

Chapter One

Chilham, Fall 1813

TESS HALE GRIPPED A KNIFE in each hand as she pressed herself along the wall of the first-floor landing. The muffled rustle of rummaging through drawers floated up to her. Someone was in their manor—someone who was not Da. What a wretched night for their only footman to be away visiting his family. But Da had been feeling benevolent given his night of prosperous gambling. Tess detested the habit. Had one of the men whom Da had won this latest fortune from come calling to reclaim what was his merely hours ago?

A flash of gray in the hallway caught her attention. Da joined her, a dirk clenched in his fist. He leaned against the wall alongside her, his eyes unusually wild and bright. “Someone has broken into the manor, lass.”

She lifted her weapons as evidence she was highly aware of that fact. “What did you do, Da? Who did you cross this time?”

He pressed his finger to his lips and, with a glance at the ground-floor landing, guided her back down the dark hall to her bedroom with a stealth that only ever appeared during his childish games of warfare training—as if Tess would ever truly need to know how to enter and exit a room unseen or how to throw knives in self-defense.

Her pulse quickened. It seemed tonight those skills would actually be of use. She twisted the familiar handles of her knives in her grip. She

could wield them well, but *throwing* them at an actual human being, threat or not, was an entirely different matter.

Da closed the door behind them, his thick, strong fingers turning the key silently. Strands of his messy queue of chin-length hair streaked across his weathered face as he turned to face her. “Take your horse and ride for Dover. At the docks, find the *Goldfinch*. The captain will take you to the port of Tain in Scotland. Once you are out of the captain’s sight, take a rowboat to our island. They will never think to look for you at the cottage. It is too close to the clan. They won’t think of it, especially if I let them overtake me. They’ll think me bumbling. Yes . . .” The rest of his words were lost in a jumble of rambling nonsensicalness.

“Dover? What are you going on about? And what *clan*?” Tess blinked. *Oh*. This was another of Da’s tests. She gritted her teeth against groaning. *I am such a fool to be taken in by another one of his elaborate schemes*. But hiring someone to pretend to break in was a new level to Da’s odd assessments of her ability to protect herself. He’d nearly convinced her. She sank down onto her bed and reached for the covers, sighing with relief that he did not actually need her to row from the coast of Scotland out to their little island cottage.

“What are you doing, Tess?” He jerked the covers from her hands. “You have to go!”

“I’ve only just returned from Bath, Da. Seeing to Vivienne and her knight’s future happiness was quite the affair. You know I always wish to spend time with you, but please, at least allow me one night’s rest before you insist on your preposterous drills. Tell your friends downstairs that they performed admirably.” She yawned and drew the covers over her warmest nightdress. It was far too cold to humor Da tonight.

“This is no false alarm, lass.” He crossed to her closet and seized the first gown his fingers brushed. Shoving it at her, he said, “Tonight, the terror I have been dreading for decades has become all too real.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “I am not following . . .” Had Da been in the cups again along with his gambling? The two did seem to go hand in hand. There was no logic to this latest test. “But Da—”

“Why else do you think I’ve trained you for years?” he snapped as he

retrieved the valise she'd unpacked just that morning and began stuffing things inside.

Honestly? Because being a proper gentleman bored you. But at his uncharacteristically frantic packing, she rose, her heart picking up speed. She grasped his sleeve in an attempt to make him face her. "You are frightening me. Tell me this instant if you are in earnest. Are those real thieves downstairs?"

He paused with a day dress halfway packed, lifting a single finger to listen.

Voices floated up through the floorboards.

"They are no friends of mine. The intruders will surely overtake us any moment. You are in grave danger."

Her pulse pounded in her ears. "Who would wish to harm a lady? Why would I be in danger?"

He sighed and handed over her half boots. "Because of who your mother is." He withdrew a small leather pouch from his pocket and dumped the contents into his hand, then tossed a handful of gold coins into her reticule, along with several pound notes.

"Mam?" She shook her head, unable to comprehend why he was speaking of Mam as if she were still alive. "What has this to do with her?"

He shoved the reticule, as well as her dirk in its harness, into her hand. "Everything. If you value your freedom, you will move. *Now.*"

Her breath caught at the fire in his green eyes that matched hers but were, at this moment, like those of a man about to stride into battle. She seized an emerald traveling gown from her closet and darted behind the dressing screen, tossing on layers of clothing as quickly as possible and affixing her weapon's harness to her thigh. "Explain."

"I made choices her clan did not like." The sound of her bedroom window opening had her peeking around the screen as she buttoned her gown. "The time of reckoning is here. While there is little hope for me, you can escape. No one has seen you in nearly two decades and they likely don't know where you are . . . yet. But it will be over the moment they see you."

"Little hope for you? Wait—" Tess shook her head as his words hit her. "I am not leaving without you."

