

The
LADY
DAUNTLESS
ELIZABETH
COLE

ALSO BY ELIZABETH COLE

A Heartless Design

A Reckless Soul

A Shameless Angel

Beneath Sleepless Stars

Honor & Roses

Regency Rhapsody Novellas

The
LADY
DAUNTLESS
ELIZABETH
COLE

SKYSPARK BOOKS

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THE LADY DAUNTLESS / Cole, Elizabeth. – Sample edition

Chapter 1



Scotland, Autumn 1807

TWILIGHT. IN THE GLOAMING, THE smell of the sea filled the air, though the water was hidden by hills surrounding the narrow glen. A shape burst forth from a dark grove of trees on the near side of the valley. A woman sat astride a tall roan, riding at a breakneck pace, like she was being chased by the devil himself. The woman's face was flushed with exertion, but she didn't have the look of the hunted about her. Amber hair streamed behind her like ribbons of fire, defying the falling darkness. Her creamy skin was highlighted by rosy cheeks, and a wide smile graced her face.

Gemma laughed in delight, catching her breath after the wild ride, her locks streaming down her shoulders in complete disarray. Hector was panting yet still in fine form. The tall roan was far smarter than the average horse—at least she thought so—and he often matched her mood without any need for her to give commands.

She'd been restless all day, pacing her room, wondering what had put this mood on her. With her uncle away as usual, she was almost alone in the great ruin known as Caithny castle. As a young

girl, she had pretended she was a princess, lost in an enchantment, only waiting for a handsome prince to ride up and free her. As she grew older, however, she learned a bit more of the world, and that dream faded. She was now twenty years old, without a suitor or an expectation of one, and only Uncle Conall and Aunt Maura to call family.

Desperate to escape the walls of her home, Gemma had saddled up Hector and ridden into the forest. She'd left shortly after lunch, and only as nighttime approached did she turn back to the house. She didn't want to return. The crisp fall air and the dying light seemed to whisper a thousand possibilities to her. She could ride out into the night and never come back. She could ride to the seashore and hail a passing ship to take her all the way into the sunset. She might even meet her prince!

Gemma shoved such thoughts aside as she gathered her strength for a last canter through the valley before she reached the gates of Caithny. Tossing her hair free, she nudged Hector to a wild gallop, trusting the horse to carry her safely. She rode nearly fast enough to escape her life, but not quite. She led Hector to jump the last barrier, a huge fallen tree. It was like flying.

She reined the lathered horse in after the jump, letting the beast regain his breath. She glanced up at the western slope, where the sunset lingered, turning the ridge line of the forest into a screen of stark black silhouettes, without depth. She narrowed her eyes, catching a glimpse of a different shape. A man-shaped shadow on a black horse. The trees were only half bare, and the shape was not distinct. Gemma looked longer, but couldn't tell in the fading light if the form was real. Her uncle didn't like strangers on the property. She was aware of the weight of the pistol she always carried. Should she go and investigate the shape?

Hector's tired snort reminded her that the horse was not ready for another race. She shrugged, looking away from the shape. No doubt it was just the twilight playing tricks on her. She nudged

Hector once, and they turned toward home.

When she reached the courtyard of the crumbling pile known as Caithny castle, Gemma earned a mild look of disapproval from Fergus, the stable “boy”—he was well over fifty.

“I thought we agreed Hector could use a day of rest,” the man said, looking critically at the beautiful roan.

She offered an apologetic shrug. “I had to go out, Fergus. I was feeling cooped up.” She was always feeling cooped up lately. Restless and itchy for something new.

“You’ll take the beast too far one day, Gemma girl, and then it’ll be too late.”

“Hector hasn’t begun to hit his limit,” Gemma said, stroking the horse’s neck. “Don’t worry! No wild rides tomorrow. Just a mild one. I promised Cook I’d search out more mushrooms for dinner.”

Fergus watched her. “In truth, I’d never have the heart to keep you from a ride. But you go in now. Your aunt’s been asking after you.”

“Asking where I am, you mean!” Gemma called back as she advanced toward the main part of the building.

The bulk of Caithny castle was impressive, even when one got closer and saw how little of it was really habitable. Massive stone towers at the corners of the place stood empty, and the tops of the walls were ragged after the mortar crumbled, allowing stones to fall. Gemma scarcely thought about whether it was odd, though. Since she was quite young, Caithny was the only home she knew.

She passed in through the heavy wooden door at one end of the courtyard, stepping into the front room her uncle insisted on calling a foyer. It was a lofty space due to the staircase that climbed around the edges, up three flights, around and around and around. She ought to go straight up those stairs to her room and change into cleaner clothes. Aunt Maura would expect her to do so. But the older woman also expected Gemma to appear without delay. Knowing that she would disappoint her aunt no matter what,

Gemma walked straight ahead and down a dark hall that led to the library.

“Aunt Maura?” she asked as she opened the door. It was warm in the library, thanks to a small fire burning in the hearth. A woman sat nearby, her face shielded from direct heat by a fireplace screen.

“Come in, Gemma girl,” her aunt said. The voice was cultured, thin, and little disapproving, much like Aunt Maura herself. She was full Scot, but for part of her life she lived in England, and her accent had softened considerably. It had a pleasant, gentle lilt even when she reprimanded Gemma, as she had to do all too often. “Have you been outside all day long?”

“I was riding,” Gemma said, approaching the fire.

“Yes, that is plain enough. Your hair is a bird’s nest of tangles, your skin so flushed and freckled...and your dress! It’s more tears than fabric now. My word, girl, have you no concern for your appearance?”

“No one is around to see me,” Gemma objected. That made her think of the shape in the woods. Was someone watching her? Should she be embarrassed by how wild she looked? Then she threw her shoulders back defiantly. If someone was watching her, then she was not to blame if her looks disappointed them. After all, she thought she was alone. Surely it was up to them to announce their presence. In fact, it was almost like spying....

“Well, you’d best clean up,” Maura said. “You may be a wild creature all day, but you have a few hours until supper, and you will comport yourself properly while you dine at my table.”

“It’s not your table. It belongs to Uncle Conall.” As soon as the words were out, Gemma wished she’d bitten her tongue.

Maura’s face blanched, and she looked away. To a woman as proud as Miss Maura Caithny, the reminder that she was dependent on her brother’s charity was especially cruel.

“I’m sorry!” Gemma said. “I didn’t mean it like that. I only meant is he joining us tonight? Uncle Conall, that is?”

“He is attending to his business, I believe.” Aunt Maura didn’t like Conall’s business—smuggling—which added insult to injury. “But you will join me at the table at half past.”

Gemma turned and left. She should not have snapped at her aunt, who was endlessly kind, though strict and very proper. If only Gemma wasn’t so out of sorts. She resolved to be a perfect lady at dinner. That would cheer her aunt up.

Before she could change, though, she was halted by a voice in the foyer. “Gemma girl!”

Uncle Conall stood at the door, dressed for the outdoors in boots and tough trousers and a greatcoat that concealed the rest of his outfit. He was getting older, but he was still an imposing man, built by years of hard work. When he spoke, men listened.

“Are you coming or going?” Gemma asked.

“Bit of both,” he replied. Unlike Aunt Maura, his Scottish accent was undiluted. He’d lived his whole life in Caithny. “Busy times, and I’m needed down at the shore.” He looked her over appraisingly, his eyes taking in her less than clean outfit. “You’ve been out as well, I surmise.”

“I was riding.”

“Meet anyone?” he asked, his eyes narrowed.

“No. I was alone the whole time.”

“See you keep it that way.” He grunted. “You’re to stay in tonight, mind. We’re to have a guest.”

“Does that concern me?”

“Aye, he’s here to talk business. I anticipate a run soon, for which you will be needed.”

Gemma nodded. Over the past few years, she had begun to participate in what Conall termed the “family trade.” As his own eyes grew weaker, he relied more and more on Gemma’s sharp vision and keen senses to detect Customs agents, ships, and other threats that might ruin an evening’s work. Gemma found it exciting, even though she knew it was hardly acceptable for a lady. And that again

reminded her of what she saw at the very end of her ride.

“Uncle,” she began. “Speaking of that, I may have seen someone during my ride after all.”

He was all attention. “Go on.”

“It was exactly at sunset, and the light was odd...but I was certain for a moment that I saw a man on horseback, watching me ride.”

“You were certain for a moment?”

She grimaced. “I would have had to ride back around for a better look. And since I was alone I didn’t think it would be wise.”

“You had your pistol about you, did you not?” From his tone, it wasn’t clear whether he thought she should have acted differently than she had.

“Oh, I always do,” Gemma said with an easy confidence. She was an excellent shot. “But Hector was tired too, and I wasn’t sure...”

Conall shrugged one shoulder. “It was probably nothing. And anyone fool enough to spy on my operations will soon regret it.” He paused, looking Gemma over again. “But you be careful, girl. Don’t let any stranger get close to you.”

She smiled, disregarding the warning as unnecessary. “Don’t worry. No man can hurt me.”

Chapter 2



IN POINT OF FACT, THERE *was* a shape on the ridge line. The shape was that of a man named Logan Hartley. He was extremely interested in Caithny castle, as well as anyone who lived inside—which appeared to include a pretty, redheaded woman who rode like a demon.

He'd been using a spyglass to examine the outline of Caithny, but at the sound of hooves, he swung the glass around quickly to catch sight of the newcomer.

He focused just in time to see a roan horse gather itself and jump to clear a massive tree trunk lying across the path. It was a jump he'd hesitate to take himself.

Then he saw the rider.

It was a woman, though that word seemed a weak description for the vision that appeared in the spyglass. Exhilarated after the jump, she slowed the horse down reluctantly. For a moment, Logan thought she saw him. But then she glanced up toward Caithny castle, and turned her horse toward the grounds of the very estate he came to survey.

Logan leaned back, marveling. Who was that gorgeous creature?

And what business did she have with Conall Caithny? Logan watched the place a little longer, slowly circling the grounds, committing the layout to heart, but his thoughts were hounded by the flame-haired rider.

Logan would have to plan his approach carefully. By all accounts, Conall Caithny was a ruthless, shrewd man who could sense a trick a mile off. But Logan smiled grimly as he considered his own reputation for ruthlessness. Caithny would hear him out, all right; he'd be too greedy not to. Then Logan would learn everything about the operation that was aiding the French war effort. And stop it.

Logan was a spy. He was a member of a group called the Zodiac, an organization so secret that it didn't even surface in rumors, which was exactly the way the Zodiac liked it. Logan joined the group at the invitation of a man known as Aries, the first sign of the Zodiac. Aries ran the operations of the group and supervised the assignments carried out by the members, but the assignments came from even higher up. A mysterious person called the Astronomer truly ran the Zodiac. Logan didn't know who that person was and he had no desire to.

He'd been given this assignment a few months ago, and he threw himself into it. Despite working for the Zodiac for nearly two years, he still felt like a student, a pretender. Logan wanted to carry this work out perfectly to get the appreciation of the Astronomer. Then he would be given other, more significant missions—the sort that only elite agents would be trusted with.

After seeing the beautiful rider enter Caithny castle, though, he had to admit that surprises could be pleasant too. He wouldn't mind seeing the mysterious beauty again, while he was in the wilds of the north.

When the sunlight disappeared entirely, Logan guided his horse through the trees, careful to avoid making any more noise than necessary. The fading light was deceptive, making a rider think he

saw much more than was truly there. Logan could not afford to make any mistakes.

His horse, more gentle than its rough appearance suggested, picked its way through the fallen leaves, past the trees and shrubs now colored with autumn glory—although the colors were hidden now, tinted only by the silvery moonlight.

He had to return to the inn where he was staying. Although he wanted to go back to the *Mistral*, his beloved ship, Logan couldn't risk discovery by riding to where she was hidden. He'd simply have to trust his first mate to watch over the *Mistral*. Tobias would care for the ship just as well as Logan himself, for he'd helped Logan build her. He'd been at Logan's side for years.

But at the moment, Logan was on his own. He rode back to the Rose and Crown, the inn in the little town by the shore. The village was also called Caithny, taking its name from the castle that protected it once upon a time, when invasions and local wars were still real threats. Now, the castle was little more than a remnant of the past. The town, on the other hand, bustled with life and was concerned only with the present and the future.

The Rose and Crown was on the main thoroughfare, and it was not too busy that evening. Jennie, the barmaid, looked up as the door opened. Reflexively, she smiled in her friendly way, but the smile shrank a little when she saw who it was. "Oh. Evening, Mr Lockridge."

Logan offered her a thin answering smile. He knew exactly what the girl was thinking. He frightened her.

True, Logan was not a particularly intimidating man. He'd always thought his brown hair and brown eyes were plain, though he'd been told by dozens of women that his smile was charming—beginning with his nursemaid when he was very young, and progressing over the years to other women considerably less innocent in their admiration. He was on the tall side with a lean strength from years of constantly tugging at rigging and fighting winds that

sometimes seemed intent on sweeping him into the ocean. They hadn't won yet, and that was due to Logan's natural gift for balance. He always knew where to step when on board a ship. Land, however, proved to be a bit of a challenge.

But it wasn't his appearance that alarmed Jennie. It was his apparent profession—smuggler. Smugglers were known to be ruthless bastards, no matter what their outward behavior. And Lockridge was worse than most, according to the rumors.

As Lockridge, Logan was always polite and never raised his voice. He could tell that actually scared her more, but he didn't have the time to charm Jennie.

"Something to eat, sir?" Jennie asked as he sat down at the table in the corner he'd already claimed.

"No. Just ale," he replied. Jennie drew the ale and brought it to him. He looked up at her as she placed it on the table. "Any messages for me?"

She shook her head quickly, nervously. "Not today, sir."

Jennie headed back to the bar. Logan leaned back, surveying the main room.

Moments later, Tobias walked in, taking a direct path for Logan's table. "You beat me," he said.

"How's my beauty?" Logan asked, referring to his ship.

"Tucked away. She's so well hidden I have trouble spotting her, and I know where she's anchored. No one will find her. And even if they do, two men are aboard to watch things."

Logan nodded. He had every faith in Toby's assessment.

Toby got an ale from Jennie, and a much brighter smile too. Everyone liked Toby, with his light blue eyes and loud laugh. The older man appeared to be as harmless as Logan was dangerous. Not fair, Logan thought. If people knew what Toby was capable of....

Before he could think further on that, another man came into the tavern. He looked around for only a moment before he spotted

Logan and Toby in the corner. He paused for a beat, then made his way directly across the room.

“You’re Lockridge?” the man asked.

Logan nodded. “You have something to tell me?”

“Aye. Caithny will see you. You must come to Caithny castle at eleven o’ clock this evening.”

“I *must*, eh?” Logan pulled an object out of his pocket. It looked rather like a brass pocket watch, but he didn’t open the lid. “Eleven?”

“Well, that’s the message I was given...sir.” The man looked a bit nervous, perhaps remembering that Lockridge was a name associated with some very nasty rumors.

Logan pretended to think about it for a moment, turning the brass ornament over in his hand. Then he said, “Tell him I’ll be there.”

