

Chapter One

She should have jumped over the body lying in the street. Everyone else was stepping over it, and she was in a hurry. That Charley had spotted her, and he was sure to remember her from last week when she'd managed to escape him after stealing that crust of bread. Jenny didn't want to be dragged before a magistrate or clapped in the stocks.

Again.

The body was barefoot and dressed in coat and trousers. It lay face down in a mud puddle, the wetness on the ground left over from the rain the night before. If horses and carriages ever passed through this dirty, narrow street in Spitalfields, the body would have been trampled. But no one with enough bluntness for a horse and carriage ever ventured to this corner of London. There were no gaming halls or painted women or gin houses here. Just hunger, poverty, and despair.

Jenny slowed and looked over her shoulder. The Charley wasn't behind her. She might have lost him. Or he might have been too much of a coward to come this way alone. A few rough-looking men leaned against buildings, spoiling for a fight, and a Charley would make a nice target for their foul moods.

A couple walking in front of her stepped over the body as if it were a piece of trash. Nearby, a woman hung once-white sheets on a clothesline while a small child—Jenny couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl—clung to her ragged skirts. Jenny figured the body's pockets had already been picked clean, but she was starving. No harm in giving them another once-over. She patted it down then rolled it over.

She jumped back in shock and crossed herself when its eyes fluttered open. It was a boy, and he looked up at her with dark eyes, made darker still by large, black pupils. He gazed at her, unseeing, then closed his eyes again. Her heart slowed enough that she stopped fearing it would burst. He wasn't dead. She hadn't disturbed his eternal rest. Jenny glanced over at the woman, still hanging her laundry. She hadn't seen Jenny, but her child was watching. Jenny told herself the child had nothing to do with why she didn't walk away. It wasn't up to her to teach that kid some semblance of humanity, but she couldn't abandon this boy all together. What if he died and haunted her because she didn't try to help him?

She stood and wiped her hands on her rough trousers. "Oy," she said and nudged the boy with the toe of her too-small shoe. "Ye better get up now."

The boy moaned something and didn't move.

"Oy!" Jenny said louder. "Yer lying in the street. Get up."

When he still didn't move, she swore then got an arm around his shoulders, his *wet* shoulders, and dragged him to the side of the street. She propped him up against a wall and sat down beside him. It annoyed her that her shirt was wet again. She'd been drenched in the downpours the night before. Though it was spring—or so she supposed because green buds had started appearing on the trees again—the morning was still cold enough that she moved closer to him, hoping to steal some of his body heat. Not that he had much of that. He didn't seem to have much of anything.

A cursory glance at his clothing told her it had once been good quality. It was little more than rags now. He had a black eye, bruises on his jaw, and scraped knuckles. "Looks like ye got into a bit of a touse," she said.

He rolled his head to look at her out of his one good eye. "You might say that."

The way he spoke surprised her. It wasn't like the people she knew. It sounded like the gentlemen who came to Spitalfields half drunk and stumbled about with their friends looking for cheap gin and whores. They slapped each other on the back for their bravery when everyone could see they carried walking sticks and were followed by burly footmen, keeping anyone with nefarious intentions away.

"'Ave to learn to run faster," she said. "Me. I can run fast as the wind. Were it the Watch or a group of rogues?"

"I tried to run," he said, raking a hand through his dark hair. "But two of them were behind me and then two stepped out in front."

"Oldest trick in the book," she said. "Two of them 'erd ye where the others lie in wait."

He held out a hand. "Aidan Sterling."

She looked down at his hand.

"You shake it," he said. "Like this." He took her hand and pumped it up and down.

"I know wot to do," she said, pulling her hand back. "I don't know why ye'd want to do it. I'm Jenny Tate."

His eyes widened slightly. "Yer a girl?"

"That's right." She always felt a little defensive when boys looked at her like that. She was thirteen and skinny and flat as a boy, and she dressed in boys' clothing to keep anyone from getting ideas—most especially arch rogues who ran the gangs in this part of London. But she still didn't like when people looked at her like being a girl was a liability. "And I could knock ye down quick as any boy."

"I don't doubt it," he said. "But then that little child over there could knock me down."

"Ye don't belong 'ere," she said. "Where do ye belong? I'll make sure ye get 'ome." And she might just get a big reward for it too.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I do belong here. I have nowhere else to go."

