

CHAPTER 1



London
Early spring

Amaryllis

The woman on the other side of the counter glared at me, her lips pressed into a firm line, however I was equally resolute. I had learned my lesson well, and often the hard way. No more would I allow others to dictate the terms of my existence, whether it was my choice of marriage partner—if any at all, if I may be so bold—or something so mundane as my coiffure. The goods which I had provided to the proprietress of the wig shop were first quality and I expected to be compensated accordingly.

I held her gaze and spoke not a word. My confidence was manufactured, yet effective. With a grumble she reached into her pockets and pulled out the coins I had demanded and placed them in the palm of my gloved hand.

Though her demeanor reflected pique, it did not hide the glint

in her eye as she fingered the braid of flaxen hair of which she was now the owner. We both knew it would fetch far more than what she had paid for it, and I turned and left the shop pleased I had stuck to my price.

As I stepped into the fresh morning air, I breathed deeply for the first time in a great while. With the sale of my own hank of hair, I had, literally, cut all ties to my past life. The future beckoned and I moved toward it filled with hope and optimism. At last, my freedom was at hand.

The weight of the past dropped from my shoulders and I strolled along the boulevard with nary a care in the world.

In retrospect, I ought to have been a bit more attentive to my surroundings. A young street urchin came forward, begging coin or crust. It seemed serendipitous that a waif in need would be waiting for me, as my new life would be spent caring for the less fortunate. Smiling down at her and admiring her large brown eyes, I reached into my pocket intending to share my good fortune.

So caught up was I in the child's enthusiasm at the prospect of a gift, the approach of several people, presumably her compatriots in larceny, occurred without raising my suspicions, much to my bad luck.

A firm grip upon my arm halted my progress in retrieving a coin from my pocket. "All of it," a menacing voice whispered in my ear, the heat and stench of his breath making my skin crawl.

Brought up short by this sudden change of events, I paused, wrapping my fist around a small knife which I carried in my pocket. Hoping to surprise my assailant, I yanked my arm from his grasp and stepped away at the same time I drew the knife from its sheath and prepared to defend myself, as well as my life's savings.

"Aye," he said, his dark eyes narrowing into black beads in his head. "I didna take you for a fighter. You must be carrying even more money than what you got from the wig maker." He drew a knife from the waistband of his trousers and assumed an aggressive stance.

The bright sunshine, which moments before had filled my heart with joy, glistened off the blade of his knife, which made my weapon look like a child's plaything. Regardless, I refused to back down. I had not come this far toward my goal to have it stolen by a man with filthy hair and missing teeth.

Rather than wait for him to decide on a means of attack, I took a step toward him and thrust my knife at his gut in a long sweeping motion.

My attacker, however, was not alone. As my arm moved through the air, another of the disgusting band of robbers shoved me to the ground. The impact sent my own knife flying from my hand while the beady-eyed leader leaned over me, the blade of his weapon poking the flesh beneath my chin. "I said, give me all your money."

His instruction was hardly necessary as the foul wretches who accompanied him had already turned my pockets inside out, whooping with glee over their bounty. "Looka here," said one, his hands filled with my money, "I never 'spected this much. You got a good eye for marks, boss."

"Shut yer yap," boss said, removing the knife from beneath my chin, he gave a hard kick to my ribs and then backhanded his underling and grabbed the loot from his hands. Pain shot through my body and I bit my lip to keep myself from moaning. For some reason, the idea of letting this miscreant know his actions had caused me pain seemed worse than the injuries he inflicted.

He turned to the rest of his gang. "Get a move on." He gestured with his head. "We've spent too much time out here already. We be drawing too much attention."

As if on cue, I heard a commotion from somewhere near the street. I stretched my neck out and saw a middle-aged woman with a hat the size of a serving platter approaching at a rapid clip, her parasol swishing through the air in an ominous arc. She landed one blow on 'the boss' and then gave him a jab with the pointed end as well.

