



A
TASTE
FOR
MONSTERS

MATTHEW J. KIRBY



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CHAPTER 1

I woke up next to a dead woman. A black fly rested on her open left eye, straddling her lashes, and in my fear and disgust I leapt from the bed without first making certain the straps of my carpet-bag were still entwined in my arms. The bag fell to the floor as I reached my feet, and I snatched it up with the brief, daily moment of relief that it hadn't been stolen in the night.

"Who was she?" asked a dollymop from the bed next to me, the paint on her cheek a smeared bruise, crudely applied to hide how young she was.

"I never asked her name," I said, though I had been forced to share the bed with her when the doss-house filled to overflowing the night before.

"Best notify the manager," the girl said, and flopped onto her back.

I stared at the dead woman and wondered when in the night she had passed away. Her body lay on its side, utterly still, facing the empty half of the soiled bed I had just fled, her gray hair filled with grease and dirt, the toil of her life in evidence. She was of dizzy age, her face ruttled with deep lines, her nails chipped away and fingertips blunted by hard labor. I had no idea what color her dress had been before the back slums got to it, but it was ratty enough now that it wasn't worth taking.

I turned away from her and opened my bag, then pulled out the nicer of my own two dresses, the one I kept away from the fleas and grime. My skin turned to gooseflesh as I undressed to my corset and pulled on the dress, and afterward I placed around my neck the silver locket bearing twin portraits of my parents, painted when they were still happy.

“Ain’t you fine and large,” said the prostitute. “Off to the palace today, are we?”

I ignored her. This clean dress had been my mother’s, one of the few pieces of finery my father hadn’t sold off. It was ten years old, its fuller shape now out of fashion, but still lovely and respectable, and clean, which were all I required.

“You’re enough to make a stuffed bird laugh,” the girl said. “You can change your dress but not your face, now can you.” She chuckled.

I held myself still against the familiar pain, for I could not show a whit of weakness. To do so invited the cannibals to descend upon me. They waited for any opportunity to plunder the living and the dead, and if I tarried here, I would see it again. There would be someone who would take the dead woman’s dress.

It helped if I allowed the pain to become anger, to let it scorch the backs of my eyes for several moments, and then unleash it like the phosphor I once handled so carefully. To survive, I had to always be a savage fire-in-waiting.

I put that flame into my voice. “I can’t change my looks, and you can’t change the number of times you’ve spread your legs. Can you even count that high?”

That stunned her eyes and mouth open wide. “Who you think you are?” she said, but I could see that my appearance and my tone had unsteadied her.

I pulled my shawl out of the bag, draped it over the top of my head, and wrapped it around the lower half of my face. “Keep to your own business, church-bell.”

She didn’t utter another word as I snatched up my bag and left her in the cramped room. My anger burned out and left me shaking as I bumped down the narrow corridor. I did not relish having said that to her, nor any of the far worse things I’d had to do in the last few years. That was not me. I hadn’t yet let the streets change me deep down, though they had surely tried.

In the kitchen, several women sat along the benches against the wall, sipping weak tea and eating their breakfast. When the manager saw me come in, she left her stove and offered me bread, but I could see that mold had got into it and declined. She shrugged.

“The woman who shared my bed last night is dead,” I said.

She put her red hands on her hips, her arms huge. “Another one, eh?”

I nodded. She shrugged once more and went back to stirring whatever she had in the pot that would be served as supper that night. But I would not be coming back for it. Even if my plan today failed, I didn’t have the coin for another night’s lodging.

I checked the placement of my shawl and stepped outside, where I found it had rained the night before, turning the streets into a foul mire. I kept carefully to the sidewalk as horse hooves and carriages slipped in the muck, and set off down Wentworth

Street toward Osborn. Before I reached Whitechapel High Street, mud had caked my boots above the soles and clung to the hems of my skirts, while rough, gray clouds shouldered the city, threatening to rain again. It was early enough and the weather dour enough that the streets weren't yet swarming, but were coming to life with oystermen, milk boys, organ grinders, and tinkers.

I made my way eastward a half mile on foot, wishing I had but one more farthing to make the two required to ride the omnibus down the street. I passed storefronts as they opened, the lurid signs for Thomas Barry's Live Entertainments, the Red Lion pub, and the Star and Garter, until I stood opposite the black gates and porters' lodges of the London Hospital.

