

Chapter One

Someone was singing outside her window. Or quite possibly a cat was being strangled. As her mind grew more fully awake, Matty realized that there were several men on the street outside, all sounding as drunk as David's sow. Hythe's public houses must have closed by now, or perhaps the men had been forced to leave because they'd run out of money. They'd soon disperse to their homes. At least she hoped it would be soon so she could get back to sleep. She had visits to make tomorrow in anticipation of Christmas and she would need all her wits about her.

"And there, with good Fellows," they sang, "we'll learn to intertwine The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchuss's Vine."

There was definitely more than one cat being strangled. Matty put her pillow over her head and told herself she'd never liked cats much.

Eventually the horrid sounds stopped.

"Gennelman's fallen over there, 'asn't 'e?"

"Out like an ash."

"S'pose I should be gettin' to m' bed."

"What're we to do with the gennelman?"

"S too cold t'leave 'im 'ere t'sleep it off."

"Let's leave 'im to the almshouse."

The sounds of heaving and grunting commenced outside as they apparently dragged the drunken man around to the front of the house. The house was full, as always, but Robin would let anyone in need of shelter spend the night on the floor of the entry.

At least she could be sure that Robin would answer the bell so she would not have to. The old lad's vision might not be the best, but his ear missed nothing.

She rolled over and went back to sleep.

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William Fletcher sat up, leaned against the wall, rubbed the stubbly growth of beard on his chin and looked around the narrow room. It was plain and sparsely furnished but clean, with whitewashed stone walls that gleamed in the morning light coming through the window above his head.

As he tried to swallow, he noticed that his mouth tasted as if a large dog had taken up residence inside during the night. His neck was stiff and his head hurt like the devil.

He had no earthly idea where he was either, but it didn't much matter. He had no place to go.

Wind rattled the window above, reminding him that wherever he was, it was December, and in this godforsaken English climate he was lucky to be indoors. He would stay as long as he could.

Or maybe not. A woman approached, a woman with a face that evoked nightmares from his childhood. She was tall, especially now as she stood looming over him. Her face, like her build, was broad, with big hazel eyes that seemed able to look right into his soul and detect every weakness. Though her wild brown hair was now pulled back and tucked under a demure white cap, he would bet she could still throw a punch as well as when she was fourteen. She had to be nearly twice that now. Matilda Blakethorn, terror of St. Margaret's parish. Fully grown and three times more terrifying.

She scowled at him with the look he remembered so well. “So. You’re awake then, are you?”

He scrambled to his feet and swallowed in a vain attempt to force some moisture into his parched throat. “I was just leaving,” he croaked. As he stood, he belied the intended strength of his statement by staggering backward and having to brace himself against the wall.

“Not without some breakfast first, I think. You’ve not been here before. Food is served in the basement, next to the kitchen. Stairs are just down there.” She nodded toward the door on his left.

Was it possible? She didn’t seem to know who he was. But she spoke the truth—he had never been here before, wherever here was.

He licked his dry lips, gathering courage to ask her a question, even though the sound of his voice would likely give away his identity. “Thank you. Would you be so kind as to tell me where I am?”

She did something totally unexpected then—she laughed. Her face changed from that of a big beefy sergeant to something resembling a female. A not terribly ugly female. “Had a night of it, did you? You’re in St. Bartholomew’s Almshouse.”

His weary mind tried to piece together what that meant. St. Bartholomew’s was the old ragstone almshouse in Hythe. He was even closer to Godinton than he’d realized. The last thing he remembered was a gaming house in Tunbridge Wells.

“And,” she added, “judging by your clothing, you have no need to be here. So after breakfast, please do us the courtesy of removing yourself to your home to make room for the truly indigent.”

He just looked at her for a moment. It was true, then. She did not recognize him.

But he couldn’t resist just testing her a bit more. “I have no home to go to.”

Oh yes you do. Your uncle is Nicholas Roundell Toke, Esquire, of Godinton and your family estate is not two hours ride away.

But she said none of that. She didn’t realize who he was. She did not remember that she had the power to turn him into a blubbering idiot.

He smiled.

“You seem remarkably joyful for a man with no home and no money.”

“Oh. Er, you’re right.” He didn’t have much to smile about, actually. The last thing he wanted to do was present himself on Uncle Delly’s doorstep seeking admittance like the prodigal nephew he was.

“Are you in need of employment?”

“Not exactly.” He was in need of luck, that was all. His had run dry. But it would turn, it always did. Until then, he needed a friend.

And he certainly wouldn’t find one here. He pushed away from the wall, not really aware that it was still holding him up. So he staggered again.

“You do seem to be in need of nourishment.”

“I’m fine. I—” The room spun in circles a few times and he forgot what he was going to say.

