

## CHAPTER ONE

### *London, England*

### *August 31, 1888 – The Beginning of the Autumn of Terror*

Hell was supposed to be a place of flames and heat, not darkness and damp; not this perpetual night broken feebly by a few dim shop-front lights. It seemed to Rhiannon Moore that Hell was here on earth but there were no real demons, no fire and brimstone — just human deeds and human woes. Damnation was to be found in poverty, and in the acts that desperation drove men and women to commit. Rhiannon understood that all too well.

She had wandered too far west, away from the brightly blazing, noisy, and crowded environs of Mile End. The tawdry cheerfulness of hawkers and cook-shops and gin-palaces was absent in the stretch of road where Wentworth Street turned into Old Montague Street. Instead of laughter and the crash of barrel organs, there was an oppressive silence in the tenement houses and lightless passages. It weighed upon the spirits.

The cobblestones were slimy with some evil-smelling substance. Houses leaned together drunkenly, rotten from cellar to chimney pot and reeking of corruption. In a doorway, some men were tormenting a rat, having pinned the wretched animal's tail to the threshold with a nail. The pallid faces of children flashed here and there in a shaft of moonlight or lamplight; they had suckled the baffled rage of the hopelessly poor along with their mothers' milk, and ran in feral packs after sunset. She did not fear an attack, though. Even at so young an age, the little savages could discern that she, like them, carried nothing of value.

Rhiannon's troubles were too pressing to worry about such trivial things.

She clutched her shawl more tightly around her shoulders and shivered, wishing she had not pawned her heavy velvet dress. The gown she wore was made of thin Indian cotton, faded from many washings — utterly inadequate for the weather since the late summer evenings had turned crisp and biting, a sure sign of winter snows to come. *A sen'night ago*, Rhiannon thought, *food was more important than warmth. Now I don't know which vexes me more — the ache in my belly or the chill in my bones.*

*Visions of soup, a knuckle of beef, mutton stew, and dumplings made Rhiannon's stomach growl. Her mouth watered and she swallowed hard. Even hard cheese and stale bread sounded lovely. Hungry dogs will gobble dirty pudding*, as the saying went. She had not eaten since the previous day. Fear that she might faint kept her walking, though her feet were aching from the impact of cobblestones through her well-worn boot soles.

In Whitechapel, human predators lurked in every shadowed doorway, eager to take advantage of the weak. A woman who drank to excess and lost consciousness on the way home from the pub would likely awaken stripped to her skin and badly used, if she woke up at all. Martha Tabram, for example, had recently been found dead in Spitalfields; she had been stabbed a mind-boggling thirty-nine times. The viciousness of the crime had the neighbourhood on edge. Rhiannon had nightmares about encountering the criminals responsible for the attack, but like the majority of prostitutes in the area, she could not afford to stop working. Nor could she pick and choose her clientele. It was catch as catch can, every night from dusk to dawn until she earned enough to pay for her lodgings and fill her grumbling belly.

*Lord, how I wish a gentleman or three would make an appearance.* Rhiannon tucked her hands under her armpits in the vain hope of thawing frozen fingers. *Not just carriage trade, mind you. Mouth*

*music's quick but doesn't pay as well. I want to make a few shillings, buy some supper, and go home before it rains again.*

*Home was a single room in a run-down building that stank of boiled cabbage, unwashed bodies and urine. It had a staircase like a corkscrew and a public privy that was nightmarish at the best of times. Rhiannon had known better places, more respectable houses, and infinitely more well-bred neighbours. She was a gentleman's daughter, but destitution and starvation had driven her to abandon good breeding in order to survive.*

*A lady may be advised to endure death before dishonour, but I've been left very little choice. Hunger is a great motivator and virtue doesn't make a very filling meal. Neither does pride, for that matter,* she thought. Rhiannon squared her shoulders and moved to stand beneath a flickering street lamp, one of the few of its kind in this particular street. The gaslight turned her strawberry-blonde hair to flaming glory.

Her stomach growled again, a reminder that she had yet to earn her supper or her rent. Rhiannon pushed off from the lamp and went on her way, trying to ignore sharp hunger pangs. Fog drifted through the streets and alleys, a humid, dirty yellow shroud that covered a multitude of sins. It was difficult to see the filth, the squalid tenements, the overflowing gutters, the heaps of rotting rubbish — but it was also hard to spot other impediments. Blinded by an exceptionally thick patch of mist, Rhiannon splashed into a noisome puddle, wetting her dress to the knees. Since she had only a single petticoat, her legs immediately felt as though they were covered in a thin layer of ice.

