece of work from

his lyrical pen.

This collection of jewellery, given by Marsh with a courtly kindness which had never really concealed his sense of ownership towards her, was too valuable to be left in her stateroom, but Della didn't relock the case before adding her jade bracelet and her engagement ring. She had some costume jewellery which could be worn in the evenings, and she still had this strong, almost desperate desire to belong only to herself while she was a passen-

ger aboard the Gothic Star.

Very firmly she locked the jewel-case and took all the precious contents to the Purser. She returned to her quarters feeling a sense of lightness and release. She also felt a stab of hunger and rang for the steward to bring her some coffee and sandwiches. 'It'll be a pleasure, Miss Neve.' He gave her a broad smile. 'My missus dotes on them chansons you recorded a few months ago. Real love songs, she calls them, and a bit of a change from all that pop screaming. What sandwiches would you like, miss? There's some lovely cold beef, or you could have grouse. A gentleman ordered some a while ago—'

'Beef, please.' She returned his smile. 'What's your

name, steward? I'd like us to be friends.'

'It's Larkin, miss, and my missus will be downright delighted when I write to let her know that I'm looking after the famous Della Neve. I hope you'll soon be

making some more of those romantic records?"

'I – I don't know, Larkin.' Della clasped her throat with her hand and felt again the shock and bewilderment of not being able to break into warm, clear song. 'I'm resting my voice at the present time and I just want to relax on this cruise and not think about work – is it a good trip? I do hope so.'

'A very nice one, miss, as soon as we hit the warm waters. We call at some interesting ports and it's always fun to go ashore. It's a shame you're travelling all alone, but you'll soon pick up with a – with a pal.' He grinned and hurried away to fetch her beef sandwiches and coffee, and these were waiting for her on a covered tray when she came from her shower, wearing a short towelling jacket that revealed her long slim legs, and with her fair hair damp and curling at the edges, She sat on a little velvet chair and ate her snack; the beef was delicious, and the coffee brown and sweet. So far Della was untroubled by the weight problems of some of the other singers she had performed with, and Marsh had ensured that she followed a routine of tennis and swimming that kept her trim and fit.

She picked up a magazine and flipped through it ... and then she stared and gripped the glossy pages as her gaze met the dark, lazily worldly eyes of one of the persons featured in the magazine. The man was photographed standing beside the American heiress Sorine Hunter, and the columnist hinted that the beautiful Sorine, twice married before, was thinking of adding to her collection the Conte Nicholas di Fioro Franquila, the Continental heart-throb who was reputed to have a certain air of mystery about him, but who was definitely known to have had his name linked with several other ladies of good fortune and good looks. 'Had he now been hunted down and finally captured?' the columnist coyly asked of her readers.

Della wasn't impressed by his title, but she was definitely confirmed in her opinion that he was an experienced pursuer of the ladies; the sort who cashed in on his looks and his background and led a totally useless life chasing after heiresses and getting his face featured in the glossies. She felt that such men were contemptible and she vowed to herself that she would give him the icy

为试读; 需要完整PDF请访问:www.ertongbook.com