The man nodded quickly. Just as he turned to leave, Logan said, “What’s your name?”

“Munro.”

“Thank you, Munro.”

“For what?”

“For delivering the message. I’ll remember your name.” Logan didn’t put the slightest inflection in his tone. It was impossible to tell if he was being sincere or sarcastic.

Munro certainly didn’t know how to take it, so he hovered indecisively for a moment, unsure if he should be pleased, offended, or scared. He settled on pleased and bobbed his head once. “Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” He left in a hurry.

“What was that about?” Toby asked. “Why should you remember his name?”

“Lord, I don’t know,” Logan said with a low laugh. “I just like to see how people react. Say something a bit off from the expected and suddenly, people have to think. They can’t fall back on convention because they don’t know what the convention would be. So

they're more revealing."

"You were such a fine young boy. But you've become rather a sneaky bastard in the last few years," Tobias noted.

"Have I? Must be the corrupting influence of the mother country."

"I know damn well to what you owe the influence. Those new friends of yours, *Lockridge*."

Toby knew that Logan was spy. He didn't know much beyond that, because the Zodiac did not like people knowing about it at all.

But Logan was feeling a little nostalgic, so he let Toby's remark pass. He looked at the object he was holding. After a moment, he pressed the button, opening the lid. "Fortune favors the bold," he said softly.

"Missing your family?" Toby asked, aware of how Logan's mood had shifted.

"I've been thinking about family lately. More than usual. I don't know why." He looked at his friend. "We haven't been back to St George's for nearly three years. Seems odd to think about it." Logan paused. "Do you miss home?"

Toby shook his head. "Home is the ship I'm on. No doubt we'll see Bermuda again."

"Spoken like a true sailor." Logan stood up and stretched, sliding the brass item back into his pocket. "Well, I waited long enough for the message to arrive. Think I'll take a walk. I need to waste a few hours before going back to the castle. See you in the morning."

"You're going to the meeting alone? I've been poking around, and I've heard of Caithny. If he catches any hint that you're not what you seem..."

"But I *am* what I seem," Logan reminded him. "A smuggler, from a long line of smugglers. I speak Caithny's language. He'll listen to me."

Toby frowned. "I don't like it."

"You can leave if you like."

“You know I’d never do that,” Toby said. “But I’ll leave you to your walk. Plenty of ale to keep me busy.”

Logan left enough coin to cover his drink and whatever Toby would manage to put away. Leaving the smoky air of the tavern and breathing in the cool night helped his mood instantly. He’d been nervous about getting a meeting with Caithny, though he was good at hiding it. As Tobias said, Logan had become a sneaky bastard.

He didn’t set out to become a spy. When Logan sailed to England on his own ship, he intended to see the country his ancestors came from, build his business, and perhaps earn a bit of respect. Almost through chance, he became a petty officer in the Royal Navy a few months after arriving in England. Though firmly of the merchant class, his family could afford the commission. And it was said that some Bermudans were more British than the British themselves. Logan’s family was proud of their heritage. Of course a few generations ago, his family was dodging custom officers and naval raids. Smugglers were so misunderstood.

But now, his family was—almost—completely respectable.

However, even after Logan joined the Royal Navy as an ensign with the goal of living a perfectly law-abiding life, fate took a hand. He was more intelligent than most men—even most officers—and he was soon sent on missions requiring stealth and a sharp eye. On the continent, Bonaparte was causing all manner of worries for Britain, so Logan considered it his duty to get in the man’s way. After one such mission while he served on a ship called the *Providence*, he met a gentleman who was rather more than he seemed. Logan must have made a good impression, because shortly after that, he was given an offer. If he was interested, he could join an organization called the Zodiac, a secretive group of elite agents who protected Britain against its worst enemies. Of course Logan was interested. He agreed instantly, and began his training within weeks.

Two years later, he had become an agent with a sign of his own: Aquarius. He carried out several assignments usually involving some element of smuggling, a key part of the war.

His current assignment was to identify the missing links in a supply chain that went all the way up to Napoleon's high command. He was uniquely suited for the task, being a bit of an outsider, and a bit unpredictable. The fact that he had his own ship and crew made him even more desirable.

The Zodiac dreamed up Logan's alter ego of Lockridge. Once the story was created, other agents carefully fleshed out Lockridge's imaginary history. They slipped the name into gossip, into government reports, even among their underworld contacts. The story was simple enough. Lockridge was a young, ambitious smuggler from the New World, seeking to gain a toehold in the more established operations of Europe. He was ruthless, with no loyalty and no scruples.

Logan already knew the sort of character he had to project, but his Zodiac training gave him the tools he needed to be a good spy. He'd make use all of them when he was to return to Caithny castle tonight.

Chapter 3



THE AUTUMN DAYS BROUGHT SWIFT and early sunsets. In the time between sunset and supper, Aunt Maura conducted one of her usual lessons on deportment and manners. Now presentable in her appearance, Gemma provided the correct answers for most of Maura's questions.

"An archduke would be addressed before a viscount," Gemma said in response to one, adding, "which will be *so* important at the next party we host." She put her hand to her mouth in mock horror. "Oh, no! I've forgotten that we never host anyone here...other than Conall's dubious associates, of course."

"Pertness of manner is not admirable, Gemma," her aunt said with a frown. "Nor is it useful as a display of intelligence."

"Sorry," she said, not sounding very sorry.

Maura sighed. She had several sighs, and spent a lifetime mastering each one. There was the sigh of disappointment when she found a stain or rip in Gemma's gowns. There was the sigh of resignation when Conall made a pronouncement. There was the sigh of skepticism when anyone decided something Maura did not agree with. And then there was the sigh of I-told-you-so whenever Maura's opinion was vindicated. Gemma had grown adept at translating these sighs. The latest one was a plea-to-the-angels-for-pa-

tience sigh, and it was one she heard quite a lot.

"All right, Aunt. I understand that I can't say what I'm thinking if I'm among society. Now resume."

"No, Gemma. You're misunderstanding the lesson. A true lady does not *hide* her thoughts. She takes care to only cultivate good and generous and proper thoughts in her mind. Thus no deceit is necessary."

Now Gemma sighed. "I'll do my best."

"I hope so. Now, let's shift to a different subject. Ladies are conversant in the rudiments of music, even if they have no talent for it. Tell me what you have learned about the classical masters and the sort of music created by each..."

Gemma gave another little sigh herself. She couldn't wait till they were summoned for supper.

* * * *

Conall joined Gemma and Maura for dinner in the cavernous dining hall. Their chef was competent, though no artist. He came to Caithny about two years ago at Conall's request. He'd found the man somewhere and liked his cooking, though Gemma couldn't see much that distinguished it. The chef did, however, have a strange knack for finding excellent produce that Gemma would swear was out of season. She speared a piece of asparagus. It was slender and bright green, just touched with a serviceable cream sauce. In spring, such a dish would be expected. But it was fall, and Gemma couldn't begin to think where Cook had gotten the vegetable. It wasn't as if Caithny castle boasted a glass house for growing.

Her hunger outweighed her curiosity, and she put the conundrum aside. Maura never commented on the meals, possibly because she rarely spoke when her brother was present. Conall talked with Gemma about news in the village of Caithny, and she answered with what she knew. Gemma often rode into the village to

chat with neighbors or carry messages.

Conall seemed strangely anxious. Whoever he was meeting that evening, it must be more important than usual.

Conall noted the demure gown Gemma wore to dinner, and told her to change after the meal. “Put on the blue one you’ve got. Give our guest something to look at. Makes my task a bit easier if he’s distracted by your pretty face.”

Gemma rolled her eyes. Of course Conall would press every advantage, even to the point of using his niece as a distraction. If the visitor was looking down the front of her dress, he wouldn’t be thinking clearly about the terms of the deal Conall offered. Conall didn’t let *anything* get in the way of business.

Maura glared at Conall for the crude remark, but didn’t say anything to oppose him. She gave a sigh of endless disappointment and excused herself from the table.

After supper, Gemma went to her room to tidy up and change into the requested dress. It was not new or fashionable. Aunt Maura, in some mysterious way, knew all about the prevailing winds of fashion in London and beyond. She said gowns worn by society ladies were shockingly modern now, with almost no corsets and barely any covering at all.

But Gemma also thought her blue dress was very pretty, so she didn’t mind out-of-fashion styling. It hugged her torso with lacing across her chest, and it emphasized her narrow waist. She frowned at her reflection in the mirror, hoping the corset was effective. From years of observation and overhearing drunk smugglers, she knew men preferred women with bigger breasts. Did hers qualify? Gemma had no notion, and of course no one from whom to get an honest answer. Oh, well. The dress was pretty all the same. The blue tone of the soft wool emphasized her fair complexion and complemented her bright red hair. Annie, the maid, had already braided her hair for dinner, and Gemma saw no reason to change the style. Whoever this guest was, he’d better be impressed.

“Not that I should bother to even think of it,” she muttered to herself. “What’s another smuggler?” He’d be just like the rest of Conall’s associates. Hardened, vicious men who looked more at home in a tavern brawl than anywhere else. One who cared for nothing but profit, or at best tweaking the British interests. Even in lowland Scotland there was still plenty of resentment against England, despite Scotland being part of the empire.

She went downstairs again. Aunt Maura was nowhere to be found, naturally. She had a gift for absenting herself whenever the slightest hint of criminal activity was afoot. In practice, that meant Conall and Maura rarely spoke or even stayed in the same room, despite the fact that they were brother and sister. It was one of the many things Gemma always thought normal, until recently.

Conall was in his parlor. He’d remain there while Gemma met their guest at the door. Conall liked to play up his position, making his guests come to him.

Gemma waited, and waited. She would not open the door to peek out. That might ruin the effect. And effect was important. How should she appear when she opened the door? Gracious? Aloof? Perhaps even queenly?

She was so lost in her thoughts that when the knock sounded, she jumped up and proceeded to answer the door just as she would if she were not expecting anything.

“Well, come in!” she burst out. “Why else come all this way if you’re just going to stand—” Gemma stopped short when she got a look at the man.

He was young, perhaps only five years older than her. He had thick brown hair and warm, brown eyes that glowed in the dim light of the foyer. The tanned skin was definitely that of a sailor. But this could not possibly be a smuggler come to do business with her uncle. He was too young, and handsome, and....

And he was smiling at her. A smile that started slow and grew until her insides felt like honey.

She was lost.

“Hello,” she said finally, aware that she had to say something. “You’re...with Lockridge?” she asked, completely forgetting the half dozen lines she thought might serve as greetings.

He shook his head, plainly admiring her. “No.”

“You’re not with Lockridge?” she asked, confused, and still quite thrown by his appearance. Handsome strangers did not just wander into Caithny.

“I *am* Lockridge,” he said.

“Oh.” Gemma felt a weird sensation in her belly. Disappointment? Maybe. “I thought you’d be...older.”

“I’m used to that. Eventually the assumption will be correct. If I live long enough.”

His casual reference to death made Gemma’s belly flutter again. He didn’t look like the sort of man who would die.

“If you’re Lockridge, you’d best come in,” she said. “Conall is waiting.”

Lockridge raised an eyebrow. “You’re on a first name basis with him?”

“He’s family, so yes.”

Her answer appeared to spark even more interest. He looked at Gemma more carefully. “You’re another Caithny, then.”

Gemma drew herself up to her full five and a half feet. “No, I’m a Harrington. Miss Gemma Harrington. Conall Caithny is my uncle. And he doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

“Well, show me in, Miss Harrington.”

She did, acutely conscious of his every action. He took off his hat, then shrugged out of his great coat, flinging it carelessly onto a chair. She watched covertly. His body was thin, athletic. No doubt he spent his life on a ship.

Gemma led him down the hallway to the parlor, feeling his gaze on her as they went.

“Uncle Conall,” she said as they entered the parlor, “Mr Lock-

ridge has come to see you.” She stepped aside to allow Lockridge to walk further into the room.

As she did, she was surprised to see that all the warmth she imagined in Lockridge was utterly gone. Now he stood there, his eyes dark and cold as he surveyed the room.

Conall sat in state on a large, high-backed chair by the fire, which made the walls glow a pale orange. He looked for all the world like a king in his domain. A chair stood opposite him, with no back and no embellishments. It was little more than a bench.

“Lockridge! Come in, come in.” Conall gestured for him to sit in the empty chair.

Lockridge didn’t even glance at the chair, but strolled to the fireplace mantle. He bent down to the fire to warm his hands by the flame. That made his body turn away from Conall for a moment. Gemma caught a glimpse of his profile as he did so, and saw his eyes gleam as they reflected the fire. He looked devilish, if devils were handsome.

Then he stood again, and turned back to face Conall. Lockridge looked perfectly at home, just as much the master as Conall.

“Quite the old pile of stones you’ve got,” he said to Conall, his voice just short of insulting. His accent did change how his words sounded, but that certainly wasn’t the explanation for his tone.

“Been in the family for generations,” said Conall. Annoyed by Lockridge’s manner, he looked around the room, seeking Gemma. “Gemma girl. We’ll be discussing business. Why don’t you offer our guest a drink?” Conall suggested, but it held the tone of an order.

“Would you care for a drink?” Gemma asked, not feeling particularly servile.

“Anything but rum,” he said, his gaze matching hers.

“You don’t drink rum?” asked Conall. “I thought you were from the Indies.”

“Bermuda,” Lockridge clarified. “And I’ll ship rum, but I won’t drink it.”

"We have whisky," Gemma said.

"That will do," he said.

Gemma went to the kitchen to prepare a warm, and deeply alcoholic, drink for their guest. She sighed, thinking of all the "gentlemen" her uncle had seen in his house in the past few years. "Gentlemen" was the term the villagers used to describe the smugglers keeping them supplied with rare goods. The gentlemen gave the village first pick of the goods when they arrived, in exchange for silence on the matter of where their boats lay at night, or what caves were best left unexplored by the law. Gemma had seen more of the gentlemen than most of the village, but she thought she had never seen a man as cool as the one now in her parlor. Not that he'd done anything. It was the aura of ruthlessness about him.

She returned with the drinks. When Conall saw her, he broke off whatever conversation he'd been having with Lockridge. "What were you doing with that whisky, girl? Did you grow the grain first?"

"I warmed it," she said, irritated. "It takes a few minutes for the poker to heat." They made their drinks hot in the time-tested way of heating a metal rod in the fire, then plunging it into the liquid.

"Well, bring them over. Don't dawdle. Lockridge is a man with a reputation." Conall laughed. "How many crewmen did you throw overboard on your journey here?"

"Only one," Lockridge responded. Nothing in his voice suggested it was a joke.

She walked to Lockridge to hand him the drink. She was between him and Conall as she did so, so her uncle couldn't see how Lockridge's fingers brushed hers as the drink exchanged hands. It was deliberate, and deliberately provoking. Gemma had every right to take offense and alert Conall immediately.

For some reason, she didn't. Instead, she inquired of Lockridge, "What would inspire you to throw a man overboard?"

