



CHAPTER ONE

London

Late October 1816

Bloody hell. The prince regent had made him a baron.

Blowing out an aggravated breath that left a cloud of steam on the damp midnight air, Merritt Rivers quickened his pace through the rain-drenched back alleys and narrow passages between Lincoln's Inn Fields and St Paul's. He flipped up his greatcoat's collar against the ice-cold drizzle, yet he was thankful that tonight's rain had prevented another riot from breaking out and kept the City relatively quiet for once.

A barony. *Christ.* If he'd known that the infamous Mrs. Fitzherbert had been in the carriage he'd saved from attack last month, he'd have fled in the opposite direction as fast as he could run.

He grimaced. No. He still would have rescued her, but he would at least have had the foresight to give a false name.

Maybe that was what he needed, he considered as he continued to scan the foggy darkness around him. A secret identity. An easier way to separate his daytime career as a barrister from his nighttime activities on the streets. After all, didn't he already become a different person when he put on his black clothes, armed himself for battle, and headed out into the night? *Had* to. It was the only way he could survive.

The Night Guardian...the City Watchman...

"The Black Baron," he muttered.

He rolled his eyes. *Bloody hell.*

He turned south toward the Thames. There was plenty of time left before dawn to search the area and find the contacts he kept within London's criminal underworld, to question them about an escaped convict named Ronald Chase. The Home Office was certain the man could provide information on the recent spate of riots that were raining havoc across the City, and they had asked Merritt to catch him.

He'd agreed, but not to support the Home Office as much as to give himself an excuse for stalking the streets tonight and burning off the tension coiling inside him.

An excuse for hunting.

As with most nights, sleep wouldn't be forthcoming anyway. *Especially* tonight, when restlessness pulsed in his veins like poison and gripped every muscle like a vise. He'd never be able to simply lie still in the darkness and close his eyes without the ghosts coming to—

A shout broke the stillness, followed by a smashing of wood and the sounds of running footsteps.

He bit back a curse. So much for a quiet night.

Merritt ran after the noise, dodging down a passageway in almost pitch-blackness. He broke out into a fog-banked alley and skidded to a halt, staring at the scene in front of him. *What the hell...?*

A large man stood with his back pressed against the brick wall. His hands rested at his sides; his eyes were as large as plates and his face pallid. A small barrel lay broken on the cobblestones beside him, its contents spreading around him in a dark puddle. Less than ten feet away, the door of the shop hung splintered on its twisted hinges. So...a burglar.

But it was the person who'd caught him who stole Merritt's attention, who even now stood in front of the man with the tip of a knife pointed at his chin. *A woman.* And one unlike any Merritt had ever seen.

She held the knife with its tip pressed lightly into the soft flesh beneath the man's jaw and at such an angle that its sharp blade would slice through his throat if he dared try to shove it away. Not a trace of fear showed anywhere in her. But then, what else would he expect from a woman dressed in a man's black work shirt beneath a tightly cinched waistcoat made of thick leather and metal studs, black breeches, and short boots? Two short knife sheaths were tied to both forearms, with a pair of handcuffs dangling from her right hip and a small sword strapped to her left. Thick, coppery red curls were tied back at her neck with a black ribbon, yet stray curls as wild as she was had slipped free and framed the sides of her face. Good God...who *was* she?

"Thank you for coming," she called out, her eyes never leaving the man in front of her. A faint foreign accent Merritt couldn't identify thickened her voice. "But I'm not in need of rescue."

Well, he could certainly see *that*. He arched a brow and leaned his shoulder against the wall, settling in to watch whatever happened next. "Who says I'm here to rescue *you*?"

Her sensuous lips curled with amusement. "In that case, he's mine. I got to him first."

"I would never attempt to pull rank." Not with a woman. And certainly not one armed to the teeth. Good Lord, was that a gladius sword sheathed at her hip? "But I'm a bit foggy tonight, so you'll have to explain to me why I would want him."

"He broke into the shop."

"I see." Actually, he didn't have a clue. "And you are...?"

"Rich man, poor man, beggar man...thief," she mused, chanting out the beginning of the old children's rhyme. With a slow smile, she added, "Taker."

