

## Chapter 1

I wake to a hammering on the door, and a sinking feeling.

I'm still wearing my corset, stockings and shift. Though I did at least heave off my great dress, before dropping into exhausted oblivion this morning.

I can tell by the pitch of the afternoon sunlight that I've overslept.

*Did Kitty leave already?*

My eyes flick to the floor. The money we earned last night is gone.

I sit up on the dusty double bed. We've decorated it to look like a four-poster, and arranged sheets and silks. But it's still a cheap mattress. The straw filling pokes into my legs as I slide back the covers.

'Open the door!' calls a voice.

I wince, moving a tentative hand to my head, which is pounding from last night's wine. Then I swing my legs over the side of the bed where Kitty usually sleeps.

We only have one room, so we share. Though in a fit of cleverness, I had a false door and doorframe nailed to the far wall. It gives the impression there is a room beyond. So male guests might imagine that Kitty and I have a chamber each.

My bare feet knock against empty wine bottles, sending them clattering, and the banging outside reaches a fever pitch.

'Open up!'

I stand, smoothing my white linen shift, so it falls to my ankles. My stays are laced rigidly and I can feel where my ribs are bruised, from them digging in as I slept.

I move towards the door, which is now reverberating dangerously, due to the pounding fist on the other side.

No decent woman would open the door dressed as I am. But that is no concern for a girl like me. My only thought is, no one should see for free what he should pay for.

I turn the key, and the knocking falls silent as I lift the latch and open the door.

'Yes?' I set my face haughtily. The man on the other side is not fooled. My visitor is a heavy-set, beefy-faced kind of man. He wears the plain clothing of a debt collector.

'Five guineas,' he says, without preamble.

I shake my head, remembering the pile of money missing from by the bed. Thanks to Kitty, I have nothing but my wits to trade.

'You are wanting Kitty,' I say. 'It is she who owes a debt, not I.'

The man frowns and brings out a dog-eared roll of paper. He unfurls it, licks his lip and scans it with a sausage finger.

‘Kitty French and Elizabeth Ward,’ he says. ‘Both runaways from Mrs Wilkes, Mayfair, London,’ he adds, stating the address as if legal fact of our guilt. ‘You think you can hide in Piccadilly?’

‘I paid my debt,’ I say evenly. ‘Before I left. I owed nothing to her house.’

‘And did you leave Mrs Wilkes stark naked?’ sneers the man. ‘You girls bite the hand that feeds. You ran away, wearing the clothes that Mrs Wilkes fitted you with. Those belong to her, and she will be paid out for them.’

He leans close enough that I can smell pipe tobacco.

‘I mean to leave here with money, or a girl for the debtors’ prison,’ he says.

I feel fear slide into my stomach.

‘I did not steal clothes,’ I say, trying to imitate the boldness that Kitty would muster. I take a step back into the room. The man moves towards me, as though fearing I might run. Though I am trapped by him in this small room.

‘I will show you,’ I say, backing towards the large trunk where we keep our dresses.

I’m gambling that Kitty is wearing her stolen silken gown today. Otherwise I’m about to give her only fine dress to a debt collector.

I open the trunk. To my relief, there is nothing but my plain cotton dress inside.

I pull it up.

‘I stitched this dress,’ I explain. ‘In secret, every morning, for a month, while I worked in Mrs Wilkes’s house. I bought the cotton myself from Cheapside, and I can sew well enough, for I was raised to make my own clothing.’

The man looks at the cheap printed cotton and then back at my face.

‘What of the rest,’ he says, after a moment. ‘The shift and the stays.’ He’s pointing at my half-dress.

‘The shift was always mine, since I came to London at seventeen,’ I say. ‘The stays have been paid for. You may ask Mrs Wilkes.’

I swallow, because this situation can still turn on me. And if Kitty is already out drinking, she won’t think to look for me in the prison. Perhaps not for days.

‘And what of Kitty’s clothing?’ he asks.

‘That is between you and her,’ I say evenly.

He steps forward and grabs my arm.

‘You will tell me where I can find her.’

‘I do not know where she is,’ I lie. ‘She has a new gallant, a lord. She is under his protection. He often takes her away for days.’

‘You share a room,’ he insists. ‘You must know where she is.’

‘I do not know,’ I say. ‘I swear it.’

It sometimes amazes me, how adept I have become at lying. It was never a skill I sought to learn. I suppose necessity is the best teacher.

His fingers dig in.

‘You are her friend,’ he says. ‘You will take me to her.’

