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Cross-Dressed at Dawn

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Introduction

At first light, when chimney pots still exhale the last of night and the streets take their first breath, London becomes a stage that belongs to anyone with the courage to step upon it. Gaslamps sputter out, carts begin their clatter, and the pavements flush with the small economies of survival—newsboys, sweepers, women with baskets, clerks with hastily buttered bread. Before the day stiffens into rules, there is a softness to the hour, a seam in the city's fabric through which one might slip. Clothing is conversation then, and a name—whichever one fits in the mouth—is a key.

This novel opens in that seam. A woman fastens a collar she is not meant to fasten, threads her hair flat, and learns the weight of a coat that grants passage. The streets are different from inside a borrowed silhouette: alleys narrow, doors unlatch, and men who would not meet her glance yesterday nod to her this morning. In her pocket rests a new name, the sound of it untested on the tongue, the syllables offering both safety and risk. She does not set out to deceive; she sets out to work. Yet to work, she must first be seen.

There are trades that will not open to her unless she wears the right story upon her body. The pressroom, with its muscular chorus of iron and ink, is one such place—close and hot, aromatic with oil, democratic in the way that skill is weighed but selective in whom it permits to lift the formes. The city, for all its cruelties, has always made space for performance, and under its ceaseless watching she learns to walk, to joke, to lean, to take up the reasonable measure of room allotted to a young man. In that performance there is exhilaration: a freedom of the hand and stride, of speech and silence, of choosing when to be visible and when to become part of the brickwork.

But London is not merely audience; it is also constable, ledger, curtained window. The same streets that grant disguise also demand an accounting. There are eyes that patrol from the glow of a lantern and from behind lace, rules written and unwritten, and the brittle crack of scandal where it meets the law. To live between prescribed genders in a surveilled society is to measure the cost of every doorway: each friendship weighed against suspicion, each night's lodging against a landlady's questions, each step echoed by the possibility of being named—by someone else—too loudly.

Between those calculations, something unexpected flowers. Intimacies appear in unlikely places: over tea cooled by conversation, in the shared labor of ink-stained hands, in the quiet of a barber's chair where touch is both necessity and trust. Some confidences are exchanged in laugh and smoke, others in music hall shadows where an audience rehearses its own disguises. Language changes here—not only in the

words chosen, but in the ways two people learn to witness one another, to refuse the small violences of misrecognition. Desire does not always announce itself; sometimes it arrives as shelter, as competence admired, as the relief of being known.

This is a story of identity worked like metal at the forge, tempered by risk, brightened by connection. It is not a treatise but a tale, attentive to the textures of cloth and cobblestone, to the tempos of rumor and the hush of rooms where secrets rest a moment before taking air. The city will test the seams of a life stitched in two names, and the test itself will ask which parts can be let out, which must be taken in, and which can never again be cut away.

If you walk with these pages at dawn, you may find the city briefly yours as well. Listen for the press calling the day's shape into being, for the bell at a crossing, for laughter that sounds like defiance. Watch how a coat becomes a passport, how a name becomes a room, how love finds a way to sit at the same table as fear. And when the light strengthens and the rules return, remember what was possible in that interval—the hour when anything one dares to wear might fit, and the self steps forward, cross-dressed, yes, but also simply, finally, seen.

CHAPTER ONE: The Borrowed Morning Coat

The first thing Amelia noticed about the morning coat was its silence. It didn't rustle, didn't demand fussing with petticoats or the constant awareness of a cinched waist. It was a dense, heavy blue-black twill, smelling faintly of pipe smoke and damp wool, and it simply *hung*—off the shoulders, down the hips, terminating in a purposeful, uninterrupted line. It was her brother Thomas's coat, left behind when he shipped out for Bombay three months prior, and it was a garment engineered for locomotion, for action, and for invisibility in the press of other men.

Amelia stood before the chipped looking-glass in the cramped back bedroom she shared with her younger sister, Clara. The gaslight from the street lamp outside cast long, theatrical shadows, making the room seem deeper and less real. It was four o'clock, and the only other sound in the house was the low, steady snore of their mother, who believed firmly that four o'clock was an ungodly hour best spent horizontal. Amelia pulled the coat tighter around her slender frame. Even cinched at the waist with Thomas's belt—which was far too large and required an extra hole punched crudely with a sewing awl—the coat offered a generous, misleading bulk.

Beneath the coat, she wore the other pieces of her temporary armor: a stiff, starched white shirt borrowed from her father's rarely-used dress drawer, a black satin stock tied in a respectable but unremarkable knot, and Thomas's oldest pair of trousers. The trousers were the worst compromise. They fit her height, but not her hips, and she had spent a sweaty, nervous hour the previous night modifying the waistline with careful, almost invisible darts, praying the changes would not be noticed when Thomas inevitably returned. She had practiced walking in them until the floorboards groaned in protest.