He narrowed his eyes on her. The streets were filled with thief-takers these days, lurking about in the wakes of the riots to arrest opportunistic men who used the confusion and destruction to cover their own crimes. Low-hanging fruit. Merritt had no patience for them, knowing they were profiting off the riots as much as the men they captured. But this one... *Sweet Lucifer*. He'd never seen one like her before. Hell, he'd never seen a female thief-taker at all.

His boring night had suddenly turned interesting.

"So as you can see, I don't need your help," she reiterated.

Apparently not. “Good. Because I wasn’t offering it.” He ran a deliberate and assessing gaze over her. “I didn’t realize Bow Street employed women.”

“*Bow Street?*” Keeping the knife lightly pressed under the burglar’s chin, she turned sideways to shoot Merritt an expression of such disgust that he wondered for a moment if he’d sprung a second head. “Do I look weak and corrupt to you?”

“Not at all.” Actually, she looked...*magnificent*. And deadly.

“Bow Street,” she muttered in an aside to her prisoner. “He thinks I’m a runner. No honor among thieves with that lot. Did I behave like a runner to you?”

The thief stiltedly shook his head, afraid to move more for fear of slitting his own throat.

She slid her eyes to the criminal. “Did I ask you for bribery money to turn you loose or make an offer to split the profits of what you’ve stolen? Of course not.” She scoffed a snort of revulsion. “Bow Street...*please*.”

“Then who are you?” Merritt asked.

“You first.”

Damnation. Where was a good false identity when he needed one? He *really* needed to work on that. The first name that popped into his head—“Mrs. Fitzherbert.”

“And I would have guessed you were Lady Jersey.”

It was her turn then to finally scrutinize him with a good long perusal. If she were surprised to see him looking like a wraith in the night, the hilt of his own sword visible beneath his open greatcoat, she didn’t show it, and her expression remained as enigmatic as ever.

She arched a brow. “Prinny’s tastes in women have definitely turned unique, I daresay.”

His lips pursed in mocking insult. “Are you saying I don’t look feminine enough to entice a prince?”

“Not at all. Only that you look...*younger* than I would have assumed.”

He sent her his best rakish grin. “It’s not the years. It’s how you wear them.” And speaking of wearing... He nodded toward her sword. “That’s an interesting choice of fashion accessory.”

“My dressmaker was all out of matching parasols.”

“Really.”

“I’d show you what she substitutes for reticules, but I’m not certain you’d survive.”

Good Lord, she was sharp. So were all three blades she carried, he’d wager. “What—no pistols?”

“A weapon that’s useless up close, has to be reloaded after a single use, and kills more people who pull the trigger through misfires than those whom the barrel is pointed at?” She shook her head with only slightly less disdain than she’d expressed at being confused for a Bow Street runner. “Where’s the fun in that?”

She took a step toward Merritt and sheathed her knife on her left forearm. From the curious way her gaze journeyed over him, she couldn’t quite fathom him or what he was doing lurking in the rain-soaked streets so far from any place respectable. But then, he could barely understand it himself.

Her eyes drifted down from his shoulders and across the black tunic he wore instead of a shirt and waistcoat, then down his black trousers. His cock flexed

shamelessly when her attention landed on his crotch.

He grimaced. *That* look was certainly more likely done to note if he carried a pistol tucked into his waistband than because this unusual encounter was arousing her. Disappointingly.

Behind her, the burglar moved to step away from the wall and run.

“Stay.” With a lightning quick reflex, she drew her sword and pointed it at the man’s chest, not looking away from Merritt.

The burglar froze like a well-trained dog.

She cocked her head as she studied Merritt. “Who are you? Who do you work for?”

She’d said earlier that she’d beaten him to the burglar. She must have thought him a fellow thief-taker. He didn’t correct her. That omission was far better than the truth.

Like her, he looked nothing like a thief-taker. He looked nothing like a baron either. *Thank God.*

“I’m a peer of His Majesty’s realm.” Merritt could still barely say that without laughing. Or wanting to flee.