Lockridge didn't look at her, but kept his eyes on Conall as he

replied, "The man annoyed me."

"Keep the others in line," Conall said, with a nod. "That's the way to do it."

How appalling that such a handsome man should have such a cold soul. "Excuse me, I should go," Gemma said, turning to leave.

"Don't go far," Lockridge said when she reached the door. She turned at those words. Lockridge was staring directly at her, and the look in his eyes wasn't cold at all.

"Be careful what you wish for," she warned him as she left.

Chapter 4



GOOD ADVICE, LOGAN THOUGHT. HE watched the woman leave, noting how gracefully she moved. She'd surprised him when she flung the door open on his arrival. Who could be prepared for that sort of woman? The flame colored hair he remembered from the afternoon was now bound in a wide, intricate braid that fell down the center of her back. It left her face unframed, which made her strong cheekbones and bright blue eyes even more prominent. The way her skin was spotted with freckles was instantly appealing to him. Unfortunately, it wasn't this woman he came to do business with.

After Miss Harrington's departure from the parlor, he felt the better part of the evening was already over. He turned back to his host.

"So you're from Bermuda," said Caithny. "There are several versions of your history."

"Rumors do spread," Logan said. Many had been spread quite deliberately. "But it is a fact that I was born and raised in Bermuda. Been sailing ever since I could walk."

"Bermuda is part of the British Empire." Caithny said it with a certain amount of disdain.

"So is Scotland," Lockridge countered. Then he grinned. "But Bermuda is a long way from London. We have our own minds there. Just as you do here."

Caithny laughed. He liked the answer.

"Pretty thing, isn't she?" Caithny asked, with a nod toward the door Gemma had retreated through.

Logan nodded, unsure what a safe answer to that would be.

"Ah, I saw you watch her," Caithny went on. "Don't pretend you didn't notice."

"A man would have to be dead not to notice her."

Caithny leaned forward suddenly. "Aye. So let me be clear. You look at her again, you touch her, you say a sweet word to her, and you *will* be dead."

"That's very direct," Logan said smoothly. Inside, he was shaken by Conall Caithny's dramatic shift in mood. He was either playing up his role as guardian, or he truly did watch out for the young lady's virtue.

"It had better be."

"I'm here to talk business," Logan said, wanting to avoid unnecessary confrontation. "So let's get to that."

"Very well. You requested this meeting. What do you want of *me*?" Caithny asked. "I've an established operation here. What makes you think I need another man at this point?"

"I'm not offering service," Logan said grimly. "Like you, I've also got an established operation. Not as large as yours, though I hope to expand my influence. But I believe there is an opportunity for mutual profit...so long as we have a brief alliance."

"Continue."

"You lost a ship six weeks ago," Logan said. "The *Lapin*, just off the coast of Devon."

Caithny raised his eyebrow, curious at Logan's knowledge. "Aye, she sank. Bad luck."

"Luck had nothing to do with it. *I* sank her."

Caithny sat up. "And you dare come here—"

"Calm down," Logan said. "It was dark, with no moon. She came upon my ship in the lane and we fired cannon before her captain called out her colors. His mistake. We did, however, take the survivors aboard."

"And one of them spilled what he knew." Caithny sneered at the weakness of ordinary men.

"They were all grateful to be on the water and not in it. I confess I was curious, especially when one of the men lamented the loss of the cargo." Logan paused. "Thirty-six crates of rifles, destined for Napoleon's forces. Most profitable indeed."

Caithny's eyes flashed, but he then relaxed. "So he told you I was shipping rifles. Yes. It would have been profitable if the shipment went through!"

"Tough loss?" Logan asked.

"Risks are inevitable. I'll make it back."

"Would you like to make it back faster?"

Caithny looked interested. "How so?"

"You need more ships. I have one that could be put to use. I'll loan you my services for a cut of each run."

"How much of a cut?"

"Fifty percent sounds fair."

"Sounds like robbery," Caithny said. "Ten percent."

"Forty," countered Logan.

"Fifteen."

"Thirty, and the return of your loose-tongued crew member."

"Where is he?"

"Agree to thirty percent, and you'll soon know," Logan promised.

Caithny narrowed his eyes. "Why do you have spare room in your hold? What are you transporting?"

Logan gave a slight smile. "Something small but valuable."

"You ask to be cut in on a deal, but you won't reveal your

angle?”

“I am offering *you* a deal,” Logan said. “A fast, guaranteed delivery, at a date far earlier than you could hope to match on your own. If you could afford it, you would have got another ship by now. So you need a ship more than I need spare cargo.”

“And in return you get thirty percent of the profits,” Caithny said cautiously.

“*And* access to your port here in Scotland. I’ve got goods produced in the New World, including rum, which offer a tidy profit of their own. But I prefer not to use English ports.”

“I’ll consider it. You can wait in town. And don’t press me. If I choose to speak to the law, they might show a keen interest in your operation, sir.”

“I’ll wait,” said Logan, not particularly impressed by Caithny’s threat. “But if I hear wind of a better offer, I’ll be gone. And you’ll be out a deal.”

“You’ve come a long way to meet me. I believe you’ll wait,” said Caithny, sounding more confident. “But let’s shake on it. Stay two nights. If you don’t hear from me by then, no deal and no hard feelings.”

Logan watched him narrowly, then held out his hand. “I can accept that.”

Caithny reached out as well, clasping Logan’s right hand in a hard grip. But then he turned Logan’s hand over, surveying the skin. “You *are* a sailor,” he said with cautious approval.

Logan almost laughed. Conall Caithny was no fool. A spy without the calloused hands of a sailor used to ropes and oars would have been exposed immediately. So the Zodiac had done right to send him. “I was born a sailor,” he said. “I’ll wait in town for your response.”

“You can show yourself out.” Caithny turned away, dismissing Logan for the moment.

Logan turned and left. He briefly considered exploring the in-

side of Caithny castle. There were a number of things he was quite curious about the location of—primarily Gemma Harrington, but also the whereabouts of Caithny's records. But he knew better than to press his luck on the first night.

He didn't see Miss Harrington as he walked to the front door and out into the courtyard. Perhaps the revelation of his so-called occupation was enough to drive her away, in which case she was an intelligent lady.

However, Logan wasn't going to leave without some snooping, and the grounds of Caithny castle begged to be surveyed. It was easy to slip into the shadows. Caithny castle was scarcely populated, and few buildings held any lights at all. When Logan looked up at the sky, he saw thick cloud cover. A good night for spying.

He moved silently, orienting himself as he explored the paths and structures. The actual castle, which was more of a manor house, was in decent repair. The windows looked to be mostly glassed in, and the stones were solid. But there were many out-buildings scattered around, the remnants of previous years, when Caithny castle probably supported the lives of several dozen people. Now, most of those buildings were crumbling, or partially dismantled. He peeked in a few storehouses, found an old cistern that appeared to be in working order, and even explored what might have been an armory long ago. More buildings stood closer to the outer wall, but Logan couldn't spend too much time wandering.

He located the stable by the unmistakable smell of straw and horse, and entered where he saw the warm glow of a lantern.

"Hello?" he called.

A short man popped out from a stall down the way. "One minute!"

"I'm in no hurry," Logan said easily. He saw his horse in one of the near stalls, and it snorted in recognition.

"You were in the house," the hostler said, coming down the

aisle with a bucket in his hand. "You'll be wanting to get back to town as soon as you may," he guessed.

"Not many guests?" Logan asked.

"Up here? Never." The hostler put the bucket down and went into the stall. "Caithny isn't a man who likes others in his domain. He used to put up some of his dockworkers in one of the out-buildings, but that ended a few years ago."

"Why?"

The hostler glanced at Logan, assessing. "Did you happen to meet a young lady at the house?"

"If you mean Miss Harrington, yes."

"Well, then you know the reason. Caithny wasn't keen on men being too close to her when she grew a bit older, if you understand."

Logan understood perfectly well, and for once he fully approved of Caithny's decision making. "A man should keep his family safe," he said.

"If only he did," the hostler grunted. But he had Logan's horse out of the stall now, and was eager to have them on their way. "Here you are," the hostler said. "Gave him a bit of meal, too."

"Thank you for that," Logan said, sincerely. "What's your name?"

"Fergus, sir."

"Worked here your whole life, I'll bet."

"Not quite, but more years than I care to count. Mind how you ride in the dark. The clouds are keeping the moon at bay, and the track can be tricky."

"I'll keep that in mind, Fergus." Logan flipped a coin to the hostler as a tip, and the man caught it in midair.

Grinning, Logan mounted and rode away. His first foray was a success. Conall Caithny was interested in his offer, though he pretended indifference. He also learned that Gemma Harrington knew at least a little about the operation, because Conall didn't hide the

nature of their meeting from her.

But she wasn't enough in Caithny's thrall to report Logan's flirtations immediately. Logan had to learn more about that tidbit. If Miss Harrington knew about her uncle's business, it might be a good idea to soften her up. Though she looked quite soft already, he thought, with a wry smile.

Chapter 5



THE NEXT DAY, GEMMA WENT out riding again. She'd told Cook she would search out some mushrooms for supper, which she fully intended to do. And anyway, she couldn't stand to be inside walls.

The visit from Lockridge last night made a stronger impression on Gemma than she'd ever admit out loud. He was so unlike what she was expecting. Yes, he was far younger than she assumed. For him to have his own ship at his age implied that he was shrewd or ruthless or both.

But for a shrewd, ruthless criminal, Gemma couldn't stop thinking about him, with his easy grace and slow smile when he first saw her. Gemma always kept a certain distance from the sort of people her uncle employed, avoiding any familiarity. Though she was rather wild, she had a good upbringing thanks to Aunt Maura. Conall himself made it clear to his men that Gemma was under his protection. She worked with Uncle Conall because he was family, and because the exciting nature of smuggling kept her from losing her mind at the castle. But she had no intention of following in Conall's footsteps. The day she achieved her majority, she would flee Caithny castle and start living her own life...somewhere.

She rode through the woods, ecstatic to be outside. The odor

of the sea mingled with the unique scent of fallen leaves, oddly spicy with just a hint of earthiness. The day was bright and warm though, and it was pure pleasure to be riding.

When she got to where the mushrooms grew, Gemma dismounted. She tied Hector to a low-hanging branch, going on foot to find what she'd sighted the other day. She paused, sniffing the crisp air to locate the elusive odor of the mushrooms.

Just as she caught the scent, she heard a bloodcurdling yowl. She stood rooted to the spot, wondering what it could be. There was a moment of deathly silence, then the call broke out again. Gemma's blood froze, but she shook herself, casting off any thoughts of ghosts or goblins. There was a creature nearby in need of help.

She scampered to the top of the ridge, going in the direction of the sound. Once again, a yowl came from the far side of the glen below, about a hundred yards distant. Gemma almost plunged down the slope in her haste to get there.

She quickly found the source of the dreadful cries. A dog had somehow become caught in a trap, with one wounded front paw bleeding on the carpet of fallen leaves. It let out another mournful howl when it saw her approach, but Gemma spoke to it in a low, soothing voice. The dog stopped yowling and settled into a pitiful whine. She reached out a hand. The dog sniffed, and decided she was not a threat. She stroked the creature briefly, then turned to inspect the trap.

It was rusty with age, which was probably why it had not sprung closed completely. If it had, the dog's leg would have been severed. As it was, Gemma could hardly stand to look at the creature.

A few minutes tugging at the trap proved she didn't have the strength to defeat the mechanism. Worse, whenever she tilted the whole thing too far, the dog yelped and growled in pain.

"I'm trying to help you," she explained. She hated the feeling in her chest, the one she got when she saw something she could do

nothing about. The dog only howled again, a heartbreaking sound carrying through the glen.

Then something responded to the howl. Gemma looked around, alarmed. What had she heard? Not a call, but definitely a sound. Looking up, she saw it on the ridge. Just like yesterday, when she thought she was seeing things in the dusk. An outline of a rider on horseback. But now it was daytime, and she knew it was real.

The rider moved down the slope toward her. She recognized the shape. *Lockridge*. Dressed in dark clothes, riding an equally dark horse, he looked just as much the devil as he had the previous evening.

Gemma watched him glance around the clearing. He twisted in his saddle. Lean, but well-muscled, like a man in constant motion.

He saw her too, of course. But he didn't smile or even greet her. He just dismounted and moved toward the dog. "Move away," he said, his voice low and unfriendly.

"No! He needs help."

"I can see that," Lockridge retorted. "But he's liable to bite you if you get too close. He could be feral. Or sick." Lockridge discarded his overcoat, revealing a form covered only by a linen shirt. "Move aside, and let me help."

"You're not going to put him down," she said in warning.

"That's not my intention. Now move. The dog's in pain. Would you have me ignore it?"

"No, of course not." Gemma shifted so Lockridge could inspect the trap. "I couldn't pull it open," she added, in a contrite tone. "I tried."

He bent down to grasp the jaws of the trap with both hands. Gemma watched as he began to pry the jaws open, the muscles in his back and arms straining with the effort. He got the trap open a precious two inches, allowing the dog to snatch its leg free. He let go the trap then, the jaws snapping closed with a sickening sound

that echoed throughout the clearing.

The dog tried to run when it got free, but it was weak with hunger and pain, so it stumbled and fell almost immediately.

Gemma stepped forward instinctively, but Lockridge held up one hand to stop her. “Wait,” he said.

He approached the dog, using a soft, slow voice, until it allowed him to pick it up. He carried the creature to the edge of the nearby stream and laid it down again.

Lockridge looked over to her at last. “There’s a spare cloth in my saddlebag. Can you bring it here?”

Gemma nodded. She opened the saddlebag and hunted for the cloth. “Here,” she said.

“Thank you.” He took the cloth and started ripping it into strips. He’d done this before—and probably not for a dog.

“I’m going to touch him,” she said.

Lockridge nodded absently. “He seems calm enough now. I just didn’t want you to get bitten.”

She put a hand on the dog’s head, stroking the fur and speaking friendly nonsense. It was spotted brown and white along the body, with a head that was entirely dark brown. It had a long snout and soft ears. The dog snuffled when Gemma scratched carefully behind one ear. “Good boy,” she murmured. “You’re all right now.”

Meanwhile, Lockridge ministered efficiently to the dog’s injured foreleg, first washing it in the stream, then binding the paw. He looked around, perhaps wondering how a dog had ended up so far into the forest.

“Wandered from someone’s property, perhaps?” he asked. “He’s no mutt. A hunting dog, I should think.”

“I can ask if anyone’s lost a dog,” Gemma said. “But there aren’t many houses around here besides Caithny castle, and he’s not ours.”

The dog looked up at Logan with big liquid eyes, then licked his hand in gratitude.

"He seems to like you," Gemma said.

Lockridge shook his head once. "I've no room for a dog aboard, especially one that's never seen a ship. He'll just get underfoot. Or be washed overboard. You keep him. I'm sure you'll soon earn his devotion."

His comment reminded her of something. "Did you really throw a man overboard on the way here? Or was that something you just said to Uncle Conall?" To judge by the way he treated the dog, she found it hard to believe.