Rhiannon gritted her teeth against a very unladylike expletive. She bent over, gathered her skirts together with both hands, and tried to wring as much water out of the worn fabric as she could without ripping it. Despite her irritation, Rhiannon was acutely aware of the picture she presented. Anyone passing would get an eyeful of her darned stockings, fastened by suspenders that bit into her plump thighs; her full, rounded bosom was practically popping out of her low-cut bodice. Her nipples were visible, too, hardened to peaks in the cold.

*If my father could see me now, the Heavenly Choir would have to administer sal volatile with a liberal hand.* Suddenly, she became conscious of movement, a swirling in the fog that signalled the presence of another person. Her blue eyes narrowed to gleaming slits. Licking her lips, Rhiannon straightened, still holding up her skirts in as dainty a fashion as possible.

"Is anyone there?" she cooed, catching the sound of footsteps coming near. They stopped, but there was definitely someone in the mist; quite close, in fact. She could just make out a blurred outline, too tall to be a woman. Rhiannon swayed towards the dim figure. "Come along, my lord, don't be shy. I've got the best medicine; a sure cure for whatever ails you."

There was no reply. The silence made her uneasy. "It's a perishing cold night," Rhiannon said, trying to pinpoint the other person's location. Just when it seemed she was getting close, the supposed gentleman moved deeper into the thick yellow-brown haze. "Wouldn't you like to warm yourself with me, my lord? I'll give you plenty of heat and anything else you desire." Frustration made her drop the syrup from her tone and add in a no-nonsense manner, "I've no time for games like hide and seek unless you're paying."

A voice next to her ear said, "Why in the blazes is such a pretty girl walking the streets alone in this neighbourhood?"

Rhiannon jumped and whirled around, a scream stuck in her throat. She caught a brief glimpse of the man's face before he melted back into the fog — hardly more than an impression of emerald green eyes, black brows, and a curiously feminine mouth. "I should think my occupation was obvious," she replied, smoothing down her bodice with both hands. The action made her generous bosom even more prominent.

"Did I give you a fright? My most heartfelt apologies, my dear." The voice came from Rhiannon's left. "Pray allow me to escort you back to your lodgings. I fear this is no fit place for a young lady."

"It'll cost you a pound for the whole night," Rhiannon said, turning to try to follow her elusive customer. She had learned the hard way to get financial transactions completed before permitting any liberties. He seemed well mannered — he certainly spoke like an upper class gentleman — and she felt emboldened. He had called her pretty, which meant he was attracted. Perhaps she could wheedle a fee and something to eat out of him.

"I live close-by. And I'll want supper, too," Rhiannon continued, swallowing a burst of saliva at the mention of food. "A hot pie...but I'll eat it after, if that's alright."

Metallic chinks rang at her feet. Rhiannon glanced down and saw five coins near the tip of her boot. She scooped up the gold sovereigns, worth a pound apiece, and doubled her fist upon the prize.

The voice issued from the fog once more. "Go home, sweetheart. Have your pie in peace."

Two years of rough living had erased any objections that Rhiannon might once have made to charity. She still remembered her manners, though. The gentleman remained hidden, but she called out to the mist, "Thank you, my lord. I'm most grateful. Are you sure there's nothing I can do to tempt you?"

Warm breath on the back of her neck made Rhiannon bite off a surprised squeak. A tall, solid body spooned up against her back. "You have already tempted me, my dear, nearly beyond my ability to control," he said. "Urgent business calls me away, much to my regret. You will not object if I take a small token as a memento?"

Rhiannon shook her head and allowed herself to be turned around. No, she did not mind as long as he did not expect anything too exotic. She automatically closed her eyes when a hot, soft mouth touched her own. The kiss was sweet rather than passionate, but she found it a pleasant change from the usual demanding embraces. Rhiannon was not fond of being slobbered on, or handled as though she was an automaton built solely for man's pleasure. This kiss was like the mystery fellow himself — polite, inoffensive, and chivalrous — a gentlemanly gesture rather than a rape of tongue and teeth.

When it was over, he hugged her close and sighed against her hair. "Ah, well, duty bids me away. I shall wait upon you another time, my dear, for we will meet again. Until then, remain safe, I beg you." He pressed his lips against her forehead. "*À bientôt*, my dear." And then he was gone, disappearing into the fog.

