

**"A STORY THAT WRAPS AROUND YOUR
HEART AND DOESN'T LET GO." *Oakland Press***

***New York Times* bestselling author**

SUSAN ELIZABETH PHILLIPS

"Gone With the Wind the way it should have been."

Jill Barnett

A photograph of a garden path made of reddish-brown bricks, leading towards a white arched doorway. The doorway is flanked by lush green hedges and covered in climbing purple flowers. The path is bordered by green grass and white flowers. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Just Imagine

SUSAN
ELIZABETH
PHILLIPS

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(Previously published as *Risen Glory*)



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Dear Readers,

Over the years I've received hundreds of letters asking about my historical romance *Risen Glory*. This book was my first solo effort, originally published in 1984, and has been out of print for many years. You've complained and whined—yes, I've definitely heard whining!—because you wanted to read it. Well, *stop it right now!* *Risen Glory* is back in this newly revised and retitled edition, *Just Imagine*.

Like many of you, I was first introduced to the wonderful world of romantic fiction through the swashbuckling historical romances of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Those passionate, sexy, and woefully politically incorrect tales of brooding heroes and feisty heroines enchanted me. They took me to a world where all the odds were tilted in favor of men, and the only rights a woman had were the ones she fought for. Yet the woman always won! If only real life were like that.

Revising this book has been nostalgic for me. When I first wrote it, I was a young mother trying to squeeze in a few hours at my portable typewriter between nursery school carpools. My writing has changed over the years, and my current books are different from this one. Yet I found so many similarities. From the very beginning I loved powerful characters, strong emotions, humor, and lots of sizzle!

So come back with me to an earlier time . . . a time when men were men, and women were put on earth to give them trouble!

Happy reading,

Susan Elizabeth Phillips

P.S. For more about *Just Imagine*, visit my Web site at www.susanephillips.com



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The Chicago Stars/Bonner Brothers Books

IT HAD TO BE YOU
HEAVEN, TEXAS
NOBODY'S BABY BUT MINE
DREAM A LITTLE DREAM
THIS HEART OF MINE

Other Avon Books

KISS AN ANGEL
LADY BE GOOD
FIRST LADY

*To my husband Bill,
with love and appreciation*





PART ONE

A Stable Boy

*When duty whispers low, Thou must,
The youth replies, I can.*

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
"VOLUNTARIES III"





1

*T*he old street vendor noticed him at once, for the boy was out of place in the crowd of well-dressed stockbrokers and bankers who thronged the streets of lower Manhattan. Cropped black hair that might have held a hint of curl had it been clean stuck out in spikes from beneath the brim of a battered felt hat. A patched shirt unbuttoned at the neck, perhaps in deference to the early July heat, covered narrow, fragile shoulders, while a strap of leather harness held up a pair of greasy, oversized britches. The boy wore black boots that seemed too big for one so small, and he held an oblong bundle in the crook of his arm.

The street vendor leaned against a pushcart filled with trays of pastries and watched the boy shove his way through the crowd, as if it were an enemy to be conquered. The old man saw things others missed, and something about the boy caught his imagination.

"You there, *ragazzo*. I got a pastry for you. Light as the kiss of an angel. *Vieni qui*."

The lad jerked up his head, then gazed longingly at the trays of confections the old man's wife made fresh each day. The peddler could almost hear him counting the pennies concealed in the bundle he clutched so protectively. "Come, *ragazzo*. It is my gift to you." He held up a fat apple tart. "The gift of an old man to a new arrival in this, the most important city in the world."

The boy stuck a defiant thumb into the waistband of his trousers and approached the cart. "Jes' what makes you reckon I'm a new arrival?"

His accent was as thick as the smell of Carolina jasmine blowing across a cotton field, and the old man concealed a smile. "Perhaps it is only a silly fancy, eh?"

The boy shrugged and kicked at some litter in the gutter. "I'm not sayin' I am, and I'm not sayin' I'm not." He punched a grimy finger in the direction of the tart. "How much you want for that?"

"Did I not say it was a gift?"

The boy considered this, then gave a short nod and held out his hand. "Thank you kindly."

As he took the bun, two businessmen in frock coats and tall beaver hats came up to the cart. The boy's gaze swept contemptuously over their gold watch fobs, rolled umbrellas, and polished black shoes. "Damn fool Yankees," he muttered.

The men were engaged in conversation and didn't hear, but as soon as they left, the old man frowned. "I think this city of mine is not a good place for you, eh? It has only been three months since the war is over. Our President is dead. Tempers are still high."