"It's true," Lockridge said, without apology. "My ship arrived with one less sailor than we started out with. And before you ask, I don't feel the least bit bad about it."

"Just because he annoyed you?"

He looked at her, his expression serious. "Do you want to know how he annoyed me?"

"I think so."

"The night before we sailed out of Portsmouth, we went for a few drinks. One of the crew went out to the alley in back. He wasn't gone very long, but I noticed that shortly after he returned, one of the barmaids came back the same way. She was crying—and those girls aren't the sort to cry easily. I had a hunch, so I had my first mate interview the girl. Toby's the sort of man people feel they can talk to."

"And had the man...hurt her?" Gemma asked, afraid to ask the obvious question.

"Yes," Lockridge said shortly. "He paid her, but she was a barmaid, not a whore, and paying for it afterward isn't the same as asking beforehand. The girl wasn't to blame for anything but not being as strong or as tough as a sailor."

Gemma didn't blink at his blunt language, because she was too busy thinking about the story.

"But you let him back on your ship. Why not simply sack him and send him on his way?"

“So he could do the same thing again?” Lockridge shook his head. “No one works for me without knowing exactly what’s expected. I have rules, and he broke one. The man had his chance. He lost it.”

Gemma thought for a moment, considering. “You didn’t tell all this to my uncle.”

“He didn’t ask about the details,” Lockridge said. Then he shifted. “Now, you have more immediate problems, Miss Harrington.”

He picked up the dog, then stood up. “He can’t be left here, and it’s time for you to go. Where did you leave your horse?”

With Gemma leading the way, Logan carried the dog to where Hector was tied up.

She mounted and took the reins lightly in one hand. “Give him to me.”

Lockridge lifted the dog up so it lay across the saddle. Gemma used her free hand to hold the dog close. “Good boy,” she said. “It was a lucky chance we heard you today.”

“Chance is a good name,” Lockridge said.

Gemma smiled, liking the sound of it. “That is a good name. Do you like it, Chance?” she asked the dog. “Don’t try to jump away. Good. You’re very well behaved.”

“He’d be mad to jump away from you,” Lockridge said slyly. “I suddenly envy Chance.”

“You ought to watch your words, Mr Lockridge,” Gemma warned him. “Uncle Conall’s punched men for less when it comes to me.”

“Protective, isn’t he,” Lockridge said. “Not enough to keep you safe at home. But enough to threaten me last night when I admitted you were beautiful.”

“What did he say?” Gemma asked. *Beautiful?*

“Oh, just that he’d kill me if I so much as touched you.” But Lockridge didn’t look worried. In fact, he was smiling. “So of course I wouldn’t dare touch you.”

Gemma noticed just then he was doing exactly that. His hand had drifted from the dog's back to her own hand. "You don't take him seriously," she said.

"Or perhaps I can't resist you."

She shrugged the easy compliment off, though she didn't shrug his hand off. "Why were you here today? Why ride by Caithny?"

"I'm curious," he said. "I like to know the lay of the land."

"What should it matter? You don't need to know anything about the land. You'll load up whatever it is Conall wants you to ship, and then you'll sail off. You need not even disembark."

"You don't know what he deals in?"

"The usual things—liquor and fabric and the like. Any goods affected by the tariffs."

"That's all?"

"What else could there be?"

He watched her for a long moment, his eyes searching her face. Then he said, "No matter, I suppose. You get that dog back home, dryad. He ought to rest."

"And you?" she asked. "You shouldn't wander around here."

"But if I leave, how can I run into you again?"

"You shouldn't do that either." But Gemma rather did want to run into him again. "If you want to see me again, you should show me your ship."

"Not likely. She's shy," he hedged.

"Well, I'm not," said Gemma. "Please. I've never been aboard a ship," she confessed.

"What?" He was astonished by that. "You haven't? How is that even possible?"

"Uncle Conall has firm rules. I have the run of Caithny and I can ride wherever I want so long as it's not more than a day from home. But no ships. He fears I'll sail away."

"Is he right?"

"Oh, yes. I'd sail into the sunset if I could afford it...or knew

how. Won't you please show me your ship? No one will know, so you need not fear Conall's wrath."

Lockridge looked as if Conall's wrath was the last thing on his mind. But then he shook his head. "Sorry, dryad. You might be telling the truth, in which case you've got my sympathy. Life stuck on land is no life at all. But you're not seeing my ship."

"You don't trust me," she accused.

He smiled. "No. And you shouldn't trust me either. Now go."

Gemma rode off, feeling even less certain about things than when she started her ride. When she returned to the house with a dog but no mushrooms, Fergus shook his head, but accepted that Chance would be joining the household.

"You should not have gone near the creature, Miss Gemma. He could have been sick or feral."

"Yes, that's just what—" She stopped herself before she mentioned Lockridge. Fergus was her friend, but she shouldn't admit that she was alone with a strange man, even for a moment. "I couldn't just leave him. Do you think he belongs to someone?"

"I don't know. He's healthy enough. A hunting breed. He might have been untrainable, though, so he was set loose."

"How horrible."

"The smarter thing would be to shoot him," Fergus said bluntly. "One doesn't risk diluted bloodlines that way."

"Fergus! How could you say that!"

"I didn't say *I'd* shoot him!" he protested. "Lord, girl, why do you think I refuse to raise dogs? A horse I'll shoot, if it comes to it. But that's to save it a painful death."

"Can we not talk about death?" she asked. "Chance needs to be cared for." And the dog was cared for, with a little nest set up in the stables and a showing of affection from Gemma.

"Be careful, miss," Fergus said. "You'll have that dog following you everywhere, and neither your aunt nor your uncle will want him in the house."

“Well, that’s too bad,” Gemma said. “I’ve little enough to my name. Why can’t I have a companion?”

Chapter 6



AFTER SEEING GEMMA ON HER way, Logan didn't return to the *Mistral*, though he wanted to. Instead he went slowly back to the little town of Caithny. He didn't hurry. The countryside was too beautiful. Autumn was well advanced in the hills, turning trees to gold and honey in the mellow sunlight. He didn't have much experience of autumn, since he'd grown up near the tropics. He witnessed the season only a few times, and never in a countryside quite like this.

Fallen leaves crunched beneath his horse's hooves and the smell of damp earth mingled with the sharpness of the cool air, just tinged with the scent of saltwater. Logan could almost forget that he was here to spy on someone. He half wished he could just stay in the area for a while. He could learn a little more about Gemma Harrington.

Lord, she'd made an impression. Logan quickly turned his mind in another, less dangerous direction. The girl was not ripe for a seduction. If anything, he should make her into an ally, so he could find out what she knew. He was testing her to see if he could use her for her knowledge and her proximity to Conall Caithny.

Of course he was.

Logan laughed at himself. If his fellow agents could hear his thoughts, they'd mock him. He was here to solve a problem, not fall in love.

His steps took him to the Rose and Crown. There he found Jennie, who had a message for him.

"Munro came in, sir. He says you're to meet Caithny again tonight. Same time, at the castle."

"Thank you, Jennie."

She bobbed her head, and darted away, intent on other duties.

He found Tobias at the usual table. "So I got a message. I assume that means you spoke with Munro? He bought your story?" Logan and Toby were well aware that Caithny would try to get information out of the men working for Lockridge.

"Oh, no question," said Toby. "I had to get to my fifth ale before I could seem drunk enough to let him think he was getting answers out of me."

Logan laughed at the notion of Toby getting drunk off only five ales. "And what did you let slip?"

"Just what we agreed. He got me to admit that our cargo was rare and expensive. I then tried to cover it up, but I revealed that we transported spies and informants for a pretty penny...and all to the detriment of Britain. Munro gave Jennie the message then. He'll rush back to tell Caithny that you have no love for King George, but plenty of room in your ship."

"Good. I just need to get access to his contacts in France. Then we can shut down the whole operation."

Logan returned to Caithny castle that night. He hoped he'd see Gemma again, and in a place where he could get her alone for a moment.

He was lucky. She opened the door, looking as gorgeous as before, with those blue eyes looking boldly at him. This time though, there was no surprise in her tone. "Good evening, Mr Lockridge," she said formally. "Won't you follow me? Uncle Conall wants to

“speak with you.”

“That’s what I came for,” he said.

Gemma glanced back down the hall, then said in a low tone, “Please don’t tell him anything about us...meeting today.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Logan had no intention of telling Conall a thing, whether about Gemma or anything else. “Lead on, Miss Harrington.”

He was shown to the same room. Conall was ensconced in his massive chair, just as before. This time, however, Logan went directly to the lesser chair opposite the man and sat down. He had wanted to provoke the man the first night. This time he aimed to appease him. Logan didn’t look at Gemma again, even though she remained in the room this time. She sat down on a chair further away, looking wary.

“I’ve thought over your proposal, Lockridge.” Conall spoke in an even tone, and his eyes bored into Logan’s.

“And?”

“I find it has merit. A few short runs to negotiate the shipment of goods, and then we’ll evaluate a longer partnership. I promise no more than that.”

“That’s more than enough,” Logan said. He felt a little surge of triumph. He was in. He would complete the assignment. He knew it.

“We understand each other, then. So, to details. First you need to meet an important member of my operation.”

Logan nodded expectantly. Of course a man like Caithny would have a second in command to direct things on the ground.

“Gemma,” Caithny said, nodding to her.

Gemma stood up. But she did not go to fetch another man. She just walked to Caithny’s side.

Logan looked at uncle and niece and back again, grasping the truth instantly. “A family business, I see.” He hid his surprise, perhaps because he wasn’t totally surprised. Something about Gem-

ma's bold manner hinted at something like this.

"No objection?" Gemma asked, watching him carefully. There wasn't the slightest hint in her manner that she'd spoken with him earlier that day.

"Do you do your job well?" he returned.

"Uncle Conall wouldn't use me if I didn't."

"And what exactly does he use you for?" Logan asked.

"She's my eyes," Conall said. "She keeps lookout, sends signals, and alerts the men to the arrival of the law if they're fool enough to interfere. She also covers the men should a fight break out."

Now Logan was confused. "Covers them with what?"

"A gun, of course. She's an excellent shot," Conall said, a note of pride in his voice. "Aren't you, girl?"

"I am." She looked steadily at Logan as she said it, the blue gaze suddenly a little intimidating.

He believed her, but he didn't want to look too accepting. "I want a demonstration before I accept that assessment."

Gemma tilted her chin up defiantly. "Because I'm a woman?"

"Because I don't know you," he said evenly. But he certainly would like to. Gemma grew more intriguing every time he saw her.

"You'll take my word for it," Conall said, with iron in his voice.

Logan shifted his attention back to the man. "No disrespect, but I won't. Everyone who works for me or with me has to be someone I can rely on, or there is no deal. I can afford to walk away from this arrangement. Can you?"

Conall's eyes flickered. "Fair enough."

"I can show you tomorrow," Gemma spoke again. "My shooting, that is."

"Why not tonight?" Logan asked.

Her expression grew even warier. "Because I'm not going to stroll out into the woods with you alone in the middle of the night, Mr Lockridge."

"I wouldn't dare suggest it, Miss Harrington. Your uncle should

come along.”

“We’ll handle it another day,” said Caithny. “Trust me, she can shoot well in the dark, but you’ll appreciate it more when you can actually see what she hits.”

Conall sent Gemma out of the room then, and set to discussing some of the specifics of the next run with Logan. No matter how subtly Logan plied him, Caithny was very careful to not say what he was shipping.

Logan couldn’t be sure if Caithny sent Gemma away because he didn’t trust her, or if he simply wanted to keep her from Logan as much as possible. Either way, Logan wanted to get Gemma alone again as soon as he could. He had plenty of questions to ask.

When he left the castle, he got his chance. Gemma was waiting near the front door to see him out.

“Meet me tomorrow,” Logan said as he was about to leave. “Where we found Chance. I want to see you shoot. And without him hovering over you. If you can’t work alone, you’re not much use.”

“I don’t need a shepherd during a run,” Gemma said, offended. She glanced back toward the door to Caithny’s lair, then nodded once. “Eight in the morning,” she said quietly.

He grinned. “I can’t wait, dryad.”

Chapter 7



GEMMA KEPT HER WORD, THOUGH she knew it was rash to do so. She ought to tell Uncle Conall where she was going at the very least. But Conall left at dawn, and Gemma felt a thrill at the idea of doing something just because *she* wanted to. She saddled up Hector, and this time she brought Chance. After a night of rest and a belly full of food, the dog was already eager to go.

Fergus noticed the additional ammunition she carried in her saddlebag. “Expecting trouble, girl?”

Gemma laughed. “No. But I want to keep in practice.”

“Another run is coming up, then,” Fergus said. “And you’ll be participating again.” His demeanor didn’t hint at whether he approved or not, but she guessed his opinion.

“Whether I join or not, the run will happen. If I can keep a few people safe, shouldn’t I?”

“Poor logic, girl. It’s your own safety you should be thinking of.”

“And I am,” she said, undaunted. “Who will hurt me if I’m armed?”

“Tell that to any dead soldier on a battlefield.” He shook his head. “Go. And be careful.”

She rode, though not too fast, so that Chance could keep up. When she got to the clearing, Lockridge was waiting.

“Good morning, dryad. You didn’t bring a chaperone.”

“Chance’s my chaperone.” She reached down to pat the horse’s neck. “And Hector here is not a creature to upset. I’m not worried about *you*, sir. I can take care of myself.”

“So you say.” He smiled, not at all offended.

She found herself smiling back. “Now that I’m here, let’s get to business. I’ll show you I can shoot.”

“Hitting a target in the daytime isn’t the same as hitting a running body in the dark of night,” he warned.

“I’m well aware of that,” Gemma said. “And I wouldn’t claim I’m skilled at something unless I truly was.”

“I’m inclined to believe you,” Logan said.

He helped her dismount. Gemma pulled a paper target from her saddlebag, showing it to Lockridge to prove it unmarked by any holes. She walked a fair distance and then pinned it to the trunk of a tree.

She returned to where Lockridge stood with Hector and got her pistol out, along with the necessary ammunition. “I can fire a rifle as well,” she said. “That’s what I usually use for covering runs. But this will serve for a demonstration.”

“Demonstrate away, Miss Harrington.”

“Stand back, and keep hold of Chance, will you? Hector won’t spook at a shot, but I don’t know about Chance.”

Gemma turned her attention to the target. She loaded quickly, readied the charge, and aimed carefully. After taking a slow breath, she fired.

“Not bad,” she said critically.

“You don’t even know if you hit anything,” Lockridge said.

“I did.” But she didn’t move. She took her second pistol, loaded and primed it. She aimed and shot. She smiled. “And again.”

Lockridge said nothing. Perhaps he didn’t believe her. Gemma shot half a dozen times before she stopped. In all, her demonstration took a couple of minutes. “During a run, I will fire to signal the men, or to head off...ah, curiosity from the law. I’ve never hit

anyone to kill. Wounding is usually just as effective.”