She shook her head. “Claiming to be Mrs. Fitzherbert was more believable.” She kept her sword pointed at the burglar, who was too afraid to flee. “As you can see,” she pointed out, “your assistance is unnecessary.”

In other words, he could go rot, and she could be on her way, criminal in tow, to the nearest watchhouse.

But Merritt wasn’t ready to saunter off just yet. Not once had he experienced a night like this since he’d returned to England last year, taken up at the bar again by day, and been compelled to patrol the streets at night to keep from going mad. The Home Office’s mission for him tonight suddenly fell out of favor. Who needed an escaped convict to distract him when a woman like this stood before him?

“You think I’d dare try steal away credit for your arrest with the night watch?” He feigned offense. “What kind of gentleman would I be to do something like that?”

She shrugged. “A thief-taker.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I leave the thief taking to better men.” And better women, too, apparently. “I’m the exact opposite, in fact.”

Good Lord, was he ever. In his daylight profession as a barrister, he encountered more thief-takers than he could shake a stick at, and God knew how much he wanted to take a stick *to* the corrupt, lying lot of them. As far as he was concerned, only the foot patrols had worth. Men who walked the streets to look for crimes as they were happening, to arrest the criminals right then rather than hunt them down after the fact the way most runners did. After all, wasn’t that what he did himself almost every night, patrolling the streets to protect innocents?

She must belong to one of those patrols. And clearly didn’t believe him.

“Then why would you be out on a night like this, prowling the dark streets at this hour?” She sardonically clucked her tongue. “A defenseless thing like you might get hurt.”

I’m hunting. And not just for an escaped convict.

“I could ask the same of you,” he dodged, pushing darker thoughts from his mind. “I’ve never met a female thief-taker before.”

“Then we’re even,” she shot back. “I’ve never met Mrs. Fitzherbert.”

With a lazy grin, he let that pass. There was no good response and more important things to focus on at the moment. Or at least more pointed things.

He nodded at her sword. "Do you truly know how to use that thing without hurting yourself?"

"Do you?" She gestured at his.

He pushed back his greatcoat to fully reveal his sword. "Want to find out?"

She studied him for a silent moment, her eyes flickering eagerly at the temptation. "Are you asking me to dance, my good sir?"

Dance, fight...anything else she felt like doing to him. "Yes." *Oh yes.*

Her attention flicked to the burglar as she weighed her options, then she conceded, "All right." She lowered her sword and stepped back. "It's your lucky night," she told the burglar. "*Leave.*"

The man turned and ran, stumbling over himself and the cobblestones in his scramble to vanish into the darkness of the passageway.

Slowly, she stepped into the middle of the alley. The challenge Merritt had tossed out now tingled like an electric storm between them, and the deserted street came to life beneath the cold and damp night.

Who the devil *was* she? The desire to find out coiled in his gut.

Merritt pushed himself away from the wall and deliberately drew his sword in a controlled slide from its scabbard. He didn't know her, didn't know how she'd been trained or how skilled she was, how controlled in her reactions and emotions. The last thing he needed was for her to startle at any quick movement and decide to run him through.

But that worry quickly turned baseless. Judging from the way she circled him, now assessing him openly with the cool detachment of an adversary, the woman possessed control of emotion, body, and weapon that wouldn't have faltered even under cannon fire. A well-trained and experienced soldier. Each fluid, graceful move she made reminded him of a lioness stalking its prey.

He stood still and let her circle him, his sword drawn but pointing nonthreateningly at the ground. He followed her path with a glance over his shoulder. "You've had significant training, then?"

"I have." Her boot heels clicked softly against the cobblestones, and every breath she took sent up a cloud of steam on the cold air. "I've studied under some of the best fighters in Spain and France."

"What a coincidence." He turned his head to glance over his other shoulder, keeping her in sight as she completed her circle. "I've killed some of the best fighters in Spain and France."

She stopped in front of him. "Then you might possibly put up a challenge."

An amused grin tugged at his lips. Oh, he was enjoying this! "Possibly."

She dragged her gaze over him one last time. "Until I skewer you."

"Very possibly," he returned, deadpan.