I take a breath and go for a bluff.

‘Sir,’ I say, ‘if you bruise my arm, you do damage which must be paid for. I am in keeping with a merchant, who regards me as his own property. He will come for you and he has heavy men to make his case.’

The debt collector’s face shifts to uncertainty. But his hold remains firm. His eyes roam the room, assessing if I am wealthy enough to be telling the truth.

I hold my breath as he takes in the modest chamber that Kitty and I rent. It’s decked out best we can, to look like a high-up boudoir.

Besides the conjurer’s trick of making our plain bed look four-poster, our furnishings are meagre. What’s more, the smell of the cheap straw mattress sneaks through, so we hide bushels of lavender beneath the bedding. It’s a feint to fool aristocrats, but it won’t wash with this man. The smell hangs accusingly on the air.

I see the debt collector take in our mirror, then fix on our trunk. Kitty begged this item of furniture from an old suitor. It bears his household crest, so it looks grander than it might. For a moment I think this will swing things in my favour.

Then the debt collector’s eyes flick to the ageing casement window and down to the floor.

We no longer have a rug to disguise the dusty floorboards. Our old one was bought cheap at London Bridge and had fleas. Since there are two of us, and men do not like to share a bed, Kitty and I could not do with the flea bites from rolling on the rug.

The man’s eyes move up to the false door, assessing the illusion of a second room beyond.

The charade is convincing enough in candlelight. But it’s late afternoon, and dying sunlight streams through our little diamond pane window.

I wait, with my breath held.

Slowly, the fingers ease away from my arm. I move my hand to the place reflexively, rubbing it.

‘You may tell Kitty,’ he says, ‘she must pay her debt. I will find her out, whether she has a suitor or not.’

‘I will tell her.’

The man tilts his head slightly. He’s still standing a great deal too close for comfort.

‘If she does not pay,’ he adds, his eyes sweeping my body, ‘I will come for you, and you will work off her debt with me.’

I swallow, keeping my face neutral. He’s regarding me in that way men do when they decide you might be useful to them.

‘And believe me,’ he adds, with a leer, ‘I will make you work hard for it.’

My expression must hold, because the light in his face dies a little, as though I didn’t react in the way he was hoping for.

He turns and spits.

‘Whores,’ he mutters as he leaves. ‘You think yourselves fine when you’re young and beautiful. But you all end up gutter-beggars in the end.’

## Chapter 2

As the door closes, I realise my heart is pounding. I'm furious with Kitty. She promised me she would not steal clothes. But on the night we ran away, she arrived dressed in the finest silks, announcing she wore this or went naked.

Rose, the only other girl brave enough to run with us, had earned out her own dress long ago. She regarded Kitty's theft with silent terror, clearly regretting her decision to join our escape. But it worked out very well for Rose, in the end. Better, at least, than for Kitty and me.

Willing my body to calm, I turn back to our little room. I have slept too long, and need to get dressed and working.

Carefully, I ease out my own fine dress from its hiding place beneath the straw mattress.

It's linen. But I chose a deep blue colour and the best weave I could afford. From a distance, or in the dark, it could be mistaken for silk. I had it made from my first street earnings at a bargain dressmaker, who understood why it should be cut so very low at the front, and made no judgements.

I stand before our long mirror – the first tool of our trade Kitty and I bought, when we moved into this room. Before even a bed.

I set my dress down, and the skirts are so wide they stand half up on their own, spreading out like great wings. As though a ghostly girl is sunk into our bare floorboards, trying to fly her way to freedom.

I step into the confines of the dress, pulling it up and around my body, and settling into the practised restriction of it.

Mrs Wilkes gave us daily lessons in how to walk gracefully, bearing the weight of our great dresses. But though I learned the walk well enough, I have never felt easy with the heavy fabric crushing me.

I tie the back myself with the great dexterity street girls learn, from doing without maidservants. Regarding myself in the glass, I tighten the bust, pulling my breasts so just the tiniest edge of nipple is visible. This is a trick I learned from Kitty, since neither of us has the pillowy bosom of fattened ladies.

I have never quite lost my country skinniness. And since Kitty and I live hand-to-mouth, my arms and legs have become thinner, these past few months.

My special banknote, which I carry with me always, is tucked down, just out of view. Pressed against my heart. Touching it with my fingers, I make myself the same promise I have made ever since I earned it. That one day I will have my own independence.

I examine the half-moons of my breasts, then reach for my powder, sweeping blush to make my cleavage unavoidably eye-catching.