Behind me, an aproned greengrocer stood next to his bushels and crates, muttering curses at the sky in Irish, and next to his shop, a boarded-up waxworks suggested former horrors. The smell of souring fruit cut through the odors of manure and soot.

Beyond the iron fence, set back from the commotion of the street, the hospital's high arches and columns presented a severe and imposing edifice. It seemed almost scornful of me, daring me in my impudence to attempt what I was about to do. But I could not be dissuaded or intimidated, for I had no choice.

"Pardon me, miss?"

I turned to my left.

A costermonger with a door-knocker beard had his wheelbarrow of eels and herring up on the sidewalk, out of the mud, chancing the ire of a passing copper. He flinched when he saw my face, his revulsion apparent, and I realized my shawl had slipped.

I hurried to adjust it as his gaze dropped hard to his wares and stayed there.

“Out of the way,” he said.

I stepped aside. “Good day to you.”

He trundled past me, eyes downward, shoulders rounded. “Filthy strum,” I think he may have said, but the rumble of the wheelbarrow flattened his words.

He wasn’t a threat to me, and I was exhausted, so I let the affront slip by me as he walked on. A moment later, the greengrocer cleared his throat behind me. I turned, and he stared at me before nodding his head toward the hospital.

“Can they help you, then?” he asked.

He had seen the slip of my shawl, too. “That is my hope.”

His nod was quick. “Best be off. Gates open soon, and there’ll be a crowd already.”

I thanked him, then dove through an opening in the traffic and hastened across the wide street. My boots collected more mud along the way and grew heavy before I reached the gate, where I found the greengrocer had been right. A crowd had already gathered.

Among them was a young woman, about my age, clutching a sunken-eyed little boy, his chestnut hair lank with sweat. I could tell his mother had endured a sleepless night, and I pitied her.

“Can I give you something?” I asked the boy.

He cast me a shy look from against his mother’s bosom, the hope in his eyes somewhat tarnished. His mother eyed me with suspicion, so I waited until she nodded her permission.

Then I leaned in close to the boy and pulled out my last farthing. “This coin is charmed with luck. You hang on to it whilst

your mother speaks with the doctor, and you'll be feeling better in no time. I've got all the luck I need, you see. Will you take care of it for me?"

He came out from hiding a bit and nodded, with a smile, and I pressed the coin into his dirty little palm.

"You hold tight to that, now," I said, and his mother mouthed a silent thank-you.

Near us, a dandy fellow swayed on his feet, his eyelids fluttering, clutching an arm that bent in the wrong place. He was supported by several other young men, and by the look of them they all suffered, to a far lesser degree than their comrade, from the excesses of their night. They regarded me with their lewd and bleary eyes, and I checked the placement of my shawl.

We all waited in grim silence for the hospital gates to open. This was the red-slicked eddy where the city's currents collected its maimed and diseased. It had carried me here today for the second time in my life.

A doctor and a nurse soon came with two porters to open the gates. Before doing so, their practiced eyes surveyed us, and I imagined them cataloging and sorting the afflictions before them.

"The broken arm will most likely need surgery," the doctor said to the porters. His blond hair had as much wave as a silk ribbon, and his face was shaven. "Take him up to the operating theater. The rest of them can wait in the receiving room."

One of the porters nodded. "Yes, Doctor."

The doctor exchanged a look with the nurse and turned away, but he gave me a parting glance that held curiosity, and perhaps even a brush of admiration for the part of my face I didn't hide. I

was accustomed to that and took no more flattery from it than the fruiterer takes in the few ripe apples he uses to hide the worm-ridden.

I made use of the boot brush as the porters unlocked the squealing gate, and then we all shuffled through, first into the hospital's foyer and then into the receiving room.

It remained as I remembered it. The austere benches waited in rows, the wooden floor beneath them an open testament to mortal suffering, written in stains that would never lift out. The fronds and leaves of potted plants reached out from the room's corners, while the sweet, almost burnt scent of carbolic permeated the air.

All the other wretches who had been waiting outside took seats, but I inhaled deeply and approached the attending nurse sitting behind her broad desk. This was a scene I had rehearsed again and again, but had no true confidence it would unfold as I had envisioned it.

"I would like to speak with Matron Luckes," I said.

The nurse looked up from a wide ledger. "Pardon me?" She had a few gray hairs and wore a blue dress, white apron, and a small white bonnet.

