

THROW A DOG A DEAD
MAN'S BONE



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TRINITYROSE



PRESS

*With thanks to
Deb Lee,
Dirk Mensonides,
Joanne Reese,
and
Marla Schultz
Who never fail to inspire me to do my best.*

*In memory of Nathan,
AKA 'Coot,'
Central California Labrador Retriever Rescue;
and
Edward,
'The little cat with the big attitude'*

CHAPTER 1



OCTOBER, 1813, JUST OUTSIDE THE
VILLAGE OF MOUSEHOLE, CORNWALL.

From my position belly-down in the heath I watched the two men.

Night smells swirled in the cool October wind. The waning moon shed a watery light over the scene. Somewhere to my left, field mice scritchd but I ignored them. Merrick had commanded me to watch. So I did.

It was easy to keep my attention on the shadows flickering before the red-lensed smuggler's lantern hung in the bow window of the cottage. The bitter stink of Merrick's fear had surrounded him like a cloud, accompanying us all the way from the inn to this lonely old house. Was he worried lest we run afoul of the White Lady of the Pascoes? Lanthorne Cottage was rumored to be her home. No matter what he feared, his scent had made me anxious. When Merrick's fear oozed from his pores it boded ill for someone, and often for me as well.

I was not close enough to the other man to smell him. His short, slender shadow moved smoothly, without any of Merrick's jerky motions. Though he was smaller than Merrick, the other man was not afraid, at least not afraid of Merrick.

Merrick's voice, tight with his tension, carried easily to me

through the open door. "More risk means more gain is all I'm saying. To everyone excepting me, so far."

The other's voice had not risen. He was not under the influence of his emotion, so I could not pick out the words, but he must have asked for Merrick's reasoning.

"From the weight," Merrick answered. "Casks we're sending to France are heavy n'small, and the ones we're bringin' home are bigger than usual. They take all I have and t'dog too to pull them in. They're not brandy, seeing as they don't slosh nor roll on their own." His voice took on a rough humor. "And last I checked, silk doesn't sneeze."

The other man's reply was too soft to carry, but he gestured with outspread fingers, casting long, thin shadows like a spider's legs.

"That's just it!" Merrick's shadow jumped with his reaction. "Free traders doan' kill less they have to. Makes it hard for the law to ignore, brings the excise men down on us. Of course, smuggling is a different kettle of fish now, with the war going so badly for Napoleon. A long drop from the hangman's noose is waiting for traitors, and I hear that new Coastguard captain favors short trials." Merrick snickered at his own wit. "And that snuffbox you wanted. I could tell it was something special, even though you didn't offer to pay me special for it, or how I got it. Nay, it's only yourself you can blame that I tumbled to what this new cargo is and how much more it's worth than the usual goods."

This time the smaller man's voice rose enough for me to catch some of his words. "—until you give the box to me."

"I'm not saying I got it, and I'm not saying I dinna," Merrick retorted. "But if I had, and if I had took a peek inside, I might take a fair guess at what it's worth to you. And to me."

The smaller man stood in the doorway as if breathing the night air. "We seem to have reached an impasse. Such a shame."

His silhouette rippled with a small shrug. "Shall we at least share another dram to mark the end of our partnership?"

Perhaps Merrick discounted the man because of his size. Perhaps he could not sense the determination in the man's coolness. More likely he simply ignored it, trusting to his own strength, his cunning, and his thirst.

Even I was lulled me into relaxation by the clinks of bottle against tankard, the lapse in the soft talk, the dry clicks of the blackthorn's bare branches fingering the cottage's old roof tiles. That is why I almost missed the man's sudden turn and the blade that scythed out of the darkness toward Merrick. Light winked once against the weapon, a bloody semaphore signaling 'murder.' Merrick went down like a stalk of corn before the reaper.

With a high pitched screech like a witch's curse, a white flash burst out from beneath the cottage eaves. I jumped to my feet, every hair standing on end. Was it *she*, the White Lady, free to walk the earth in these deep nights leading up to Halloween? The whirring of wind over outspread wings told me it was a barn owl the scent of violence had flushed from her perch.

I looked around wildly. I must call the alarm! But to whom? It was already too late. *I* was too late. I still had to see—to be certain. I understood Merrick's fear now, and I shared it. A man who would strike without warning, without heat of anger, would he kill me too? I hugged the ground as I crept closer, trusting to my dark brown coat to hide me among the flickering shadows, until I reached the stone steps.

I cocked my ears and listened with all my strength, turning my head this way and that to catch every sound.

A series of small 'pops' then soft rustling, as of clothing. The jerking tear of a knife through heavy fabric, a hissed profanity. Then the ascending 'cush' of the saber sliding home in the scabbard.

Boot heels tapped toward the door. I squeezed myself behind a winter-bare tree beside the door and closed my eyes so their golden glint in the moonlight would not give me away. If the killer found me and my end was upon me, perhaps it would seem as quick as Merrick's if I did not have to watch the blow descending. All I could do now was pray to make a good death by meeting it without flinching. If it took closed eyes to do it, well, what is it the fisher folk used to say in my home village? "Tell the truth and shame the devil?"

The killer paused at the threshold.

I did not even dare to breathe. Perhaps it was my coat that blended so well with the night-muted gray-brown colors of fall, perhaps it was my prayer, or perhaps it was his own inner demons that drove the killer to impatience and saved me. He spat on the paving stones, turned on his heel and took the path around the back of the cottage. Within moments a flurry of hooves carried the killer away.

The door gaped inward. The killer had not even bothered to close it behind him to hide his sin. I skirted his spittle and stepped down into the low-ceilinged space.

The sharp copper scent of blood pulled me toward the fireplace. Merrick sprawled face down on the hearthstones, a terrible wound at the back of his head. Small wonder Merrick had not fought or cried out. This had been a quick death, but not a fair death. Unlike the ones dealt out in my world, Merrick had had no chance to fight or run or even know his death had value, as when the prey knows his death brings life to his predator.

I touched him, just once.

My nostrils flared. That scent—I would never forget it. The spoor of the killer, transferred onto his victim. It was tantalizingly familiar, but the essential nature was overlaid with other elements: wax, powder, scents strange and foreign to me, including a disturbing sharp, white odor, as of soil, but clean. If I met this slender killer again, deciphered his own personal

scent out of this welter of other odors, would I recognize him? Then what? I must learn everything I could, store up every atom of information until I could decide what to do.

Head down, upper lip curled, nostrils flickering, I read the scent-story of what had happened. My mind painted the event as clearly as if my eyes had witnessed it. Merrick had stood *here*, his killer *there*. The two scents merged—Merrick must have trusted the killer to turn his back on him, armed as the killer was. Then the swift, terrible blow and Merrick's collapse.

I dotted my nose to the smear at the corner of the hearth, then to the stone flags. Yes. Merrick's killer had turned the body over. He had rifled the clothes of his victim, rending buttons, tearing, even slitting pockets with his blade still reeking of blood. He had not found what he sought, that was clear to me, for I could smell the ghost of the boot print on Merrick's back where his frustrated killer had shoved the body aside like a cast off sack of rubbish.

Was it this small item he had been searching for? It was wedged between the hearthstones by a few bits of smashed pottery. It was a small metal box more long than wide. I had taken it at first for a spent coal rather than a manmade thing, thanks to the coating of sour ashes from the neglected fire. I scratched the box out of its hiding place with my foot. A puff of that half-familiar scent escaped.

Had Merrick died for this?

My failure settled over me like an icy cloak. I had failed Merrick tonight. He hadn't been a good master, but he had been the only one I had. How could I ever atone?

The door slammed shut behind me. I scooped up the little box in my mouth and scuttled under a ramshackle table.

"Thought I did not know you were watching, eh, villain? Hoping I would pay you for your silence?" The killer kicked a footstool out of his path. "Come out so I can give you your reward."

I peeped out through the forest of table and chair legs.

His eyes must have been nearly as keen as one of my kind, to catch that slight motion. His boots took two smooth strides toward me then the blade jabbed into the shadows under the table.

I pressed back into the corner, presenting my shoulder to the threat to protect my vulnerable belly.

“Come out, you dog, your game is up.” He hurled the chairs aside. The saber drew back then whistled with fresh force across the open space. A pale face lowered itself into view. “What? A dog, in truth.”

My tail thumped a greeting on the floor. Sometimes it seems to me that my tail has a mind of its own. It has no sense of discrimination.

He laughed, a high cackle without any warmth. “What a nice doggie. Come here.”

His wheedling was even worse than his laugh. At least my fool tail at last agreed, tucking itself up under my haunches.

He snapped his fingers. “I said, come here.” His outstretched hand reeked of gunpowder, Merrick’s blood and that other scent.

My lips skinned up over my fangs. How I would love to bite that hand, savage it as the only memorial Merrick was likely to receive. But my kind do not do that. We have been bred to work alongside men, the deserving as well as the despicable, to pull in their fishing nets during the day and to nursemaid their children and guard their hearths in the night. I would not betray my heritage and my nature for a moment of revenge. Merrick was dead. Nothing I did to this man here and now would bring my old master back and undo my failure.

The killer’s hand closed over my collar. With a grunt he half lifted, half dragged me from my hiding place. I willed my body to become as dense and heavy as one of the barrels I used to drag out of the sea for Merrick.

Once he had me out from under the table, he dropped me. I thumped down onto my brisket, one forepaw twisting beneath me.

He hefted the red-blinkered lantern over me. "You are that dog of Merrick's. Crept in to mourn your beloved master?"

I craned my neck upwards to meet his eyes. *Hardly 'beloved,' but deserving the final courtesies of any creature of good character. From which number I exclude you, sir.*

"Too bad you cannot tell me where he hid it. Who could have guessed the lout had the brains to cross me?"

The corners of the box pricked my gums, making the saliva come. I dared not flick out my tongue to catch it and risk showing what I carried.

"Slobbering cur." He shoved me aside with his foot.

I would have liked to answer him with a growl but this was not the time for petty satisfactions.

While he wiped my drool from his boot with a corner of Merrick's coat, I scanned the room for a way out. Stout stone walls, most of the windows small and high, barred with stout iron staples. Even the broad bow window was glazed with thick glass in heavy oak frames. Strong as I was, I'd be more likely to lame myself than be able to burst through it. If I escaped, it would have to be through the door.

And Merrick's killer—his sword still reeking with Merrick's blood—stood between me and the nail-studded portal. The man wasn't large, but even if I knocked him aside, I would have no time to fumble with the catch to release it and open the door. Not without dropping the box.

A chance draft sent the guttering lantern's flame leaping and turned the man's shadow into a grotesquely wavering scarecrow. My nostrils twitched as they caught the thinnest suggestion of heath and salt water.

"The night is almost over and Merrick has wasted enough of it," the man said. He withdrew a pistol from beneath his coat. "I

shall tie up this one loose end then neither of you shall trouble my interests any longer.”

I looked past the unblinking single eye of the pistol's barrel toward the door. With a 'pop' the wick of the guttering candle dropped and the light flared up. The killer cursed and raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sudden blaze. My own, far keener eyes needed no such shielding. They seized on a thread of moonlight falling across the threshold.

My eyes agreed with my nose. The door was ever so slightly ajar.

I threw myself forward from my crouched position. My five-odd stones' weight hit the lightly-built killer at the knees. There was a satisfying impact and a yelp, then the sound was cut off as he hit the hard floor and the air left his lungs. I lunged for the door, up and over him, the weight of my footsteps drawing airless croaks. With a quick paw, I hooked the opening wider then I was out.

I skidded around the corner and across the cobbled front yard toward the horse tethered in the shadow of the stable. If I could convince the killer's horse to leave without him, and from what I had learned of him the killer was unlikely to have earned the loyalty of any good animal, that would gain me precious time. I had no more than grunted the bare outline to the black gelding than steps pounded around the corner.

A tongue of fire streaked through the blackness. It licked along my ribs, knocking me head over hocks. I threw out a paw to stop my tumble but it was the injured one. It buckled, sending me careering off in a sickening spin.

A scream of pain filled my throat but I clamped my jaws shut and swallowed the sound. I must not drop the box. Even if I died before I could get it to someone and make them understand, the killer would always be uneasy. It might be my only revenge for Merrick's death.

And my own.

I fetched up hard against a thick stand of marsh grass. I howled between clenched teeth. Another bullet streaked through the raised hackles along my back. It sizzled as it hit the water beyond.

Blessed water. I had forgotten about the little stream that ran from the duckpond beside the cottage and across the rutted track leading to the cottage gates before it meandered down to the seaside cliffs. I hitched myself forward on elbows and haunches, every inch of me quivering with pain and expectation of the next—and final—bullet. High whinnies split the night, then hooves pounded away in the opposite direction. Curses and the man's footsteps followed the horse. I closed my eyes and breathed a prayer of thanks to my nameless equine friend.

Perhaps I dozed for a moment, weakened by the lifeblood oozing from my side. Harsh breaths of the man's jogging approach jerked me awake. If I could not drag myself over the last stretch of marsh grass and into the water, the next bullet would finish me.

The pistol made a metallic ratchet as the killer cocked it and aimed. My hackles rose in anticipation of pain. Then a flash of white-feathered belly passed only a few feet over our heads. The barn owl's screech split the night.

I heard the killer curse and stumble. I had been given a few more seconds of life. I hauled myself the last yards toward the sweet-rank water smell. The bank crumbled beneath me, sending me slithering into the ebbing black water.

The killer's muffled steps halted just above me. "Stupid dog. If you're not dead yet, you'll drown soon enough."

I did not paddle but let the current pull me away. I was relaxed now, cradled in the gentle grasp of the water as it sought the sea. Dying this way held no fear for me. It was fitting for members of my tribe to pass out of life in the embrace of the element that was the sum and substance of our work, our pleasure and our duty.

The freshening on shore breeze carried the killer's words after me. "If I don't have the box, then neither does anyone else."

'Duty?' The thought stung my conscience and pride. I had singularly failed in my duty. When He made my kind, the Lord of Creation did not give us a choice of masters. Nor did He give us a choice in doing our duty to that master. He made us loyal, since His human creations, good masters or bad, would be lost without us. I had failed my master, failed to warn him, failed to protect him. Because of me, Merrick was dead and the killer was free.

And when a human killed one of his own kind like this, in secret, in the dark, without warning, others were sure to be in danger. It was now my duty to live. To bring the killer to justice, and to protect other humans from him until I could do it. I had a new duty.

I could not speak, but I could tell.

I swept my otter-like tail to turn into the current and floundered upstream toward the road.

CHAPTER 2



“*T*here’s more heath over here,” a woman’s voice called. “This lavender colored variety only grows in Cornwall. Isn’t it beautiful? I’d like to cut some for the house.”

I struggled to raise my head. Had I made it all the way to the road? I could not recall climbing out of the water, yet I did not feel wet as if I were still floating. In fact, I felt wrapped in smothering warmth.

Long light strides brushed closer. “Oh, poor thing.”

My lids were gummed shut. I could not see her, but a ribbon of flowery female essence floating over the sharp scent of crushed herbage told me a young woman had knelt beside me.

I could do little to greet her but turn my nose into her palm. *Good morning, Miss. Pray excuse my not rising nor giving you a polite wag. You see, I thought last night I was going to die, and at the moment I cannot be sure I have not.*

Her hands on me were snowflake-soft, like the fresh snowfalls of the Labrador coast of my puppyhood. I decided then that if I had died, it was not so very bad a state. Not if one could receive angels’ caresses like this.

“Magdalen, whatever it is, leave it be.” Slow steps-tap-steps

approached, as of feet aided by a cane. “Smugglers are rife in these parts. If it is something of theirs, best to give it a wide berth and act as if you’d not seen it in the first place.”

“This is naught to do with the free trade, Aunt Hetty. It is a sick dog.”

“Well heavens, child, get away from him. Sick dogs can be dangerous. He might bite you.”

‘Magdalen’ is your name? To me, you’ll always be my ‘Angel.’ I snuffled softly against her hand. *I would never bite you.*

“No, no, Aunt, look. He is trying to wag his tail.”

“Very well, he is a good natured sick dog. Still, his owner has left him here to die. There must have been a reason.”

“It seems a pity that any intelligent creature should spend his final moments alone.”

The older woman’s voice drew close. “Please, my dear. We cannot afford to alienate our new neighbors. We are already outsiders. Best not to make life any more difficult than it already is. Come away now. It appears the carter has repaired the harness and he looks none too pleased to be kept waiting.”

“Very well,” my angel sighed. She laid a hand on my head for a moment like a benediction.

“When the new housekeeper arrives from the village I will ask her if she knows someone who can come out to end the creature’s suffering,” said the woman I had heard my Magdalen-angel call ‘Aunt Hetty.’ “If it is diseased, best the body be disposed of safely so others do not catch their death from it.” She stumped-tapped away.

Magdalen’s steps were heavy as they trailed away, leaving me behind and alone, once more. To feel that hand on my head again gave me one last bit of strength. I tore my lids open, dug my elbows into the turf and pulled myself after her. *Take me with you, angel!* I called.

Thick fluid clogged my snout. I sneezed and gagged. The

metal box dropped onto the grass. Pain roared up out of the numbness and crushed me flat.

Magdalen rushed back toward me. "He is not sick, he's been shot," she called to her aunt. She gasped. "And look at this."

Hetty step-tap-stepped close. "What is it, child?"

"He must have been carrying it the whole time."

I tried to take the box back from her, but only succeeded in brushing her hand with my snout. I folded my ears flat against my head and whined a warning. *I think my old master was killed for it. It is not safe for you to have.*

Her hazel green eyes troubled, Magdalen passed the box to the older lady.

"Very much like his own," Aunt Hetty said after a long pause. With a hand shading her eyes, the older woman turned a slow circle, sinking her cane into the turf at each point of the compass as she took in the wild windswept headland, the little cottage in the distance the only sign of habitation. "Wherever could the dog have found such a thing?"

I did not need to raise my head to know what she saw. *There is nothing here but that cottage there, and the sea. That is why Merrick and the others used the place.*

Hetty returned the little box to Magdalen. With a 'click' Magdalen opened the box. She looked inside, then wordlessly held it out toward Hetty.

I watched Hetty's eyes flick from the inside of the lid, to Magdalen, then back to the box. "Here." Hetty pulled her cloak from her shoulders. "Wrap the dog in this. The carter is from Town, not a local, still, best not to advertise someone shot at the creature until we know more about how he came to have that." She nodded toward Magdalen's pocket into which the younger woman had slipped the box. "And how it came to be here in the first place."

The carter and his lad carried me between them to the wagon and settled me on some sacking, the older man grum-

bling under his breath the whole time about meddling old maids and spinsters not caring whether a man could get a dram before closing time at the tavern.

Magdalen and Hetty waited beside me, Magdalen's hand on my shoulder, while the lad shut and latched the wagon's gate and the older man hauled himself into his seat.

"At least we know the creature doesn't have something catching." Hetty pitched her voice low for us three alone to hear.

"I'm not so sure." Magdalen's rings made little clicks against the box as she turned it over and over in the pocket of her pelisse. "It could be quite easy to catch one's death of a bullet. As this poor fellow almost did."

Yes. I could just reach her hand. I dotted it with my nose. *You must be careful, my angel Magdalen. Very careful.*

I had done my best. Now I must get well and strong, and quickly. I had a new duty, and now I had a new mistress to serve as part of that duty. I let myself sink into healing sleep, but one thought followed me down into the darkness.

I must not fail in this second chance.

THE SPLASHING of wheels through water then the cart's jerking to a halt woke me. I rested my chin on the tailgate and looked around with surprise.

How could this be? I must be out of my head. Same rutted track crossed by the little stream, same sagging gate, same lonely stone cottage on the sea cliff. Same spoor of treacherous death. I coughed out a rusty bark of warning. *This is a bad place! Stay back!*

Magdalen jumped down from the gig and gave me a quick caress in passing. "I am not leaving you, friend. I must open up the house." She strode across the cobbled yard and shoved open the door.

I braced myself for her screams.

Magdalen stood stock still in the open doorway, staring into the cottage's front room. I could see her shoulders rise and fall with her deep breaths. "You should have let me gather more greenery, Aunt Hetty," Magdalen finally said over her shoulder. She fished a stone into place with her foot to hold the door open wide. "It will need several arms' full to sweeten this house."

I hauled myself to my feet and cocked my head, puzzling at the disgust, not fear, in her voice. I was prepared to credit my new mistress with any amount of fine qualities, but this imperturbability seemed an extreme lack of reaction to finding a corpse in one's den.

Aunt Hetty tapped across the yard to the bow window and peered in. "Shocking."

A series of sharp clacks progressing around the corner and out of sight told of Magdalen's throwing open the shutters of each window in turn. She appeared again in the doorway. "That rascal Merrick has not even had the place cleaned as I directed. There is a mess in the middle of the sitting room floor and nothing of what I ordered in the larder."

I gave myself a good shake, ears flapping against my head. None of this was making sense. 'A mess,' one might fairly have called Merrick in life. He had certainly never been fussy about his grooming, even for a human. I found the layered smells that lingered about his person a pleasant exercise for my nose, but humans did not have my connoisseur's appreciation of strong odors and I noticed they would often move aside or stand upwind from him.

But even my bold Magdalen would not, could not, fail to mention his lifeless body. Would she not have had to step right over it to open the window? Where had it—that is to say, Merrick—gone, that only a bit of debris remained?

There was little time for speculation after that. Magdalen and Hetty set off a storm of activity. After he lifted me out of the wagon, the carter's boy was sent off in the gig and returned

with two village women packed into the little vehicle like pilchards in a barrel. Magdalen set them to work then tied up her burnished mahogany curls, a color I was pleased to note that was not dissimilar to my own, and attacked the cobwebbed corners of the sitting room with a broom held aloft. I dozed in a nest of blankets set in a sunny out of the way spot and monitored the activity.

Hetty used a roguish charm to cozen the old carter into cleaning the stable first before the furniture was set, for the time being, on the fresh straw. The breeze carried the chink of coins to my ears and I watched the man bow to Aunt Hetty then turn to the woodpile. The boy ducked into the house then returned with oaken buckets he carried to the well.

By midafternoon, a snapping driftwood fire was chasing the chill from the main room the women had called the sitting room, and from me. I nuzzled another fold into the thick pallet of blankets set for me beside the hearth. This was life as I had always imagined it. Scones smelled loudly from a steaming napkin bundle, and game pie added a rich, meaty undertone as Magdalen and Hetty took an improvised luncheon from cups and plates set on the heavy oak mantel-piece over the hearth. There was even a carved turnip lantern, a gift from the servants in a Cornish nod to the All Hallows season, flickering in pride of place from a bracket above the mantel.

I raised my head and flicked my gaze to the napkin bundle, then to my ladies and back again toward the scones. Both women were oblivious to my request. It appeared they would need slow and careful instruction in the art of communication. Ah well, the scones were far off but my Magdalen was near. I ceased my efforts after one more eloquent sniff, and laid my head back down to enjoy the comfort of belonging.

“I’ve never seen you like that, Aunt Hetty.” Magdalen smiled at Hetty. “The carter and his boy were practically bowing and

scraping at your lightest wish. What a terror you must have been among the beaus."

Hetty snorted, but the graceful little wave of her hand told me she was pleased. "One needs only to know how to treat them. A few compliments and 'if you please' to sweeten the labor, and most men will work their hearts out. And of course these short autumn days made them eager to have done and get back to the pub before dark."

"Not to mention a few coins?"

Magdalen had heard that? I was impressed. So few humans knew how to use their ears.

"I already paid them amply for the trip here, Aunt Hetty. You should keep your remaining money for yourself."

"Why should I not make things a bit easier for you where I can? There is little enough help I can give you with this gout of mine, let alone repay you for your kindness after my Romney died—"

"Please, Aunt Hetty, let us speak no more of repayment." Magdalen laid her hand over her aunt's where it rested on the mantel. "It is you who are doing me the kindness, by sharing my exile."

"As if I would allow a young woman to go off by herself, let alone my own niece."

"There are many who will tar you with my disgrace, Aunt Hetty. Society may not be eager to take you back after your open support of me, especially after what Father is accused of. And your own fortune lost, as well."

Hetty raised her chin. "The *Ton* should be so fortunate that I would wish to take *them* back."

"But had you not come away with me, Aunt Stella would have offered you a home. You would have been far more comfortable with her, I am certain."

Aunt Hetty held up her hand. "I will hear no more of this, Magdalen."

I flinched at the sudden gesture. My nostrils twitched, testing the air. Strange. Despite the sound of wrangling, these ladies did not smell angry. Concern I could detect, yes, even anxiety, but the whole was underlaid by the sweet scent of affection.

“I do not for a moment believe my brother stole the bank’s gold as he is accused of,” Magdalen’s aunt insisted. “Let alone disappear without so much as a word, leaving his only daughter and sister penniless, like the rest of the bank’s customers. Certainly my sister in law Ambrose would have taken great pleasure in ‘sheltering’ me to make a show of her charity, all the while exhibiting me to her friends as the source of endless gossip and speculation.”

Magdalen smiled crookedly as she sank into a chair near the hearth. “In truth, I’ll be glad of your company, at least until I become settled. And your memories.” Her forehead puckered. “How strange—no, nearly impossible, finding my father’s snuff-box, here, of all places. Yes he was traced this far, but to find such a small object in such a vast, wild space...”

You mean, to have me bring it to you.

As if she had caught my meaning, Magdalen trailed a soft hand over my head and down over my ears. She slid the velvety soft flaps between her gentle fingers, soothing us both.

“I do not remember it being engraved like that,” she mused. “If the box weren’t so completely unique, I would say it was merely a similar one, and not my father’s. But you’re certain it’s his?”

“Without a doubt.” Hetty glanced toward the kitchen door, where the splash of water and scratching of a twig broom across the stone floor showed the village women were still occupied with their cleaning. “I was there the day your mother gave it to your father. It was at his birthday dinner, and I confess I was surprised, because your mother did not approve your father’s taking of snuff. She explained that was why she

had had a snuffbox made up in the shape of a little coffin. It was to remind him, when she was not with him to do it, that the habit eventually brought partakers to a bad end. Your father roared with laughter and said if the habit was to be the death of him, at least he'd go out with style." The older lady stopped suddenly. "I'm sorry, my dear. How thoughtless of me."

Magdalen patted her aunt's arm. "Go on, Aunt Hetty. I know how much he treasured the snuff box because Mother gave it to him, but I've never heard this part of the story."

"Well, if you're sure?" Hetty looked askance at her niece, who nodded. "Your mother had just as lively a wit as your father. She insisted she had made a major investment in him by giving him a child—that's you, my dear—and she intended to see him live a long life so she would have a good return on her investment. At that, your father kissed her, right there at the table in front of all of us, and said he wished the bank's directors were half as shrewd as she. Then he promised he'd have a diamond set into the top to add to your mother's widow's portion."

Magdalen shared a sad smile with her aunt. "Instead it became her daughter's portion. Father never was the same after Mother died, was he?"

"That is true, I am sad to say. He was a different man after that. Lost without her." Hetty sighed deeply. "I wonder...No." She shook her head abruptly as if to push away the thought. "No man can change that much, in his essential nature."

After a glance toward the kitchen, she lowered her voice and gestured Magdalen to lean close. "Let us hear no more of my staying with you 'until you get settled.' Here in Mousehole with you is where I mean to stay until either we find your father, or we find a way to clear his name. I don't care what the evidence shows. The Henry Haven I knew was an honorable man. He deserves my faith."

Magdalen shook her head. "I did not realize you knew so

much of my plans. Had I known, I would never have agreed to your coming into Cornwall with me.”

“An old woman can go places and ask questions a young woman cannot.” Hetty harrumphed. “You need me.”

“No. It is too dangerous.” Magdalen’s voice was flat. “Mousehole is a small village. Someone—someones—must know what happened to Father. Major Abbey,” her lips twisted as if she had just bitten into something sour, “traced Father here. If he has not yet found Father or what became of him, it can only be that people have a reason for holding their tongues.”

Hetty held up one hand. “The free trade for one. Now that smuggling is considered an act of treason with a death sentence for those who are caught at it, no stranger asking questions is going to be welcomed. In fact, I shouldn’t be surprised if some of the free traders are seeking to profit from both sides. Their lives as fishermen are hard enough, and the blockades have driven up prices. One even hears stories of human cargo coming over from France, poor souls so desperate to escape the war and Napoleon’s excesses that they’ll allow themselves to be sealed into casks and be dropped overboard in the hopes of being hauled ashore in England before they suffocate or drown.”

Both women shivered a little. I closed my eyes too and said a prayer for those poor people in the casks. I could only hope I’d pulled them out quickly enough. Even though I had only helped in the work, I could not bear to think I could have contributed to other deaths.

“To say nothing of enemies of our nation, even the emperor’s spies that might enter England that way,” Hetty went on. “It may seem little more risk to a smuggler to die at the end of a noose accused of spying for France, than drown on a stormy crossing if one successful crossing means laying up ten seasons’ worth of coin.”

I rolled over onto my hip and listened attentively. Was this what my old master had discovered? Is that why the slender

man had killed him? And what was this 'noose' one could die from? I had worked alongside Merrick and the other men. Did that make me a traitor too?

Magdalen pushed out of her chair and began to pace. "I am no threat to any fisherman making a few extra shillings in the free trade, Aunt Hetty, or even running a few poor refugees and deserters past the blockades. All I want is to find my father, if he is still alive, and prove him innocent."

Hetty tapped over to the kitchen door and pushed it shut with the tip of her cane. "Those spies don't operate for their own amusement, but for masters, powerful ones, in the employ of kings." She laid her hand over Magdalen's where it rested on the mantel. "There's one more consideration that affects us directly. Your uncle Romney told me before he died, that a vicious new smuggling scheme had risen, running stolen gold from England to France. It is called guinea running, for the gold guineas that are transported. Napoleon himself has sanctioned it. The emperor is desperate for gold to pay his troops and to achieve his ultimate goal."

"To conquer England," Magdalen whispered. "Yes, from his work in the Alien Office, Uncle Romney would know this too well."

"We would be the jewel in Napoleon's imperial crown, and a rich land for him to drain dry." Hetty's expression was grim. "What do we really know about why your father was last seen here in the heart of smuggling country after he and the gold were discovered missing from London?"

Magdalen pursed her lips mulishly without answering.

Hetty squeezed Magdalen's hand. "I am not saying I believe your father had ill intentions. Remember, he is my own dear brother. But remember, Magdalen, your father is facing a charge of treason if he is found alive. Twenty five thousand pounds would pay for troops, cannons, ammunition and supplies, perhaps enough to wage a successful assault on

England. Treason is the same charge you could face, if you persist in this plan. To be in possession of his snuffbox, engraved that way, and with *that* inside..."

Magdalen pulled away from her aunt and crossed her arms tightly across her chest. I thought I saw the shimmer of tears in her eyes. "Father used to say it allowed him to carry a bit of my mother with him wherever he went," she said. "If it was he who altered it that way, that means the box had become doubly important to him. Something happened to him right here that caused him to lose it." She raised her chin. "I'm going to discover what, and why."

"Men have killed for far less than twenty five thousand pounds, never mind for the fate of entire nations. Add the risk of a traitor's death and you see what you're up against." Hetty held out her hands in appeal, but it seemed to me the older woman was resigned rather than angry. Perhaps this afternoon wasn't the first time Hetty had seen her niece wear that mulish expression.

Magdalen swallowed hard. "Even the risk of death is preferable to this not knowing. It haunts me more than the shame of the accusations. I have to know. But Aunt Hetty," Magdalen sucked in a shaky breath, "how will I bear the truth once I find it?"

"All the more reason for me to be here with you."

Magdalen released a sob and Hetty wrapped her in a tight embrace.

I wrapped my tail over my nose and curled deep into my blankets while I considered what I had heard and sensed.

CHAPTER 3



“*H*ere now, ma’am, miss, let me get them things out of yer way.”

Hetty released Magdalen as Mrs. Tregurtha, the newly arrived cook-housekeeper, entered with her tray.

What the Cornishwoman made of Magdalen’s tears, she kept to herself. But the curiosity in her eyes belied her stolid expression.

Best do something about that, I chuffed softly to my ladies. *I believe she’s one of the good ones, but unsatisfied curiosity could make you the center of the kind of attention you need to avoid if we’re to find the killer, and find out what happened to your father, and, I licked my lips anxiously, live to tell.* How to make my ladies understand?

“Gwynifer has the chambers aired and set to rights,” the squarely-built woman reported as she gathered the cups and plates, “and I’ve thrashed the kitchen into some sort of order. Though I’d as soon thrash that *grammersow* Merrick,” clack went the scone basket onto the tray, “as give him *yeghes da*, leaving the place looking like a sty and the larder empty for you ladies.”

“*Grammersow?*” Magdalen mouthed silently to her aunt.

Hetty raised her eyebrows in return.

Mrs. Tregurtha's rustic Cornish was not so different from the dialect used in my native Labrador. I easily understood the housekeeper meant she would rather beat Merrick, a louse in her opinion, than give him a fair greeting.

"Still and all, you got that Town feller to clean out the stable and shed," Mrs. Tregurtha added as she jockeyed the teapot into the center of the crowded tray. "I doubt he's often willing to lug furniture upstairs, let alone muck out a stable."

"Quite, Mrs. Tregurtha." Aunty Hetty folded the tea towel and passed it to the housekeeper. "Nevertheless he was willing to see reason. I was not about to have our furniture set atop soiled straw while we cleaned the house. As it is, there is still a faint but definite odor of the stable in this room."

"It's quite mysterious." Magdalen tapped her finger against her chin, eyes distant with thought.

"There is nothing mysterious about it." Hetty propped her hands on her knees and bent stiffly to shoot a keen look at the planked floor. "The carter or his lad must have tracked a bit of manure inside on their boots. Mrs. Tregurtha," Hetty instructed, "follow your nose. See if you can sniff it out."

I climbed to my feet. *I can help. Smelling things is my specialty.*

Magdalen shook her head. "I meant to say, it is mysterious to me that Mr. Merrick came all the way out here, stayed long enough to stable his horse yet did nothing to prepare the house for us."

She stepped aside as Mrs. Tregurtha narrowed her search toward the corner near the hearth where my blankets were set. She pulled her skirts aside and hunkered down. I was impressed. The woman was taking deep sniffs that would do a basset hound credit.

"I wonder if perhaps this had been Mr. Merrick's own home," Magdalen said. "I thought only of Lady Felicia's kindness when I accepted her offer of this cottage. I never considered she

might have removed someone else from their home to give it to us. I could understand if that person was not eager to prepare the fatted calf for us."

"Your ready sympathy does you credit, Magdalen dear," Hetty said, "but I doubt his circumstances could have been at all the same as ours."

"Lady Felicia? You ladies know 'er?" Mrs. Tregurtha looked up from her scenting.

Magdalen and Hetty exchanged quick glances. Hetty said, "My niece Magdalen's father Mr. Henry Haven was the chief comptroller of the Cavendish Bank. Lady Felicia Pascoe was one of the main trustees. He worked especially closely with Lady Felicia when she returned to this country from abroad and began taking active interest in the bank.

When Henry—" Hetty closed her eyes for a moment. "When my brother left us and the bank closed, Lady Felicia offered us a safe haven here in Mousehole."

I wrinkled my nose at the delicate aroma of deception wafting from Aunt Hetty. The older woman had avoided telling any outright lies but also ensured Mrs. Tregurtha would pass on the interesting news of her new employers' influential patron, despite their being in reduced circumstances and being an orphan and widow without support. That 'left us' had been masterful, indeed, worthy of any cat I had ever met.

Catching Mrs. Tregurtha's expression, I could tell she was sympathetic. Aunt Hetty's subterfuge would not stop the gossip in our small village, but it might put a more charitable spin to it. Perhaps Hetty had understood my caution about the housekeeper's curiosity after all? *I salute you, ma'am*. I sat up on my haunches to encourage her.

"Down, pup, no begging," Hetty said absently.

Or perhaps not. I sighed, disappointed but not surprised, and went back to hunting the source of the odor.

Mrs. Tregurtha put her hands to the small of her back and

straightened with a groan. "Aye, well, no need to fear Merrick was forced out of his own home, Miss Magdalen. Merrick has no more'n the clothes he stands up in, no matter how much he likes to lord it over the rest of us for being Sir Phillip's agent. Sir Phillip, that's Lady Felicia's brother, tha knows, who's been master here, or as good as. At least until Lady Felicia got it into her head to come home." Mrs. Tregurtha shook her head. "Merrick lodges over the stables at Kemyel Hall, that's the Pascoe estate, at Sir Phillip's pleasure."

Let us be fair, Mrs. Tregurtha. I paused in my search. *Merrick had a bit to crow about, in truth. He had done well for himself, if the sack of guineas in the bolt hole under the south corner of the stable at the Hall is anything to judge by. He even paid handsomely to have my collar specially made. Said I had earned it.*

"Well, no more than his clothes and that 'ound there."

"The dog has an owner, then?" Hetty's sharp gaze fell on me.

I rolled my eyes in reproach at Mrs. Tregurtha. *The less said on that matter, the better.*

The housekeeper frowned down at me as if she had caught my meaning. "Now that is an odd thing, come to think on it, your finding the dog and not his master. Mostly you see one, you see t'other."

I wagged my tail briefly to honor Mrs. Tregurtha's strike on the correct trail. *Precisely. Merrick should still be here. At least, what remains of Merrick.*

My nose had led me to the rough joints where the hearthstones met the plastered stone wall. Faint animal and mineral odors pooled in the crevices, faint and difficult to separate from their covering of coal dust and driftwood ash. I blew out hard and coughed once, trying to clear my nose and throat. My scenting abilities had not returned to their peak, not after I'd spent last night lying injured and wet in the October chill. Normally my breed are some of the best searchers in dogdom. This partial nose-blindness was frustrating.

Magdalen stood watching me. "What does Merrick call him?"

Mrs. Tregurtha cocked her head as she thought. "Now that you ask, I never heard him called anything but 'dog.' When Merrick came 'ome to Mousehole after his deepwater sailing days were over, he brought this'n with him. And not much more to show for all the years away, like most sailing men."

The housekeeper wiped her hands on her apron. "Took work managing the Kemyel lands for Sir Phillip. The two of them were a right pair, Lady Felicia's younger brother and Merrick. Seems like we only saw Sir Phillip when it was rent time, and Merrick mostly took his duties to heart only when it was time to collect the rents to deliver them to Sir Phillip so his lordship could go back to London and spend them. Most of the cottages are near falling apart. Almost as if the two of 'em were doing their best to discourage folks from living on this part of the coast. Not that Merrick was ever held to account for it, nor Sir Phillip neither, considering Lady Felicia's been living in Italy for so many years."

Carefully, slowly, I drew up another scant tendril of scent. Under the sting of the strong soap Gwynifer had used on the floor, I'd found the sharp trace of blood and fatty brain matter. But there was a teasing skein of that other odor too, complex and sharp. The smell-picture was murky and the images would not come.

I sat down, confused and embarrassed. *I cannot be sure.*

"What is it, boy?" Magdalen knelt beside me and laid a hand on my shoulder. "I do not see anything."

I rested my chin on her knee. *I know what I witnessed last night. And what is missing today. But it cannot be.* Had I not seen and scented death often enough in the hunting field or in the fishing nets to recognize it? When the vibrating thread of life force has been cut, there is a profound stillness that no living thing can manage. A dog is never wrong about these things. But

dead men do not rise and walk away from the scene of their death. I pressed against Magdalen and whined softly. *Something is wrong here. You must be very careful.*

Magdalen looked deep into my eyes. Something warm and sweet bloomed within me as we exchanged a long look. And I could see an answering warmth in my angel's eyes. Like a tiny seedling sprouting, something had been born between us.

Aunt Hetty hooked a footstool close with her cane and sat beside us. "I believe we have found the source of the smell."

I swept my ears forward. *You smell it too?*

"I had Gwynifer scrub the hearth first thing so you ladies could have your tea before the fire," Mrs. Tregurtha said. "Good lye soap you'll smell from that floor, naught else."

"I am afraid there is one more thing that remains to be washed." Hetty rapped the end of her cane on the floor. "Mrs. Tregurtha, get your washtub. This dog needs a bath."

'Bath'? I was not totally sure what that meant but from Hetty's rapping out of orders like a captain on his quarterdeck, I was very sure I did not want anything to do with one. I slung myself low and tried to creep away.

Magdalen raised her hand from my shoulder and gave fingertips a delicate sniff. "Oh dear. That sponging does not seem to have been sufficient, does it? I had thought to wait until tomorrow but the fire has warmed this room nicely. He'll feel better afterwards, won't he?"

The next hour made me give serious revision to my assessment of Merrick as 'not much of a master.' He, to his credit, had never done *this* to me. Though I locked all four legs rigid as broomsticks, the three ladies managed to trundle me into the tub. Magdalen whipped off my collar before I could protest.

My tribe was bred to brave the stormy seas off Canada's Labrador coast that gave us our name. Water is my second home. Sea water, river water, lake water, even scummy pond water.

Not perfumed bath water.

Though I must admit, it was a relief to be rid of the last of the dried mud from my skin without having to lick and bite it out over a period of days, with the peaty taste lingering on my tongue. Magdalen even crumbled some tangy herb in the water that rose in the steam and cleared the sticky fluid from my nose and helped me to breathe more easily.

After they let me out of the tub, Aunt Hetty sent Mrs. Tregurtha to retrieve a bottle from the older woman's chamber above stairs. She directed Magdalen to rub the rose-scented liquid into the wound over my ribs. It smarted fiercely and I could not help flinching, but I dotted my nose to Magdalen's cheek to apologize for moving and to tell her I understood she was helping me. Then I stared off resolutely as she and Hetty clipped the now softened hair and sponged away the rest of the festering matter. The lingering sting told me it would heal cleanly now.

All in all, nearly as effective as dog saliva.

Nonetheless, I wanted no repeats of this experience. Once they had dried me and wrapped me in warm sheets, I let my head droop over Magdalen's supporting arm. I looked up from under my brows and rounded my eyes into deep wells of long-suffering. It all gained me much caressing and 'poor darling's' and even kisses which I had not known since I had left my dam's side. Such affection can never be a bad thing, even if it takes just a bit of exaggeration to get it started.

It also gained me my name.

Magdalen was working the towel between my webbed toes. She ran her thumb across my rough, scarred pads then took my face in her hands. "You've been a wandering soul, haven't you? You've journeyed a long way on bare feet, just like a poor pilgrim."

My eyes drank her in. *But I'm home now, with you, wherever you go.*

“More ‘grim’ than ‘pilgrim,’ I should say, with that expression,” Hetty said, peering over Magdalen’s shoulder.

Magdalen cocked her head and studied me afresh. “Yes. There is something about those eyes. Deep and burnished as old gold refined by fire.” She cupped my chin in her hands. “Shall we name you ‘Pilgrim,’” she asked me, looking deep in my eyes, “and call you ‘Grim’ for short?”

‘Grim.’ My heart-name. A dog never forgets who gives him that. I thumped my tail, just once, firm and certain, to seal it.