With my professional advertisement taken care of, I direct my attention to my face. Which is probably the best part of me. It was my pretty face that convinced Mrs Wilkes to take me in, when I was brought ruined and weeping to her door.

Do not think me conceited to think myself fair. Mrs Wilkes only takes girls who are very beautiful, and I was not the most pleasing of her harem.

Rose, who ran away with Kitty and me, is far more lovely than I am. And Belle was so enchanting it would make you sick. Yet she was so nice with it that you could not help but like her. Everyone loved Belle. She was the real thing, beauty and purity.

Belle was the one who warned me to keep my special banknote safe when I first came to the house. She pointed at the other gaudy, loud girls, of whom I was sick with fear at having to imitate, and told me beware.

*They may dress like ladies, Belle had whispered, but many come from the gutter, and they steal as naturally as breathing. Keep anything dear to you tied in your stays.*

Of all the girls I came to know, I had loved Belle the most. Mrs Wilkes sold her in secret just before we ran away and we never found out who bought her.

Besides Rose and Belle, my face was the next best in that house. Better than Kitty who looks brazenly seductive. I have been told my countenance can be almost genteel in the right context. Though I have not lost all of my country mannerisms.

In any case, I have perfectly even features, with wide-apart hazel eyes, a straight little nose and a generous mouth. My grandmother always called me her little elf, with a pixie nose and my eyes always dwelling on mischief.

My nose is a bit big for a pixie now, but it's right for my face, and my eyes still sparkle in the right circumstances. With my wide mouth I fancy I still look a little impish. Not voluptuous like Rose, or perfect like Belle. But attractive enough to turn heads.

I also have good skin, and though it has a tendency to tan, I have not had smallpox. So I have an advantage over many fine ladies who were poxed in childhood. Especially in candlelight.

‘Take note from Elizabeth,’ Mrs Wilkes would say, as we applied make-up at our dressers. ‘She is not the most beautiful here. But men do not mind if a girl is a little brown, or does not fill a bodice. They care for a girl who looks healthy and lively, and game for the sport.’

Mrs Wilkes liked me, because, despite everything, when I settled in, I was always laughing. She said that was what rich old men liked.

I have a few other advantages. Besides my face, I am tall, which is good, and young, which is better. But my figure has not much else to recommend it. I do not put on weight easily like some girls. I cannot yet afford to feed myself up.

So I make the very most of my face, because my whole life I’ve always made best use of what I’ve got. And in this strange midnight world, which I never imagined for myself, my face is my greatest asset.

I pick up my lip paint and notice it has almost run out, again. I sigh, spreading the red pigment as meanly as I can across my lips. A hazard of having a big mouth is using a lot of lip paint.

I tug my dress tight closed and reach for my shoes, which are handmade and expensive. They’re dark blue, to match my dress, with a little heel.

I pick up my gloves from where I laid them out before the mirror.

Gloves are a habit we all learned at Mrs Wilkes’s house. She taught us to scorn the poor wretches who were not educated enough to realise a pair of gloves could double a girl’s worth.

Mine are almost worn through on two fingers and not as clean as they could be. But I don’t dare wash them, for they might fall apart entirely. Kitty and I have run out of credit with the haberdashers.

I reach for my hat, which is wide-brimmed in the shepherdess style – a fashionable prop to keep the sun from my face.

I wear the hat low, so my eyes peek out flirtatiously beneath, and arrange my hair so it seems to tumble from the brim. My head grows masses of chestnut curls, which are abundant enough that I can pass them off as an expensive wig with the right hair ornaments.

I push in my favourite pewter comb, which is decorated with little butterflies and feathers – both blue to match my dress and shoes. Then I take up my hanging purse. Since Kitty has absconded with our main earnings I have only a few small coins. Enough to buy a little cheese and bread if I get too hungry.

Assessing my reflection, I give my breasts a final heave. Then I powder my face white as I dare and rouge my cheeks.

My hazel eyes sparkle back in the glass, as if daring me to do something wicked.

*Tonight could be the night*, I tell myself, as I do every evening. *Tonight could be the night when I meet the right man, and everything changes.*

### Chapter 3

Kitty will be in the gin shop. I can't quite bear to see her there yet. So I walk instead to the bird market a few streets away.

Piccadilly, where we rent our room, has a good-sized pavement, which means us street girls can keep our shoes clean without paying for a sedan chair.

Our area is not as grand as Mayfair, where Mrs Wilkes keeps her famous house. But the street attracts a fair influx of younger aristocrats, looking to entertain themselves any way their money takes them.