Lockridge raised an eyebrow at the coolness of her attitude. “I’m not the only ruthless character around here, it seems.”

She put the pistols away. “Go fetch the target,” she said. “If I go, you’ll accuse me of poking holes in it after the fact.”

He came back bearing a paper target with five bullet holes in it, four quite near the center. One must have gone wide of the mark.

“Well?” she asked.

“I’m impressed.”

She liked the way he said it. “You should be.”

He waved the target meaningfully. “What made you want to learn to shoot like this?”

“I was told my father was quite the marksman. I thought...” Gemma paused.

“Yes?” Lockridge prompted.

“I thought he might be proud of me, if I was as well.” She was unaccountably a little shy in confessing that to a near stranger.

But Lockridge just nodded, accepting her logic. “You’re an unusual young lady, Miss Harrington.”

“My aunt wouldn’t agree about that last part. She despairs of making me a lady.”

“If it’s any consolation, I think you make for a very intriguing lady,” he said. Then he looked around. “Let’s walk for a while. Tell me what it was like growing up around here.”

So she did. He seemed interested, asking questions, making her laugh. Gemma scarcely realized how much time was passing. They walked through the woods, seemingly without aim. Lockridge took charge of Hector, and Chance trailed at Gemma’s heels. With the deceptively warm sun and quiet sounds of the forest, it was easy to forget why they were together in the first place.

Gemma realized she was talking far more than he was. “Can you tell me about growing up on Bermuda? Isn’t it hundreds of miles from anywhere?”

"That's one of the best parts about it," he said. "But it's not isolated, not in the sense you mean. The trade routes pass by, and they pick up all sorts of things. Fresh water, salt, other goods. St George's is a town of thousands of people."

"Is it full of palm trees?" Gemma had only the haziest idea of the tropics.

"You're thinking too far south," he said. "There are some. But it's pines I think of. My ship's masts are made of Bermuda pine."

"I still want to see your ship," she said, hoping that he'd feel differently today.

He didn't. "I still won't let you near her."

"Why not?" Gemma asked, with an unconscious pout. "I know how to keep a secret."

"Like the ones your uncle asks you to keep?"

She frowned, not liking the question. "What do you mean?"

"Do you have ambitions to succeed your uncle in his smuggling empire?" Lockridge asked. "You'd make a beautiful pirate, no mistake—sailing to France with your fleet of illicit goods, hobnobbing with Napoleon..."

"Why would I help our enemy?" she asked, offended. "I'm British, and so are you!"

"Caithny doesn't appear to have the same scruples."

"He wouldn't do business with the French forces," she insisted. "Just ordinary people. They need certain goods that are scarce because of the war, just as we do."

"And who do you think benefits from smuggled goods that pass through French ports?" he said. "I know that quite a lot of Caithny's are sold directly to the French army."

She opened her mouth, but didn't say anything. Why would Conall do such a thing?

"Ah, dryad," he said, more gently. "The truth is a little ugly, isn't it?"

"Assuming what you say *is* the truth."

"It is. Perhaps that's why he didn't have you stay in the room last evening. He knows you wouldn't approve of all his activities."

"Well, I wouldn't!"

He leaned a little closer to her. "But he needs your sharp eyes, doesn't he? So he doesn't tell you."

"I don't believe you," Gemma insisted. "Aiding the French would make him a traitor."

"Treachery can be profitable."

Something in the way he said it struck her. It wasn't admiring. "What do you plan to do?" she asked.

"Be reasonable. I wouldn't tell you a thing about my own plans until I knew I could trust you."

"So you don't trust me, even a little?"

"Give me a reason to," he invited her. "Tell me something."

"I'm not a fool. You're not asking me all this because of idle curiosity. You have a goal. What is it? Are you hoping to cut Conall out of a trade? You want to know what you're up against?"

"Why would I admit such a thing to you?" he asked. "You'd run right back and tell him."

Gemma shook her head. "Conall can look after himself. He always has. I'll answer your questions...but not for free."

"I'm interested," he said.

"Ha! So you're *not* just an ordinary smuggler." Gemma felt triumphant at tricking him, even a little.

But he just smiled. "I'm not an ordinary anything, dryad."

"Are you working for someone?" she asked. "Did they put you up to this?"

"Knowing that won't help you in the slightest."

"Why are you here?" Gemma asked. His probing questions and slippery answers made her frustrated, and her hands curled into fists. "You have a ship. You can go anywhere."

There was a new look on his face, as if he saw something he recognized. "True. I've always had a horizon to look at. Don't care

much for these trees, even though I know the sea's just over there." He watched her carefully, then took a step toward her. "Is that the real reason you want to see my ship?"

"Yes!" Gemma said. "Won't you *please* show me?"

He laughed a little at her vehemence, but it was a kind laugh. "All right. Not today, though. I've places to be, and I've already spent more time with you than I expected."

"Tomorrow," she said. "You promise?"

He nodded. "It's in a cove not that far away. Ride Hector down to the oak grove about an hour after noon. And you'll have to come alone, you understand," he added.

That warning brought her up short. Aboard a ship with an unknown smuggler? She ought to be wary. Logic told her to reconsider, but something in his face told her to take a chance.

She bit her lip, considering. "I do want to see your ship," she said finally. "And I'm not scared of you."

"Then come tomorrow. I'll take you to my lady."

"Lady? Why do you call it a lady?"

"All ships are women. Didn't you know?"

She shook her head. "Why?"

"Because ships and women are both temperamental, and hard to master, and beautiful."

Chapter 8



THE NEXT DAY, GEMMA RODE alone to where she was to meet Lockridge. She debated all night whether to go or not. She wasn't an idiot, and there were several excellent reasons for her to avoid all danger by staying well away from Lockridge.

But she couldn't stop thinking of the ship. Ever since Gemma's parents died at sea and Conall took her in hand, she wasn't allowed near a ship. And that was despite the fact that her father made his fortune in shipping. Neither Conall nor Maura would talk about her parents, and Gemma was more curious about their silence every year. And one sure way to make Gemma want something was to tell her she couldn't have it.

So, really, it was inevitable that she would take Lockridge up on his offer.

When she rode to the meeting place, she found him waiting.

He watched her approach with a warm, pleased smile. "Good afternoon, dryad."

"Why do you call me that?" she asked, curious.

"You look like you belong to these woods," he explained.

"Well, I don't. I'm only half Scottish, you know."

"The other half dryad, I'm sure," he said.

"The other half is English," she retorted. Then she got to the more important point. "So you're taking me to your ship."

"I am. But there's a catch."

"What?" she asked.

He held up a piece of cloth. "Blindfold."

"You're joking."

"Not a bit." He nodded to the horse. "And he must stay here. I know how smart horses are. If I lead him there, he'll find it again no matter what."

"You're overly cautious. You don't have to be." But she tethered Hector to a nearby sapling, telling the horse she'd return soon.

"I'm indulging your wish to see a ship up close, because that's a daft thing to lie about, and no one should go about life without being aboard a ship," he said. "But I don't trust you entirely, you being the lovely niece of Conall Caithny and all. So you allow me to lead you there blindfolded, or you go back home."

Gemma looked at the blindfold, then at Lockridge. "This isn't some sort of trick?"

"You can trust me, dryad," he said, "though I admit you've no reason to."

"Nevertheless, I do. You can blindfold me."

He stepped up to her. "No peeking now." He tied the fabric around her head, and Gemma's world darkened.

But then he took her hands in his. "Not too tight?" he asked. His hands were rough, calloused, but warm.

"No."

"Can you see anything?" he asked.

"No."

"Are you sure? How many fingers am I holding up?"

She smiled. "None. I have your hands."

He laughed. "So you do. Let's go." He led her forward. Gemma wasn't sure if he chose a direct path, but she soon heard waves very close by. She came to a stop on his orders, and then the blindfold was pulled away.

She blinked. Pine trees surrounded the place, leaving only a few

feet of pebbly beach around the shore. The water lapped several feet away. Anchored in the center of that narrow, hidden cove was a ship. The hull was one sleek curve of dark wood, and the masts held tightly bound sails.

“There’s the *Mistral*,” Logan said, pride in his voice.

“She’s beautiful. But how do we get out there?”

He pointed to a rowboat. Within minutes, he got the little boat to the *Mistral*’s side, and Gemma climbed up a ladder to the deck. He followed after securing the rowboat to the side.

On deck, she looked around. “Is it safe to leave this ship unguarded?”

“I ordered the usual guards to take a break for an hour or two. I told them it was a personal matter. As you noted yesterday, it wouldn’t do for anyone to know we’re alone here.”

Gemma pursed her lips. Certainly, she wasn’t acting like a lady, not by going alone with a strange man to a place where she couldn’t escape other than by jumping overboard. Aunt Maura would have a fit if she knew what Gemma had done. And she had no reason to trust Lockridge, other than her gut feeling.

“You think I’m being naive, don’t you?” she asked. “Or stupid.”

“Neither,” Lockridge said. “You’re correcting a gap in your education. Not ever being on a ship is like not ever seeing the sky. What’s the point of living if you don’t know what it’s like? Now, you wanted to meet my lady.”

Starting on the deck, he told her about the ship’s history, how he built it back in Bermuda, and how sharp and fast she was on the water. “No sailing today, but someday.” He smiled at her. “You haven’t truly met the *Mistral* until you’ve seen all her sails unfurled and full of wind. Until then, she’s fast asleep.”

Gemma was delighted at his honest pride in his ship. “You keep talking about her as if she’s a person.”

“She is to me. My lady.”

“You love her,” Gemma said suddenly, her stomach fluttering at

the thought.

"I do," he said, looking around the ship. "Like she's a part of me."

Gemma looked over the side rail at the clear water. She could see the bottom, farther below than she would have expected. "It's deep here, for being so close to the shore."

"Can you swim?" he asked, moving next to her. In the surprising heat of the autumn day, he'd rolled his sleeve halfway up, and she watched his bare forearms as he leaned forward on the rail.

"Yes. Everyone expected me to be afraid of the sea, since my parents drowned. But I never was, even when I was young. And should I ever be on a ship that's sinking, I want to know how to *try* to swim ashore. I thought I owed my parents that." Gemma looked over at him. "Does that make sense?"

His eyes looked brighter on the ship, possibly because all the sunlight illuminated his face. She forgot what she was saying for a moment.

"It makes sense to me," he said finally. "How long ago did they die?"

"When I was seven, so thirteen years ago now." Gemma blinked, trying to recall their faces. "Aunt Maura has one picture of them. It was painted just after their wedding. But I don't remember much beyond that. Just a few things. My mother giving me a special cake for my seventh birthday. My father coming home in the evenings, asking me what I learned that day."

"What did he do?"

"I'm not entirely sure. Something with shipping." She shrugged. "Aunt Maura doesn't like to talk about them. And Uncle Conall never does. I don't think they got along well."

"But they made Caithny your guardian. Why not leave you with your father's people?"

"I don't know. I think he didn't have much family—my father, that is. And Mama thought London might have a corrupting influ-

ence on a young girl.” Gemma suddenly burst out laughing. “And look at me now. Sneaking away from my home, and consorting with a man I hardly know.”

He tipped his head toward the aft deck. “You haven’t even seen the rest of the *Mistral*, dryad. Let’s go before you have to ride home.”

He led her through a door and into the interior of the ship. It seemed deserted, though he said the ship could accommodate a crew of up to ten. After a moment’s consideration, he showed her the *Mistral*’s more esoteric features—a few secret compartments and hidden doors. Some could hide only the smallest of packages, and others could hold something as large as a person. She was impressed, and rather flattered that he showed her.

One compartment wasn’t hidden nearly as well as the rest. “You can see the seam once the door is closed,” Gemma said.

“You’re not wrong,” Lockridge said, though with pride. “No one would believe a smuggler’s ship with no hiding places, so I put a couple in that exist solely to be discovered. The searchers—Customs or otherwise—feel triumphant and stop looking, and my real cargo continues safely to its destination.”

“You think further than most men,” Gemma said.

“Which is why I’ve got as far as I have.” He took her hand. “Come, there’s more to see, if you’re daring.”

He led her to the captain’s quarters, his personal domain. The cabin was small, of course, in keeping with the ship’s design. But it was beautifully made. The wood panels were carved with rustic but intricate patterns, and a few maps hung on the walls. The large furniture—a heavy table and a chest of drawers—was all bolted to the floor. An unlit lantern swung gently from the beam above, and a large window at the back let in light, though the glass panes were milky and bubbled, so one couldn’t see much detail. This was the best location on the ship, naturally. A curtain was pulled over a place in the wall that she guessed hid a sort of bed. Everything was

well-ordered and well-kept, and not made for show.

Gemma looked around. "It's beautiful, actually. I like it."

"So do I. But then, it's my home." He put one hand on a carved portion of the wall, and said in quieter, almost melancholy tone, "I know it better than my own home, now."

"Did you do these carvings?" she asked.

"Mmm. There's always a risk of the wind dying. Then you're just killing time, with wood all round and a knife in your pocket, and nothing else to be done."

"You're not a bit like I thought you'd be," Gemma said suddenly.

He turned to her, his eyes searching. "What did you expect?"

"I don't know," she demurred.

He stepped a little closer to her. "You expected a rough, rude, greedy bastard who didn't think beyond the next haul."

"Something like that," she admitted, feeling a bit ashamed. "I'm used to that sort of man. I know how to deal with them, which is to say I avoid them."

"That's what you should do. That sort of man is dangerous, especially for a woman like you."

"Like me?"

"Beautiful. Curious. Bold. A little too eager to test the limits."

"That's what you think of me?" she asked.

"That's exactly what you've shown me. Am I wrong?"

"I...I suppose not." She stepped back, edging up against the carved cabin wall.

"Now, since we're here, tell me what you think of me?" he asked, even as he pressed her against the wall with his very presence. He didn't touch her. Not yet. "You think me dangerous?"

"I know you are," she whispered, staring into his eyes.

"You're right." He touched her neck with one finger, drawing a line from her collarbone to her jaw.

Gemma shuddered at the unexpected frisson. "Please, Mr Lock-

ridge..."

"My given name's Logan," he said abruptly. "Call me so."

"We're not close enough acquaintances for that."

"I could tolerate a closer acquaintance, Miss Harrington," he said.

His tone made her an interesting sort of nervous, but she said, "You're too clever to muck up a deal with Conall on my account."

"So you know all about me, then?"

"You're years younger than the others I've seen work with my uncle. You have your own ship and a crew to follow you. One doesn't get that by being a fool."

"I've got where I am because I know that I have to take what I want. No one is going to just give it to me."

"Well, you can't take me," she snapped, suddenly feeling more like herself. "I'm not a thing for the taking."

Logan shook his head. "I never said you were."

"You look like you were thinking of taking something from me."

"Actually," he said. "I was thinking of giving you a kiss."

"Oh." Gemma stilled. "That I'd permit."

