

Chapter One

The man was dead. Of this there could be no doubt. No one could survive such a terrible injury.

Bess gripped my arm. Her hand flew to her mouth. Bleary-eyed and still not quite awake, I tried to gather my thoughts. I bent down and pulled the man's cloak so that it hid his staring eyes and the grotesque gash beneath his chin.

This man had not died by accident. Only a sharp knife in a murderer's hand could have done such damage. Old he was, with thin white wisps of hair like a ghost's breath over his head. His weathered hands were clawed in pain, or gnarled old age, clutching the soil beneath him.

"It was his hut!" exclaimed Bess. "We slept in his hut!"

We had wondered why the hut was empty when we came upon it the evening before, exhausted, hungry, and somewhat afraid, in this unfamiliar countryside of

Scotland. We had guessed it to be a shepherd's hut, nestled below trees, sheltering in the elbow of a steep hillside. Lighting a lamp with our own flint, we had looked around. A cold fire lay in one corner. Near by, two blankets were folded neatly on a thin, uneven pallet on the floor – whoever slept on such a poor bed would find little comfort. And a few small possessions – a battered tin pot, two pottery cups, a horn spoon, a wooden platter, a sharp knife – sat on a large box. Creamy threads of sheep's wool were snagged on the splinters of rough wood, or lay on the floor, drifting like puffs of smoke on the draught from the door. Two shepherd's crooks hung from a warped rafter.

Although desperate to sleep, we had tried to remain awake, to listen for an occupant's return – two fourteen-year-olds travelling alone in this strange place must surely face unpredictable threats and we were accustomed to remaining alert. But in the darkest hours, Bess on the pallet and I on the floor, each wrapped in a cloak and one blanket, it had seemed to us that no one would come here now. And at last we had slept, though fitfully, the horses standing near us, breathing softly in the small space.

My sleep had been full of scattered dreams, familiar to me now, of redcoats chasing us, the shattering crashes of muskets in the darkness, of my horse, Blackfoot, falling under me and my pistol failing to

save me, and of spectral horsemen cursing me with words of powerful magic. In one dream I was fighting my brother again, with swords as before, but this time my brother had overcome me and I had woken, sweating, as his pale eyes and ginger moustache loomed over me and he prepared to plunge the sword into my throat. Truth mixed with terrors, until when I awoke I could not tell which was which. Which was from the past, which the product of my exhaustion, and which a premonition of future danger?

When we had arrived at the hut, in the dark, we had not stumbled across the old man's body, lying as it was by the stream some fifty paces away. Only in the weak grey light of morning did we find it, as we came to wash our faces and drink our fill of fresh water.

Now, the sight of that gruesome body brought us fully to our senses. Although it was hard to believe that the murderer could still be near by, yet I feared it, and the skin on the back of my neck crawled as though touched. Cautiously, I retrieved my pistols from where they lay on a rock. Bess took hers from the belt of her breeches. Bess, I should say, was dressed in man's garb, as she most often was, and could fight as well as any I had met. When I had first encountered her, only a few weeks before, she was holding a pistol to my head, and only good fortune had saved me from death at her hands. Since then, she had shown her

unwomanly strength on many occasions and I had learnt that the word “unwomanly” had a different meaning from the one I had been brought up to know.

Now, on the run from both the redcoats and my father’s militia, we both had need of courage. And trust. But we had proven ourselves each to the other. I knew I could trust her and I think she knew the same of me. I knew many things about her and her childhood; I knew what kindled the fire in her heart, the fury, the spirit. And she knew of my childhood too, my struggle against my birthright. We had no friends here, not now that we were two days’ ride over the Scottish border. But we had each other.

As long as we had each other, we had some kind of hope.

We looked and listened, straining eyes and ears for signs of danger. A low mist draped nearby hillsides but to the east there gleamed the promise of a brighter day. There the sky was a buttermilk yellow, pale and watery. Dark patches of forest splashed the distant hillsides. Closer to us, large boulders and gorse bushes could be hiding any manner of perils.

As for sounds, at first we could hear only the trickling of the stream as it ran over pebbles; the slight rustling of grasses in the breeze; and then, further away, the mournful crying of seagulls. Nothing to fear.

Averting our gaze from the body, we washed

quickly, and filled our water bottles. We began to move from that place, still wary. We walked quickly, making our way back up the slope to the hut. Bess's forehead was creased; twists of hair hung down bedraggled; dirt smudged her cheeks. Her man's shirt was splashed with water from the stream, and open at the neck – where I could see, hanging on a chain, her grandmother's locket which contained her father's ring. She looked tired, and I could sense perhaps a dulling of the fire in her eyes, as though she were weighed down by something. I think I had noticed it several times over recent days, but I had thought little of it – there was too much of greater importance to occupy my thoughts.

Many terrible things had we witnessed, many dangers had we met, and we must not let our guard drop now. We were in strange lands, with different customs and people. We must be careful indeed.

“Will!” Bess whispered suddenly. “Listen!”

I stopped. I could hear nothing. Only the birds and the faintly splashing stream below us. She was pointing to a large rock set back from our path. Now she placed her finger on her lips. Our pistols were already drawn. Slowly, carefully, I used my thumb to release the catch. I was ready to fire.

And then I heard it too.

There was something behind the rock. Or someone.