The shoes, thankfully, were simple. Thomas's boots were absurdly large, forcing her to stuff the toes with cotton wool to achieve anything approaching security. But the boots, heavy and squared, gave her stride a decisive quality. They allowed her to stomp, not mince. They announced a purpose that no respectable young woman's ankle boots ever could. Amelia caught her reflection again. With her dark hair ruthlessly slicked back and flattened beneath Thomas's tweed cap, the face looking back was undeniably hers, yet utterly foreign. The jawline looked sharper, the eyes more shaded.

It wasn't that she didn't possess the necessary education or intelligence for the work she sought. Amelia had been an assiduous reader since childhood, devouring every scrap of print that entered their small Islington home. Her father was a failed clerk whose main success in life was securing a position as a relatively well-paid

proofreader at the *London Mercury*. Amelia, sitting next to him late into the evenings, had absorbed the grammar, the punctuation, the layout, and the crucial, demanding rhythm of the print shop.

But the pressroom, she knew, did not hire women, not for the typesetting or the proofreading or the crucial, skilled work of making the news real. Women swept, women served tea, sometimes women folded papers. But women did not belong to the fraternity of ink and iron. The war of competition in the print trade was brutal, and even skilled women were viewed as a destabilizing force, a cheap threat, or simply an impossible distraction.

So, necessity—and a surging, dangerous curiosity—had driven her to this masquerade.

The financial motive was stark. Her father's health had declined severely over the winter, and he had been forced to stop work. The small savings were dissolving rapidly. Amelia was clever, quick, and desperately keen to keep their small household afloat. Her needlework brought in pennies. Her skills at the press could bring in shillings, perhaps pounds.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the masculine, dusty scent of Thomas's room. She reached into the coat pocket and touched the object resting there: a small, smooth piece of river stone, meant to keep her palm warm and, perhaps, to give her something substantial to grip should her nerve fail. She also touched the carefully folded letter she carried, addressed to Mr. E. M. Ashworth at the *London Mercury*—her father's recommendation, written hastily but firmly, introducing his "nephew, Elias," who possessed an aptitude for the press.

Elias M. Ashworth. The name felt strange and wonderful on her silent lips. It held the sturdy, serious weight of a bank ledger entry.

She slipped out of the room, careful not to wake Clara, and descended the narrow staircase. The front door latch offered a low, metallic click. Then she was out on the pavement, the early London air biting at her cheeks, a cold promise of the day to come.

The streets were not yet fully awake, but they were certainly not empty. Dray horses clopped past, heading toward the markets. A few other figures, cloaked and silent, hurried in their directions. She kept her head down, trying to inhabit the gait she had practiced: shoulders set slightly forward, a longer, less-concerned stride. It was a walk that suggested destination and agency, not merely arrival.

The sheer novelty of her freedom was exhilarating. Usually, a woman walking alone at this hour would be instantly categorized—as a servant, a milkmaid, or a woman of the streets. Elias M. Ashworth, however, was merely a young man hurrying to work. No

one questioned the right of a young man to be in the public space. No one stared, or rather, the few people who looked, looked through her, not *at* her. She was part of the background, a functioning cog in the sprawling, grinding mechanism of the city.

She passed a group of three young clerks, already dressed in their tight, respectable black coats, laughing boisterously over some shared joke. Amelia flinched internally, bracing for a comment or a shared glance, but they barely registered her presence. She felt the sudden, shocking relief of anonymity. It was a vast, open space in which to breathe.

The journey from Islington to the Strand was long and cold. Amelia tried to remember everything Thomas had ever told her about male deportment. When a man was cold, he did not huddle; he simply walked faster, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He did not pull his coat tightly around his throat; he ignored the discomfort. Amelia tried to adopt the proper indifference to the weather. Her cotton-wool-stuffed boots made a satisfying, solid sound on the cobblestones.

As she neared the Strand, the character of the city changed. The domestic quiet gave way to the industrial roar. Carts carrying heavy rolls of newsprint rumbled past. The smell of burning coal and fresh coffee mingled with the acrid, metallic tang of ink. This was the territory of the printing houses, a vibrant, demanding corner of the city where information was manufactured and distributed.

The *London Mercury* offices were housed in an imposing, soot-stained building wedged between a solicitor's office and a tavern that looked perpetually closed. Amelia paused across the street, allowing a cart full of empty beer barrels to clatter past before she made her final approach.