Since it is now early evening, traders are clustering on the street to hawk their wares. Girls with baskets of fruit or shrimps on their heads mill around. Men draw carts laden with trinkets for drunk city folk.

The bird market is closing up as I arrive, and sellers are throwing cloths over the larger enclosures. Smaller cages for sale hang on clotheslines, or line the dirt floor. There are teardrop-shaped wicker cages, chaotically wrought wire creations and the occasional elaborately crafted aviary. Still more randomly fashioned holders house the birds themselves.

I walk through the narrow tracks and find out my favourite seller. He's an old man in a patchwork of barely held together clothing. But his blue eyes are happy, as though he doesn't notice his low surroundings.

'Good day to you, Queenie.' He doffs an imaginary cap, grinning.

Queenie was a nickname given to me because some drinkers at the gin shop think I act above myself. It's usually meant as an insult. But I don't mind it from the birdman. I think he imagines it differently.

'Come to buy a bird?' he asks.

I nod. His old hands are already fumbling with the catch on his large cage of birds. I watch as the raddled fingers swoop in at lightning speed and capture a starling.

He manoeuvres the frightened bird out of the entrance, seals the cage and presents me with it, in one dextrous movement.

'Like the look of this little fellow?' he asks, holding up the chirruping starling.

I examine the creature, which the birdman holds with remarkable gentleness.

I nod again and smile.

'He's going to join the others?' asks the birdman, with a wink.

'Yes,' I reply, handing over my penny. The birdman pockets the coin and inserts the bird into a roll of paper, twisting both ends shut.

‘Here you are.’

I take the parcel, marvelling, as I always do, at the lightness of the warm paperbound little body. Then I cross the street to St James’s Park and find myself a patch on the grass where no one is walking.

Closing my eyes, I settle myself to calmness. I draw a picture of a new life into my head. One that is free from heartache and horrors, debt collectors and false suitors. I see myself well-fed, in fine clothes, with my own independence and maybe even a man to treat me kindly.

Slowly I twist open the paper.

‘Out you come, little bird,’ I whisper, unstopping the end and tipping it down.

The bird’s tiny claws scrabble against the paper and then he’s out on the grass, twisting uncertainly in the light.

The bird reminds me of us girls, when we first fled Mrs Wilkes. Blinking in the sunlight, afraid of the sudden big wide world before us.

The creature takes a few bobbing steps, growing bolder now, hardly daring to believe his luck. And then, in a split second, his wings are open and he streaks through the air, vanishing into a large leafy oak tree.

I close my eyes and feel my heart go with it. Then I hear birdsong. I open my eyes again and now I cannot tell which bird was mine, from all the other starlings chattering in the oak. I smile.

The memory of my last failed liaison still aches. But I know I will survive. I’m going to get up again. I’m going to try harder.

*And one day, I promise myself. One day. I will be as free as that bird.*

I crumple the paper prison in my hand and stand, feeling happier.

It’s time to find Kitty. And get to work.

## Chapter 4

I am always glad of my resilience. My soul feels lighter as I walk towards the gin shop.

Perhaps the men from last night will seek us out again. Or Kitty and I will find our way into a ball. We did that once, and you could barely move for drunk and wealthy men believing you to be a real lady. Were it not for Kitty's temper, throwing drink in a man's face, it would have been rich pickings.

I turn off Piccadilly into a smaller backstreet. A jumble of overhead signs announces this is a cork-cutting street, and the squeak of the working knives closes around me.

I catch sight of a familiar face, huddled in a doorway, and for a moment my brain struggles to match the image.

Then it does and I feel a sickening surge of recognition.

*Emily-Jane.*

I knew her from the gin shop, last year. When she was fresh-faced and charming.

Now she holds out a hand, begging. Now her face is sallow and sunken, and she has only a few teeth left in her mouth.

I struggle for the memory of why she left Piccadilly.

*She was put in the debtors' prison less than a year ago. It has aged her ten.*

The woman does not recognise me, but assesses from my powdered face and low-cut dress that I am not one of those ladies who can afford to give charity. So her attention is elsewhere as I approach.

I move nearer, meaning to offer her some sympathy. But at the last minute I change my mind and walk on. It would be cruel to stop and raise her hopes, with no money to give her. She is in need of more than kind words.

Kitty's favourite gin shop has an innocent-looking door and a large sign, displaying a bottle. I push my way inside, to the familiar acrid smell of liquor and the din of drunks.

