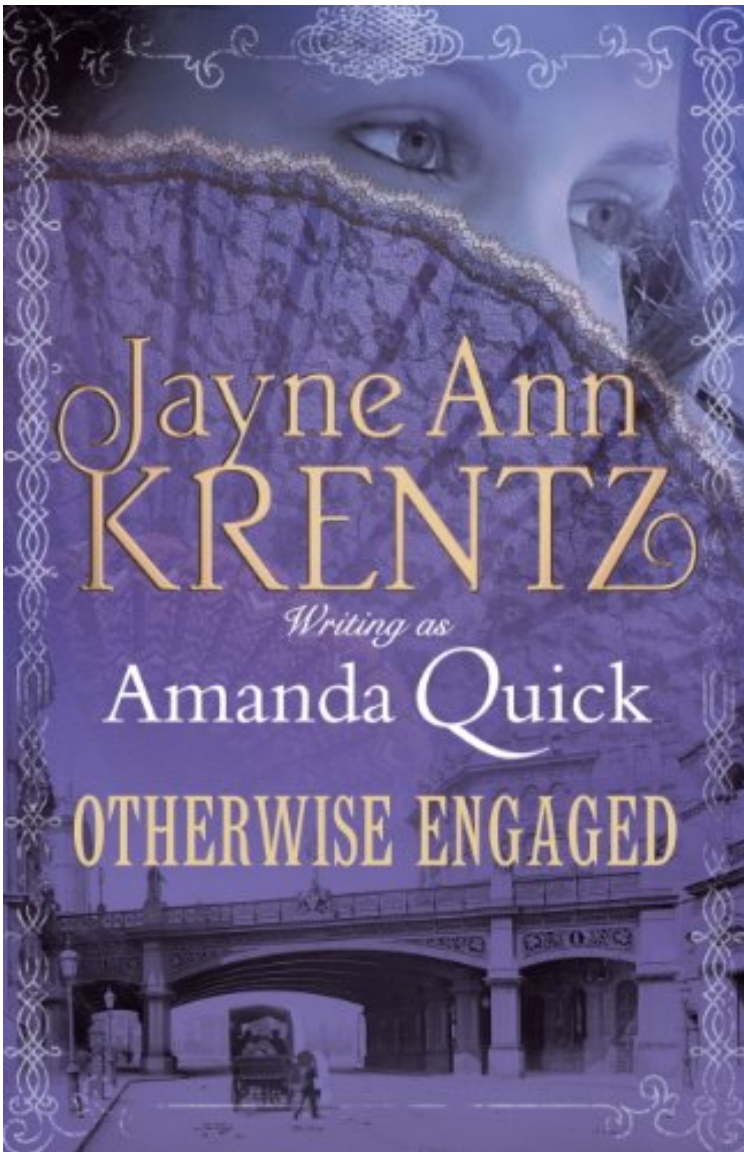


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Otherwise Engaged



Par Amanda Quick
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOne does not expect to be kidnapped on a London street in broad daylight. Yet Amity Doncaster barely escapes with her life after meeting a man in a black silk mask who whispers the most vile taunts and threats into her ear. Her quick thinking, and her secret weapon, save her - for now. But the monster known in the press as the Bridegroom has left a trail of female victims in his wake, and will soon be on his feet again. He is unwholesomely obsessed by Amity's scandalous connection to Benedict Stanbridge - and Benedict refuses to let this resourceful, daring woman suffer for her romantic link to him-as tenuous as it may be. For a man and woman so skilled at disappearing, so at home in the exotic reaches of the globe, escape is always an option. But each intends to end the Bridegroom's reign of terror in the heart of the city

