

Chapter One

Tempest

I awoke on the morning of my eighteenth birthday with that excited feeling one gets when they know their life is about to take a dramatic turn, hopefully for the better. In my case, I found it hard to believe it could turn out much worse.

The home in which I resided was located in the heart of the Mayfair District. The townhouse on Half Moon Street boasted four floors of opulent rooms with ample light and modern conveniences. All the rooms, that is, save one bedroom, tucked away on the third floor. The room's location reflected the family's opinion of its occupant—not really one of them, though slightly better than the help. It was in that little room where I awoke, hopefully for the last time.

Mattie, a lively lady's maid of seventeen, entered and set a tray upon a small table near the only window. "Good morning, miss. And a happy birthday to you as well."

Sitting up in bed and stretching my arms over my head, I returned the servant's smile. "Thank you, Mattie," I said.

"Eighteen years old, ya are. Congratulations."

My laugh was tinged with ruefulness. I supposed congratulations were in order for surviving to the age of eighteen. Six long years I had borne the drudgery of living upon the favor of my aunt and uncle, the result of being orphaned when my parents died from a virus which had torn through our county to the north.

When I had first arrived in London, at the mirthless house that was to be my residence, but never my home, I had assumed the arm's length treatment I had received from my relations resulted from fear I carried the same virus which had taken the lives of my parents, and most of our neighbors, too.

Considering, however, their years of indifference, their behavior reflected more an issue of poor character than good hygiene.

I had borne it as best I could, particularly considering no others had come forward to take responsibility for me. My mother's sister and her family had not welcomed me, but they had at least given me sup and a bed.

In addition to my aunt and uncle, there was also my cousin, Audra. Upon arriving and finding a little girl of the nearly the same age in the home, my spirits had soared. I had always wanted a sister with whom to share secrets and games. Perhaps a playmate could soften the loneliness I felt without my dear parents.

Audra, however, mimicked her parents' indifference and even took it a step or two further by being downright beastly to me, her poor orphaned cousin. It was not uncommon for Audra to pinch and slap. She had been taking out her peevish nature on the hired help ever since she realized that adults, so long as they wore servants' uniforms, would do her bidding and tolerate all manner of ill behavior.

I, her unfortunate cousin, was subjected to the same low regard. The first time I attempted

to play with my cousin, Audra bent back my finger at such a severe angle, I feared it would snap off. Frightened and in pain, I ran to my aunt to report Audra's misdeed, assuming she, an adult, would be shocked and make amends. Instead, Aunt Hestia had believed Audra's faradiddles and scolded me for telling tales. As punishment, I was forced to assist the cook for the afternoon.

The hours spent washing pots and scrubbing the floor with sawdust were not nearly as horrible as my aunt had no doubt expected. For me, it was a welcome respite from the harping of my aunt and cruelty of my cousin.

But, make no mistake, I had no wish to take up a life in service, despite the fact that it was on that afternoon I had become acquainted with Mattie, who had just begun her life in service as a scullery maid. The two of us had snatched a biscuit when the cook's back was turned and snuck out to the stable to share it. Despite our different stations in life, a friendship formed over our thievery. Other shenanigans followed over the years, though we both made a pledge to keep those secrets to the grave, which prevents revealing them here.

Soon after the incident with Cousin Audra, my aunt decreed that we two girls were not to play together any longer due to *my* bad influence on her precious daughter. It was hurtful, mean and unfair, but my aunt would not be swayed. Looking back, it was for the best, as it no doubt saved me from years of cuts and scrapes, if not worse.

Henceforth, I was treated as if I were barely visible.

The intervening years had been desolate, my only company the servant girls who cleaned and carried for the family. Mattie continued to be my favorite, but I dared not spend too much time with her for fear her chores would not be completed, the result being punishment or termination for Mattie. Additionally, had any of my relatives realized the extent of my fondness for Mattie, their ire would have been directed at the servant, as well as me. Although from vastly different backgrounds, we were both dependent upon the good favor of the ill-tempered Freebush family.

Eventually, Mattie had been promoted to lady's maid, the improvement in her station within the household the result of her own hard work and the family's difficulty in retaining a household staff. Mattie's new position allowed the two of us to spend more time together. I counted Mattie as my only friend in the household, so her birthday wishes were particularly sweet.

"I brought you a present," the servant said, shyly, pointing to a small parcel on the tray.

I pounced upon it, saying, "Oh, Mattie, you shouldn't have." Pulling off the paper I found a beautifully embroidered handkerchief adorned with bright-colored flowers in tiny stitches.

I stared at the thoughtful gift. "Thank you, Mattie. This must have taken you hours and hours. Where did you find the time? You have been a true friend to me and the only person that I shall miss from this godforsaken house."

Mattie beamed, but then sobered. "I shall miss you as well."

"Perhaps, if things go well once I am married, I will be able to send for you."

"I should like nothing better," Mattie said. "But, do not concern yourself with me. The important thing is that you are to be married. Are you anxious at the prospect?"

Before I could gather my thoughts and answer the question, a screech echoed down the hallway and Mattie scurried off to answer Audra's demands.

So much for my birthday celebration. Tucking the handkerchief into my reticule, I selected a garment and commenced to dress myself. Sharing Mattie with Audra meant that whenever Mattie had a spare moment, she assisted me, but from the instant Audra woke in the

morning until she closed her dull eyes to sleep at night, her singular goal was to be fawned over and when her parents or haughty friends were not available, the task fell to the hired help, specifically Mattie.

I sighed and said a silent prayer for Mattie, hating to imagine how much worse the last few years would have been without her.

Dressed for breakfast, I sat in front of the mirror and attempted to style my hair. As I did so, I contemplated the transformation my life was about to take.

