

# CHAPTER 1

*London, Winter 1878*

Fog lay across the darkened streets, thick and white. It clung to every surface, obscured the crumbling faces of the buildings and hid from view even the brightest of the lamplighter's flames.

Clarissa stood on a corner, peering into the soupy mess. Her ears strained for a single sound. Dashing out in front of an unseen horse could mean a grisly death, one that was hardly uncommon on nights like the one she found herself in.

Silence.

She took a tentative step forward, her sodden cloak flapping around her ankles. Taking a deep breath for courage, she made a mad dash for it and landed on the other side of the street, unharmed, but with her heart beating rather too quickly.

The pavement she was on huddled along the rough streets, before which flowed open gutters. The smell from the gutters, made worse by the fog and endless drizzle, was one she had never grown accustomed to, and she raised a pale hand to ward off that stench as she tried to get her bearings.

The denseness of the fog concerned her. It was often foggy, yes, but this fog was different. It seemed alive somehow, and insidious. It seemed intent upon suffocation.

Shaking off that rather fanciful thought, she pressed herself closer to the buildings and nearly tripped over a set of broken stairs that led into a fusty-smelling hovel. Clarissa gritted her teeth. She had to get to the butcher before he closed for the night. This was her neighborhood. She had spent every one of her eighteen years in it, and to get lost in the fog was ridiculous.

Yet she was.

She gathered her cloak more firmly around her. Even wet, it gave her some comfort. The scent of damp wool rising from it helped to keep the smell of the gutters at bay, for which she was grateful.

Her feet took her forward. She saw, with vast relief, that as she walked, several buildings became clearer and that she was, indeed, on the right street and going in the correct direction. The butcher's window was dimly lit, but lit. Clarissa grabbed the door and swung it open. The butcher, a rotund man with a cruel face and a head, both too small for his powerful body, and oddly shaped, gave her a disinterested look.

"I give no credit here."

His words, surly and rude, did not stop her. He uttered them to every unfortunate soul who stumbled across his doorstep.

"I ask for none. I need bones, beef, for a soup."

His eyes raked her. She knew what he saw—a bedraggled young girl whose reddish-gold hair had long since escaped the knot it had been placed into, and now hung in a mass of tangled curls, a ragged cloak over a ragged dress.

"I have little left." He wiped his hand on his bloody apron. "Three coppers would buy them all. Bones are going fast this day."

"I have two coppers. You have an extra copper's worth for your next customer, then." Her clear voice carried in the shop.

His eyes swept over her again. He reached into a small pail and drew out bones, some still glistening with fat. She saw that a few of them still had bits of beef attached, and her mouth watered, but she kept her face schooled in a blank expression.

Both the butcher and his wife were known to short a customer for sheer spite. If he thought her too eager to have the bones he was weighing, he would substitute others for no reason other than to wound her.

The door to the back of the shop opened, and his wife stepped out. She was small and thin, and her head moved constantly, like an eager bird's. Her eyes went to Clarissa, then moved past her.

Clarissa felt a thin thread of anger rise up. The butcher's wife and her husband lived in a three-room flat above the thriving shop, which was situated directly between the houses of the richer merchants and the meanest streets of the slums. It was a life far better than many in the slums would ever attain, however poor it might be. The cold and arrogant woman knew that, and flaunted her good fortune and contempt constantly.

“What does she want?” Her voice was sharp. “We were to close minutes ago. I’d rather not tarry late. There’s a small social at the dressmaker’s house in just an hour and we must hurry to bathe and change.”

The butcher grunted. “Bones. Two coppers worth.”

Clarissa stood still. Their eyes weighed her and dismissed her once again.

The butcher’s wife sniffed. “Well, the storerooms are cleaned and ready for morning. I shall go upstairs now. Pray hurry and finish with the beggarly creature’s bones.”

She walked out the front of the shop, her head high. Clarissa’s anger rose even more. The beggarly creature indeed!

Her fingers clenched beneath the cloak, but she kept her face in the blank expression. She was sure it made her look rather half-witted, but it was better than breaking down in front of those two tyrants! Or, worse, allowing them to see her always-volatile temper snap.

The butcher looked over her shoulder as the bell rang again. The scowl forming on his face became a groveling smile.

He bobbed his head. “Evening, sir. What can I get for you this fine night?”