The gin shop has a sturdy bar in front of a neat row of barrels. The owner, a vinegar-faced woman known as Gin Joan, is filling a glass bottle from the nearest barrel. She turns as I enter and begins refilling the glasses of a cluster of drinkers who are crowded in.

Into the night, the gin shop can get full to busting. But it is early evening and only a handful are here. So the atmosphere is yet to turn unruly.

I scan the collection of drinkers for Kitty. A young woman with bad teeth is raising a glass to be filled in one hand and holding a ragged toddler with the other. She wears the relative

finery of a streetwalker and, judging by the stoic look on her face, is steeling herself for a long night.

A middle-aged woman in a plain wool dress has her arm looped around a man I take to be her husband. They are both shouting cheerfully across the general din. Other little pockets of men and women play at cards or dice. A few rough-looking characters are lounged around with far-away looks, sipping gin like it's a reflex movement.

I see Kitty by the bar. The contrast of the other plainer women makes her appear even more striking. Her feline features are deepened by the gloom of the gin shop, blackening her eyebrows to dramatic arcs over her sultry green eyes.

Kitty has black hair, deep pink lips, high cheekbones and a gap between her front teeth, which adds a roguish air to her seductive appearance. As though she's ever-poised to say something shocking.

She catches my eye and her wide-apart eyes come alight like a cat's. Her delight in seeing me is closely followed by a false, guilty smile. Kitty is famous for having a smile that makes men want to go to bed with her. But her allure stops short at the bedroom. Men want her for a mistress, but she's too much trouble to be a wife. And she somehow belongs more to this crowd than anywhere else, despite her fine silk dress.

'Lizzy!' She raises her glass and straightens with effort. Kitty is slight, with small breasts pushed up towards her collar bone and a narrow waist that emphasises the wide bulky span of her stolen skirts. Her movement in grand clothes is never completely easy.

As usual, she has a little bevy of reprobates around her. She is arm in arm with Susie Sweetlove, who she must have made amends with, because they clawed each other's faces last week.

Pete and Leo, two card sharps from London Bridge gambling house, are hanging around her, hoping they will get some of Kitty for free if she drinks enough.

I move towards the bar and see Kitty is not so drunk as I feared. Perhaps she hasn't yet spent all of yesterday's money.

'Do not allow her credit,' I whisper fiercely as I pass Gin Joan, who has taken a break from pouring to tip a slug of gin down her own throat. Joan swallows, wipes her mouth, then points wordlessly to a chalked line of numbers.

I make out Kitty's scrawled initials next to the spiralling column of figures and my heart sinks.

Kitty sees me looking at her debt.

‘Lizzy!’ she announces with exaggerated cheer, throwing out an arm to pull me close. In the process she drops her hold on Susie Sweetlove, who glowers at me as an interloper.

‘Come join us,’ says Kitty, though she knows I do not drink gin.

As always, Leo attaches himself to me the moment I step near Kitty.

‘Come for a gin today, Queenie?’ he asks. ‘Or are you above us again?’

His hand snakes around, pressing into the small of my back.

I try to make my face belie my feelings. In my current mood, Leo’s poorly judged seductions are the last thing I need. But he is vengeful when crossed. Angering him is unwise.

‘Maybe later,’ I lie.

Leo considers, and I think for a moment he is displeased. Then his face breaks into a predatory smile. ‘A woman who doesn’t like gin,’ he says. ‘You will make a fine wife, Lizzy.’

Leo could be handsome, were it not for his weasel-like expression and a lurid knife wound running from ear to chin. He always reminds me of some feral creature, forever sniffing for a way to press an unfair advantage.

I make a face at Kitty, and to her credit, she registers my meaning immediately.

‘Liz and I will talk outside,’ she announces, taking my hand and tugging me out of the darkly fragrant confines of the shop.

We break out onto the street and I turn angrily on Kitty.

‘A debt collector visited today,’ I say.

‘Oh?’ She looks unconcerned.

‘For *you*,’ I say, ‘for the dress you took. From Mrs Wilkes.’

Her gaze drops to the dress she wears. A huge silken thing, many times more valuable than mine. Though Kitty has managed to lose her gloves and no longer bothers with a hat.

In fact, Kitty seemed to throw off as many of Mrs Wilkes’s teachings as she could, with reckless, riotous abandon, revelling in her descent to street level. I remember the lessons as best I can. But it is hard, for we have less chance to practise them than we did in Mrs Wilkes’s house.