they love, which means they must also face feelings neither of them can run away from. . . .Extrait***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof.***Copyright 2014 by Jayne Ann KrentzCHAPTER THREELondonAmity blamed herself for failing to realize until too late that there was a man concealed in the shadows of the cab. It was the rain, she concluded. Under most circumstances she would have been far more observant. Traveling abroad she made it a point to pay strict attention when she found herself in unfamiliar surroundings. But this was London. One did not expect to be kidnapped straight off the street in broad daylight. True, she had been distracted when she left the lecture hall. She was still fuming because of the countless inaccuracies in Dr. Potters lecture on the American West. The man was a benighted fool. He had never so much as set foot outside of England, let alone bothered to read her pieces in the Flying Intelligencer. Potter knew nothing of the West, yet he dared to present himself as an authority on the subject. It had been too much to take sitting down, so of course she had been forced to stand up and raise some serious objections. That had not gone over well with Potter or his audience. She had been escorted out of the lecture hall by two stout attendants. She had heard the muffled snickers and disapproving sniffs from the crowd. Respectable ladies did not interrupt noted lecturers with the goal of correcting them. Luckily, none of those in the audience were aware of her identity. Really, one had to be so careful in London. Irritated and eager to escape the dreary summer rain, she had leaped into the first cab that stopped in the street. That proved to be a serious mistake. She barely had time to register the odd, shuttered windows and the presence of the other occupant before the man wrapped an arm around her neck and hauled her close against his chest. He pressed the tip of a very sharp object to her throat. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that he gripped a scalpel in one gloved hand. Silence or Ill slice open your throat before its time, little whore. And that would be a pity. Im so looking forward to photographing you. He spoke in a harsh whisper but the accent was unmistakably upper-class. His face was covered by a mask fashioned out of black silk. Openings for his eyes, nose and mouth had been cut into the fabric. He smelled of sweat, spice-scented cigarettes and expensive cologne. She was vaguely aware of the fine quality wool of his coat because of the way he held her pinned against him. He moved, reaching out and around her to pull the door shut. The vehicle jolted into motion. She could tell that the carriage was moving at a rapid clip, but with the view through the windows blocked by the heavy wooden shutters she had little sense of direction. One thing was evident immediately. Her captor was stronger than she was. She stopped struggling and allowed her arms to go limp. Her right hand rested on the elegant fan attached to the silver chain at her waist. What do you want with me? she asked, striving for a thoroughly indignant and outraged tone of voice. But she knew the answer. She had known it from the moment she saw the scalpel. She had fallen into the clutches of the fiend the press had labeled the Bridegroom. She struggled to keep her voice cold and assertive. If there was one thing she had learned in her travels, it was that an air of coolheaded self-control was often the most useful defense in a crisis. Im going to take a lovely wedding portrait of you, my sweet little harlot, the killer crooned. Youre welcome to my purse but I must warn you that there is very little of value inside. You think I want your purse, whore? I have no need of your money. Then why are we going through this pointless exercise? she snapped. Her insulting tone enraged him. Shut your mouth, he rasped. I will tell you why I have taken you. I am going to make an example of you, just as I have done with the other women who displayed a similar lack of shame. You will learn the price of your deception. She did not think that it was possible to be any more frightened, but an even more intense wave of terror swept through her at his words. If she did not take some action to free herself, she would not survive the night. And she was quite certain she would only get one chance. She had to plan well. Im afraid you have made a great mistake, sir, she said, trying to project conviction into the words. I have deceived no one. You lie very well, Miss Doncaster, but you may save your breath. I know exactly what you are. You are just like the others. You give the outward appearance of feminine purity but underneath the faade you are tainted goods. The rumors of your shameful behavior while abroad reached my ears this past week. I am aware that you seduced Benedict Stanbridge and convinced him that, as a gentleman, he has no choice but to marry you. I am going to save him from the trap you set for him, just as I saved the other gentlemen who were deceived. The killer traced the blade lightly around her throat, not quite piercing the skin. Will he be grateful, I wonder? You think to protect Mr. Stanbridge from the likes of me? she asked. You are wasting your time. I assure you, Benedict Stanbridge is quite capable of taking care of himself. You think to trap him into marriage. If you feel that strongly about the matter, why dont you wait until he returns to London? You can inform him of your theories concerning my virtue and allow him to draw his own conclusions. No, Miss Doncaster. Stanbridge will discover the truth about you soon enough. Meanwhile, the Polite World will learn what you are tomorrow morning. Dont move or I will