"I have not sacrificed everything to keep you safe to allow you to give yourself up for me—not then and certainly not now," he fairly spat. "I can take care of myself."

She tugged on her shoes and rounded the screen, weaving her fiery, curly mane into a braid and reaching for the ribbon at her dressing table. "Sacrifice? I know not what you mean, Da."

"You were never meant to know. Take the funds in this reticule and your valise, then retrieve Wolfie from his kennel and get out." He motioned to the window. "You can climb better than most men. I suggest you do so."

"Da, you must cease speaking in riddles." She flinched as something porcelain smashed downstairs.

He guided her to the window. "Away with you, *nighean*, my daughter."

"Tadgh!" A man shouted below. "We know you are here. Come down, or we will burn the house to the ground."

"Tadgh?" She frowned and paused at the sill. "Why are they calling you by your middle name?"

"There's no time." He grasped her hand, freezing from the cool night air, and pressed a kiss to it. "Run and do not look back. They will not kill me, lass. I mean too much to her." His eyes softened, and, with fingers that shook yet, he unclasped the chain he always wore beneath his cuff. He lifted it so the charm, a single tiny, pinhead-sized diamond set in a copper-sized circle of gold stamped with a crest on the underside, sparkled in the moonlight. He caught her hand and affixed the bracelet to her wrist. "If ever you are in danger in Scotland, this crest will save your life, but remember, your future is secure at the cottage with the *things* you loved most."

"What are you talking about?" She scowled at the jewel dangling from her wrist and ran her fingers over the emblem. "I thought you said you won this from a Scottish nobleman?"

Da picked up the reticule stuffed with gold coins and pound notes

and again pressed it into her hand. Then he drew a cloak about her shoulders and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

"It is your mother's crest. I will escape as soon as I can and join you at the *bothan*." He tossed the valise out the window, far away from the house to minimize the thump.

"Mam's crest?" She rested her hand on his shoulder. "Why would a crest matter at such a time as this? You are sending me off alone, into the dead of night, to the island cottage. The journey will take days, if not a week! Da, I'm still not entirely certain you are in your right mind."

"You are my nighean, my flesh and blood. You have strength you do not know you possess. You will find your way, lass. Tell no one who you are, not even if you are beset by highwaymen on the road to Dover or, heaven forbid, by the privateers who lurk about the sea."

"And yet you said the crest will see me to safety. Da, you are making no sense."

"Use it only when your very life is threatened and not a moment sooner. Go!" He gripped his daggers and slipped halfway out the door. "Follow the coast. Mind the rise and fall of the tides and you should be safe enough."

How comforting. "If these men pose such a danger, come with me," she pleaded.

"I must buy you time before I escape. God be with you."

"And you, Da," Tess replied, but he had already vanished.

Another crash sounded below. A startled curse from the intruders unlocked her movements.

Fear numbed her senses, but if all her father said was true, she needed to focus. "Pretend this is a drill. It's only a silly game you've done countless times." She gripped the windowsill and looked down to where the trellis began two feet below. She could descend the trellis and drop the last length. She had done it often enough.

She rolled her shoulders, hiked her skirts to her knees, and crawled out. She was strong for a gentlewoman, thanks to Da's training since her childhood. It had seemed like a grand sort of pastime then, and a way to have his full attention, but tonight, with the thieves below,

and the wind nipping at her exposed cheeks and hands and rippling through her gown, it was distressing.

Moving cautiously, she let her feet dangle over the roofline before finding her footing and starting down. Her half boots didn't grip the trellis well, but at least they would protect her feet from the thorns of the roses crawling up the house. She had learned that the hard way when she'd forgotten her shoes before a drill. She'd learned another valuable lesson when she'd rushed while wearing shoes and missed a foothold, and landed hard on her derriere. *Slow and steady.*

At the sound of shattering glass, she fumbled her hold and dropped the remaining four feet to the ground. Draping her traveling skirt over her arm and crouching low, she slipped around the outside of the manor to the curtained parlor window. A lantern flickered inside, and she made out the forms of two men standing over a heap on the floor. *Da! How could they have overpowered him?* She pulled the blade from its sheath at her thigh. She could fight, but draw blood? Only if it were unavoidable. She pressed herself along the stone exterior and dared to listen.

"Well, that was surprisingly easy, given all the stories surrounding him. Why would he leave himself unguarded?" one said with a deep intonation that left her no doubt he was a Scotsman.

"Perhaps the thief has grown arrogant in his dotage," the other answered, a matching lilt in his tone. "It's been decades. The traitor thought that we would've forgotten him and that there would no longer be consequences. But he crossed our chief, and his own wife, and it is time to pay for his sins against the clans."