“Grim, you are then, Grim Haven in full.” Meredyth touched her forehead to mine. “Though I pray our family name may prove more of a haven for you, than it has been for us recently.”

Hands on her hips, Hetty stared down at me. “It might be a good thing to have a big dog about the place, as lonely and set apart from everything as this house is.”

“Mrs. Tregurtha said Merrick always has Grim with him,” Magdalen shifted on her knees to look up at her aunt. “And that he brought the dog home with him on his last voyage as a prized possession. How do I convince him to let us keep Grim? I doubt Merrick would sell him to us, even if I could afford the price he would likely name.”

I laid a paw on Magdalen’s wrist. *That much is true. For all his roughness, Merrick bragged on me, or at least on the money I brought him.*

“Oh, I think we can prevail upon Mr. Merrick to accept a reasonable offer for the dog,” Aunt Hetty said, “rather than have us complain to Lady Felicia of your money he’s absconded with.” The older woman paused until we could hear Mrs. Tregurtha’s tuneless humming cut off by the closing of the kitchen door behind her.

With a tilt of her head toward Magdalen’s pelisse hanging from a peg near the door, Henry Haven’s snuff box concealed in its pocket, Aunt Hetty said, “Then there’s your father’s snuff box. Odd it should be Merrick’s dog who had it.”

Magdalen nodded pensively as she ran the soft flaps of my ears through her fingers. "The few things we've discovered so far have just made things murkier, instead of clearer. If Mr. Merrick is somehow involved with Father, that cannot bode well," she said reluctantly. "If Mr. Merrick is involved in smuggling, or the disappearance of Father and the gold, and discovers what I'm doing here, he could simply 'forget' the rent and supply money I already paid, and throw us out. That would stop my investigation, or at least make it extremely difficult." Her hands stilled on my head. "And of course any suspicions we raise against him, he could turn around and use against Father, and against us as well."

I pressed my ear against her palm and groaned a little in pleasure. *Right there. That's the spot. Don't stop.*

Hetty made a tutting sound. "I doubt he will try anything of the kind, lest we enlighten Lady Felicia. I imagine she would object most strongly to being publicly linked to Merrick's less savory activities. And there's her brother Sir Phillip. He has had charge of the estate all the time Lady Felicia has been in Italy. From what Mrs. Tregurtha told us, he's been a lax landlord at best, and possibly countenanced criminal activities on the family estate. What would Lady Felicia do, I wonder, if she learned the full extent of their activities? No, something tells me Mr. Merrick will say nothing at all about us to Lady Felicia, or to anyone else."

I shivered and licked my lips. *If only you knew, Aunt Hetty.*

CHAPTER 4



The household went to bed after an early dinner, tired from their work setting the cottage to rights. I dozed restlessly beside the banked fire. Even though my tummy was full of lamb and bread and gravy, I was too stiff to curl myself into the usual comfortable ball.

I call it 'grim' indeed, if they propose keeping a dog in my house.

The voice floated down from the shadows pooled atop the massive oak wardrobe in the corner.

Who is there? I growled.

Do at least try to keep any more of the humans from killing each other here, the voice drawled. It disturbs the mice.

Who are you? I challenged him.

I am the holder of this place.

I snorted. *Not holding onto much if that was the habitual condition in which you leave it.*

A furry feline face hung over the edge of the wardrobe. *It suited me just the way it was. Snug roof to keep out the rain, chink in the wall to let in the mice, fish in the stream, a few trees to climb. A white-tipped tail twitched into view. And no humans or their dogs.*

Arrogance is the common language of felines the world over.

Still, they are inveterate spies and can usually be counted on to know exactly who did what to whom, and how. Magdalen would need all my help to solve the mystery of her father's disappearance, and I could use this fellow's observations myself in my own quest to bring Merrick's killer to justice. It would be worth my while to cultivate this fellow.

Well, we are here now. My name is—

'Pilgrim,' yes, I heard. 'Grim' for short. Really, the silly names people give to animals. Especially dogs.

Reminding myself of how much this chap might tell me if he was so inclined, I kept my response polite. *And what is your name, may I ask?*

You may. A large orange and white cat made two heavy thumps as he descended from the wardrobe to the back of a wing chair to the floor. He had a round belly like a furry ball, and a wide face with plump tomcat cheeks. *Cheddar*, he said, sitting up very straight in front of me. *They call me Cheddar.*

Surname of Stilton, perhaps?

The cat narrowed his eyes into suspicious slits. *I do not take your meaning.*

Your name. A nod to your appreciation of the arts of the cheesemaker? Or just eating in general? I made a suggestive swipe of tongue across my chops to underscore my jest.

What exactly are you trying to say?

Cats have absolutely no sense of humor when it comes to laughing at themselves, I reminded myself. *I apologize. I suppose I'm still a bit muzzy headed from the wound, or perhaps it's the herbs in my bath.*

I saw. His pupils flared into black moons. *It looked like torture. Frankly, I preferred what you smelled like before.* He lifted his upper lip from his teeth and wrinkled his nose in an open-mouthed taste of the eddying odors. *Now you smell like roses and—is that lavender?* He made that snuffling that passes for laughter among the cat-kind. *They should have christened you 'Flower' instead.*

I yawned to show I appreciated his point. *You know how limited their senses are. This will wear off soon enough. I'll try to find something to roll in, to get my proper aroma back.*

Yes, do.

I relaxed onto my brisket and settled my chin on my outstretched forelegs. *You sound like a very observant cat, I began.*

Of course. His voice burred with a satisfied purr. *It is how I make my living.*

Were you here last night?

His whiskers stiffened like quivering wires. *Why do you want to know?*

I folded my ears back and rounded my eyes into an expression of innocence. *You heard what they said this afternoon. Of Merrick. He was my old master. We came here last night to meet someone.*

I know. I told you, this is my home. Nothing happens here I do not know of.

I rubbed my muzzle along my foreleg while I marshalled my patience. *Then you saw the other one, the smaller man, kill Merrick. But now Merrick's body is gone. And no one from the village seems to know Merrick is dead, or even missing. Do you know who killer is?*

If I do, and I tell you, then you'll just bring more people here. They'll make their usual human ruckus and I'll have to leave. Cheddar stood.

The killer will be brought to justice.

Human justice? What is that to me? The cat hoisted his tail like a flagpole and stalked away, fluffy hindquarters quivering in disdain.

Finding the killer will stop more trouble from happening here, I called after him. You'll have the peace you crave.

In an elaborate charade of being unaffected by my words, Cheddar dipped his head to a scent path. I could have told him it was three days old and belonged to the youngest-but-one mouse pup in the nest behind the firebox, a sleek quick young-

ster who would outrun Cheddar every time. Not that any cat will admit my nose is superior to his own. But I kept all those details to myself. I needed to remain on this fellow's good side. So I climbed from my blankets and strolled after him to keep the conversation going. *Finding the killer will protect your home.*

Cheddar stopped his scenting and narrowed his eyes at me. *As long as the law stays clear of this house and leaves the free traders alone, everything will be fine. That is what happened to the other one. Man poked his nose in where it didn't belong and got killed for his trouble.* One of his ears twitched. Cheddar scratched at it with a hind foot. *Though no one seems to know about that death, either.*

'The other one?' Someone else had been killed here before Merrick? My heart sank for what that might mean to Magdalen.

Cheddar paused in his scratching, his hind foot sticking up behind his head like a third ear as he made a silent mewl of distaste. *Killer drew out his saber all of a sudden and cut the other man down from behind. Later that body too just—went away.*

That is exactly what happened to Merrick.

Uh huh. Cheddar chewed at one of his hind claws. *And that was before that master of yours came back here one other night and poked around some more. He spat out the old claw sheath. So many men coming and going, kept the mice inside the walls for days. I'm glad they're gone and I'm not going to question my good fortune about what took them away.*

My stomach roiled as I considered what the cat had said. I had to lick the drool from my lips before I spoke again. *That means you're a witness to two murders.*

'Witness?' Cheddar's pupils dilated, the black nearly eclipsing the gold irises. *I never used that word.*

I said nothing, letting him consider how he had revealed himself. Cheddar made an elaborate show of licking the side of a forepaw and rubbing it over his face. He was playing for time, I knew, working off his chagrin at being bested in wordplay by a dog.

I eased onto my right hip so my left side with its bullet gash was uppermost. *The killer shot at me last night. He tried to murder me because I saw him kill my master.*

Cheddar paused in his washing, a pink sliver of tongue showing between his front teeth.

I pressed my advantage. *If he knew you had seen both murders, he would want to kill you, too.*

Cheddar stared at me without blinking. Then he pulled his tongue back between his teeth with a little zip. His muzzle rounded into a fanged grin. *You had me going for a moment. You're quite amusing, for a dog.* He settled onto his chest, bundling himself into a compact form like a furry loaf of bread. *True, a man might fear that a dog would lead others to evidence of his crime. Your kind lavish so much time and attention on the humans, you have nearly succeeded in training them to understand you. But a cat?*

Cheddar blinked slowly, his eyes worldly wise. *Most people simply ignore my race. Almost none suspect we know everything they do, and much of what they think. We felines like it that way. Life would be far too dangerous for us if the humans knew otherwise. Anything that brings attention to my house and what has happened here puts my life in danger. I have no incentive to tell you more.* His tail undulated back and forth. *The less I tell you, the safer I shall be and the sooner I shall have my house back as I like it.*

He was right. I had nothing to offer him that was worth more than his present anonymity. To the killer, Cheddar was invisible—thus safe. I closed my eyes in misery.

Take heart, Cheddar purred. You reason quite well, for a dog. I am certain you will devise a way to keep your ladies safe. Just do not let them go exploring in the attic, or gathering sloes in that patch of blackthorn on the far side of the pasture near the coast road. Especially at the new moon when the night is darkest.

I snorted. *What do you think these women are, mice? Why should they poke about in a dusty attic, or wander about in a patch of dry trees, especially on the darkest night of the month?*

So many questions. Cheddar's whiskers swept back and his eyes squeezed nearly shut as he yawned hugely. His canines glittered in the banked firelight like needles before he closed his jaws with a little snap. Remember it is supposed to be we cats the humans say are killed by our curiosity, he said. But all right, I shall give you the answer to one of your questions. That first man, he died on the night of the full moon. Killer caught him coming down the attic stairs carrying something in his hand. Struck him down with his sword.

What could he have found in an old cottage that men would kill for?

For the first time, Cheddar looked frightened. The white tip of his tail jerked in nervous twitches. *I'm not superstitious, you understand. But there are some things I've seen lately, and heard, from up there—His head turned toward the tall oak wardrobe, then he popped to his feet. Can't spend all night explaining things to you. I find I have a sudden hunger for a midnight snack. There's a gull's nest I've been saving for just such a time. Just find a way to keep the women behind locked doors at night and out of trouble by day, for the time they're here.*

I chuffed softly. Cheddar, a moment please, before you go.

Well?

You seem to know a fair bit about smuggling.

You mean, the free trade? Not as much as you do, I imagine. He looked me up and down with his golden eyes.

I let that pass. What a good dog does in obedience to his master makes the deed clean.

If I were to guess, Cheddar continued, I would say your Merrick brought you home with him precisely for smuggling. Strong dog like you, that thick coat and tail like a rudder. You were bred for pulling heavy things out of the sea, weren't you, whether fishermen's nets and dropped fish, or bales and barrels of contraband goods?

I gave a few slow licks to my flank. I earn my living as my people direct.

Yes. That is what I knew you would say. His lips curled in smug feline satisfaction.

I hauled myself to my feet and looked down at him. Then you will also know I am telling the truth when I say that if the law learns of what has been going on here at Lanthorne Cottage, they'll likely tear the place down. Did you not hear what Magdalen's aunt told us? This is no longer just smuggling brandy and lace to avoid the high tax. We are at war with France. Now smugglers are called spies, and their cargo is something called 'treason.' The humans will kill any spies they catch and tear down their haunts to stop it. Including your Lanthorne Cottage here.

Tear down my home? Cheddar threw up a paw, claws flexed and red-tipped in the firelight.

I made two slow, emphatic thumps of the floor with my tail.

Cheddar's tail fluffed out like a bottle brush. That would be sheer, cruel vandalism. I'll scratch out the eyes of the first person who dares lay a hand on even one stone of my home.

You'll be starting with the new Coastguard commander, then. I flicked my tongue over my nose in a way I hoped the cat would ignore, but I was in deadly earnest. I wanted to be able to pick up every scented nuance of my companion's reaction. He seems quite driven to stamp out the smuggling. Just let him catch wind of these murders... Remind me of his name, Cheddar? I'm sure you're well informed about local news.

Abbey, Cheddar spat. Major Felix Abbey.

'Abbey,' ah, yes that's the name.

Cheddar plopped down, threw a hind leg in the air and began to groom the base of his tail in what I knew was an effort to vent his frustration.

This Major Abbey would not consider tearing down Lanthorne Cottage to be vandalism, I said. From what we've both seen, this cottage is a hotbed of criminal activity. And now my ladies have become involved. They might be in danger too.

I could smell the sharp tang of nervous sweat bloom from

the cat's pads. But he was not going to throw in his lot with me so easily. *Coastguardsmen come and coastguardsmen go. Sometimes they go in a pine box.* His expression was smug. *Lady Felicia is the landowner. Lanthorne stands until she says otherwise. As for your ladies, they're nice enough. I wouldn't mind the occasional soft lap to nap in. But better for all of us they leave this place, the sooner the better.*

I pushed a bit harder. *With two murders connected to this place...* I paused for a bit of contemplative grooming of my own, watching Cheddar sidelong as I nibbled a clean edge onto my broken dewclaw. *Tearing the place down really would be the prudent thing to do. Even Lady Felicia would have to go along with Major Abbey's recommendation or risk some ugly questions herself. Treason brings scandal and ruin. It might even bring death. Think Lady Felicia would trade her entire estate for one tiny, tumbledown cottage?*

Hah! Two murders my freckled left forepaw pad, Cheddar crowed. You have to prove they happened first, and you have no bodies. No one knew the first man was here or who he was, and any humans who've noticed Merrick is missing just think he went off on a drunken toot. We're the only witnesses and we don't count. As far as the humans are concerned, there've been no murders at all.

Oh really? You do not think I can lead the humans toward what happened? That Major Abbey sounds like he is already hard on the trail. I extended my hind legs straight out behind me, enjoying the stretch of the muscles in my hips and the cool floorboards against my belly. I crossed my front paws, right over left, taking my time so Cheddar could mull over my words.

I have something of a reputation in the village, I resumed. People will pay attention to me. A few head tilts and mournful looks, a bit of scratching at Merrick's belongings and a low howl before I take off in this direction... I'll soon have them trailing after me. Add in the occasional 'are you still following me?' look back over my shoulder, and even the slowest-witted humans cannot fail to understand. Don't

forget, Magdalen is here to find out what became of her father. She'll be quick to pick up any clues. I'll see to it.

The cat's face split in a fang-baring hiss. *Enough already, you've made your point, you—you—dog.*

It took all my willpower to keep my tail from thumping the floor. This was not the time to inflame the feline's prickly pride. He was wrong about at least two things already—I was fairly certain I knew who the first victim was, and poor Magdalen suspected her father had visited Lanthorne Cottage recently. With me to guide her, my mistress would catch the trail quickly. *Do we have an agreement then?* I asked the cat. *We will work together to find out who killed Merrick, and the first man, and why?*

Cheddar was not easily bested. *I work alone*, he said. *Always have. Besides, even if there is something to what you say, Lady Felicia is a canny one. My mate and our two kittens from our spring litter live in Kemyel's stables and they tell me all the news. Lady Felicia is unlikely to give away or destroy anything she has a use for or can squeeze a profit from, including one small, delightfully run down cottage. The word is, she came home to manage things herself because the estate was no longer supporting her as it used to. She'll have quite the task to rebuild her fortune from how her brother Phillip and your Merrick have left things. Perform all the tricks you like but you have no bodies to show them. It may well be your precious Major Abbey who will have to bow to Lady Felicia's preference and leave my home standing.*

I winced a little as I used my hind foot to scratch around inside my ear. It tweaked my wounded flank, but the pain sharpened my attention while I framed a response. Cheddar certainly had a firm understanding of the realities of the case, and the practicalities of rank.

But I knew what I had seen and scented. I feared—no, *I knew*—this killer would not stop at two. I dropped my foot and fixed the cat with my eyes. *Cheddar, how often do you kill?*

What? Why? His pupils flared. My question had excited him. I hoped it had also raised his curiosity.

Cats are the great predators in our world. I pressed my advantage. Even if you have caretakers who feed you, the catkind still kill, do they not?

Of course. It is our nature. We kill to eat, to teach and protect our young, and sometimes we kill to refine our art. His eyes closed in a slow blink. *It is the essence of Cat.*

Precisely.

Cheddar's eyebrow whiskers bristled. *Precisely what does your precisely mean?*

When humans kill, that is the rare exception for them, not the rule, yes?

Yesss... He drew the word out as he watched me closely.

Even in times of war, I explained, when their leaders give them license to do it, killing takes a great toll on humans. I have seen it. The humans are delicate in their essential nature. The Creator made us strong, to protect and shelter humans from that reality. But this killer has struck twice, that we know of. This killer was not killing to feed himself or protect his young. He was not striking back at an attacker.

Cheddar's ears tilted back against his head. *You mean, the killer had no reason for killing? He just killed, like a fish just—swims?*

No, I mean he killed for a reason, but that reason was only secondary. For how many of our lifetimes have the free traders worked this area without needing to kill to resolve their issues? Like among us, a sharp demonstration of strength and will is usually enough to show which dog—or tom or man—is the stronger and should have first place.

True. Cheddar sat up, keen to explain. *Actually we toms work quite hard to avoid battle. Too great a risk of laming oneself, losing an eye... Then you starve and die slowly because you can no longer hunt well. Or worse! The queens won't walk out with you under the full moon. And you know what that means!* His tail began to lash.

Er, yes. Well. What I meant is that this human is different than the

ones we're used to. What we know of the humankind many not apply. This man killed not because he had to, but because he chose to. We don't know his reasons. That means he will be difficult to hunt down.

Well now you are just philosophizing. You have spent too much time around humankind. Next you will say you wish to learn to read. Cheddar was so amused, he sneezed.

Learn to read? For just a moment a bright vision danced before my eyes. The things I could learn, the questions that would finally be answered... I shook my head, letting my ears flap against the sides of my face to bring me back to my senses. I needed to concentrate on convincing Cheddar to help me, not become lost in my dreams.

Cheddar, listen. If this killer has struck twice, why not a third time, or even more? Once humans taste blood, they develop a taste for it. It becomes easier for them to kill again. We all know that. They do not understand that the wanton killer must himself die, oftimes sooner and harder than his prey.

That is true. Cheddar nodded. *So why not just wait and allow nature to take its course? Sooner or later this killer will reveal himself to his own kind. Let them deal with their own.*

He did have a point. Why was I so intent on poking my canine snout into decidedly human affairs? Then I recalled that deep, long look I had shared with Magdalen, and the memory caused a little burst of that soul-deep warmth. For that feeling, and the mistress who had caused it to bloom, I would do anything.

Even attempt to catch a human killer and solve the mystery of her missing father.

A new strategy was needed if I was to make the cat my ally. I eyed Cheddar's round bellied silhouette as he washed himself in the light of the banked embers. *Cheddar, think of all those people tramping in and out of here. Major Abbey and his men, constables and the like. Long hours of searching inside and out, working up a hunger, Mrs. Tregurtha serving them a hearty tea or supper...*

And dropping crumbs for my mice and perhaps leaving scraps behind for me? Cheddar's purr made his plump tummy vibrate. *You made Major Abbey's investigation sound like it would be a bad thing. Now I'm beginning to reconsider.*

I slid him a sidelong glance, not daring to turn my head and let him read my strategy in my face. *No free trader ever left you a bit of roast lamb like I had for my supper tonight. The delicious crusty part from the end, and the chewy tendon around the bone, and rich gravy besides.* I did not have to feign a drool at the memory.

Roast lamb? Cheddar's whiskers twitched. *I took myself off on a hunt when you all arrived like some traveling fair. The humans may waltz in and out of my home without so much as a 'by your leave,' but I greet them, or not, at my pleasure.*

I rubbed my muzzle along my foreleg to hide my smile. *Shall I tell you what remains in the food hamper for the morning? Or perhaps it is better you do not know. If one of the ladies is the killer's next victim, or if they are arrested and taken off by Major Abbey, they will leave and their food will leave with them. But you will still have your cottage. Doubtless the free traders would stay away too, those that escaped Major Abbey. But that will be no loss for you, Cheddar. Lanthorne Cottage will return to being the cold, drafty, moldy shelter you're used to. No bright fire, no fluffy pillows, no crumbs and garbage to tempt out the mice and make them fat and slow and tasty...* I slid my eyes toward him to gauge his reaction, *and no roast lamb.*

You've made your point. Cheddar's eyes had narrowed into annoyed slits. *You are like a kitten with a half-dead mouse. Finish your attack and be done with it.*

Very well. I raised my head proudly and erected my ears, at least as much as my soft ear flaps could go, and stretched my forepaws out straight before me like a picture of a wolf I once saw on a coat of arms. *I tell you now, I will do everything I can to help and protect my ladies, and bring justice to my old master. That means uncovering the killer and his crimes, and making them known*

to the humans before anyone else dies. Will you at least ask the other cats what they know or suspect and pass it along to me? Anything at all may help. Especially your family at Lady Felicia's estate. What did you say their names were?

I didn't. Cheddar shifted uneasily.

A little pawprint of sweat dotted the floor where Cheddar's paw had rested. Another path to the cat's cooperation dawned. It was more, well, devious, more cat-like than I preferred, but I pushed my qualms aside. I must not fail in my duty this time. And if we succeeded, Cheddar and his family would also be the safer for it.

I lowered my head and nosed deliberately at the wound in my side. *This killer may not be as ignorant of what we animals see and know as you believe,* I said. *You are gambling that belonging to the Catkind allows you to pass unseen, unrecognized, unregarded. Will you risk the lives of your mate and your kits in the same gamble?*

Enough! Cheddar's mouth opened wide in a low hiss, his eyes squeezed into angry slits. *It is supposed to be my people who are killed by too much curiosity. But you seem determined to follow suit. Why can't you just let things be? Protect your ladies, by all means. Do dog things, bark at strangers, bite intruders. But this poking your snout into the doings of the humans, finding the killer and making him known to the other humans, it's not natural. It's not Animal. You're right that I trust to being unknown and keeping my secrets. What will you gain by acting so openly?*

It was a fair question. Could I tell him I sought to regain my self-respect, my pride as a dog? Even if he understand that, and he might, for I'd gathered that Cheddar was a cat of character, could I expect him to accept the other reason driving me? I scarcely understood it myself, thought it had been growing from the moment I met Magdalen and Aunt Hetty.

I wanted justice, for them and for me. The killer had taken my dogly duty and despoiled it. And he had done something similar to Henry Haven and his family, twisting the love and joy

my ladies remembered and bringing grief and shame in its place. That was why I would hunt this killer down. So we could have ourselves back once more, our honor and our lives, whole and true.

Cheddar's purr brought me back to the present with a start. He was sitting tall and straight, tail wrapped snug around himself, vibrating with the strength of the sound. He was watching me through half closed eyes.

Why are you purring? I asked him.

You looked like you needed it. Where did you go?

I stood up and shook myself to chase away my dark thoughts. When I sat down again I had my emotions under better control. *Cheddar, you asked why I cannot let this go. This killer has a canker in his soul that can only be soothed by killing. It is not just what he does, it is who he is. That is wrong, and bad for everyone, furbearers and humans alike.*

And you know this—how?

I just know.

Hmmph. It seems I am not the only one who keeps secrets. Cheddar yawned, then stretched, arching his back like a bow. *Just be sure your secrets don't drag those humans you love so much down to their deaths with you. And the rest of us too.*

With a preparatory wriggling of his haunches and a grunt of effort, Cheddar jumped to the back of the wingback chair, then up to the top of the tall oak wardrobe.

I returned to my blankets and rested my chin on my paws. Cheddar's warning made good sense. But I sensed deep in my bones that Magdalen would not let things rest. Ignorance would not be bliss, it would be ammunition in the hands of the killer until the moment he struck at Magdalen to stop her.

The fluffy orange face stared down at me from high atop the wardrobe. *I will ask around. For the sake of my kits and mate. And for the roast lamb!* Cheddar flashed a toothy grin, then he disappeared into the shadows as if he had never been there.

CHAPTER 5



I should have been asleep moments after Cheddar left. I doubt I would even have produced a snore—not that I truly believe Merrick’s claim that I snore. That is a canard he used to cover his own ear-rending night noises—and from both ends, may I add—but surely I could be excused some small sound or two, so tired and sore was I from the events of the past days and night.

Instead I lay awake, my unquiet mind chewing over what Cheddar had told me. There were too many murders, too few bodies in this matter, and no clear trail to follow. Well enough for me to philosophize about killing being part of the evildoer’s nature. But even snakes, those mindless biting machines, have rudimentary reasons for striking this and not that. Otherwise they’d strike a rock or tree, spend themselves and die. So there was a reason, at least to the killer’s way of thinking, to kill these men, at this time, at this place. The deaths fitted into his plan, brought some goal closer. I had to flush out that reason so I could trail the killer to his lair. And I had to do it soon. Magdalen and Hetty thought they were tracking the missing Henry Haven, but I feared they were unknowingly on the trail

of the killer. They would be certain to bring themselves to the killer's attention very soon.

I shifted again, but the blankets were lumpy beneath me and I could not find a comfortable position. Worry and guilt niggled at the back of my mind and would not let me rest. I got up to scratch the soft material into place. At the first pass of my claws over the pile, a puff of fragrance rose. A scent picture filled my mind and I knew what I had left unfinished tonight.

Each step of the narrow staircase loomed as tall as the seafront cliff outside our front door. The gash in my side protested at each one. Half way up, my legs began to tremble. Once I missed a step and had to bite my tongue to silence my cry.

Three doors led off the landing, all shut against me. I tested the air seeping from beneath each. Powdery smells, as of old roses and dry spice: Aunt Hetty was asleep in the north-facing chamber. The middle door spoke of dry wood and mouse droppings. These were the stairs to the attic. Cheddar would have to get to work on that problem. I looked forward to telling him.

The door of the south chamber whispered of green herbs and lavender. Bracing but sweet. Magdalen's scent. The oak planks were cool and hard, without so much as a rag rug to curl myself upon, but with my nose pressed to the space beneath her door, I was warmed by Magdalen's scent. I was serving my purpose once more, barring my mistress's door against the terrors that come by night. Knowing that my nose and ears would always remain alert, I could finally relax. Sleep came quickly.

"GOOD GRACIOUS, WHAT IS THIS?"

Even before I was fully awake my tail thumped an emphatic 'good morning.' I smiled up at Magdalen. *Your door was closed. This was as close as I could get to you last night.*

“Poor Grim.” Magdalen caressed my head. “Were you not comfortable in your bed?”

We should talk about the sleeping arrangements. You will be safer with me guarding you from inside your chamber.

“I hope you did not take a chill from sleeping on these cold boards. That could not have been comfortable.”

I turned my muzzle into her hand. *My comfort is in being near you.*

Her hands sleeked down my side, gently at first then more firmly along the wound on my flank and the area all around. “This is healing very well.”

I laid my paw on her wrist. *You should pet me a bit longer. Just to be very, very sure.*

“Sleeping on the cold boards does not seem to have done you any harm. This time. Nevertheless, I will be more comfortable if you use the warm bed we made for you beside the hearth.”

I rounded my eyes into pools of emotion. *We'll both be more comfortable, Mother, if I sleep in your chamber with you. You can trust me on this.* I flicked my gaze toward her chamber door, back up at Magdalen, then toward the door again.

Magdalen tousled my ears with a laugh and stood. “You are a very shrewd pup, Grim. Unfortunately, I am not easily led.”

Not to worry, Mother. I have enough patience to teach you.

“Magdalen, whom are you speaking to?” Hetty stood in the open door of her chamber.

I greeted the older woman with a soft, gentlemanly panting.

“Grim spent the night outside my door.”

“Just as I told you, dear.” Aunt Hetty bent stiffly and peered into my face. “A big dog like this belongs outside. Otherwise he'll take advantage, and the next you know he'll be tracking muddy footprints inside and sleeping on your bed.”

I would never track mud inside. All I ask is to be close enough to

protect you. Both of you. I kept my unblinking gaze on Hetty's face while I slowly toppled over onto my side at her feet.

She frowned down at me. "Perhaps if he was smaller. A pug, perhaps, more of a lap dog."

I am much more entertaining than any lap dog. I rolled onto my back. Humans rarely could resist the invitation to rub my tummy. I gave a little squirm. *See?*

Magdalen slid a sideways look at her aunt.

Hetty's lips twitched.

I tipped my head back until my lips were caught up on my fangs in a toothy smile, just as the humans give to each other. *You are powerless to resist my charm, Aunt Hetty. We both know it. Just admit it.*

"Admit it, Aunt Hetty, he's irresistible."

Well done, Magdalen. I tipped my head so she too could enjoy my smile.

Aunt Hetty sighed as if put upon, but I was at the perfect angle to see the little quirk of her lips that told me she was repressing a smile. "Never seen anyone work so hard to make his point." She gave my brisket a gentle stroke with her slippered toe. "Very well, Pilgrim, you have carried your point. We can try—" she raised an admonishing finger, "I said *try* letting you sleep in Magdalen's chamber."

I leapt to my feet and capered with relief. Training these women to see their best interest was hard work. I'd need a large breakfast to restore my strength. Perhaps two breakfasts.

I made a hurried visit outside, and returned to the dining room just in time to hear Aunt Hetty conclude, "—town to arrange for the milk and coal and wood to be delivered."

I took up my place at Magdalen's left side, demonstrating my manners by sitting very upright and still. Meals were serious business and required the utmost decorum.

Magdalen poured their tea. "I wonder what Mrs. Tregurtha was able to do with the food remaining in our traveling basket?"

Let us see. I snuffed the air. *There's more tea, of course, and toasted bread of some kind, I make it the leftover scones? And something sharp—let me double check—I blew out sharply to take in more of the intriguing scent—yes, orange marmalade. Oh, and lovely butter, and something meaty and sweet.* I flicked my tongue over my nose to catch every atom of scent. *I believe it's ham.*

You believe correctly, Cheddar called from the hearth. He was washing his face before the newly made up fire. Sitting on my blankets. And smelling to high heaven.

I stalked toward him. *You reek of ham.*

“Oh ho, now I see why the dog slept at your door. It appears that little cat tossed him out of his blankets,” Aunt Hetty laughed.

I threw her a reproachful glance over my shoulder. *Nobody tosses me out of my bed. Especially not a cat.*

Cheddar's giggles made his purr come in staccato bursts. *I like the old one. I am going to keep her.* He rose from the blankets—my blankets—and strolled past me toward the dining table.

I trailed after him, nostrils twitching. *Why do you smell like ham?*

Why do you think? The cook, Mrs. Treehouse, Mrs. Girdletrunk, it's something to do with—

Tregurtha.

Whatever. She cut off a simply enormous chunk for me. I've decided she can stay, too. He twined himself around Hetty's ankles, purr trilling, prancing and smiling into her face all the while.

I rubbed my muzzle along the floor. *Disgusting. No dog does that.*

He tipped me a look over his shoulder. *Did you not just grovel on the floor and show your belly?*

That was not groveling, it was training. One must encourage and reward the humans as they struggle to communicate.

Heavy footsteps interrupted. “Now, now, don't be snappish

with the puir cat because he got the jump on ye." Mrs. Tregurtha tossed a chunk of ham rind to me. "I kept a bit back for ye, too."

I would work on her priorities later.

MAGDALEN TUCKED a last chestnut curl beneath her bonnet and tied the green ribbons of her bonnet in a bow near her ear. She frowned at the image in looking glass in the hall tree beside the door. "Perhaps I should invest in a more sober wardrobe. At least more black. Even if I am not officially in mourning yet, likely the village will expect a more humble wardrobe from an old maid in reduced circumstances."

I reared up briefly on my hind legs and looked too. *I quite like the pheasant's feather in your bonnet. And those green earbobs that match your eyes.. Since your kind must make do without a perfect-for-all occasions fur coat like mine, might as well show a bit of flair.*

Magdalen's startled glance met mine before her hazel eyes crinkled into a smile that raised their warm green and gold lights. *Now that's the way to charm the village!* I gave her an encouraging pant.

She unlatched the door, pausing to call up the stairs. "I have the list made out, Aunt Hetty. Are you ready to leave?"

"I'll be in the cart by the time you've locked up the dog," Hetty's voice called down.

"Come, Grim." Magdalen turned in a circle then leaned out the door and looked around. "Grim?"

Here, Magdalen-angel, I chuffed from my position on the cart seat.

Magdalen hurried out and reached up a hand to me. "I'm sorry, my friend, it's best you stay here today. We have so much to do and I'll have no time to look after you."

I cocked my head. *You have matters exactly backwards. I am going in order to look after you.*

“Magdalen, why is that dog in the cart? I thought you were going to lock him in the stable. We’ve too much to accomplish today to be slowed down by having a dog underfoot.”

I rolled my eyes in the direction of her cane but politely refrained from any other reaction.

“Get down, dog.” Hetty reached up for my collar and tugged. It could never have been a contest, but I swayed a bit so she could feel she was accomplishing something.

Magdalen covered her little chirp of laughter with a diplomatic cough. “He seems quite intent on going, Aunt Hetty. As if he is used to riding in carts and going on errands.”

“Tis truth, Miss,” Mrs. Tregurtha spoke up from the back of the cart. “Went everywhere with Merrick, he did. Never heard he caused any harm.”

“Nevertheless, a dog’s first duty is to obey,” Hetty insisted. “This dog must learn who is master. We must start as we mean to go on.”

I am sorry to contradict you, Aunt Hetty, but a dog’s first duty is to protect his master. Or mistress, as the case may be. I panted softly to show I was not being disobedient but rather, expressing my informed opinion.

“We can leave him in the cart to watch our purchases. How would that be?” Magdalen offered.

Hetty released my collar and crossed her arms. “You’ll spoil the dog.”

“Mousehole’s a quiet place but hound’d keep any lads from filching an apple as they passed,” Mrs. Tregurtha supported Magdalen’s suggestion.

I grunted gently. *You’re a sensible woman, Aunt Hetty. Admit it, you need my help and protection.*

Hetty frowned heavily at me, then shook her head as if to clear it. She looked from Magdalen to Mrs. Tregurtha, then back to me. “Very well, but if he runs amok through the market

stalls or steals loaves from the bakeshop, do not say I did not warn you."

I rolled my eyes at her. *I have never 'run amok' in my life. Occasionally a bit of eloquent drooling earns me a sample. That is not stealing, that is a compliment to the baker's—or cheesemonger's or sausage maker's—skills.*

Magdalen helped her aunt climb up to the seat. I encouraged the elderly woman by nuzzling her ear. Hetty paused halfway up, looking pointedly at where I sat in the middle of the seat.

I dotted her cheek with my nose. *Not to worry, Aunt Hetty, there's room for you if we three all squeeze up a bit.*

Hetty's face reddened. I could smell her protests rising. Behind her, Magdalen turned her head away and began studying the roof of the cottage with great concentration. Ah well, perhaps I should be satisfied with a partial victory at this early stage of the older woman's training. I climbed over the back of the seat and into the bed of the cart, settling in beside Mrs. Tregurtha.

Magdalen clucked to Patch, the black and white cob, and we set off with a jerk and a jingle of harness. We bowled through the gate, across the little stream, then down the rutted track and onto the coast road. On the seat before me, Magdalen and Hetty chattered, pointing out one sight after another. I shifted to the left, then to the right. Something was not right.

"Oh go one with ye," Mrs. Tregurtha muttered. Her tone was gruff but her eyes were kind.

I wedged my head between the ladies' shoulders and rested my chin on the back of the seat. I took in a deep breath. Marsh grass, sea air, warm horse—and Magdalen.

"What's this now?" Hetty shifted to one side and craned her neck at me.

I kept my chin on the seatback but rolled my eyes upward to meet hers in the way that makes my eyebrows bob up and down. Humans seem to find this appeal difficult to withstand.

Patch flicked his ears back, alert to the sudden silence from the cart.

Hetty faced resolutely forward again. She did not speak to me again, but her hand rested comfortably on the top of my head for the rest of the ride into town.

We rounded the little spit of land which brought the village of Mousehole into sight and joined the tail end of the slow-moving line of other carts and wagons. It was market day. Patch slowed to a walk without Magdalen having to pull the reins. With the rest of the traffic, we followed the seafront Parade on its winding course around the first of the two breakwaters that protect Mousehole's little horseshoe harbor from the waves of Mount's Bay. I rose to my feet, rocking with the motion of the cart over the cobbles, savoring the stink of drying seaweed, tarry rigging, and warm sand.

With Mrs. Tregurtha directing, Magdalen finally found a bit of space for the cart on Duck Street, a few blocks up the hill from the harbor. My ladies clasped their cloaks against the breeze. Mrs. Tregurtha crossed the tails of her shawl across her bosom then tied them into a firm knot, and each lady slipped a marketing basket over an arm.

Magdalen slipped down from the seat and gave me a pat on the head. "We'll be back as soon as we can, Grim."

I am in no hurry. We can shop as long as you wish. I scrambled down from the cart and fell into step at Magdalen's side.

"Magdalen," Aunt Hetty called after us, "the dog is following you."

I'm not 'following,' Aunt Hetty, I'm heeling.

Magdalen shrugged. "He is probably used to going about with Merrick."

"His shadow, this'n was." Mrs. Tregurtha nodded at me.

"Would it really be so bad?" Magdalen smiled at Hetty. Her eyes were as pleading as any spaniel's I'd ever seen. "Let us just see how he does."

Hetty shook her head. "Farm dog, that's what he is, and where he belongs. A proper pet for a lady is something small and decorative and discreet."

I can be discreet. You'll never know I'm here. I gave a little whine, a discreet one, of course. Sometimes things just fall, or get knocked over. I've never quite figured out how it happens.

Hetty frowned as she resettled her bonnet firmly. "On your head be it, Magdalen, if he causes trouble. We need to make all the friends we can in this village."

It was a wearying day. I escorted my ladies in and out of the shops, sitting patiently as they introduced themselves to the merchants and set up accounts and deliveries. First to the coal dealer for the delivery of coal and wood, then to the livery for Patch's oats, hay and straw. There was a lengthy transaction at the drapers having to do with cushion covers and window lengths; I used the time to attend to a matter of personal grooming.

At the greengrocer, I viewed Mr. Gloyne's turnips and apples with equal parts dispassion and drowsiness. Perhaps I was growing faint from hunger? Breakfast had been ages ago, at least two hours. Fortunately, the butcher's shop was around the corner. It only took two times of leading my ladies to the corner and cocking my head for them to accept my suggestion. While Hetty quizzed Mr. Bolitho on the fatness of his joints and the leanness of his bacon, I exchanged pleasantries and a bit of drooling with Nessa, the butcher's daughter. That earned me a fat chunk of sausage. My drooling, of course, not Nessa's.

From there, it was mere steps to the cluster of market stalls set up along the beach beside the Parade. Mrs. Tregurtha conducted Magdalen and Hetty straight to her preferred cheesemonger and baker, while I took a winding route. I had many friends here, and I greeted them all. They would expect it, and I did not want anyone to feel slighted. Sated and sleepy

from handouts, I rejoined my ladies where they paused outside the bow window of The Mousehole Cat tea shop.

Capitol idea, ladies. I'll take a rest in the sun while you have your own meal.

"Will he be all right here, do you think?" Hetty asked.

Magdalen ran a hand over my head. "He's probably tired from all the errands. Doubtless he'll just sleep while we have our luncheon. He's still recovering from his wound."

I waved my tail slowly to show I did not really begrudge the women their shopping.

"Perhaps we should just call the meal 'tea,' as everyone does here," Hetty said, catching Magdalen's arm. "We're no longer living in the style to call it 'luncheon.' No sense having our new neighbors thinking we're giving ourselves airs."

Magdalen turned to her. "Do you mind, Aunt Hetty?"

"Mind?" Hetty patted Magdalen's arm. "No, child. Not for myself. If I've learned anything from living to this age, it's that I'll always be the same plain Hetty Haven Balfour whether I'm eating tea in Mousehole or luncheon in London. It's you I'm concerned about, and your future. You were bred for more than this."

I blinked back the sleepiness and raised my head.

Magdalen took a few steps farther along the pavement. She crossed her arms across her chest, hugging herself, looking along the curving street of yellow stone houses, their foundations in the sand, backs against the cliffs. "No matter what I may have been bred for, since what happened to Father, this is what I have."

I hurried over to her and leaned against her leg. *And now you have me.*

Sea birds wheeled overhead. In the tiny port, no bigger than a figurative mouse's hole the legend says gave the village its name, fishing boats lay at the end of their chains where the low tide had laid them on the wet sand. Waves rolling in from

Mount's Bay splashed in showy plumes against the low islet of St. Clement's, just a few yards off shore. The soft Cornish accent rose from a pair of passing shoppers, and laughter and friendly chaffering drifted up from the market stalls.

"It's beautiful here," Magdalen finally said. "I'm only sorry it took disgrace and reduced circumstances to find this place. If our new neighbors knew what my father did, they'd turn us away too. We'd be as much outcasts here as we were in London."

"What your father was *accused* of doing," Hetty said.

Magdalen pressed her lips together firmly and nodded, eyes bright with unshed tears.

"I miss him too, child," Hetty said softly.

I set my paw gently on Magdalen's foot. *Don't cry, Angel. No one will turn you away. Not if I have anything to say about it.*

Magdalen knelt and twined an arm around my neck.

"I want to feel at home again, Aunt Hetty, and I believe I'd like 'home' to be here, in Mousehole."

I brushed her face with my whiskers in the gentlest of kisses.

Magdalen laid her forehead to mine for a too-short moment. Then she sat back on her heels and straightened her bonnet, her motions brisk. "But we can't make a home for ourselves here," she said, "unless I can prove Father was innocent. This is where his trail ended."

Hetty helped Magdalen to her feet then kept her close by drawing Magdalen's arm through hers. "My dear, you are my niece, and the only daughter I'll ever have. I pray you remember that, because I am about to point out some very hard truths I'd like you to consider before you embark on your plan."

What was this? I tilted my head, squinting slightly to catch their every tiny movement, my ears and nose savoring every nuance of sound and scent.

Magdalen nodded, eyes wide.

"Your father was my brother and I loved him. He was a kind, gentle brother to me all our years together at home, and once he

left to make his way in the world, he was known as a man of character and intelligence. But he was *not* perfect.” Hetty nodded as Magdalen’s proud expression sobered. “He was imaginative and passionate. One might even say willful. Unusual qualities in a banker. Your mother steadied him. Her support allowed him to develop into a man of means and influence.”