“Mind yer business,” he growled. “Get back in yer carriage and get out of here. This don’t concern you.” To emphasize his point, he gave me another kick in the side.

“Oh, young man, I believe you are very much mistaken.” From my vantage point flat on my back on the ground, I watched as she tucked her parasol under her arm and reached into her reticule.

Seeing her put down her weapon, the louse jabbed his knife in her direction. “Good, give me everything you got in there too.”

“Why of course,” she said, completely nonplussed by his aggression. “I intend to.”

My assailant’s grin of greed soon turned to wide-eyed wonder. I moved my gaze from him to the woman with the parasol, though instead of brandishing her feather adorned accessory, her palm contained a revolver which she pointed at the man’s chest. “I believe you had best be on your way, young man. I should hate to fire my weapon and get gunpowder on my new gloves.”

“You ain’t got the nerve.” He put his hands on his hips and glared, a smug grin on his face, as he took a menacing step toward her.

A shot rang out and a cloud of dust fluttered around his feet. “I assure you, I do. Now, please be on your way before I take aim a bit higher.”



I AWOKE with an atrocious headache and soul crushing pain in my ribs. As I regained consciousness, my eyes focused on the bedchamber in which I lay. Glancing to the window, I could see that night was falling. Much of the day had passed while I had been unconscious.

Still in the haze of my traumatic experience, I struggled to recall the balance of the incident. Forcing my mind back to the scene on the sidewalk, I had an image of the scoundrel who had attacked me rushing off after my rescuer fired a weapon at his feet. I could not

help but find a bit of humor in the unexpected and unconventional woman who had come to my aid.

The sound of the gunshot had roused a great deal of curiosity and as my assailant fled, my heroine's footmen had loaded me into her carriage. I might have wished for them to be more careful, but a crowd had gathered and it seemed the constables would arrive imminently and my pistol packing benefactress did not wish to tarry.

I was in no position to object, nor would I have, as I wished to remain anonymous as well.

The carriage had lurched into traffic. I opened my mouth to speak to my mysterious new friend, but overcome by shock and pain, I had lost consciousness.

As I endeavored to make sense of my current situation, I felt someone working the fastenings of my clothing. With a shock, I glanced down to see a man attempting to lower my trousers.

In my groggy state, I did not move as quickly as I ought and soon the man had bared me past the hips. At that point, he stole a peek at my privates, shrieked and jumped backward, shouting, "Bloody hell!"

A painting on the wall fell and landed on his head creating quite a gash along his temple.

Though I was concerned for his injury, I cared more for my own modesty and pulled the covers across my person.

Despite my injuries and throbbing head, I pushed myself to a sitting position and grasped the nearest object within my reach, in this case, a vase of flowers. I had no idea where I was or what this man's intentions were and I raised my hand to defend myself with porcelain if need be.

Never in all my nineteen years had I experienced such a day as this. Were enemies lurking at every corner?

The man stared at me, wild-eyed and dabbed at his injury with a handkerchief. As we assessed each other, the door to the room

flung open and my rescuer stood in the doorway, a tray of food in her hands, her mouth agape.

“Good heavens. Whatever is happening in here?”

The man, who upon closer inspection I noted wore servants livery, responded first. “My lady, I was doing as you asked, but he —” the man paused and a scarlet flush covered his face, “he... is a she!”

I lowered my arm and returned the flowers to the table next to the bed, though I kept a wary eye on the blushing servant.

My hostess appeared completely unfazed by this turn of events. “Thank you, Thomas. Perhaps you ought to see about your own tea and tell cook I have given permission for you to have an extra pint of ale.” The man nodded and exited the room while she set the tray on a table near a window and beckoned me to join her.

I fastened my pants and considered following the servant out the door, but something about the kindly lady in the wildly flowered dress filled me with a sense that she could be trusted. Not to mention I had not eaten in at least a day.