A matchmaker. My fate was in the hands of an unknown matchmaker named Lady Ambrosia. Surely, someone with a name as grand as that would know about love.

During my most lonely and horrendous times in the house on Half Moon Street, I had dreamed of being married someday and having my own family, a handsome husband to treasure me and lavish upon me the love I craved, as well as my own children to cherish and adore, the way my parents had before their inopportune deaths.

I counted herself lucky in many ways. At least I had experienced the warmth of my parents' love and had seen the deep affection they shared with each other. For all of her privilege, Audra had no idea what that was like, given the nature of her own parents. I suppose I ought to have felt sorry for her over that, but I did not.

How was it possible that my own dear mother and acerbic aunt had come from the same branch of the family tree?

My melancholy thoughts were disrupted when Mattie slipped into the room and took the brush from my hand. "I have an idea for a new style. I snuck a peek in one of Lady Audra's fashion magazines. I want your hair to look beautiful when you meet your new husband."

"Do you think I am foolish to allow a marriage broker to select my husband?" The question had been nagging my brain for several days, and sadly, I had no one from whom I could seek advice other than Mattie.

Mattie paused thoughtfully. "No, I do not believe so," she said, stroking the brush through my stubborn auburn tresses. "Otherwise, your aunt and uncle shall select a husband for you, and they would not have your best interests in mind."

I shuddered at the idea of my aunt and uncle making such an important decision for me. Yes, better to trust in the judgment of a stranger than those two sanctimonious sods.

Mattie completed styling my hair and our gazes met in the mirror. "Do you like it?"

"Oh, Mattie, it is beautiful. I do so hope that my future husband, whoever he might be, will not mind my hair."

"Pish." Mattie squeezed my shoulder. "A man would have to be bird-witted not to find you, and your hair, beautiful. Why do you think your aunt and uncle encouraged you to use a matchmaker?"

I shrugged. "I assumed it was because they did not wish the expense of my clothing for a Season, or more so, simply to be rid of me."

Mattie tsked. "Those things may be true. If I may speak boldly, your aunt and uncle are the most cheeseparing people I have ever seen. But, the real reason they wish you gone is because they know that with you around, no man will give a second glance to their bracket-faced daughter."

"I shall agree that Audra is unpleasant, selfish and dull, but do you think her parents see her that way? They have always been rather blinded to reality when it comes to their daughter." I examined my face in the mirror. Was I really beautiful?

“They are rather besotted with her, are they not? However, even they cannot miss her caterpillar eyebrows.”

The two of us fell into fits of laughter. As though she had a sixth sense to discern when anyone in the household was enjoying themselves, Aunt Hestia called for Mattie.

“If I do not see you before you leave,” Mattie whispered, “I wish you the very best. Be happy, my friend.”

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I stared at my aunt and uncle, seated opposite me in the family carriage. After a breakfast during which my aunt and cousin feigned interest in my future and gave lip service to how much they would miss me, my desire to vacate the premises as quickly as possible became even more urgent.

For years, I had tolerated their mistreatment and indifference, primarily because I had no other choice. However, once realization sunk in that my time with them would be short-lived, even the few minutes between breakfast and entering the carriage had seemed interminable.

Frankly, I was surprised when my relations showed an interest in accompanying me, particularly Aunt Hestia whose post-breakfast activities generally included making calls upon the ladies of the neighborhood who carried the most social standing or gossip, or ideally, both.

However, once my aunt indicated her chief concern as making sure I did not make a muddle of things, it all made perfect sense.

My Uncle Norbert clutched a bundle of papers in his hand. When I looked at them quizzically, my aunt piped up with an explanation. “Since you are not yet one and twenty, your uncle has kindly signed the papers to give consent to your marriage, regardless of who the groom might be.” She gave a superior sniff and turned to gaze out the window, no further discussion being required.

As far as they were concerned, I had made a muddle of everything I touched, particularly their family. Upon whom would they place the blame for any future misfortune?

The answer mattered not at all to me. I had served my penance, despite committing no offense other than being without friend or funds.

Silence accompanied us on the way to meet Lady Ambrosia, and I was just as glad not to have to pretend to care about conversation. No doubt we could all agree on one thing—we would each breath a hefty sigh of relief once the match was made, the papers were recorded and my luggage and I were left in the care of Lady Ambrosia.

Oh lord, what if Lady Ambrosia could not make a match for me? Was such a thing possible? Why had I not considered the possibility before now, particularly considering the long years of bad fortune I had endured? Was there any reason to believe the pattern would change?

No. I mentally stomped my foot. There was a husband for me and he would be everything I ever dreamed, handsome, kind, generous and at least willing to tolerate my vexatious red hair.

I would beg, throw myself upon the mercy of Lady Ambrosia, for if a marriage partner could not be found, what would become of me? The idea of returning to the doorstep of my aunt and uncle’s home pleading for shelter made my skin crawl.

No, regardless of what the future might hold, I was moving forward and would never cross their threshold again.

The thought made me so happy I even smiled at the two people whose backs I could not wait to see receding from my sight.

“Well, is it not just like your ungrateful soul to leave without the bother of thanking us for all the kindness we have extended to you over the many years you have been with us?” Aunt Hestia said with a huff.

“Let us not pretend any further, Aunt.” I looked her directly in the eye. “You have fulfilled your obligation, and for that I suppose I am grateful. However, I believe ‘kindness’ is an exaggeration of the utmost.” The carriage came to a halt. Snatching up the documents from my uncle’s beefy hand, I exited the door before the footman had a chance to open it. Turning back, I addressed my flummoxed aunt and uncle. “There is no need for you to accompany me beyond this point. My new life begins now, and I wish you to have no part in it.” Thereupon I slammed the door, thanked the footman for dragging my trunk from the rear of the carriage and turned my back on my old life as the carriage pulled away.