Hetty pulled Magdalen into a slow stroll along the paving stones. “When he lost your mother, your father seemed to lose himself as well. At first Romney and I attributed it to grief. But Henry continued erratic as the months and then these last three years passed. He developed enthusiasms—for ideas, ventures, people, many of them questionable—some of them of a nature he would have rejected as unworthy before your mother died. He was desperately lonely, and try as we could to befriend him, to counsel him, introduce him to new friends of interest and character, your father just...drifted.”

Magdalen drew her aunt to a halt. “You are saying you believe my father did steal the gold because without my mother, he no longer had a reason to remain honest.” Her voice was carefully modulated, but to me its tightness betrayed her anguish.

“I am saying your father was vulnerable,” Hetty corrected her. “And vulnerable men can be manipulated into doing things far outside their usual character.”

“You know this because of Uncle Romney’s work with the Alien Office? Is that how he got people to spy for him? By manipulating desperate, vulnerable people?”

Hetty met Magdalen’s hot eyes unflinchingly. “I know this because I have lived in the world many, many years longer than you have, and have observed the men and women around me. The book of life has much to teach. I recommend it to you.” She smiled to soften the reprimand. “As for Romney’s work, yes, if the nation’s need for the information was serious enough, he leveraged men’s weaknesses against them. But most often, your

uncle, and our nation, was simply another paymaster in a long line, for men and women who would do anything for coin."

A thin smile flickered across Hetty's face. "Romney once said his best—but most dangerous—operatives were completely without allegiance to anything except themselves. He said it was like working in a hall of mirrors, never really knowing if the person you were dealing with was the real one, or an image of an image."

"Father's last letter to me said he had uncovered grave misdeeds at the bank," Magdalen said slowly. "Strange...he'd seemed happier, more interested in his work in the six months before he disappeared, than I'd seen him since Mother died. More focused, as if he'd found a new purpose in life. So when his farewell letter said he had to go away because of that..."

"You thought he was continuing his work bringing these misdeeds to light," Hetty finished for her. "And you've come to Cornwall to help him, if he is still alive, or to vindicate him."

Magdalen nodded. "I've hung my hopes on that, all along. Now I must wonder if he was a willing part of the crime, even if he was duped into it, and what I read as happiness was merely the thrill of being part of a forbidden enterprise."

The three of us came to a halt. Magdalen stared at the pavers, brow wrinkled, lips pressed into a grim line.

"My dear," Hetty said, "I would do nothing to destroy your love for your father. But he was a man, like any other. Real love is based on knowing another's flaws and still loving the person. He was an honest man at heart, and he would want me to be honest with you about the dangers and the consequences of what you've set out to do."

Magdalen's shoulders rose as she took a deep breath. Then she raised her head. "Someone has worked hard to hide the truth of this matter and lay the blame on my father."

Hetty held up her hand. I tensed, but Magdalen caught the fingers gently and gave them a little shake to forestall her aunt's

protest. "I'm not completely naïve. I know whoever it is who could arrange the theft of twenty five thousand pounds, and keep his own involvement completely unsuspected, is extremely powerful. We do not even know if Father is missing because he took action against this mastermind and is having to hide from him and his compatriots, or was killed by them."

Hetty's brows rose. "You have been giving this a great deal of thought, haven't you? Good." I could hear her growing respect for her niece's conclusions in her voice. "Then you'll also have realized there's likely to be a violent reaction when you start uncovering the things this mastermind thinks are well hidden. Did your father give you any specifics?"

"No." Magdalen turned her head and tucked a lock of hair back in place. "He said that was to protect me. He was struggling to decide whom he could trust to help him put an end to it."

"I fear he may have trusted the wrong man." Hetty's voice was urgent but pitched low to keep her words from being overheard. "Twenty. Five. Thousand. Pounds. For that amount to go missing at one time, it can only mean the theft was planned at the highest levels. And one must wonder—for whom was the gold intended? With the trail leading to the heart of smuggling territory, one can make a good guess." She nodded southeast over Mount's Bay, toward France—and her war-beleaguered emperor—lurking beyond the horizon. "Your attempt to exonerate your father and uncover the real thief and his smuggling operatives will be opposed by *him* and his agents as well."

Magdalen straightened her shoulders. "I understand that, Aunt Hetty. No matter my father's involvement, I want to see justice done. It's not just that the gold would fund Napoleon's armies and keep this war going. When the Cavendish Bank collapsed from the theft, so many ordinary people lost their homes, their dignity, their hope." Her voice throbbed with resolve. "Perhaps my father came to realize that too, and that's

what he came here to do. To find and return the gold could repair some of those damaged lives. What is my life compared to the possibility of doing that?"

I pressed close to her side. Her vow chilled me, at the same time my pride in my mistress swelled. *Here* was a human to serve.

"You're your father's daughter. The best part of him." Hetty ducked her head and fumbled in her reticule for a handkerchief.

Both Magdalen and I pretended not to notice her tears, but Magdalen slipped her arm around Hetty as she guided her toward the tea shop, and I paced close beside Hetty's other side to support her slow steps.

I watched my ladies safely across the threshold into The Mousehole Cat before I curled into a tight ball on the pathway outside. The stones were cold but the sun flooded over me in a warm wave and I knew I would be warm soon enough. No, I presented my back to passersby and tucked my nose beneath the tip of my otter-plumed tail so I would have privacy for some very hard thinking.

Both my ladies shared a strong family tendency toward loyalty and courage. Their family line also carried the worrying trait of stubbornness. Worst of all, this Haven breed seemed to be born secret-keepers, even from each other. Both women had known more than they had admitted to just now. I had sensed it from the tension in their bodies, the tiny changes in their pupils, the speeding of their pulses, all the signs humans miss in each other but which speak volumes to dogs, who see everything.

I could battle our foes, but how could I protect my ladies from themselves?

It was that realization that caused the rest of the problems for the day.

CHAPTER 6



I woke with a start. Where was I? Even before my eyes opened wide, my nose reminded me I was still curled on the pavement in front of the Mousehole Cat. I had set myself to guarding Magdalen but I had fallen asleep at my post.

Perhaps she was still inside? I planted my forepaws on the windowsill and peered through the teashop's wide many-paned front window. Two female shapes at the nearest table turned toward me, their teacups arrested halfway to their mouths. Squinting ferociously, I brought my nose nearly to the glass. Most of us dogs do not rely on our eyes alone, or even primarily. I pressed my nostrils against the cold pane. Even a hair's width crack or loose seal would pass the fragment of scent that was all I needed to be sure. I strained my ears, scanning for the voices I knew.

The door swung open. Bearing a stack of cloth-covered trays, the Mousehole Cat's delivery lad staggered out on a wave of scent and sound. My nostrils quivered as I sorted and defined the odors.

On the tray were one batch of quince jam rolls, a batch of cream scones, and two of currant buns ever so slightly scorched

on the bottom. Mrs. Nance would probably not reduce the price until a disgruntled buyer made of point of it, then she'd toss out the lot. I'd happily eaten my share of burnt-bottomed scones at the shop's back door.

Inside the shop, my nose told me, were two men, seven women and three children, one of them a male child with a turtle in his pocket. I snorted then rechecked the scent. Mmm, make that a lizard.

I tilted my head, comparing the sounds from ear to ear so I could untangle the skeins of laughter, female chatter and a small boy's whining. The closing door cut off a kind voice saying, "He looks as if he wants to come in and eat his tea." If I were not on duty, I would have seized the comment as an invitation. I could indeed relish one of those quince jam rolls with a dab of clotted cream.

But I smelled no Hetty, nor caught any note of Magdalen. They were both gone. How long had I been asleep? I blinked upward. The sun had not slipped its angle by much. My angel and Hetty could not have gone far in such a short passage of time.

The door banged back against its stops. A fat little boy in a blue velvet suit stood in the opening. His red cheeks told me his was the whining I had heard.

"Doggie! Doggie come here," he demanded.

His odor was a nose-thrilling *mélange* of raspberry jam, toast fingers, warm milk and a full nappy. He extended an imperious, jammy hand. "Doggie here," he repeated.

I sighed inwardly. I had little time to spare, but one must always be kind to the young. How else will they learn good manners? Human whelps need especially patient handling as they remain infants for so long and learn so slowly.

Bracing myself, I lowered my head for his petting.

"Bop!" One little palm patted me atop the head. He chortled.

“Bap!” A second little palm slapped the side of my head. I could feel the jam working its way into my lovely clean fur.

I drew back slightly and caught his eye. *Have a care, there, little friend.*

“Delbert! What has mummy told you about touching filthy boo boos?”

Delbert and I both skewed around.

A very broad woman with a pile of very black hair snatched at Delbert’s chubby arm. It hardly needed my astute canine senses to know she was Delbert’s dam.

“Come away from that dirty beast!”

Really, madam. I snorted softly. I suggest you take a sniff of your pup before you toss words such as ‘dirty’ at others.

“No!” Delbert shouted. He shrugged out of her grip and set his heels against the doorjamb.

Mrs. Delbert recaptured Delbert’s arm and pulled.

“Doggie!” he squalled at me.

“Leave the mangy creature be, Delbert. There is no telling what manner of things he’s been rolling in.”

Such as raspberry jam? With a wide panting smile for Delbert’s mother, I stepped forward and washed Delbert’s cheeks with my tongue.

Delbert crowed. His mother shrieked. A forest of legs surrounded us as the shop’s patrons filled the doorway.

You see, Madam? I rolled my eyes in Mrs. Delbert’s direction. *That is how to keep a pup clean and presentable.*

Mrs. Delbert shoved around her with her elbows to make a space and dropped to a ponderous crouch. She hauled Delbert from my caresses.

“Mummy, no!” Delbert’s flailing fists clocked me under the jaw. Another swipe knocked his mother’s hair sideways.

She shrieked and clapped a hand to the construction atop her head. “Delbert! Look what you’ve done to Mummy’s coffer.”

My ears were ringing, as much from the two Delberts’

emphatic mode of speech, as from the blow to my jaw. Perhaps that made the puff of powder from Mrs. Delbert's hair all the more startling.

I recognized that scent.

'Coffer,' indeed—*Thank you! Thank you, Delbert's mother!* I darted forward and gave her cheek a quick lap of gratitude. She was so startled she stopped her shrieking.

I ran, mouth half open, tasting the air for the ragged scent trail. One particle at a time, I picked up Magdalen's trail. She, Hetty, and that powdery odor were on parallel courses.

Down the Parade the scents uncoiled, visible to my nose as pale beckoning ribbons. Around the first corner, past the fruiterer, then the cobbler, on past a third storefront and a fourth.

The aromas combined but the trail ended. Had I overrun my track?

I whirled, claws skittering on the paving stones, and charged back the way I had come. Head low, I swept the ground with quick motions, flews and ears funneling every fragment of scent to my nose.

There.

I skidded to a halt. The waxy, powdery white smell that had accompanied Merrick's killer and rose from Mrs. Delbert's 'coffer' eddied in the sheltered stoop of the third shop door I had passed the first time.

I tested the air again. *Yes!* Magdalen's own unique scent was braided together with the white scent. The smell painted a lurid sense memory of that night, the flashing sword and Merrick's falling body. Anyone in range of that powdery scent was in deadly danger.

Right now, that *anyone* included my own *someone*.

The red door sported a single bright brass knob in its center. There was no latch for me to bite at and open. I reared up on my hind legs, scrabbling with my forepaws. The glossy door

was bare of any trim that would offer purchase to hold me up so I could work at turning the knob with my teeth. I slid back to all fours, claws raking trails in the paint.

I paced in tight circles, Magdalen's scent pulling at me like a stout rope. I pressed my nose to the window. Unlike the Mousehole Cat, this shop hid any view of its patrons behind layers of lace and muslin. I could not even hope to be seen from the inside and beckon someone to assist me.

If guile would not open the door for me, then I would batter down the red door with my shoulder. I backed a few paces, dug in for traction, then launched myself off my powerful haunches. The door swung open just as I reached it. I hurtled across the threshold, past a skirted figure that pressed against the door-frame, and bowled head over tail into the main space. I rolled to a stop and leapt to my feet.

Oh horrible, *horrible*, the sight that met my eyes.

White shrouded bodies lay half reclined in tall chairs on either side of a center aisle. What had Delbert's mother said? That she had just come from the 'coffers'? I had thought she meant 'coiffures,' making allowance for her Cornish accent. Had she meant 'coffins' instead? A keening whine rose in my throat. Was I too late? Not just for Magdalen, but for Hetty, and all these others, too?

I scrambled down the aisle, catching at the sheets with my teeth and jerking them aside. Shrieks rose on all sides. The sheeted figures were moving, popping upright all around me, revealed as women in various states of—I knew not what. It looked to me as if the dead were rising from their graves.

I had heard of the White Lady of the Pascoes who was said to haunt Kemyel Hall and its lands, including Lanthorne Cottage. I'd even thought I'd seen her, the night Merrick was killed, like a shrieking, white-shrouded remnant of a woman. That night's experience I had chalked down to an owl on the hunt. But now I wondered.

These women were as unnatural, as uncanny, as ever I'd heard the White Lady described. Some had a thick green mud coating their faces. Others were barefooted with the same goo applied over their feet and up their exposed legs. One woman, poor suffering creature, had small metal clamps affixed all about her head. The reek of burning hair hovered around her like a stinking halo.

A clatter from behind sent me on the double toward an alcove at the back of the room. Just visible behind a set of looped up curtains, a white-shrouded Magdalen cowered in a chair. A man stalked her, something sharp and metal glittering in his hand.

"It wath all over for your aunt in a few minuteth," her stalker lisped. "It will be painless, I assthure you." Scissors, I saw now. He worked the blades with lethal intent.

"No, Monsieur," Magdalen held her palms outward toward him. "I am afraid—"

That was all I needed.

I closed the distance in three bounding strides, my fourth launching me like an arrow. I clamped my jaws on the hissing blackguard's wrist, arresting the scissors mere inches from my Magdalen's neck. The man spun around and away under my weight.

From the corner of my eye I saw Hetty scuttle out of our way. She must have been hiding, and no wonder. She was shorn as close as a ewe in spring, her silvery hair like a close-fitting pelt with just a quiff of forelock remaining. I pushed hard off my hocks and pulled back on the man's arm to take us safely past her. The pair of us fetched up against the wall. I will grant the man, thought slight in build, showed a terrier-like tenacity as his hand still clenched the scissors.

Behind us, Magdalen was shouting. I was too intent on disarming the person who had threatened my angel to discern her words, but I swear by my dewclaws her tone sounded

encouraging. I tightened my jaws ever so slightly on the chap's wrist to motivate him to drop the scissors. I will confess it readily, my bite is not equal in force to that of a mastiff, say, or a bulldog. My folk have been bred to secure a valuable struggling catch and return it undamaged to the fisherman or hunter, not immobilize a housebreaker or control a maddened bull. Nevertheless, my bite can be most persuasive when I intend it should be. It is all a matter of skill and finesse.

The man's fingers opened. The scissors made a tinny ping when they struck the floor.

Immediately, I released my grip. I dropped to my haunches, my hard stare holding the man where he was. *I'm watching him for you, my angel*, I panted to Magdalen. *He won't give you or Hetty any more trouble.*

Magdalen patted me with a shaking hand then faced the scissors monster.

"Monsieur Etienne, I am terribly sorry," she said. "My dog must have misunderstood. He is very protective."

This 'Monsieur Etienne' person was examining his wrist with anxious care. "My armth, my hands, they are the instruments of my art," he sniffled. He held out both arms toward her. "If they are damaged, just imagine, Etienne could no longer work hith art on the heads of the ladies of Mousethole."

'Art' is what you call it? I surveyed the ladies crowding into the alcove. *Looks like vandalism to me.*

Etienne, too, must have noted our audience and my reaction. Perhaps he was not so daft after all. He pushed his lower lip into a dramatic pout. "If you did not feel able to wear the Etienne Easter mode, you had only to thay tho."

I rose to my feet. *She said more than 'tho,'* I growled, *she said 'no.' I heard her.*

"Hush, Grim," Magdalen muttered. "That is not helpful right now."

I contented myself with a direct—albeit silent—squint at Easter and reseated myself.

“What is going on here? Is someone injured?” The deep voice cut through the feminine babble like a trumpet call.

There was one moment of profound silence while the pack of gawping women turned toward the voice. In the next moment, they threw their shrouds over their heads and fled for the far corners of the shop. Only Monsieur Etienne, Magdalen and Hetty remained in the alcove. I placed myself in front of the women and turned to face this new threat.

CHAPTER 7



The tattoo of boot heels marked an unwavering path from the shop door toward us. They halted at the alcove then the draperies flew aside. An officer in a dark wool uniform twinkling with a waterfall of silver braid across a broad chest swept us with his eyes.

Hetty smoothed her poor, shorn head with trembling fingers. Monsieur Etienne draped himself against the chair, sniffing. Magdalen stacked her arms across her chest and raised her chin.

“We were told of a disturbance,” the officer stated. His deep set blue eyes swept the room like a cool breeze. “Would someone care to enlighten me?”

My nose worked a rapid assessment. He smelled alert, but also confident and calm. This one did not need the uniform to be recognized as a pack leader among his kind. I found myself relaxing. I sensed we were in good hands.

“I have been attacked, cruelly athaulted, in my own shop. Thee?” Etienne thrust out an arm, turned back the lacy cuff and turned his wrist this way and that. “I can only pray the effecths of the experience will not limit my ability to create my art.”

The officer's brows rose very slightly in his weatherbeaten, blunt-featured face. "Point out your assailant and my men will take him off."

Etienne made a dramatic sweep of his lace edged handkerchief. "There he thits."

"Thits?" The officer's mouth quirked. "Er, yes. You are saying the dog bit you?"

"*Oui, cest vrai.*"

"Bit?" Magdalen took a long step forward. "He barely touched you."

The officer glanced from the slight reddening of the man's wrist, to me, then back at Etienne. "It appears you have been fortunate, mons—"

"Fortunate?" Monsieur Etienne burst out. "I could have lotht my arm to that ravening creature."

The officer's brows snapped together at the interruption. His piercing stare at Etienne was the quintessential pack leader's response to a challenge. I shifted onto one hip, the better to relax and enjoy this.

Magdalen pushed her way between the two. "Utter nonsense," she said, setting her hands on her hips. I have found females, whether canine or human, tend to pay little mind to the posturing of their males. "Ravening?" Grim is nothing of the sort. Doubtless he saw you aiming the scissors at me and assumed you planned to do me harm."

Etienne stabbed a finger at Magdalen. "Bringing order to that mane ith not harm, it is a thervith to our community. My scissors are my artists' tool, the brush I use to paint a new image of feminine beauty."

Etienne caught Hetty by the wrist and pulled her forward. "Look," he said to the officer, "just look at Madame Hetty. In a few moments Miss Haven would have looked just like this, had I not been impeded by thith hound of Hell." He threw his hands in the air.

I grinned toothily at the officer. *Just call me an admirer of natural beauty.*

The officer's eyes, bright blue in his tanned face, met mine before they passed over Hetty's crop. "Just like that, you say? Yeth, er," he cleared his throat, "yes, I see."

Magdalen stepped around Hetty and glared at Etienne. "I resent your calling Grim a hound of hell. He was only protecting me."

"Protecting' you? You are as mad as your dog." Etienne threw up his hands and backed away from Magdalen until he reached the chair. "You see what I mean?" He flicked his fingers at her in a shooing motion and rolled imploring eyes toward the uniformed man.

Magdalen turned to the officer. "Sir, my dog is perfectly well behaved. He was only doing his duty. My aunt and I live alone in a most retired location with only two women servants. We cannot do without Grim's protection. If anyone is to be blamed, it should be I." She set her shoulders. "I am ready to go with you."

The officer blinked. "With me? Where to?"

I cocked my head at the man's tone. He sounded genuinely bemused.

"To gaol." Magdalen held out her arms. "Clap me in irons, or whatever form of restraint you usually employ in these kinds of situations."

The officer stroked his chin. "I cannot say I come across 'these kinds of situations' very often."

I inhaled deeply, savoring the atmosphere to be sure. Yes, I was certain now, there was a definite aura of suppressed amusement swirling around the officer.

Magdalen brushed back her sleeves as if preparing for manacles. "Grim is my dog, and no matter that he was performing his natural duty to protect me, I can see we have

caused a disturbance. Shall I go before the magistrate today, or must I spend the night in prison?"

"I see no need for that, Miss. There was no lasting damage."

Etienne gasped.

The officer spared only a slight turn of his head at the sound. One brow raised, he said over his shoulder, "You were singularly fortunate to be in the hands, or should I say the teeth, of an artist, Monsieur Etienne. His breed have such control over their bite, they can pick up an egg without breaking it. Any other dog would have mangled you."

Why thank you! A pleasure to make the acquaintance of an educated man. I sidled around until I was sitting beside the officer in a perfect heel position. *The ladies of Mousehole will benefit from my timely intervention, don't you think? Better a little less of Monsieur Etienne's 'art' and a little more of my common sense.*

The little hairdresser gingerly slid down from the chair. "Artist?! Paugh, a dumb animal. It is only luck that has saved me today."

He sketched a jerky bow to Hetty, then to Magdalen. "I am certain you ladies will be more comfortable seeking the ministrations of Mrs. Gotobed. Her skills in cutting hair are adequate for most of the woman of the village." Pointing his nose in the air, he swept the curtains aside and left.

The officer studied Magdalen for a moment. "Wise decision."

Magdalen smoothed a hand over her hair, tucking a wavy lock behind her ear. "I believe it was the only way he could salvage what remained of his pride," she said.

"I refer to your decision not to allow him to cut off your hair."

Magdalen's eyes widened.

"I know it is all the mode," the officer continued in his frank fashion, "especially in Town, all the tonnish ladies wanting to look like young lads. They merely end up looking like young fools."

Hetty sniffed, fingering the wisps at her nape. Magdalen slipped an arm around her shoulder.

The officer flushed. "Of course, there are some ladies who have sufficient years to carry it off," he amended.

Hetty and Magdalen stared at him.

"That is to say, they have the gravity to wear the style. That is, I should say, the dignity?"

I could scent the sweat rising to his forehead before the poor man slipped a finger within his stiffly embroidered collar and pulled as if it were strangling him. I stepped on his boot—hard. *Give over, sir. You're only digging yourself in deeper.*

With undisguised relief, the officer took up the escape route I offered. "Nice, soft mouthed dog," he said, bending down to pat me. "'Grim,' did you call him? I imagine he could retrieve just about any bird, no matter how delicate, without crushing it."

Magdalen too looked relieved by the change of subject. "As to Grim's hunting skills, I cannot say. My aunt and I found him only a few days ago as we were moving into our new house. He was injured and left for dead by the side of the road. He looked like he had come a long, hard way so we named him Pilgrim. Grim for short."

"Does no one know his owner?"

"Yes, they do, but it seems the man has gone away and abandoned Grim." Magdalen tapped the side of her leg. I left the man's side, circling behind Magdalen like a gentleman to take up my position beside her. She laid a possessive hand on the top of my head. "He is mine now."

I turned my muzzle into her hand. *And you are mine. No one could take me from you. Not even if Merrick rose from the grave.*

"Odd, not to take his dog with him, especially one like this. This is no common animal. A fine breed, though still rare in this country. I've seen even fewer in this dark brown color. Usually see them with black or yellow fur."

"I've been describing him as a liver color," Magdalen said, "but just this morning the baker's boy called him 'Chocolate.' I rather thought that suited him, as he's sweet..." Her voice trailed off and her smile was rueful, as if she was embarrassed by her enthusiasm over a mere dog.

Aunt Hetty's skirts brushed along my side like a caress as she took up a position on my other side. "Our housekeeper says the former owner often left for days at a time, without a word to anyone. He was in the habit of overindulging in strong spirits, we were given to understand, so that type of behavior is sadly not unexpected. Even to abandoning a fine dog."

The officer nodded. Gently, he lifted my chin. I panted politely to tell him he was free to do with me as he chose, and studied him as he was studying me.

His features were too blunt and irregular to pass for what the humans called 'handsome,' but relaxed in friendly interest like they were now, they combined into an appealing whole I judged made him more than acceptable to ladies. He looked deep into my eyes, then lifted my lip to examine my teeth. He ran a hand down my forelegs, then over my topline and back along my ribs, considerately avoiding the healing wound in my side. He finished by giving me a lovely firm scratch on my end of my back where my thick, strong tail joins my haunches.

"Your Grim has a true look of class and character about him," he said to Magdalen. "Many a sporting gentleman would be glad to have him in his kennel. Dog must be worth a fair price."

Magdalen shifted uneasily.

The officer stood dusting off his hands with his handkerchief while he frowned down at me. "It seems strange a man of limited means would abandon a valuable creature like this."

Hetty's rueful smile and dismissive shrug formed a masterpiece of misdirection. "We asked around, but no one seems

surprised that Merrick finally just decided not to return. Apparently he owed money to most of the merchants in town.”

I sensed the officer’s alert even before he quickly asked, “This dog belonged to Adam Merrick?”

“He did. And an irresponsible fellow we have the personal experience to know,” Hetty said.

“Is it important that Merrick used to own the dog?”

The rising timbre of Magdalen’s voice told me of her alarm. Passing my tongue over my nose to pick up every bit of scent, I analyzed the complex bloom of moods around me. Magdalen was afraid and tense. Hetty was alert and concerned, though she concealed it behind her usual well-bred dignity.

But the officer had suddenly become the hunter, though he camouflaged his keen concentration by a show of refolding his handkerchief and tucking it away.

“Just attaching a name to a report,” he said. “It is part of my job to know the people of the area.”

The sharp tang of deception tickled my nostrils. For the first time since we had met him, the officer had told an untruth.

Hetty dropped a small curtsy. “Then I’ll not stand on ceremony. Lady Henrietta Balfour, widow, new resident of Mousehole, and law abiding citizen.” She gestured. “Allow me to present my niece Magdalen Haven. She is the same.” The corners of Hetty’s eyes crinkled in the lightest hint of roguery. “All but the widow part, I should say.”

“My apologies, ladies, I have been remiss.” The man bowed hastily, but with proper elegance. “Allow me to introduce myself. Major Felix Abbey. I am newly arrived myself. I have just been seconded from my regiment to oversee the preventive measures against smuggling in this part of the coast. I am the new Coastguard commander.”

Magdalen stiffened. “The same Major Abbey who persecuted my poor father and drove him from our home with unjust accusations?”

"To my recollection, I have never 'persecuted' anyone." Abbey drew himself to his full height. "I *prosecute* criminals."

At her sides, Magdalen's fists clenched. The gesture was hidden by her skirts, but not from me. "My father was no criminal. He was forced to flee for his life while the authorities—that would be *you*, sir—did the bidding of the Cavendish Bank's board of governors and made him their scapegoat for their own crimes."

"Your father is Henry Haven."

"Was." She angled her face away.

Major Abbey narrowed his eyes. "You have proof of his death?"

"No. But he would never go away and leave me and Aunt Hetty, his only family. Particularly not without saying goodbye."

"And you, Lady Balfour." Abbey turned back to Aunt Hetty. "Would you be the widow of Lord Romney Balfour?"

Hetty inclined her head. "I lost my husband last winter."

"My sincere condolences." The major bowed. "I had the honor to meet your late husband. He was a wealth of knowledge concerning Napoleon's espionage, and the methods and agents the emperor uses to plant spies in England." His bright blue eyes took on a considering cast as they passed over Aunt Hetty.

Hetty drew herself up and bore his assessment calmly. She was too shrewd to defend herself against Major Abbey's unspoken question, but Magdalen passed her arm protectively around her aunt.

The gesture was not lost on the major. "You believe your father has died, I believe you said, Miss Haven. Based on the evidence I gathered at the behest of His Majesty's government," the major said with careful emphasis, "I believe your father is still alive and preparing to move the gold to France. He will live well on his share of the prize, as well as the rewards Napoleon will doubtless give him. Boney may be short of gold to pay his troops but no doubt he has rooms full of jeweled trinkets

captured as war booty to give the man whose efforts will allow him to continue the war. Twenty five thousand pounds would make your father something of a legend among the smugglers on the guinea run.”

Magdalen’s lips pursed. “What evidence? Doubtless it was only what the powerful men in charge prepared and made sure you found. Oh, the Board of Trustees of the Cavendish Bank led you a merry dance, of that I am sure.”

From the tension in the major’s face, I could tell he was unused to being contradicted, let alone so vehemently. His voice was very controlled when he answered, a warning not to trespass further on his patience. “Yet here you are, his only family, in the last place Henry Haven was seen, which is a prime port for the guinea run. Regardless of your opinion of the evidence I collected, even you must admit that is suggestive.”

The scent of fear surrounded Magdalen. The fur on my spine stiffened in instant response. I half rose into a stiff legged crouch.

“Sit!” Magdalen and Abbey said in unison.

My haunches hit the floor. I flicked my eyes to Magdalen to assure her it was *her* command I had answered.

Aunt Hetty stepped around me, placing herself between the two. “Major Abbey, even during the painful period of your active investigation into my brother’s disappearance, I heard you spoken of as a man of integrity. Yes, our being here in Mousehole may raise eyebrows, but it is because we still have questions too.”

All coquettishness was gone. Aunt Hetty was waging a desperate but discreet battle to defend Magdalen. “My niece and I are friendless and alone now. We rely on you not to harry the innocent along with the guilty.”

“I assure you, Lady Balfour, my official mission, as well as my personal commitment, has always been protect the powerless. I can best do that by detecting and convicting the criminals

that would prey on them." Major Abbey's words were uncompromising, but his eyes held compassion as he looked at the women.

"Do not forget the unjustly accused," Magdalen protested. "What of your duty to them?"

"My duty is to the truth, Miss Haven. No matter how unpleasant that truth may be."

"But will you know the truth when you see it?" Magdalen pressed.

Hetty sighed. Major Abbey exchanged a commiserating glance with her, then he inclined his head to Magdalen the slightest degree. "At this moment, with no additional evidence, let us agree to leave off the topic. I have other matters at present that require my attendance."

He gestured toward the curtained opening into the main shop. "As both you and I are new to the community, allow me to escort you and Lady Balfour home. I can see you both arrive there safely, as well as learn more of the countryside I am to patrol." Abbey offered his arm to Magdalen with an air of expectation he would be obeyed.

Magdalen's lips pushed forward into that mulish expression I was coming to know well.

"Magdalen," Aunt Hetty appealed.

Magdalen, please, I whined softly, raising one paw.

The major looked pointedly from his arm still waiting for Magdalen's hand, to her face. "It is my duty, given this disturbance, to escort you from the premises." The implication shivered in the air around him.

I was probably the only one who caught Magdalen's momentary blaze of frustrated anger.

I sat upright before Magdalen, pawing the air with my forepaws. *If only you knew how much we need this man as our friend, Angel, not as our enemy.* Magdalen met my eyes. I grunted softly to underscore my point.

With a little shake of her head, Magdalen turned back to the major. She smiled puckishly. "How considerate of you, Major Abbey. My aunt is surely fatigued from the excitement of the day. No doubt she will be glad of your arm."

Abbey's face was perfectly composed as he turned and held out his arm to the older woman. "Delighted, Lady Balfour." As he drew Hetty's hand through his arm, the major's eyes rested on Magdalen with the relaxed manner of the pack leader who ignores a small trespass because he knows he is wise enough and strong enough to remain the leader.

"I shall collect Mrs. Tregurtha while I fetch our cart." Magdalen's lips twitched.

I was already learning Magdalen had a dislike for being managed. Even when it was for her own good. I licked my lips in response to the tension around me and leaned heavily against Magdalen's legs. *Don't mistake his tolerance for weakness, Mother.*

"Downton!" the Major called over his shoulder.

A very young man, to my nose smelling not much more than a boy, really, pushed through the draperies in a clatter of boot heels. He snapped to attention. "Sir!" he bellowed.

Abbey winced. "Sergeant, escort Miss Haven to her cart then drive it here for her. We are accompanying these ladies home."

Magdalen's eyes flashed before she busied herself fastening her cloak with abrupt movements. I could not help a small snort of amusement. *I tried to tell you.*

"Oh, and Downton?"

The young man turned sharply on his heel. "Sir?"

"Have a care for Grim, here. He's a stickler for etiquette where his mistress is concerned. Wouldn't want any more disturbances or misunderstandings. Would we?" The major smiled at me, but his posture and tone told me his words were really for Magdalen.

Though I sensed Major Abbey would have preferred his sergeant drive the cart home, that would have meant either

Aunt Hetty would have had to ride in the back with Mrs. Tregurtha, which clearly displeased Abbey to ask of a lady of her age and rank, or the two ladies and Downton would have to squeeze together on the seat, which displeased me because I would not have been able to rest my head on the seat back between my ladies. In the end, Magdalen drove while Aunt Hetty, Mrs. Tregurtha and I took up our same places of this morning. Major Abbey had to be content with having Downton trail us on his gelding. Abbey rode beside us on a talkative iron gray mare.

However do you stand it, she whickered, all this sand and salt air? It makes my coat gummy and my tail stringy. Can you imagine what that's like? No, I gather not. You have only that stout thing like a furry club at the end of your hindquarters. Can't brush away many flies with that, can you? This is by far the dampest, most primitive posting I've ever had. I'm a city creature. Gaiety is my name. What's yours?

She did not leave me time to answer her before she was off again.

I prefer morning gallops in St. James's Park to the dreary nights he's kept me out 'til all hours standing around in the wind on the cliffs, while he lies on the ground and stares down at the beach and pretends he can actually see something in the dark with those weak little human eyes of his. For the life of me I cannot understand why he does not ride Argo on those expeditions. Argo carried Felix into battle and he's practically deaf from all the cannons. Argo, I mean, not Felix.

The mare snorted at her own joke. *Old Argo wouldn't turn a hair at creeping about all night long a step at a time. Just because Argo's getting old and has grown so white in places, while I am young and my coat is lovely and dark so I am the one Felix has to ride at night.*

She would be a fount of information, if I had the time to pick the kernels from the chaff. Gaiety shook her head and bounced a little in exuberance. Major Abbey chided her with a few quiet

words and curbed her gently. It halted the mare's flow of commentary for just a moment. I seized my chance.

My name is Pilgrim, but please call me Grim. Everyone else does. My tail is quite correct for one of my breed, I informed her mildly. We call it an 'otter tail.' It's like a rudder. Helps me turn quickly in water.

Water. Ugh. Gaiety snorted. Speaking of water, have you noticed how the streams here are so brackish and muddy? I don't mind leaping over water when we follow the hounds but he wants me to walk through it, can you imagine that, actually walk through streams while he hangs over one side of me then the other looking down. Now, Argo does not have the slightest care for where he puts his feet. Mud, blood, sand, stones, Argo will step where Felix says 'step' and stand where Felix says 'stand.' One of these days I'm going to slip on some of that slimy stuff in the streambed, and Felix is going to tumble right off over my withers and go face first into the water. Then won't I laugh and laugh and laugh! I might even make him chase me a bit before I let him get back on.

Does he do that a lot?

What? Tumble off me? Or chase me?

I sighed inwardly. I like horses, I really do. But they can be such flibbertigibbets.

He means does your master do a lot of searching on cliff tops or in streams? Patch spoke up.

Searching? Is that what he's doing?

Yes, Patch and I both said.

You don't say.

No, you did. Patch gave his bushy tail an irritated swish that just missed the gray's delicate muzzle.

Gaiety threw up her head. *Well, fine. Just for that, I shan't tell you why we're here and what Felix's orders are.*

You know? I stood up quickly, accidentally brushing Aunt Hetty's bonnet askew in my haste to hear the mare's answer.

Of course I know. He tells me everything. He's forever coming out to the barn to talk to me. Values my counsel, naturally.

Patch raised his tail and contributed a pungent response.

Well enough for you local types to take on against outsiders, Gaiety retorted, but you'd think twice if you knew how Felix's mission is likely to put an end to the soft new place you're enjoying. Gaiety flicked her ears toward Lanthorne Cottage's gables, just coming into view as the road turned back toward the coast.

What concern are your master's orders to me? Patch turned his head so he could see Gaiety around his blinkers. Why would he put an end to my work?

Not your work, I said your 'place.'

Magdalen pulled Patch to a halt before the gate. While Sergeant Downton hauled the sagging gate open, Patch tossed his bushy mane. *Sorry, Grim, I can't seem to make hooves or tails of what she means.*

Tell your provincial friend it's as plain as the shaggy coat on his rump, Gaiety nickered to me. For pity's sake, don't your owners possess a curry comb? What was I saying? Oh, yes, well, Felix's orders are track down the ring of traitors that is smuggling money and secrets to the French. His superiors in the Alien Office have been watching them for a long time, but this recent theft of mountains of gold seems to have lit a fire under their haunches. Either that, or the rumor the leader is a woman. The pretty mare's eyes twinkled. Either way, Felix's bosses want it put to a stop, so naturally they've called in the best man and horses for the job. He's even got a special paper with him that gives him permission to do anything necessary. He's allowed to 'string them up without delay,' he told me, Gaiety tossed her head as if puzzled, though he didn't bring any string with him that I could see.

Patch shook his shaggy mane as if a fly had irritated his neck, but I caught the gleam of his eye through his long forelock as a bit of slobber from his bit landed on one of Gaiety's gleaming black hooves.

The mare danced sideways. *Country cart dragger!* she whickered.

Friends, please, I pleaded. I had to hear what Gaiety knew. *Patch, Gaiety is new to Mousehole. We want her to take away a good opinion of Cornish animals, don't we?*

Patch just chewed on his bit, but he did incline his head toward the young mare.

Gaiety was easily mollified. *I suppose you have your own manner of jesting here in the country,* she acknowledged Patch's gesture. *Now, what was I saying?*

I suppressed my sigh. *You were telling us how Felix tells you his orders and why you've been sent here.*

Ah, yes, of course. Well, as I was saying, Felix believes he is closing in on the guinea runners, as he calls them. Felix thinks Lanthorne Cottage is the smugglers' chief hiding place and that they have a network of local support. He even suspects, she pawed the ground with excitement, that there is someone in what he calls 'the top ranks' who is protecting them. He's going to set a trap to arrest everyone involved, and have Lanthorne Cottage torn down to stop the guinea run for good.

No! I barked.

The horses looked at me in surprise. I clambered down off the cart. Downton was helping Mrs. Tregurtha with the boxes and packages, and the major had escorted my ladies inside so we had some time to talk.

Oh my, I am sorry. Gaiety reached her head down toward me. *I suppose that means your mother will have to find a new place to live.*

I let the mare nuzzle me. She had a good heart, even if she had no discretion and a wandering mind. *It's not the cottage I care about,* I told her. *If Major Abbey thinks the gold smuggling is centered on Lanthorne Cottage, that means he might suspect Magdalen is the leader. It was a small leap, now that he knew Magdalen was the daughter of the man he was hunting. But I knew Magdalen and her aunt were friendless and alone. That*

hardly fit with Gaiety's description of a female mastermind 'in the top ranks.'

Then I remembered that first evening with my ladies, and Aunt Hetty's explanation of how the gold smuggling worked. Then and today, she had spoken of spies and agents, Napoleon's hunger for money and his hunger for empire. I recalled, too, the older woman's instant decision and air of command when Magdalen showed her the snuff box I had carried, and the way she cozened the carter into doing her bidding. There was much more to Aunt Hetty than just a gouty, elderly lady of breeding.

Major Abbey had seen that. His interest had been intense when he had discovered her connection to the Alien Office. He had concealed it well, for a human. But my nose knew. Felix was trailing the wrong quarry if he suspected Magdalen of anything but clutching at straws to prove her father's innocence. That left the next most obvious suspect. But Hetty—a ring leader of smugglers?

If this Major Abbey suspects Magdalen, the local free traders will be suspicious of her too. Cheddar slipped through the forest of horses' legs to take his place in the center of our circle. They won't appreciate her bringing Major Abbey and his special mission here. Your Magdalen-Angel could find herself hunted by both sides.

Say 'all sides,' Cheddar, and you'd be more accurate, I said.

CHAPTER 8



*Y*ou sound tense, Grim. What's wrong? Belly full of worms? The cat yawned hugely at his own jibe, treating us to a view of his curled pink tongue.

Gaiety tossed her head in alarm. *Ooh, nasty things, worms! The drench they make you take for them, even worse! Grim, lift your tail, let's see if there's any eggs stuck to your fur.* The mare lifted her hind feet one after the other, dancing in place. *Have I stepped on any? Somebody check!*

He's clean, straw-for-brains. Downton's seal brown gelding Dan pinned his ears in annoyance then lowered his head to lip up a few stray cabbage leaves, making a show of ignoring us.

Now, now, settle down, Patch rumbled to Gaiety, or Felix will have Downton tether you on the far side of the barn and you won't be able to talk with the rest of us.

A fate worse than death for her, Cheddar drawled.

The black and white cob lowered his neck to bring him nearly eye to eye with the cat. *Cheddar, one of these days that sense of humor of yours will bring you to grief.*

Add a Labrador to our group and suddenly the animalkind become so serious, the cat grumbled. I was surprised when the orange

tom rolled onto his back, allowing Patch to nuzzle his belly gently.

Watching the old friends make up their disagreement brought me an idea. *Cheddar, there are some things we discussed that you missed.* I cocked my head to indicate our little group, tossing a lure to the cat's instinctive curiosity.

He rose to the bait. *Missed? I suppose I have time to listen now.* He scratched casually behind his ear with one hind foot, trying to disguise his interest.

I filled him in, Patch with his prodigious memory coming in where I faltered.

That is why they need our help, I concluded. *The humans don't always know their own kind best.*

Strange, since they're always talking, talking, talking, to each other and about each other. They're like the flocks of herring gulls, all that shrieking and gossiping. Surely this mastermind will give himself—or herself— away eventually? Mmmm, gulls. Eggs... Cheddar's eyes grew round and black and he bunched himself into a crouch.

I pressed the cat back down with a paw on his back. *Focus, please, Cheddar. Aside from all that talking,* I gave the cat his due, which also served to regain his attention, *the humans have few other ways to learn about the world and each other. They don't hear well, and it seems they use their noses mainly to decorate their faces. Plus they can't go in and out of each others' dwellings or observe activities like we can. There are already two people dead—*

—that we know of. Patch stamped a shaggy hoof for emphasis.

True. Patch had a point. *The human behind this is making very sure his own kind does NOT know what he really is. But he cannot hide his true nature and identity from us. Not if we work together and pool our information.*

Now I'm confused. You're as bad as that one, Cheddar flicked a glance toward Gaiety, *jumping from one idea to the other. Are we hunting one person or two? A man or a woman? Is the killer the same person who is the leader of these Guinea Runners?*

I scratched behind my ear. *The man I saw kill my old master Merrick was small, slight but strong. You saw the first murder, Cheddar. What did that killer look like?*

The same, Cheddar said. Not much to him, but wiry and quick. Almost catlike, I'd say. Must be the same man.

Do either of the ladies resemble these killers you saw? Patch peered at us with concern from behind his thick forelock.