She pointed to the door. “Breakfast. Downstairs. Now.”

Had he remembered to eat yesterday? He had vague memories of a mutton chop, but that may have been the day before. Now food sounded both heavenly and revolting at the same time.

At least it would give him something to do. “Very well, breakfast it is. Thank you for your hospitality, Miss Blakethorn.”

If it surprised her that he knew her name, she didn't show it, just as she still showed no sign of recognizing him. She offered a resigned smile, turned and left through a door opposite the one where she'd sent him.

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"What's with the swell in the frock coat?" Robin asked as Matty stepped in to the long basement room to find out whether the men had finished breakfast so she could send in the women and children before she left.

Matty eyed the yawning gentleman for a moment, the one who'd come in the middle of the night and slept on the entry floor. His shirt was of the finest linen, a bit dirty but not terribly worn, and his coat and trousers were of similarly fine cut and composition. He had a sallow complexion under a few days growth of dark beard, his dark eyes were somewhat red rimmed. Overall, his appearance was unkempt, but not as if he were habitually so, just as if he had traveled a great distance in haste without stopping to shave or change linen. But if he had been in haste before, something had changed, for he did not now seem to be in any hurry whatsoever. He stared bleakly into his noggin of porridge as if a fortune teller had just read his future among the oats.

"I don't know," she mused. "Seems in poor health. Do you suppose he's a confidence man of some sort?"

"Hmnn." A shock of gray hair fell in Robin's eye as he squinted. "I'd keep an eye on the silver if I was you."

They both laughed, knowing whatever silver the Blakethorn family had possessed had been sold off long ago.

"If he stays," Matty instructed her assistant, "put him to work with the others."

"What? In those shoes?"

She nodded. "And if he won't work, out he goes."

Robin laughed again. "You, Matty, would not put out the devil himself if he showed up on th' doorstep."

"But our gentle guest does not know that. Now I must go out and start the visits today."

"Visits?"

"You know." She rolled her eyes. "The Christmas visits. Time to beg for money. Remind them of the duties of the season and so forth."

"Ah yes. *Noblesse oblige* and all that."

"I'm hoping my father will join me. Nobody likes to give money to a woman."

"The rev'end seemed in good spirits when I took him his small beer."

She just looked at him, knowing full well how unlikely that was to have been true.

"Well," Robin admitted, "he seemed no worse'n usual this mornin'."

"His usual won't be good enough, I'm afraid. I shall have to try to inspire a little more."

"D'ye start out toward Folkestone?"

She nodded. "Rev. Bligh has been good enough to lend us St. Leonard's pony cart, at least for today."

"And do he expect you to wear out your shoe leather when you set out in t'other directions?"

She smiled. "I think he'll want to see how the pony fares before he promises it to me for the succeeding two days."

"Well, best o' luck w' the undertaking."

She held her finger to her lips, trying to frown but letting a laugh escape instead. "Do not let my father hear you or we shall all be treated to a sermon about the dangers of paganism. We shall have a *blessed* undertaking. I hope. I'm not certain how much longer I can extend our credit with the coal merchant."

"Aw go on, jus' charm 'im. Smile and bat your eyelashes an' that should get us another for'night, at least."

She felt the smile melt off her face. "Not bloody likely."

"Who said what about your father over'earing language?"

She sighed and started for the door, but then stopped and turned around. "You can hustle this lot off and I'll send in the east siders before I try to get the old man to put on shoes and a coat."

"I can send the girl to do it."

"I haven't seen her at all this morning. So I might as well do it. It's on my way to the back wing."

"Fair 'nough." He stepped over to the head of the table. "Finish up, gents," he urged. "We need to be off to work."

Work? Will felt a headache settle just above his right eye. He had envisioned spending the day sleeping under the window where he'd spent the night. Then, as it grew dark, he planned to find someone headed in the direction of Tunbridge or Epsom. No good could come from staying in Hythe. The region had twice the ratio of vicars to gamers and besides, it was far too close to Godinton.

It seemed now though that despite his fatigue and headache, he would have to leave immediately or be forced into some sort of hideous labor with all the other unfortunates sharing his breakfast table.

A slight, wiry, energetic man with a blue-checked waistcoat and gray hair that shot out in all directions ordered them—about eight in all—to follow him back up the narrow staircase to the small entry hall that apparently divided the house into separate chambers for women and men. Others in the group referred to the little blue-checked chap as "Mr. Robin".

That worthy gathered the men of the almshouse around him in a group. "Most of ye will be working on the canal bridge repairs agin, but I need a few as knows joinery to build bunks for the east wing."

"How so?" asked a man with stooped shoulders and long, greasy, gray hunks of hair that hung past his shoulders.

"We've so many children now," Robin explained, "Miss Matty thinks if we stack the beds, there'll be more room for all to move about."