Sins against what clans? What are they talking about? Her father wasn't a thief, and there weren't any clans nearby, unless one was visiting the region? Men from the clans wouldn't have come all this way . . . Certainly Da was a notoriously sharp cardplayer who swindled unwitting gentlemen out of their fortunes, but he was not a thief. He wouldn't steal, not from anyone, much less clan leaders. He was smart and a gentleman who prided himself on his strict code of conduct. Tess scooted around so she could raise herself to see through the crack in the curtains.

"And if he doesn't give us the treasure?" The shorter of the two drew his knife.

"Then we take it, one way or another," the taller replied with a cackle. "Which do you think he'd miss more? His thumb or his little finger?"

"The thumb, obviously."

Her stomach churned at their boisterous laughter. And *treasure*? They must be confusing Da with someone else. They were well-off and she had a sizable dowry, but treasure?

A third man appeared from the shadows. She jolted and gripped the windowsill, hissing as the forgotten thorns of the crawling roses on the sill cut her flesh. His gaze flicked toward the window for a half a moment. She pressed against the wall, ignoring the thorns that grabbed at her cloak. *He did not see me. It is too dark.* When no shouts sounded, she eased back to peer through the crack in the curtain. Even in her terror and the poor lighting, she could tell the third man was massively built, though she could not make out his features. One man she could've taken, but two would prove difficult, and three was impossible.

The giant of a man cleared his throat. "Gentlemen."

The fiends standing over her father cried out as they turned their weapons on the newcomer.

"Stay your hands." He warned in a deep brogue, two dirks materializing in his hands.

So, he is a Highlander? Questions swirled within as her fingers dug into the mortar of the wall, willing herself to mind her father's wishes not to launch herself into danger on the slight chance she could help.

The men drew back a step.

"This is not your business, Malcolm," the shortest thief warned.

"I disagree," the Highlander called Malcolm fairly growled. "Tadgh's sin affects me far more than you, I'd say."

Another is calling Da by his middle name? What has Da gotten himself into, giving his middle name as his first?

"This is your final warning, Malcolm," said the other.

"Aye, I was hoping you'd say that." Malcolm chuckled and flipped his right blade in the air, catching it with ease.

The men charged at Malcolm, but the Highlander blocked their strikes, shoving one toward the wall as the second attacked him, and fighting as if he knew their next attack before they did. He spun and threw his dirk, pinning the tall fellow to the wall by his collar and missing his neck by a hairbreadth.

The miss was not by mistake. She pressed a hand to her mouth, suffocating an outburst at his lethal skills. *Can Da truly hope to escape from men such as these?*

Malcolm held the shorter one to the floor with a knee to his chest, his other dirk aimed at the man's eye.

"Truce?" The man gritted out, squirming beneath Malcolm's knee.

Malcolm eased the blade away by a few inches. "You may question him, but you shall not harm an unarmed man."

"You think he'll give up the location without harm? He won't talk," the taller man spat back. He gripped the blade, ripped it free from the wall, and tossed it at Malcolm's feet, terms apparently accepted.

"Then you should not have knocked him senseless. When he wakes, we question him, and if he refuses to answer, then we burn this place to the ground and destroy everything he holds dear."

No!

"If that doesn't work, *then* you may take him to your chieftess. She'll make him talk, I have no doubt. I will not see you maim or slay an unarmed, unconscious man, even one with sins such as his ushering him to the gates of Hades."

"You should know, since you are on the same road as he," the short one shot back as Malcolm shoved off him and went to stand over her father.

Tess's blood rushed in her ears. Her hands trembled so badly she nearly dropped her blade. If these men had knocked out her da, she was no match for them. And if they found her, no doubt they'd use her to get what they wished from her father. Da was right. She was more of a liability than a help right now. She needed to get away to keep her

father safe. She sheathed the blade and, picking up her skirts and the valise, raced to the stables, the rumble of a building dispute behind her.

If only Muriel and Vivienne still lived in the village so she could've gone to them. If only her father didn't gamble, these inebriated men wouldn't be after him. If only— She dashed inside and patted the stall door open, hoping the vibrations and noise would wake her dog. The barn cat mewled, unhappy at being awakened. Her mottled pointer roused at the cat's protest, wagging his tail in greeting. She rubbed his head, tears filling her eyes at the comfort. "Some watchdog you are, Wolfie. You are never having such a large dinner again, if it makes you so sleepy. I know your hearing isn't that bad."

She lifted her palm, motioning him to sit and stay with her as she harnessed her bay mare, Katie, to the light two-wheeled gig. She worked quickly, her movements confident even though she had little moonlight to work by. She finished the harnessing, snatched up her sidesaddle and pad to stuff in the back of the gig, and climbed inside, snapping her fingers. Wolfie leapt into the gig. "Walk on, Katie girl," she commanded, praying the sound of the wheels would not reach the shouting men in the parlor. As soon as she was far enough away from the house not to garner attention, she slapped the ribbons and sent the gig flying into the night.