No. I gave a little tail wag of relief. Magdalen is strong, but she's taller than the man I saw. And Hetty is small enough, but she's wider. And she walks with that cane.

I like her, but I'd hardly call her catlike, Cheddar laughed.

So if Felix suspects Hetty of being the mastermind—

—or Magdalen, Gaiety interrupted. Don't forget, she's a female too. Felix won't overlook that, no matter how attracted he is to her. Gaiety's eyes gleamed with a surprising shrewdness.

I licked my lips. Point taken, I said grudgingly. That means we're looking for two people.

Do you agree, Cheddar?

His whiskers bristled. I do.

Horses?

Patch and Gaiety both tossed their heads, signifying their agreement.

Cheddar jumped to his feet. *Well isn't this nice. We've all had this lovely chat in the sunshine of a peaceful afternoon, and based on what we've overheard and imagined, we propose to unmask two dangerous human criminals who have succeeded in eluding their own kind for some time.*

He raised his forepaw, claws extended. *And lest you've forgotten, at least one of these humans is a murderer! If we wait long enough, the killer will run out of victims or he'll be caught, the war will be over, and so will the smuggling of spies and gold. I'm starting to think we're losing our animal common sense. No one is trying to kill us. Why do we care who wins a war? We're animals. Our lives will return to normal.*

We're English animals, Cheddar, that is why we should care, I said. English gold and English secrets are being smuggled to the French emperor to allow him to continue to fight on. He's very close to invading our country already.

So we'll have new landlords. I understand the French eat snails. I'd be willing to try them, in a lovely butter sauce, perhaps. Cheddar rolled onto his side and began cleaning a paw, spreading the toes wide as he licked between them. I tried to hold on to my patience. It wasn't Cheddar's fault if he'd lived within a mile of his kitting place his entire life. Not every animal had had the broadening experience of world travel as I had.

Surprisingly, it was young Gaiety who spoke up. *Cheddar, have you heard of a place called Russia?*

No. And if I've lived this long without hearing of it, I don't need to, now. He stood up and stretched fore and aft.

It is a country far to the north star of us, she said. When Napoleon tried to conquer that country, they resisted him so strongly that eventually Napoleon's army had to retreat. But not before hundreds of thousands of lives—human and animal—died. I wasn't there, but Argo told me. He still whinnies and sweats in his sleep when he dreams of it.

The gray mare pawed the ground. *Winter was setting in and the few human survivors ate anything they could. The farm animals were long gone. They ate the horses first and their harness. The thin skin beneath the mare's glossy coat twitched as if from dozens of imaginary bites. Then field creatures like rabbits and mice. The dogs too, Gaiety said with an apologetic glance for me. And when they'd eaten everything else they could catch or trap, do you know what the starving people did then?*

Cheddar's eyes had grown huge and round as he'd become caught up in the mare's story. His tongue made a quick flick over his quivering nostrils.

Yes, I see you can guess, she said. The humans turned to the cats.

First the kittens, small and not too difficult to overcome despite their best efforts at self defense.

A little mowl escaped the orange tom.

Patch tossed his head, shaking the thick forelock from his eyes. *Argo told me that's the reason his master will do anything to stop these traitors and prevent the French from invading this country, the cob said. Felix says the man he calls 'Boney' has never forgotten the humiliation of being defeated by the Russians, both their soldiers and their people. He'll lay waste to our country to ensure he's successful in this invasion.* Patch stamped the ground with a ring of iron shoe against stone. *Even animals will suffer.*

Enough! Cheddar bared his fangs at me in a hiss at being so neatly maneuvered. *I'll be having nightmares through all nine lives, thank you very much!* He twisted himself nearly in two, smoothing his fur with quick, hard strokes of his barbed tongue.

The rest of us waited quietly, mulling the images the horses' story had conjured. Finally the cat straightened and formed himself into an erect bundle. He looked at us. *Not one of you has offered a single idea of how we're to go about this.*

What do you suggest? I asked him mildly. I rolled onto one haunch and tucked my tail underneath me. I did not want to risk provoking the cat's prickly ego with any ill-timed wagging.

I'm not very good at planning, but I'm very good at remembering, Gaiety offered.

I can hear a whisper three stalls away, Patch said.

Dan had been half asleep, ears cocked sideways like a mule's. Now he raised his head. *I was just brought up from the farm.* He sounded abashed. *I'm still learning. But I'll try to help, if you'll tell me what to do.*

Memory and listening are good, Cheddar acknowledged, *but you horses will only hear things when the humans are riding or driving. And how will you tell us what you've learned?* The cat turned to me. *And you. Magdalen seems set to go about with you constantly at her heels, but there will be events and places even*

Magdalen cannot not take you. You're hardly a lady's lap dog. Remember Hetty arguing for a pug? You'll be shut out of much of what the humans do and say in private. Especially humans who already have reason to guard against being overheard.

I sat up, one front paw raised. *That's where you come in, my friend. Cats are the perfect animal spies.*

The cat stared at me through slitted eyes.

You can go anywhere, you're admitted everywhere, you can pass anytime, and no one leashes or tethers you. The catkind can hide in plain sight, as you've told me before.

That is all true. You'll never be able to do it on your own. Cheddar bent his head to give his chest a few rapid licks. His voice was cool but the gesture betrayed his anxiety. *Very well, for the sake of my family, I will join you.*

Gaiety danced a little jig of elation. Patch whickered in relief and even Dan made a shy snort. Sergeant Downton hurried up to lead the horses away to water them. They followed him obediently, with brief head bobs of farewell to us.

Cheddar and I strolled side by side toward the cottage. Just as we reached the blackthorn tree beside the door, Cheddar stepped across my path, stopping me.

Through the bow window we could see Major Abbey in one of the chairs before the hearth, taking a cup from Magdalen. Aunt Hetty sat in the other chair, already sipping her tea. All was peaceful and warm. All it lacked was a chocolate brown Labrador lying among them.

Charming scene, Cheddar commented. I begin to understand the appeal belonging to the humans has for you. Or is it one particular human that holds you? He followed my gaze to Magdalen, then fixed me with his shrewd golden eyes. *Now. Tell me what you meant by Magdalen being hunted on all sides, and why the thought made you look so ill.*

CHAPTER 9



Before I could force my words past the burden on my heart, the iron studded door swung open.

“A most retired spot, indeed,” Major Abbey said. He strolled a few feet into the yard and made a slow turn. I watched his eyes travel to the little round window high up under the eaves. “Complete with smugglers’ window, I see. What do you know about the house?”

Magdalen followed his upward gaze and frowned. Before she could say anything, Hetty spoke. “Very little. Only that Lady Felicia took pity on the distressed family of a former employee and has offered us shelter here on very generous terms.”

“Did she indeed?” His flat inflection turned the question into a statement.

“It appeared the place had not been lived in for some time,” Magdalen added.

“Yet the stable is sound. Doors are solid, all the hinges oiled and recently, my sergeant tells me.”

Magdalen crossed her arms. I could sense her wariness as surely as if she’d had hackles to raise. “Perhaps you’d be good enough to tell us exactly what you mean, Major Abbey?”

Hetty laid a quelling hand on Magdalen's arm. "Surely the major is simply expressing his natural concern for two spinster ladies living in a remote cottage, with only a few women servants besides. Naturally a property as old as this one will have its share of traditional features. He can have no deeper suspicions of us, can you, Major Abbey?" Folding her hands over the carved top of her cane, Hetty leaned forward slightly.

Her tone brought my head up with a start from where I was snuffling at a delightfully odorous patch of weeds. If the major's tone had turned his question into a statement, Aunt Hetty's had turned her question into an order. I sidled over to the major's side and grunted for his attention. *Softly, softly with this one, sir. I once underestimated a silver-muzzled, half crippled she dog when I tried to take the knuckle bone she was gnawing on. I bear the scars to this day. See?* I rolled over to display the marks.

"That," Major Abbey pointed with his chin toward the attic window, as his hands were occupied in scratching my chest and belly, "is known as a 'smuggler's light.' It is positioned so it can only be seen from sea, not from land. During the new moon when the nights are darkest, a red lantern is placed in the window by a fellow known as a 'spotsman.' He's responsible for finding places to land the cargo unseen by preventatives—soldiers or coastguardsmen such as myself and my men. Places just like this."

I sighed and rolled to my feet. Some young males won't take instruction easily and have to learn from painful experience. I'd have my paws full with this one.

Hetty tutted. "These smugglers and spotsmen must be dirty, disagreeable persons, if they would live in the state in which we found this house."

One corner of the major's mouth quirked upward. "They would be far more interested in the stable than the house, Lady Balfour," he said. "Solid, with stout doors that open quietly without a shriek of hinges that carry for miles on a quiet night.

Doors that can be locked securely. Downton tells me there's an impressive new set of staples and hasps on the doors. Far stronger than any farmer would need."

Magdalen shifted restlessly. "I still cannot imagine smugglers frequented Lanthorne Cottage as you seem to think. Why would Lady Felicia house us here, if it would put us in the center of criminal activity?"

I sat at attention and raised one forepaw. *Yes, Major Abbey, why indeed?*

"The answer is simple," Hetty looked from one to the other. "As the landholder, Lady Felicia was able to extend a kindness to us, at the same time safeguarding a valuable property that's been neglected—thanks to Adam Merrick, no doubt. She's only just returned to this country. She cannot have had any idea of the actual condition of the interior, or what unlawful activities may have occurred here."

"A neat trick Lady Felicia has managed, according to you, Lady Balfour. She is a generous and prudent landowner, and a neglectful one at the same time. You seem remarkably well informed." The major sketched a bow to temper any offense. "What then do you make of her care for her duties as trustee of the Cavendish Bank? Was she merely ignorant of what others were doing in her name? Or was it something more purposeful?" The major's tone was casual, almost bantering, but I could read his intensity through the tensing of the hand resting on my withers.

Aunt Hetty's lips turned down in a little frown as if she was considering the idea. "I comprehend your dilemma. Has Lady Felicia's neglect allowed these crimes to occur, or is the neglect a deliberate effort to conceal the crimes?"

Cheddar rubbed himself against Aunt Hetty's skirt and smiled up into her face. *I liked this one from the start. Now I know why. She reasons like a cat.*

Hetty shook her head at the cat's blandishments but ran her

hand along his back from ears to tail. "Robbery is bad enough. Accusing a lady of manners, means, and considerable influence, of the capital offense of treason..." She cocked her head, bird-like, but her eyes glittered with a keen intelligence I'd never seen in any feathered creature. "That is a dangerous line to pursue, Major Abbey."

I tilted my head from side to side, straining for every nuance in her tone. There was a meaning here beyond her words, if only I could understand it. Magdalen's indrawn breath only confirmed I was missing something important. *Cheddar*, I grunted. *Pay close attention. See if you can tell what they actually mean instead of what they are saying.*

I'll try to read their faces. It's difficult, though. Without long ears and whiskers, they're not as expressive as we are. He trotted a few steps away, took a running start and vaulted to the top of the water butt Major Abbey was leaning against.

There was a long moment of strained silence among the humans until a red billed chough, the crow unique to Cornwall, drawn by the activity and hopeful of dropped bits to eat, uttered his distinctive barking call and broke the spell.

"Are you certain you are not weaving simple coincidence into a conspiracy, Major Abbey? Lady Felicia had neglected her responsibilities both at home and at the bank for too long. The inevitable decay and collapse ensued." Magdalen held out her hands, palms up. "Sometimes the most obvious answer is correct."

Cheddar pranced in a circle atop the barrel. *Oh, oh, I know exactly what this means!* he yowled. *While the cat's away, the mice will grow fat and delicious!*

All the humans looked over at him. How could he jest at a time like this? *I believe the saying goes, while the cat's away, the mice will play*, I said sourly.

Well, either way, unsupervised mice will steal anything they can lay their paws on. Is that not what we're discussing? The unrepentant

tant cat had the nerve to stretch out a paw and swat at the shining braid trimming the major's sleeve. *If you're looking for stolen things, Felix, he burred cheekily, I can lead you to any number of thieves. The butcher's cat stole the better part of a mutton joint not long ago, and he nearly clawed my face off when I offered to share it with him. I'll lead you to it as long as I get a nice large chunk as a finder's fee. And feel free to take the unpleasant fellow away with you. The cat, not the butcher.*

We're looking for gold, Cheddar, not mutton, I reminded him.

Just another reason the catkind usually let humans go their own way without interference. They have disordered priorities. You can't eat, chase, or warm yourself with gold.

"Either way, coincidence or cause and effect, as comptroller of the bank, your father would have been aware of Lady Felicia's plans." Major Abbey plucked up the cat and tucked him under his arm. His bright blue gaze slanted up at the women from under his brows while he gently worked Cheddar's claws free of the braid. "I see you are a close family, so I must assume he would pass on to his only daughter and widowed sister news of such interest as Lady Felicia Pascoe returning to England after decades away."

One part of the major's strategy had become ominously clear. I positioned myself between the women, on guard.

"Of course my father told me of Lady Felicia's return!" Magdalen retorted. "He enjoyed discussing the news and excitement of the world with me. He likes to say—he used to say—" Magdalen stuttered to a stop. She turned her face, but not before I saw her knuckle a tear from her eye.

I could not help the bristling of my hackles. My angel was crying, and that man was the cause. I gave the major a hard squint.

"Major Abbey, a word with you?" Hetty held out an imperious hand. The major unceremoniously shifted Cheddar to dangle from under his other arm and gave the elderly woman

his closer arm. I followed them so I could hear their conversation, but I pointedly gave the major a wide berth, so he would understand my first loyalty was to Magdalen and Hetty.

"Perhaps the one you should speak to is Sir Phillip," Hetty said quietly. "He's been Lady Felicia's deputy for many, many years. Mrs. Tregurtha, our housekeeper, who is born and bred here, told us some of the younger tenants have never even seen Lady Felicia. Any cooperation with gold smugglers on Pascoe land would necessarily have occurred under his authority. Do not forget, his agent, Mr. Merrick, is missing. Is that not suggestive?"

Major Abbey looked at her curiously. "Are you defending Lady Felicia, or accusing Sir Phillip?"

"Neither. What I am doing is protecting my niece from unjust accusations that can only lead to unnecessary pain." She managed to look down her nose at the taller man. She definitely had that eye of command I had seen in some strong-willed dogs. This one didn't need to raise her hackles to make her point. "Which I will do to the utmost of my ability."

"A quite considerable ability, I don't doubt." There was respect in the military man's tone. I was relieved he had taken my warning not to underestimate the older woman.

Why are you holding me so tight now? Cheddar wriggled out from under the major's grasp and sat with his back to us as if offended, but from the backward angle of his ears I knew the cat was still listening to every word.

Magdalen slipped an arm around her aunt protectively. "Major Abbey, it appears there is nothing I or my aunt can tell you that will remove us from your suspicions. We shall simply have to live our lives as we normally would while you complete your investigations, and allow our character and honesty to speak for themselves. But tell me one thing." I perceived the barest rustle of fabric where her other hand was hidden in her skirts to hide its trembling. "Is it usual for the

chief investigator to speak so openly of his theories with his suspects?”

He looked down at the shiny toes of his boots for a moment, then nodded as if he'd made a decision. He gestured the ladies to a nearby bench set invitingly in a sunny spot beside the house. Once he'd seen them seated, the major took up a stance before them. “The reason I've spoken so candidly with you both is to put you on your guard. There are rumors Napoleon has dispatched a special agent to find the missing gold and deliver it without delay. The agent is also ordered to find and put an end to whichever of his counterparts on the English side was responsible for the delay. Heaven help your father if he is the one. Disappointing Napoleon is a deadly mistake.”

Aunt Hetty rapped her cane on the cobbles. “Major Abbey, let us be frank. I do not believe for a moment that my brother would have anything to do with treason against his country, no matter what other foolishness he might have been gulled into.”

Magdalen flinched as if her aunt's words were a blow. Major Abbey did not miss her unguarded response. An expression of compassion, mingled with something else I could not read, fled across his face. It made me uneasy.

“It appears you and your aunt have been placed here deliberately at Lanthorne Cottage in the hope your father would make contact with you, and lead the conspirators to the missing gold,” he said.

“So you still see my aunt and me as suspects.” Magdalen's eyes snapped.

“I see your presence here as highly significant,” he clarified. It did not take my finely tuned canine senses to recognize the signs. The major was definitely on the hunt. “Time is growing short and the key players are desperate. If you have any way to contact your father—” he raised one hand to halt Magdalen's retort, “—do your best to bring him to me. No matter his involvement,” the major inclined his head slightly to Aunt Hetty,

acknowledging her candor, "that is the best hope for his exoneration, and your safety."

The sound of clopping hooves and a cheerful whistle broke the moment as Perran, Mrs. Tregurtha's grandson and our newly hired stable boy and gardener, was leading Patch in from the pasture for the night. Warm light bloomed in the sitting room bow window as Mrs. Tregurtha lit the lamps against the swiftly gathering twilight. My nostrils quivered, sifting out the scents. A stoked fire, something meaty and cheesy on the hob, aroma of yellow soap rising from the scrubbed doorstep: homey smells, reassuring smells.

Then the freshening breeze set the blackthorn tree moving. Someone had hung one of the little turnip lanterns on it. The crudely carved face seemed to leer as it bounced before the window, while the twigged ends of the bare limbs scratched at the panes like fingers, seeking to get in.

Aunt Hetty shivered. Cheddar jumped onto her lap, pressing his warm furry bulk against her while he watched the tree with eyes grown wide. What was it about this place? Lanthorne Cottage was just an assemblage of stone and wood, mortar and brick. It could have no memory of what had happened within its walls, or give rise to a ghost. Could it?

Magdalen tchk'ed with impatience and plucked the lantern off the tree.

Bless you for your good sense, my angel, I chuffed. I leaned against her leg, regaining my confidence. *No spooks for you*.

She pulled off her shawl and draped it around her aunt. "It is growing late and my aunt is tired," she said briskly. "Thank you for your warning and your concern, Major Abbey. As you suggest, we shall be on our guard. What more can we do? We can hardly duel with a French agent hand to hand, or repel Napoleon's gold smugglers should we see them land on the beach here below the house."

The major's tanned face flushed. "You know I did not intend any such thing, Miss Haven."

Aunt Hetty had climbed stiffly to her feet with Magdalen's aid. She braced herself in the open doorway. "Do you propose to set a watch on us?" she asked the major.

"I believe you already have a closer watch in place than I could arrange myself," he said.

I stepped forward proudly.

Major Abbey acknowledged my offer with a small upward quirk of the corner of his mouth. "You have the White Lady of the Pascoes," he clarified. She's begun to walk again this year after three generations asleep or more, the locals say. No one wants to meet the ghost while they're trespassing in a place she's claimed as hers."

From behind me, I heard Cheddar hiss.

CHAPTER 10



*I*t took some doing to rouse Cheddar. He had taken to sleeping with Aunt Hetty. I had to press my snoot to the bottom of Hetty's chamber door and puff little breaths through the opening until a slightly rumped Cheddar slipped out. He claimed it was her fat eiderdown quilt he loved, but I wasn't fooled. When we touched noses in greeting, I smelled the faint trace of rose oil, like the soothing potion Hetty rubbed into her hands before bed, on the cat's fur as if he'd been curled within her arms.

I didn't think you'd be asleep. I thought you cats were night hunters, I commented as we pattered across the sitting room.

We're not. We're crepuscular, he answered shortly.

I didn't even try to repeat the term. *You're what?*

Low light hunters. Dawn and dusk. And by my calculations, he squinted through the window, that's not low light, it's full dark. I'll just nap here on the hearth and you can call me at the first hint of dawn.

I shifted my paws impatiently. *Cheddar, remember what Major Abbey said about the women's best chance for being proven innocent?*

But if Magdalen's father was the first victim of the killer, there's no way he can come forward.

Mumpfh, Cheddar mumbled his agreement.

I smelled untruth swirling around the major. I have a feeling for every secret he reveals, there is a deeper one beneath it.

Cheddar looked up. You caught that too? The way Hetty's lap was shifting around underneath me, one would think she's Major Abbey's chief suspect with some dark secrets of her own. He left off his grooming and padded after me into the kitchen. Whatever he thinks of Aunt Hetty, I could save him the trouble, the cat commented as we pushed through the door into the kitchen. I've nosed all through her room. The only thing she's hiding is a taste for gothic novels. Keeps those in the bottom of her traveling trunk.

I eyed the latch on the door to the kitchen yard while I said over my shoulder, You know what we need to do first.

Cheddar's voice was resigned. Find the missing bodies.

As hard as it will be for the ladies, if we're correct and Henry Haven was the first person you saw killed here, that means Major Abbey cannot suspect Magdalen and Hetty from conspiring with Henry to take the gold for themselves.

I balanced on my hind legs. With the tip of my nose, I prodded at the simple latch until it slipped up and over its catches. Cheddar used his nimble paw, claws unsheathed, to tease the door open, then I used my strong neck and broad chest to push it wide enough for us to slip through. The cat helped me push the door closed behind us, then trotted to the opening of the low stone wall of the kitchen yard. First though, before we took the path toward the cliffside pasture, I asked Cheddar to wait for me a moment. I hurried around to the front of the cottage.

I slunk the last yard toward the turnip lantern lying in the dirt where Magdalen had dropped it earlier this evening. Careful sniffs erased my fear. Burnt turnip now cooled into a collapsed lump, melted tallow candle, bit of coarse twine—this

was not an imp from the spirit world but a child's Halloween toy. Adam Merrick had carried his doom with him the night he led me here. He had jumped at shadows he thought heralded a ghost, while the thing that killed him was very much of this earth. Merrick had been befuddled by drink then befooled by appearances. I vowed I would not be deceived that way. From now on, I would rely on my canine common sense.

Full of disdain, I cocked my leg over the remains of the lantern.

Did that make you feel better? Cheddar looked at me curiously.

Actually, yes.

How so?

Cheddar, some people in this matter are not what they appear. I'd wager my dewclaws that's at the bottom of all this.

You got that from a burned out old turnip? He stood up and shook his tail. *Come along. We have a lot of ground to search before sunrise and I don't want to be late for breakfast.*

Side by side we trotted across the cobbled yard. As we rounded the corner of the stable we could hear Patch's snores, and the hooting of the big owl who roosted in the gable. We passed through the pasture fence—I ducked under the bottom rail, Cheddar bounded over it—then onto the springy turf. The waning moon still shed enough light for our eyes to make for easy travel, so we eased into a run. Ahead loomed the shadowy mass of the blackthorn thicket, backed by ranks of windswept pines that formed a narrow band of forest marching uphill to the headland overlooking the sea.

We stopped to rest when we reached the thicket. A ragged stone wall half hidden by the trees marked the border of the little property belonging to Lanthorne Cottage and separated it from the coast road that ran north and south. This far from Mousehole, the road was a sandy track that dipped inland to allow for seaside pastures like ours.

I propped my front paws on the wall and peered over. *What's across the road, Cheddar?*

He landed soundlessly atop the wall beside me. *That's Kemyel land.*

I thought Kemyel Hall was farther along the road?

The gate, yes. The drive curves back around in this direction. You can't see the house from here since it stands on the hill, but it looks down across our pasture to the sea.

Now I could see the pine forest and the blackthorn thicket were actually two groups of trees, separated by the road. The sandy surface of the track reflected the moonlight and took on a glow that threw the black void beneath the pines into relief.

I savored the tail of fragrance carried to me from the across the road on a puff of breeze. Moss, reeds, wet leaves, and moving water. There was a stream under the trees across the road. It had worn a narrow channel in the hillside and made the stand of evergreens a steep sided tunnel running uphill. *And that? Where does it lead?*

To Kemyel House, of course. It's the direct path. You didn't think I traveled along the road to visit my family, did you? We call it the Shade Way, but the humans call it Kemyel Crease. Courting couples from the village used to picnic there on the flat rocks under the shade. The kiddies too, water's shallow enough for the littlest ones to play in, catch frogs and pick lilies for their mams. But not since the White Lady began walking. There was a trace of regret in his voice.

I dropped back onto all fours and stretched fore and aft to ease the stiffness that came from standing upright. I could feel in my whiskers the night was running quickly toward morning. *We'd better get started, Cheddar. Tell me what you saw that made you warn me to keep the ladies from this stand of trees.*

Cheddar crouched before me. His eyes glowed as yellow as a turnip lantern and the tip of his tail twitched nervously. *It's not so much what I saw, as what I didn't see...he began.*

I eased onto one hip. The cat was going to tell his story in his own way. I might as well be comfortable while he did it.

I pass this way often, Cheddar continued, especially on the new moon when the free traders or guinea runners or whatever Felix calls them are tramping around my cottage. I visit the family, patrol the borders of my territory, freshen up any markers that need it. Cat business. Well, last new moon night, one of my trees disappeared. I couldn't stop to investigate just then because I was running so fast, but the next day I came back. Look what I found.

The cat led me deep into the thicket, where a break in the canopy marked a missing tree. At ground level was a ragged stump, leaning and half sunk in a rough depression. The stage may have been set to satisfy human eyes that a tree had been torn out by a storm and churned up the earth as it fell, but the sweet mineral tang of the ax lingered on the wood, plain for any animal to smell. No matter the cat had been so incensed by the thought of his property being 'vandalized' by Major Abbey if he could prove the guinea runners were using Lanthorne Cottage. As the animal holder of the place, he'd already suffered a violation of his property rights.

I set my nose to the ground and began a slow, methodical search, spiraling in from the perimeter toward the stump. Cheddar followed close behind, still talking, words coming rapidly.

I kept that tree scratched and marked as a signpost so any passing tom can see and smell that this place is taken and well-guarded. I've had to start over again on this one here—he backed close to a smaller tree close by and raised his tail.

I'd appreciate if you'd kindly hold off on that until I'm finished, I said hastily.

No sense adding to the scents, yes, I see. The cat padded over to the churned earth surrounding the stump. *You'll want to get a nose-full of this.*

I was getting to it. Scent drifts. Reading its story as well as its source is an artform.

Drift over here, if you please. He trotted in a little circle around the depression, leaving his pad prints marked out in perspiration on the fallen leaves. *Not much art needed to discover something over here reeks of human to at least two tails' length depth. No wonder she—*

Here! My body stiffened from whiskers to tail. I'd found it.

Days of alternating wind, sun, and rain had burnished the disrupted earth so the low mound beside the stump was no longer so raw. The place had been well chosen for secrecy. I scratched the top of the mound, breaking the crust and releasing the dark, sweet-sour odor. Yes, this was a grave.

Cheddar peered around me. *From bad to worse. The humans have begun using my property as a burial ground.*

You know what we have to do, I said.

Cheddar nodded, resigned.

It was hard going. Even with Cheddar's help, I was panting hard by the time our paws had dug down far enough to uncover a layer of broken branches and splintered wood. Cheddar's tomcat aroma lingered still. This must be the remains of the missing tree.

They kill my tree then bury perfectly good wood? Humans are daft. Cheddar shook his paw at the pile in disgust.

The killer probably used the wood to weigh down the body and disguise its shape if any other humans came upon the mound. I set my nose to the brushy pile and inhaled deeply. Hundreds of images displayed themselves inside my head. My mind sorted them more quickly than I can tell, disregarding the normal elements of nature and seeking a match with the scent of a familiar human. *No. That can't be right.*

I backed away a few steps, gave myself a hard, mind-clearing full body shake, then put my nose down again. Inhaled, savored, soaked in the scents.

My head jerked up. *When did you say this happened?*

Cheddar's whiskers swept forward. *I told you. Last new moon. I remember it clearly. Isolde had just weaned the kittens and I was bringing them a fresh mouse for their blooding. Fine fat one I'd been watching and saving especially for the occasion. He licked his whiskers. Frigid and all, I still managed to hold on to it.*

I sat down heavily. *Last moon? Cheddar, that's too early. Merrick was killed just a few nights ago, and that first man, the one you saw killed, not long before that. This body isn't Merrick, and its scent signature doesn't share any family elements with Magdalen or Hetty.*

Oh? Cheddar's face went blank, ears twitching backwards and forwards in consternation. Then they snapped forward again in my direction. *Ooohh. Then if it's not your old master, and it's not Henry Haven, who is it?*

I looked up from running my snout along my outstretched front leg to clean the dirt off my nose leather. *Who indeed?*

Because we are civilized creatures, we scraped a covering of earth back over the body the best we could. We would have to bring our humans back here, but until then, the poor remains deserved their dignity.

The eastern horizon was pearling with first light as we trailed homeward through the pasture. It was no burden to slow my pace to match the shorter stride of the cat. We were both tired, but my mind was chewing busily on this new piece of the puzzle.

I'm sorry you didn't find your old master, Cheddar said. We haven't helped Magdalen and Hetty with this night's work either, have we? Major Abbey's suspicions of our ladies will skyrocket once he finds out about this body. The cat's worried face was level with mine from his perch on the bench near the front door, where we waited for someone to see us through the bow window and let us in for breakfast. *But it's probably best they don't spend any more time here at Lanthorne Cottage than can be helped.*

I helped myself to a deep drink from the stone trough. The

crisp, mineral taste made it especially delicious, as if the water had been cleansed and sweetened by tumbling over a long, rocky streambed.

Like the stream running through the Shade Way. I stared into the trough, seeing again the darkly shadowed watercourse running down its evergreen tunnel from Kemyel House atop the hill. The stream that ended abruptly at the roadway. The body had been buried in the Lanthorne pasture thicket, only a few yards away from the end of the stream if one crossed directly over the road.

Heedless of the water dripping from my muzzle, I said, *Cheddar, why were you running so fast that night you saw your tree was gone? You said 'despite the fright,' you held onto the gift mouse. You crossed paths with the White Lady of the Pascoes in the thicket that night, didn't you?*

"Where have you two been? We've been looking for you everywhere." Magdalen stood at the corner of the house, hands on her hips. "You've been up to some havey cavey business for sure." Her voice was exasperated, but her hands were gentle as they lifted my face to dot her nose to mine.

Mrs. Tregurtha's face appeared in the window, then she threw open the front door. Cheddar flashed across the threshold, rubbed briefly against the cook's skirts as a greeting, and leapt to Aunt Hetty's lap to receive a hug of his own from the old woman. His purrs mingled with a few suspicious sniffs she tried to hide behind her napkin.

Soon we were settling into our breakfast. My bowl had been placed on the floor close to Magdalen's chair, which was as it should be. But Cheddar ate from a plate on the table itself. I rolled a reproachful eye from Magdalen, to that outrageous sight, back to Magdalen, but she only laughed and ruffled my ears. "It's just for today, Grim. Because we're so relieved you're home."

Hetty looked over the rim of her teacup. "Magdalen, dear, you've a bit of smut on your nose."

Magdalen dabbed with her napkin then looked at the cloth. "Odd. It looks like dirt. I promise you, I washed my face as usual before I came downstairs. How could I—" She looked down at me, frowned slightly, then passed the napkin over my nose. She held it up. "You've been digging, haven't you?"

If only you knew, Cheddar yargled, talking while he continued polishing his plate with his tongue.

"If that's what he likes to do, might as well put him to work helping Perran this morning," Aunt Hetty said. "I asked the boy to start a vegetable patch. Mrs. Tregurtha says we can start cabbages, that sort of thing, even this late, if we plant in a protected spot."

Magdalen's brow crinkled as if Hetty's comment was worth deep consideration. She said slowly, "Aunt Hetty, don't you find it strange a man like Major Abbey, a soldier, a man entrusted by the crown with the defense of our coastline during a time of war, would believe in ghosts?"

Hetty set her cup down. "Perhaps he just said he does."

"I believe this White Lady of the Pascoes is nothing but a confabulation. A scary tale. And Major Abbey knows that perfectly well."

Cheddar perched tensely, ears swiveling as he took in every word and gesture. *I've wondered if I ate something that night that made me imagine things*, he whispered to me. *That hare I took off the fox from across the road a few days before and stashed away for later tasted gamy, but I could hardly give it back after eating half of what I took, now could I?* His whiskers twitched uneasily. *Oh the shame if the other toms knew I was chased out of my own territory by a—a—a bout of indigestion.*

"Yet he was all seriousness when he told us that faradiddle about a ghost, and this cottage being her favorite haunt, and that she's watching over us." Magdalen made a ladylike snort.

Hetty cleared her throat. "Watching us, not watching over us, I believe he said."

Magdalen waved an impatient hand. "Either way, what is the major up to with his ghost tale?"

Her aunt tipped her head toward the turnip lantern hanging over the mantle in the other room. "Well, why do people tell each other ghost stories? Especially this time of the year?"

Yes, why? Cheddar slipped down from the table. We hunched, side by side, barely daring to breathe.

"Ah, let me think. To frighten little children. To pass on the traditions and history of the past. Neither of these would further the major's investigation, would they?" Magdalen said.

Hetty tapped her chin. "To add to the cachet of a place and bring in visitors. Paying ones. You can thank Mr. Walpole and his *Castle of Otronto*. Nothing a group of holiday makers enjoys more than a visit to a picturesque site connected to murder and madness." Hetty's eyes flashed with wicked humor.

"Or to keep visitors away?" Magdalen gripped the edge of the table.

"Yes, that too," Hetty nodded, serious once again. "This White Lady of the Pascoes must be a fearsome sight on a dark night, moaning and carrying her heart in her hands. The legend says she is searching for the man who broke it, leaving her to die of unrequited love. She wants to remove his heart so he too will wander the world, lost and loveless."

Cheddar leaned against me. *That's just what I saw that night! She burst into the trees, dressed in white, making an awful noise. And Grim, she was holding her heart at arm's length, red and beating!* His ears were pinned back so tightly, he appeared to have none. *I was trapped between her and the wall where it's highest, without even my marking tree to climb. She was coming for me, grabbing for me. I jumped as high as I could but I still had to shove off against her to get over the wall. That's why I was running. I'm not a coward.*

No one could say that of you, Cheddar. I nuzzled him. *You were*

very brave to return there with me after what you experienced.

“Especially for the local people reared on the legend, the White Lady would certainly frighten the curious away from Lanthorne Cottage...” Hetty stared at Magdalen.

“And keep them away,” Magdalen completed her aunt’s thought. “So the guinea runners could have free rein of the cottage and the beach below. Now Major Abbey is using the legend too.” Magdalen pressed her hands flat on the table. “It is time we made a thorough exploration of this new home of ours, inside and out. I want to find what someone is trying so hard to frighten people away from finding.”

The gold! “The gold!” All four of us spoke at once.

Hetty shifted uneasily. “Magdalen, have you considered you are playing directly into Major Abbey’s hands? Ghosts, whether real or a Halloween mummery, can propel prudent people into imprudent actions.”

Magdalen’s lips relaxed into a chiding smile. “Auntie, more ideas from your beloved gothic novels?”

Hetty’s cheeks flushed and she ducked her head as if caught. “No, my dear. I invite you to look around my chamber. Not one work of Mrs. Radcliffe or Mr. Monk Lewis will you see.”

Cheddar trilled with approval. *Masterful, Aunt Hetty! It’s not a lie since we both know she’d never see your current gothic since it’s shoved between your bed and the wall.*

Hetty patted Cheddar absently then looked up again. Her cheeks were pale, her expression intent. “What I said was learned through observation over a long lifetime. Recall Major Abbey said time was growing short. Perhaps he means to flush out your father and this mysterious woman rumored to be the mastermind of the guinea runners by making them operate on the major’s timetable, not theirs. ‘Caught in the act’ is the saying, I believe.”

Cheddar and I exchanged a long look. Even from the other side of the table we could smell the older woman’s fear.

. . .

WE WERE patient as the ladies started their search by poking into every corner of the yard and stable. It was amusing, for a time, listening to law abiding citizens try to put themselves into the devious mind of a smuggler and imagine his strategies. Magdalen had snatched up the long poker from the kitchen and much to Mrs. Tregurtha's disgust, was ramming it down into the earth at random places, to see if she could strike a buried stash. They'd opened every door and hatch they could find in the outbuildings, even sending Perran into any likely spaces they'd found, as if those tiny places a whip slender boy had trouble shimmying inside could admit a full grown man or mark the start of a tunnel many men would use.

Cheddar and I waited them out, lounging comfortably in the sun. *Ever notice how humans wander about like ducks?* Cheddar snickered.

They'd found nothing. Perran had been sent back to dig out the new vegetable patch. Gwynifer, at first agog to see fine ladies grub about in dusty corners, had soon grown bored and made no protest when Mrs. Tregurtha called her back inside. Then Magdalen leaned over the pasture fence, shading her hand and surveying the bit of seaside pasture attached to Lanthorne Cottage.

In the changing weather marking the late afternoon, a worn path was just visible as the winds parted the grasses. "Isn't that interesting..."

Hetty tensed. "Patch must have worn it down. There's probably others. It is a pasture, after all."

Magdalen gathered her skirts and clambered between the fence rails. "Too straight. No hoofprints," she said shortly.

Cheddar and I trotted alongside Magdalen as she followed the lightly worn path uphill toward the blackthorn thicket. She didn't say it aloud, but I guessed the presence of Kemyel Hall

brooding unseen above us had made her search this end of the path first. But almost at the thicket, she swerved onto a fox's path that crossed this one and led off to the south.

I cut sharply in front of her, making her stumble to a halt.

"Grim, what's gotten into you?" Magdalen exclaimed. "Get by. Let me pass."

Against all my training and my nature, I ignored her. We had to know. *She had to know. Cheddar, I'll block this way, I said, while you lead her back.*

The cat trotted from Magdalen to the thicket and back again but Magdalen stubbornly remained in the same spot. *It's the trees, he panted. She must think the path dead ends at the thicket. I'll have to try something more drastic.* He stretched to his height and hooked his claws in the fabric of Magdalen's skirt, pulling her along.

"Aunt Hetty," Magdalen called, "tell this cat of yours that I'm about to carry him back to the cottage and lock him in the scullery. He's snagging my skirts."

If you'd follow the clear directions we've been giving you, I wouldn't have to resort to theatrics, Cheddar sassed. He ran back and forth before her feet, alternately leading and pressing her step by step back to the blackthorn thicket. I paced behind, giving her gentle pushes against the back of her legs to keep her going. Finally she stopped, confronted by the tangle of winter-dry branches where the path appeared to end.

I paced in small circles. *Just push through the branches, Magdalen. Cheddar, show her where.*

Cheddar slipped beneath the brush, then back out again. *Right here. Surely even human eyes can see the path continues,* he yowled up at her.

Magdalen chewed her lip.

Pay attention to us, Magdalen. I whined softly. The rising tension felt like a thousand fleas chewing at my skin. I craned my neck. Perhaps at her height she could not see the natural

opening lower down. *Cheddar, I'll push through from the road, you keep pushing her from this side.*

This job calls for a border collie, not a Labrador and a tabby cat, he groused.

Just do your best, I called back, already in full stride. I skidded around the trees and cleared the stone wall bordering the coast road. I galloped a few strides farther along the sandy roadway, then slid to a stop so I could clamber back over the wall and into the thicket. I carefully avoided the mound, not even looking at it as I passed through the little room formed by the overarching trees. Now just one layer of brush separated me from the others.

Follow the sound of my voice, Magdalen! I barked. *Come here to me.*

"Perhaps the dog is caught in the thicket and his little friend knows it," Hetty said, breathlessly. She'd painfully tip-tapped all the way along the path to where we were gathered. "You'll need to run back and get Perran to bring a pruning hook to free him. I'll wait here to keep him calm."

"No, he's trying to tell us something. I can tell from his bark," I heard Magdalen say. Then with a crunch of breaking twigs, arms over her head for protection, Magdalen pushed inside.

Well done, angel. I wagged my entire hindquarters in praise but I didn't let her get close enough to catch my collar. I backed through the thicket, leading her toward the mound by the stump. *Come see what we found. We need to know who it is and why he's buried here this way, but we can't do that without your help.*

After another few steps, I didn't need to lead her anymore. The ruddy late afternoon light slanted onto the mound through the break in the canopy. Cheddar and I had done our best to rebury the victim, but we'd had no way to smooth the earth. The finger bones of two cold, white hands bloomed from the broken earth like a bouquet of dead flower stalks, surrounded by pawprints of two different sizes.

Magdalen pressed her hands over her mouth and stumbled backwards. She bumped into a tree and leaned against it, eyes closed, shuddering. From outside the thicket we could hear Hetty calling, her voice growing more anxious by the moment.

After a few moments, Magdalen knelt clumsily next to me. "You knew. You and Cheddar, and you led me here. That dirt on your nose—you were here. And those—" she swallowed hard—"are your pawprints." She held out her other arm for Cheddar, holding him tightly against her chest. I noticed he did not mind.

She laid her hand on our heads, cautiously, as if in wonder. "It's almost as if you're trying to help me. I've prayed for a way to find my father and redeem his name. But I never imagined this..."

She had to use me as a prop to get to her feet. I stood very still beside her until she regained her balance, but she still moved jerkily with the shock so I stayed close. Cheddar kept his tail twined about her leg in a feline hug. I could smell her grief and knew what she feared. I wished we could make her understand the body wasn't her father's.

Then she noticed my ears, flat against my head in sympathy. "Were you looking for your old master, Merrick? I'm truly sorry, Grim, whether it's Merrick or my father, to find a loved one that way...Don't be broken hearted. I'm your family now."

And I am yours, forever, I said, before I led her out of the thicket.

"Aunt Hetty, it turns out we'll need Perran after all. He'll have to go for Major Abbey and his men," Magdalen said in a thin but reasonably controlled voice.

Aunt Hetty surprised me by not asking any questions, just directing a piercing gaze toward the thicket then back to her niece.

Magdalen nodded. "Yes. I think we may have found my father."

CHAPTER 11



It seemed like days before Major Abbey knocked on the kitchen door, though the ladies had only started on their second pot of tea. I should say, they had called for a second pot of tea they would likely allow to grow cold like the first, scarcely tasted, while they waited out the time between Perran's bringing the Coastguard and his men back from Mousehole, and the major coming to tell us what—or rather who—he believed was buried in the makeshift grave.

Cheddar curled on Hetty's lap, while I lay on my side near the hearth, keeping an eye on Magdalen as she paced, back and forth, back and forth.

"All the time we've been searching, he was there. So close, as if his killer was mocking us," she fumed. "We're missing something. Something obvious, something right in front of our faces. I just cannot put my finger on it." She rubbed her hands together before the fire as if the recent memory of other hands had suddenly chilled them.

Aunt Hetty set down the knitting she was attempting. "But Magdalen, recall we've only been here a few days," she said

reasonably. "Did you not tell me that the remains you glimpsed appeared to be, well, more bone than flesh?"

"Yesss." Magdalen drew out the word as she frowned down at her hands, turning them this way and that, studying them as if she'd never seen them before. Their silhouettes were misshapen into odd, skeletal shapes by the flickering light from the turnip lanterns. As Halloween approached, the servants had added freshly carved lanterns, until the mantel was covered with a festive display. But just now their faces looked menacing, gibbering and leering at us. Magdalen rubbed her arms with her hands as if to ward off a sudden chill. "There was something about those bones," she said half to herself.