Taking a seat opposite her, I waited as she filled a teacup for me as well as a plate of meat and cheese which she laid before me with a smile. “I am Lady Ambrosia,” she said. “Welcome to my home.”

Surely, she had more than a passing curiosity about my choice of attire—and coiffure— yet she added copious amounts of sugar and cream to her tea as though nothing was amiss.

Despite outward appearances, I could behave in a ladylike manner. “Thank you, Lady Ambrosia,” I said, spreading a linen napkin across my lap. “I am Amaryllis Montlake.”

“How nice to meet you, Miss Montlake. I am pleased to see you are awake. Those ruffians gave you quite a thrubbing.”

“Yes,” I said, touching my fingers to my temple, “my head is pounding still and my ribs are sore, however I am most grateful to you. I hate to think what might have happened if you had not come to my rescue.”

“I am gratified to have been able to assist you.” She gave me a

pointed look before continuing, "I should hate to think what might have happened if your assailants had realized you were more than you appeared to be."

The stench and sight of the leader of the gang flashed into my brain and I shuddered at the implications of her statement. She was, of course, completely accurate and I had been exceedingly fortunate things had not turned out much worse for me.

Perhaps I had not thought through my charade as carefully as I had believed.

"Now," Lady Ambrosia said, her countenance brighter as though she was finished with talking of unpleasant matters, "I do not wish to pry, but I am rather curious about your choice of apparel." She split a scone, then slathered it with strawberry jam and cream before popping a large morsel into her mouth, a dab of cream lingered at the corner of her lip which she dispatched with a swipe of her tongue. Lady Ambrosia was clearly a woman who savoured her food, and I suspected she had a particular proclivity for sweets.

I found myself intrigued by my hostess, a woman who fearlessly took on a street gang, wielded a pistol with a surprising amount of skill and ease and who accepted my unusual choice of clothing as curious but not shocking. I had an eerie feeling that unusual occurrences were part of Lady Ambrosia's daily life.

Her query hung in the air between us. I owed her at least a minimal explanation, considering her kindness to me, a complete stranger whom she had taken in without the slightest hesitation.

I decided to change my life by literally discarding my identity as Amaryllis Montlake and becoming a non-descript, inconspicuous gentleman en route to America where he intended to assist his sister in the operation of a home for unfortunate and unwanted children.

It was a daring plan. Truly shocking. Just two days into my new endeavor, I had been robbed and revealed. With a sigh, I decided to unburden myself in an uncharacteristic way to Lady Ambrosia. She

inspired confidence and I suspected I was not the first to reveal their deepest secrets to her.

I finished off my tea, and enjoyed a bit of meat and cheese as I contemplated where to begin.

“My father was a vicar. A kind man of great faith and a true asset to his community. My mother was the perfect wife for him, sweet and adoring. They gave my sister and myself a lovely upbringing.”

“Why, that sounds ideal. But I assume something went amiss along the way?”

My face heated with a flush of shame. I wiped the corners of my mouth with my napkin, then held it in my lap, twisting it between my fingers as I confessed all.

“My sister is a few years older. She married a noble man of God and the two of them ventured to America to serve the poor. They opened a house and school for orphaned children.”

“Oh, what a grand calling,” Lady Ambrosia said. “However that does not explain why you are so obviously aggrieved by telling me about yourself. There is no shame in having a sister and brother-in-law devoted to the betterment of society.”

“That is very true. My sister, Diana, has great virtue.”

“And, do you take after your sister?” Lady Ambrosia pressed, leaning toward me.

I continued to strangle the linen napkin, then screwed up my courage and looked directly at Lady Ambrosia. “No, ma’am, I am not at all like my sister. I am... deprived.”

My hostess gasped and sat back in her chair. “My dear, what a thing to say. I am sure it cannot be true.”

“Oh, I have it on the best authority. God’s.”

“No!” Lady Ambrosia shook her head from side to side to emphasize her disagreement.