"I would like to speak with the matron." I bowed my head a little. "Please."

"The matron does not see patients. What is your complaint?" She swept me with a quick glance. "Are you ill?"

"No, ma'am. I wish to speak with her about becoming a probationer."

"Oh." Now she scrutinized me as if through a different lens, and I felt myself standing straighter. Though I had worn the

better of my two dresses, I still felt shabby. “You wish to be a nurse?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And what is your name?”

I gave my voice a gentle clearing. “Evelyn Fallow, ma’am.”

She rose from her desk. “Please wait here, Miss Fallow,” she said, and left through a nearby door.

I waited and watched as nurses moved down the rows of patients, documenting illnesses and injuries, and doctors summoned the poor souls in order of urgency for further examination. I admired them all for their charitable work, and wished that I could say the same about my own reasons for being there.

The nurse returned. “Matron Luckes will see you.” She extended her hand to usher me through. “This way.”

We left the receiving room and entered a wide hall. Glass doors at one end opened onto the hospital’s gardens, but we turned to the right down a corridor into the west wing. Nurses glided by us with gentle nods, entering and exiting the wards we passed. I tried not to be overt about peering inward, and thus caught only a glimpse of the rows of patients in metal beds.

At the next intersecting hallway, we turned right again and came into an area of offices. We passed a few doors, until we arrived at one labeled *MATRON* in brass. The nurse knocked with the back of a knuckle.

“Enter,” came a voice from within.

The nurse opened the door and gestured for me to go through, which I did, and then heard the door shut behind me. Here in the west wing, direct sunlight had not yet reached the well-appointed

office. Matron Luckes stood behind her desk, a very sturdy woman, her complexion the color of boiled sheets, fingertips on her desk, her arms spread like flying buttresses. She appeared to be in her thirties and wore a black dress, white lace at her collar and cuffs, and she had a round moon of a face. Papers covered the desk in neat stacks, an inkwell and pen nearby. Behind her, shelves displayed books, plaques, pictures in frames, and other objets d'art.

"Miss Fallow?" she asked, her voice imperious.

I stepped farther into the room, which smelled delicately of violet. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you for seeing me, ma'am."

"It is customary for requests such as yours to be put in writing and delivered. But I like to recognize initiative, and I see no reason for you to have wasted a journey here. From where do you come?"

"Spitalfields, ma'am."

"Oh." She paused. "I see."

I thought I heard disappointment in her words and feared in that moment she had set her mind against me. Nurses came from far better places than the godforsaken East End. But she lowered herself into her chair and motioned me toward one of the seats in front of her desk with an elegant flick of her wrist.

"Please, Miss Fallow."

I sat forward on the edge of the cushion and laid my bag close by.

"Tell me." The matron propped her elbows on the desk and looked at me over the steeple of her fingers, each of which bore a jeweled ring. "Why do you wish to become a nurse?"

This, too, I had rehearsed. "To help others, ma'am. To do some good in the world."

“A noble intent,” she said. “And why do you wish to do good?”

I hadn’t expected that question, and it seemed to contain its own answer. “Aren’t we all supposed to do good?”

“Yes. But some do good even when others would not expect it. Take this hospital, for example, which operates by the charity of others. There are those who think our patients bring their misfortunes on themselves, and are both deserving of the consequences and undeserving of our mercy. How would you respond to such people?”

My first thought was that such people might think me undeserving. “I’d point them to the Bible, ma’am. If I remember correctly, Jesus did not hold much company with the toffs and swells. He ministered to the sick and afflicted.”

“True. You have read the Bible?”

“I have, ma’am.”

“Remove your shawl, please.”

“Ma’am?” The sudden request came at me like a hansom cab charging out of the fog, and left me frantic.

“It seems to me you are hiding something.” Her eyes shone. “I must know what it is if we are to go any further with this interview.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I looked down at my lap. I’d known this moment would come, and I had tried to prepare for it, but when confronted with its reality, I faltered in the fear that the matron would treat me no different than the streets I’d come here to escape. Perhaps my purpose had been a failure before the first step taken.

“Miss Fallow,” Matron Luckes said, “please remove your shawl.”

I reached up and pulled the fabric away from my head. I felt some of my hairs fly loose, and felt the air against my scars.

The matron was silent for several moments. “You poor girl. You worked in a match factory, if I am not mistaken.”