‘You need not be always so fearful,’ says Kitty. ‘She must forget the debt soon. It has been months. This is freedom, Lizzy. We’ve made it. We escaped.’

She gives me a wide grin.

‘It doesn’t feel like freedom to me,’ I mutter, looking at the sloping eyes of a few drinkers who have arranged themselves on the street outside the gin shop.

‘Would you go back?’ asks Kitty. ‘Would you rather work for Mrs Wilkes, like a slave? On your back ten times a night, for any decrepit old man who pays her the right money?’

‘No. I would not,’ I reply. ‘I should rather we lived in hope that some young lord or duke will fall in love with us. And I did not like it that we had to give Mrs Wilkes part of our money.’

‘*Most* of our money,’ corrects Kitty. ‘The old hag took almost all.’

She runs a hand through her long black hair. Mrs Wilkes also brought in very rich men. We do not earn as much on the streets as we did in her house. But I have lost the will to argue.

*At least we make our own destiny*, I remind myself.

Then I remember the beggar girl.

‘I saw Emily-Jane on the street,’ I admit, my fears suddenly returning in lurid detail. ‘Remember her? From the gin shop last year.’

Kitty rubs her forehead foggily.

‘Oh. Yes,’ she agrees.

‘She is begging on the street,’ I say. ‘She looks over forty and can only be twenty-five.’

Kitty looks unconcerned.

‘Emily-Jane had no one to bail her,’ she says. ‘Else she would never have spent a year in the Fleet Prison.’

My face must look distraught, because Kitty’s face twists. ‘Has she lost all her looks?’ she asks.

I nod, the terrible image of the haggard face floating before me.

Kitty puts her arm around me and squeezes me tight.

‘Half the women in London prostitute themselves at one time or another,’ she says. ‘Not all are made for Piccadilly.’

‘Neither are we,’ I insist. ‘We will rise above all this and find ourselves fine men. Men who will keep us and give us an annual wage.’

Kitty only shrugs. Then her eyes widen suddenly.

‘Holy Mary!’ she says. ‘Did you ever see such a thing outside Westminster?’

I follow her gaze and see a glossy racing stallion bearing a handsomely dressed rider, who seems to be struggling for control in the noisy mayhem of Shaftesbury Avenue.

‘That is a thoroughbred,’ I murmur, taking in the shape of the fine-looking horse. ‘That is a foolish animal to ride in a city.’

‘The rider must be a lord,’ decides Kitty. ‘Look at his boots and coat. And he cannot be above thirty.’

I had been preoccupied by the horse, but now my gaze takes in the rider. There is something striking about him, even from this distance. He has a solid poise that hints at a muscular frame beneath the lordly clothes, and a quiet determination, even as he grapples with the temperamental horse.

Kitty nudges me, her eyes shining. ‘Rich pickings.’

I nod slowly, following her line of thought.

London attracts young titles. They come to town to spend their money and avoid their lady wives. A girl who catches a newly arrived lord might do very well.

Kitty licks her lips, considering.

‘You should go,’ she decides. ‘You have more grace with fine folk.’

I can tell she’s thinking of the five guineas she owes. Her eyes slide along the pavement, taking in the array of painted faces that have also seen the rider. ‘I will make sure none come to trouble you,’ she adds.

I am frozen with self-doubt, aware of my poor quality dress and worn out gloves.

‘Lizzy, you are the most beautiful girl in Piccadilly,’ Kitty reassures me, reading my uncertain expression. ‘Men see faces before finery.’

She leans in, fanning my chestnut curls across my shoulders. Then she adjusts my shepherdess hat so the brim comes a little lower.

‘Go,’ she adds, pushing me into the street. ‘Before another girl gets to him.’

## Chapter 5

I move from the pavement onto the dirt of the road, picking my way between the muddy patches to spare my shoes.

The horse has stopped moving forward now. It stands, tossing its head and flexing its legs as if working up to rear. The rider seems to have temporarily given up on urging it onward, running his hands soothingly through the animal's mane.

I'm close enough to get a good look at the man now. His shoulder-length brown hair falls into a slight wave. And as my eyes reach his face, I see his features are fine, with high cheekbones and a straight nose. You could almost think it a feminine face, were it not for the broad jaw.

I am struck by his eyes. So deep brown they are almost black. A girl could get lost in those eyes. They seem to tell a story all of their own.

The rider's attention flicks to where I'm standing, and I realise I am staring. Instinctively I look away. The focus of that dark gaze is so intense that it seems to pierce right through me.