Clarissa’s gut tightened. Her eyes went to the bones. Her anger seethed. If the man walking into the shop now wanted all those bones, he would get them, and she knew it. The butcher’s suddenly servile attitude told her that he would sell them without hesitation and leave her with nothing.

She turned her head to study the newcomer. He was tall and handsome in a hard and severe way. His coat was black and of good quality. His breeches and boots were well made and very clean. Confusion rode over her. Why would a man such as this come to the butcher by himself? Men with the kind of wealth he obviously had usually sent their wives or servants. His eyes, a clear hazel, peered at her from below perfectly straight brows of jet-black, the same color as the impeccably groomed hair on his finely made head.

Perhaps he was a clerk on his way home, and he had no wife. He would likely want something easy to cook, something far easier than a strong soup. No man wanted bones for a soup, not when he was well off enough to afford clothes and a haircut such as his.

He surveyed the few cuts of meat left in the case. Then his eyes lit on the bones. Close to panic now, she spoke sharply.

“Butcher, I’d like to conclude my business, if you please. You were about to wrap my order.”

The butcher stared at her, his mouth hanging open. The fawning demeanor was gone, and under it she saw the same simmering contempt that his wife had toward those who lived in the slums.

Well, and so what? She had been there first, and she had already ordered the bones. She was not about to let the man who’d come late into the shop steal them from under her very nose!

She drew herself up to her full height, all five-foot-one of it. The butcher’s mouth worked.

“You dare interrupt his lordship’s purchase?”

Lordship? Her face paled. Her heart sank.

Well, in for a penny, in for a pound, as so many were fond of saying. She kept her head high. “I was here first, and the fog is thick. I would like to get home.” Her voice didn’t shake, but she quaked inside as she spoke.

Oh, her miserable temper! Why could she not curb it and her equally miserable tongue?

The man stepped toward her. Fear slammed into her body. He smelled of good soap and ink. His eyes took in her pale and determined face, and his lips curved upward into a smile.

“Serve her first,” he said quietly. “After all, she was here before me.”

The look of shock on the butcher’s face was nearly worth the terror running through her veins. The lord could have her whipped or arrested for her insolence, and she well knew it. Why he was not having either of those things done was anyone’s guess, but she wanted to get away from there—and him—as fast as possible before he changed his mind.

“Aye, then. Two coppers worth of bones.”

“Nay. Give her all the bones you have. And some chops. Put them on my bill.”

The words froze her in place. Her feet rooted to the floor. Her face turned back to his. A tingle of familiarity arced through her, but try as she might, she could not recall ever having seen him before.

“I have no need for your charity, sir, but thank you for the kindness.”

Her hand fumbled under the cloak and produced the two coppers. She slid them across the counter.

Her eyes fell on the chops, and a wave of dizziness threatened to fell her. They were thick and wonderful. They'd be delicious and rich with fat that crackled between her teeth. Her stomach shrank and saliva shot into her mouth. Her brain screamed at her to take the unexpected kindness, but her pride kept her back ramrod-stiff and her face set.

The butcher was in a tizzy of confusion and fear. His eyes darted back and forth between hers and the lord's. Finally he muttered, "Aye," and reached for a few sheets of newspaper to wrap the bones in.

She took the bones. The butcher slid another package, one containing the two smallest chops in the case, toward her. Sweat hung over his face, shrouding it in a fine, greasy mist.

She looked at the chops, at the butcher, and into the amused eyes of the devilishly handsome man beside her. She clutched her bundle more tightly and walked toward the door of the shop without the chops.

"She's the bastard of a noble. Thinks she's better'n everyone else."

The butcher's words stiffened her shoulders. She turned. Her eyes went to the butcher's red and swollen face.

"I am under no illusions as to my station. Perhaps you'd be better off addressing those words toward yourself and your rather ridiculous wife."

She flounced out with her heart pounding.

The nearest butcher besides that one was a long walk away. Now she'd have to make that trek on days she had enough coppers for bones or scraps of meat. The one whose shop she'd just left would cheat her for the rest of her days, just to get even for that last remark, and she was not so foolish that she didn't know it.

The bones drew the attention of a few beggars skulking nearby. One was a small child, barely five. Clarissa knew the bones were dear, too dear to part with, but she wrapped three of them in a loose section of the paper and handed the parcel to the child.

The child darted off. A few older children gave her a hopeful stare. She shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I could not spare those, in truth."

