

# Chapter 1

Edinburgh, Scotland, 1844

I've memorised their every accusation: *Murderess. She did it. She was crouched over her mother's body, covered in blood.*

Behind me, several ladies are gathered close, gowns touching, heads bent as they murmur. A common sight at every ball I've attended since coming out of mourning a fortnight ago. Their comments still sting, no matter how often I hear them.

'I heard her father caught her just after it happened.'

I jerk away from the punch-dispenser. A panel opens on the gold cylindrical device's side. A metallic arm extends, takes my porcelain cup from under the spout and returns it to the table.

'You can't believe her responsible,' another lady says. She's standing far enough away that I only just catch her words above the other discussions in the crowded ballroom. 'My father said she must have witnessed what happened, but surely you don't think—'

'Well, my brother was present at her debut last year and *he* told me she was completely covered and elbow-deep in ... Well, I shan't go on. Too gruesome.'

'The authorities insist it was an animal attack. Even the Marquess of Douglas said so.'

'He couldn't accuse his own daughter, now could he?' the

first replies. ‘He should have sent her to the asylum. Do you know she—’ Her voice dips too low for me to hear the rest.

I grip the fabric of my dress. If not for the thick silk, my nails would have bitten into skin. It’s all I can do to keep myself from pulling out the pistol hidden beneath my petticoats.

*You’re fine, I tell myself. You’re not angry. They’re just a bunch of ninnies not worth being upset over.*

My body doesn’t listen. I clench my teeth hard, releasing my dress to press my thumb against the quickened pulse at my wrist. One hundred and twenty beats later, it still hasn’t slowed.

‘Well?’ a voice next to me says. ‘Are you going to take some punch or glare at the contraption for the rest of the evening?’

My friend Miss Catherine Stewart regards me with a reassuring smile. As usual, she looks absolutely beautiful in her rose-pink silk gown. Her blonde curls – all perfectly in place – shine from the overhead lights as she leans in, plucks a fresh cup from the table and passes it to me.

My breathing is a bit ragged, audibly so. How utterly annoying that is. I hope she doesn’t notice. ‘Glaring at inanimate objects has become my new favourite pastime,’ I say.

She scrutinises me slowly. ‘Oh? I thought you might be listening to the chatter at the other end of the refreshment table.’

The gaggle of ladies gasp collectively. I wonder what transgression they have made up for me this time – other than the obvious one, of course.

No, best not to think about it. If I do, I might resort to threats of bodily injury; I might even pull out my pistol. And if I do that, I’ll *really* be put in the asylum.

I place the cup under the spout and shove the machine’s button much harder than necessary. Steam spurts from the top and punch pours out, filling my cup almost to the brim. I remove the cup and sip.

Dash it all. Not even a hint of whisky yet. Surely someone

has sneaked in a flask to save us all from the tedious chatter. Someone always does.

‘No witty rejoinder?’ Catherine asks with a click of her tongue. ‘You must be ill.’

I glance at the gossips. Three young ladies are garbed in near identical white gowns, each decorated with various-coloured ribbons and flowered adornments. I don’t recognise any of them. The one whispering has dark hair pulled back from her face, a single ringlet resting on one shoulder.

Her eyes meet mine. She quickly averts her gaze and whispers to her companions, who glance at me for a moment before turning away. Just long enough for me to see the distress in their features, along with a touch of malice.

‘Just look at them,’ I say. ‘They’re about ready to draw blood, wouldn’t you say?’

Catherine follows my gaze. ‘If my eyes don’t deceive me, her claws have most certainly come out. Did you happen to hear what she said?’

I exhale a bit louder than necessary and try to calm myself. There’s a place for my rage inside me, a hollow I’ve carved to bury it deep. That daily control allows me to feign a pleasant demeanour and an incandescent smile, complete with forced bubbly laughter that’s a touch vapid, even stupid. I can never let the real me show. If I do, they’ll all realise that I’m far worse a woman than they imagine me to be.

With all the poise I can muster, I sample more punch. ‘That I am the very picture of grace,’ I say sarcastically. ‘You know very well what she said.’

‘Wonderful.’ Catherine smooths the front of her gown. ‘I’m off to defend your honour. Expect me triumphant upon my return.’

I step into her path and say bluntly, ‘No. I’d prefer you didn’t.’  
During my year in mourning, I’ve apparently forgotten the

fine art of the polite insult. The old Aileana Kameron would have sauntered over to that group of ladies and said something amiable and utterly cutting. Now, my first instinct is to reach for one of the two weapons I have with me. Perhaps the solid weight of the blade in my hand would be a comforting thing.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Catherine says. ‘Besides, I’ve always disliked Miss Stanley. She dipped my hair in an inkpot once during a French lesson.’

‘You haven’t had a French lesson in three years. Goodness, but you can hold a grudge.’

‘Four. My opinion of her has not improved with time.’

She tries to manoeuvre around me, but I’m too quick. In my haste, I bump into the refreshment table. China cups clink together and a few saucers teeter close to the table’s edge. The group of ladies take note and whisper even more.

‘For heaven’s sake!’ Catherine stops. ‘Are you really going to stand here and drink punch while that harridan falsely accuses you of—’

*‘Catherine.’*

She glares at me. ‘Say something, or I will.’