Father God, she prayed, help us this night. Keep my Da alive. Let me be making the right choice in following his wish that I leave. Her heart threatened to crumble with dread over the secrets her da possessed—secrets that might very well send them both to an early grave.



Jamie Malcolm spun the handle of his dirk in hand, ready for a fight as he leaned against the fireplace mantel. His years in the Organization had honed the rigorous training from his youth, and experience in the field had proven that vigilance was the difference between drawing another breath and drawing one's last. And so he assumed an air of nonchalance and tossed the blade from hand to hand, staying vigilant

all the while. He watched the two Haldane clansmen shove a still-unconscious Tadgh into a chair for his interrogation as they argued over the best way to get their information without crossing Jamie's line.

The shorter clansman ripped a vase of roses from atop the piano. Tossing the flowers to the floor, he cast the water into Tadgh's face.

Tadgh sputtered. "T-Tess!" he cried, starting awake in his chair.

Jamie shoved off the mantel at a lady's name. *Tess*? Is that what he called Elspeth these days? The daughter everyone in his clan knew of but none had seen in decades? The woman on whom the fragile alliance between his clan and the Haldane clan rested? He never dared hope that Tadgh had kept her near all these years. "Where is your daughter, Tadgh?"

Tadgh narrowed his gaze at the men surrounding him. His concern disappeared, and his lips curled into a sneer as realization evidently settled into place that he had let such a secret slip. "Like I would ever tell the likes of you anything."

"See, we told you. Seems the traitor needs a bit of convincing." The tall one spun his knife in hand. "It won't take much to get him talking. I'm very good at what I do."

Jamie crossed the room and snatched the fiend's wrist, digging his fingers into the man's flesh. "I suggest that you do not forget who, or *what*, he is to your chieftess."

A thump sounded nearby, and Jamie tossed the man's hand aside.

"I'll check the area for anyone else. Do not harm him while I'm gone." Jamie grabbed a taper and lit it in the lantern. Gripping the candle, he spun on his heel and took the stairs three at a time. He made no effort to be stealthy. If someone was hiding, he wanted their fear to build. It would make them weaker.

He opened doors as he passed them until he found a chamber with a mussed bed and the smoldering remains of a fire in the hearth. His gaze flicked to the dressing screen. He strode around it. There was a crumpled nightdress on the floor. Tadgh's daughter had been here, and recently, too, given the still-crackling embers. He observed the delicate

furnishings, pale-blue bed-curtains, and pressed flower compilations covering nearly every corner of the room. A lady's room was a curious thing and one he did not feel altogether right about searching, but there had been that curious thump . . .

He moved about the room, searching the closet and under the bed. There was naught but stacks of botany and entomology books and more paintings. He spied a small jewelry box on the dressing table. He lifted the lid and the tinkling music of a familiar, soft Scottish lullaby filled the room. He combed through the paltry jewels. Nothing sapphire greeted him. He snapped the lid shut.

There was no second door for her to have escaped through. He moved to the open window, leaning out as a feral-looking cat skittered out of the barn. He regarded the ground. It was a far drop for a gentlewoman. Might she be injured? If she were, it would be easy enough to scoop up the prize. Turning back to the room, he spotted a miniature on the mantel. It featured three pretty, youthful maidens. One with caramel curls, a redhead, and another with frizzy blond curls. The middle one had a lift to her smile that suggested a mischievous nature, and if that hadn't been a giveaway, her flaming hair certainly would've been. This *Tess* had to be the daughter of Fiona Haldane, which meant she *had* to be the missing Elspeth.

He pocketed the miniature and jogged down the stairs, pausing at a portrait on the landing of a stunning woman with red curls. She was a more mature version of the young lady in the miniature. He grinned.

When he'd received word that his clan's famous stolen necklace had been spotted at a wedding ball in Draybridge, he felt that Providence had favored him, but he'd hardly dared hope he'd locate the long-lost daughter along with the treasure.

If Tadgh had sent his daughter out into the night with no servants to guard her, perhaps he had sent her, with the necklace, to retrieve the rest of the gold and jewels and hide them again? All Jamie had to do was to allow those two Haldane clansmen to think he was allowing them to take Tadgh because they'd arrived first. *This could work.* They were too focused on their hatred of Tadgh and his betrayal to think of the greater

lead, the daughter. Jamie could catch up with her. He would be hailed a hero and be forgiven for leaving the clan to secretly join the Foreign Office's covert branch.

He returned to the front room, where it appeared the two men were gaining nothing from Tadgh. Jamie moved about the room, flipping through books abandoned on a side table and flicking open drawers of the writing desk, until at last he spied a ledger. It was filled with the business of running a house, except for one entry that stood out. A payment in Dover, labeled "The Goldfinch." He snapped the book closed with a grunt, as if he had found nothing. "Has Tadgh talked?"