My eyes drop to his well-worn riding boots. The butter-soft leather has faded to grey, looping in large folds at mid-thigh. The pirate style suggests he's new here. City lords wear stockings and shoes.

*Courage, Lizzy, I admonish myself, you are not a girl to be cowed by an aristocrat.*

Frowning at my lowered gaze I force myself to look upwards. I take in his long black frock coat, hanging open at the front, with large rolled cuffs, and French lace at his wrists and at his neck. My eyes flick defiantly to the rider's face and I see his expression has changed. Before it seemed as though he was assessing me very deeply. Now there is something almost challenging there, as though he is waiting for me to disappoint him.

I take a determined step forward and his horse snorts as I near the flank. I reach out a hand to pat, feeling more confident. I've got a way with horses. This animal is wet with nervous sweat and I rub him soothingly.

When I look back up to the rider his head is tilted and the dark eyebrows are slightly raised. Perhaps he is outraged that I have been bold enough to touch his horse but I cannot tell. 'Are you looking for business?' I ask, the universal question of prostitutes all over London.

He sweeps me with that appraising stare again. I cannot decide if it is unnerving or flattering to be the object of such undivided attention. This time I refuse to look away.

‘I am looking for an ostler,’ he replies eventually, giving no indication my lack of servility offends him. The horse twitches beneath him as he speaks. ‘I need blinkers to get this animal to Mayfair.’

His voice is not loud. But it has a smooth authority that makes his words resonate easily through the Piccadilly hubbub.

‘What is your horse’s name?’ I ask, trying not to be unnerved by the command in his voice. His accent is upper-class with a slight country burr making him sound warmer than most aristocrats. There is a calm power there.

The rider frowns, studying me, as though I could be working some confidence trick. ‘Samson,’ he says, after a moment.

‘Easy, Samson,’ I whisper, patting the flank. ‘Easy.’

The horse lets out a disgruntled snort. As though he’ll take pacifying for the moment but it won’t wash in the long term.

I look up to the rider. ‘Your horse thinks to bolt,’ I explain. ‘You will not easily get him to an ostler, and blinkers will not help. It is the noise that frightens him, not the sights.’

I consider for a moment.

‘If you like, I will guide him to Mayfair, with you atop. It is only a few streets from here. He will be easier with another person alongside.’

The man nods, acknowledging the truth of this. ‘I would be grateful,’ he says. The tone suggests he is not used to being beholden to people.

I make an assessment of his hanging pocket. ‘You must pay me three shillings,’ I add.

The man’s eyes widen and I see him make a swift calculation of his options. I’m on surer ground now. We both know he will not easily get to Mayfair alone. He must take my offer or risk injuring his horse.

‘Very well,’ he says, after a pause. For an instant I think I see a glint of admiration in his face, and then it is gone.

‘You should be ashamed of your lack of charity,’ he adds, his face hardening to an expression more familiar to men of his rank. ‘I am a visitor to the city.’

I take hold of the bridle.

‘It is not you who needs charity,’ I say easily, wrapping the reins around my hand. ‘And shame costs money.’

We set off in silence, at a slow walk, and Samson calms considerably with someone to lead him. I plot a path to avoid the squawking cockfights on Cockspur Street and away from the hustling sedan chair carriers on St James.

‘What is your name?’ I ask the rider, since he’s making no effort to speak.

‘Edward,’ he says. But he does not ask mine. He seems transfixed by the squalor of Piccadilly, and I wonder how often he visits the city.

We walk on a little more.

‘Samson is a fine horse,’ I say, reverting to the easy small-talk that has become part of my working girl persona.

‘How do you know about horses?’ Edward asks after a pause. I get the feeling he would rather not ask. But his curiosity has got the better of him.

‘I grew up in the country,’ I explain. ‘My grandfather bred horses and I learned a little. Yours is an Arabian thoroughbred,’ I add, by way of illustrating my knowledge. ‘It is the finest I have seen.’

‘Do you ride?’ he asks.

‘Yes.’

‘Side saddle?’

I shake my head. ‘Only astride,’ I admit, not liking to confess I cannot ride the lady’s way. ‘I have never ridden in London,’ I add, reasoning he might as well know the whole. ‘Or an animal as beautiful as this. You must be proud to own him,’ I conclude wistfully.

I glance up and the expression on Edward’s face is thoughtful.

It strikes me anew how handsome he is. Many lords have a certain look after generations of inbreeding – exaggerated noses or pronounced overbites. Or they are florid with wine and swollen with gout. Edward’s features could be described as refined.