"I'm glad to hear it." He moved forward and kissed her. Not roughly, but the shock of the sensation was enough to make her gasp. Then Gemma leaned into the kiss, her senses awakened and eager. She'd always been curious about forbidden things, and this forbidden thing was delicious. Logan wrapped his arms around her, pulling her closer to him, bringing her into a circle of heat. After a moment he ended the kiss, and she took an unsteady breath.

"Dryad," he asked quietly. "Why did you come here today?"

"To see the ship," she said honestly. "Though now that we're here, I find I want to correct another gap in my education."

"On what subject?" he asked.

It was time to show Logan she wasn't quite as naive as he seemed to think. "Teach me to kiss. That's a subject that seems to

interest you. And I'm certainly interested now."

Logan leaned back, putting his hands on her shoulders. "Why should I teach you anything?"

"Because you want to. I may not know much, but I can tell *that*," she said, meeting his gaze. "Besides, it's maddening to know there's something I don't know. Does that make sense?"

"A little," he said, as if trying not to laugh.

"Anyway, you should show me how to kiss properly."

Logan stared at her, as if considering a wholly new creature. "Properly. Maybe not the word I'd choose," he said, bringing his mouth back to hers.

Gemma felt a shiver roll over her, the sort of shiver that left her skin awake and waiting all over her body, not merely her mouth. His lips were warm on hers, and he made her want to bend toward him, erasing the gap between their bodies.

She did just that, putting her arms around his shoulders and drawing him closer. "I like what you're doing," she said simply. "What should I do?"

"To begin with, keep telling me what you like." He smiled at her in a way that made her want to melt.

He kissed her again. This time he tasted her lips with his tongue. She opened her mouth to say how much she liked it, but before she could say a word, he took the opportunity to dart inside her mouth. Gemma's fingers curled up, digging into his shoulders. "Oh, I like that," she whispered. "Do you?"

Logan nodded, then moved so he could kiss her neck. "The next lesson is that one can be kissed anywhere." Keeping one arm around her shoulder, he laid a series of light kisses down her neck, each one making her shiver a little.

"I like that too," she said. "I think I should try."

She turned her head so her lips touched the bare skin of his inner forearm. It was easy to kiss his skin up to the elbow, and she even licked him out of curiosity. "You taste like salt," she said.

“Dryad.” Logan’s voice had a new tone, one that made her look up to catch his gaze. She realized exactly how close they were. Her breasts were pressed against him, and his legs were pressed against hers. She shifted slightly, drawing a hiss from him.

“I think that’s enough for today,” he said. There was a warning in his words.

“Are you sure?” she asked. How much time had passed since they went below deck?

“Sadly, yes,” he said. He kissed her once more before she could respond. “You’re a little too quick a learner, and I’m feeling less civilized by the second.”

Gemma was enjoying the moment too much to let it go. “What would happen if I stayed?”

“You’d be in that bed long past your bedtime.”

She took a ragged breath. “Oh. I...I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Sounding like a very good idea to me, which is exactly why you’re leaving. Now.” He stepped away with obvious reluctance. “I’d like to end this afternoon with your good opinion.”

“I have a good opinion of your kiss,” she said, with a laugh. It was absolutely true, and Gemma rarely saw reason to lie about things.

“You’re either a natural flirt or you’re looking for trouble,” Logan said. But then he stood up straighter. His demeanor changed, and he looked as he had the first night, calm and cool.

Evidently over his desire to keep her on the ship, Logan led Gemma back to the deck. He sent her down the ladder and into the little boat, then rowed ashore. He didn’t speak much, and his expression was unreadable.

“Did I make you angry?” Gemma asked, contrite. She never intended to end up in his arms, and certainly not so...enthusiastically. What had come over her?

“No,” he said. “But I’ll not do it again.”

“Kiss me?”

“Be alone with you.”

“You were very gallant.”

“Oh, was I?” He smiled at last, though with a bitter edge. “You put yourself in fate’s hands, dryad.”

Gemma glanced away from him, aware that he was absolutely correct. She looked over the water instead. “We’re all in fate’s hands, whether we admit it or not. But I think you proved yourself to be a gentleman.”

“This time,” he said. The rowboat scraped against the bottom, startling them both. He got out and hauled the boat up so Gemma could step ashore without getting wet.

She did so, and then waited expectantly. “Will you blindfold me again?”

“Do you know where you are?” he asked.

She paused, then nodded. “I know this cove,” she admitted. “But I promise not to tell.”

He gave a rueful laugh. “Well, serves me right for thinking I could fool a native. Let’s go back to your horse. It’s not far.”

They returned to Hector, and she mounted up.

Looking down at Logan, she said, in all seriousness, “Thank you for introducing me to your lady today. I think she’s beautiful.”

“It was a pleasure.” He gave her a smile in return that she’d never seen before, young and open and kind. “Someday you should see her sail.” His eyes seemed to burn with emotion.

“Someday,” Gemma agreed. Then, before she promised Logan something terribly bold, she turned Hector around and rode away. Her heart was beating fast, and she could barely stop from singing back to the birds in the trees.

Chapter 9



LOGAN TRIED NOT TO BE charmed by Gemma's last words, but he was all the same. She could have allowed him anything in the cabin, but it wouldn't have undone him like referring to the *Mistral* as his lady. He didn't know how she understood, but she did.

Every time he saw her, he liked her more. And that was dangerous. Logan had no idea what to do about Gemma. He alternately believed her and doubted her. Perhaps she was innocent, but Conall Caithny wasn't. He might well have thrown Gemma in his path to see how Logan would react. He couldn't trust anything. He didn't play fair as a spy. He should expect Caithny to be just as ruthless.

Logan walked the narrow trails of the woods for a good long while, then sat down on a stone to brood. This was growing far more complex than he imagined it could. It was not the assignment itself which had gotten complicated. It was the presence of Gemma. He wished he could discuss the developments with someone—he wanted to talk with Sophie.

Sophie would know exactly what to do about Gemma. She was also a sign of the Zodiac, and during his training, Sophie taught him several skills. She also took him aside one day, and said, "How much experience have you got with women? Talking to them, that

is?”

After getting the honest answer out of him—which was that he generally thought of women as either potential wives to avoid or potential conquests to enjoy, she rolled her eyes. “You’ll never get anywhere. Listen.”

She gave him a few pointers on how to read and interrogate women, assuring him that it required far different techniques than those for dealing with other men. Sophie was probably responsible for half his successful assignments, considering just how often he needed to talk with—not seduce—a woman during his work. So of course he listened to every word she had to say.

And Sophie would say he should not have taken Gemma aboard the *Mistral*. He should not have kissed her and he surely should not have told her that he wanted to tumble her right into bed.

But Lord, it was nearly worth it. Her delight with the ship, her unguarded answers to his questions, and then her lovely and warm response to him in the cabin. Was she even real? A woman who lived by the sea but who’d never been on a ship?

Logan had thought he knew what he was doing—he pried a few facts and secrets out of her in the beginning. But by the time she kissed him in the cabin, he wasn’t subtly drawing out information. He was losing his mind. Gemma was the most potent blend of innocence and daring that he’d ever encountered. He was already trying to think of a way to see her again.

Logan breathed deeply, and tried to calm down. Aries would have his head if he fouled this assignment up. He had to take stock of the situation, assess his options, and proceed calmly. He couldn’t talk to anyone from the Zodiac, but he had another person to trust. Tobias. Logan could rely on him for both discretion and honesty. Logan trusted Tobias with his life, and had done so for the past fifteen years.

Considering where he grew up and what his family did, it was

no surprise that Logan was shipboard most of his life. He ran about the dry docks where his family built new ships, using the sturdy Bermuda pines for masts and decking and the hull. The smell of fresh cut wood was the smell of his childhood.

When he grew a little older, he joined the crew of the ship *Alliance* so he could learn the family business first hand. He was invaluable on short runs between islands, with his sharp eyes and excellent memory. He could recall where the safe coves were and where the shoals lay...even without a map. He watched and learned how the crews worked together, how the ship required constant attention to ensure she stayed seaworthy. No one paid him much mind. Logan was just like any other little boy.

But when the *Alliance* sailed on a longer journey across the Atlantic, someone did notice Logan. One of the sailors always seemed to be watching the boy. One night, he asked Logan if he'd ever got drunk. Logan hadn't, so the sailor plied the boy with rum until he was giggly, then woozy, then sick. The man took him aside, out of view of anyone else, and told him to vomit over the rail. Logan did, and passed out soon after.

He awoke much later. His pants were pulled up oddly, and he was in pain. His whole body ached and complained. His head was pounding in the aftermath of the rum, and he had a nightmare involving some violence he didn't have a name for. All he knew was that it left him with a dread he couldn't shake.

The whole next day, he stumbled through his chores, still not sure what happened. He resolved, though, to never drink a sip of rum again. The stuff was clearly bad for him.

But when he went down into the cargo hold to bring up some food for the galley, he found the same sailor waiting for him.

"Not much time today," he said. "So you'll have to do without the rum."

He grabbed Logan and clapped a hand over the boy's mouth. Logan knew his nightmare wasn't a nightmare at all. It was a mem-

ory. But now he had a much clearer picture of what happened, because it was happening again. The man was fast, but that didn't lessen the pain, or the confusion or shame. Logan cried when he was finally released. He crawled away, as if that would help.

The sailor just gave a low laugh. "Get used to it, boy. It'll be three weeks before we see land again. And as long as there's no girls on board, you'll do."

Logan tried to speak, but choked on vomit instead.

"And don't even think about saying a word to anyone, boy. I'll bleed you dry if you do. Then I'll feed you to the fish."

He left with the promise that he'd find Logan again, whenever he wanted. Logan wanted to die. He found a bottle of rum in a nearby crate, and drank it till he got sick again. It didn't take long. He shook with fear and hate the whole time.

"Logan?" a new voice called. "Where are you, lad? I sent you down for potatoes and you never..."

The galley cook, Tobias, appeared around a stack of barrels. He took in Logan's appearance and the bottle. He frowned. "Didn't think you had a taste for rum yet."

"I hate it," Logan hissed.

Toby sat down beside Logan and took the bottle out of his hand. He took a swig of what was left. "Aye, it's a demon. If you hate it, why are you down here drinking it?"

"I want to learn how to use a knife," Logan said then. He couldn't tell the cook the truth. It was too awful. But the thought of being found again by that sailor made him shake.

"To cut up potatoes?" Tobias asked.

"Potatoes. Sure."

The cook took another, more thoughtful sip. "Suppose it's never a bad thing to learn how to use a blade. You can slice a potato. Or a man, should you find yourself in a nasty situation."

"Can you teach me?"

"I could. Learn a lot from a ship's cook, you know. I've all sorts

of skills, not just cooking.”

“When can you teach me? When can we start?”

“We start the moment after you tell me who your first target will be.”

Logan shook his head, dropping his gaze to the planking. “Can’t.”

“Learning to fight with a knife takes time. If you want to do it well. Otherwise, your opponent will just snatch it right out of your hand, and then where will you be? Not only will he have your weapon, he’ll know you want to kill him.”

“I can learn fast.”

“Fast is a week or two. I could teach you for a little while every day.”

“A week? That’s too long,” Logan said, shuddering.

“Thought it might be. So tell me. Who do you need to fight, and why?”

Logan remembered the other man’s threat. “I can’t.”

“I’m a bit older than you, lad. You can tell me, and I won’t be surprised.”

“I can’t.”

“You know we won’t see the coast for another three weeks? And that’s not even counting the leg back.”

Logan buried his face in his arms, crouching into a ball until he couldn’t see anything but the fabric of his sleeves, right there in front of his eyes.

“Hey now,” Toby said awkwardly, putting a hand on Logan’s thin shoulders. “We’ll make it right. Or at least, we’ll make it over. I can keep a secret. Come, lad. Tell me the name.”

Logan took a few deep breaths, then whispered the name. The cook just nodded grimly, unsurprised by the revelation. “So that’s how it is. Well, you lay low and avoid him till dinner tomorrow. You can hide in the galley if you like—I’ll give you chores and no one will question it. But you leave him to me. I know how to deal with

scum like that.”

Toby wasn't lying. He kept an eye on Logan all the next day. After dinner, he muttered the plan to him. Logan obeyed Toby's instructions, and allowed the sailor to find him on the aft deck, well after the sky had gone dark. Crates of tied-down cargo and spare rope were coiled up nearby, blocking the view from the main deck.

The sailor was already half drunk when he saw Logan alone by the rail.

“Made it easy, did you,” he growled.

“Stay away from me,” Logan warned him.

The man grinned, showing yellowed teeth. “Or you'll do what, little boy?”

Logan shook his head. “I can't do anything.”

“That's right.” He loomed over young Logan, who could smell the sick scent of rum on his breath.

Before he could touch Logan, though, Toby rushed out of the spot where he was hiding. He seized the sailor and with one swift move slit his throat with a cooking knife.

Logan was astonished at the speed of the act. He just managed to jump aside as Toby pushed the dying man toward the rail and then over it. He hadn't even had time to make a sound. Toby was that fast.

The cook watched calmly as the dark waters swallowed up the sailor's body, his breathing barely faster than normal. “Now, lad. Seems to me we've both learned a bit about each other's nature. We've both got a secret to keep for the other. Way I see it, that means we're allies. Am I right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Don't sir me. I'm just a cook. Tell me, lad. What are we?”

“Allies.”

Toby then pulled out his little pocket knife, and made a cut in his thumb. Logan held out his hand, knowing the ritual already. He flinched a bit when the blade bit his flesh, but when Toby pressed

their thumbs together, the pain evaporated with his words. "Not just allies. Blood brothers. Yeah? We watch each other's backs."

"Yes," Logan swore. "And you'll teach me to fight with a knife."

"And you'll help me out in the galley." The cook put away the knife, an easy grin spreading across his face. "Let's get on with it, lad."

No one paid much mind when the sailor was reported missing. These things happened. And he wasn't well-liked by the others, so few efforts were made to find out more than the obvious conclusion: he drank too much and went overboard at night.

From that moment on, Logan and Tobias were allies. Logan shadowed him on board ship. He learned everything. And as he got older and gained more responsibility, he brought Tobias up along with him, until the day he captained his own ship and needed a first mate. Who else would he trust in the role?

They were both already used to slightly shady business deals and the occasional bit of occupational spying. Tobias wouldn't blink if Logan moved into spying with a bit more seriousness. When the Zodiac came knocking, Logan told them flat out that Toby was essential to his work. Logan did agree that certain details would be secret even from Toby, including the very name of Zodiac and Logan's code name. All Toby knew was that Logan did a little spying for the right side, which was all Toby needed to know.

As far as the matter of the sailor, Logan was eventually able to put the memory away. Toby told him it wasn't his fault. If he'd been a girl in a town when the sailor happened by, the outcome would have been the same. Toby said, "Some people just don't have souls inside. They take what they want no matter who it hurts."

Logan had been unlucky, and he got taken advantage of. But he resolved to never be taken advantage of again, and he never tolerated such behavior on his ships. He kept an eye out, and if he got word of one of his crew mistreating anyone—man or woman—in that way, he dealt with it swiftly and mercilessly.