"Not since the first few words." The tall man removed a blade from its sheath. "I still think injuring him would work best. We should start with his small finger, not as bad as the thumb."

"I doubt you would wish to do that." Jamie crossed his arms, keeping a dirk in hand and his stance loose enough so he could intervene if needed. "Maybe your chieftess cares for him yet . . . if you two were sent here to retrieve him, she well may."

"Tadgh lost all our respect when he stole from his people. She will understand and consider it a necessary evil to right the wrong against us. Besides, she wasn't the one who paid us."

The shorter man kicked the tall one in the shins, silencing him.

"He stole from mine as well, but you do not see me slicing off any of his digits." Jamie paced the room, trying to appear as if he had all the time in the world. Really, he needed to be riding as fast as he could to Dover to intercept the lass before she disappeared for another two decades.

"Then what do you suggest, Malcolm?" the short one sneered at him.

Jamie kicked off the mantel and strode toward Tadgh, spinning his blade in his hand. He needed to portray interest in order for this diversion to succeed. "Let me take him. If he won't respect you, he will the chief of Malcolmore."

"I find that hard to believe. If he will not speak to his own clan, why would he, a man who has never agreed with the alliance terms between our clans, speak with your leader?"

Jamie sighed. “Good point. Then take him to someone who can get the truth from him and get my treasure back.” He sauntered to the door, calling over his shoulder, “You best remember this gesture of goodwill. If the Malcolm clan doesn’t hear from you in a fortnight, we will come looking for answers, and you know how we deal with those who deceive us.”

Jamie strode around the side of the house until he was beneath the window of the lady’s chamber. He studied the ground where the slightly longer grass was bent, leading to the stables. He ran to the stables and, finding no gig, retrieved his horse and followed the imprints to the gate. His gut told him she was heading to Dover in a gig. He could overtake her easily enough, but if he wanted to return to his clan, unite the divided factions within it, and prepare the way for his leadership, what better way would there be than to return with both her and the treasure? But to do that, he needed to let the lass feel the freedom of flying away and wait for her to reveal the treasure’s location before he captured this bird in his net.

Chapter Two

NAVIGATING THE ROADS BY MOONLIGHT proved a difficult task. Anxiety washed over Tess again and again, threatening to shake her willpower to make it to the cottage. It was so far, and she was so alone. *Lord, clear my path. Protect Da! I cannot do this alone.* A rut in the road jostled her so hard her teeth rattled. With a groan, she snapped the reins, refocusing on getting to Dover and to the boat where her father said help would be waiting.

Da had spoken as if he had it all planned. Was this why he always had them practicing drills? *Of course he had a plan.* Years of training hammered her like fierce waves in a storm of lies. From the sounds of it, they had been searching for her father for years . . . which meant her father had had this in mind for years. What else was he keeping from her? Her fingers stung from exposure as she gripped the reins. She had stupidly forgotten her gloves in the rush. Her body trembled, but she pressed onward, thankful for the warmth Wolfie offered at her feet. If the danger was as great as her father claimed, there was no other course. No time to deviate her focus long enough to dive into the past and sift through memories that would bring light to this night.

The little town of Dover was still sleeping when Tess arrived. She rubbed her strained eyes and arched her back, tight from the jarring holes she had managed to strike. The sense of relief blooming from her completion of the first part of the journey faded quickly. She still had so far to go before she reached the cottage. She blinked away the tears and

rested her hand atop Wolfie's head. "We will be fine, boy." She cleared the fear from her voice.

She could not panic. She would be rational and calm until she had a moment of safety at the cottage to question and wade through everything. Da would have some serious explaining to do after what he'd put her through this night. *If he makes it.* She shook that thought from her mind. He had to be well. She was too vexed with him for him not to be well.

Wolfie whined, leapt atop the bench seat, and licked her face, calling her back to the present even as the town filled her with memories. When Tess was a child, the journey to the remote island cottage was always an adventure, filled with delightful stops at the bakeries in each town they rested the horses. On the island, they had lived off the land, and she'd always felt she could do anything, conquer anything if she followed her father's instruction.

Well, at least she wouldn't starve, thanks to Da's demonstrating how to obtain food in the wild.

She reached the docks and slowed the horse as she approached the stable they always used. She pushed confidence into her shoulders and reached for the second dagger she had kept at her feet for the whole of the journey. She slipped the blade into the hidden right pocket of her gown. She stowed her reticule in the other. The lumps showing through her gown would stay hidden under her cloak. In her left hand, she gripped the valise, keeping her right hand free to draw the blade if needed.