The greasy-haired man nodded, as did the others, about half of whom, Will realized, were just as stooped and greasy-haired as the man who'd spoken.

"So, then." Robin looked around at them in turn. "Who has experience with joinery or carpentry?"

No one moved or said anything or even looked up at him.

"None of ye?"

Will cleared his throat. "I've no idea how to build proper furniture. But I could build simple bunks—any man could."

"Not I," the man nearest him grumbled, rubbing his gnarled hands together.

"Why, they're just straight slabs nailed together like so." Will demonstrated with his hands.

The man next to him shook his head. "Nivir seen one."

“Are you in earnest?” Will could draw pictures of bunks with his eyes closed— rows and rows of them. But then, he’d spent years in an army barracks with little to do some days but accompany his sergeants on inspection rounds. Apparently this man had spent his time otherwise.

“A’right then, you, eh.” Robin frowned at him. “I don’ b’lieve we ever got your name.”

Will cringed when he realized how much he’d drawn attention to himself.

“William...Smith.”

“Very well, Mr. Smith, you shall lead the exercise. Choose two of the men to assist an’ the rest of us ’ll be off.”

“What?” He’d never meant to lead anything, just to show the others how easy the task would be. “I think there must be a mistake.”

“You can’t build a bunk?”

“No, that’s not it, but uh, ah yes, Miss Blakethorn told me I must leave after breakfast.”

“If yer to lead a work crew, I’m sure she won’ object to yer stayin.”

“But—”

“I think Hollins and Ponsonby will be yer best assistants.” He nodded to two of the grayest, greasiest and most stooped men of the lot. “You two stay. The lumber’s in the yard and what tools as we have are in the coal shed.”

“But—”

“But what?”

Suddenly, Will found that he could not voice his objections. Could he refuse to help build bunks for the poor children confined to the almshouse just because he had a headache? Or because he wasn’t dressed for the undertaking? He would manage this task and then leave afterward, as planned. “Where is the yard?” was all he asked.

“They’ll show you. We’ll see you back here for dinner.” With that, the wiry Mr. Robin urged his charges out the front door wearing nothing more against the December cold than the clothes they’d worn inside. Will shivered involuntarily just thinking of the work that must lay ahead of them.

All he had to do was oversee the construction of a few simple bunks in the comparative comfort of a sheltered yard. Then perhaps he’d make his way to the Shorncliffe Garrison, see if anyone he knew was still there.

“Very well,” he said to Hollins and Ponsonby. “Lead the way to the yard.”

The first fellow—he had no idea which one he was—scratched the side of his head and came away with a loose handful of grizzled hair. “Didn’ know we ’ad a yard.”

“We neither of us ever goes out,” the other man explained in a raspy voice.

“Oh, well there’s a help.” His headache suddenly hit with enhanced force and his mouth grew so dry it seemed as if all the water in the world could not quench his thirst. “Do either of you know the way to the kitchen, then?”

“Aye.” Both men nodded.

He didn’t know which one spoke. It didn’t matter. He needed something to drink and he needed it now. “Show me.”

Making their way side to side as much as forward, the two men tottered toward the stairs and then down, one agonizing step at a time, bracing themselves against the walls that pressed in close on either side.

They went past the long narrow room where he’d breakfasted to another space, more square with a great yawning fireplace at the end.

A woman in a big white apron squinted at them as she looked up from a pot she was stirring. "S a bit early for you gents, ain' it?" She squinted even more. "An' who's wif you?"

"A Mr. Smith," the raspy-voiced man called out.

"Who?"

Will tried to clear his dry throat. "Mr. Smith. I am to lead these two good men on work detail in the yard. But first I was hoping we might brace ourselves with a fortifying drink of some sort."

"Work? These two?" The cook laughed. "Best of luck w' that. Spend every morning annoyin' the wimmin at their sewin' an' every afternoon in 'ere takin' up all the space in front o' me fire."

"Wonderful," Will muttered as he suddenly succumbed to the urge to lean back against the wall.

She shooed them away with her arms. "So outta 'ere, now. Miss Matty said I ain' got to let you in 'til after I'm done cookin' the dinner."

"Aw, well now."

Both of the old men turned and started their slow shuffle out of the room.

Will stayed behind. "My thirst sorely has the better of me this morning," he said quietly, embarrassed. "Might I trouble you for something to drink?"

The cook nodded toward a pail sitting by the door. "There's a dipper in there somewhere."

"The local water has a saltiness I cannot endure. Have you anything else? Grog, ale, punch?"

She shook her head. "We have a supply of small beer but—"

"That will be fine."

"But that's reserved for the Rev. Blakethorn. We've only enough for 'im."

"I will replenish your supply, I promise."