slit your throat here and now. She held herself very still. The tip of the scalpel did not waver. She contemplated the possibility of slipping away from the blade and hurling herself to one side of the seat. But such a maneuver, even if successful, would buy her only a few seconds at most. She would find herself trapped in the corner, her tessen against the scalpel. The Bridegroom was unlikely to murder her inside the carriage, she thought. It would be far too messy, to say the least. Surely there would be a great deal of blood and that would require an explanation to someone, even if only to the coachman. Everything about the killer, from his elegantly knotted tie to the furnishings of his vehicle, indicated that he was the fastidious sort. He would not ruin his fine suit and the velvet cushions if he could avoid it. She concluded that her best chance would come when he attempted to remove her from the carriage. She gripped the closed tessen and waited. The killer reached across the seat to a small box that sat on the opposite cushion. When she caught the telltale whiff of chloroform, another current of panic arced through her. She no longer possessed the option of waiting for the carriage to halt. Once she was unconscious she would be helpless. This will keep you quiet until we reach our destination, the Bridegroom said. Never fear, I will wake you when it is time for you to put on your wedding gown and pose for your portrait. Now, then, lean back in the corner. That's a good girl. You will soon learn to obey me. He prodded her with the scalpel, forcing her to edge toward the corner. She tightened her grip on the fan. The killer glanced down but he was not alarmed by her small action. She could not see his expression because of the mask but she was quite sure that he was smiling. He no doubt enjoyed the sight of a helpless woman clutching piteously at an attractive bit of frippery attached to her gown. He readied the chloroform-soaked rag, preparing to clamp it across her nose and mouth. Just breathe deeply, he urged her. It will all be over in a moment. She did what any delicately bred lady would do under such circumstances. She uttered a deep sigh, raised her eyes toward the heavens and fainted. She took care not to collapse straight onto the blade, sliding sideways along the seat instead. From there she started to tumble off the cushion onto the floor. Bloody hell, the Bridegroom grumbled. He moved instinctively to avoid the weight of her body. The blade of the scalpel was no longer pointed directly at her throat. As if in answer to her silent prayers, the coachman turned a sharp corner at speed. The vehicle lurched to one side. The Bridegroom automatically sought to steady himself. It was now or never. She straightened, twisted and stabbed the sharpened steel ribs of the folded fan into the nearest target, the killer's thigh. The points bit deep through clothing and flesh. The Bridegroom screamed in surprise and pain. He slashed at her with the scalpel but she already had the tessen open. The steel leaves of the fan deflected the blow. Bitch. Startled and off balance, the killer tried to ready himself for another strike. She snapped the fan closed and stabbed the points deep into his shoulder. The hand holding the scalpel spasmed in a reflexive action. The blade landed on the floor of the vehicle. She yanked the tessen free and stabbed wildly a third time, heedless of her target. She was in a panic, desperate to free herself from the carriage. The Bridegroom shrieked again and batted at her, trying to ward off the blows. He groped for the fallen scalpel. She opened the fan again, revealing the elegant garden scene etched into the steel, and slashed at the killer's hand with the edges of the razor-sharp leaves. He jerked back, shrieking in rage. The carriage slammed to a jarring halt. The coachman had evidently heard the screams. She clawed at the door and managed to get it open. She closed the tessen and let it dangle from the chatelaine. Seizing handfuls of her skirts and petticoats in one hand to keep the yards of fabric out of the way, she scrambled out of the vehicle. What the bloody hell? The coachman stared at her from the box, rain dripping off the brim of his low-crowned hat. He was clearly stunned by the turn of events. Here, now, what's this all about? He said you was his lady friend. Said the two of you wanted a bit of privacy. She did not stop to explain the situation. She dared not trust the coachman. He might be innocent but he might just as easily be in league with the killer. A quick glance showed her that the vehicle had come to a halt in a narrow lane.

Once again she hiked up her skirts and petticoats. She fled toward the far end where the cross street promised traffic and safety. She heard the coachman crack his whip behind her. The horse broke into a frenzied gallop, hoofs ringing on the stones. The carriage clattered away in the opposite direction. The anguished, enraged howls from inside the cab grew faint. She ran for her life. There was more screaming when she reached the cross street. A woman pushing a baby in a perambulator was the first person to see her rush out of the dark lane. The nanny uttered a high, shrill screech. Her horrified cry immediately attracted a crowd. Everyone stared, shock and fascinated horror etching their faces. A constable appeared. He hurried toward her, baton in hand. You're bleeding, ma'am, he said. What happened? She looked down and saw for the first time that her dress was splashed with blood. Not mine, she said quickly. The constable assumed a forbidding air. Who did you kill, then, ma'am? The Bridegroom, she said. I think. The thing is, I'm not certain that he's dead. *Revue de presse* Praise for Otherwise Engaged Quick...has outdone herself with the nineteenth-

century protagonist of *Otherwise Engaged*....A plot that sustains the suspense in a novel that never loses its sense of humor. *The Seattle Times* Stellar plotting, exquisite dialogue, and impeccable characterization. *Kirkus* s (starred review) Plenty of humor, sassiness, romance, and mystery. *Heroes and Heartbreakers* Neatly complemented by equal measures of smoldering chemistry and lively banter, the action-packed plot is served up with plenty of dramatic flair and just the right dash of dry wit, making this a first-rate addition to Quick's canon of classic historical romances. *Booklist* (starred review) Clever main characters, complex plot and passionate connections...a fun, quick read. *Novel Reaction* Fans of the author in all her incarnations (Amanda Quick, Jayne Castle, Jayne Ann Krentz) will really enjoy this addition to her work. Examiner.com