"Yer an orphan?"

"Yes. My mother died...what day is it now?"

Jenny shrugged. She didn't even know what month it was.

"I suppose it was a month ago now. My father died before that and *his lordship* hadn't thought to provide for us."

His lordship. There was blunt in those words. Jenny knew it. "Who was yer father?" she asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," the boy said. Some color had returned to his face, and he looked almost human, except for that swollen eye.

"Try me."

"The Earl of Cranbourne."

She laughed. "Yer right. I don't believe ye."

"I'm not his legitimate offspring," he said.

"Wot's that mean?"

"To be blunt, Jenny—may I call you Jenny?"

She shrugged.

“To be blunt, I’m a bastard. My mother was a chambermaid in the earl’s service. When she bore me, the earl recognized me and gave my mother money for a house and for my schooling, but it seems he made no provision for me in his will.”

“Ye got a lot of fancy words.”

He nodded but didn’t behave as though she were stupid. “It means, once he died, my mother and I received nothing. I’m sure she had a plan. I know she went to the new earl’s chief of staff and his solicitor. But neither of them liked her very much, always thought she was a grasping—well, they wouldn’t help her. Without any money, I couldn’t go to school, we couldn’t pay the rent. My mother became ill, and we couldn’t afford a doctor.”

Jenny knew a hundred stories like this. Half the children on the street had stories of parents who’d become ill and died because there was no blunt for doctors or medicine. The charity hospitals weren’t much better than the street. But not everyone’s story included an earl. Jenny wouldn’t have believed it except the way the boy talked was definitely unusual.

She moved to tell him good-bye and continue her search for something to eat. It wasn’t as though he could help her, and she couldn’t help him. She could take care of herself, and that was it. If she started getting all soft-hearted and trying to save every street rat, she’d be buried under a pile of needy kids in two minutes.

“What about you? Are you an orphan?”

Jenny didn’t move. No one had ever asked about her before. No one had ever cared.

“No,” she said, even though she rarely talked about her family. “I can only wish I were an orphan.” Her parents clung stubbornly to life, despite having every disadvantage.

“That bad, eh?” He scratched his head. Jenny imagined he probably had fleas or worse. “Perhaps we could be friends.”

Jenny would have laughed, except he looked serious. She sat straight. She’d never had a friend before. The idea was intriguing. “Alright then. Wot do I get out of it?”

He gave her a puzzled look. “You’d rather our relationship be transactional? A business partnership?”

“Wot ye just said. Business. I do my part, and ye do yer part.” Jenny didn’t know why she was even suggesting such a thing. She knew enough of people to know that you couldn’t trust

them. Someone promised to give you half the loaf of bread they pinched, but then they disappeared with the whole thing. She'd been no older than four when she realized she had to hide any money she earned begging. Her parents would steal it while she slept if she wasn't careful. At first, she'd hid her half pennies under her pillow, but as she got older and wiser, she found a hiding place outside the dingy room where the two of them—sometimes three if her father remembered to come home—lived. A few years before her father had reached under her pillow while she was asleep, thinking she might still keep her coin there. She'd pulled a knife on him and threatened to slit his throat.

The next day, when she'd been making her way through Spitalfields, he'd ambushed her and beat her bloody.

Jenny no longer slept at home if her father was there.

The boy held out his hand, and Jenny looked at it. There wasn't any coin in his palm. "You shake it," he reminded her. "That seals the deal."

"Wot deal?" Jenny asked.

"We look out for each other. I share what I have, and you share what you have."

She squinted at him. "Ye don't 'ave nothing."

He tapped his temple. "I have an education."

"Book learning." She spat.

"I can teach you to read."

Jenny looked up at him.

"If you could read, you'd know what all the pamphlets nailed to the posts say. Then you'd know where to go to pick pockets."

"I'm not a pickpocket." She looked about to make sure no one was listening. "I'm a 'ouse breaker."

"Then you'll know if what you steal from houses has any real value."

" 'Ow does reading 'elp with that?"

He gave her a surprised look. "Books are everything. They have all the information in the world. Let's say you steal an old coin. How do you know if it's a hundred years old or five hundred years old? You look it up in a book."