The boy settled on the edge of the curb to consume the tart. "I didn't hold much with Mr. Lincoln. I thought he was puerile."

"Puerile? *Madre di Dio!* What does this word mean?"

"Foolish like a child."

"And where does a boy like you learn such a word?"

The boy shaded his eyes from the late-afternoon sun and squinted at the old man. "Readin' books is my avocation. I learned that particular word from Mr. Ralph Waldo Emerson. I'm an admirer of Mr. Emerson." He began nibbling delicately around the edge of his tart. "'Course, I didn't know he was a Yankee when I started to read his essays. I was mad as skunk piss when I found out. By then it was too late, though. I was already a disciple."

"This Mr. Emerson. What does he say that is so special?"

A fleck of apple clung to the tip of the boy's grimy index finger, and he flicked it with a small pink tongue. "He talks about character and self-reliance. I reckon self-reliance is the most important attribute a person can have, don't you?"

"Faith in God. That is the most important."

"I don't hold much with God anymore, or even Jesus. I used to, but I reckon I've seen too much these last few years. Watched the Yankees slaughter our livestock and burn our barns. Watched them shoot my dog, Fergis. Saw Mrs. Lewis Godfrey Forsythe lose her husband and her son Henry on the same day. My eyes feel old."

The street vendor looked more closely at the boy. A small, heart-shaped face. A nose that tilted up ever so slightly at the end. It seemed somehow a sin that manhood would soon coarsen those delicate features. "How old are you, *ragazzo*? Eleven? Twelve?"

Wariness crept into eyes that were a surprising shade of deep violet. "Old enough, I guess."

"What about your parents?"

"My mother died when I was born. My daddy died at Shiloh three years ago."

"And you, *ragazzo*? Why have you come here to my city of New York?"

The boy popped the last bit of tart into his mouth, tucked the bundle back under his arm, and stood. "I've got to protect what's mine. Thank you kindly for that tart. It's been a real pleasure makin' your acquaintance." He began to walk away, then hesitated. "And just so you know . . . I'm not a boy. And my name's Kit."

As Kit made her way uptown toward Washington Square according to the directions she'd received from a lady on the ferry, she decided she shouldn't have told the old man her name. A person bent on murder shouldn't go around advertising herself. Except it wasn't murder. It was justice, even though the Yankee courts wouldn't see it that way if she got caught. She'd better make certain they never found out that Katharine Louise Weston of Risen Glory Plantation, near what was left of Rutherford, South Carolina, had ever been within spitting distance of their damn city.

She clutched the bundle more tightly. It held her daddy's six-shot Pettingill's self-cocking army percussion revolver; a train ticket back to Charleston; Emerson's *Essays, First Series*; a change of clothing; and the money she'd need while she was here. She wished she could get it over with today so she could go back home, but she needed time to watch the Yankee bastard and get to know his ways. Killing him was only half the job. The other half was not getting caught.

Up until now, Charleston was the largest city she'd seen, but New York wasn't anything like Charleston. As she walked through the noisy, bustling streets, she had to admit there were some fine sights. Beautiful

churches, elegant hotels, emporiums with great marble doorways. But bitterness kept her from enjoying her surroundings. The city seemed untouched by the war that had torn apart the South. If there was a God, she hoped He'd see to it that William T. Sherman's soul roasted in hell.

She was staring at an organ grinder instead of paying attention to where she was going, and she bumped into a man hurrying home. "Hey, boy! Watch out!"

"Watch out yourself," she snarled. "And I'm not a boy!" But the man had already disappeared around the corner.

Was everybody blind? Since the day she'd left Charleston, people had been mistaking her for a boy. She didn't like it, but it was probably for the best. A boy wandering alone wasn't nearly as conspicuous as a girl. Folks back home never mistook her. Of course, they'd all known her since she was born, so they knew she didn't have any patience with girlish gewgaws.

If only everything weren't changing so fast. South Carolina. Rutherford. Risen Glory. Even herself. The old man thought she was a child, but she wasn't. She'd already turned eighteen, which made her a woman. It was something her body wouldn't let her forget, but her mind refused to accept. The birthday, along with her sex, seemed accidental, and like a horse confronted with too high a fence, she'd decided to balk.