I nodded. “Bryant and May’s.”

“Were you party to their strike last month?”

“No, ma’am. My jaw had already started to ache by the end of April, and I haven’t worked there since.”

“Phosphorus necrosis.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You have fared very well, considering. You are lucky to have a lower jaw at all.”

“I didn’t ignore the signs, and a doctor here in the hospital got to it early. He performed surgery and saved much of the bone and some of my teeth. I had already quit the factory when the strike started, but I’m glad for the reforms, for the sake of those still working there.”

“The reforms did not go far enough.” The matron shook her head, scowling. “White phosphorous is a poison. There is simply no justification for its continued use over red phosphorous, other than greed.”

That was true, and the greed of the match factory owners had left me disfigured, unable to find good work or to marry a good husband. But the doctor and nurses who had cared for me had inspired a single possibility for a decent life, and now that I was here, I was determined not to let the opportunity pass without an attempt to take hold of it.

“I am aware of my appearance,” I said. “More acutely than anyone else, I assure you. But I can read and write. I can do sums and figures. I will make a fine nurse if you but give me the chance.”

My revelations seemed to surprise her. “Where were you educated?”

“I did not come from the East End, ma’am. I went to school. I had tutors. My father was once a quite prosperous silk merchant. But he lost his fortune speculating, and the financial ruin proved too much for him. He took to the bottle and the bottle took his life.” I didn’t tell her about the countless times I’d pleaded with him to leave the drink alone, or how he’d left me crying and alone that last night, and I hadn’t seen him again until I was called to identify his body at the inquest.

“And your mother?” the matron asked.

“She died when I was eight while giving birth to my sister, who lived but five days.”

“I see.” The matron looked down at her desk, drumming a tattoo with her fingertips, and a delicate hope fluttered inside me. Several moments passed with maddening slowness, counted by the ticking of the wall clock. But then she looked up abruptly, and by the serious expression she wore, I knew my hope had been false.

“I’m sorry, Miss Fallow. I truly sympathize with your plight. But here are the facts, which cannot be ignored. Our patients come to us in the extremities of pain and despair. A nurse is engaged in divine work, and to be of comfort and benefit, she must possess an angelic countenance. Your disfigurement would cause shock and discomfort, I am afraid. There is also the matter of maturity. How old are you?”

“Seventeen, ma’am.”

She sighed. “There we are. Probationers must be at least twenty-one. You have my deepest pity. Had I the power, I would—”

“Begging your pardon, Matron, but I did not come here for your pity.” I swallowed to keep my voice steady and strong. “I came for a position, and if I’m to be perfectly honest, it wasn’t out of charity, either. I came because I have nowhere else I can go. I have no money, but I refuse to debase myself with men. I do not want to die in a doss-house, but I am terrified that is my fate, or something worse. Please, ma’am. I’ll accept anything. Just allow me—”

She held up a hand to stop me from speaking. “You have strength of character, and I admire it,” she said. “But it does not change the facts I have already stated. I am sorry, Miss Fallow, but there is nothing I can do.”

“I see.” I felt my whole being collapsing inward, but forced myself to my feet. “Thank you for your time, Matron.” I managed a curtsy, reclaimed my bag, then turned and crossed her office, eyes downward on the Persian rug, attempting to scrape together a desperate plan for where I would go and what I would do outside the hospital walls. I reached the door and grasped its cold handle.

“Miss Fallow,” the matron said.

I turned to face her. “Ma’am?”

“A possibility has just occurred to me.” She came around from behind her desk and approached me, joining her bejeweled hands in front of her waist. “It is actually your condition, as well as the strength you have shown, that may render you suitable to the task I have in mind. But I must warn you. The patient has proven too much for even the most seasoned and accomplished on my staff.”

I forged my voice of adamant. “Whatever the duty, ma’am, I accept it.”

“You will be a maid, but also the patient’s attendant. You will light his fire, bring his food, and you will assist him with whatever he requires.”

I would not have to return to the streets, after all. I had escaped the city and what it had tried to make out of me, the life and death that waited for me there. “You have my deepest gratitude, ma’am. I know I am capable, and I won’t disappoint you.”

“But this duty is different from whatever it is you are expecting, I assure you. This patient is quite singular.”

“How so, ma’am?”

“His name is Joseph Merrick. You may have heard him referred to as the Elephant Man.”