Her heart was beating a panicked rhythm against her ribs. This was the moment of truth. Entering the public sphere in male guise was one thing; presenting herself for employment under the scrutiny of men who worked with observation and precision was quite another. She adjusted the cap, pulled down low over her eyes, and walked briskly across the road.

The pressroom entrance was a heavy, brass-handled door. She pushed it open and stepped into a hallway smelling overwhelmingly of hot oil and wet paper. A set of worn wooden stairs led down to the sub-street level where the great presses lived. The noise was immediately deafening—a chaotic, rhythmic thunder of machinery, punctuated by sharp shouts and the clatter of metal.

She located the small, glass-paned office tucked near the stairwell, designated for the Foreman. He was a large man with enormous hands and spectacles perched halfway down his nose, currently examining a galley proof in the harsh light of a single bare lamp. His name, according to her father, was Mr. Finch.

"Morning," Amelia—Elias—said, attempting to pitch her voice low and firm, but slightly breathless due to the journey. The word came out a little thin, a little hesitant.

Mr. Finch glanced up, unimpressed. He surveyed Elias quickly, registering the worn coat and the young, slightly pale face. "You're late, lad. We begin the run at four-thirty sharp."

"Beg pardon, sir. Had a long way to walk," Amelia replied, concentrating fiercely on keeping her tone even. She presented the letter with a steady hand. "My name is Elias Ashworth. I was told to report to you by my uncle—Mr. Ashworth."

Finch took the letter, ripping the seal with a thick thumbnail. He scanned the contents quickly, his lips moving silently. He paused at the signature, giving a quick, dismissive nod. He knew Amelia's father well enough; Thomas Ashworth was reliable, if sickly.

"Well, Elias. Your uncle recommends you highly for typesetting assistance. Says you have an eye for errors and a quick hand." Finch folded the letter and tucked it into a wire basket. "I'll not take your uncle's word as gospel. The press doesn't care about family ties. It cares about efficiency."

He motioned toward the roar behind him, which was now accelerating as the presses geared up for the morning paper run. "We need compositors and proof runners today. You'll be running proofs up to the editors, learning the layout, and keeping out of the way of the machinery. Can you take direction without arguing?"

"Yes, sir," Amelia said, feeling a surge of cautious hope. She had a job.

"The payment is three shillings a day for a start. Twelve hours of noise and grime. If you drop a sheet or smudge the final plate, it'll be deducted. Understood?"

"Perfectly, sir."

Finch sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Right. Go see Mr. Harrison—he's by the stone, setting the main features. Tell him Finch sent the new lad. And I want that cap off in the print room. Respect the tools, Elias."

Amelia quickly removed the tweed cap, running a hand over her tightly pinned hair. Finch didn't look closely, merely registering the presence of dark hair suitable for a working man. She stuffed the cap into her coat pocket, suddenly aware of the need to look less sheltered. She saw her reflection again, briefly, in the glass of the Foreman's office door. Elias looked young, nervous, but ready.

She stepped out of the small office and directly into the pandemonium of the

pressroom.

The heat was immediate and intense, radiating from the great iron presses. The air was thick with the smell of lampblack, paper dust, and sweat. The cavernous room was a landscape of specialized chaos. Massive rollers turned with mechanical precision, spewing out sheets of damp, fresh newspaper. Men moved everywhere—some in grimy leather aprons, others in shirtsleeves, their faces uniformly marked with streaks of ink and fatigue.

The sound was a living entity, making conversation impossible save for shouted commands. Amelia realized instantly why women were said to be ill-suited for this environment; the noise alone was enough to make one's teeth ache, and the machinery seemed to demand a certain brutal competence that brooked no fragility.

She scanned the room for "the stone"—the massive, flat, slate or metal surface where the compositors arranged the metal type into pages, known as formes. She saw a group of men clustered around a large table near the rear wall. That must be Mr. Harrison's domain.

Navigating the pressroom was like traversing a dark, churning river. She sidestepped a hand truck loaded with zinc plates, narrowly avoided bumping into a man carrying a heavy wooden frame of type, and tried to adopt the confident, head-up posture she had practiced. But here, confidence was born of familiarity, and Amelia felt acutely, humiliatingly green.

She reached the compositors' area. Mr. Harrison was a stocky man with a severe expression, standing before a frame of type, picking up tiny pieces of metal with practiced speed. He was shouting instructions at a younger apprentice, whose hands were visibly shaking.

Amelia waited for a momentary pause, then tapped Harrison on the arm. "Mr. Harrison? Elias Ashworth. Mr. Finch sent me."