"Let's hurry, Wolfie," she commanded, and hopped down, striding inside the stable. A boy lay atop a heap of fresh hay near the door. She bit back a sigh of relief that she needn't speak with the stable master, who might have recognized her. Da had wished for her anonymity, so she boarded the horse and gig under her friend Vivienne's new surname, Larkby. With any luck, that would prove a breadcrumb for her friends to know where she had gone. With a last rub to her bay mare's nose, she slipped into the foggy darkness.

A light flickered from the window of what she knew to be the bakery.

That meant it was likely a little after four in the morning, or so she guessed. Her friend Muriel, a baker-turned-heiress-turned-duchess, still ran a bakery in her dukedom's village and enjoyed waking far too early to fire up the ovens.

Tess warred between the need to secure supplies and the need to keep fleeing. She did not have time to spare, but the *Goldfinch* might have naught much aboard to eat. The captain might not have enough for her, or it might be unappetizing. Da would be angry with her for delaying, but the idea of enduring the next few days without anything edible urged her feet forward. She pointed to the ground by the front door and lifted her palm, and Wolfie took a seat with a whimper.

"I know. I'm sorry, boy." She scratched his chin and pushed open the door. The scent of warm vanilla, cinnamon, ginger, and icing greeted her. "Hello? I know it's early . . ."

A man with a reddened face and sweat at his temples poked his head through the curtains dividing the shop front from the kitchen and smiled. "Good morning, my lady. How nice to see a friendly face at this hour. I haven't been at the ovens long, so I have only two dozen scones and four dozen cinnamon buns prepared. Would any of that interest you?" His gaze flicked over the mud and dirt clinging to her cloak, and he paused, his brows furrowing. "I always make an extra from each batch in case any are irregular in shape. I had two such bakes this morning, if you find you are unable to pay . . ."

Her cheeks warmed at what a sight she must be if he thought her a pauper even as her soul was heartened by his kindness. "I thank you, good sir, but I merely had a trying journey to Dover, which accounts for my state of disrepair. If you please, I'll take a half dozen each." They would be hard as bricks on the third day, but a little bit of tea should help loosen the bread . . . if they even had tea aboard.

His smile broadened with what she guessed was relief. "Excellent. Thank you, my lady. I hope you enjoy the scones. I tried a new spice with this batch, and I think it makes for an excellent change from the simple vanilla ones I usually prepare."

The baker packaged up the items in a single box, tied it with string,

and named his price. Tess tugged out her reticule and counted the correct change. Then she tucked the bag away and smiled at the friendly baker.

"Have a good day, sir," she said, and threaded the string on the box of baked goods over her left arm before gripping her valise to her hip. It was cumbersome to carry both on one side, but she had to keep her right arm free if she wanted to be able to use her dagger should the need arise.

She hurried out, and Wolfie greeted her with a wag of his tail.

"Sorry, boy. There is naught in here you can eat. Bread doesn't suit you, remember?"

The dog whimpered.

"I'm certain the boat's captain will have some plates for you to lick clean. Come along," she whispered. The scent of baked goods under her nose made her mouth water, but she dared not spare another moment to stave the growling in her stomach. She had little doubt Da would keep silent on the location of this treasure, as he apparently had a talent for keeping secrets given the two decades of bald-faced lies he'd told her. But she doubted his silence would keep those brigands from tracking her if they were desperate enough to attack her home and father.

The first glimmer of sunrise broke on the horizon as she approached the docks. Obscure vessels bobbed in the impossibly dark water, and she beckoned Wolfie to remain close. Everything about the situation screamed at her to seek accommodation and protection at an inn. To wait until broad daylight's welcome embrace. And yet, her training bade her continue.

Take charge. Don't wait for help from any man. Da's voice echoed in her mind. He had raised her to be independent. He would not want her to give in to what he called her feminine desire for safety and protection.

She moved with purpose. She had the name of a vessel, and gold in her reticule. She would be fine. She stared down at the line of vessels in port, questioning her father's judgment in sending her here of all

places without even the captain's name. In the blossoming sunrise, she squinted at the names painted on them.

"Stay close, Wolfie." With the knife safely curled in her fingers, she gripped the opening of her cloak and tugged downward as the wind whipped at her skirts. Thankfully her hood was weighted enough to stay in place and keep her flaming hair concealed. She hurried down the dock, continuing to read the names of the vessels.

Her heart slammed in her chest at the familiar name painted on a forty-foot yacht. There it was—the *Goldfinch*. She nearly sagged in relief. Rest was coming. She stumbled in her haste just as a group of sailors sauntering through the maze of barrels and crates that lined the dock paused in her path. Appreciative male gazes landed on her, but she swallowed her panic and surged forward.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" A giant sailor with a thick mustache crossed his arms and grinned, looking her up and down in a fashion that would have had her father calling for a duel.

La, I'll call for a duel if he doesn't move. She kept her chin up and moved to pass him. He caught her elbow.