Tobias supported him in that. He was never less than honest, so Logan asked his advice on other matters. Toby was twenty years older than Logan, and he just knew more about life.

When he reached the village of Caithny, Logan found his friend in the main room of the tavern, contemplating an amber-hued drink on the table.

“What’s that?” Logan asked.

Toby said, “I ordered a whisky, and Jennie brought me this.”

“It looks like a whisky.” Logan shrugged.

“I already had one. It’s better than whisky.”

Logan asked, “You’re sure you only had one?”

Jennie happened to walk by just then, and Logan asked her what Toby was drinking.

“Scotch, sir. It’s made here.”

“In town?”

“Well, no. But not far. Caithny used to have a distillery, but it got bought a few years ago, and now it doesn’t make scotch any more.”

“What does it make?” Toby asked. “Seems foolish to stop making this,” and he held up the glass.

Jennie just shrugged. “Don’t know. Some of the men and women work there, but they don’t talk about their work. And it all gets exported.”

“By Conall Caithny,” Logan guessed.

Jennie glanced at him. “Well, yes, sir. Almost nothing goes into or out of town unless he’s involved.”

Logan nodded. Everything he learned seemed to bear that out. He requested another scotch for himself, and Jennie left to fetch it.

Logan sat down across from Toby. “I have a problem.”

Toby looked up alertly. “What sort?”

“It involves a lady.” Since Toby never met Gemma, Logan quickly outlined her relationship to Conall, and explained her role. “Doesn’t it seem odd to you? Why would the man employ his ward

in his business?"

"Sounds like she's a bit of a handful," Toby said, with a shrug. "An orphaned redhead? That's asking for trouble. She probably insisted on getting involved."

"Assuming, of course, she's telling the truth," said Logan. "She might be doing exactly what Caithny tells her to do."

"Do you believe her?"

Logan paused, contemplating. "I think so."

"Do you believe her because she's a pretty face?"

"She is that," Logan said, musingly. "But something tells me she's being honest...more or less."

"Why the hesitation?"

"Well, if she's telling the truth, her uncle keeps her close. No suitors, no being around men at all. But she's seen me three times without supervision. So she's capable of tricking someone. I'm just not sure who she's tricking."

"Women are complicated." Toby took a drink.

"Truly insightful," Logan said sarcastically. "No wonder I keep you around for counsel."

"You want counsel? Here it is. That girl's got you turned around. Stay away from her if you like the life you've got."

"What does that mean?"

"Don't play ignorant." Toby leaned in. "I've known you since long before you even knew what girls were. And I've never seen you talk like this."

"Please. I'm not in love with her."

"Not yet. But she's done something to you. The longer you stick around, the more danger you're in."

"From her?"

Toby made a sweeping circle in the air with his empty glass. "From...all this. All your business. Just watch your back, Logan."

Chapter 10



GEMMA SPENT A RESTLESS NIGHT. She stayed up well past two o'clock. Her mind was racing, and to even pretend to sleep would be absurd. She kept thinking of Logan. Not just his kiss, but his expression when he showed off his ship. No one who could be so proud and loving about a wooden ship could be evil at heart. Perhaps Logan was stuck in his life, like she was stuck at Caithny.

She finally went to bed when the candle guttered out. Her memories of the day began to meld into an abstraction that was both dreamy and carnal. She imagined the *Mistral* at full sail, without a shore in sight. And only Gemma and Logan were aboard, with no one to tell them what to do. She revisited the moment when he first kissed her, and dreamed about what would've happened if she refused to leave. What had he said? *You'd be in my bed long past your bedtime.* If that had been a warning, it didn't work. The words thrilled her to her core. In the darkness of her bedroom, she touched herself until she sighed into sleep. Just one more thing she'd been told never to do...and ignored.

The next morning, she felt calmer, but still rather bemused. Gemma went down to breakfast as soon as the sun brightened the day. She was surprised to find both Uncle Conall and Aunt Maura

there. The two weren't speaking. That in itself wasn't surprising, of course. Maura staunchly avoided anything related to Conall's activities, and he in turn despised what he called her sanctimonious manner. The only topic they both discussed was Gemma, since both had firm—and conflicting—opinions about her future.

This morning, Maura sat at the table, primly buttering some thick and crusty bread. Conall stood at the head of the table, drinking his coffee without sitting down. In his other hand he held a folded up letter, the seal broken. His expression was worried and distant.

Gemma looked at them both, trying to decide if they were about to argue, or if they'd just finished.

"Good morning," she said neutrally.

"Good morning, dear," her aunt said, with a smile.

Conall grunted. "What are your plans today, Gemma girl?"

She shrugged. With Logan still on her mind, she unwisely indulged a whim for honesty. "I was thinking of running off and getting married, though I don't know if I should do it before or after lunch."

Her words dropped into a shocked, cold silence. Aunt Maura stared at her with wide eyes, and then put her butter knife down with a soft clink. Conall held frozen for half a moment, then slammed his cup down on the table, breaking it and spilling the remains of his drink.

"Uncle!" Gemma yelped. "You'll burn yourself!"

"Never mind me, girl." He stuffed the letter into his jacket pocket and advanced toward her. "What the devil are you talking about?"

Aunt Maura murmured, "Your language, Conall."

He whirled around to face his sister. "She's running away, and you're berating my language, sister? Do you find her defiance amusing?"

He took one step back toward Maura, his fist tightening.

Gemma moved even faster, pulling at his arm. "Don't you dare touch her!"

Conall shifted his attention to Gemma, his gaze furious and his breath fast. "You're going to get in my way, girl," he growled.

"Every time!" Gemma snapped back. She wasn't scared for herself, but the thought of Aunt Maura being hurt sickened her. "Your very own sister! What are you thinking?"

"Your fault, girl. Talking of running off with a man!"

Gemma put her hands on her hips. "I was joking. It was a joke."

"Damn poor joke, little girl. Don't you ever say such a thing again."

"Is marriage such a dire fate that you both avoided it?"

He glanced at Maura, but only said, "I am your guardian, Gemma. I'll say if and when and whom you'll marry."

"Only until my birthday," she said.

His eyes narrowed. "You fancy being locked up until your birthday? Because I have rooms in this castle for just that purpose. I'll throw you in the old barracks. They're still in perfectly good condition."

Gemma thought of the barracks, the long, low stone building near the outer wall. She grinned. "Even if you could lock the door, I'd get out of the windows in about one minute."

"Not after I put bars on them!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You've not got the slightest idea what I'd dare. Now you tell me the truth this moment. Have you met a man?"

She raised her chin. "I have met a man. More than one. It tends to happen when you invite them into the house and make *me* greet them."

"So this Lockridge has eyes for you," Conall said, his voice low. "I'll fix that."

Gemma didn't like the look on his face. She said hastily, "Now you're joking, Uncle. Him? Why would I marry a smuggler?"

"He finds you pretty," Conall said, musingly. "Admitted as much to me."

"I am pretty!" she said confidently. "But I'm not a fool."

Conall stared at her. Gemma kept her chin up and refused to look away. Lying didn't come naturally to her, but she didn't want Logan to fall afoul of Conall in the middle of a run.

"He's only been here twice," Conall said finally. "You've not met him elsewhere?"

"Of course not," she said, a bald-faced lie that sounded more sincere than she expected. "Aunt Maura has taught me that ladies never consort with strange men."

"So she listened to something you said, after all," Conall said, with a look toward his sister. "Perhaps you earned your keep."

"I did my duty to our family," Maura said softly, still not looking at him. "Someone has to look out for this child."

He sneered. "And you're a mighty protector!" He looked down at himself, as if just realizing he was covered in coffee. "God, I'm going to have to change before I go out, or I'll stink of coffee beans. Gemma, you behave yourself all day, mind. And don't even mention the word marriage."

"What about wedding?" she asked, with a wicked smile.

Conall glared at her, then suddenly burst out laughing. "You're a spitfire. *I* taught you that."

"Go change, Uncle," she said. "I'll clean up here." She bent to pick up the broken china.

Conall moved away, his mood restored. "That's a good girl. I'm off. I'll have words with you tonight, Gemma."

"I'll be here," she said.

He left, and Maura let out a long, thin sigh of relief. "Sweet heaven, child. You are provoking."

"It was just a joke," she repeated. "I wouldn't have said it if I knew he'd react like that. To think he'd raise a hand to you..." Gemma felt a little stab of fear. She hated the idea that her words

might cause Aunt Maura to suffer.

“Was it a joke?” her aunt asked.

Gemma looked at her more closely. “Not you too. Who would I marry out here?”

“He mentioned a name. Lockridge.”

“Just the latest smuggler come to do business,” Gemma said, trying to forget how he kissed her.

“You’re blushing,” said Maura.

“I am not.”

“Is he handsome?”

Handsome? He could melt ice just by smiling. Gemma paused, then said, “Well, yes.”

“Has he proposed to you?”

“Certainly not! I met him four *days* ago, Aunt.” She sat at the table, ready to eat.

“Would you accept a proposal from him?”

“I have no wish to marry! I never did!”

“Don’t be daft. You’ve always dreamed of marriage. I remember well the stories you made up in the nursery, dressing up in your mother’s best gown, and telling me how you would meet your husband.”

“I was a girl, playing make believe. You probably told me too many fairy tales. I’m older now. I know better.”

“To think a twenty year old who has lived in seclusion half her life would tell *me* the way of the world. Marriage is the natural state for a well-born lady. And despite your wild behavior you come from good stock. Don’t forget your father was the son of a baronet! You ought to embrace your future, which does include marriage, though you may not accept it now.”

“How can you speak with such authority on the matter?”

Maura put the teacup down. “I was married.”

“You *were*?” said Gemma. She was so surprised by the revelation that she put her crumpet down, forgetting she was ravenous. “I

never knew that.”

“Conall doesn’t like me to talk about it. It happened before you came to live at Caithny. I was married for three years. We never had children, though my husband and I both wanted them very much.”

Gemma was still stunned by the news. “You were not married! Your name is Caithny!”

“Oh, I was Mrs Edward Douglas, and very happy to be so for those brief years. I went back to my maiden name when I moved here. It seemed safer.”

“Safer how? Why should it matter?”

“I didn’t want to make a fuss in the aftermath of my Ned’s death.”

“But how did he die?”

Maura paused, then decided it was useless to hold back anything at this point. “He worked as a Customs agent. One of the deputies. He was shot by a smuggler.”

“Not one of Conall’s gang?” Gemma asked, aghast.

“I could never be sure,” said Maura. “All I knew is that he was killed at night, while in the process of interrupting a smuggling run. He was buried in the churchyard in the village—I still visit after church sometimes. When he died, I was given a small payment out of the fund reserved for widows and orphans of the law in the town. But that didn’t last very long. So I accepted Conall’s invitation to live here at the castle again.”

“But how could you if.... What if *he* was responsible for your husband’s death?”

“What should I have done?” Maura gave a sigh Gemma never heard before. “Should I have demanded an investigation of the magistrate who is in Conall’s pocket? You don’t suppose it’s just luck that Conall never attracts the law. He pays for the privilege.”

“There must have been something to do.”

“For a woman with no money and no man? No, my choices were to slowly starve or join the poorhouse, or come to live with

Conall. I knew what I would do. I was living here a year when your parents came to visit us and leave you here before their voyage. After they passed, I felt I could be of some use, if I could help raise my sister's child."

"And you did!" said Gemma, smiling.

"Well, I tried. You were always a wild girl, and much more so after the death of your parents. I did my best to instill a love of God in you, and to keep you from the worst wickedness. But living in a place like this, with a man like my brother...you are surrounded by vice. It's no wonder you have joined in Conall's schemes."

"I haven't joined in them. I just..." She trailed off.

"I know what you do. You scout out the caves. You make trips into town to visit the shopkeepers and citizens, finding out what they desire for the next shipment. And you work at night! Keeping lookout while the men work on the shore. That's the most dangerous of all, Gemma. You're in peril of being hurt, or captured, or running afoul of one of the men."

"Conall would never allow that."

"It's not always a matter of what he'd allow. It only takes a moment. You let down your guard, all eyes are on the ship..."

"I keep my pistols about me for a reason, Aunt Maura."

"Now that's supposed to make me feel better!" she cried. "I despair of your ever becoming a lady."

"What need have I to be a lady? I'm stuck here. No one sees me."

"You will go to London when you achieve your majority. You will get your inheritance and you can choose a different life. But you can't go traipsing into the city dressed as a tatterdemalion and brandishing pistols! You must be civilized. You must behave according to convention."

"Well, we'll see if Conall locks me in a tower first," Gemma grumbled.

"You must not let that happen. Don't see this Lockridge again,

Gemma, not for a moment. And don't mention his name to Conall. The sooner he forgets that conversation, the better."

"Yes, Aunt."

"Four days," her aunt said then.

"What?"

"You met him four days ago."

"Yes. What of it?"

"When I met my Ned, it only took two days for me to know he was the one I wanted."

"How did you know?"

Maura smiled softly, her eyes on a distant past. "Perhaps I'll tell you some day, dear."

* * * *

Later that day, Gemma passed her uncle's office door, but then her steps slowed. Conall was gone. If she wanted to peek inside, there was no better time, and Logan's hints about who Conall was shipping to haunted her. Conall kept the door locked, of course. But Gemma could get the spare key within moments. He locked it to demonstrate that it was private; he didn't expect that anyone would ever actually try to break in.

He also didn't expect Gemma to defy him. Armed with the proper key, she entered easily. It was not a tidy room, and there were not too many obvious places to look for...well, whatever she was looking for. Would it be so bad if Gemma knew exactly what she was helping to move? Why should Conall keep it hidden, if he had nothing to hide?

On the other hand, it was just as likely that he considered her a child not worth telling. She was still annoyed by their conversation that morning. Conall's flat out resistance to the idea of her getting married or even leaving Caithny was deeply irritating.

What was worse was hearing her aunt's revelation about her marriage and widowhood. If Conall was responsible, he didn't de-

serve *any* loyalty. With all that in mind, Gemma decided she was entitled to a little information. Maybe she would share it with Logan, and maybe she wouldn't. But she'd find it all the same.

Conall kept few records. Part of it was mistrust, but also simply because he was a man who relied on rote memory. So there were far fewer papers about than one would expect, considering the extent of the operation Conall ran.

Gemma opened a few envelopes and carefully sorted through the papers she found, making sure to keep everything in order. Conall's handwriting was cramped and cryptic, but Gemma knew it well enough to read the contents.

Most of the papers were unenlightening. Accounts of expenses, a few lists of the men who worked for Conall, the lists of the various shopkeepers who regularly bought his contraband liquor and such. The most recent cargo appeared to be very ordinary things—hardly worth smuggling at all. She saw line items for tin, glass, produce, and some grains. How dull. Perhaps the prices of those things was higher than expected. But who smuggled apples? She'd be embarrassed to be caught with such a cargo.

It was also reassuring. Logan implied that Conall was shipping guns to the French. Gemma refused to believe it, and these ledgers proved her right. Conall was not a traitor. Of course he couldn't be! Gemma smiled to herself. She'd enjoy getting an apology from Logan when she told him.