She laughed again. "Oh no. I can't give anythin' to the indigents 'cept cider at lunch an' tea in the even."

"Cider?" He heaved a sigh of relief. By this time, the autumn supply of cider would have started to turn. "May I have some?"

She frowned. "It's for your dinner. We haven't 'nough to be handing it out at all hours."

"Please." He hated to beg. But what choice did he have? He was like to collapse at any moment.

"Why're you 'ere, anyways? Ah." She looked suddenly relieved. "You must be a friend of Miss Matty's come in to help make life better for the poor like she done. Very good of you sir, I knew you couldn' be one of them." She shot a contemptuous look toward the old men still visible through the doorway. "Would you rather cider or small beer? I'm sorry I've nothing nicer to offer you."

"Ah, well, either would be fine." He could let her continue on in her mistake if it got him what he needed.

And it was not so far off from the truth anyway. Except that he never in a million ages would have considered himself a friend of Matilda Blakethorn.

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Matty realized she was limping as she left the stable at St. Leonard's. That seemed to be happening more often or maybe she was just noticing it more as she aged. When she was young and her father asked the doctor why she walked so strangely, he pointed out that her legs were slightly different in length and she would most likely be lame by the time she was fully grown. And now she was most definitely grown and not lame. But in order to walk with an even gait,

she had to hold her hips a certain way and it took a great deal of effort. As she grew older, maybe it was taking more effort. Or perhaps she cared less than she used to about walking like a “normal” woman.

She approached the house from the rear, planning to go straight to her own chamber in the back to rest for a few minutes before supper. But there was a man in her way. Or rather, there was a pile of lumber in her way but she presumed the wood had been placed there by the man who was cursing at it.

“Hell and damnation!” He threw a pair of boards to the ground in disgust. It was the drunken gentleman from the previous night, looking a great deal less the gentleman now, with his coat off, sawdust coating his trousers and his face dripping with sweat, despite the cold.

“You’re still here.”

He grimaced. “Unfortunately. I should have followed your orders and left straight after breakfast.”

“Instead you disregarded my instructions and apparently spent the day destroying our supply of donated lumber.”

“I was trying to build the bunks you wanted.” He picked up a piece that had split and eyed it critically.

She frowned at the stack of mangled wood. “Should you not have left this task for someone who knew what he was about?”

“Yes.” He dropped the wood he was holding, shook back his head to knock a loose strand of hair from his eyes and glared at her. “Yes I should have. Unfortunately no one else volunteered.”

“Well, it would have been better had no one undertaken the work. At least so much of our lumber would not be ruined.”

He looked away, fuming and apparently also somewhat embarrassed. “I will find more for you.”

She laughed, despite herself. “How on earth would you do that?”

“I have means. Or know people who do.” He turned and looked her full in the face for the first time.

She staggered backward. His scruffy beard faded away, his sallow cheeks filled out into rosy boyish roundness and she had to fight the urge to run and hide behind a tombstone.

But it couldn’t be.

One of the squire’s family in the almshouse? They’d sooner see a pig in the prince’s palace. But those eyes—the fierce mocking challenge in those eyes—she would never forget that look.

Another step backward and she was falling as a loose piece of wood slipped out from under her foot. She landed on her backside hard, stunned, unable to breathe for a moment. And in the next moment, he was looming over her. She cringed, waiting for the inevitable ridicule.

“Are you hurt?”

She opened one eye warily.

“Oh, you are. Something’s wrong with your face, your eye—”

She opened both eyes, seething with anger at him and herself for allowing herself to be tricked into making a face. “I am not hurt. You should leave, William Fletcher.”

“So you do know who I am.”

“I do now.” She sat up fully, feeling a stab of pain in her lower back. It would be awkward for her to stand up and she didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of witnessing that spectacle, so she stayed on the ground. “I’ve no idea why you are here, but it matters not a whit. You need to leave.”

“Rest assured, as soon as I’ve set this mess to rights, I shall be as distant as a penny on tax day.”

“Just leave it. I shall have one of the men sort it out.”

“How? You cannot even stand up.”

“I can indeed.” Awkward or not, she drew her legs up, pushed off the ground with her hands and somehow made it upright, staggering forward a little. She took two steps toward the house, then stopped and pointed in the opposite direction. “Leave. Now.”

“You are hurt. You’re limping.”

Damn. “I am not.” She winced at the effort it took to straighten her hips and walk with an even gait, but she did so anyway to demonstrate. The pain was intense. But she would not give this man reason to ridicule her ever again.

“And now you’re crying.”

Her shoulders shook with impotent rage and something much worse. Humiliation. “I told you to leave.” Her voice broke on the last word and she hated herself even more for showing that weakness.

“And I told you before,” he said in a quiet voice. “I have no place to go.”