Light laughter bubbled from her lips, and the inscrutable mask she wore splintered to reveal the humor beneath, the amused glimmer in her eyes, and the tug of her lips into just the start of a faint smile.

But immediately, her world-weary mask fell back into place, all her emotions once more controlled. What a damn shame, too, because he would have loved to have

seen what she looked like with a beaming smile on her face.

"Shall I call off?" She stepped back until they were arm and sword's distance apart.

He raised his blade in front of his face in salute. "Please do."

With an edgy smile registering her mounting excitement—the same anticipation he felt pulsing inside himself—she returned the salute. "*En garde.*"

They took their positions, as if on a refereed piste instead of a slippery cobblestone alley half obscured by thick fog and haze. Their well-practiced stances of seasoned fencers only added to the absurdity of this sparring match. And to the fun of it.

"*Prêts?*"

"Oh yes," he drawled. More ready than he'd been for any match in months.

"*Allez!*"

Instead of charging, she fainted, surprising him by retreating instead of attacking. But then, nearly everything she'd done so far had surprised him. The simple move forced him forward on the offensive, and he obliged by charging her. The clash of steel against steel jarred loudly through the quiet streets and reverberated off the stone buildings. The noise gave the foggy night an otherworldly feel, as if he'd fallen into a bizarre dream.

He pressed forward with testing thrusts of his sword to gauge her skill and study her movements. Damnation if she wasn't doing the same to him as she continued to fall back in a circling retreat, every parry and deflection a chance to assess how he fought.

She lunged. Her blade pushed his to the side and ran down the steel shaft toward the hilt. But he dodged to the left before she could score such an easy touch.

There would be no blood drawn; both of them were too well controlled to accidentally prick the other. The match would only be won when one knocked the other's sword to the cobblestones. Which he had no intention of allowing to happen to his.

She was good, he'd admit.

But he was better.

To prove it, he launched a series of thrusts that forced her to turn her dominant side to him, leaving her weaker left side unguarded. A side he exposed with a lightning quick slash of the flat side of his blade to her leather waistcoat. A spank meant to put her in her place.

"So we're playing like that, are we?" she panted out, her eyes gleaming with unveiled excitement. "All right, then."

She let loose an offensive of thrusts and slashes that had him parrying her blade from all directions. Then she dropped down onto her heels and swung her sword in a wide slash at his lower legs.

He jumped, and the blade passed harmlessly through the air beneath.

"So we're playing like that, are we?" he repeated. He lunged, catching her blade with a hard slash of his. The strength of the thrust knocked her arm far to the side and forced her to stagger back half a dozen steps to regain her balance and once more find her fighting stance. He leveled a hard look at her. "Then do it."

With a sound that was half exertion, half pleasure, she ran at him, hacking and slashing in a flurry of movement, not to cut him but to force him to parry each move so that he'd leave himself open to attack. So that each hard and quick thrust forced him to swing slightly wider, putting him increasingly off-balance and leaving his sword arm exposed. What she'd unleashed wasn't at all the controlled, tight movements taught to

dandies at fencing academies but the tactics of a fierce fighter.

"You're in the streets every night," he forced out breathlessly between parries and thrusts, still holding his ground despite her attack. *Not* a question.

"Yes." Her answer came just as breathlessly as she dropped back a stride, only to charge again. "Aren't you?"

He caught her sword with a twist of his wrist and strode forward, deflecting her blade to the side and closing the distance between them until they were less than an arm's length apart. It was a deadly position he never would have taken with any other adversary, but with her, one he felt confident enough to claim.

"The riots have been increasing," he stated and seized the opportunity to turn their match into an interrogation.

"Yes." Her chest rose and fell with her rapid breaths of exertion, her face deliciously flushed and her green eyes gleaming. "Every night."

"But not tonight."

"No. It rained." With a twist, she freed her blade, stepped back, and thrust.

He easily parried. "No. It drizzled." He parried a second thrust to the opposite side. "What kind of rioters have you ever met who would let a little sprinkle stop them?"

His question caught her by surprise. For a split second, she froze, just long enough for him to advance, twist his arm around hers, and hold both swords pressed immobile between them.