"Let me by," she growled, jerking back as Wolfie, hackles raised, snapped at the giant's ankles in warning.

"Oy! Can a lady not walk past without you harassing her?" another sailor protested, scowling at the man gripping her arm. "Let her go, Big Brady."

"Wolfie, attack!" Tess commanded.

The hound released a snarling bark and latched onto his thigh, and Big Brady cursed, attempting to shake off the hound. Wolfie had been a champion in the dogfighting rings, which had led to his hearing being damaged. However, he knew well how to fight to the death.

Big Brady dropped Tess's arm, and she darted away. Sailors shouted as Wolfie took the mountain of a man to the ground, snarling and biting at him viciously once more. One of them snatched up a small barrel and raised it as if to bash her dog's head.

She emitted a shrill recall whistle. Wolfie immediately released his hold and trotted to her side, a little prance in his step. "Good dog." She

lifted her dagger, not willing to drop her baked goods and valise unless necessary. She must not let them see her fear. "Let us on our way, and no further harm shall befall you this day."

Big Brady, with red creeping up his neck, and armed with whatever he'd found lying about, sneered at the dog and leered at her. He took a step forward, and Wolfie immediately lowered himself into an attack stance and growled again.

The shorter sailor grabbed his arm. "You'll let her be if you know what's good for you. That dog will eat you as soon as look at you."

A broad-shouldered man stepped between her and the sailors, his fists clenched. "Listen to your friend and get on with you."

She stiffened at the deep lilt of his voice. He was a Scot, that was sure. And with those muscular shoulders and flawless physique, a powerful one. But he sounded so like the darkly clad man in her manor. *Don't be silly. You weren't followed. Surely one Scotsman can sound like another. Especially when I am thinking like a frightened bunny.*

"We're not doing anything uncalled for. It's not every day that a pretty lady walks onto our docks. Mayhap she is looking for a position?" Big Brady guffawed even as the other sailor hauled him back a foot, snapping at him to shut it.

"Big Brady's stayed too long in the cups, I'm afraid," the sailor explained, lifting a staying hand to the Scot.

"A 'position'?" Her defender scoffed. "Can a lady not walk the dock without being accused of being a harlot? Apologize at once."

Big Brady shrugged off his friend. "Why? She is clearly not a lady—"

"I *said* apologize. Do so at once, and then move along before I bash in your face for even looking at her another time."

Tess sank into the shadows of her hood. The Scotsman was intimidating from behind . . . how terrifying his expression must be if he was sending a group of three men scurrying.

He turned to her, his set jaw looking like it had been carved from stone. Her breath hitched as his thick, dark hair fell over his face.

She scurried away from him, champion or not, and eyed the plank leading onto the yacht. Yet she questioned her every step. *I should stop.*

I should go back and find Muriel and Vivienne. They have powerful connections. Their husbands can protect me. I must be mad to be following Da's orders, boarding an unknown vessel and looking for a captain whose name I do not know. She crossed the plank into the boat. A few flickering lanterns graced the deck, their light less prominent now in the growing sunrise. She paused. What if the captain and first mate denied knowing her father? After coming so far, would she now be arrested for trespassing? *No*, she told herself. *Da would not leave this to chance. The captain and crew will know of him. And if they don't, it's a good thing I can talk my way out of anything.*

"Hello? Captain?" Her voice sounded small. She summoned authority, as if she were a fine lady used to having her word followed. "I am looking for the captain of the *Goldfinch*. Is anyone aboard?"

Lord, let me not have to venture into the cabin to find the owner. Her prayer fluttered heavenward as the plank creaked behind her. She whirled, and her jaw dropped slightly at the man before her. He was not the cantankerous old sailor sporting shoots of gray and a gold tooth she'd imagined.

"Are you following me, lass?" Her champion studied her, a hint of a smile curving his lips.

She gasped. "N-no."

"Then who is asking after the captain?"

Da had said not to share her name with anyone, but as this was the vessel her father had sent her to and this man was the captain of it, she answered, "Logan Hale sent me. I am his daughter."

His left brow lifted. "And?"

She pulled her reticule from her hidden pocket and gave it a little shake. "And I-I have funds and need passage to the port of Tain."



Jamie Malcolm had never lost his breath over a woman—but neither had he ever seen a beauty like Tadgh's willowy daughter confronting danger. With her fiery curls peeking out of her hood and her wide

eyes, she seemed younger, more vulnerable. And with her father having been captured and her running away at night, he supposed she was indeed.

The thought of what that brute on the dock had most certainly intended for the innocent lady, even though his fellow sailor had objected . . . Jamie clenched his fists. He'd had to fight the urge to chase after Big Brady to clout him senseless over his base and immoral actions, but following Tess took precedence. He grunted. He would not allow his emotions to rule, especially over a stranger. She was safe for now, and that was all that mattered.