Cheddar batted at the fleecy tangle of yarn, trying to break the pensive mood. *If Hetty wanted it to look like this on purpose, I could poke it into the mouse hole behind the wainscoting for her. The mice would turn this into a tangled mess in a trice. And without those words she says under her breath when she unpicks it all at night where Magdalen cannot see or hear her.* Cheddar giggled. *She thinks I do not understand. Such language. Shocking. Simply shocking from a lady of her breeding.* Despite his fun at his mistress's expense, I saw that Cheddar did not object when Hetty continued holding his paw after she disengaged it from the yarn, massaging his pads absently.

Heavy footsteps were a welcome relief as Mrs. Tregurtha carried in the pot. Behind her, the major waited at the threshold of the sitting room. "Himself's here to see you." She pointed with a jerk of her chin.

I was surprised at the servant's casual treatment of the Coastguard commander. Was that why Magdalen gripped the mantelpiece so tightly?

"My boots are still covered in dirt," he apologized.

Mrs. Tregurtha gestured him forward impatiently. "Told him pull 'em off and I'll have young Perran clean them boots while the major's telling you his news. But he's shy, like, not wanting

to appear before ladies in his stockin' feet. Needs a wife to break him of that. One that's houseproud and won't want him tracking muck across her clean floors." She sounded fierce, but I knew it was her way of expressing her anxiety for her mistresses she'd come to love.

The major flushed darkly.

Hetty gestured him forward. "This is not the time to stand on ceremony, Major Abbey. Please, come in. We understand you mean no discourtesy." Then she nodded meaningfully in the direction of the kitchen, sending the disappointed servant out before she could hear the major's news, or the ladies' reaction to it.

The major padded awkwardly across the floor to the chair Magdalen pulled forward, toes curled as if he did not wish his stocking feet to besmirch the gleaming floors. I saw the fleeting smile she turned aside to hide, but the major only caught the motion. His brow creased as if he feared she was already in tears. "Miss Haven, Lady Balfour," he began.

The silence stretched. I sidled close to the major and leaned against his leg. *They're strong, major. Kinder to tell them at once. They half suspect it already.*

"Major Abbey," Magdalen prompted. "I promise you, I am not in danger of having hysterics, nor is my aunt. After all, despite finding it—" she looked up at the grimacing lanterns and swallowed, "—er, him—in such a state, I still managed to keep my wits about me. I am not likely to fall apart now at learning his identity."

"No, I don't imagine so." He inhaled as if getting ready to dive into cold water. "Very well. I do not yet know the identity of the man in the makeshift grave, but I am sorry to tell you, I believe he is Henry Haven."

"What? That cannot be." Magdalen tottered a step toward him, hands outstretched.

She's falling! I barked.

The major leapt up and caught her. He swept her up in his arms, then looked around him, wildly.

"Quick, set her on the divan." Aunt Hetty pointed with her cane. "I'll get a basin of cool water to bathe her forehead."

The major eased Magdalen down and knelt beside her, arms still around her as if loathe to let her go. I was pleasantly surprised that my independent Magdalen did not pull away either. "Curse me for being so clumsy about breaking the news," the major muttered. "He's still your father, no matter what he's accused of. Naturally you'd be grief stricken."

"It's not that, Major Abbey."

He drew back. "I thought you loved your father. Isn't that why you've come down to Cornwall and started poking around, even when everything points to his being guilty as—er, guilty?" His confusion made him speak baldly.

Magdalen threw her head back against the cushion. "How to make you understand without making things worse!" She clenched her hands and controlled her voice with a visible effort. "You are wrong. That body is not my father's. I'd recognized that immediately. I just hadn't known until now how I knew what I knew. If you know what I mean?"

He frowned and passed a hand over her brow. It was pink from sunburn, and damp from a sudden sheen of perspiration. "You've made yourself ill, out in the sun and wind all day."

I put my front paws on the cushions and gave Magdalen a quick but thorough sniff. *No, she's completely fit*, I told him. *Just worried about what she's discovered and anxious about how to tell you.*

"Down, dog," the major said.

Magdalen gripped his hands in hers to get his attention. "Major Abbey, I am not ill. I'm anxious because I'm about to make a confession."

I stared at the major. He lifted one shoulder very slightly, accepting my reproach.

“One I’m afraid will reflect badly on my family,” Magdalen went on. “But you must know it, to track down the real criminals in all this.”

“I see.” He studied her face, then their linked hands. “Then under the circumstances, I believe you should call me Felix.”

The pink of Magdalen’s windburned cheeks deepened to red. “Felix,” she said softly. She looked up under her lashes. “I hope you will still allow me the privilege after I tell you—”

The bang of the kitchen door against its stops broke Magdalen and Felix apart. Mrs. Tregurtha brandished a dusty jug of what I suspected was smuggled French brandy, Gwynifer struggled under a tray laden with bowls and towels, and Perran brought up the rear with a pair of tall boots. Unable to push through the crowd ringing the couple on the divan, Hetty met Felix and Magdalen’s surprised looks with a sheepish shrug.

It took some time for Magdalen to assure them all that she was quite well, thank them, and see them off. In the meantime, Major Abbey, now Felix to us, had pulled on his boots. He and I had monitored the minor chaos from an out of the way corner, while he polished off the hevva cake Mrs. Tregurtha had pressed on Magdalen, vowing it was the perfect restorative. He had even shared a generous piece with me.

Now the three humans sat close to the fire, the rustic flickering lanterns and the warm fire inside, dark night outside. I inhaled deeply, savoring the feeling, trying to give it a name. Lanthorne Cottage felt like complete tonight, like it sheltered a family.

Felix drained the last of his tea and set his cup down. “I am glad to see you are surrounded by so many devoted protectors. It eases my worry somewhat about you ladies being out here on your own. Especially now that we’ve found this body. Remember, the killer is still at large.” He leaned forward. “Now, Magdalen, about that confession? And what does it have to do

with why you're so sure the body we found is not that of your father?"

Magdalen jumped a little. "I pray you will keep in mind, it is but the whim of nature, no matter what it is called," she temporized. "That's how I realized the body couldn't be my father's. It didn't have his thumb."

Felix squinted, perplexed.

"We all have it. All the Havens. See?" She held up her hands, while Hetty lifted hers from stroking Cheddar. The last joint of the thumb of each hand was shorter than average, broad and powerful, though still feminine with the ladies' elegant nails and smooth skin. "My father's thumbs were especially notable. The fingers poking from the grave were all very long and slender." Her voice lowered. "They call them 'murderer's thumbs...'"

Felix stared at the women's hands, now folded decorously in their laps, while he pulled at his lip in thought.

"You have not told us the circumstances of this person's death," Hetty said. "Perhaps that might tell us something about who he is, since we know who he is not."

The major flashed a look of curiosity, quickly masked, at the older woman. "From the injuries I could see, our man in the makeshift grave was killed by a bladed instrument, possibly a saber. I'll wait for Dr. Cardew to examine the body tomorrow to rule out anything else, but based on the injury and how he was buried, there's little doubt in my mind the man was murdered."

"Might it be Adam Merrick?" Magdalen asked.

"Doubtful. What I saw of the clothing was..." Felix searched for the right word, "...different than I would expect Adam Merrick to be wearing."

The women exchanged mystified looks.

"Could a woman have done it?" Magdalen asked.

"Under most circumstances, I'd say unlikely. A saber is a heavy weapon. They're carried by cavalrymen where the weight and length is an advantage, wielded from horseback down and

across an opponent. I carried a saber myself in battle. For a woman to use one, especially on foot?" He shook his head.

"But you said, 'under most circumstances,'" Hetty prompted.

"I did. Our victim was struck from behind. The blow nearly took his head off. Dr. Cardew will confirm, but I'm guessing he was kneeling and was taken unawares. In that case, yes, it is just possible a woman could have been behind the saber that killed him."

Magdalen and Hetty sat down in unison on the divan and held hands. I took up a position before them. No one, not even Felix, would harm them while I had anything to say about it.

Felix shook his head. "In answer to the question I see on your faces, considering who I now believe him to be, thanks to you, Miss Haven," he gave a short bow, "no, I do not suspect either of you of killing this man."

The ladies sagged against the cushions in relief.

Pity and regret flickered across the major's face and he made a quelling gesture with his hands. "But it does further implicate your father. Especially given the paw prints we found at the site. Fresh marks of a dog and a cat. Why else would these two," he pointed with his chin toward Cheddar and me, "be at such a place, unless they were with someone they knew, perhaps a family member or a person connected to one. You, Miss Haven, or you, Lady Balfour."

There was a feeling as if all the air had been sucked from the room. The pressure beat at my ears and my tail stiffened. From Hetty's lap, Cheddar mewled, his fur rising along his spine.

"From today, Henry Haven is now a suspect in murder, as well as theft and treason."

And just like the popping of a soap bubble, the lovely feeling of family shattered.

CHAPTER 12



Despite the tragedy and worry of yesterday, life still had to be lived. In fact, Magdalen's determination to do just that, to continue her investigation, had caused the fierce argument between Magdalen and her aunt that kept them awake until late, and tossing restlessly in their beds the rest of the night. Now it was later than usual as the women were clattering down the stairs in stout walking shoes and their plainest outdoor dresses.

The heavy knocker on the front door set up a racket.

Stranger! Stranger at the door! I bellowed. I brushed past Mrs. Tregurtha, sending her twirling. *Could be the killer—I'll go first and check.*

Cheddar reached the top of the wardrobe in three prodigious bounds. *I'll keep watch.*

Before I could push through the doorway and interpose myself between my ladies and the intruder, Magdalen peeped through the bow window. Muttering something under her breath, she caught my collar and pulled me upright.

"Hush, Pilgrim! Sit!"

I did as I was told. When she used my full name, I knew I

must obey. All the same, I licked my lips and rolled my eyes so she would know I was obliging under protest. It was my duty to protect her, even when she didn't know she needed it.

A smallish woman wearing a multitude of largish ruffles was standing on the doorstep with her back to us, gesturing to a gaggle of liveried servants carrying baskets. "Around the back to the kitchen," she called. "You there, er, Diggory—not the sack of oats, you dolt. They go to the stable." At last she turned.

"Good morning, Lady Felicia," Magdalen said. I cocked an ear, catching her hesitation. "What a—an unexpected pleasure. Won't you please come in?" She curtsied, then gestured the visitor ahead of her into the sitting room, shooting a silent grimace at Aunt Hetty over the visitor's shoulder.

"You'll pardon me, I'm certain, for a call at this hour," Lady Felicia said in a nasal drawl. "Shockingly early, I know, but that new Coastguard major has already been to see me about your tragedy here yesterday. Yet another scandal, with the Haven family found in the middle of it! Amid all his questions, he managed to let drop that this unpleasantness comes on the heels of some minor difficulty you met when you first moved in to Lanthorne Cottage. Of course I came straightaway to offer any help, you being my proteges, as it were."

So this personage was Merrick's employer, the storied holder of one of the largest estates on the coast from Penzance to Mousehole and beyond. 'Minor?' 'Straightaway?' 'Scandal?' Her understatements made my whiskers tingle with sardonic amusement. I sneezed once—twice—to relieve the feeling. It might have also been the cloud of artificial scent she wore like a cloak. Some of the elements were tantalizingly familiar, even troubling, but the overall effect was so cloying, my nose felt clogged with competing odors. I craned my neck upwards and examined her with my eyes while she waited for my ladies to arrange things for her comfort, and I waited for my nose to work over her scent.

The enormous bonnet Lady Felicia wore might be hiding them, but I saw no sign of the horns Merrick used to swear sprouted from every Pascoe head. Nor, as she lowered herself into a chair, did I see any suggestion of a tail peeping below out below her hem. Once again it seemed Merrick had allowed his fear and jealousy to color his opinions. The shiny silk of the woman's gown rustled too loudly, she was enveloped in that personal cloud of artificial odor, and all her motions were as quick and startling as those of a lizard, but she didn't seem to be a threat.

I relaxed a little and laid down, though I made sure to position myself between my ladies and Lady Felicia. Merrick hadn't been wrong every time.

From the kitchen I heard clinks and clatters that told me Mrs. Tregurtha was preparing something called 'refreshments.' Whatever those were, I imagined they would be cobbled together from the food that was to have fed my ladies and our household for the rest of the day. Surely not including the pancake Gwynifer had dropped on the floor this morning? Mrs. Tregurtha had dusted it off and set aside what she called in her Cornish burr a 'hevva' cake for "the dear beastie's" tea. And that dear beastie was to have been me.

"Naturally you must tell me everything about yesterday. Whatever was a dead person doing there?" Lady Felicia asked.

My ladies were at a loss for a sensible reply. I answered for them. *Doing?* I chuffed. *Just lying there in his makeshift grave.*

Lady Felicia leaned forward. "That is to say, to have a dead body found on one's property is unfortunate at any time, but for your family, considering everything, the timing couldn't be more...shall we say, inconvenient?"

Not very concerned about the poor victim, is she? Cheddar said from his perch. *She's more worried about how this will affect her standing in society.*

I wish it were only that. I stared at the titled lady, teasing out

what she actually meant from among all the words she spoke. *She's making it sound as if our ladies are responsible for the body being there. And she's more worried about the body being found now, not that her tenants might have killed him.*

"How amusing. Your dog seems to be studying me most intently." Her eyes glittered at me from the shadows of her bonnet, like ripples in black water. I could make out nothing more of her face, camouflaged as it was by the curled plume of some foreign waterfowl shading her brow and the large bow tied beside her cheek.

Magdalen glanced over from where she was kneeling at the hearth. "Yes, he's most attentive. We're discovering what a wonderful sense of security it brings, to have a large dog keeping watch over us so faithfully. Especially considering yesterday."

"Thank goodness Major Abbey was here to take charge. He could see how taken aback we were. He was most reassuring," Hetty said sweetly. "Such a prop for the innocent."

Magdalen set a light to the little pile of precious applewood logs that were all the ladies normally allowed themselves at night. It also served to hide the faint blush that touched her pale cheeks at the mention of Felix's name.

Lady Felicia leaned back as if disappointed. "Well, be sure I shall support you in your endeavors, no matter what. Now that I've returned to Kemyel House, I'm taking things in hand. Personally."

She gestured vaguely toward the window, through which we could see more baskets being unloaded and carried around to the kitchen door. "I brought along a few necessities you might be lacking. It's by way of apologizing for the state in which I understand Mr. Merrick left the cottage. My brother Sir Phillip has worked very hard during the years I was away, but his own business so often required him to be in Town that he delegated

many of the responsibilities to others...who were not always as conscientious as one might hope."

"Tea." Mrs. Tregurtha set the tray down with a bang that suggested she had heard Sir Phillip's indulgent sister excuse his irresponsibility—and Merrick's. She turned the plate so the dented hevvva cake was closest to Lady Felicia's hand.

Lady Felicia seemed unaffected. "Ah, Cornish servants. Dependable enough, but they do have their own ways of doing things. A word of advice." She held up a finger. "Mind your cook closely or you'll find fish heads in absolutely everything."

My dislike of Lady Felicia deepened as she gestured impatiently to Hetty who was wielding the sugar tongs. Two—three—four lumps of imported sugar gone as well, and an overlarge pour of this morning's fresh milk. My stomach growled in protest.

She's as bad as those mice behind the wainscot, for all she's so small. Looks set to eat her own weight, Cheddar snickered.

"At least your servants have made sure you're not lacking the most essential element of a Cornish home at this season," Lady Felicia said with a touch of mockery.

"What is that, Lady Felicia?" Hetty asked. "We're so enjoying learning about the traditions of our new home." Either she had not recognized Lady Felicia's disdain, or she was choosing to ignore it.

"Why, your turnip lanterns, of course. Spirit lights or ghost lights, they're also called. At Halloween, the veil between the worlds is said to be especially thin. In the days of the tribal Celts, the lanterns were supposed to light the way home for the ghosts of the family's dead to visit. Or to frighten them off, if such visitors were unwelcome. No matter the church put most of these superstitions to rest, our traditions run deep. No self-respecting Cornish home is without a turnip lantern or two leading up to All Hallows Eve."

“Do you have any turnip lanterns at Kemyel Hall?” Magdalen asked. Her fingers tightened on her tea cup.

I rolled over onto my chest and tented my ears. For some reason, Magdalen’s question was very important to her.

“Pascoes have no need of turnip lanterns. We’re a law unto ourselves. Besides, we have our very own visitant, the White Lady of the Pascoes, or hadn’t you heard?” Lady Felicia laughed, high and nasal like a horse’s whinny. “She does an admirable job scaring off trespassers from Kemyel lands. The story goes that she’ll snatch the living, beating heart out of anyone she catches, to replace the one her lover broke. I’m surprised you haven’t seen her yet.

Oh, not as intruders, of course.” She sketched an apology with a flutter of her fingers. “As those who are present through the grace and favor of a Pascoe. One can only imagine the crop of gossip your murder victim will cause, especially at this season. Has the White Lady taken another heart—does she have a human accomplice—who will be next—and why...” She leaned forward as if to gauge the effect of her tale.

Aunt Hetty smoothed her skirt over her lap. “We are Christians,” she said with simple dignity. “Our faith in Jesus Christ gives us strength. We are not frightened by a naughty child under a bedsheet stolen from her mother’s linen cupboard.”

“In other words, should we see a ghost, we would suspect a sham, rather than a specter,” Magdalen put in. “There is an all too human murderer hiding behind the legend of your White Lady. Since my aunt and I do not know the person murdered, why should we pose any danger to the person who killed him, or be of interest to his pantomime ghost?”

“Exactly what I wanted to hear,” Lady Felicia purred.

Her tone made the hackles rise along my spine as if a cool draft had passed close by. I shifted position so I could watch her, even as Lady Felicia relaxed into her chair and took two slices from the plate of mottled green and white cheese Hetty offered.

It was the crumbly white cheese wrapped and aged in nettle leaves we had purchased from Mrs. Tregurtha's favorite cheesemonger. Mrs. Tregurtha had pointed it out to us as a local specialty and not to be missed.

A orange and white head rose into view from behind the pediment atop the wardrobe. *No, Hetty, not the yarg, it's my favorite*, Cheddar mewled piteously.

He must have brushed against one of the old painted plates Magdalen had propped there as decorations. The center one fell forward, struck the edge of the wardrobe, and cracked in two. The room went silent except for the clatter as the pieces tumbled down the wardrobe and struck the floor, shattering into dozens of pieces.

Hetty quickly stifled her chirrup of laughter and slid a guilty look at Magdalen. Magdalen shrugged ruefully. But Lady Felicia stiffened.

We all caught a glimpse of Cheddar's appalled face before he ducked down behind the pediment. *Sorry, can't stay*. Paws sliding along wood marked the cat's descent down the steep side of the wardrobe.

Wait! I still need help watching and listening! I barked.

"Pilgrim! It was just a plate. There's no need to bark," Magdalen snapped.

I rolled back my ears meekly, though I had deliberately used my softest indoor bark. Even the kindest masters sometimes reprove us wrongly. I wouldn't hold it against her. Humans misunderstand so much of what is going on around them because they miss things that are clear to us, their animal companions.

There's no reason to leave, Cheddar, I trotted after the retreating cat. *Hetty won't be upset with you. She hated that piece. She just didn't want to hurt Magdalen's feelings*. To be truthful, which a dog should always be, I had never liked the piece either. It attempted to portray a hunting scene, but the misshapen dog

with its lumpy head and improbably long legs looked more like a bulldog on stilts than a pointer.

I've seen enough. His voice came from beneath the dining table. *That Lady Felicia. She knows.*

Knows? I extended my front legs into a bow so I could peer at the cat where he had taken shelter amidst the forest of chair and table legs.

She knows that we know. Just look at her. His whiskers swept forward stiff as wires.

The doorway framed the view into the sitting room like an image caught and frozen in a painting. Our ladies hovered around Lady Felicia. Gwynifer brushed shards into a dustpan. But Lady Felicia ignored them all, staring fixedly at the top of the wardrobe. The image came to life again when the enormous bonnet swiveled, following the maid where she knelt at the hearth prying out an errant bit of plate. Back toward the wardrobe the bonnet turned, then again toward the hearth. Then the bonnet and its mistress looked in our direction.

We both shivered under the weight of an unsettling energy, before we could free ourselves of its grip. We pushed through the kitchen door and into the privacy of the little scullery.

You broke a plate the night of the first murder, didn't you? I asked Cheddar.

An old cup. The killer moved so suddenly, I flinched. He shifted tensely where he crouched on the stone sink. *This place has only one door. I don't like being trapped. Especially with her in the house.*

It doesn't have to be bad, her guessing that we saw the murders. I nudged him encouragingly. *What if she was a witness too? Maybe she's trying to uncover what's going on here, the same as we are. All that double talk about the body—wouldn't it be natural she'd want to know what our ladies know, without revealing her own involvement in the matter?*

That's just what I'm afraid of, the cat muttered. *Didn't you feel*

the weight of that stare? Why else would she be nattering on about the White Lady? He scrubbed his paw over each side of his face.

I stared at Cheddar as the full weight of his suspicion settled on me. Even my canine optimism couldn't overcome what our senses told us about Lady Felicia. *You've got to get inside Kemyel Hall and bring me back something from both Lady Felicia and Sir Phillip.*

His paw stilled, hovering behind his ear. *Why?*

So I can learn their true scents. You're a regular visitor to the Hall. They're used to seeing you about. We've got to find out if there's any connection between either of them and that body in the blackthorn thicket.

I'm a regular visitor to the stable and the outbuildings, he pointed out. Not the big house. How am I going to get inside?

He was right. The next step was clear, but the way forward was blocked. I nibbled at my side, working off my frustration while I considered. I also needed the snuffbox. If the murderer had killed Merrick and almost killed me for it, and a mere look inside it had made Magdalen and Hetty turn pale, then that must hold the anchor scent.

I know where Magdalen hid it. It's in her chambers, but it will take me time to claw it out, Cheddar said doubtfully.

I sketched out my plan to him. *You'll need to stay close, I summed up, then get to work when you see me—*

—inspect the premises. Considering what has happened, it is my duty as your landlady to ensure this is a safe and secure dwelling place for you. Feminine footsteps pattered across the kitchen floor toward us. Cheddar and I turned as Lady Felicia appeared in the doorway.

“Well, well, the plate smasher and his supporter. I suppose this orange fellow,” she pointed at Cheddar with the nankeen toe of her boot, “is useful in keeping out mice. Fortunately that piece was clearly one of yours, Miss Magdalen, so if you do not mind the cat reducing your decorations to rubble, feel free to

allow him in the house. He more or less comes with the place. But the dog, that's a different matter. Something you said—" She tipped her head to one side, tapping her chin. "Ah yes, now I remember."

I could see Magdalen, hands gripped tightly, where she stood behind Lady Felicia. "Something I said, Lady Felicia?"

"Yes. That you had just discovered the advantage of having a large dog about the place. You did not bring the dog with you from London. You found him here. He is Adam Merrick's dog, is he not?"

Not anymore, I said, skirting Lady Felicia and sitting at the heel position close beside my angel Magdalen. *Not even if Merrick were to rise from his grave, wherever that might be, and whistle me to him.* I lifted my lip the tiniest bit, so the gleaming tip of my canine was visible.

"I had heard something to that effect," Magdalen said weakly. I leaned against her legs to comfort her.

"I believe Merrick paid no small amount for the creature and set great store by his working abilities. He's too valuable to be wasted as a mere house pet. Considering that the body is yet to be identified and here is Merrick's dog without Merrick, I had better take him along with me to Kemyel Hall." Lady Felicia reached for my collar. Her fingers drew back at my low growl.

"Working abilities such as pulling in nets and other heavy objects from the sea?" Aunt Hetty asked with bright interest as she tapped-stepped into the kitchen. She took Magdalen's arm for support and waved her cane. "I'm not as quick as you younger ladies, thanks to this. But my hearing and memory are still excellent. For example, I heard the villagers easily when they talked of Merrick's disappearing for days at a time, abandoning his responsibilities, including this dog. And I recall quite clearly Major Abbey's explaining to us the significance of the round smuggler's window in the attic gable.

But forgive me, Lady Felicia." Aunt Hetty's smile had steel

behind it. "Don't allow me to keep you from completing your inspection. I believe you wished to see the attic next?"

I sidled around to Hetty's side. There the humans went again, weaving a different meaning around and beneath the words they spoke. But I understood this much: Hetty was on the trail of something, and I would honor her find, even if I wasn't sure what it was.

Lady Felicia shrugged. "Such a to-do over a dumb beast. I am afraid my years abroad have colored my views. Please forgive me. The attitude toward dogs is more casual in France. I suppose he is safe enough here." She examined the elegant little gold watch pinned to her pelisse. "The attic must wait. At least this makes me feel better about pressing you to accept my invitation."

Magdalen and Hetty looked with polite interest at Lady Felicia.

"My brother is giving an evening party tonight as my official welcome home. Dinner and dancing. Cards, of course," she bowed in Hetty's direction, "for those who do not dance. Please do not think your family reputation has anything to do with your not receiving a formal invitation before this. Phillip could not have imagined you would have your domestic arrangements so well in hand so soon after your arrival. All the county families will be there. You may even be surprised to find a few who share your interests." Her eyes locked on the women from under the overshadowing bonnet. "It is an evening not to be missed."

Magdalen and Hetty exchanged uneasy looks. "Lady Felicia," Hetty said, "As much as it would please me to see my niece enjoy such a gathering, considering what has happened to our family in recent weeks, we had already determined to live in discreet retirement. Especially now considering the poor soul in the blackthorn thicket, our appearance at your party would likely cause a scandal that would reflect upon you

and be a poor return on your kindness in providing us this cottage.”

“Oh piffle. As I already told you, we Pascoes go our own way. If I, a director of the late Cavendish Bank, see fit to invite you, my guests will accept you as well. This is Cornwall. Society is small. Too small to drop an acquaintance because of the misbehavior of a relative.” Lady Felicia laughed sardonically. “Besides, having you there will ensure my little gathering is the talk of the county—which is every host’s dream.”

Magdalen swept her hand down her skirts, coarse wool stuff faded from green to a dull gray. “Unfortunately we did not bring suitable attire for elegant gatherings.”

The scent of deception made me study Magdalen with a cocked head. True, Magdalen and Hetty had dressed in their oldest clothes again this morning, suitable for the second day of the exploring Magdalen planned. Their usual clothing might not be suitable for presentation to the monarch, but it was simple and pretty and of good quality. Certainly they did not normally wear clothing little better than that of their maids, as Magdalen had just implied.

Lady Felicia raised an imperious hand. “Oh, well, if that is all that is stopping you, I shall some people along to help you with clothes and hair and such things. This will be a simple festivity of the Halloween season, traditional foods, decorations, you know the thing.” She flicked her fingers dismissively. “Now let us hear no more about it. I shall send a carriage for you at eight.”

Cheddar and I remained in the kitchen after our ladies, somewhat stunned, trailed out to see their visitor off. *Looks like we’ve found your way into Kemyel House*, I said.

Yes, he said gloomily. Then in a little voice he asked, *Did you happen to notice if that fellow in the grave still had his heart?*

CHAPTER 13



Despite Magdalen's reluctance, there was no distracting the rest of the household from the electrifying prospect of the two of them attending the party at Kemyel House that night. "At Lady Felicia's particular condescendence!" Mrs. Tregurtha reminded Magdalen, shooing her upstairs. Wide-eyed Gwynifer brought up the rear, loaded with mysterious boxes resurrected from the box room.

The four women were in and out of both ladies' chambers and up and down the stairs so frequently on their feminine business that I grew resigned, and to tell the truth, more than a little bored. I carried my newly acquired rope toy to my blankets, tucked it in carefully, and napped away the rest of the morning. Cheddar had quit the house in disgust after his tail was trod upon a third time. But when I saw Magdalen modeling the party gown that was the result of their combined efforts, I could not begrudge the lost opportunity.

I took up my accustomed heel position and studied our combined image in the tall mirror on the back of the door. *You look beautiful. Truly like the angel you are,* I panted.

Magdalen smoothed her hand lightly over the darkly shim-

mering silk, the subtle blue of a martin's feathers. "It's certainly sober enough for a woman in my situation," she mused. She twisted her hair in her hands, piled the mass atop her head and looked at the result from several angles, then sighed and let the red-brown waves fall around her shoulders. "I shan't aspire to elegance. Neat and proper will have to do." She dipped a curtsy to an imaginary partner and twirled. "I just hope all these hasty stitches survive. Assuming anyone asks me to dance."

She caught my reflected eyes watching her. "Would you like to escort me to the party? You'd be the perfect attendant for a country gentlewoman. I'm certain I'd prefer your company to that of anyone else I'm likely to meet there." She cupped my face in her hands.

I drank her in, letting the warmth of our bond spread through me from nose to tail.

Hetty tapped on the door. "Magdalen, dear, may I see?"

Magdalen opened the door for her aunt. Aunt Hetty's gown of smokey gray was very handsome too. "Ah yes, we've struck exactly the right tone," she said, taking in her niece's gown. "Very neat and proper."

Magdalen mouthed the words to me with a wink.

Aunt Hetty gave a little upward tug on Magdalen's bodice. "It would not do to stand out. You know I was initially reluctant to accept Lady Felicia's invitation, despite her insistence."

"I certainly do not feel in a party mood." Magdalen fidgeted while Hetty circled her slowly, plucking and adjusting here and there. "Father is still missing, and the gold, and Adam Merrick, and now we have a body on our hands. Despite what he said last night, I have a feeling Major Abbey still has us in his sights."

"Quite." Hetty stepped back to survey the effect of her adjustments. "Then I realized what a God-given opportunity had been dropped in our laps." She rapped the tip of her cane on the floor. "Did not Major Abbey say he suspected the guinea runners were organized and led by persons of influence in the

county, possibly even a highly placed woman? Just think—nearly everyone who could fit that description will be gathered in one room tomorrow night. News will have spread fast about the body. Someone will know, or at least suspect who that person was, which means they'll know who put him there. Or even be the murderer himself!"

"You've always said the darkest secrets paint themselves the brightest on the face of the person trying to keep them. All you have to do is look."

"Precisely. And in that dark gown, you'll be able to pass among the guests unremarked and observe them closely."

"And you as well. The chatter at the card tables—we could learn more in one night through casual gossip than we could manage through our own questioning in weeks," Magdalen said, her eyes growing wide. "And if the opportunity should arise for me to explore the house..."

"Oh yes," Aunt Hetty breathed.

Oh no. My misgivings were growing by the second. Cheddar was going to have his paws full looking after our ladies on top of looking for evidence.

A brisk rapping interrupted them. I was grateful at first that their mutual madness had been sidetracked, but when we trooped down the stairs and saw who Mrs. Tregurtha was just showing into the sitting room, my pessimism about the night's potential for disaster only deepened.

"Monsieur Etienne! Whatever are you doing here?" Magdalen sounded no more pleased than I was. "Lady Felicia said she would be sending someone, but I never imagined..." She self-consciously touched her bodice where it had returned to its lower position after Aunt Hetty's earlier adjustment. "Mrs. Tregurtha, perhaps our visitor would care for a dish of tea?"

"No time, no time." The little hairdresser waved his hands. "We have much to do, and few enough hourths to do it in, espethally since you did not allow me to properly address that

situation—” he shrugged eloquently toward Magdalen’s hair, falling around her shoulders in waves, “—when last we met.”

We all turned at the clatter of footsteps. Two servants tottered in, arms piled high with trunks, baskets, and bags. Even Gwynifer had been pressed into service. She trailed behind the two, her eyes round with wonder and her arms held high to keep a garment bag from dragging on the floor.

“After the hair, I will select just the right gown for you, to complete the effect.” He swept his arm toward the growing pile of items.

“We had thought to wear these,” Magdalen began.

Monsieur Etienne arched one brow nearly to his hairline. “One does not attend an evening party at Kemyel Hall in a made over dress pulled from the bottom of one’s travel trunk,” he sniffed.

Magdalen’s eyes slid to Gwynifer’s crestfallen expression. “I am quite pleased with the result. We’ve been sewing half the day. Mrs. Tregurtha and Gwynifer especially...”

“Have you really?” Etienne took a fold of Hetty’s skirt gingerly between his fingers, then brushed his hands off as if they’d become soiled. “I got here just in time. Where shall my assistants set up my work area? I require a large space with a fire and hot water.”

Magdalen’s brows rose. “Er, the kitchen, I suppose it will have to be, Mrs. Tregurtha?”

The housekeeper harumphed. “This way, monsoors.” Her lips compressed into a thin line, she led the assistants through the swinging door into the kitchen.

The hairdresser’s eyes passed over me where I sat, grinning up at him wolfishly. The servant women were my friends. I had not missed their hurt. “I also require the peace to perform my art without harassment,” he sniffed. “Is it possible for that *hound* to be elthwhere?”

I passed my tongue over my lips, remembering the taste of

the little man's wrist. Narrow, the skin soft and perfumed, but surprisingly resilient—

"Grim, be still." Magdalen frowned, but the quivering of her lips told me she was repressing her own memory of that day. "Let me search out a lead for him so I can tether him here by the fire. Will that do, monsieur Etienne?"

"Eh, it will have to do. I have hours of labor ahead of me, if my newest creations are to be ready in time to grace Kemyel Hall's drawing room tonight."

I rolled over and onto my feet in one motion as an idea formed. Before I trotted out of the room and left him alone with Magdalen, I gave the hairdresser one last hard squint over my shoulder, and a slow, suggestive passage of my tongue around my lips, just for good measure.

Right now? The long whiskers that marked Cheddar's eyebrows quivered. *With all these people in the house?*

You heard the man. He'll be in labor for hours, I said.

Cheddar sneezed with sudden laughter. *That's not what he meant.*

I couldn't help a quick tail wag at my own jest. *Nevertheless, he's got all the women downstairs, either bumping into each other following his orders, or held captive in the kitchen as what he calls his 'canvathses.' Hetty's face is covered with green goop, and Magdalen's feet are soaking in something that smells like peppermint. You'll have all the time and privacy you need.*

Still, we tried to make no noise as we crept down the hall toward Magdalen's chamber door. Cheddar hissed an annoyed, *Quiet, you dolt,* over his shoulder when my claws clicked against an uneven floor board. I looked with envy at the cat's soft-padded paws. I could not retract my claws like he could, so I ended by taking high steps and setting each paw down squarely. It looked ridiculous and slowed me considerably, but it was quieter. Besides, I'd told the cat we had ample time.

Cheddar slipped his paw under the chamber door and

rattled it. The latch popped free, I shouldered the solid oak door ajar, and we slipped inside. I took in a deep, reassuring breath. This chamber was the heart of home for me, because it was full of just two main scents, Magdalen's and mine, woven into one.

Cheddar padded over to the bureau, a scarred dark oak piece sitting on stumpy feet shaped like one of the buns Mrs. Nance served at the Mousehole Cat. He laid on his side and reached underneath to the full extent of his forearm. He seemed to be fishing or grappling for something behind one of the wooden feet. Several times I heard a grunted word I took to be a curse in Cattish. He pulled back the arm suddenly and examined a broken claw anxiously.

Should I try to push the whole thing away from the wall for you?

Won't 'elp, he said around the paw in his mouth, chewing the ragged claw into a blunt end. He spat the bit of claw from his tongue. *It's inside the foot. There's a hollowed out space the box just fits into. Easy enough when you have those long snake fingers and bendy thumbs like the humans do. Tougher for paws with short toes. There—*he spread his toes and extended his claws, three needle-tipped, one blunted—*that's better. Well-kept claws mean a well-fed cat, my mother always said.*

If you can't get it, we'll have to come up with another plan.

Cheddar scowled and curled the paw forward, giving the claws one last, savage lick. *Did I say I couldn't do it?*

No, but look at the angle of the sun. We've been at this for a while now and they've got to be nearly finished downstairs. The noise has certainly died down, I pointed out.

Cheddar glanced toward the window then his ears flicked toward the door, registering the same quiet I had.

Remember, once you get the box out, I still have to give it a good sniff before you put it back. They'll be coming upstairs soon to start dressing.

Cheddar wasted no more time. He snaked his arm under the bureau and around the stumpy wooden foot once more. *I've*

never envied a human, he panted, *but right now I'd give my left dewclaw for a thumb*. Finally, with a prodigious effort and a high pitched squeal of claws on wood that hurt my ears, he batted a small metal box into the middle of the floor.

Well done! Mindful of claw clicks, I high stepped across to the box and set my nose to work.

Powder, spices, some I did not recognize, and wax. And that dry white scent again, like earth, but clean and sharp. I opened my mouth to let the aromas meld on my palate, the combined mixture and each component sinking deep into my sense memory so I would never forget them. I exhaled with a snort and drew up one more nose full.

They're coming, Cheddar hissed. *Give it here*.

I must have been nose-blinded by my concentration. Now I too could hear them. They were climbing the stairs, more than halfway up. Two, three, no four sets of feet, one set a man's. I pushed the box past the anxious cat who was leaving sweaty pawprints on the floorboards, and nosed it under the bureau. *Head start for you*, I grunted.

The lead set of feet stepped onto the landing and turned the corner into the hall.

In one motion Cheddar rolled onto his side and slung the box around behind the wooden foot with a sweep of his arm. Too hard. The metal box slid out from under the bureau on the other side, visible to anyone who walked in.

Two other sets of feet stepped onto the landing. The first set of feet passed Hetty's chamber. Two more steps and they'd be at Magdalen's chamber door.

I lunged for the box, heedless of my paws scrambling on the wood. I shoved the box back under the bureau toward Cheddar. Cheddar's extended claws caught it. With a short, sharp motion he slapped the box against the inside aspect of the foot and yanked upward. I heard a metallic click of metal against wood, then the box rebounded. It was still beneath the bureau, hidden

from casual view by the ornamental trim, but it was not secreted inside the little compartment as before. I could only hope the humans, with their eyes so high above the floor, would not notice it.

The door opened and Magdalen stepped inside then turned in the doorway. "I assure you, Monsieur Etienne, the accessories my aunt and I chose are most suitable."

"Suitable?" I could not yet see the man but I could hear his sneer. "I aspire to elegance. I must see, then I shall tell you what accessories you may take with you."

When Magdalen turned, her surprised "Oh!" gave us the cue we needed to caper about in greeting, covering our heavy panting from our efforts of moments ago.

It took all my effort not to trip going down the stairs. My legs were still trembling from the tension of the last hour's work. I took myself off for a short stroll around the corner of the house, then a long drink from the trough. Cheddar slipped inside the barn for a refreshing hunt and a light meal before he went off to the Hall with the ladies.

I was glad, for once, to be out of Magdalen's presence, at least while Etienne was with her. The little hairdresser kept up a barrage of criticism and complaint. Through an open window above me where I rested on the sun-warmed paving stones outside the front door, I even caught the ping and clatter of something being thrown. Mrs. Tregurtha and Gwynifer had long since retreated to the kitchen with the excuse of tomorrow's bread to start on, the glamour of the preparations having lost their appeal.

But when my ladies appeared in the doorway, coifed and laced and jeweled, glowing with pleasure from the servants' awed compliments, I could have licked Monsieur Etienne for what he'd accomplished. It wasn't that he'd made them beautiful. Magdalen and Hetty could not be any more beautiful to me, for I loved them and they loved me. What Monsieur Etienne

had accomplished was to make my ladies *know* they were beautiful. For that I could forgive him much.

I brushed aside the waiting footman and with high head and waving tail, I escorted my ladies to the carriage myself as their guard of honor. As the carriage jerked into motion, they waved goodbye to us all. Well, nearly all. I could just make out the white tip of Cheddar's tail, twitching in excitement where it peeped from beneath the livery draping the coachman's high box.

CHAPTER 14



By the next setting of the sun, that last glimpse of Magdalen and Hetty departing from the cottage in triumph was a memory that mocked me. For they returned in abject defeat, and more deeply enmeshed in suspicion than when they left.

I sat up from a light doze beside the banked fire in the sitting room where I had been waiting for the women to return. There it was again—the strike of a shod hoof against a stone. I tented my ears and focused my attention. Something was wrong. Low voices carried on slow feet approached the door. No laughter, no quick tempo as of a pleasant time being remembered and talked over. What had happened? I sniffed carefully. No cat? Why had Cheddar not returned with them?

Major Abbey held the door for the women and gestured them inside. “I trust you will remain here at home until we speak again,” he said. “I gave my word to Lady Felicia that I would see you caused no more trouble if she agreed not to press charges.”

“It is ridiculous to accuse my niece of housebreaking,” Hetty said. Her voice was hoarse as if this was a protest she’d already

repeated many times. She released the major's supporting arm and sank wearily into a chair. "We were there at Lady Felicia's express invitation. Express to the point of rudeness, to be exact."

Magdalen's face was set in that mulish expression I recognized. She pulled off her slippers without ceremony then padded into the room in stocking feet. "I had the right to be there," she said.

"In Lady Felicia's own chamber?" the major countered. His eyes flashed to Magdalen's silk-clad toes before he studiously returned his attention to her face. I wondered if he was recalling his own stocking footed steps over this same floor, and with what emotion?

"I already told you," she gritted out. "I was looking for the ladies' retiring chamber. I asked a footman for directions. I followed them. They must have been wrong." She jabbed at the banked coals with the poker, stirring up a cloud of ashes and sparks.

"Hold on." The major took the poker from her. "You'll set yourself alight." He knelt and carefully fed a few twigs to the fire, one after the other, until small, bright flames bloomed.

I stood beside him as he worked, studying him. In the growing firelight, I could see the lines of exhaustion and unhappiness in his face. This night's events were touching him personally, taking a toll on him. Suddenly my own fears seemed just a bit lighter, knowing someone else shared my concerns. He did not seem to mind when I dotted my nose once, very gently, to his cheek.

He straightened up with a small grunt. "You deny opening that drawer and rifling through it? You were found with a lace, er—" he consulted a small notebook he pulled from an interior pocket of his coat, "—tippet in your hand."

Magdalen steadied herself with one hand on the mantel. "I wasn't stealing it, I was tidying it away. The drawer was already open, things hanging out of it." She closed her eyes. "I know it

doesn't make sense. It just seemed wrong to leave things that way."

"Did you realize you were in Lady Felicia's own chamber, not the one set aside for guests?"

"No. Yes. I suppose." She wobbled her head in a combination yes-and-no gesture. "I realized it could not be the chamber I was looking for because there was no attendant waiting to assist the ladies. Nor the usual items set out that ladies might need to repair their toilettes."

"Why didn't you retreat immediately? Why go farther into the room, even begin to tidy things away as you call it, so you were there long enough to be discovered?"

"It was late. I was tired." Magdalen pressed her fingertips against her temples. "I suppose I wasn't thinking clearly."

Aunt Hetty snorted. "Major Abbey, has it occurred to you that things tonight were contrived in such a way so that my niece would be discovered?"

His level gaze at the older woman showed he had already made that observation.