‘It is not my horse,’ he admits. ‘I am usually a better rider.’

‘You must have good credit,’ I say, ‘to have the loan of him.’

‘He belongs to a friend.’ His tone pronounces the topic is closed, and I let the subject drop. I do not mind. I have no sensitivities and expect no courtesy where rich men are concerned.

Samson tosses his head agitatedly and I let him some slack, and then wind the reins back in.

‘Thoroughbreds are temperamental,’ I explain. ‘If you sit a little further forward, you will help him feel easier.’

I do not know what it is that makes me so outspoken. Only that he does not seem so arrogant as most lords.

Edward frowns in reply, and I think perhaps I have misjudged and spoken too free.

We reach a junction.

‘Which street in Mayfair?’ I ask.

‘Clarges Street.’

I consult my mental map. Though I lodged here with Mrs Wilkes, we slept by day and worked by night. The only way I know for certain is through a busy street.

I move around to catch Samson’s head between my hands, and blow gently in his nostrils to calm him.

He snorts back, lowering his head, and I press my forehead to his.

‘It will be a little noisier here,’ I explain to Samson apologetically, fixing on his uncertain eyes. ‘But I will take good care and no harm will come to you, I promise it.’

I release his head when I’m confident he’s taken my meaning, and move to take his bridle again. It is only then I realise Edward is looking down at me with a slight smile on his lips. I look away, embarrassed, concluding fine folk do not talk with their horses.

I’m about to walk on, when Edward slides down from the saddle in one agile movement. He lands directly next to me and his sudden proximity makes me catch my breath. Edward appeared statuesque on the horse, but now his height is daunting. I am not used to men being this much taller than me. His muscular frame has a coiled energy that is almost palpable. There is an easy grace to him that puts me in mind of a predator. Without meaning to I take a slight step back.

Edward takes the reins from my unprotesting hand. His face is completely neutral; though he must know the effect he has on women.

I look up at him questioningly. Perhaps my conversing with his horse was the final straw. He has decided that I am too strange a companion to brook any further association with.

‘Will you walk on yourself from here?’ I ask.

He wraps the reins around his forearm but shakes his head.

‘I thought you should ride,’ he replies.

‘What?’ My first thought is he is mocking me.

‘I should like you to ride,’ he repeats patiently. ‘The horse seems to like you. I think he would be easier.’

I point to the shining coat of the thoroughbred, thinking I have mistaken his meaning.

‘You want me to ride your friend’s horse?’

He nods patiently, as if explaining to a child. And there is that disarming smile again, very faint, but unmistakable. As though some deep part of him is amused beyond measure.

‘This horse?’ I clarify, trying not to be disconcerted.

‘Unless you think I have some other horse hidden about my person.’

It takes me a moment to realise he is in jest. I break into a wide grin, and unexpectedly, he smiles broadly back. Then his features recompose themselves quickly, as though the expression took him by surprise too.

For an instant he looked much younger than the thirty or so I judged him to be.

‘Do you need a hand up?’ he asks, reaching forward to offer his arm.

The bare skin of his hand brushes mine and I start slightly. The unexpected contact makes the hairs on the nape of my neck stand on end.

I realise I am transfixed by his dark eyes again, and now they seem to hold a question. As if something in me has confounded him.

To hide my confusion I step quickly away and put my hands on the horse. In a moment, my foot is in the stirrup and I’ve swung myself full over Samson’s sturdy body.

‘You have a more confident mount than many lords,’ Edward murmurs approvingly. All his lordly poise has returned now, and I wonder if I imagined the moment that seemed to have passed between us.

Atop the fine horse I sit taking it all in, smiling delightedly. Samson’s black coat has been groomed to a high shine. His mane is fastidiously plaited close to his neck, revealing the prominent muscles that join to his broad back. I can feel the power of him, solid and expectant.

I am beaming at my chance to ride him.

‘Such a beautiful creature,’ I murmur, leaning forward to run my hands across Samson’s wide neck.

I know I must look a fine sight. A gaudily dressed girl on top of this magnificent beast. But I don’t care. Not in the slightest. This is the finest horse I have ever seen in London. And here I am about to ride him.

I let my eyes wander, taking in my elevated view. The city looks a great deal more regal from this height, with the mud and the squalor safely hidden away.

Edward gives a little smile, but doesn’t say anything.

‘To Clarges Street then?’ I ask, uncertain of myself again. He gives a little bow, and I touch my legs against Samson, urging him softly forwards and marvelling at my good fortune.

This is starting out to be a good night after all.

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