Rhiannon was stunned. She touched the place on her brow, which seemed to burn, and stared after him for a long time. He wanted to see her again? No, it went further than that. The gentleman had assured her that they would, most definitely, meet once more. He must have been besotted in an instant to make such a promise after a single, simple kiss. A momentary vision entranced her, induced by misery and hunger; if she became this fellow's mistress, she would be assured of a place to live, food on the table, pretty clothes and baubles. He seemed gentle and caring enough; he was certainly generous to a fault.

The fantasy broadened into the well-cherished dreams of a child whose heart and hopes had not yet been crushed by cruel circumstance — the girl she had been before her father's death. The gentleman was a knight in shining armour, come to rescue her from the twin dragons of poverty and despair. He was an angel with soot-stained wings, washing her clean of every degradation that she had endured.

Perhaps he loved her.

But that was too much, even for a fantasy. At last, Rhiannon came out of her trance, shrugged, and tucked the money into a secret pocket in her bodice. *A whore can't afford sentiment*, she told herself, ruthlessly squashing the tiny fluttering of hope in her breast. She was not a girl anymore. Her dreams were broken beyond reclamation. She ought to know better, and yet...

The kiss on her mouth had left her mostly unmoved, but that fleeting touch on her forehead made her wish — for just a moment — that she were not a prostitute. He had pierced the shell around her heart with a simple caress. The touch on her brow had been a loving gift from someone who saw her as a human

being rather than a piece of filth. She wanted time to turn back until she was a simple tutor's daughter again, free to fall in love, be wooed, and be happy forever in strong, protecting arms.

*Fairy tales*, she thought, disgusted. She turned on her heel and walked in the direction of home. *No one lives happily ever after. He was probably playing me for a fool.* No longer wistful, she rejected the deceptive lure of romance. Hope was better off dead and buried. Cynicism was more valuable than rosy optimism in Whitechapel. The longer Rhiannon considered the matter, the more she believed that the gentleman was having fun at her expense. *Perhaps he makes a habit of it, dispensing that oily charm here and there, as gracious as a king, then laughing about the way he nearly made a light-skirt swoon. I hope I do meet him again someday. I'll give him a tongue-lashing he'll never forget.*

*Dismissing the gentleman from her mind, Rhiannon made her way to the Frying Pan public house to buy a steak-and-kidney pie. The place was crowded, every face bloated and ugly with drink. At least it was warm, although that warmth was underlain by the sour stink of too many bodies and too little hygiene. Pipe smoke filled the air, as well as smoke that seeped into the room from a furiously burning fireplace. Spilled beer and gin were sticky underfoot; the lime-washed walls were yellowed by decades of nicotine. Shrill voices mingled with the thumping of a badly tuned piano, and a wavering soprano with brassy hair sang the popular music hall tune, Sweet Rose of My Heart.* Rhiannon mouthed the words beneath her breath as she waited for her supper, delivered with ill grace by the landlord who had not liked to give change for a sovereign.

By the time she left the pub, the thick fog had faded to nothingness in the face of a gathering storm, heralded by flashes of lightning. She hastened her steps as she took bites of her pie, noticing that the darkness was dispelled considerably by a pair of fires at the docks that had turned the sky a sullen crimson and blotted out the stars.

Some women she knew had walked down Commercial Road to the East London Docks in order to gawk at one of the blazes that had started in a huge warehouse on the southern quay. Rhiannon had heard the news from these acquaintances, who had also told her that the warehouse was crammed full of brandy and gin, among other valuable commodities, and the authorities anticipated an explosion. Shadwell Dry Dock was the location of the second fire, but as it was not as severe, it was not thought nearly as entertaining as the other. While the action took place a considerable distance from the women's usual haunts, it was generally agreed that the spectacle was thrilling enough to warrant the journey.

Rhiannon licked gravy from her fingers and continued down Whitechapel Road, determined to reach shelter before she got soaked. A church bell struck three o'clock. The smell of smoke grew stronger as she travelled further east.

The only occasion more well attended than a fire was a public hanging. Rhiannon thought about going to have a peek herself, but decided that she was too tired to walk all the way to the end of Commercial Road. She wanted to go home and go to bed.