All at once, she remembered the letter Conall had that morning. She'd seen very similar letters many times before, but it never occurred to her to wonder about them. He had a tendency to stuff them into pockets or pouches as he went about his business. Unless he moved them to a special place, it was likely they ended up here.

With an idea of what she was looking for, she searched for letters with the same appearance. She found several, all bound together with string. She opened the pack hastily and unfolded the letters.

The contents were just what she feared she'd find. The letters were from a contact in France. She squinted at the handwriting—the author was not at home in English—and read the name of a few ships, a name of what must be a small port on the coast of France, and finally the name of the sender. Lisle. Gemma repeated it under her breath. She found some scratch paper and copied all the names down. She wouldn't remember them, and it would never do to take the original letters.

Gemma stuffed the list into the pocket of her skirt, folded the letters back up, and put the bundle back. It looked almost the same as before, and Conall shouldn't notice any change.

She peeped out into the corridor again. All was quiet. Should she risk a longer look? Of course she should. Gemma was getting into the game, and after learning about the French contact, she wanted to know all of Conall's secrets.

She found a few ledger books, and added some numbers up in her head. Conall did quite well for himself over the years. Smuggling was even more profitable than she guessed.

But when she pulled out the most recent ledger book, Gemma was surprised to see that Conall was having financial difficulties at the moment. The loss of a few ships over the past year, combined with an increase in payments to the corrupt law officials, meant Conall was running very low on funds.

Gemma flipped forward a few pages, and saw a large influx of money, but with a notation beside it. Conall had to pay it back. He was not merely broke, he was in debt.

She put the book back on the shelf, not knowing what to think. She always thought Conall was a good businessman, even if he chose a shady business. It never occurred to her that he might be in difficulty. That was not the sort of information Logan suggested he was after, and she wasn't sure she'd want to tell him.

A sound outside made her look up. If Conall caught her in the office, she'd be locked up in her room for the next three months.

Gemma crept to the door, listening. Nothing.

Taking a deep breath, she eased it open.

“Gemma!” Aunt Maura was standing at the far end of the hall.

She jumped. “You startled me, Aunt!”

“What were you doing in Conall’s office?”

“Um, he wanted me to file something for him. So he didn’t forget. Nothing important.”

Maura watched her carefully. “I thought he always kept the room locked tight.”

“Yes,” Gemma agreed. She held the key up. “So I should lock it right back up. Thank you for reminding me.”

Maura sighed. “He trusts you with the key, does he? You’re in deeper than I feared.”

Gemma gave her aunt a weak smile. “Just filing a paper. Not so deep, I promise.”

She was getting in deep, but not with Conall’s business. She was falling for Logan, and the fact that she was willing to tell him a few names was proof. Had a few kisses turned her around so completely? No wonder she had been forbidden from men. They were more dangerous than she thought.

Chapter 11



AT THE DOCKS WHERE CONALL conducted some of his slightly more legitimate business, Logan stood in a quiet spot, surveying the shore and the water. He'd already snuck into the building here over the last couple of nights, searching for the arms Conall must be storing before the run. But he found nothing, which frustrated the hell out of him. He saw dozens of crates filled with quite boring, legal items like glass jars and bolts of wool. But he couldn't find a single crate containing any sort of weapon. Conall must have a separate hiding spot, and this warehouse was just a cover.

It was very quiet, indeed, and that made Logan even more suspicious. No ships were anchored there at the moment. Not even one in for repairs. Either it was a case of bad timing and all the ships were on runs, or Conall didn't have nearly the fleet that Logan had been led to believe.

Logan ambled over to a man working at one of the docks, replacing some rotted boards. "Slow day," he commented.

"They're all slow lately," the worker said, still intent on what he was doing. "Good for me. This needed to be done six months ago. But now I got plenty of time to do it."

"Because all the ships are on the water?"

"All two, you mean." The man hauled another board into place. "Bad year. First the *Georgette* got lost in a storm, then the new sloop never got delivered—damn crook of a builder. The Navy nearly intercepted the *Kestrel* in June, but it sank before they could board it. And the *Lapin* sank not two months ago."

"Bad luck never comes alone, does it?" Logan mused.

"No, it brings its cousins. And bad luck spreads. Less work for the village, fewer goods coming in."

"You got work here."

"For now," the man said. "But repairs don't take forever. Come winter, I'll be in need of a new job, or we'll be eating thin porridge for months."

"Isn't there a factory in town? The old distillery?"

"Aye, but there's not jobs for everyone. And it's Caithny's place too—just like here."

"He runs the town," Logan agreed. "Like a king in his castle."

The man looked up, curious at last. "Caithny doesn't usually take up with strangers. You must have talked him into something."

"You can't do business if you've no one to do business with. We both get something out of this."

"Well, here's luck to you. Caithny needs better luck. The village, I mean. Conall Caithny can make his own damn luck."

Logan nodded. "Fortune favors the bold." He bid the man good day and headed to the building nearby, where he expected to find Caithny. The place was part warehouse and part boat house. Caithny's office was at the far end, down a narrow hall.

Logan reached the doorway, but paused when he heard voices. Dropping back a step, he listened. Perhaps he'd get a scrap of information he could put to use.

The voices rose and fell. An argument, but not a fierce one. Logan tried to identify the other man in the room, but couldn't place the voice yet.

“You can’t keep her forever.”

Then Conall’s voice rose sharply. “Leave off, Munro! We’re not going through this again. I’ve heard quite enough about marriage for today. You’ve asked and I’ve answered. Gemma will not be married to you. Ever.”

“Thought we were friends, man. I’d treat her well.”

“Friendship has nothing to do with it! And if you want to keep my friendship, you’ll not ask again! I have other plans for the girl!”

Munro grumbled but apparently gave up. Logan heard footsteps and moved back around the corner. Someone, presumably Munro, left the room, but luckily went the other way from where Logan was lurking.

Logan considered the exchange with interest. Caithny let Gemma ride wild through the woods and play smuggler, but he turned all suitors away. He seemed to keep an eye on Gemma, but he didn’t show the slightest inclination to protect her reputation, even if he had firm opinions about who she could marry. If he didn’t want to provide for her, why wouldn’t he want to see her married off? And if he did care for her, why treat her so cavalierly? Logan couldn’t get his head around the conundrum. Something else was going on, and he would probably never know what it was. He would not be at Caithny long enough to get involved. *Then why do I keep thinking about it?* he wondered to himself.

Logan shook his head. Gemma was not his problem.

He stepped out and walked confidently into the office. “Caithny,” he said. “Glad I caught you. There’s a rumor in town that Customs is making a push on this part of the coast. Have you heard that?”

Caithny waved the news aside. “All in hand. I’ve an understanding with the law in these parts.”

“But Customs isn’t local.”

“It’s administered by local men. Oh, an officer from one of the districts might join them, but what’s one more man? I control this

coast, Lockridge. We've nothing to fear from the law."

"Aye, sir," Logan said. He smiled, thinking of what the Zodiac might say to that. Conall Caithny was so confident in his power that he was growing reckless. "If you're certain, I won't bother you any further. I've plenty of work to do before tomorrow night."

"Get to it, then. If the weather holds, tomorrow night will be clear, with a beautiful smugglers' moon rising at ten o'clock."

Logan left Caithny musing over the weather. He did in fact have work to do. His first task was to find the Customs office. Conall Caithny wasn't the only man who could cut a deal with the law.

Logan returned to town, but before he could even think about finding a Customs agent, he saw Gemma riding down the street on Hector, with Chance trotting happily alongside. She nodded coolly as she passed, and said in a voice so low only he could hear it, "Meet me behind the Rose and Crown in five minutes." Then she rode on.

He followed her instructions, and was waiting outside the back of the Rose and Crown. Several minutes later, Gemma appeared. "I took a little longer so no one would see."

"Is that a problem? Should you be out?"

"Not with you," she said. "But...I've got some names."

He paused, a little surprised. "You do?"

"Yes. I did a little snooping and I found them."

"I thought you weren't going to betray the family business."

"It's not my family business," she said. "And besides, I think you may be right, because some of the names are French." Her voice dropped. "If you're right.... I don't want any part of it."

"Tell me. Please."

"No." She put her hand in her pocket and withdrew a slip of paper. "I won't tell you anything." She handed him the paper. "But if you just happen to come across the information, at least I can say I didn't tell you anything."

He took it and read the contents. Names of people, and possi-

bly a location near Calais. He breathed a little sigh of relief. "That helps."

"I don't want to hear a thing about it. I have a feeling that dealing with you is going to ruin Uncle Conall."

"What makes you say that?" he asked.

"You're going to undercut him, aren't you? You say you won't deal with the French. I believe you—God knows why, but I do. But you have to sell the goods somewhere, and that means you'll take a loss, and Conall will get nothing. He'll never repay his debt then."

"He's in debt?" Logan asked, interested. "I knew he had a bad year, but he's done well for himself before."

Gemma nodded. "He took out a large loan several months ago. He must pay it back on the year, which leaves him about three months to do it. Winter is coming, which puts the smuggling business to sleep, more or less. If this run goes badly, he'll be in a very sticky spot."

"You don't sound too worried."

"By then," she said, "I'll have my majority and I'll be gone. Uncle Conall chose his fate. I'll choose mine."

"But you'll be part of the run?" he asked, feeling a new sense of urgency. He needed her for his contingency plan in case things went badly during the smuggling run.

"He needs me," Gemma said. "One last time, I'll help him. Just be careful," she said. "I have to go. Conall would likely kill us both if he caught us together."

"Then go, dryad."

But Chance barked then, causing both of them to whirl toward the entrance to the alley.

"Hey now," Toby said, raising his hands as he came toward them. "It's just me. I was looking for you...Lockridge."

"Toby," Logan said, relaxing. "You should meet Miss Harrington. She lives up at the castle with Caithny."

Toby wisely said nothing about the unconventionality of their

meeting place. “How do you do, miss,” he said, with a rough bob of his head. “Name’s Tobias.”

“Toby’s my first mate,” Logan said proudly. “He’s kept me alive for the last couple decades.”

“Sounds like quite the task,” Gemma noted. Her tone was acerbic, but her blue eyes sparkled. “A pleasure to meet you, Toby. And this is Chance.”

Toby bent down to greet the dog. “Fine animal,” he said, with approval. “Goes with his mistress everywhere, I’d guess.”

“He does indeed,” Gemma replied. “And now we should both go home. Good day, gentlemen.” She slipped out of the alley, leaving Toby and Logan alone.

“*Well*,” Toby said after she was out of earshot. “That explains a lot.”

“Don’t start,” Logan warned.

“You started it! A woman like that one. Don’t you know red’s a sign of danger?”

Logan laughed. “She appeared without warning.”

“She *is* the warning. I see how you looked at her. I’ll admit I like her, but that girl is going to be trouble for you.”

Logan shook his head. “We’re leaving here very soon. She’s safe from me, and I’m safe from her.”

Toby snorted. “I’d offer a wager, ‘cept I don’t involve ladies in a bet. You stay away from her.”

“Good advice.” Any promise to heed that advice would be a lie. He didn’t want to avoid Gemma Harrington. He wanted to see her every chance he got. He wanted to show her the *Mistral* under full sail and convince her it was better than any castle on land.

But he returned to his room at the Rose and Crown. He had to write up what he knew for the Zodiac, in case things did not go well. Logan took a little while to compose the message, largely because he wasn’t terribly comfortable with the code he had to use to write it. Some genius who Logan never met devised the code exclu-

sively for the Zodiac to use.

The code required him to change his words into numbers and then back into other words, so none of the sentences flowed naturally. He wrote the whole thing out in plain English first, then translated it, then burned the original.

The message conveyed the newest facts he learned. Logan had every hope that he'd be able to report those facts to the Zodiac personally. But if something went wrong and he was captured or killed, he wanted there to be some clues to follow. So he reported on the names Gemma gave him, and explained about the run, and his expected outcome of detaining Caithny as soon as the run was completed.

After a moment's pause, he wrote one more letter, this one to Sophie. Logan told her about Gemma, explaining she was marginally involved in his assignment. She could use looking after if something went very wrong, if only because of her close connection to Conall Caithny. Sophie, being a female agent and also prone to striking out on her own, would be the best person to help Gemma, if it came to that. Logan also guessed that Aries wouldn't consider Gemma's role to be as important as Logan thought it was. He told himself it was a perfectly rational thing to do, and it had nothing to do with his personal feelings.

Satisfied with the messages, he sealed them and walked to the small post office on the high street.

"How long does it usually take for the post to go all the way to London?" he asked the man behind the counter.

"Few days, unless the mail coach is delayed," the man said. "Urgent news, sir?"

"Doesn't everyone think their news is urgent?" Logan answered vaguely.

"That's so," the postmaster agreed. "Gossip travels just as fast as official mail. Faster, when my wife's involved," he added with a grumble.

With the messages safely in the post, Logan left. Time was growing short. If everything went according to plan, he'd been sailing away from Caithny very soon. He'd detain Conall not long after, and then...the assignment would be over. He would have no reason to come back to Caithny. And even if he did come back, what would he say to Gemma? *Hello, beautiful. I'm a spy responsible for your uncle's arrest, thus depriving your family of its income. But don't worry, it's all for the good of king and country.*

Not a stunning beginning to a courtship. Anyway, he couldn't tell her he was a spy, which left him the option of courting her as Lockridge. Hello, beautiful. How do you feel about marrying a smuggler? Oh, and by the way, Lockridge isn't my real name, so that will be awkward during the wedding ceremony.

No, Gemma wouldn't look kindly on either approach. "Damn," Logan said to himself.

Later, Logan pulled Toby aside. "The run will happen tomorrow night. Customs may choose to do the right thing and stop the run. If so, Conall will be arrested here, and I won't risk blowing my cover."

"And if they don't?"

"Then the original plan goes into effect. All the usual rules apply. Keep the men in line, and if there's so much as a hint of conflict, turn the *Mistral* out to sea. We'll meet up again at the cove, right before the next tide. You'll be in charge of loading the *Mistral*. I'll be with Miss Harrington, wherever she is throughout the run."

"You still think that's a good idea?"

"If Caithny tries to double cross us, I want to be close to something that matters to him. And even if he's willing to let her be out at night among scoundrels with no sort of protection, I'm not. If I'm close to her, I can keep her from getting hurt."

Toby frowned. "True, I'd hate to see her hurt. But you'd use her as a hostage if Caithny turns on you? I can't picture you risking an innocent life."

“Don’t tell Caithny that. He doesn’t know me as well as you do.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to a hostage exchange,” said Toby.

“You can hope for the best. I prefer to plan for the worst.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Cole is a romance writer with a penchant for history. Her stories draw upon her deep affection for the British Isles, action movies, medieval fantasies, and even science fiction. She now lives in a small house in a big city with a cat, a snake, and a rather charming gentleman. When not writing, she is usually curled in a corner reading...or watching costume dramas or things that explode. And yes, she believes in love at first sight.