Harrison didn't stop his work, but his eyes darted to her. "Ashworth? Right. Too young to be any damn use, I suppose, but we're short. Grab that stack of sheets—the ones marked 'Foreign Desk.' Take them up to the editorial floor. Top of the stairs, third door on the left. Don't bend the corners. Don't drop them. Don't talk to the editors unless they address you first."

He gestured with his chin toward a stack of damp, proofs resting precariously on a shelf. "Go on. Move."

Amelia grabbed the stack. The paper was cool and slightly slick with residual ink. The sheets were heavy. She clutched them to her chest and turned back toward the stairs.

This was it. Her first official task as Elias M. Ashworth. It was mundane, yes, but necessary.

Climbing the stairs, the noise slowly receded, replaced by the faint scratch of pens and the murmur of serious discussion. The second floor was quieter, cleaner, and filled with men in better coats, smelling of pipe tobacco and clean linen. This was the editorial world—the minds that shaped the raw material Amelia was helping to produce.

She found the third door on the left and hesitated for a moment, adjusting her stock and smoothing the front of Thomas's coat. She knocked lightly.

"Enter," a voice called, sharp and impatient.

Amelia pushed the door open. The room was long and dimly lit, dominated by a huge mahogany table littered with papers and inkwells. Two older men, wearing waistcoats and looking impossibly serious, were hunched over a map, arguing quietly about the boundary lines of some obscure colonial territory.

Another man—younger, perhaps thirty, with startlingly light hair and a fine, if slightly frayed, smoking jacket—sat near a window, correcting proofs with a long, blue pencil. He looked up, his expression one of mild annoyance at the interruption.

"Proofs from the Foreign Desk," Amelia announced, placing the stack carefully on the corner of the large table.

The editor with the light hair glanced at her—at Elias—and then back at his work. "Leave them, lad. And shut the door quietly on your way out. We're on deadline."

"Yes, sir," Amelia replied.

As she turned to leave, the younger editor paused, chewing on the end of his pencil. "Wait a moment, you're new, aren't you?"

Amelia froze. Had she done something wrong? Was her voice too high? She turned slowly back around, keeping her face slightly shadowed. "Just started, sir."

"Well, then, I'll give you a piece of advice." The editor leaned back, studying Elias with a detached air. "Don't ever bring me sheets that are damp enough to stick together. It slows the work. Have Harrison fan them a little longer, or I'll have your wages docked. Understood?"

"Understood, sir," Amelia murmured, already moving toward the door.

"Good. Now," he said, returning to his paper, "go fetch me a fresh pot of coffee from the kitchen. And none of that lukewarm slop they keep down on the presses. Tell them Mr. Marlowe requires it piping hot."

Amelia nodded sharply, pulling the door shut behind her. Mr. Marlowe. She memorized the name. A small errand, yes, but it meant she was gaining a footing. She was performing the required duties of a "lad" in the pressroom hierarchy. The borrowed morning coat was proving to be an excellent passport.

The fear began to subside, replaced by a cool, methodical focus. She descended the stairs, finding the kitchen—a cramped, steamy room managed by an elderly woman who grumbled about editors—and secured the coffee.

When she returned to the pressroom floor, the noise and heat seemed less oppressive. She moved with greater confidence, now knowing the layout and the accepted pathways. She delivered the coffee to Mr. Marlowe and returned immediately to Mr. Harrison.

Harrison was demanding. He sent Elias running proofs, fetching tools, distributing type trays, and sweeping up the metal shavings that accumulated around the stone. It was physically demanding labor, requiring quick reactions and constant movement. Her arms quickly began to ache, and the heat beneath the heavy coat was stifling. She focused on the mechanical details—the need to keep her elbows out, the requirement to speak only when spoken to, the art of appearing preoccupied rather than watchful.

Mid-morning, while hauling a bin of used metal type, she stumbled slightly near one of the large rotary presses. A pressman—a burly man with scars on his knuckles—let out a string of curses. He looked down at Amelia with pure irritation.

"Watch yourself, boy! You spill that, and you'll be cleaning ink off the ceiling with your tongue! This ain't a tea party!"

"My apologies, sir," Amelia muttered, righting the bin and moving quickly away. The intensity of the men's language, the rough immediacy of their interactions, was a continual shock. It was a world utterly devoid of the social niceties and veiled communication of her upbringing. Here, words were hammers.

By noon, the day's first major run was complete. The presses slowed, and the men gathered in small groups for a hurried, greasy lunch, pulled from pockets and wrapped in newspaper. Amelia found a quiet corner near a pile of stacked paper, pulled out the cold bread and cheese she had packed, and ate quickly, desperately thirsty.