While she walked, Rhiannon considered what she would do with the largesse that weighted her bodice. Her belly full and finally satisfied, she was feeling somewhat more charitable. Perhaps she had wronged her gentleman benefactor. *Five pounds is too much to pay for a joke. He must've been serious about wanting to meet me. With this money, I can sit at home for at least a month, buy coal and food. I can get a heavier dress from the second-hand stalls in Sandys Row and Petticoat Lane. A new pair of wool stockings. A visit to the ladies' Turkish Baths. I wish I'd asked his name, so I can remember him in my prayers.*

*Nibbling a last bit of piecrust, Rhiannon was content for the first time in days. She hummed a snatch of an old song, then her good mood made her sing aloud: "He nightly saw her in his sleep, 'midst roaring thunders, raging seas; his cheerful mind still at ease; nor seas nor wonders made him start —*

*he held his Nancy to his heart!" She was only an indifferent mezzo, but no one likely to overhear her would care.*

The narrow bridge road that led to the entrance of Buck's Row was in front of her. Rhiannon trilled a few more lines from *The Sailor's Dream*, her mind already racing ahead to her little room. Perhaps the landlady might be persuaded to let her buy a bit of coal. It would be absolute bliss to be warm as well as full! She smiled to herself, already anticipating happier times. Her luck just might be changing.

*Yes, I must remember to thank God for my gentleman, Rhiannon thought. Even if I never see him again, he's done me a good turn.*

*Suddenly, out of the shadows of a ramshackle building, someone came flying at her. Rhiannon caught no more than a glimpse of blurred features before she was knocked to the ground. The air rushed out of her lungs; her startled yelp turned into a barely audible moan.*

*Rhiannon's head cracked against the cobblestones; the jarring impact caused her teeth to click together painfully. Scarlet flecks of light swam behind her eyelids. Raw hurt lanced through her body from skull to ankles, and she was suddenly bathed in clammy sweat in spite of the cold.*

*She was aware of a heavy weight pressing down on her chest, making it difficult to draw a full breath. Rhiannon opened her eyes, blinking to regain her focus — a task made more difficult by the vertigo that gripped her with surprising intensity. The steak-and-kidney pie seemed likely to make a reappearance; she swallowed, willing her stomach to settle.*

*Rhiannon flailed a hand at the dark figure that was squatting on her chest, and wheezed an incoherent plea. Had a thief seen her in the Frying Pan paying the landlord with a sovereign and followed to steal her few precious coins? Or was it something else? The prospect of rape was unpleasant but she would endure it, even pretend to take pleasure in the act if necessary, as long as the man did not touch her money.*

*Oh, God help me. What if this was the same person who had killed poor Martha Tabram? The thought of those thirty-nine wounds struck panic in her heart. Rhiannon struggled to sit up, still wheezing. Something glanced across her open palm. At first, she registered the blow as pressure. A belated wave of agony caught her by surprise, and she let out a ragged sound that might have been a scream had she been able to suck in enough air. Warm wetness splattered her cheeks. She forced her eyes to focus. Blood. She was bleeding. In the uncertain illumination of a streetlamp, the blood was not red. It looked black by the gaslight. She froze, gaping in shock.*

Rhiannon recognized the instrument that had wounded her as a knife when it plunged down again, aimed at her throat. The prospect of death galvanized her to action. She twisted her body and bucked her hips, trying to throw off her attacker. Deflected, the blade ripped into her bodice, the tip glancing off the coins in her secret pocket, and ploughing along the curve of her breast. This new pain fuelled her desperation.

Her writhing had the effect of unbalancing the man. As soon as the weight was off her chest, Rhiannon found her voice and yelled like a madwoman, frantic to fend off the weapon and the person wielding it. She did not want to end up like Martha Tabram, a cold corpse destined to lie unmourned in a cold pauper's grave.

"Help me! Murder! Murder!" Rhiannon cried, as loudly as she could manage. There were houses in Buck's Row. There was a wharf nearby, and warehouses, and Whitechapel Road itself. Someone had to hear her. *Please, God, let someone hear me!*

*A fist struck the side of her head. Rhiannon bit her tongue hard, tasting the rusty tang of blood in her mouth. She could not breathe. Fear of suffocation was more excruciating than pain. A remembered prayer from her childhood ran through her mind, recited in her mother's soft voice: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."*

*Rhiannon's eyelids fluttered. She hoped that she would go to Heaven. Her father was there, and her mother, too. The knife was poised above her, the steel length glittering where it was not dulled by the black stain of her blood. Her eyes drifted shut. Rhiannon drowsily thought that this, too, was Hell on earth, but that did not alarm her in the slightest.*

*The black that engulfed her vision was faintly tinged with scarlet when she surrendered to oblivion, sinking far away from murder and madness into peace.*

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