Though her voice was husky, the older woman still had energy enough to mount a spirited defense. "You of all people can understand why my niece and I were reluctant to attend an event of this kind just now. But Lady Felicia overrode our objections. Even to the point of sending Monsieur Etienne to assist us in preparing, and loaning us these lovely accessories." She smiled in mild self-deprecation as she smoothed the exquisite lace at her throat. "Surely you do not imagine two spinsters in constrained circumstances would normally have the resources to achieve such elegance?"

A moment of unguarded admiration softened Major Abbey's expression. "I cannot imagine two spinsters, as you call yourself, who display a more natural elegance, regardless of the circumstances or their attire." His eyes lingered on Magdalen before he seemed to recall himself. "And that

is basis of the accusation. That your niece was so bewitched by the borrowed finery that she crept into Lady Felicia's chamber to steal some to keep. We do have witnesses."

Magdalen sank into a chair, hands over her face. "All those people staring at me. Their faces. Some of them were even enjoying my embarrassment." She shuddered.

I laid my head in her lap and willed her to draw from my strength. "I was beginning to love it here. I dreamed I'd found my true home," Magdalen said. "Now how can I hold up my head in public? How can I talk to the traders along the Parade on market day? Will any of them trust me enough to do business with me anymore? They'll all know, at least they'll know the rumors." A tear dropped onto the top of my head, burning with the weight of her despair.

I whined softly. *I'll vouch for you, angel. If a trader won't accept you, I won't accept another pat, or even a tidbit, from him.* I turned to Felix. *What are you going to do about this?* I chuffed.

Major Abbey reached out his hand as if he wanted to wipe away Magdalen's tears. Then he shifted uneasily and covered his unguarded moment by consulting the notebook again. "Two, three—" he scanned the list, counting, "—six, no, seven witnesses, all members of our county society. Few of them are unlikely to be doing their own marketing, if that is any consolation."

"Too many, Major Abbey," Hetty said. "Too many guests passing along a dead end hallway in the family quarters, while the dancing was in progress downstairs."

Major Abbey frowned. "That footman misdirected a number of people."

Magdalen's head snapped up. "Misdirected? Or organized them, so they'd be at the right place at just the right moment?"

The major set his hands on the mantel and stared down at the flames, chewing his lip in thought.

“Well? Did you ask him about it? What did he say?” Magdalen demanded.

Abbey slid her a sideways look. “We didn’t find him. Just the maid who called the alarm.”

Magdalen’s eyes flashed. “That rascal who directed me to Lady Felicia’s chamber was stationed on the landing just below her door. He pointed to her door most specifically. He even apologized that he could not escort me himself since he had been instructed not to leave that exact spot. He should still have been there.”

“Perhaps he could not get through the crowd of guests congregating outside Lady Felicia’s door,” Hetty said, lips quirked in sardonic humor.

Abbey shook his head. “That still does not account for the missing item. Lady Felicia’s maid told me one of her mistress’s garters is missing.”

Magdalen shot up from her chair. “Then she has mislaid it, or her mistress lost it. I certainly do not have it!” She set her foot on the chair and hauled her skirts above her knee, exposing a shapely, silk-clad leg with a frilled garter above the knee. She swept a hand out. “Please, feel free to make a search of my person. Satisfy yourself I do not have any other garter than the two any lady would normally wear. Surely that must be acceptable evidence to you, if you will not accept my word I am not a thief.”

I yipped in distress. Emotions were boiling in the air like thunder. I shuttled from Magdalen, to the major, then to Aunt Hetty, but they were so distracted that none of them would reassure me. I crouched miserably beside Aunt Hetty’s chair.

Felix turned an abrupt about-face, his cheeks flushed a dull red. He said over his shoulder, “Magdalen, your argument is not with me, it is with Lady Felicia, or rather her maid, who reported the item missing, and that you were discovered in the room from which it was taken. I am performing my sworn duty

to investigate suspected crimes and keep the peace. You are willfully misunderstanding me.”

“Children, children,” Aunt Hetty exclaimed, “Please let us not argue. Surely we’ve had enough excitement for one evening.” She took Magdalen’s hands in hers and gave them a gentle squeeze. “My dear, I believe you are being unfair to Felix. He must perform his duty with impartiality. Come now, reorder your clothing, then shake hands with him to show you meant no offense.”

Aunt Hetty touched the major lightly on the elbow. “Major Abbey, my niece spoke in the heat of the moment. She intended no aspersion against your character. I pray you will accept her apology.”

He sketched a bow to Hetty. I noticed he made a quick check over his shoulder to be certain Magdalen had straightened her skirts, before he turned and took her hand. He closed his fingers ever so gently around Magdalen’s to prolong the contact for just a moment more. I panted in approval. When all this was over, I would have to do something about that.

The women stood politely at the door while the major donned his cloak. Just as he reached out his hand for the hat Hetty held, she pulled it back with a little exclamation. “Something just occurred to me, Major Abbey. May I ask you a question?”

“Certainly, Lady Balfour.”

“Were you yourself a guest at the party? I did not see you in the supper room or at the dancing.”

One of the major’s brows rose slightly. “No, I do not move in those circles. As it happens, I have yet to meet Sir Phillip since his business keeps him in London so often. I had hoped to correct that lack this evening, but he has been called away yet again. As it happened, Downton and I were already at Kemyel Hall. We had been called out to investigate a report of a smugglers’ cache discovered in the stables.”

I stiffened. Merrick had chiseled what he called his 'bolt hole' into the rock foundation of a corner of the stable. Had someone found his stash of gold? Had Cheddar been delayed returning home because of that? Since his mate Isolde and their kittens lived in the stable, anything occurring there would concern Cheddar.

"What did you find?" Magdalen said. Her eyes were as round as mine must have been.

"Nothing," the major said flatly. "Nor did we locate the person who sent us the message. He signed a false name and disguised his handwriting. By the time we'd determined it was a wild goose chase, Lady Felicia asked me into the Hall to have a drink and something to eat, as compensation, she said, for my wasted trip. A short time later there was an outcry from upstairs. Naturally I went to see what the problem was, found you, and the rest you know."

"A remarkable coincidence, your being there, and at exactly that moment. Wouldn't you say?" Aunt Hetty suggested.

Major Abbey frowned down at his boots for a long moment. Then he took his hat from Aunt Hetty and settled it on his head. "No, Lady Balfour, I would not say that."

I walked outside with the major. I wanted to hear what Gaiety and Dan might have learned since we talked here in the yard of Lanthorne Cottage and formed our alliance. Sergeant Downton led the two horses up to the door. "We questioned all the servants, but the footman wasn't among them," he said.

Dan lowered his head so we could touch muzzles in greeting. *Nothing much to report, he said. My man and I have spent most of our time wearing a rut between headquarters and the crossroads delivering letters to the mail coach as it passes, and fetching them back. Why not collect his letters from the village shop the way everyone else in Mousehole does? But nooo, Dan drew out the word with a rumbling nicker, the major must have his mail come and go in secret.*

Major Abbey took Gaiety's reins from the sergeant then ran his stirrup down with a snap of leather. "What about a former servant? Or someone hired on for the night from the village?"

Downton shook his head. "None of the resident staff recognized the description Miss Haven gave us."

The major ducked under Gaiety's neck and ran down the other stirrup. "Downton, I'd swear to it, Lady Felicia wasn't angry that Miss Haven had been discovered in her chamber." He draped his arms across the saddle and looked across his mare's back at his sergeant, who had already mounted, ending my talk with Dan. "She was frightened, Downton. No, make that horrified. As horrified as if she'd seen a ghost in her own chamber."

Long after the sound of hoofbeats had faded in the distance, I sat in the pallid light of the waning moon. I let the rustling of the sea against the cliffs just beyond the walls of our cottage wash over me. My head ached from puzzling over what I'd heard tonight. Missing footmen, false reports, Merrick's horde—most mysterious of all, what had Magdalen been up to at Kemyel Hall tonight, and why was Lady Felicia so frightened by it?

There was already cause enough for fear. There was the body we'd found in the blackthorn thicket, still lying nameless in the doctor's back room, nameless and unclaimed. And the bodies we had *not* found, Merrick and the first man killed, who I feared was Henry Haven. Whose greed would mow down any one—human, canine, feline—who stood between them and the gold? The mystery only deepened with every clue we gathered.

A traitorous memory rose from where I had pushed it down deep, trying to hide it. Witty, well-informed Lady Balfour, widow of a senior member of the secretive spy-hunting agency the Alien Office. Cool headed, masterful Hetty with her spine of steel, facing down Lady Felicia with an unspoken threat for my sake. Warm and tender Aunt Hetty, who loved Magdalen so much and would do anything to protect her.

But did Aunt Hetty, Lady Balfour, know too much? Major Abbey suspected a female mastermind behind the guinea runners. A female with wit and determination, who did not hesitate to kill...

I was just one dog. I suddenly felt very small, and very alone. I pointed my nose skyward and howled out my anguish to the cold, unheeding stars.

A soft tendril of breeze off the shore touched me. Sweet and gentle as the touch of a loving hand, it curled around me and held me close. I hushed my cries and leaned into what I could feel but not see.

Creator of All, I prayed. You made each dog and cat and horse, and all the other animals, to be your delight and your beloved servants. Yet your Son came to earth in the form of a human. That must mean you love the humans too. Great Creator—I raised my head again. Was it my imagination or did the stars twinkle at me just a bit more warmly? Help me save the ones I love, who have saved me.

I RAISED my head from my blankets, waking slowly from a troubled sleep. I was glad to be pulled from my nightmare of wandering masterless among strangers, all of them masked, none of them who or what they seemed.

There it was again, a whisper of sound rising from downstairs. Like a scuffling at the foot of the kitchen door, as if of a body pushing against the planks. The latch rattled but the door did not open. Ordinarily I would have already been roaring the alarm and barricading my ladies' doors. But this night, using my ears and my nose, I made a count of the occupants of the cottage first.

Magdalen slept unmoving in the bed above me and Hetty snorted softly in the room next door. With just a few twitches of one ear, I caught Mrs. Tregurtha's snores and Gwynifer's

deep, slow breaths filtering up to me from their beds off the kitchen.

I used my new high stepping stride to pass soundlessly to the window. Pressing my nose to the lower left pane with the hair-thin crack, I accounted for Patch, dozing in his warm stall, and Perran, twitching and grunting like a well fed pup on his cot in the tack room. I blew out then inhaled again to double check—there was no Cheddar in our cottage or in the barn.

I padded downstairs, through the sitting room and around the corner into the kitchen. I put my muzzle to the base of the door. *Cheddar, is that you?*

'oo elth would it be?

My tail lashed with relief. *Why are you trying to come-in this way? And why are you imitating Monsieur Etienne's lisp?*

Will you justh open the door?

It's probably not the finest point of my character, but I admit I do love a good tease when the opportunity permits. Goodness knows I needed a bit of humor with what was going on around us just now. *How do I know it's really you, Cheddar? You could be any cat trying to get into a warm house.*

*Open the door already, you—*The feline voice added a string of ripe curses that sounded like caterwauling.

Hush, you'll wake the household. I popped the latch up with my snout. The odor preceded Cheddar into the room. *Great galloping greyhounds, I spluttered, what happened to you?*

Cheddar limped in, something gray and grubby clenched in his teeth. He dropped it before he spoke. *Remember that foul-mouthed fellow I told you about? The tavernkeeper's cat? Well, we had it out.*

Ohhhh. Sorry.

What do you mean, 'sorry'? I won.

*Really? The other fellow smells—*I looked up from rubbing my face against the rag rug in an effort to remove his stench—*worse?*

Cheddar paused in his bathing. *I chased him into the back of*

the fishmonger's. Got him up a fence and in the last tussle, we both came down into a keg of old fish trimmings. But he was on the bottom. Completely soaked. Cheddar's laugh burbled in between passes of his tongue through his fur. I just got a few splashes.

Then why are you limping? What's that thing, I nodded toward the mass, limp with cat drool, *and what were you doing in the village in the first place? You were supposed to be gathering scent evidence from Kemyel House and listening for clues.*

Keep your hackles down, I brought you just what you need. That's it right there. He shook a paw at it. *And I wasn't imitating that pretentious fop, I was trying to talk around what I was carrying. Funny thing, he doesn't always lisp like he does when people are around. Wonder if he carries something around in his mouth?*

Cheddar, that looks like something the scullery maid cleaned out of the drains. I wanted something that had been in contact with skin.

And that's what I got you. One of her ladyship's own garters, and I don't mind telling you, it was no small trick to get it and get out of that place with my skin and all nine lives intact.

I sat down in a heap. A tiny gleam of clarity was shining onto my confusion of earlier this evening.

You got into the Hall and upstairs to Lady Felicia's chamber, didn't you?

I did. He sat up very straight and proud. *There was so much commotion in the kitchens, I had no trouble walking right in. It was harder to keep my tail from being trodden on, than to keep from being seen. I followed a maid upstairs and right to Lady Felicia's chamber. A few quick sniffs around, then I hooked open a drawer and pawed through it to find something small enough to carry away. Didn't I do well? Congratulate me!* His cheeks rounded into a cat smile.

More light dawned. *But Cheddar, you were seen. By Magdalen. She followed you upstairs, probably in an effort to keep you from being caught and harmed. I'm guessing she saw the open drawer and was putting things away so no one would suspect you'd been snooping. Especially Lady Felicia. I'm not sure how, but Magdalen and Hetty*

both understand they must keep our part in this investigation secret. Instead of you, Magdalen was the one who was caught, and since the garter was missing, she was accused of stealing it.

She did that for me? Cheddar's mouth widened into an 'o.' That would explain all the noise, he said slowly. By the time I got safely down the backstairs, it sounded like a herd of cattle stampeding through the halls upstairs. Lucky for me there was a cart pulled up outside the door. I jumped in, just to hide until I could ride home again with our ladies, but it took off almost immediately. You'll never guess who was driving it. He sat up on his hind legs, holding his paws up for attention. Mr. Fusspot the hairdresser. Wearing satin breeches, to boot! Make that, Mr. Fussypants!

I thumped the floor once with my tail to satisfy the cat's need for a response. Then I returned to my questions. *So that explains how you got to the village. But what were you doing at the fishmongers shop?*

I was only there because I chased the tavern cat. Fussypants didn't go home to his flat over his shop, he went to the tavern instead. Odd thing, though. Cheddar brought his hind foot forward to give his ear a contemplative scratch. He didn't have any of those trunks or bags with him like he brought here earlier today, like he was dressing Lady Felicia. And he didn't go in the front of the tavern as if he were going to have an ale. He drove around back. I think someone was waiting for him. I was following Fussypants to see who he was meeting with, when I ran into the tavern cat.

I shifted from paw to paw waiting for Cheddar to get back to the heart of the matter. *What did he do then?*

Came at me like a fury, that's what he did then. Didn't give me a chance to explain what I was doing on his territory. So I let my claws do the talking. Cheddar clicked his jaws together in glee at his own witticism.

I sighed inwardly, holding onto my patience. *I meant, what did Monsieur Etienne do next? Who did he meet?*

Oh. I'm sorry, Grim, I don't know. I had to let Leo chase me for a

bit until I found a better place to wage my offense. It's no joke, grappling with another tom when you can't use your teeth. But I was determined not to drop the garter.

The cat had completed his task bravely. I could not complain. I nuzzled him gently to show my appreciation. *At least we know what to do next. We'll have to go back to the tavern and follow up. Strange you had a problem with Leo. He always seemed more of a paper lion to me.* I panted widely to show the cat I could be witty too.

I'll tell you what he's not. He's not a featherbed. Some of his bones poked me pretty good when I landed on him. I think I sprained my shoulder. Here—he twisted around, presenting me with his back. See if you can see anything.

Glinting in the banked firelight was a sliver of bone protruding from the base of Cheddar's neck, between his withers.

You've got a piece of bone sticking out of you, Cheddar.

He flipped his head around toward me. *I wasn't serious. You mean I actually squashed one of his bones out?*

Wait a moment. I sniffed the spot delicately. Not cat. It's the bone of a fish. Cod, I'd say, or maybe, my nostrils quivered, one of those big mackerals—

I don't care what kind of fish it came from, just get it out of me.

All right. But you have to stay still, and be quiet, for goodness sake. I want to keep the household asleep and safe in their beds as long as can be.

Just get on with it. Obviously I can't do it myself.

I laid a paw on Cheddar's back to keep him flat, then used my small scissor-like front teeth to delicately grasp the bone. I tasted scarcely any blood at the entry point. The thing had gone in as slick as a needle, and it would come out just as cleanly. Had it been in any other place, Cheddar would have bitten it out himself in a trice.

A needle. What was that word reminding me of? A maid

leaving the busy kitchens on a party night when every hand would be needed to cook and serve, going upstairs to an unoccupied chamber... *Cheddar, that maid you followed upstairs. What was she carrying?*

Carrying? Nothing.

No sewing basket, needles and thread, the sort of thing the lady guests might need?

No.

She was coming from the kitchen. What about food on a tray, pot of tea, anything like that?

No. I told you. Cheddar's tail twitched in an irritated fashion. She wasn't carrying anything. Unless you count the note she had shoved in her apron pocket.

What. Note.

The one she was reading when I first saw her. She made a little tchk like she was annoyed, said, 'What does he want now,' then crumpled up the note and hurried to the backstairs. That's how I knew she was going upstairs.

Cheddar, you're brilliant! I did not dare bark my excitement and chance waking the servants sleeping so close by, so I made a little hop of joy, bouncing in place like a deer.

Well, it was fairly obvious, Cheddar said, modest this once. She'd have gone through the baize door downstairs if she was going into the dining room—

No, no, you said she said 'he'! I panted happily.

*Cheddar's ears tilted to either side while he unraveled my statement. Then his eyes grew very large and black. *The missing footman!**

Yes. 'He' wrote the note summoning the maid upstairs, 'he' directed those guests to Lady Felicia's door. 'He' arranged it all to fix suspicion firmly at Magdalen.

And you believe 'he' is Monsieur Etienne.

You gave us the proof. My tip of my tail quivered. At last we were getting somewhere. Remember, you said the hairdresser left

the house by the backstairs door onto the yard immediately after the noise started, and that he was wearing satin breeches, like a footman would wear on formal occasions.

That's right. But he wasn't wearing a footman's powdered wig.

I could see it all in my mind's eye. Of course not. He would have taken that off and tossed it into a corner before he left the house, I said. It would be the only thing that would suggest to a casual observer that your Mr. Fussypants was pretending to be a footman. And he wasn't carrying any of the tools of his trade like we saw him bring into our house today.

I held up a paw. Think on it, if Monsieur Etienne passed anyone on the way back to the village, they wouldn't see the satin breeches or livery if the hairdresser was all bundled up in his cloak. And if he dressed himself up tonight as a footman, what other disguises might he have made for himself in the past? He's an expert in altering ladies' appearance. Why not his own? I recalled our ladies' stout denial that the White Lady of the Pascoes was anything other than, how had they said it? A child playacting in a borrowed sheet? Perhaps...

Cheddar broke into my thoughts. I agree. He could likely make himself up to look like anyone he wished. But there's a kink in this solution you're weaving out of these slender threads of evidence. He bundled himself into a loaf, tucked his front paws beneath his chest and fixed me with a gaze as stern as a magistrate's. Why would a country hairdresser go to such lengths to place blame on a young woman he's known for only a few days? And why would the charade he arranged tonight make Lady Felicia so afraid?

I lowered my head to my paws, my joy of just moments ago evaporating as quickly as it had come.

And the main problem, Cheddar went on inexorably. Major Abbey said there's a female mastermind behind it all. Monsieur Etienne is most definitely not a female. That must mean our killer is working for this woman mastermind. So we still another person to hunt down.

I closed my eyes, but there was no escaping his logic. I wanted to run around in circles or chase my tail, I was so frustrated.

Who does that leave? Aunt Hetty? Magdalen herself? Grim, all this uncertainty makes me feel like my whiskers are being pulled out, one by one. My heart will be as broken as the White Lady's if I can't trust Aunt Hetty. I can't imagine what you're feeling right now about Magdalen. Cheddar extended his claws, carefully controlled, and tapped my paw for emphasis. I brought you the garter. We have Magdalen's father's snuffbox. Let's fish it out again and you can compare them side by side. Use that nose of yours to sniff out the truth. Then we'll go back to the tavern and pick up the trail.

I had to turn my head aside from the cat's beseeching gaze before I could tell him. *Cheddar, it only gets worse. I went upstairs to work my nose over it after the ladies had left, and it's not there.*

Cheddar froze. What's not there?

Henry Haven's snuffbox is gone.

CHAPTER 15



We were on our way to the village at first light, brushing through the dewy heath of the pasture before we struck the coast road. Monsieur Etienne had made a secretive visit to the tavern late at night. He had also been in Magdalen's room earlier in the day. I well remembered that 'ping' of something thrown, perhaps a pair of scissors. How simple, and simply unfortunate, if he'd spied the box we'd been unable to return to its hiding place, when he bent down to retrieve whatever he'd thrown. But what did he want with it? If Merrick had been killed for it, and probably Henry Haven too, did Etienne know how dangerous the snuffbox was to anyone who possessed it?

The St. Clement's Arms served the village as ale house, coaching inn and livery, and center of village gossip, inside the premises for the humans, in the stables for the animals. Since it was where Major Abbey and his men stabled their horses, I hoped Gaiety, Argo, and Dan would have seen what went on between Etienne and the person he had met.

Cheddar looked nervously over each shoulder as we passed

through the stable's double doors into the center aisle. *Wonder where that Leo is? Hope he's not still bearing a grudge.*

Before I could tell Cheddar to leave the tavern cat to me, a booming, low pitched bark startled us.

Who are you? State your names and business! A thickset bulldog, nimble despite his bulk, bounded into our path.

Cheddar puffed himself into an orange dandelion, but I was not alarmed. I'd found bulldogs were usually reasonable creatures, not prone to violent action without good cause, despite their fearsome looks.

I'm Pilgrim, and this is my housemate Cheddar, I said politely. We're investigating a serious crime. We're friends of Gaiety and the other coastguard horses. They're helping us investigate a serious crime. Actually, more than one. We'd like to talk to them, and ask the other horses some questions.

The white and brown brindled dog considered this for a moment. *Very well, Pilgrim and Cheddar, pass friend and glad to meet you. My name is Cicero.*

Cheddar giggled. *They shorten his name to 'Grim,' he flicked his tail toward me. Do they call you 'Cissy' for short?*

Not more than once. The round, dark eyes twinkled amid the heavy wrinkles of his face. He was too self-confident take offense.

You're new here, aren't you? I asked him.

Yes. They just brought me in from Doctor Cardew's farm. From what I heard, Lady Felicia is borrowing me from Doc as protection. Until herself arrives to pick me up and take me back to Kemyel Hall, I thought I might as well keep my present surroundings in order.

Cheddar and I exchanged glances. *Protection from what?*

The bulldog sat down flat on his rump with his hind legs splayed wide. *That's a good question, come to think on it. Doc was grumbling about 'her ladyship getting the nervy megrims' and jumping at shadows. He calls himself a man of science but he's about*

run out of science to convince Lady Felicia she's letting a Halloween ghost story make her sick.

The bulldog scooted around on his bottom to get more comfortable, like some human toddlers I've seen. I caught Cheddar's eye, warning him to keep a straight face. *So as usual, call in the bulldog if you want to feel secure,* he went on. *Usually all I have to do is walk about the place and let myself be seen. That and the occasional firm 'woof' are enough to convince trespassers to take themselves off. I'm a dog of science myself. I'll be happy to research the taste of a ghost's leg if one tries to cause problems anywhere I'm on duty.* He rolled over onto his back and wriggled against the bricks, his wrinkly skin looking like a pile of un-ironed laundry.

Cheddar was vigorously scrubbing his paw over his face in an effort not to laugh. *Disable any trespasser with laughter if they saw him like that,* he muttered for my ears alone.

Ah, that's better. Cicero shook himself and returned to business. *Now—what kind of crimes?*

I reminded myself that no matter how clownish they might appear, bulldogs possessed keen minds. I quickly explained, concluding, *We need to know who the hairdresser met with, and what they said.*

Hmmm, yes, serious indeed. Skinny fellow was he, this hairdresser? Cicero asked. *No one came into the stable after I arrived.* The three of us were walking down the aisle toward our horse friends. *They bedded me down in the first stall by the double doors so I wouldn't have seen anything outside. But the horses might have.*

I saw some of it, Argo said in answer to our query. *Those men just turned the chestnut mare loose in the yard and piled the harness over the fence rails. It was your spindly hairdresser and Big Bill Bray, the owner of this place. Jago our ostler was furious when he got here this morning and found the greedy girl had broken into a barrel of oats, but he didn't dare say a thing because it was Mr. Bray.*

Gaiety giggled from her stall next to Argo's. *I've never heard such language in my life.*

Argo rumbled deep in his chest. *Learned a few words myself. That's why she's tied in that straight stall over there.* He tossed his head in the direction of a single stall at the end of the aisle, a set of powerful red chestnut hindquarters and a flaxen tail filling the narrow space. *To keep her out of trouble.*

Gaiety snorted. *No one misses her conversation. Just because she's in and out at all hours doesn't mean she has to be such a sour-puss. Puss! I made a joke. Did you hear that, Cheddar?* Gaiety nuzzled the cat where he perched on the divider between the two horses.

But did you hear what they said, Argo? I asked, redirecting the horses' attention.

You mean Bray and the hairdresser, correct? Because that chestnut gal has a rough turn of language herself. Sorry, old chap, I'm afraid I didn't. The silvery hairs flecking his dark face and muzzle caught the light when he shook his head. *Hearing's not what it used to be. Too many charges beneath artillery cover.*

And too many years, Gaiety teased.

No use their asking you, missy, Argo stamped one heavy hoof, *since you were sleeping flat on your side, dead to the world as usual. Snoring loud enough to drown out a regimental band to boot.*

Sorry, Grim, Dan broke in, None of us could make out what they were saying, just that ss-ss-ss sound the humans make when they whisper. I can tell you this, though. They were arguing something fierce. Bray kept holding out his hand like he was expecting the hairdresser to give him something. What it was, none of us heard. Rosie is the one who was out there with them, but good look getting her to talk to you.

The flaxen tail swished in an irritated fashion as if its owner knew we were talking about her. My ears drooped flat against my head. *Then we've wasted a journey here. Cheddar, we'll have to look elsewhere. I'm just not sure where.* We turned to go.

Dan stretched his neck over the stall door. *Hold hard, there. Don't you want to know what we've discovered?*

We trotted back.

The younger horses deferred to Argo, their senior in both age and experience, to give the report. *Dan here says he already told you he's spent most of his time carrying the major's letters to the London mail coach. Now we know why. Yesterday Felix got a big packet of letters from the mail coach. He told Downton they contained what he called 'confirmation' on Lady Balfour. He didn't get everything he was looking for, though. Seems like London sent him back a list of people he'd asked them to watch the ports for, either sneaking out or in. No Merrick, sorry, Grim, Argo blew softly through his nostrils, and no French agent. Felix told Downton, 'She disappeared from London, and now her brother too.' Isn't that right, Dan?*

Gaiety broke in, tossing her forelock, unable to contain herself any longer. *I heard it too. He was standing right in front of my stall when he said 'Downton, she's at the center of this all. Mark my words. Now we need to find the proof.' They're going to search Lanthorne Cottage this morning.*

Cheddar arched his back in a bow, tail puffed. *Grim, we have to get home now!*

I shared his dismay. I was being torn apart between conflicting loyalties. The horses' eyes were huge and liquid with sympathy.

Here now, this is no time to lose courage, Cicero spoke up. He'd been listening quietly to our conversation. I'm new to this investigation of yours, and I don't know all these brothers and sisters and shes and hes you're so concerned about, but there's a witness you still need to talk to right here, Rosie.

Cicero, you're right, I yipped.

I sidled gingerly along the stall partition, keeping a wary eye on the chestnut mare's hind feet just inches from my head. *Good morning, Rosie. May I have a word or two?*

A word or two. That's all I feel like sparing. She half turned her head toward me, muzzle crinkled into a sneer of ill humor. I worked hard last night, and look what I get by way of thanks. Not a

pat of thanks or a rubdown, they just turned me loose and stood there arguing. Ignored me as if I didn't exist.

That gave me an idea. I backed out of the stall, ran back down the aisle and lifted the apple from the ostler's lunch he'd left sitting on a barrel near the tack room. After the mare crunched it down then lipped through the straw and picked up every last fallen bit of fruit, she heaved a satisfied breath and turned a softer eye on me. As I expected, Rosie had the typical horse's excellent memory and was eager to tell what she knew. All she'd needed was a bit of personal attention and a touch of kindness.

Big Mr. Bray, that's the tavernkeeper and my owner, you know, was hopping mad.

Grabbed your man by the lapels. Shook him like a terrier. 'You said you'd have it and we'd be quits,' he said, right up in the other fellow's face.

'Just one more night's work will finish it. You'll get your pretty bauble then, and more.'

'You'd better deliver. Even that scarcely covers my risk. Boney already sent an agent to sniff around. He's getting impatient.'

'I took care of that problem.'

'Well you'd best take care of her, too. I don't want to be the last man standing when t'emperor figures that's where the leak's sprung.'

'Stay calm. Twenty four hours from now, you'll be clear of this, with enough money to buy a dozen taverns.'

Rosie stopped. *There's something more, she said, but it could upset my place here. Bray doesn't act like he knows I have feelings, but he feeds me reliably and keeps the roof snug over my head. A livery horse could do worse. Much worse.* Her hide twitched nervously as if a fly had landed on it. She lowered her head to mine and spoke softly. *I heard what you and the other animals said about your masters. You really like them, don't you?*

We love them, and they love us, I said simply.

You mean they feed you and let you live in their warm houses.

That kind of home is worth going to all this trouble to keep, I suppose. Her huge brown eyes were troubled.

I dotted her muzzle with my nose. Rosie, it wouldn't matter to me if Magdalen and Hetty lived in a charabanc parked beside the road and had nothing to share with me but cold oatmeal. Argo has taken Felix into battle in the face of cannon fire and brought him out again. Gaiety carries Felix safely in the hunting field over enormous fences. Even Cheddar is risking his safety for Hetty. We do it because our humans have taken us into their hearts. That's an animal's true home. That's what we're fighting to defend.

Perhaps someday, for me... The mare exhaled a deep breath, sweetly scented with hay and apple. All right. Bray said, 'You'd better not be crossing me like you're doing the other. I want what you promised me. Or I'll tell it all to that new Coastguard major. He's nearly twigged to it now. If I hang, I won't hang alone.'

But that hairdresser fellow just laughed and said the White Lady would go for the major's heart if the major poked his nose outside his door this Halloween night. That the next body in the blackthorn thicket would be wearing a diamond stickpin where his heart should be.

CHAPTER 16



Deep voices interrupted us. Felix and his sergeant were leading a small group of men through the tavern stable's big double doors. A quick glance among us all confirmed these men were strangers to the coastguard horses as well as to us dogs and cat. Strong, solid men, they appeared to be farmers or merchants from their simple, tidy clothes, perhaps respectable men breaking their travels in the village on their way somewhere else.

"Stand easy, men," Felix said. The six men made a ragged line, but their attention remained on him. I noticed the military horses listened to Felix as carefully as the men did.

"This morning we'll be searching Lanthorne Cottage, in further investigation of a theft that occurred last night at Kemyel Hall. The search warrant was granted by the magistrate based on the recent finding of a surreptitiously buried murder victim on the property, and with supporting information just sent to me by the Alien Office." He held up a heavy document, bound by wax seals and dangling an official-looking ribbon.

"The cottage is currently rented to a Miss Magdalen Haven and her aunt, Lady Balfour," he went on. "You'll secure the

perimeter of the property while Downton and I conduct the search ourselves. It is imperative you prevent interruption by passersby or any other persons, while Downton and I are inside conducting the search. My sergeant will give you your specific assignments now. Thank you for volunteering.”

One of the men stepped forward. “Sir, will we be met with resistance? Are there any weapons on the property?”

Cheddar and I made whispered farewells to the horses and began to slip out of the stable, keeping to the walls, skirting the shadows. We had to get home before the searchers got there.

Felix turned to his man. “No. Not unless you count the legend of a ghost rumored to be overfond of the location, and shy of having its privacy disturbed.”

The men’s faces showed various degrees of confusion or uncertain amusement. The major’s mouth thinned, perhaps in annoyance at himself. “That is to say, no. Just two unmarried ladies, women servants and a gardener’s boy. Oh, and there is a dog—”

Was it my imagination, or had Felix’s eye picked out my shape, a moving brown silhouette against the dark stained wood of the stall doors? His eyes narrowed, probing the shadows. I hugged the door and slipped outside before he could be sure.

The distance home was not far, so we knew we would have a little time to prepare before Felix and his men arrived. There was the stolen garter to hide, and the snuffbox to find. At least we could check the house thoroughly to be certain it hadn’t been misplaced, rather than stolen by Monsieur Etienne. I was shocked when the massed thunder of hoofbeats galloped down the coastal road, splashed through the little stream at the gate and swept into our front yard only a short time later. In the bright morning I finally recognized the watchful quality of the new men’s gaze, the upright posture of their shoulders, the military precision of their strides.

I thought you said these were local volunteers, Cheddar hissed at

me from the top of the stairs, *yokels who'd be hard pressed to stay in their saddles at more than a brisk trot. I haven't had time to find a hiding place for the garter.*

I know, I know, I growled, angry at myself for being fooled. How quickly I had forgotten that no one was who they appeared in this matter. Felix must have brought in soldiers from outside the area, precisely to fool people just as he had me. Just shove it into one of those books you said Hetty's already hiding from Magdalen.

Easy for you to say! I'll have to claw it out from between the mattress and the wall then put it back. Remember how that went before?

I'll go downstairs and stall them.

Cheddar seized the dingy garter, flipped a turn and hurried back to Hetty's room. *We both know how well your thalling worked lath time, he muttered between clenched teeth.*

I heard that, I woofed.

Good!

I raced downstairs and barreled through the door Magdalen had just opened to Downton's thundering knock. *Hello, hello one and all, I barked. Nothing to see inside, nothing at all, but there's a wide world to explore outside and I'll be your guide.*

I jumped and capered, nipping at a coattail here, clipping close behind a set of booted legs there, desperate to lead the men away from the cottage. *Follow me! What do you want to find first? A rabbit hole with a clutch of late pups? The cider Mrs. Tregurtha is secretly fermenting behind a loose stone in the scullery? The red hair ribbons an admirer gave to Gwynifer and she's too shy to wear but keeps under her pillow?*

After some quick footwork to avoid my attempts to trip them up and a few hesitant pats that assured them I wouldn't bite, the men ignored me. Downton sent them to their positions, and soon the six were as visible as tall fence posts in the pasture and along the road and clifftops.

I finally had to stop for breath, splay legged, sides heaving. I tried one last time while Felix stood on the threshold, scanning the pasture and surrounding land to assure himself the men were in position before he and Downton started their search inside. *Felix, I gasped at him, are you feeling quite well? A little bird told me you'd live longer if you spent more time indoors. Especially the next few nights. You don't want to catch your death of cold, poking about our cottage and cliffs, especially on Halloween night, do you?*

All of it had been for naught. The weight of his stare on me was punishing. A welter of emotions flashed across his face: satisfaction, that it had in fact been me he'd seen in the St. Clement's Arms' stable earlier; and surprise at my antics. Worst of all was the disappointment. Whether he had expected me to guard my ladies, or whether he somehow understood I was trying to balk him and his men in their own duty, either way he felt betrayed. By me.

I stifled the whine of despair rising from the back of my throat and slunk inside on his heels.

The end came quickly. While Magdalen and Hetty sat side by side on the divan holding tightly to each other's hands, Downton and Major Abbey each searched one of their chambers. A shout from Downton drew us all upstairs. Downton stepped out of Hetty's chamber holding out his hand.

"Looks like the missing garter, sir."

Felix poked at it with the end of his pencil. "Much the worse for wear, isn't it." He looked his inquiry at Magdalen by raising his brows.

"I never saw the item before, so I cannot account for its current condition. Perhaps Lady Felicia's lady's maid is not all that she should be. I can assure you, I allow none of mine to reach that state. Oh, wait. You can vouch for that yourself, Major Abbey. You've seen my garters," Magdalen said with poisonous sweetness.

The major stiffened, but he let that pass without replying to her. "Where did you find it, Downton?"

"When I passed my hand between the wall and the edge of the bed, I found a book hidden. Nothing so unusual in that—"

I gave Cheddar a tiny tail wag of congratulations, too small for the humans to notice.

"—but it seemed awfully wet. Pulled it out and found this between the pages."

Cheddar mouthed a silent meow of apology. Was it a trick of the light, or had Magdalen caught our byplay this time? She was staring at us.

"Did you find anything else, sergeant?"

"Not yet. The bed was the first place I looked."

"Very well. I'll leave off Miss Haven's chamber for now and help you in here."

Magdalen tried a little silent communication of her own once the men's backs were turned, raising her brows and pointing with her chin as if asking Hetty how the garter had appeared, and in her aunt's room of all places. But Hetty remained as serene and unmoved as a statue carved from ivory.

Magdalen focused her attention to Cheddar, studying him as if seeing him in a new light. He raised a pleading paw as if in protest at her harsh regard, but it was plain to both of us, she held him responsible for starting the trouble that had led to this.

And all the time, the emotions in the little cottage were rising to a boiling point, with me in the center, more unhappy and more confused by the moment. What had happened to my family? It was being torn apart. The women had returned to the sitting room, staring at cooling cups of tea. Mrs. Tregurtha had grumbled she was going to start wringing out and reusing the tea leaves since no one seemed to drink the tea she brewed from fresh leaves.

From outside on the coast road, I could hear the hush of wheels over sand as yet another cart rolled by. This section of

road had seen more traffic this morning and early afternoon, than in all the days we'd lived here, combined. Perhaps it had something to do with the men stationed so plainly visible around the cottage and its lands. My unfed stomach growled but I ignored it. It was as if the major had done everything he could to draw attention to what was going on here and raise the curiosity of our neighbors near and far. Every rumor about Henry Haven appeared to be confirmed, with fresh gossip enmeshing Magdalen and Hetty more tightly in the conspiracy by the hour, thanks to today's work. I could never imagine Felix could be so cruel.

But when the final discovery was made, I gave them credit, neither man crowed or called out. In fact, a long silence fell over Hetty's chamber, without the squeak of floorboards under men's weight and the sliding of furniture across the room to communicate their actions to our little group sitting in the room beneath. Mrs. Tregurtha and Gwynifer had long since been waved to seats at the dining table, and Perran sat cross-legged beside me, sharing my blankets. Cheddar hunched, dejected, on the periphery of the group.

Downton came downstairs first and passed directly to the door then outside, without ever looking at us. It was Felix's grave manner that gave us the first warning of bad news.

"Lady Balfour, can you give me an explanation for your having these in your possession?" He held out his hand. Nestled inside a handkerchief, a pile of gold guineas glinted. He turned them over with his forefinger. Each coin had a small notch cut into its edge.

Magdalen's body swayed as if the cushions under her had shifted. The blood drained from her face as she looked at her aunt. The servants tactfully slipped out of the room in silent shock and dismay.

Hetty closed her eyes momentarily and sighed deeply, as if in pain. "Where did you find them?"

"In your trunk."

"The hidden drawer? I see."

"Not the most original place." Felix lowered his lids over his eyes ever so slightly as he added, "But simple and quick."

Magdalen looked from her aunt to Major Abbey, her brow puckered as if she was struggling to grasp a meaning from their interchange that was just outside her grasp.

She pushed herself to her feet with her hands on the cushions. "I know how this must look, Major Abbey. You found a few gold guineas in my aunt's trunk. What does it matter if a lady in distressed circumstances has managed to keep some money set aside for emergencies? Most traveling trunks of good quality do contain hidden compartments. How else does one keep valuable possessions safe during travel? I have done it myself." Her voice was jerky, as if she was fighting for logical explanations.

Felix had moved his shoulders inside his jacket when Magdalen resorted to his formal title. He said, "In cooperation with the Alien Office's effort to track the flow of English gold to France, the mint began marking a percentage of guineas as tracer coins. A notch was cut into the edge of each of these coins. These are newly minted tracers, and they bear the serial number from a large shipment of coins delivered to the Cavendish bank shortly before it was robbed. They have never circulated in public commerce. No one could have them unless he, or she, was connected to the theft. The scheme worked as intended. This is strong evidence."

"A good thing you found no other secrets hidden there." Faint amusement flickered momentarily in Hetty's eyes.

"That would have been most—inconvenient," Major Abbey agreed soberly.

"What is this about secrets, inconvenient or not? Is not proof of my father's guilt inconvenient enough for you?" Magdalen gritted out.

“My darling, please,” Hetty said levelly. “Don’t make this more difficult for yourself. The major and I understand each perfectly.”

“You understand? That is most excellent news, because I don’t understand a thing!” Magdalen gripped her hands together tightly and fought for control. “Do you know the truth about my father and the missing gold, Aunt Hetty? I know you were in my uncle Balfour’s close confidence while he worked with the Alien Office. You are one who first told me of these guinea runners smuggling gold to France, and that there was a new scheme being considered to trace and stop the treason. You even warned him. He told me so in his last letter—” She stopped suddenly as if her air had been cut off.

Hetty held out an imperious hand to the major. He hastened to raise her to her feet. “My dear,” Hetty said to Magdalen, pressing her hands firmly on Magdalen’s shoulders, “only a few days ago I tried to warn you off pursuing this investigation of yours. There are forces here that involve the fate of nations, and twisted individuals who are only too willing to use others, even to the death, to pursue their greedy ends. They have no pity, and no conscience. They have relations but no family, they have hearts that animate their bodies but do not love. Some of us learned that too late and could only try to make things right through great personal sacrifice. I tried to warn you. Now that we are so close to the end, please do not allow those sacrifices to have been in vain.”

Magdalen’s lips trembled as she studied her aunt’s face. Then her eyes sought out Felix, searching him too, as if seeking answers to unspoken questions. “I trusted you,” she quavered. “Despite everything. I had even begun to feel—to believe—that you and I—” Her voice broke. She pulled herself from Hetty’s grasp and reeled toward the hearth. She leaned her forehead against the mantel, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

Major Abbey took a step toward Magdalen, his hand outstretched.

Yes, Felix yes! I sat up expectantly, waving my tail to encourage him. *Show her your heart. She needs to know.*

Hetty stopped him with a shake of her head, and a world of love and regret in her eyes. Then she took a breath, raised her chin and straightened to her full height. I could read the effort that cost the older woman, through the tiny tremors of her locked muscles. "Have you found anything else? What other proof do you have?"

Felix followed her example. His voice was as controlled as Hetty's. "None, yet. But I did receive confirmation from London of a brother disappearing, and his sister appearing in Cornwall. The timing is...highly suggestive."

Hetty pursed her lips as if considering the situation as an uninvolved person. "How can you be so certain this sister is the mastermind you seek? How much more evidence is required, for an indictment of treason?"

"Your arrest will bring much of what I need within my grasp."

Hetty shrugged. "Very well. Shall we get on with it?"