She spotted a policeman ahead and slipped into a group of workers carrying toolboxes. Despite the tart, she was still hungry. Tired, too. If only she were back at Risen Glory right now, climbing one of the peach trees in the orchard, or fishing, or talking to Sophronia in the kitchen. She closed her fingers around a scrap of paper in her pocket to reassure herself it was still there, even though the address printed on it was permanently stamped in her memory.

Before she found a place to stay for the night, she needed to see the house for herself. Maybe she'd catch a glimpse of the man who threatened everything she loved. Then she'd get ready to do what no soldier in the entire army of the Confederate States of America had been able to. She'd pull out her gun and kill Major Baron Nathaniel Cain.

Baron Cain was a dangerously handsome man, with tawny hair, a chiseled nose, and pewter-gray eyes that gave his face the reckless look of a man who lived on the edge. He was also bored. Even though Dora Van Ness was beautiful and sexually adventurous, he regretted his dinner invitation. He wasn't in the mood to listen to her chatter. He knew she was ready, but he lingered over his brandy. He took women on his terms, not theirs, and a brandy this old shouldn't be rushed.

The house's former owner had kept an excellent wine cellar, the contents of which, along with the home itself, Cain owed to iron nerves and a pair of kings. He pulled a thin cigar from a wooden humidor the housekeeper had left for him on the table, clipped the end, and lit it. In another few hours he was due at one of New York's finest clubs for what was sure to be a high-stakes poker game. Before then, he'd enjoy Dora's more intimate charms.

As he leaned back in his chair, he saw her gaze linger on the scar that disfigured the back of his right hand. It was one of several that he'd accumulated, and all of them seemed to excite her.

"I don't think you've heard a word I've said all evening, Baron." Her tongue flicked her lips, and she gave him a sly smile.

Cain knew that women considered him handsome, but he took little interest in his looks and certainly no pride. The way he saw it, his face had nothing to do

with him. It was an inheritance from a weak-willed father and a mother who'd spread her legs for any man who caught her eye.

He'd been fourteen when he'd begun to notice women watching him, and he'd relished the attention. But now, a dozen years later, there'd been too many women, and he'd grown jaded. "Of course I heard you. You were giving me all the reasons I should go to work for your father."

"He's very influential."

"I already have a job."

"Really, Baron, that's hardly a job. It's a social activity."

He regarded her levelly. "There's nothing social about it. Gambling is the way I earn my living."

"But—"

"Would you like to go upstairs, or would you rather I took you home now? I don't want to keep you out too late."

She was on her feet in an instant and, minutes later, in his bed. Her breasts were full and ripe, and he couldn't understand why they didn't feel better in his hands.

"Hurt me," she whispered. "Just a little."

He was tired of hurting, tired of the pain he couldn't seem to escape even though the war was over. His mouth twisted cynically. "Whatever the lady wants."

Later, when he was alone again and dressed for the night, he found himself wandering through the rooms of the house he'd won with a pair of kings. Something about it reminded him of the house where he'd grown up.

He'd been ten when his mother had run off, leaving him with his debt-ridden father in a bleak Philadelphia mansion that was falling into disrepair. Three years later his father had died, and a committee of

women came to take him to an orphan asylum. He ran away that night. He had no destination in mind, only a direction. West.

He spent the next ten years drifting from one town to another, herding cattle, laying railroad track, and panning for gold until he discovered he could find more of it over a card table than in the creeks. The West was a new land that needed educated men, but he wouldn't even admit that he knew how to read.

Women fell in love with the handsome boy whose sculptured features and cold gray eyes whispered a thousand mysteries, but there was something frozen inside him that none of them could thaw. The gentler emotions that take root and flourish in a child who has known love were missing in him. Whether they were dead forever or merely frozen, Cain didn't know. Didn't much care.

When the war broke out, he crossed back over the Mississippi River for the first time in twelve years and enlisted, not to help preserve the Union, but because he was a man who valued freedom above everything else, and he couldn't stomach the idea of slavery. He joined Grant's hard-bitten troops and caught the general's eye when they captured Fort Henry. By the time they reached Shiloh, he was a member of Grant's staff. He was nearly killed twice, once at Vicksburg, then four months later at Chattanooga, charging Missionary Ridge in the battle that opened the way for Sherman's march to the sea.

The newspapers began to write of Baron Cain, dubbing him the "Hero of Missionary Ridge" and praising him for his courage and patriotism. After Cain made a series of successful raids through enemy lines, General Grant was quoted as saying, "I would rather lose my right arm than lose Baron Cain."

What neither Grant nor the newspapers knew was