"That's why you're out here tonight," she mused with a frown. Her voice emerged as a smooth drawl that wrapped around him like a blanket. "The riots."

"What do you know about them?" Her face was framed by the crossed swords between them, and he leaned dangerously closer, even as their arms began to tremble from the exertion of keeping their swords pressed so fiercely together.

"Nothing."

Deception flared in her eyes, and his pulse stuttered. What did she know? What was she hiding? "You're lying."

Taking a moment to gather herself, she licked her lips. "They're just riots."

His eyes darted down to her mouth. Good Lord, how kissable she looked. How delectable. The fight had knocked loose the black hair ribbon, and now her hair cascaded over her shoulders and down her back in a mass of riotous copper curls. Her eyes shined bright; her lips were ripe and red and invitingly sensuous. Each panting breath she took to gather back her breath made her bosom rise and fall tumultuously beneath the leather waistcoat she wore instead of a corset.

If they weren't holding swords just inches from each other's throat, he would have said she looked...aroused. God knew he was becoming exactly that himself, helped along in no small part by the tension pulsating between them so strongly that it buzzed like electricity. The air around them practically sizzled.

"Who are the leaders?" he pressed, keeping their grappling muted by shifting his stance so that he pressed a shoulder and hip against her to keep her still.

She couldn't back away now without dropping her sword and letting him win. Something he knew she would never do. "I don't know."

He leaned closer, bringing his face so close to hers that he could feel the warmth of her sweet breath stir across his lips. The attraction between them was as palpable as the cold drizzle dripping across the city. "Then tell me this...who are *you*?"

Delight sparkled in her eyes. “Now, now, Mrs. Fitzherbert.” Her voice turned husky. “What kind of lady would I be to confide such personal information to a stranger? One wielding a sword, no less.” She clucked her tongue like a scolding governess. “Who knows what kind of wickedness such disclosure might lead to? I’m certain the archbishop would not approve.”

“I often find myself at odds with His Grace in matters of wickedness.” His mouth lingered achingly above hers, so close that he could kiss her with just a tilt of his chin. And if he did, she might very well run him through with her sword for it.

Her brow inched up. “More scandal, less sacred?”

“His Grace would surprise you.”

She curled an amused smile at the archbishop’s expense. “Not as much as you.”

That low and throaty admission played down his spine like seeking fingers of seduction. *Sweet Jesus*...she was liquid fire in his veins, tensing every muscle in his body. He couldn’t remember the last time such immediate attraction struck him the way it did now with her, the last time his gut tightened with such animal arousal at a first meeting. Irrationally, he wanted to bury himself between her thighs and claim the ferocity inside her...raw and wild and intense.

“I’m Merritt.” *Tell me your name. Dear God, please tell me your name and how I can find you again...*

A light laugh fell from her lips, tickling his. “Of course you are,” she mused, her voice lowering into a throaty whisper. It was a siren song that had him hanging on every word even though he knew she had the skills to skewer him. Her lips twitched mischievously. “Like an honor to be won?”

Not when he’d gladly surrender to her. The defeat would be exquisite.

“Who *are* you?” His eyes trailed over her beautiful face, engrossed by the fine lines of her cheeks and the creamy smoothness of her warm skin, captivated by the light in the depths of her eyes. And by the way, even now, she refused to give up the fight, continuing to press her body against his so strongly that any slip of his attention might send the sword slicing into his throat. “At least tell me your name.”

She hesitated, then capitulated, still holding the swords locked between.

“Veronica Chase.” The smile she gave him corkscrewed into his gut. “My friends call me Roni. *You* can call me Miss Chase.”

Good God. It was impossible. *She* was impossible. But he knew...damnation, he *knew*.

Carefully, he eased back the pressure of his sword until he could shift his hip and shoulder away. When he barely held her blade with his, he stepped back to safely retreat out of thrusting range and lowered his sword.

Their fight—and the moment of elation it had brought—was over.

She lowered her own sword, bewildered yet obviously pleased that he was giving up. “You’re surrendering?”

“No.” He bit back a curse. At that moment, he hated the Home Office more than he could have ever expressed. “I’m arresting you.”



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