“M-my parents arranged for me to also marry a man of God, though he was a local vicar and had no grand intentions of trav-

eling the world, which was fine with me for I wished only to be a good wife to him.”

“And I am sure you were.”

Memories flooded my mind and I felt a tear trickle down my cheek. “Marital congress,” I whispered for I had never spoken of this shame to another, “awakened something in me. Something my husband called the devil itself. I was w-wanton. M-my body heated with longings and urges. He said I was like an animal in h-heat.”

My single tear had morphed into a torrent. I wiped my face with the mangled linen napkin and glanced at Lady Ambrosia, expecting her to be horrified, but all I could see was kindness and acceptance. She patted my arm. “I am sorry he spoke to you in such an ugly manner, my child. It was cruel. You must have been deeply wounded.”

“Yes,” I said, amazed at her discernment. “I felt dirty and wrong and like a mistake of nature. He told me that I was to simply hold still for copulation and when I writhed beneath him and moans of pleasure came forth from me without my control, he accused me of being possessed by the devil.”

“The bastard,” Lady Ambrosia said, her voice hard.

“You do not believe I am possessed?”

“Absolutely not!”

“B-but he was a man of the cloth, would he not be an expert on such things?”

Lady Ambrosia clenched her jaw for a moment before she answered. “Do you believe you are possessed by the devil? Have you consorted with pagans?”

“No! Of course not.”

“And what of your husband?” She glanced at my decidedly male clothing. “I assume he is not aware of your current location or state of dress.”

“He passed away a few months ago. But not before he had slandered my name throughout both our families. I was left penniless and my parents disowned me based upon his accusations.”

Lady Ambrosia swore under her breath.

“My sister is the only one I have left. Whether she is aware of the words which have been applied to me, I do not know. She has never indicated and I have never told her. Her husband also passed on recently and I intend to join her in America and assist her in her charitable endeavors.”

“And you intend to do those things as a man?”

“It is easier for travel, a woman alone draws too much attention. As for whether I shall continue this persona once I reach America. I do not know. There are certainly many advantages to being a man.”

Lady Ambrosia helped herself to a second jam and cream covered scone and offered one to me as well, which I accepted. Another of the benefits of no longer caring whether my waist was deemed sufficiently narrow—the ability to eat with abandon. A man’s worth was measured by his pedigree and family fortune, not the size of his pantaloons.

“I wonder, and please forgive me if I am prying, my dear, but I cannot help but wonder if your choice to abandon a feminine appearance had anything to do with the wicked things your husband said about you?”

I met her gaze. She was not only kind but unerringly perceptive. “There is some truth to what you say. Cutting my hair and binding my breasts has made me feel less feminine, less needful of carnal pursuits.”

“I see,” Lady Ambrosia said, stirring her tea thoughtfully.

“You must think me a lunatic.”

“No,” Lady Ambrosia said, “not at all. I think you are quite a pragmatist. It is a man’s world, after all.”

“If you cannot beat them, join them, eh?” I said, trying to buoy my spirits.

“Absolutely! And so you shall sail for America soon?” Lady Ambrosia said around a mouthful of food.

Any spirits that had been buoyed soon deflated. “Not soon,” I said. “I was on my way to purchase passage to America when those

ruffians robbed me. I have only a few notes which I had hidden in my shoe in case of an emergency. It would appear, I shall have to rely on those funds to get me by and I shall start over.”

“Oh dear. Can your sister be of assistance?”

“Sadly, no. Her situation is as dire as my own. I hate to imagine what she will think when I write to tell her I have been delayed.”

“I am so sorry, my dear.”

By this time, the tea was gone and I stifled a yawn.

“My apologies,” said Lady Ambrosia, “I have kept you talking much too long. I have brought a powder for your headache.”

I thanked her for the medication and resumed my place in the large bed. Lady Ambrosia tucked the blankets around me and kissed my forehead. “Sleep well, my dear. We shall sort things out in the morning.”