She noticed one of the younger apprentices, the one Harrison had been shouting at

earlier, staring at her with unconcealed curiosity. He was perhaps sixteen, small for his age, with intelligent, anxious eyes.

He drifted over, wiping his hands on his trousers. "You the new one? Elias?"

"That's me," Amelia said, keeping her mouth full of bread to avoid lengthy conversation.

"I'm Sam. You look pale. Never worked in a press before?"

"No. Just learning the ropes."

"It's hell, but it pays. Don't let Harrison catch you sitting still for more than thirty seconds. He hates idleness worse than the French." Sam took a large bite of pickled onion. "Where are you from, then? You don't sound like a local."

This was the first direct, social interrogation. Amelia felt a cold knot tighten in her stomach. "Islington. I lived near the reservoirs." She hoped that sounded adequately distant and respectable.

"Ah. Clean air, then. Enjoy it while you can. By the end of the day, you'll taste printer's ink for a week." Sam lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Don't cross Mr. Marlowe upstairs. He's the one who writes all the nasty editorials about the poor laws. Total tyrant, but he buys good coffee."

Amelia managed a thin smile, relieved to have navigated the exchange without incident. The details of Thomas's life—his vague address, his interests, his acquaintances—were all being folded into the persona of Elias. It was a tiring, constant calculation.

When lunch was over, the second half of the day began, focusing on job printing and supplementary pamphlets. The work was less frantic but required more detail. Harrison assigned Elias to assist an older compositor named Mr. Davies, who smelled strongly of gin and tobacco but possessed a surprisingly delicate touch with the tiny metal types.

"You'll sort these into the cases," Davies instructed, pointing to a massive pile of used letters and punctuation marks. "Keep the letters upright, mind the serifs. We need clean type."

The type sorting, known as distribution, was tedious, precise work. Standing at the imposing wooden case, Amelia began to separate the letters, her fingers moving over the metal pieces. The contact was oddly grounding. The smell of the ancient, oily type was comforting. Each letter was a small, solid promise of communication.

Davies watched her for a few moments, grunting. "You got good hands, lad. Steady. Most new boys look like they're trying to sort flies."

"Thank you, sir," Amelia replied, focusing on the small, smooth 'e's. Her father had taught her this task years ago, simply for the pleasure of it. Now, it was her living.

As the afternoon wore on, the initial exhilaration of the disguise settled into a dull, persistent exhaustion. The coat felt like a furnace. The boots rubbed her heels despite the padding. But the work continued, demanding her entire attention.

Towards five in the evening, as the lamps were lit and the outer streets grew busy with the homeward rush, Davies leaned close, lowering his voice.

"You been out late, lad? Got a place to stay tonight?"

Amelia tensed, her hand pausing over a capital 'T'. "Yes, sir. I'm lodging nearby."

"Good. Don't waste your wages at the public house, Ashworth. Save your coin. This is a cruel city for a young man with no resource but his own ten fingers."

Davies turned back to his work, leaving Amelia with the unsettling realization that Elias was now perceived as utterly alone—a solitary young man surviving on his own effort. She was not merely disguised; she was now socially repositioned. The vulnerability of being a lone woman was replaced by the different, but equally acute, vulnerability of being a lone young man.

As the final duties were completed and the pressroom floor was swept down, Mr. Finch appeared, holding a small pouch of coins.

"Ashworth. Here. Three shillings." He dropped the heavy coins into her waiting hand. The weight was satisfying and real. "Be back at four tomorrow. On time."

"Thank you, sir," Amelia said, the gratitude genuine.

She walked out of the pressroom, the thundering noise now behind her, into the comparative calm of the Strand just after dusk. The lamplighter was making his rounds, and the gas lamps cast circles of yellow light on the pavement.

Outside, she leaned against a cold brick wall, pulling the tweed cap back over her head. She counted the coins in her pocket, their metallic clink a sound of profound relief. She had earned her passage. She had been Elias.

The physical relief of standing still was immense, but she knew the performance was

not yet over. She had to walk back through the city, maintain the disguise, and return to the quiet, feminine realm of her own home. She had to become Amelia again before her mother or Clara awoke.

The greatest challenge now lay in the careful, silent, and complete transition. Elias M. Ashworth had worked a twelve-hour shift, but Amelia had a whole other identity to maintain in the small hours of the night.

She started walking north, pulling her coat tight, adapting her stride once more. She was a different figure now than the nervous youth who had arrived that morning. She was tired, ink-stained, and poorer in spirit, but three shillings richer. And she knew, with absolute certainty, that she would be back tomorrow. The print room, with its smell of oil and its muscular din, had opened a door she could not now close.

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