Downton stepped forward with a set of manacles. He had entered so silently none of us had heard him.

"If there was any other way, Lady Balfour—" Major Abbey began. He looked toward the fireplace. "Magdalen—"

She stiffened and raised her head, but she did not turn or look at him.

"She knows, Felix," Hetty said very softly, before she held out her wrists to Sergeant Downton.

CHAPTER 17



The house had fallen silent. The servants had retreated to the kitchen after serving a dinner Magdalen stared at sightlessly, pushing peas around her plate until the tall case clock marked off a quarter hour and the shortest interval at table that would allow Magdalen to escape. Now she sat on the edge of her bed, head in her hands. I had crawled up next to her and pushed my head into her lap. It was the only comfort I could offer her. Truth be told, I needed the warmth of our contact as much as she did.

“What am I going to do, Grim? We have no friends remaining who would help us, or who are powerful to be able to do anything, even if they were willing.” Magdalen sat up, took a deep breath then unlaced one half boot and slipped it off. “Lady Felicia was the last person of any influence willing to speak to me. Now that door’s been slammed shut—” She threw the boot across the room “—thanks to a lazy footman and a snooping cat. And what do I get for my pains in saving Cheddar’s neck?”

She tugged at the knot she’d made of the laces of the second boot. Impatiently, she jerked it off then held it up, staring in disgust at the stocking that had come off with the boot. “A

search for the garter he stole that leads to my aunt being arrested as a gold smuggler and a traitor and a—an—I don't even want to think what else!" The second boot flew across the room. It hit the wall, bounced back and hit Magdalen in the shin.

She slid to the floor in a heap, buried her face against her upraised knees and began to cry.

Please, please, Angel, your pain is killing me. I sniffed at her hair, nosing her neck, feeling her erratically beating pulse. *You already own my heart. Take it, if yours is broken.*

An orange tabby body brushed past me. Cheddar pushed and squeezed until he had insinuated himself into Magdalen's lap. *Please don't be angry with me. I'm scared, too,* Cheddar said in a tiny voice. *We did it to try to help you, and now because of me, Hetty has been taken away. We've got to save her.*

She squeezed him tight and hid her face in his fur, wetting it with her tears. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I wasn't truly angry with you, just upset."

Cheddar rolled his head into her cupped hand. *You were wrong to be upset, but I forgive you.*

"Poor kitty," she whispered. "Your mama has gone away and you don't know what happened to her."

Cheddar squirmed in her arms until he could reach up and pat her face, claws carefully sheathed. *I know exactly what happened to her. Felix took her away.* His fear had been replaced by determination. *He's wrong. Hetty is involved, somehow, but Felix has his evidence all tangled, like Hetty's yarn. We have to untangle it for him.*

"I know you didn't mean to cause trouble. But that moment keeps replaying in my head—the maid screaming and all those people staring at me. Their expressions—especially Lady Felicia's..." Magdalen's voice broke and she began to cry again.

More tears? The time for crying is past. Now is the time for work. Cheddar squirmed higher against Magdalen's chest, then he

ever so gently bit her on the chin. When she drew back in surprise, he locked eyes with her. Golden cat eyes meet and held green and golden hazel human eyes. *You're wondering what I was doing in Lady Felicia's room, aren't you?*

Magdalen's stilled on Cheddar's back. "It was like she was frightened of me. But if she thought my father was cooperating with the guinea runners and so were Aunt Hetty and I, why would she offer us a home here in Cornwall on her estate?" Her lips pushed into a thoughtful pout. "Then nearly force us to attend an event in her very own home, directly after that body was found? Even Felix doesn't suspect us of being the killers, no matter the body was buried only a few yards from our cottage."

Cheddar made a nearly silent chirrup of encouragement. *Good Magdalen. Good girl. Now you're thinking.*

I was happy for another reason, when I heard Magdalen return to using Felix's name, unthinkingly, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Friends," she spoke directly to us, "she was afraid, no, make that terrified, of something else she saw in that moment. *Someone* else. But there were nearly a dozen people in that crowd and I don't know a single one of them."

Grim, help me, Cheddar said, flicking his ears toward me. *How can we tell her she knows the one significant person in that crowd?*

I hopped up and trotted to the bureau. I stood on my hind legs, set my paws on the top and scanned the contents. I paused briefly to consider my reflection. Dogs are blessed by our Creator with natural beauty that requires little enhancement, my own breed especially. But the human species requires more care to look well. The bureau held a tray of what I imagined were typical grooming tools for females of the species, including a silver backed brush and comb, a pretty porcelain dish holding ear bobs, and a matching porcelain tumbler with nail files, an orangewood stick, a tooth brush, scissors—

I plucked at the scissors with my tiny front teeth, knocking the tumbler over in my haste. I galloped the two short strides back to Magdalen, raised my head and dropped the scissors to the floor. They made a tiny click when they landed.

She was halfway to her feet, no doubt to set the tray back in order. I retrieved the scissors, this time throwing them down with all the force I could muster. They hit the floorboards with a ping, bounced and slid a few feet toward the bureau before they came to rest.

Magdalen's mouth formed a silent 'o.' She looked from the two of us, sitting expectantly, then back at the scissors. All of a sudden she scrambled forward on hands and knees, then reached under the bureau. After a bit of manipulation behind the same bun foot of the bureau, she sat back on her heels. "Father's snuffbox is gone. Felix didn't mention finding it today so there's only one other person who could have taken it. I remember now. He even made a little sound, like a gasp, when he fished his scissors out from under here. I just thought he'd caught a sliver."

Magdalen slapped her palms against her thighs. "No wonder that footman stayed in the darkest corner of the landing and wouldn't take me to the door himself. And that wig. No self-respecting butler would allow a footman under his supervision to appear in such a thing, would he?" She described it to us, pantomiming with arms held over her head. "It belonged on the stage, it was so enormous. It did an excellent job hiding his face, though. It must have been Etienne. And who else could have planted those guineas in Aunt Hetty's trunk?"

Well done! Yes, yes! We rushed forward. Magdalen half fell backward under my weight, laughing and throwing her arms about me and returning my embrace. Cheddar curved around us both, leaning into us, wrapping his tail in a feline hug around any part of Magdalen he could reach. After just a few minutes, though, she guddled in her pocket for a crumpled handkerchief

and blew her nose hard. Then she wiped the rest of the tears from her face with decisive motions and climbed to her feet.

She fished one errant half boot from near the door. “That whole conversation between Aunt Hetty and Felix was decidedly odd. Like they were having an entirely separate conversation, while trying to keep me from understanding what they were really talking about.”

She pointed the toe of boot at us. “This brother and sister they were talking about tonight—that’s not my father and Aunt Hetty, it has to be Lady Felicia and Sir Phillip. Felicia has been maneuvering us all along. First she keeps company with my father, cozening up to a lonely widower until, no doubt, she convinces her to do his bidding and arrange the theft of the gold. But he and the gold disappear. Who else swoops in to rescue Hetty and me from poverty and disgrace but the oh so magnanimous Lady Felicia? She wanted to keep us close, until the moment Father contacted us again. And when he didn’t—”

Magdalen threw up her hands in disgust. “She must have known about his snuffbox, too. The nonsense of inviting us to the party was just to get Monsieur Etienne into the cottage to search for it. You were wise, Grim, very wise, to recognize its importance and take it when you first found it. That’s the final piece of evidence that would send her to the gallows.”

I wagged so hard in the sitting position that my body wiggled in place. *Merrick died for it. I knew I couldn’t allow his killer to keep it.*

“And so Etienne could plant those coins while he was here and we were so distracted. Of course Lady Felicia would insist on a search of the cottage. The missing garter was just a happy accident. She would have arranged for something to go missing at the party that pointed to us. She fears Aunt Hetty knows, or at least suspects, that Lady Felicia’s the mastermind behind the guinea smuggling. Her connection with the Alien Office makes that probable. Perhaps she even thinks Aunt Hetty and my

father are working together to double cross her and take the gold themselves. But with the coins found in my aunt's possession, Felix would have no choice but to arrest my aunt. That gets Hetty out of the way, puts Felix off Lady Felicia's track, and leaves me alone here."

Magdalen slumped against the door. "But that doesn't explain her terror of Etienne the night of the party. Not if he's been her creature all along. Unless..." Magdalen drew out the last syllable in a low hiss, her eyes narrowed into hard slits. The likeness to a hunting cat was unmistakable.

She pointed to me. "Grim, if you already feared my father had double crossed you and was planning to escape to the continent with your gold, then why not suspect Etienne of double crossing you too? What if he had already killed on your order? Did he kill Merrick for her? Perhaps right here in Lanthorne Cottage. No wonder she wanted to take you away. You're a witness."

She pointed at the cat. "You too, Cheddar. If you saw Etienne in your home, wouldn't you fear he was preparing to kill you, too? Especially if he'd killed my father too soon for your purposes. Before you'd wrested the gold and the snuffbox from him. And what of Sir Phillip? No one has seen him since Lady Felicia returned to Cornwall. Did Etienne kill him so there would be fewer partners to split the gold? Lady Felicia may have found herself tied to the worst kind of partner—unpredictable and deadly."

I wouldn't double cross anyone, Angel. I licked my lips anxiously. I don't count bringing Merrick's crimes to light. He was not a good man. Just like his employers. They all need to be brought to justice.

"Here's what we know." She pushed herself from the door and began to pace. I walked beside her, four steps to the window, about face, then another four to the chamber door and repeat. I was glad for the chance to move. I always thought

more clearly on my feet. Cheddar crouched atop Magdalen's pillow, front paws folded under his chest, eyes nearly shut, but his twitching ears followed every syllable and thought.

She began to count off the fingers of one hand, folding them down one by one. "First. I am Henry Haven's daughter and we were known to be very close. Second. Lady Felicia must believe my father confided the location of the gold to me. Since he hasn't made contact with me yet, we must assume he cannot, because he is dead." Her hand quivered slightly on this. "Third. Lady Felicia is waiting and watching for me to take my father's place Halloween night, the last chance to smuggle the gold out before Felix and his men close in. Fourth. She'll follow me and take the gold, and the snuffbox she must think I still have, the last piece of physical evidence."

The three of us all looked at the remaining finger, the Haven family's distinctive 'murderer's thumb.' Then Magdalen folded it down to join the rest. "Fifth and final. She'll kill the remaining witnesses. That's Etienne, Hetty, me—and you two."

She looked down at the fist she'd made. "What I'm thinking is monstrous. People will hang for their crimes, if I'm right. But my aunt is in danger of hanging for crimes she didn't commit. That means I can't tell anyone, until I have the proof to take to Felix." She laid a hand on each of our heads and closed her eyes. "Thank you, Lord, that I'm not alone or undefended, thanks to the animal friends you've sent me."

She pulled the same faded green-gray wool dress from the peg and dressed swiftly, then swung a cloak around her shoulders. "I need to find that gold, and I have a good idea where to look. Are you two coming? If the White Lady takes exception, I'd like some friends along who will give her some earthly things to distract her."

Like fangs! Like claws! Cheddar and I said at the same time. Then we scampered down the stairs after her.

CHAPTER 18



Magdalen carried a few gardening tools and a small candle lantern in a satchel, but she would not light the lantern here in the open sweep of the pasture for fear of being seen. The three of us moved quickly along the smuggler's path. It gleamed beneath the last sliver of the waning crescent moon like a slender silver thread woven through the dark foliage. Even without that faint guidance to our eyes, our paws would have felt the shallow rut and followed it unerringly. Once she saw Cheddar and me strike the path and turn, Magdalen was content to follow our lead.

Night smells washed over us: the breath of heath and dew-damp grass, salt breeze off the ocean, sandy soil underfoot, and the rising mist off the moist earth, faintly rank. As we neared the blackthorn thicket, I smelled leaf mold and running water, and the lingering odor of decay, so faint now, I doubted Magdalen could smell it. Still, she stopped at the edge of the trees and took a deep breath.

"Must be my imagination," she said. "Just wet, dead leaves, yes?" She laughed uneasily and rested her hand on my withers, reassuring herself I was still there. She turned slightly, cocked

her head. The hushed murmur of the water running down Kemyel Crease was just audible, a punctuated rhythm in contrast to the steady note of the wind in the branches. "Where is the water coming from? And where is it going? There's no stream running through our pasture. A stream can't just end..." She chewed her lip.

Cheddar, I said to the cat who was lying on his side recovering his breath, let's do the opposite of last time. I'll lead her into the thicket, and you go on ahead and call from the other side of the road where the stream ends.

So the stream runs down Kemyel Crease from the Hall. How does it help Magdalen to know that? he panted. I thought we were going to spy on Lady Felicia.

Lady Felicia and her men have to have a concealed way of taking smuggled goods down to the beach from the Hall to meet their French partners once they get to the end of the Shade Way. Tunnels are the usual way, but we checked the cottage, the barn, and all the outbuildings and didn't find any. A stream that just—ends? I agree with Magdalen. That needs checking out. It might even have something to do with your vandalized marker tree. Wouldn't you like to know?

The cat rolled to his feet, shook his fur into place then slipped under the dry branches and into the thicket's concealed center.

Let's follow him, Magdalen. This way. I'll show you. I nudged the back of her knees. It only took a couple of tries before Magdalen was pushing through the branches. I forged through and helped hold back most of them.

Within moments, Cheddar set up a yowling from across the coast road. I translated the song, at least as much as I could considering the doubtful quality of Cheddar's poetry:

*When the moon is new but the old loves grow cold,
A tom's heart turns to the lassies now bold.
When the moon is full and the mice are sweet,
A tom's thoughts turn to what he can eat!*

Magdalen set the satchel down near the wall. She leaned against it, trying to trace the water sound, but Cheddar's singing had reached a new pitch. He was perched on a boulder at the side of the stream, legs planted firmly, as he took another breath then launched into a third, even louder and more discordant verse:

*When the moon's on the wane but there's cats on the prowl,
A tom's claws turn to who he can fight!*

Cheddar, pipe down, I yipped. *We can't hear ourselves think over here. Besides, that last one doesn't even rhyme.*

What do you want? I made it up on the spot. Got her attention, didn't it? He dropped down from his rocky stage and trotted up to us. *Besides, Isolde loves my songs.*

Hmph. I'll ask her myself when I meet her.

Magdalen had indeed followed Cheddar's voice. She had hitched up her skirts and climbed the wall. Now she paced slowly across the road, head turned slightly, following her ears until she reached the verge on the other side. The ferns and evergreen shrubs hid the end of the steep crease in the hillside during the day and camouflaged it from view, but in the dark, the sound marked the course as clearly as a signpost. Cheddar looked behind himself to be sure Magdalen was watching him, then he zipped through the dark mass.

Magdalen understood. She pushed the greenery aside and took several steps before she stopped with a small exclamation. "It drops underground right here. There's a tunnel under the road! No doubt it opens out somewhere on the beach below Lanthorne Cottage. No wonder the White Lady was haunting here. She was keeping the entry to the Pascoes' smuggling tunnel from being discovered." She caught up Cheddar and hugged him. "You're an excellent guide, even if you're not much of a singer."

I accidentally on purpose bumped into Cheddar as we all turned back toward the road, just so he could see my satisfac-

tion that Magdalen shared my opinion of his voice. I thought we would return back along the path and look for the tunnel's opening on the beach, but Magdalen pulled a trowel from her satchel. Tapping it against the road's surface and following the faint hollow sound, she traced the tunnel working backwards from the end of Kemyel Crease where it dropped underground, passing under the wall and below the blackthorn thicket.

For the thick cushion of leaf mold beneath the trees, she substituted a narrow shovel for the trowel. After a few trial jabs, with a twist of her lips and a deep breath, she set the tip of the blade in the depression where the body had been buried. Between grunts of effort, she explained to us, "They built—" and a hard push, "a conduit to pass under the road." She rocked the shovel and pushed again. "But in open land, they probably just—" she pulled out the blade and frowned at the smears of sap and strands of fiber before she forced it down again, "—enlarged the tunnel the stream had already cut through. The smugglers' path likely traces the course the rest of the way. Maybe someone walks the path to keep watch while the smugglers are in the tun—"

The shovel slid through the last resistance and plunged in halfway up the shaft. Magdalen stumbled forward before she caught herself.

She laughed shakily, catching her breath and rubbing her hands together where I could smell the blisters were starting. "I think our deceased friend did the same thing we just did. He broke into the tunnel from the top, right here, trying to enter it and track it to its source. Looking for the gold, no doubt. Whoever caught and killed him cut that tree down and used it to reroof the opening. Then the body was tossed in on top and the whole thing was reburied." She froze, as if she'd been startled.

Cheddar and I turned. The cat's pupils grew into huge dark moons nearly eclipsing their golden color as he scanned the

thicket. I raised my head, nostrils flickering, ears swiveling, whiskers feeling for any sign out of place. There was nothing besides the shy night creatures, the ones who hunted them, and the soft breeze.

Magdalen sat down hard on the ground as if her legs had grown weak. "The White Lady killed him. I've made a jest out of her, trying to show I was too sophisticated to be afraid of a local Halloween tradition meant to frighten children. I've been so stubborn and so blind. I've been playing at my little game of investigating, while the government knew it would require a professional soldier like Felix to fight the smugglers."

She dropped her head into her hands and groaned. "He tried to warn me, and so did Hetty. The head of the guinea runners is in deadly earnest. Lady Felicia and whoever is acting the White Lady for her, has killed at least three times to protect the smuggling, and now I've found her secret tunnel by digging in the same place as one of her victims."

She gathered us to her. Cheddar climbed up into her lap, while Magdalen put her arms around my neck. I could feel her shivers as we huddled together. After a time, she raised her head and squared her shoulders. "There's nothing I can do but keep going. Lady Felicia was likely going to order me killed, but after what we found tonight, she'll have no choice. Maybe I haven't done so badly, at least with your help?"

Her smile flashed in the dark. "At least if I run into the two of them, I know to watch out for Etienne, especially if he comes at me armed with more than just a pair of scissors."

I used the few moments while Magdalen packed up her satchel to give the opening in the tunnel one last search. I plunged my muzzle deep into the hole the shovel had punched into the leafy makeshift roof, closed my eyes and let my nose work.

When I pulled my snout free and opened my eyes, I discov-

ered Cheddar staring at me, his tail quivering with distaste. *Didn't you get enough of that dead body the first time?*

It was something Magdalen just said. A detail that's been bothering me, and I needed to double check. Remember what I told you about people carrying the scents of other people and other places? I knew by firsthand smell memory that this body wasn't Merrick, and it wasn't Henry Haven because it didn't smell like Magdalen or Hetty. And now I'm sure—" I wiped the dirt from my nose by rubbing it along my foreleg, "—that it wasn't Sir Phillip either, because it didn't smell like Lady Felicia.

We had followed the smugglers' path back down the pasture, moving as quickly as our tired legs could take us. We were nearly to the clifftop when Magdalen stopped to rest. At the foot of the low cliff, the waves boomed against the rocky beach with the force of the incoming tide.

Cheddar picked up the thread of our discussion. *Finding the tunnel is good. But we still don't know the identity of the body in the thicket. I'm afraid we're missing something that could help us save Hetty, and keep Magdalen and Felix from being killed.*

Identity! I yipped, jumping to my feet. *That's been the problem all along!* I caught Magdalen's frown and shake of the head, telling me to stay down and quiet. I dropped onto my chest then quietly said, *I'll tell you what the body did smell like.*

Euuuu. Cheddar made a sound like he was gagging on a hairball, earning him his own sharp glance.

No, not that. I meant, there were elements of that powdery waxy scent on this body. But just elements, not the full scent including the bitter, white earthy part. I caught the full scent on Lady Felicia, and on Merrick's killer, and of course in the snuffbox that started it all. But on this body, there was just the waxy, powdery elements of the scent. It smelled like Monsieur Etienne.

The ideas were forming so quickly, spinning a solution so unexpected that it made me pant with excitement and uncertainty. But my nose was never wrong. I knew I could trust it.

The problem was, could I convince Cheddar, and with his help, get our humans to believe us in time? Abruptly, I asked, *You haven't seen Sir Phillip in at least two moons, have you?*

The cat blinked at the sudden change in subject. *It's been at least that long. For sure, not since Lady Felicia came home.*

The Lady Felicia I met here at Lanthorne Cottage smelled of a lot of things. Except one.

Cheddar's ears tilted to either side, adding to his look of confusion. *I don't understand.*

That garter you brought me smelled like woman, but the person we know as Lady Felicia does not. Remember, Felix said a woman was unlikely to be able to wield the heavy saber that struck down this victim, and Merrick, and the first victim you saw murdered.

A small man would likely have trouble, too, Cheddar nodded. *Remember how Felix described how a saber was used by cavalymen, from above, with gravity adding to the force of the stroke? He shivered a little, his fur rising along his neck. But if the victims were kneeling, like they were digging into a tunnel, Cheddar flicked his ears back, toward the blackthorn thicket behind us, or bending forward, searching for something...*

Yes! Cheddar was catching my vision. I went on rapidly, *Even easier for our lightly-built killer if the victims had been made slow or sleepy first by a potion or drug. That white, bitter scent. That's what it is. You could say, it cuts his victims down to size for him, before he cuts them down. Etienne didn't need to drug his victim first before he killed him. That's why neither this victim nor Etienne carry the bitter white smell. Etienne isn't a big man, but he's taller and stronger than Phillip. With this man on his knees digging into the tunnel, Etienne could easily kill him with a saber. Perhaps Etienne even lured him here with exactly that in mind.*

Cheddar's tail puffed and his back arched in shock. *You're saying Sir Phillip has been masquerading as Lady Felicia? And killing, too?*

No one has seen them together, have they? Who else would know

Lady Felicia well enough to pass as her at the Cavendish Bank and here at home, but her brother?

Don't joke, Grim. Cheddar's fur settled and his whiskers swept back against his cheeks as his feline common sense began to reassert itself. If she's been impersonated by her brother all this time, why hasn't Lady Felicia protested? Besides, you're not the only one with a keen sense of smell. The rest of the finery and fripperies in that room had belonged to a woman.

Believe me, I wasn't joking. Sir Phillip probably killed his sister as soon as she reached England earlier this year. I'd guess he took her clothing and belongings away with him as readymade costumes, and moved it all into Kemyel Hall to enhance his deception. You've seen him. He's short, thin, and with a hairdresser as an accomplice to dress him elegantly and coif his hair, he'd pass as a woman quite well. How perfectly that would suit his purposes! Even to getting his victims to accept a drugged cup of wine or mug of ale from him, and turn their backs on him. What man would be fearful of the petite and elegant Lady Felicia?

His purposes including blaming murder, theft, and treason on a sister who no longer exists, then escaping to France with the gold and living happily ever after as a different person? Cheddar licked the side of his paw and scrubbed it over his face as if even just naming the crimes made him feel soiled.

"Come along, boys. I want to find the mouth of the tunnel before the sun comes up and we can be seen." Magdalen started down the steep path along the cliff face toward the beach.

Something tells me there's no happily ever after for anyone connected with Sir Phillip, I muttered to Cheddar, before we both scrambled to catch up with Magdalen.

After a few steps, Magdalen dug her feet into a steadier stance in the sliding sand and scanned the path above and behind us. "The cliff face turns to the north but the path winds south. I've lost the trace of the tunnel. You'd think the stream would run fairly true downhill to the sea and exit from the cliff

face, but the beach is so narrow here, the cliff face is always wet. The stream water running out of the entrance would just blend in with the waves." She tipped her head back to look back up at the clifftop above us, steadying herself with a hand on my withers. She blew out through her lower lip with a frustrated huff. "I need someone up there to mark where the natural tunnel hits the cliff."

Her brows snapped together. "Grim—heel!" Soon we had popped back up onto the promontory. Magdalen gave me the command to sit and stay at the spot where the path dropped down the cliff.

It's not safe for you to be without me, I whined uneasily. I need to protect you. It's my duty.

"You'll be fine here, Grim. I just need you to help me find the mouth of the tunnel."

We found more than enough evidence tonight to convince Felix. I put a pleading paw on her wrist. Let's get him and bring him back, him and his men.

"For shame, Pilgrim. Surely you're not afraid of the White Lady?" Magdalen chided me gently.

I rolled my ears flat along my head. *I'm not, but you should be.*

Nothing would balk her. Magdalen hefted the poker and scrambled back down the path and out of my sight. I sat as motionless as a dog carved from stone. If my serving as a guidepost would help Magdalen find the opening of the tunnel quickly and return so we could report our findings to Felix, I would be the best guidepost I could. I rolled my eyes uneasily toward the horizon, where the faintest change in color marked the line between sea and sky. Dawn was coming quickly, bringing with it the highest reach of the morning high tide. I had already lost track of Magdalen's progress by sound, as the waves ran higher and louder up the narrow beach.

A whirring flash of white overhead made me whirl. It was the barn owl. She circled so low and close I had to flatten myself

against the ground to avoid her trailing legs. Her feet were balled into lethal instruments that could kill her small prey with one blow, or cripple even a large creature like me. She raised one wing and turned sharply, leading my eye a short way along the cliff top just in time to see a white shape and a small red light drop over the edge, toward the beach—and Magdalen.

I leapt to my feet, roaring the warning. *Cheddar! Magdalen! The White Lady—it's Etienne—look out!* Then the ground beneath my paws turned to liquid. The cliff edge gave way with a roar and I was sliding, tumbling, rolling downhill in a river of rock and sand to the sea.

CHAPTER 19



Hitting the icy water was a shock, and a blessing. It washed me free of the dirt and debris that threatened to suffocate me. I popped to the surface, found my feet, and bounded ashore.

Cheddar met me at the water's edge, heedless of the foamy edge of the waves washing over his paws. All his fur was standing on edge and his eyes were huge with shock and terror. *This way!* He spun on his hindlegs.

It was easy to see where the tunnel's mouth had once been. A pile of enormous rocks, probably relics that had fallen from this section of cliff centuries ago, now covered in mussels and seaweed, created an apparent wall. In the little alcove created behind them, an opening in the cliff face was blocked by a mound of cast off sand and rock. A thin stream issued from the center of the debris.

Dig here. She had just gone inside. She can't be that far. Cheddar's little paws sent the sand flying, until he reached a layer of rocks. Still he kept digging, even though I could smell the blood as he tore his paw pads.

I shouldered him aside. *You keep watch, I'll dig.*

It's my fault, Grim, he gabbled, more distraught than I'd ever seen him. As soon as we saw the rocks directly below you, Magdalen and I both knew. It's the perfect place. The stream broadens and the giant boulders block any view of the opening from offshore or from landward. And the beach is so narrow here at high tide, it would wash away any footprints almost immediately. You could land a longboat here and almost float the cargo out of the cave to the boat.

I found breath for a few words between furious bouts of digging. *How's this your fault, then?*

Cheddar licked his flank savagely as if unwilling to meet my eyes. *Rocks to climb over, dark tunnel to explore—it's a cat's nature to investigate. I ran right in and she followed.*

If the smugglers have been using this tunnel regularly, it would have taken more than the weight of a cat and one woman to cave it in.

That's just it. Etienne must have followed me too. I heard a sound from behind us, and a shape silhouetted against red light at the entrance. Then it all just went—rocks, sand, dirt. I barely managed to get out. The others are inside. I should have called you first before I let Magdalen know what I'd found.

Not. Your. Fault, I grunted while I forced three hen-sized rocks out of the way. He probably saw me on the clifftop and realized what Magdalen was up to.

The sand was heaving. My pads brushed against leather—the heel of a boot. The whole foot broke free, followed by the lower leg. I exchanged a nose bump of joy with Cheddar, then went back to digging, slowly and carefully now so I wouldn't scrape Magdalen with my claws.

In a few more moments Magdalen was pushing herself up on hands and knees. She'd fallen face first just inside the tunnel's mouth, partially shielded by the overlapping roots that formed the support for a much smaller opening, now that I had cleared away the loose earth. She was filthy and shocked, her lower body bruised by the weight of the debris, but her upper body and head had been spared and she was alive and well.

Cheddar and I covered her with kisses. She held us tight, gasping and shuddering. As soon as Magdalen's breath slowed, my duty reasserted itself. Cheddar had said there were 'others' inside. I needed to find Etienne and make certain he posed no further danger.

Farther inside the rocky room, at the limit of the nascent dawn light, I could see stacks of small, distinctive kegs. They looked like the ones Merrick and I had helped to load onto French longboats in the previous months. I knew now that those had contained smaller shipments of gold. There were more kegs here than I'd ever seen in one place before. This must be Henry Haven's missing gold.

My nose led me to two man-sized barrels farther along the wall, the size of the casks used by the desperate emigres who would allow themselves to be sealed inside and dropped off the French smugglers' ships standing just offshore, hoping they would be pulled ashore and freed before they suffocated or drowned. The too-familiar spoor of death made my ears droop. Were these two souls who had lost their gamble? Had Merrick and I been too slow in pulling them ashore on some previous dark of the moon?

I applied my nose to the first cask. It was Merrick sealed inside, yes, that was unmistakable. And in the second? I blew out hard to clear my nostrils, then I delicately worked my nose over the wood. Surprise and shock made me stiffen. Here, at last, was Henry Haven. I hoped these were the only 'others' Cheddar had seen.

"Stupid, bungling woman," the voice said from behind. "Why didn't you die as you were supposed to? You have as many lives as a cat. Fine. By the time they dig you out, you'll have used up any you have left, and I and the gold will be long gone."

I whipped around. Monsieur Etienne stepped over the pile of debris and into the cavern. In his hand he carried not scis-

sors, but an iron bar. He raised it over his head, pointing it upwards.

He's going to start another rockfall! I barked.

Before he could plunge the bar into the ceiling and bring it down on her, Magdalen scooped up a handful of rocks and sand and pitched them in the hairdresser's face. He cursed and dropped the bar, but that stopped him for only a moment. He started forward again, one hand wiping his face, the other reaching, claw-like, for her throat.

Cheddar! Go for his eyes, I roared.

My voice boomed in the small space. Etienne turned to this new threat, at the same time presenting his profile to Cheddar where the cat crouched beside the wall, a few feet from Magdalen. The cat sprang onto an outcropping, then launched himself at the onrushing man.

They met with a combined force that made Etienne stumble. Cheddar dug in, both to secure his foothold and to rake his hind claws over Etienne's face and neck with powerful kicks. I knocked the man over the rest of the way by throwing my full weight against his chest. He hit the ground with a croak and I seized his flailing arm in my teeth.

Cheddar, I said, grunting out the word around a mouthful of sleeve and surprisingly powerful arm, *take Magdalen and go.*

The cat leapt clear of the struggling man and ran to Magdalen. With a hard pull at her skirt, he got her attention, then he nipped at her ankles and chased her, fur puffed and skittering sideways, to the mouth of the cave. She had to slosh through the first waves fingering their way into the space, rising higher and running faster with each cycle.

What about you? Cheddar paused in the opening.

I slid a sideways glance to my friend, silhouetted in the strengthening light, from where I was standing atop the hairdresser's chest. My bared teeth were mere inches from Etienne's face, and I noted with satisfaction he dared not even flinch

when my drool fell onto his face. *We've come to a meeting of the minds, Etienne and I, I told Cheddar. I'll hold him here until you get Magdalen up onto the cliff top. The sun's nearly up now and she'll be safe as long as she can be seen.*

Well hurry. I can see you're enjoying yourself, but the tide's coming in fast. Part of the entrance here still feels unstable. You don't want to be trapped if the tide washes it loose.

I was pleased to see my dear ones disappear. I hadn't wanted to lie to them anymore than I had to. In truth, I wasn't sure how I was going to get out of the cave alive with Etienne still able to strike at me the moment I let him up.

For just a moment, I considered his throat, naked and vulnerable, straining away from the shower of my drool. *No, I growled, to him and to myself. That would make me even worse than you. I will not sell my soul to avenge murder with more murder.*

A whisper of seafoam brushed my hind foot. We had to get out now. What if I took him with me? Perhaps I could effect a canine citizen's arrest. I stepped off Etienne's chest, freeing him but keeping a hard eye and bared teeth aimed at him. He pushed himself to his feet and stood with his hands in front of him, palms out.

"I hate dogs and cats," he said conversationally. "Hair gets everywhere. Especially in wig powder and adhesive wax. That's why I had to put Phillip in that ridiculous bonnet. Couldn't figure out why my wig creations wouldn't stay in place until I saw the pet hair. First my shop customers, all the biddies complaining, then Phillip's disguise. You nearly brought disaster down on me by revealing Phillip as Felicia before it was time."

He took a step back toward the chamber wall, sliding his feet through the deep sand. The tone and pace of his voice matched his motions, slow and disarming. I could feel myself relaxing ever so slightly as he kept talking.

"But where I truly learned to hate animals was from the way Phillip kept on about how he was being watched by you two."

He cocked his head and raised one hand, flicking his fingers, imitating 'Lady Felicia' as I had seen her. "Etienne, they're staring at me—Etienne, they're following me—Etienne, they know what we did—Etienne, they're going to tell.' The night he saw you in Felicia's chamber, he nearly came out of his skin. Like he'd seen a ghost. 'Etienne, Merrick sent the animals to avenge himself,' he told me, gibbering, weeping, when we both know I'm the only ghost in these parts. But I knew just how to soothe him, didn't I? I told him I'd make dead certain he'd be haunted no more, once the French cutter sailed off with the gold on Halloween night. And he won't be." His giggle flirted with insanity. "He'll be dead by then."

His laughter stopped abruptly. He met my eyes as if speaking to an equal. "At least you served a useful purpose in your life, dog. Cats are sneaky, thieving creatures by comparison." He traced the claw marks on his face with tender fingers. "Like big rats with fluffy tails. Especially those nasty, creeping kittens at the stables at Kemyel Hall. Caught one of them digging in Merrick's hiding hole in the foundation on the night of the party. I'd had a bit of a panic, moving Merrick's stash that evening before that new Coastguard and his nosy sergeant found it. Pathetically small amount, but Phillip had stolen the coins from my share first. Tried to tell me the coins must have leaked out of the barrels as we moved them to the ship."

He giggled, his lips forming a rictus of humorless laughter. "But I had the last laugh, didn't I? Phillip gave Merrick the marked guineas he couldn't spend, and Merrick discovered he couldn't spend them either." His eyes twinkled as they met mine, as if he expected me to share his amusement.

The hairdresser shifted his weight and idly traced a toe in the sand. His eyes never left mine as he went on talking, low and singsong, like he was chatting idly with another human. "Then what do I find when I nip back into the Hall just in time to play the phantom footman? The other kitten, head first in my

carpet bag. Tossed him across the room for his pains." Annoyance and confusion crept into his expression. "Snuffbox was missing after that. Bray nearly tore my head off because I couldn't give it to him, with the diamond set into the top he craved. If I'd known the nasty, sneaking kitten had stolen it, I would have killed him instead of just tossing him."

Was no creature safe from this man's cruelty? I backed away, shaking my head to break the spell of his voice. My teeth skinned back from my teeth, an instinctive growl rising from my gut to my throat. I could feel my lips flutter over my exposed fangs.

"Ah well," he shrugged philosophically, "very soon all these petty aggravations will be behind me. I've just a few loose ends to tie up before I go. Phillip, that puffed up Coastguard commander Major Abbey, and those meddling women you animals dragged into this. No doubt that fat yellow cat will be in the thick of things, too. Don't want him to miss out on his just desserts. Yes, I'll have them where I want them, all in one place at one time tomorrow night."

His scratched and bloody face widened into a mad smile. "I can start off by killing you right now, dog!" In one fluid motion, Etienne stooped, snatched up the iron bar that had been hidden in the dirt beside his foot, and rammed it into the wall beside the arched entrance. He pulled with both hands and the unstable surface crumbled. The water sheeted up as rocks and sand rained down, driving the hairdresser backwards. The archway collapsed, closing up the mouth of the cave with me on the outside and Etienne entombed inside.

CHAPTER 20



As the dawn brightened into full day, All Hallows Eve proved bright and clear, nearly as warm as summer but with a bracing wind that brought a shiver to the shade and chased the clouds into gray piles on the far horizon. Outside the Coastguard office, Magdalen hauled herself into the saddle and turned Patch onto the Parade in the direction of home. She let the black and white cob amble along while she eyed the sky uneasily.

Cheddar, perched on the pommel before Magdalen, and I trailing behind, sniffed for moisture, and evaluated the air pressure with our sensitive whiskers. The chill in the rising winds and the near total darkness of the new moon would make it an exhilarating night for the fall festival, and keep nearly every inhabitant in the village to enjoy the final hours of clement weather before the first of winter's storms rolled in. We three prayed that the incoming storm would hold off long enough to allow the French cutter we knew hovered just out of sight off the horizon to swoop in close to pick up the gold shipment.

Patch turned his shaggy head in longing toward the green-grocer as we clopped past. In front of his store, Mr. Gloyne had

created a perfect pyramid of bright red Allan apples in honor of Allantide, the alternate dedication of the day, to St. Allan of Cornwall. More than one village girl would slip into the shop over the course of the day when she thought no one was looking, to purchase an Allan apple to place under her pillow that night and perhaps dream of the man she would marry. Those marriageable young men would create their own ideas of romance in the dancing around the bonfire later that night.

Inside his forge just at the edge of town, Emlyn Williams hammered wood instead of iron this day, as he assembled the holiday's traditional apple bobbing game—two pieces of wood nailed in the shape of a cross, supporting candles atop each of the four branches, with apples dangling from various lengths of twine below. At sunset the children would have the first chance, trying to take a bite out of a bobbing, bouncing apple while avoiding being knocked about by the other apples. After dark, and after many tankards of ale and cider had been downed, their elders would play the game, this time with the candles on the crosspieces lit, and try to bite an apple without tipping hot wax on themselves. Merrick had been a keen apple bobber in the years I had been with him, though not a skillful one, and usually had to clip his beard short the next day to get the last of the wax out.

Once we reached the coast road, our little group was passed by excited children coming the opposite way, escorting the traveling merchants and tinkers arriving for the festival. Some of the bigger children were earning a few pennies helping to carry packs or push laden carts along. A piper and a drummer marched along, adding their music to the fun and gathering up bystanders into the throng.

And everywhere we passed, in every window, over every lintel, garnishing every tree, swinging from every gatepost, turnip lanterns grinned and flickered, the ancient superstition resurrected on this one day of the year, that the little baubles

could protect against the unholy things that walked by night. It seemed every household in Mousehole was full of high spirits, looking forward to a Halloween night of games, frolic, and innocent thrills.

Every household but ours.

The trouble started right after dinner. Mrs. Tregurtha had carried in the tea tray, a candle lantern lensed with red glass jostling amid the pot and cups. "I put in a new candle and polished the glass to a sheen for you, Miss Magdalen," she said. "Frenchies ought to be able to see it clear across the bay to Saint Michael's Mount on a night like tonight."

At last, the significance of Magdalen's unadorned gown of deepest black and her hair, pulled into a simple knot and wrapped with a dark scarf to hide its warm chestnut gleam, penetrated Felix's masculine unawareness. "Magdalen," he said warily, "what are you up to now?"

"I am going with you to meet the French guinea runners." She continued calmly pouring out the tea as if discussing a mildly interesting social obligation. "I need the lantern to signal them in since Etienne seems unlike to do it for us. Don't you agree, he's been the spotsman until now? His guise as the White Lady kept people away from the cottage, and allowed him to slip inside and set the lantern in the smuggler's window in our attic. I'll do that from the clifftop, since I'll already be there to meet the French. They're used to seeing a woman directing their counterparts here. Their usual 'Lady Felicia' won't be there thanks to Sir Phillip being under house arrest, so I will take her place."

"You cannot be serious. This plan is sheer madness." He flung his arm out, slopping tea from his cup and making Cheddar hiss when a few drops sprinkled him. "Do you know who these men are?"

"Of course I do."

"Clearly you do not. Your plan reveals as much. These are

not boys playing with tin soldiers. Do you not think they have already considered this, and every other dodge and cheat that man can devise, and woman?"

Magdalen rescued the cup from Felix's grasp before his next gesture baptized the rest of us with tea. "I have. But you need a woman. You need me."

"She's right, Major Abbey. There's really no escaping it," Hetty said.

"It must be a family trait." Felix threw his arms in the air. "You're all mad together."

THE MAJOR AND Sergeant Downton had escorted Aunt Hetty home soon after Magdalen had galloped Patch into town this morning and reported the night's events and our discoveries, including the startling news of Lady Felicia's true identity. The rest of the men's day was spent with Downton supervised the squadron of men in hurriedly but discreetly opening up the beach end of the tunnel, while the major drew up the final plans for tonight's operation.

More men were dispatched to Kemyel Hall to quietly arrest Sir Phillip and begin searching the house. Worryingly, Etienne's body had not yet been found inside the nearly cleared tunnel. Another man had been set to keep watch on the hairdresser's shop and flat above, in case he returned there.

Lanthorne Cottage would be Major Abbey's headquarters of operation for the rest of the night, so he was pleased to accept when Hetty offered dinner and hospitality to him and his men while they waited for darkness. Our stable now sheltered six coastguardsmen's horses, fully tacked but with girths loosened and munching from nosebags, ready to be mounted within moments of the signal to move. These men and Downton were eating a hearty stew and fresh baked bread on a trestle table set up in the kitchen yard, and my ladies and Felix

had just seated themselves at the dining table for their own meal.

All afternoon, Cheddar and I had been tantalized by the rich smells filling the house. Mrs. Tregurtha was clearly making a special—and secret—effort for my ladies and their guest, Major Abbey, who had become the housekeeper's marked favorite. Finally Gwynifer banged the ancient dinner gong Mrs. Tregurtha had unearthed from somewhere, then held the connecting door wide as Mrs. Tregurtha carried in a heavy baking dish. She set the dish on the table and pulled off the concealing tea towel with a flourish.

Five baked fish heads sprouted from a sea of flaky brown crust, their milky eyes staring skyward.

The three human diners sat frozen and speechless.

Fish heads! My favorite. I hurried around to Magdalen's side.

Those aren't just fish heads, you bumpkin, that's Stargazy Pie. And mmm, Cheddar raised his head, tiny nostrils flickering, evaluating the scent like a connoisseur, a shortbread crust. She doesn't go to all that trouble very often. A solid thump and a patter of paws marked his hurried descent from the back of the Hetty's accustomed fireside chair into the dining room.

Mrs. Tregurtha clasped her hands under her apron. She seemed to interpret her audience's reaction as admiration. "Made it special, in honor of *Nos Kalan Gwav*," she said. "That's how we say All Hallows Eve in the old Cornish tongue. Best thing in the world for tea on a cold day, is Stargazy Pie. Not to mention it sets up a man for hard work on a dark night." She dropped a slow wink at Felix.

She fished the serving utensils out of her apron pocket and set them at Magdalen's elbow. "You folks being from London, you probably don't get good food like this very often."

"Not often, no." Magdalen's voice sounded strained. "I thank you for your extra effort, Mrs. Tregurtha. Take this plate, Major. You'll want to enjoy it while it's still hot. Mrs. Tregurtha made it

especially for you." She gave him a mischievous sideways look, along with an enormous serving.