She looked him up and down. "All yer book learning 'asn't kept ye from being beaten and 'aving yer shoes pinched."

"Then I can learn from you and you from me." He offered his hand again. "What do you say?"

She put her hand in his, surprised at how warm his flesh was. He moved her hand up and down and smiled. "So," he said, releasing her hand. "What do we do first?"

"First, we steal something to eat." She rose and took his hand, pulling him up. As they started for the market and the food stalls, it occurred to her that having a partner might have benefits. When they neared the market, she pulled him aside and pointed to the stalls. "Wot do ye fancy?"

"Bread and soup would be lovely."

She elbowed him then pulled out her pockets. She always wore trousers. Dresses made it too hard to run fast and climb when a quick escape was necessary. "No blunt for bread and soup. We 'ave to steal wot we want, and I can't run off with a bowl of soup."

The boy, Aidan, nodded thoughtfully. "Why don't we try and earn our coin?"

She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. "Ye think I 'aven't tried that?" She pointed to his black eye and then to herself. "Who would 'ire us?"

"Fine. Do we just grab an apple and run?" he asked.

"Only if we want to be chased. I usually wait for a distraction or try to cause one. Then while everyone is looking, I causally pocket a loaf of bread or a couple of onions."

"I can cause a distraction."

Jenny gave him a skeptical look. "If ye make a muck of this, we'll both be 'ungry tonight."

"I won't."

"If ye do, then ye can forget about our deal."

His eyes widened with shock. "You would go back on a handshake?"

She wanted to grab his shoulders, shake them, and scream, *Look around ye! No one cares about a 'andshake!* But the look of surprise on his face only made her feel more protective of him. "Just make sure ye distract them," she said.

He gave her a nod, squared those skinny shoulders again, and marched back toward the stalls. Instead of going to the costermongers, he made his way to a pedestal with a statue of some man she didn't know. He climbed up beside the statue and cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said. A few people glanced at him, but most paid him no heed. Mentally, she prepared herself for another long night with a protesting belly.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Aidan said, this time his voice carrying. He raised a hand and turned to the side dramatically. Jenny would have laughed at this posture if her meal hadn't depended on it.

"To be, or not to be, that is the question," he said. A few more heads turned toward him. That seemed to be the encouragement he needed because he continued in a deeper voice. "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune—"

Jenny slid out of her spot and walked casually toward the costermonger selling fruit. He was watching with some interest, and she'd been eyeing those plums all afternoon.

"Or to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them. To die!" His voice rose with emotion as Jenny neared the wheelbarrow the man had lowered to watch.

"To sleep, no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache." He clenched his chest dramatically and Jenny reached out, grasped the fruit, and sidled away. She could still hear him as she continued on her way. She thought about walking on. She thought about leaving him behind and feasting on the two plums herself. But she thought about that shocked look on his face, and how he'd seemed to believe that a handshake meant something. And so when he finally finished his flowery words and bowed to a smattering of applause, she was waiting when he joined her.

"Did you get something?" he asked, holding out a hand.

"Not 'ere," she hissed. She motioned for him to follow and led him to a dusty yard behind a tavern. Horses had once been stabled here, but the stable was gone, and no one came out this way except to toss out rubbish. They found a place and sat with their backs up against the back of the tavern. The sound of laughter washed over them as she handed him a plum. He nodded at her as though expecting more. She produced the second plum. "That's it."

"That's it?"

“Eat it and shut yer potato ‘ole.”

He seemed to know enough not to argue. He bit into the plum, and for a time there was silence as they savored the fruit. But it was gone all too quickly. Jenny licked the juice from her fingers. “Wot was that ye were saying up there?” she asked. “Did ye make it up?”

“It was Shakespeare.”

“Shakes a spear?”

He laughed. “No. Shakespeare. He wrote plays. I was quoting one of his more famous ones.”

“I didn’t understand a word ye said.”

He leaned close to her, smelling of dirt, boy, and plum juice. “Can I tell you a secret?”

She lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“I don’t understand it either.” He laughed, and his laugh was so infectious, she laughed too. And before long they were both laughing so hard tears streamed from their eyes. She leaned her head against his shoulder as she wiped away the tears, and he said, “I like you, Jenny Tate.”

And though she didn’t say it back, she liked Aidan Sterling too.