None of them – including Catherine – realises that the rumour isn’t inaccurate, only understated. I’ve committed murder exactly one hundred and fifty-eight times in twelve months. My tally now grows almost every night.

‘And what would you have me do the next time?’ I ask. ‘Shall I confront everyone who says the same?’

She sniffs. ‘It’s ridiculous, old gossip that’s soon to become stale. People like Miss Stanley refuse to let the topic die because they’ve nothing else to discuss. No one actually believes the horrid rumour.’

I shift from the table then. The Hepburns’ ballroom is crowded with groups of people milling about, enjoying refreshments before the next round of dances begin.

A crystal chandelier hangs in the middle of the room, newly outfitted with electricity since the last time I was here. Floating lanterns drift about just below the ceiling, each glass casing decorated with its own distinct, ornate design. Their inner mechanisms hum as they hover above the crowd. Shadows from the tinted glass play along the floral-patterned wallpaper.

As I study the groups of people in their fine dresses and tailored suits, more than one head swivels in my direction. Their gazes are heavy, judging. I wonder if those who were there for my debut will always see me as I was that night – the blood-soaked girl who couldn't speak or cry or scream.

I brought misfortune into their tidy, ordered lives, and the mystery of my mother's death has never been solved. After all, what sort of animal slays as methodically as the one that killed her? What daughter sits next to her mother's corpse and doesn't shed a single tear?

I've never spoken a word to anyone about what happened that night. Never displayed any outward signs of grief, not even at my mother's funeral. I simply didn't respond the way a guiltless girl should have.

'Come now,' I murmur. 'You've always been a terrible liar.'

Catherine scowls in the direction of Miss Stanley. 'They're just being hateful because they don't know you.'

She sounds so sure of me, certain that I'm innocent and good. Catherine did know me, once. The way I used to be. Now there is a sole individual alive who truly understands me, who has seen the destructive part of me that I conceal – because he is the one who helped create it.

'Even your mother suspects me of some involvement and she's known me since I was a bairn.'

Catherine smirks at me. 'You do little to improve her opinion of you, what with you disappearing at every assembly she escorts us to.'

'I have headaches,' I say.

'A good lie the first time, but suspicious by the seventh. Perhaps try a different affliction next time?'

She sets down her empty cup. Immediately, the dispenser's arm picks it up and places it on the conveyer that returns dirty dishes to the kitchen.

'I'm not lying,' I insist. 'The headache forming at my temples right now was caused by Miss Stanley.'

Catherine rolls her eyes.

The orchestra at the back of the room strikes a few practice chords on their fiddles. The strathspey is about to begin, and the dance card that hangs from my wrist is surprisingly full. Aristocrats are nothing if not hypocritical. They have invented a crime and condemned me for it, yet the business of our acquaintance continues uninterrupted. My dowry is a draw many gentlemen won't ignore.

The result: not an empty spot for a dance, and hours of inane conversation. At least I enjoy the dancing.

'Your Lord Hamilton is leaving his companions,' Catherine observes.

Lord Hamilton manoeuvres around a group of ladies near the refreshment tables. A short, stout man about twenty years my senior, Lord Hamilton has a receding hairline and a penchant for cravats of unusual design. He also has an unfortunate habit of patting my wrist – which I suppose is meant to comfort me, but makes me feel all of twelve years old.

'He's not *my* Lord Hamilton,' I say. 'Good heavens, he's old enough to be my father.' I lean in and whisper, 'And if he pats my wrist again, I shall surely scream.'

Catherine lets out an unladylike snort. 'You're the one who agreed to dance with him.'

I cast her a withering glance. 'I'm not a complete boor. I won't turn down a dance unless someone else has claimed it.'

Lord Hamilton stops before us. Today's cravat has mauve, green and blue dye splashed in a strange pattern on the silk. Ever the gentleman, he smiles politely.

'Good evening, Lady Aileana,' he says, then nods at Catherine. 'Miss Stewart, I trust you're well.'

'I am indeed, Lord Hamilton,' she says. 'And may I say, that is quite a ... *striking* cravat.'

Lord Hamilton peers down at it fondly, as though someone has complimented his greatest achievement. 'Why, thank you. The dyes form the outline of a unicorn. Part of the Hamilton crest, you see.'

I blink. If anything, it resembles a sea creature of some kind.

Catherine, however, simply nods. 'How wonderful. It suits you very well, I think.'

I remain silent. I'm so terribly out of practice with social niceties that I might actually tell him the mauve splashes look like tentacles.

The orchestra strikes a few more chords as couples move to the centre of the room and take their places for the dance.

Lord Hamilton extends his gloved hand. 'May I have the pleasure?'

I place my fingers in his palm, and – hell and blast – he pats my wrist. I distinctly hear Catherine's stifled giggle as she is led off by her own suitor. I glower at her over my shoulder as Lord Hamilton and I walk to the dance line. He deposits me at the end and stands across from me.

But just as the orchestra begins to play, an odd taste sweeps across my tongue from front to back. Like a volatile mixture of sulphur and ammonia, hot and burning as it trickles down the inside of my throat.

A vile swearword almost escapes my lips. There's a faery here.