He cast a glance toward the galley steps, where he had sent the first mate and the real captain of the *Goldfinch* only a quarter of an hour before. The captain, with a pocket full of Jamie's hard-earned funds, had agreed to pose as Jamie's first mate, while the similarly enriched first mate had agreed to act as cook and sailor. But if all went right this night, the gold spent here would be a pittance compared to the amount that would soon return to his family's coffers.

He regarded the woman and the dog at her side, who kept a wary eye on Jamie.

It hadn't taken much to track the gentlewoman to the *Goldfinch*. After Jamie had halted the ruffians from parting her father from his little finger, he'd let them take the man away. Jamie knew Tadgh would not give up the treasure. In relinquishing the chance to interrogate the man who committed the crime against his family, Jamie had found the bigger prize, he was sure. *Aye, the daughter will do nicely.*

But if Tess was shaken from the ordeal, the privileged lady was doing an admirable job of concealing it.

"Well? Can you take me there, or should I find a captain who can?" Her chin lifted defiantly.

"Do you have coin enough for the journey?"

She dropped the valise on the deck, exasperation tinting her actions, and yanked open her reticule. The coins inside jingled as she held it open for him to see. "Of course."

He could easily captain this sorry excuse for a yacht, and if this

woman was determined to sail, it was better she do so with him than with some seedy sailor in this port like the man he'd chased away from her, but he couldn't seem too eager.

"Aye. Passage will cost you . . . thirty guineas."

She muffled a gasp and she jerked the strings of her reticule closed. "Am I purchasing you a new vessel, sir? I can purchase this heap of lumber from you and sail it myself if that is your price." She lifted her chin.

His brows shot up at the absurd claim. *Sail it yourself? A forty-foot yacht?* One man could sail it if he was efficient and knew what he was about, but even then, it would be difficult, especially if he were sailing for longer than a single day.

This girl was so confident that she could make it on her own that he might be underestimating her. A quick glance at her long, delicate fingers, however, told him what he needed to know. She might be strong, but she bore no calluses, and that meant she was out of practice. She was, in fact, *not* prepared to sail.

Jamie kept silent. He knew from experience that people tended to break silences on their own. As the moments stretched between them, he shifted his stance. *Apparently, Miss Hale knows this rule as well.* He could not afford for her to look elsewhere for transportation, but he held his desperation in check. He'd stick to his part of greedy captain. "Fine. Twenty-five. It's my final offer. Take it or leave it."

"Twenty, and I get the cabin."

He extended his hand palm up for the coins. "Twenty-five guineas and you get the cabin."

"Done." Her lips quirked in triumph as she counted out the gold, dropping each piece into his hand.

He grunted and pocketed the coins as if they were the only reason he'd agreed to this trip. He was used to operating in the shadows with his work as a spy for England. Guilt had had no place in his line of work. But to have the woman trust him to follow through on his word . . . He didn't like the way his stomach knotted. The sensation was both unfamiliar and unpleasant. *But this is for the good of the clans*, he reminded himself. *Focus on the mission. The time for guilt is past.*

He moved about the ship, adjusting ropes and sails as he went, readying it to pull from the slip. He didn't need to wake the true captain of the *Goldfinch* just yet. Part of his bargaining when he had hired the vessel had been saying that he could manage it. Steering a vessel this large as a one-man crew would be tricky, but he could do it as long as he didn't get distracted by the comely lass standing at the bow.

Her cape billowed out as she gripped the railing, her gaze fixed on the horizon. She kept her hood up, but he could tell by her form that she was lovely. And by her hands, he could tell she had lived as a gentlewoman . . . probably because of her father's thieving ways. He ignored the second twist in his gut, the one that came from knowing her world was about to change forever, even if he wouldn't be the one ultimately responsible for the disorientation she'd feel. No, that fault belonged to her father. If she had not been taken as a child, she would know that her duty lay with keeping the alliance active. Jamie was simply following through with the mission for the good of the clans. For peace.

He gripped the wheel and guided the ship to open water. The gentle lapping of the waves increased the farther they moved from shore. He had a perfect view of the woman. As he was to be the next leader of the clan, he'd not considered his hand one offered in the treaty. The clans would prefer him to marry from among the daughters of their *closest* allies. He gazed at the woman, destined since childhood to be the bride of a noble clansman. All these years, he had thought of her only as the legendary daughter to be given in marriage at age twenty-five to a high-ranking Malcolm clansman, but who went missing. Now? She was everything beautiful and ladylike to him.

The wrong Malcolm man would crush her. And that *would* be Jamie's fault. There was only one man he would trust to be good and true to her. He'd just have to convince his best friend and second cousin to ask for her hand before the next heir in line caught sight of her and her uncanny beauty.