

## CHAPTER 1



LONDON 1886.

“Get up, Eve, and make yourself useful.”

Eve Smythe’s father kicked her, hard, and she scrambled to move. The fog in her eyes never seemed to abate. She cast off her threadbare blankets and coughed deeply. Sitting up always made the ever-present phlegm tickle her throat as it shifted in her chest. She had no shoes to wear; her father had sold his boots two years ago for more drink, and those had been the only pair in the house.

Eve shuddered at the thought of going out there again. It was cold enough inside the room where they lived. Cold and damp. Snails crawled up the walls and sometimes she was so hungry that she ate them. She hated snails.

The stench of her father seemed to keep the rats plentiful, too. Eve slept on the floor, and sometimes she awoke in the night, frozen with fear, as she felt the tiny claws of vermin crawling over her body.

Her jaw ached from the cold.

“Stop dawdling, child, and get out there.” Her father had no sympathy. Eve knew he was in too much pain himself to recognise that she was afraid. The coldness, she knew, would be her grave one of these days.

She mentally roused herself. There was no way of avoiding it. She picked up her box of matches and went outside. The moment her feet touched the icy paving slabs, she cringed as the cold locked her muscles all the way up her legs. With all her effort, she forced herself to tune out the pain in her feet. Soon, they would feel nothing, and then she could think about something other than how cold it was.

Unsteadily, each step agonizing, she walked through the slums of the East End of London. Through the thick smog, an illuminated factory clock declared that it was six in the morning. She hurried to Leicester Square, to try and sell to the shopkeepers and other workers as they arrived to begin burning in their own version of Hell.

Everyone in the city was doomed. Only the rich could afford to spend their days without pain, exhaustion and hunger. Eve just wanted to stop hurting all the time, but the brutal cold wouldn't give her any reprieve.

When daylight feebly penetrated the city with its bleak light, Eve had still sold no matches. Her teeth chattered with cold. She no longer felt the outside of her hands and feet, but the bones inside them ached in the frigid, damp air. Her face hurt, too, but that was a constant reminder of her own folly.

“Please, matches,” she mumbled, barely able to move her lips. She wanted to eat, to get warm again, and to rest. All around her, people wrapped in thick coats and scarves avoided her. Sometimes, when she was out here trying to sell matches, Eve wondered if she were a ghost. It wouldn't surprise her if someone walked straight through her, one day. She watched her breath turn into an ever-growing white cloud, until it faded into the rest of the air. A thicker

puff of mist passed her lips as someone barged past her, thumping her back and demanding she get out of the way.

If only there were somewhere else for her to be, she would gladly stop standing on the frosty paving slabs.

The day was long, and Eve fought rising panic as nobody bought her matches. If she returned home with no money again, her father would beat her with the poker. The scabbed welts hadn't healed from the last time, barely three days ago. No, this time, if she didn't sell a single match by sunset, she would find an alcove, hide in it until morning, and hope she sold more tomorrow than today. It wouldn't be the first time she had slept out of doors for fear of her father's wrath. The cold was permanent and unavoidable, but beatings were something she could sometimes escape from.

The white clouds took on a dull, bluish hue, then the lamplighters began making their rounds, and as the soft orange glow illuminated the square, snow began to fall.

"Please, sirs... d-do y-y-you want m-more mmm-matches?" she asked, forcing her freezing lips to shape the words.

"Filthy urchin! Get out of here!" The older lamplighter kicked out at her, connecting his hobnail boots with her shin, hard, and Eve fell to the floor. Dazed and struggling to move, she remained where she was for a long moment, as the lamplighters laughed and walked off, chattering about a hand of cards they'd both played.

More desperate than ever, Eve held out a match and did the unforgivable: She struck it against the paper. As the head caught fire, it hissed, accompanied by the familiar, delicious scent of phosphorous, and for a moment, Eve's body drank in the warmth emanating from the tiny fire. She had hoped that the light would cause someone to take notice and buy a match, but the people all walked with their heads down, hats set against the snow, hands in pockets or muffs, as they hurried back to their destinations.

The snow fell in thick, fluffy wads, but its likeness to cotton wool didn't fool Eve. She knew how the coldness clung to her

exposed skin as she shuffled her feet, trying to keep the soles from sticking to the ground.

Eventually, when the snow was several inches deep, Eve gave up. She was too cold to walk home. Instead, she trudged on wobbly legs around the edge of the square, looking for a dry alcove. All the best ones had already been taken by children. She stopped outside a restaurant, where a family had sat down for roast dinner. For a moment, she entertained the thought of being in there, and of having all that food. She would sit on a chair, her feet never touching the cold floor, and she would savour every mouthful. If she had eaten her fill, she would save the rest for later. Or perhaps she would only take very small bites, so that it would last forever.