She couldn't. There were still nine bones in the package, but she needed them all. It might be long days before she could afford more, and the oily broth she'd make from them would push her mother's flagging spirits and health a little higher. It would keep them from

starving, even if it didn't ease their hunger, and she could not afford to hand out more, no matter how much she wished that she could.

She clutched the bones beneath her cloak, gripping them tightly in case a thief decided to try to take them. It wasn't at all unlikely. Life was cheap in the slums, and if someone could save his own, he did, no matter the cost to another.

She began to walk, taking a mental tally as she did so. There were four potatoes left in the cupboard. Big fat ones. There were a few wilting carrots and parsnips, and one half of an onion.

She could make a large pot of soup with half the vegetables and the bones. Before adding the vegetables, she'd skim off the rich fat and then halve the broth for her mother to drink. She'd bake the remaining potatoes and parsnips for lunch the next day—and the day after. The soup would fill them for two nights.

There was a loaf of the coarse bread known as household bread, as well. It was enough food for nearly two whole days. Her body relaxed somewhat. There was tea and a tiny amount of sugar, milk and flour, also. If she could but secure a few eggs with the remaining copper hidden in the little pocket sewn into her bodice, they would be fine.

For at least two days.

Her mind, so often numbed by the overwhelming needs of survival, kept hitting against that fact. Two days. It was not such a long time, and when the food ran out again—

Perhaps tomorrow it would not be so foggy, and she could sell more posies, or take in more wash or sewing from the merchants' wives. Unlike the houses of the very wealthy, few of the merchants had their own wells, and it was not at all uncommon for them to hire out their laundry.

Clarissa's mood soured. Of course it wasn't unheard of. No rich merchant's wife would be caught dead on her hands knees by the river, scrubbing clothes in a cold bucket of lye.

“You.”

She turned, her fingers clutching her packet so hard that the rough and splintered edges of the bones scraped and cut her fingertips.

He stood there, his coat gathering moisture. The beggar children approached, their eyes filled with hope. He shook a few coins at them. They came close, and he held up one hand.

“You'll not pick my pockets this night.”

He flipped the coins in a neat little trick. Each child caught one. They ran off, hooting in triumph.

His rich baritone sent thrills down her spine. “You gave away your meal.”

She held her head high. “I most certainly did not. You gave away coin. So why must you point out my doings?”

He came closer. He asked, “Who is your father?”

Her teeth ground against each other. “That is none of your business. Also, your lordship, these streets are dangerous. You should make for your carriage before you are set upon by pickpockets or worse.”

He shifted. “You should allow me to escort you home, then, if it is so dangerous out here.”

Her face flared. “I am not a fallen angel, sir, nor do I have any intention of becoming one. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must go tend to my mother.”

“Did I ask you to become a fallen angel?”

She lifted her chin high. “You don’t have to. There’s only one reason lords chase after common girls.”

“You intrigue me greatly. Tell me your name.”

It was a command. One she could not disobey. He was a lord, after all. Resentment simmered through her veins.

She said, “Sabrina Willis.”

It was the name of a young milkmaid who’d died earlier in the week. She uttered a short apology in her head and hoped Sabrina, wherever she was just then, would understand.

“Well, Sabrina Willis, you have forgotten this.” He held out a large parcel. It ran with grease, and her belly clenched tightly. Pride battled hunger and in the end pride won, but only barely.

“I have no wish to take it, sir. You must forgive me, but I cannot take charity.”

“It is not charity. It’s a gift.”

“And a gift from a man to a young woman should always be looked upon with the gravest of suspicion.”

The words were her mother's, and she'd heard them nearly every day of her young life. His eyes settled on her face. She had the uneasy feeling he was probing deep into her heart—and soul.

“Some gifts are free.”

“No gift is free. It comes with an obligation. I cannot accept it.”

He set the parcel on the ground. “I will leave you, then. I would hate for that to go to waste. Then again, if you don't take it, I imagine someone shall.”

He backed away. The fog swallowed him until he was just a bare outline. She saw the lights of a carriage coming toward his shadowy figure, heard the stamp of a horse.

He got in. The door slammed shut. The horses made their way down the street.

Clarissa vacillated. The package was full. She needed whatever was in it. But to take it—

“Oh, bother!”

She snatched it up and pressed it close. She'd have to think of something to tell her mother, but right then all she could think of was how dangerous it was to be on the street with such a large amount of life-sustaining food. She gathered her skirts in her free hand and fled into the night.