A tapping on the window in front of her made her jump. A waiter stood on the other side of the glass, looking down at her with a disgusted glare. She turned away, and rounded a corner, then stumbled and landed face down in the snow. Scrambling to get out of it quickly, before it melted through more of her dress and made her wetter and colder, she pulled herself into a sitting position against a tall brick wall, then she wrapped her long skirt over her blue-black feet, hoping it would bring some life into them. She wasn't even shaking any longer, for she was too cold.

It seemed so unfair that this was where her life would end. She'd never really had a chance. Why did some people get born with everything, and do nothing with it, and people like her weren't even allowed warm air to breathe?

If God had a plan, she didn't understand it. She had been born invisible, had lived a life unseen, and now she would die in an alcove. In the morning, someone would find her, and she was sure they'd just be irritated that they would have to dispose of her body.

Everything about her was a failure. She couldn't really feel sorry for herself, though, because her heart was too cold. The permanent blackness would be a relief in a lot of ways. At least it would mean she didn't need to keep making an effort to survive against the current of the rest of the world.

A piece of paper fluttered to the ground. She didn't know how to read it and didn't care what it said. It was dry, and she snatched it up triumphantly, then cradled it in her skirt as she fumbled for the matches. She'd already used one. Her father would assume she sold it and kept the money for herself. If she lived through the night, he would beat her so hard tomorrow that she wouldn't walk for weeks. How much worse would it be if she lit a second match?

She struck it, and stared at the flame, mesmerised for a moment. Lingering too long, she allowed it to burn her fingers. Reflexively, she dropped it, then put her black fingertips in her mouth to abate the pain. When it subsided a little, she struck another match. This time, she remembered to hold the paper to it, then she gently placed the burning sheet in the snow before her, and she held her hands and face near it.

It was heavenly, although it didn't pierce the thick chill that permeated her whole body. The fire was gone too soon, and Eve wondered if she had imagined its warmth.

She leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. She just needed to rest for a moment. Tiredness was more pressing than the cold.

When she opened them, a man stood before her, holding a lantern, which stopped her from seeing more than his black hooded cloak and deathly pale face.

"Matches, sir?" she attempted to ask weakly, but only a senseless sound came out of her mouth.

"You look very cold," the man observed.

Eve tried to nod but her neck was rigid.

"Would you do anything to get warm?" he asked.

Eve eyed him warily; for there were a lot of things that fell into 'anything', but she was so cold and hungry that she couldn't think of a single thing worse than her current predicament. She felt her life slipping away. If the man left, she knew she wouldn't see the sun rise again.

"Y-yes, sir," she mumbled, fighting her eyes which were trying to close.

"Tell me what you would do to warm up." His voice was honeyed and Eve was almost certain this man didn't want to be a good neighbour.

"I would do anything you wanted me to, sir." She wasn't sure how much of her words were intelligible, but he seemed to somehow interpret her meaning.

"Good girl. And how old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir." She wondered if he were looking for a child, but his grin got wider, almost predatory.

"Excellent. What's your name?"

"Eve, sir."

"Well, Eve, today is your lucky day. Come with me, and I *promise* you'll be warm in no time at all."

Eve struggled to her feet, taking clumsy steps as she tried to balance. The man held out a leather-gloved hand to her, and she took it. He helped her walk across the frigid snow until they reached a carriage. She stared in half-belief, for she had never ridden in one, nor knowingly spoken to anyone who owned one.

"Yes, this is mine. Samuel, help the girl inside," the man ordered. A coach driver hopped down from his seat and regarded Eve with distaste, but he obeyed his master, all the same.

Sitting in the carriage, Eve stared out of the window as it began to move. The motion felt strange, and her stomach clenched, but it was too empty to protest properly.

"You've never travelled in a vehicle before?" the man asked.

She looked at the floor as she replied, "No, sir."

"If you remain with me, this experience will become commonplace."

"As you wish, sir." Out of the cold's fierce glare, Eve's mouth began to move a little more easily. Her face still ached on one side, but that was a constant problem, a hazard of her former job in a match factory.

Even inside the carriage, however, Eve wouldn't say it was warm enough to thaw her out after a day trying to sell matches.

"There are a great many things I wish for, my dear, and a compliant companion who will do anything I want her to do is at the very top of my list. If you do as I say, if you learn to accept anything I give you without complaint, I will ensure you are never cold or hungry again."

It sounded almost too good to be true. Eve wondered if she had died in the alleyway, if she were being taken away somewhere. The man in the carriage didn't strike her as being part of a choir of angels, though. Perhaps she shouldn't have lit those matches, after all. It was nothing short of theft, and she was sure that a court would have convicted her for it. Perhaps they would have sent her to Australia. She had heard it was much warmer there. It was hard to be afraid of the fires of Hell when she'd never been warm enough in her entire life. Was that where she was headed, in the rolling carriage, with the peculiar, deathly-pale man whose name she didn't know?