"And I appreciate her effort. You keep that portion, Miss Haven, you've had a busy several days, you must be famished." One corner of his mouth quirked when Mrs. Tregurtha took the plate with the smaller portion Magdalen had just scooped out for herself and set it in front of him.

As soon as the cook left the room, Magdalen dropped the towel over the baking dish. "I cannot abide food that stares at me," she muttered.

Doesn't bother me a bit. Cheddar tapped at Hetty's legs with an insistent paw. *In fact, I prefer my food to know it's being eaten.*

Porcelain clicked on wood as Magdalen set her plate on the floor in front of me. "Quick. Eat this before she comes back."

Hetty and Felix each followed suit.

I'd polished off Magdalen and Felix's servings and was just about to help Cheddar finish Hetty's when the connecting door to the kitchen creaked a warning and each diner whisked the plates from beneath our noses.

"Bless you but you ate that quickly." Mrs. Tregurtha looked at the emptied dinner plates with satisfaction. "Does my heart good to see young people enjoy their food." She picked up Hetty's plate. "Even you, Lady Balfour." She rubbed at something stuck to the bottom of Hetty's plate. A fish eye and a flake of crust dropped to the floor. Before Mrs. Tregurtha could see what it was, I gobbled them up.

Sloppy, Cheddar, I said to the cat under my breath.

I was saving the eye for my last bite, Cheddar groused. *I'd have gotten to it if Hetty hadn't pulled the plate out from under me.*

"Since you like mah Cornish recipes so well," Mrs. Tregurtha said over her shoulder as she carried the plates into the kitchen, "I'll make Oggies for tomorrow's tea."

"Capital idea, Mrs. Tregurtha," Felix called after her. "The

ladies were just telling me how much they enjoy trying the traditional foods of Cornwall.”

“What part of the animal do you suppose will be staring at us tomorrow?” Hetty whispered.

Felix’s face was wooden with his effort to keep from laughing out loud.

Don’t worry, Mother. I laid my head on her knee. *Whatever it turns out to be, I’ll eat it.* My stomach rumbled and out popped a fishy burp.

“Whatever it is,” Magdalen said sweetly to Felix, “I’ll be sure she makes enough to share with you and Downton.”

That was the end of sweetness and laughter for the night.

Now, as the relative peace of after dinner tea at the fireside allowed the possibilities of Magdalen’s idea to expand in Felix’s imagination, his face grew horrified. “You’re all mad together,” he repeated.

“Sit down, Felix, do, and calm yourself, or you’ll have an apoplexy,” Hetty soothed, patting the cushion of the seat beside hers.

To Magdalen she said, “In fairness to Major Abbey, have you considered he knows what he is about, and may already have planned for this contingency? The Alien Office would not have sent him here if he was not an expert. He is too modest to tell you, but his superiors in the Alien Office call him ‘The Spy Catcher.’ Your uncle Romney told me Major Abbey ferreted out other traitors during his service in the peninsular campaign. Who knows how many soldiers’ lives he saved by keeping our battle plans out of the hand of Napoleon’s generals.”

Felix dropped into his chair.

“I believe you were decorated by Wellington himself, were you not, Felix?” Hetty raised her brows.

"That is so," he muttered, looking at his empty hands as if he could not imagine where his tea cup had disappeared to.

Magdalen's eyes warmed as they rested on Felix. "I am proud, but not surprised." Then she leaned forward, suddenly intent. "But you just pointed out yourself, tonight's mission does not involve soldiers. These are civilian smugglers we're dealing with, sailors and fishermen and farmers. They won't have officers to force them to keep charging forward regardless of the risk. If anything looks the least bit out of place, that will frighten them off. You'll have the gold, but you won't have broken the smuggling ring. Someone else will step into Phillip's place and the whole thing will begin again."

Hetty cocked her head inquiringly. "That is your chief objective tonight, is it not, major? To capture as many men as you can and learn the names of the men at every level of the operation? Then operatives of the Alien Office can pursue them all the way to the top and," her eyes flickered as she searched Felix's face, "deal with them."

Felix returned her look without flinching, his keen mind fully engaged. Lying on my side between them all, I could feel the shifting waves of their emotions. Magdalen, eager, more than a little frightened, but brave in the face of her fear; Hetty, resolute but sad; Felix, equally resolute, burdened by a duty that often called for painful choices.

He nodded. "That is the only way to end this smuggling that is supplying Napoleon and prolonging the war."

"It all hinges on the presence tonight of the female mastermind of the Cornish contingent. What other choice do you have?" Magdalen concluded.

Felix's face twisted in an expression of frustration, and he got up from his chair abruptly. "I wish we had been able to find your father's snuffbox. From the way you described it to me, Lady Balfour, it seems Henry Haven engraved initials or other identifying marks of his main contacts inside the lid. There

wasn't space for more than a few sets, so he must have chosen the most important. With that snuffbox in hand, we'd be able to advance multiple rungs up the ladder at once and we wouldn't be under so much pressure tonight to take prisoners."

"Unfortunately, it was stolen from its hiding place here before we understood its true importance," Magdalen said. "We are still not quite sure how Etienne found it." Her eyes passed over Cheddar curiously, where he was perched on the back of Hetty's chair and had just now tucked his face into her neck as if hiding.

Hetty laid her fingertips on the major's sleeve. Like Magdalen, he was dressed in dark woolens. He wore a black knitted jersey under a midnight blue peacoat, black breeches, and heavy hobnailed boots. I'd seen him doff a low peaked fisherman's cap when he stepped through the door earlier this evening.

"You know I would not allow my niece to expose herself to so much danger," the older woman said, "if I did not agree that her participation is essential to your success tonight. *Our* success," she added, with delicate emphasis.

Both women's faces were set in the mulish expression I had come to recognize as a family trait. I sidled over to the major and leaned against his leg. *You won't talk them out of an idea if they think they're right, Felix. Even less chance if they think it's for the good of others.*

But it seemed the major had inherited a stubborn streak of his own. He rested his elbows on the back of his chair and leaned forward over it. "It occurs to me you are both considering only the physical danger of tonight's operation. It will be a hard fight against long odds. The Admiralty informed me some days ago they're unable to support our operation with so much as a single sloop to cut off the French cutter's escape. If we are not successful in capturing the smugglers, or even worse, if the French succeed in escaping with the gold, you risk the very real

possibility of being tried and being hanged as a traitor, Lady Balfour.”

Hetty hunched her shoulders slightly, as if feeling the brush of a cold draft.

On the back of her chair, Cheddar arched his back, fur puffed, forming a fluffy feline halo for Hetty as we three viewed her from the front. *I'll scratch the eyes out of anyone who frightens my old woman. Hanging, calling her a thief or even implying it.* He growled, his eyes darting around the room as if looking for challengers. *I could start with you, Felix!*

I woofed softly at the cat. *He's not our enemy, Cheddar. He's trying to make sure Hetty understands the risk she's taking.*

Felix was unintimidated. He smiled a little as if he understood and even appreciated the cat's loyalty. But only for a moment, before he continued on with his relentless logic. “Passing on that information about your brother to the Alien Office could be seen as a falling out among thieves and a bid to save your own neck. And allowing me to arrest you and parade your supposed guilt before the entire county, no matter it was our stratagem to push Sir Phillip and Etienne into keeping their plans for moving the gold tonight, would be a gift for Sir Phillip's defense. Finally, consider your niece's position.”

He stood in front of the hearth and planted his feet, as if addressing a court of law. “Magdalen led us to the body of what we now know is the murdered French agent. She also found the Kemyel smuggler's tunnel. And she found the gold. Any one of these chance discoveries would be considered the occurrence of a lifetime. For the same person to make two such would be nearly unimaginable coincidence. All three?” He held up a hand, three fingers raised.

“Without some kind of outside guidance”—was it my imagination or did the major's eyes linger for a long moment on me and then pass on to Cheddar—“it could only be viewed as guilty knowledge. Your niece would hang alongside you.”

I jumped to my feet. *No! I'll fight them all.*

Remember, Grim, Cheddar said. Felix is not our enemy. How did you put it just now? He's only trying to be sure Magdalen knows the risks?

I curled around to bite an imaginary flea, just to avoid the cat's smug expression.

Magdalen's eyes had been growing wider with the major's every word. Now she slewed in her seat, her hands gripped so tightly together the knuckles were white. "Aunt Hetty? You betrayed my father?"

Hetty closed her eyes briefly. "Sometime after we came into Cornwall, a long delayed letter from your father finally reached me. I had no choice but to share it with Major Abbey. Believe me, my dear, it is what your father would have wanted." Her voice was scratchy as if her throat had gone dry. "He laid out the entirety of his involvement and his suspicions to me precisely for that reason. He knew I understood the stakes and would do what was necessary. *All* that was necessary. Do you remember I spoke of the sacrifices others had made in fighting this guinea running, and that we owed it to them to ensure those sacrifices were not in vain?"

Magdalen nodded, her eyes glimmering with the start of tears.

"It was your father I was speaking of in that moment. You see, while your father lost himself for a time, allowing his loneliness and grief to override his good judgement, he had not yet sold his soul for Lady Felicia's offer of wealth unimaginable. He finally realized anything he gained would be paid for by the deaths of his countrymen. He chose to risk his own life, instead, to stop the guinea runners." Her serene face expressed quiet dignity, but no trace of apology.

Magdalen slipped to the floor at her aunt's feet. "You carried that burden all this time. Alone. Why didn't you tell me?"

Hetty's smile was tremulous as she cupped Magdalen's cheek

in her hand. "For the same reason Henry wrote to me and told me everything. Because we love you and wanted to protect you. With our lives, if necessary."

A heavy step and a throat clearing made us all look around. Sergeant Downton stood in the doorway, turning his cap in his hands. "Sir, the men just made a discovery in the beach cave you need to know about. Miss Haven and Lady Balfour, too."

Felix wiped surreptitiously at his eyes before he turned and waved his man in.

Magdalen pulled a chair into our circle and Hetty welcomed the junior officer with a gracious nod. Downton perched on the edge of his seat.

I sat between Magdalen and Hetty, then I bumped Magdalen's hand where it rested on the arm of her chair. *Rest your hand on my head. It will steady you for what is coming.*

"We still haven't found Etienne Easter, sir," Downton began. "His body wasn't buried under the fallen debris we cleared from the mouth of the tunnel. There was another partial cave in, farther back where the tunnel carries away inland. Don't know if his body is under that. With time running so short, I told the men to attend to the other bodies we'd found and I came on to tell you."

Downton turned to the ladies. "Sealed into two large casks like the ones used to float immigrants to shore, we found the bodies of Adam Merrick and Henry Haven. From papers and personal items in their pockets, the identity is positive." He bowed his head. "Lady Balfour, Miss Haven—you have my deepest sympathy."

Magdalen's hand weighed heavily atop my head. I saw Cheddar slip onto Hetty's lap and rub his face against her chin, purring his support. Both men watched them anxiously, but the women made no outcry. In truth, this was only confirmation of what they had already come to believe in their hearts. I felt their grief, but it was anchored in a bedrock of assurance, soul deep.

Felix bowed his head. “Greater love has no one than this—”
“—that someone lay down his life for his friends,” Magdalen completed for him. She stood behind Hetty’s chair, her hands resting on her aunt’s shoulders. “Two thousand years ago, Jesus said those words, then died to make them true. Two weeks ago, my father restored his honor by following His example. Can I do any less tonight?”

Cheddar and I pressed close to our ladies, uniting our family circle in one belief.

CHAPTER 21



Downton legged Dan sideways against the paddock gate to hold it open against the rising wind that threatened to push it shut on the riders who followed close behind. I climbed between the fence rails beside the gate, while Cheddar studied the fence briefly then sailed between the rails without touching the one above or below, despite the near blackness.

I glanced back for a last look at the cottage. In the window, Aunt Hetty was a vague silhouette against the soft glow of the turnip lanterns that were the only lights inside at this late hour. I knew she would not leave her post until this night's business was concluded. I prayed I would be able to bring Magdalen and Felix home safe and well to her.

Felix had mounted Magdalen on Gaiety. The mare stamped, impatient at having to wait behind the horse ahead of her. Gaiety hadn't seen Felix's frown as he sat atop the patient Argo, but Argo nudged the mare. *It's an honor, Felix giving you Magdalen to look after. He's trusting you. Don't muck it up.*

Don't you worry about me, old timer, Gaiety nudged him back a little harder. *I'll carry her as sweetly as if she were a baby in a cradle.*

It's just that she's so light, and the wind is so sweet, and I feel like I could jump the moon!

Felix reached over and touched Gaiety's neck, meeting Magdalen's hand as she too patted the mare soothingly. His fingers closed over hers.

Once all the riders were through, they divided. One group went with Downton, turning inland toward Kemyel Hall and the upland end of the tunnel. Cheddar went with them, as we'd agreed. That is, Cheddar and I had agreed. The men would probably not care to admit how much they would need his keen night vision and sharp hearing. And I knew Cheddar was worried about his cat family at the Hall. Etienne was still missing, and both he and Phillip knew Cheddar and I had been instrumental in their downfall. Would Phillip turn his wrath on Isolde and the kittens? If Etienne was still alive, no animal was safe in his path, let alone a mother cat and two young kittens.

I turned toward the clifftop with Magdalen, Felix, and his small squad. After Felix had positioned the men according to his plan, there was only the three of us remaining. We halted at the top of the cliff where the smugglers' path descended. Felix pulled his fob watch from an interior pocket and checked the time, then he nodded to Magdalen. She flipped back her cloak.

Tinted by the colored glass, the light of the single candle shot out over the ocean like a red arrow. Within a few seconds, an answering beacon flashed, once, then twice. Magdalen repeated the sequence, covering the lantern with the tail of her cloak then pulling it away.

Felix nudged Argo stirrup to stirrup with Gaiety. "Sounds carry over incredible distances at night, especially voices," he explained in a low voice. "We have a few minutes while they drop the lighters off the cutter and row them ashore. You haven't forgotten the plan? You know what you're to do?"

"No, Felix, and yes, Felix, I haven't forgotten and I remember

perfectly. Including giving you the signal when the French are in place." The warmth of her tone, with the music of a smile behind it, took any sting from her words. "Please, don't let worry over me distract you. My own safety lies in your being able to concentrate on leading your men and winning this battle."

"It seems you have forgotten one thing after all."

"I did?" The saddle creaked as Magdalen turned to Felix. "What is that?"

"A man never stops worrying about the woman he loves." He leaned across the space between the horses and kissed her.

With the deepest sense of rightness, I watched the two shadows meld into one, for a long, sweet moment. Then soft rhythmic splashes and muffled creaks in the distance drew the shadows apart.

Felix cocked his head and listened. "They're close. Oars in the water, the oarlocks padded. Ten minutes, no more." He dropped a swift kiss on Magdalen's forehead, said, "Be good," then pivoted Argo in a neat turn on the haunches and the two were swallowed up by the darkness.

I could sense Magdalen's heartbeat pounding to the rhythm of Argo's hoofbeats. "Goodbye, my love. Come back safe to me, forever," she said softly. Then even the hoofbeats were gone and Magdalen urged Gaiety down the cliffside path. I trotted after them.

The three lighters ran up onto the narrow shingle one after the other, each crew of rowers shipping their oars and jumping ashore in an impressive display of seamanship. Magdalen stepped forward from the shadow of the tumbled boulders, with me close by her side, to meet the first man up the beach, clearly the leader of the loading gang.

"Mademoiselle Felicia?" He stopped short, his suspicion plain from the hand that dropped to the hilt of his cutlass. "It is you, is it not?"

“*Oui, Monsieur le Capitaine.* Who else? Are your men ready to begin loading? The sooner we begin, the sooner we can be off.”

“You are the only Englishwoman I’ve ever met who wished to get to Lorient in a hurry. It is difficult for me to believe my beautiful France could contain such a miserable place.” The French captain’s smile flashed white in the dark. “Overrun with slavers and haggling merchants. If the Emperor hadn’t assigned me to this duty and transferred my ship to the naval base there, I’d count myself blessed never to see the place.”

I felt Magdalen’s little tremor of excitement as the French captain confirmed what we’d suspected. If we were successful, we could strike a mortal blow at England’s enemy.

“Now tell me who you really are.” The Frenchman’s easy manner disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. “The Lady Felicia who directed the operations every other month would no more dirty her feet on the streets of Lorient than she’d lift a finger to carry a barrel. And she was dressed for a ball every time we saw her—wig, bonnet, silk gown. What are you, her maid?”

Magdalen dug her feet into the pebbly sand and raised her chin. Despite the perspiration that told me she was having to control her fear, she kept her voice an amused drawl. “You didn’t expect me to expose my true identity, did you? I trust you and your master no more than you trust me. Now a disguise no longer matters, since after tonight I’ll never return to England again. Lorient is just a place from which to disappear. When I reappear elsewhere, I shall be a very wealthy, and entirely anonymous, woman.”

The smuggling chief combed his fingers through his heavy beard and mustache. “I know a bit about disguises myself. Eh,” he shrugged, “the dog vouches for you as well. Never saw Lady Felicia or that lieutenant of hers without *Monsieur le Chien de foie.*”

My forehead puckered between my sharply raised ears as I puzzled out the nickname. "Dog of liver?" Magdalen translated.

"Is that not correct?"

"Assuming you meant to say he is the color of liver, not actually composed of it, yes."

"The color, yes, that is why the men call him that." The wary captain's attitude shifted once more. "*Pas important*. Why is the dog here, and not the man? You see I have brought my own lieutenant. Marcel," he spoke over his shoulder, "wave to the *made-moiselle*."

A man standing alertly at the brow of the second lighter held his cutlass suggestively in front of his throat.

A chance surge of wind tugged at the scarf wrapped around Magdalen's hair. She caught at it with both hands just before it blew away. While she turned aside to retie it, I could see she was thinking furiously of an answer. Her expression was calm, even a trifle bored when she turned back to the captain. "Oh, Merrick? The fewer witnesses the better, don't you agree? I paid off the rest of my men. Killing them all would have been messy, and more trouble than they were worth." She sketched a lazy gesture with her hand.

"*Bon*, that's the Lady Felicia I know!" To his lieutenant, he called, "Marcel, start loading the gold. As soon as the first boat has all she'll take, shove off. The other crews can start on the next boat in the meantime."

I poked my nose into Magdalen's hand. *We need to keep the men together so Felix and his men can capture them all. Remember?*

"Now, now, now, *ma cher capitaine*," Magdalen said, "haven't we established that you and I suffer from an unfortunate inability to trust each other, despite our long friendship? How can I prove to the Emperor I have delivered every single guinea promised to him, unless I have an accurate bill of receipt from you? How...naïve...of me if I were to allow you to take the casks onto the ship and inventory them out of my sight. I have no

doubt of your abilities as a sailor. Your accounting skills, on the other hand..." She set her fists on her hips and waited.

The French captain pulled out his watch and checked it, shooting a glance at Magdalen from under his brows. "The time grows short. I have no more time to bandy words with a woman, no matter how charming." He grabbed the sleeve of a passing sailor. "Tell Marcel to bring everything out of the cave and stack it on the beach. We'll do the count here with all of you as witnesses for the *mademoiselle*, then load all three lighters at one time and leave together." He strode off, gesturing to his other men.

Shrouded by the dark and hidden from direct view of the French guinea runners who were too busy and pressed for time to care about one woman, Magdalen slumped against one of the boulders. She slid down until she was crouching, released a shaky breath and wrapped an arm around my neck. "Grim, don't tell Felix, but after tonight I never want to investigate another single, solitary thing. I've never been so frightened in my life."

I licked her face. It was salty with the sweat of her tension and fear, negotiating with the French smuggling captain. *You were magnificent! You have a real talent for investigation. With me beside you and Felix to help, it doesn't always have to be so scary.*

The sound of arguing, muffled but still hard and angry, rose from the other end of the little beach. Then running footsteps crunched through the pebbly sand, and Sir Phillip rounded the boulders. He was dressed as Lady Felicia complete with powdered wig and bonnet. He was laboring through the deep going, carrying a casket against his chest and a sack dangling from one arm. One of the sailors caught him and pulled him to a stop, holding him in place, while another ran for the cave and his captain.

For the moment, Phillip still had not seen us. Magdalen looked around wildly for an escape, but the captain's men were

between us and any way off the beach. I glanced upward, but I knew Felix and his men could not see what was going on so close to the base of the cliff, and the Frenchmen, experienced smugglers all, had kept their voices low, so I doubted any sound signaling our predicament had carried.

A flicker of movement caught the corner of my eye, then two small bodies, one orange, one white, slipped between the boulders and crouched at our feet.

"What are you doing here?" Magdalen whispered to Cheddar. "And who are you?" She gingerly reached toward Isolde, who gravely sniffed Magdalen's finger then allowed her to stroke her silky white fur.

Why aren't you with Downton and his men at Kemyel Hall? I asked Cheddar.

It was Isolde who answered. *Cheddar asked me to keep watch over Merrick's hidden stash of gold while he helped Downton inside. The next thing I knew, a beautifully dressed woman slipped inside and went straight to the loose rock in the foundation. I'd heard some voices outside, perhaps the men set to guard the stable didn't consider a woman to be a threat. The kittens and I climbed up into the hay loft to watch. The woman took off her gloves and started pulling out the coins Merrick had hidden, so I knew then it was Sir Phillip, disguised again as Lady Felicia.*

The white cat nervously slithered out from under Magdalen's hand. *I sent the kittens into the house to tell their father Sir Phillip was escaping with the gold, while I stayed to see if I could do something to stop him. I thought my babies would be safe and out of the way...* She mewed, a sound of grief and loss, and pressed her head against Cheddar.

Cheddar took up the story. *I ran back to the stables just in time to see Phillip slip out one of the outside stall doors. He stopped suddenly and reached back inside the stall and grabbed at something. It was struggling but I couldn't see what it was until he opened the sack he was carrying and shoved it in. It was Dove. He said something*

under his breath about how curiosity killed the cat, then he laughed. Cheddar's ears were flat against his head, his eyes black pools of fear. Grim, he sounded evil. Unhinged. And he has my girl kitten.

"*Tellement bizarre.*" The captain's voice made us turn. "In my accounting, I have discovered we seem to have one more Lady Felicia than we should have. Unfortunately for you," he prodded Magdalen with the tip of his cutlass, "though I find you highly entertaining, I do not believe you are the real Lady Felicia."

"Of course she's not. I'm the real Lady Felicia." Phillip struggled in the grip of two sailors. "She's just the daughter of the man who stole the gold for me in the first place, then hid it, to keep it for himself. Now she's trying to cheat me out of my share. She got that tinpot of a Coastguard commander to believe her story she wanted to prove her father was innocent and she was only looking for the gold to keep it out of Napoleon's hands."

"Eh? The Coastguard is on to us?" The captain shot a hard look at Magdalen, before he jerked his chin at the men holding Phillip, signaling them to let go.

"Real?" Magdalen scoffed. "That's not the real Lady Felicia. That's not even a lady. It's Sir Phillip. He's deceived and cheated everyone he's come across in this scheme. Including you, *Monsieur le Capitaine*, and he's planning on deceiving the emperor too. His plan is to leave England as Lady Felicia, then arrive in France as Sir Phillip and disappear with the gold. He's already killed my father and Adam Merrick. Maybe he'll try to kill you too, during the crossing tonight, or just let Napoleon execute you for failing in your mission. Are you willing to take that chance?"

The sailors had surrounded us by now in a glaring, angry circle. The captain eyed them. I sensed his unease. Very soon their fear of being caught and their even greater greed for the gold could make them mutiny and turn on him, leaving him and both Lady Felicias dead.

“Bah! I no longer care which one of you is this Lady Felicia. I’m going to let the two of you fight it out.” The captain eyed them both up and down. “You look evenly matched. The one who survives, I’ll transport to France as agreed. Chained in the hold of my ship. I’ll leave it to the Emperor and his agents to decide what to do with you, Phillippe or Felicia.” He snapped his fingers and two men tossed their short swords into the sand at the prisoners’ feet.

Phillip rushed forward, bent low, arm out to scoop up a weapon. The three of us, Cheddar, Isolde, and I, scattered. I ran forward then hard to the right, cutting across Phillip’s path. His knees struck my flank and he pitched forward, feet tangled in his skirts. His powdered wig went flying.

Look out, Grim, he can still reach the sword, Isolde screeched.

For an agonizing second I faced the dilemma of stopping Phillip or pushing Magdalen out of the way. I couldn’t do both, and neither was guaranteed to save Magdalen’s life. She had whipped off her cloak and wound it around her arm as a makeshift shield, but how many blows with the heavy, razor sharp blade would that withstand, even wielded by a short, slight man like Phillip?

Phillip had pushed up onto his hands and knees and scuttled toward the sword. Then Cheddar leapt onto Phillip’s hand. The cat opened his mouth so wide his eyes were nearly squeezed shut, then clamped down onto the webbing between Phillip’s thumb and forefinger. Phillip let loose a piercing wail not unlike a cat’s.

I scooped up the second cutlass from the sand and veered back toward Magdalen. She seized it and ran forward toward Phillip, with me matching her stride for stride. But neither of us could strike at Phillip. He had gotten to his feet and was swinging his arm around trying to shake Cheddar off, despite his pain and the blood running freely. Cheddar was growling, struggling, trying desperately to catch Phillip’s arm in his claws

for a secure grip, but I could see the cat was tiring and with each swing of Phillip's arm, the orange marmalade body flew more wildly.

Magdalen made a feint with the cutlass at Phillip's knees but he dodged her and she succeeded only in cutting away the trailing skirts that had hobbled him. I circled around behind, thinking to jump on him and bring him down, but Phillip ran forward at the same moment, his steps newly nimble thanks to Magdalen, toward the boulders. My push only succeeded in speeding his headlong rush.

Magdalen gave way from his charge, stumbling backwards. I could see she was going for the shelter of the rocks. *No, Magdalen!* I barked. *You'll be trapped. Go left or right, not back.*

But Magdalen wasn't Phillip's target this time. He raised his arm high, Cheddar swinging loose, holding on just by the grip of his fangs in Phillip's hand. I realized Phillip planned to batter Cheddar against the boulder.

With a thin, eerie cry, Isolde flew from the highest point of the boulder, like a keening beam of moonlight. She struck Phillip's raised arm and he spun away. Her slender frame could not take him to the ground, but she had prevented him from killing her mate and allowed Cheddar to drop free. He scrambled to his feet but he was clearly exhausted and bruised. He tried to leap up onto the boulder and scramble out of reach, but he slid back down to the sand. He hauled himself onto a low shelf in the rock just behind Magdalen and gamely bared his fangs.

Phillip shifted the cutlass to his undamaged hand. "I don't need my right hand to cut down a woman or her flea bitten cat," he gritted out.

Magdalen bent her knees slightly and raised her own sword in two hands. I could see her heart beating in her neck, faster than I could count. The tip of the sword wavered, but Magdalen's face was eerily calm. Her lips moved in a nearly

soundless whisper. I caught a few words: "Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil..."

I prayed too, wordlessly. I had to time it perfectly, to jump at just the right time to catch Phillip's arm and avoid Magdalen's counterstrike. I knew she would never intentionally hurt me, but she was clearly untutored in using a sword, she was tiring rapidly, and she was terrified.

"Demons, beasts, all of you," Phillip sobbed. "You've cursed me." Then he swung with all his might. I pushed off my muscular hindquarters, fangs bared.

Too late I realized Phillip had tricked me. He pivoted in place. He was aiming not for Magdalen and Cheddar, but for me. I heard a whistling as the blade cleaved the air, a harsh grunt as if Magdalen had expelled all her breath in one tremendous effort, then something struck me in the head. My vision turned to black, my ears buzzed then fell silent, and I fell into nothingness.

CHAPTER 22



Wake up, Grim. Please wake up.

A sandpaper tongue was licking my cheek. I cracked open one eyelid that felt as if it had been welded shut. Isolde's face was so close to mine she was just a white furry blur with blue and green dots for eyes. She started licking my nose. It hurt.

You're the only one who can help us. Please wake up.

I rolled onto my chest. It seemed I had only been unconscious for a few minutes, just long enough for the captain to take Phillip's sword from him, ending the fight, and instruct his men to bind Magdalen's hands and feet.

They dumped Magdalen in the bottom of one of the boats, Isolde panted. They're going to take her out and throw her overboard. And Phillip has the sack with Dove still inside. He said he's going to drown them both, Dove and your Magdalen.

I staggered to my feet. With Isolde's every word, the urgency to rescue Magdalen was filling my mind, tamping down the pounding ache in my head.

Isolde trotted ahead of me then back again, leading me to the water's edge. *They're just pushing off now, see? It's the captain and*

Phillip. They're taking the first boat with all the gold it will carry, and leaving the rest of the men to load the other two and follow after as best they can. I chewed on the Magdalen's ropes as much as I could before they put her in the boat. I don't know if it was enough. Maybe—

Visions of Magdalen flailing helplessly in the water, sinking, drowning, rose before my eyes. *Where's Cheddar?* I interrupted the little white cat.

I thought you heard me. He's in the boat with our Dove and Magdalen. He'll try to chew the rest of the way through the ropes so maybe Magdalen can save herself and my family. Please, you're the only one who can—

I did not hear the rest of her plea. I did not need to. I plunged into the water, leapt the onrushing waves, then settled into my powerful swimming stroke, praying with every reach and pull of my limbs and paddle-like paws.

But I did not need to swim very far. The lighter's oars leaned in their locks, the oars slapping the water as the boat rocked wildly. The phosphorescent glow from the tiny inhabitants of the sea gave enough light to show two figures standing. They were grappling with each other, pulling back and forth at some object between them. Then I heard a cat's scream of rage, as if a tail had been trodden on. One of the figures overbalanced, grabbed at the gunwales with both hands then the boat rolled over with the shift in weight, dumping the passengers into the icy water.

I flipped around. My tail struck the water, helping me turn sharply, and I went after the bubbles that marked where one of the passengers had sunk beneath the surface. A larger burst of bubbles popped close by, and Magdalen broke the surface.

"Phillip! Phillip, drop the casket," she called. "You'll drown unless you do. Gold is not worth dying for."

Some distance away, a thin voice carried across the swells. "But it was worth killing for." Uncanny laughter floated to us out of the darkness. "I'm never letting go."

Magdalen took one stroke toward the voice when an arm caught and held her.

“No, mademoiselle.” The French captain bobbed in the water, treading in place beside her. “He’d just pull you down with him. He’s *toque*, how do you say it, touched? Mad? What good is a prize if it kills you? I, on the other hand, am a very sane man. I shall use you as a hostage and negotiate for my freedom.” He flipped an arm around Magdalen’s throat like a bar and began side-stroking out the sea, pulling her with him toward his black-hulled cutter just visible in the near distance as a slightly darker shadow.

Magdalen twisted like an eel, trying to slip from his grasp. She screamed, the captain swore violently, then Magdalen’s voice was cut off by a slap of a wave. She gagged on the water and her head sank beneath the swells.

I crossed the distance in two hard strokes, lunging through the water. I did not stop when I reached the struggling figures. They separated for just a moment and I drove on, my paws catching the French captain on the chest. I kept swimming, pulling, treading him down into the water until he sank away beneath me and did not reappear.

“G-g-grim,” Magdalen whispered through chattering teeth. She stretched out her arm and I slipped beneath it. She tightened her arm around my neck. A gargling yowl made us look to our left. A small yellow figure was making directly for us. Cheddar! Magdalen dipped under the water just low enough so the cat could climb onto her shoulders. Then I struck out for shore, pulling Magdalen and Cheddar with me.

We were just beyond the breakers when the sounds of pistol fire and shouts reached us from the beach. I stopped, treading water. What now? We could not step out of the water into the middle of a battle.

Then a light flashed out of the darkness. A sleek naval sloop hove into view and a voice cried out, “Ahoy the lighters and

return to shore. This is Captain Ambrose of His Majesty's battle sloop Lively. Lay down your weapons and prepare to be taken into custody by Coastguard officers."

I started swimming again, only to meet Felix crashing through the surf toward us. He scooped Magdalen out of the water and gripped my collar with his other hand, hauling us the last yards to dry land.

A short, sharp sea battle ended when the Lively fired her carriage guns at the fleeing guinea cutter. The French ship hove to, her rigging in tatters, and the Lively grappled her close so she could be boarded. The second lighter that had slipped away from shore during the confusion of the battle on the beach, laden nearly to the waterline with the gold, made a wallowing turn back toward shore with the Lively's own boats in pursuit. The disciplined royal navy sailors, without a heavy load to pull against, landed their boats nearly in unison with the fugitive boat and took the French into custody as the men clambered off.

With naval efficiency, some of Captain Ambrose's men got a blazing driftwood fire going, while the others helped Felix's men shackle the prisoners and round up the stragglers.

Magdalen laid her face against my head, her tears warm on my face. "Thank you for saving my life," she whispered. "Seeing you coming for me was an answer to prayer. You are my angel."

I drew back and stared at her. I was *her* angel? A shiver ran from my nose leather to the tip of my otter tail, as if the hand of the Creator had sleeked itself along my length in benediction. The weight of my past failures seemed to slide off my withers. I felt light, and clean, and *free*. I was myself again, a dog living out his purpose, fulfilling his duty, ever faithful.

A trilling noise made Magdalen look down. She swung Cheddar into her arms and cuddled him against her chest. "And you, Cheddar!" She kissed the top of his head, between his ears. "If I had not seen you attack Phillip, I would not have believed

it. You are a hero too. You and your little white friend.” She smiled toward Isolde, hovering shyly at the edge of the firelight. Cheddar squeezed his eyes, his entire body vibrating with his purr.

Soon Cheddar gently extracted himself from Magdalen’s arms. *I’ll be back as soon as I can, Grim, he said. We have to find Dove.*

She hasn’t surfaced?

I was trying to open the sack so she could get out, but then that lummox Phillip stepped on my tail, overbalanced, and rolled the boat. I haven’t seen her. Have you? Cheddar’s eyes were wide with fear, only a thin golden line showing around the huge black pupils.

No. I nuzzled Cheddar in concern. Do you want me to help search? You know my nose is better than yours.

It was a sure sign of Cheddar’s distress that he did not bother with a sarcastic retort. He watched Magdalen and Felix talk quietly in the firelight, first by themselves, then joined by Captain Ambrose. After a moment of consideration, he said, *Thank you, but it is best you stay here with the humans. Isolde told me it was Etienne who helped Phillip escape from Kemyel Hall tonight, to draw off Downton and his men. He’s out there, somewhere. They’ll need you to watch and call the alarm if he tries to escape through the tunnel.*

He stood up and shook the sand from his furry haunches. *I want to take Isolde back to the Hall. I don’t want her to be here if I find—when I—*He scrubbed his paw hard over his cheeks. *At least Panic is safe at the Hall where I left him.*

All I could do was touch my nose to Cheddar’s so he could smell and feel my shared worry and sorrow.

“My men found this fellow parked up on the coast road.” Sergeant Downton prodded Bill Bray into the light of the bonfire. “Odd that the tavernkeeper, of all people, was waiting with a wagon on the coast road near the Kemyel Crease end of

the tunnel, instead of at his tavern serving drinks on the busiest night of the year."

"Yes, that is odd." Felix got to his feet, dusting off his breeches. "Mr. Bray, you have one opportunity to tell me the truth. When the tide leaves, so will Captain Ambrose, with our prisoners, bound for London and a full investigation. With them goes your last chance to avoid the noose for being a traitor to your country." Felix took in the big man's sullen face then squinted at the angle of the moon, just visible now in her descent. He pulled out his pocket watch as if to double check the moon's accuracy. "Tic, tic, tic, Mr. Bray."

"All right, all right," Bray said. "Stephen promised me the box. I didn't care about the box, were just pinchbeck. All I wanted was the diamond out of the top. I know people in London as will give me a good price for a gem like that. Set me up for life, never have to wipe down another counter again."

"Stephen? Who is Stephen?" Felix frowned.

Bray's eyes bulged, then he began to laugh. "And you with your threats of the noose. You don't know nearly as much as you think you do, Mr. Coastguard Commander. Think I'll take my chances at the quarter sessions. Most of the justices enjoy a dram of my best French brandy when they're in town. Don't think they'll go too hard on the hardworking tavernkeeper what caters to their taste."

I stalked toward him on stiff legs, my hackles rising. Too many lives had been lost for this petty criminal to make sport of the people jeopardizing their own lives to end the conspiracy.

Brag took a step back from me but stopped short when he felt the point of Downton's saber in the small of his back. He threw up his hands. "Call off your 'ound. There's no call for that. Haven't we already had enough trouble with animals in this case?"

Felix's eyes flicked toward me. I dropped into a crouch, but I kept my eyes on the tavernkeeper's fat calves.

“Stephen—that’s Etienne in the French language,” Magdalen said slowly. “Like Pascoe derives from the old Cornish for Easter. Etienne Easter, Stephen Pascoe?”

“The hairdresser is too much younger than Phillip and Felicia to be a brother,” Felix reasoned. “A son?”

“Phillip’s natural son,” Brag nodded. “Result of one of Phillip’s little adventures in Paris. Our Sir Phillip always did love everything French. More frog than bulldog, heh?” he jested coarsely. Getting no appreciation from his audience, he went on, “His tastes didn’t go over so well here at Home, what with the Frenchies’ bloody revolution and then Napoleon starting the war. Phillip left Stephen behind in Paris. Oh, he sent the boy a bit of money now and again, but t’boy mostly raised himself.”

“How do you know all this?” Felix asked.

“Me and two generations of my family’ve been running brandy and whatnot for two generations of Pascoes. What they want but don’t want to pay the excise on, we smuggle in for a tidy profit. Including a long lost member of the family when Stephen showed up and wanted a ride ‘ome.” Brag scratched his head. “Guess that was one shipment Sir Phillip didn’t relish.” He shrugged. “Stephen got on the boat in France, Etienne got off in England, and I got promised a nice big bonus to keep my mouth shut. Now I’m here, to take delivery of what was promised to me.”

“I think we can be certain you’ll receive everything that’s due to you.” Felix nodded to Downton, who slipped manacles over Brag’s wrists.

The tavernkeeper seemed resigned. While Downton locked the restraints, Brag said conversationally, “I’d a been long gone if he’d just handed it over. You’d never credit all the excuses. Dropped the box here, dog run away with it there, kittens stole it next—” Brag shook his head, puzzlement in his face. “I’ll tell you the truth, there’s somethin’ wrong with a man what loves a

shiny object so much he'll blame a bunch of dumb animals just to keep it."

Downton guided Brag toward the other prisoners, with Felix and Captain Ambrose following to give further instructions.

Magdalen alone remained at the fireside. Her eyes grew huge as the ideas flickered across her face, one after the other. I could smell her growing excitement so clearly it transferred to me, making the fur rise along my spine. Then she stood, threw off the blanket and was off, running toward the horses. She scrambled up onto Gaiety, spun the mare in a tight, rearing pivot that sent the sand flying, and sent her pounding across the shingle toward the cliff path.

Wait! You need me! I barked. *Felix! Help!*

Felix vaulted to Argo's back and sent him galloping after Gaiety and Magdalen.

I was not as fast as the horses, if only because their strides were so much longer than mine, but I could run a straight course while they had to follow the twisting cliffside path. I would be first at the finish—whatever that was. The spurt of fear put spurs to my sides.

The ring of horseshoes on hardpacked sand told me Magdalen had turned Gaiety onto the smugglers' path toward Kemyel Crease. If she reached the road then tried to take the stream path as a shortcut to the Hall—my pounding heart seemed to fill my mouth. That twisting, narrow streamside with its mossy stones was treacherous even during noon light. At night and at speed, a horse could break a leg and spill her rider onto the rocks, to the death of both. Even for a dog, long and low, it would be easy to twist a paw and tumble head over haunches.

Argo was giving his best, but his roaring breaths told me he could go no faster. He and Felix would not catch and stop Magdalen. Ahead of me, Gaiety's gray haunches were silhouetted against the looming mass of the blackthorn thicket.

Then Gaiety's head came up as a horse and cart cut across her path. The snap of a whiplash rang out and the cart horse screamed in terror and pain. I knew that horse, I knew that voice urging her on, and I knew that white robed figure wielding the whip. It was Etienne, or Stephen Pascoe as we now knew. He must have slipped down Kemyel Crease from the Hall, evading Downton's men while they searched for Phillip, and found Bill Brag's cart waiting on the road, unoccupied, like the answer to some profane prayer. He'd stolen it and now he was pushing Rosie as fast as she would go, in a last desperate bid to reach the coast and the French cutter.

Rosie! I squeezed a last howl from my burning lungs. *It's not the White Lady—it's just a man. Hold hard! Stop right now!*

The chestnut mare threw up her head and stiffened her forelegs like props. The wheels skipped, the whole cart bounced in place, then the traces snapped and the shafts shot upwards. Etienne was thrown out of the cart. I swerved to intercept him, but my exhausted legs betrayed me. I stumbled and went flying, end over end.

Etienne bounced and rolled, but he was up and running back to the cart. He hauled leather saddlebags off the floorboards, slung them over his shoulder, and ran down the path. He took two steps before he saw the looming shape of Argo thundering toward him. Cut off, he swerved across the pasture, toward the lights of Lanthorne Cottage.

Gaiety, he's heading toward home! My voice was no more than a reedy yip but somehow either Gaiety or Magdalen, or both, heard it. I saw Gaiety rear, pivot, then race off toward the cottage.

One more stride, God give me just one more stride, I prayed, as I struggled after them on wooden limbs. Argo with Felix turned inside me, then we all held our breath when we saw the white-clad shape slip through the railings, the gray mare close behind, Magdalen low over her neck, urging her on.

If she didn't pull the mare up, they'd crash into the paddock fence. It was far too dark to jump safely. Either way both horse and rider could be killed. But the pair never stopped. In one heart-stopping motion, Gaiety gathered herself and arced cleanly over the three rail fence, landing lightly on the other side. We heard her hooves clatter another stride, then slither on the cobbles as Magdalen turned her back toward the cottage in pursuit of Stephen.

Argo slid to a stop at the gate and Felix flew from his back and hauled open the gate. I had already pushed between the railings, cracking one in my haste, when an explosion of glass split the night. Stephen had struck Lanthorne Cottage's bow window with his sword and shattered it.

For a few seconds we all froze. In the glare of the turnip lanterns, we saw the white clad figure climb through the gaping window frame, where shards of glass hung like giant fangs. "I'm taking you with me," Stephen Pascoe screamed at Aunt Hetty. "You'll be my passport, whether to freedom or to H—"

An angry squalling, like two tiny voices raised in outrage, cut him off. I shook my head, flapping my ears hard to clear them. It couldn't be!

"I'll teach you and your demons a lesson," Stephen raged. His arm rose, his saber in his hand. The squalling rose to a shriek and Stephen screamed. As his saber descended, the roar of a pistol and a streak of orange flame sent him reeling backwards. Stephen Pascoe, the White Lady, fell at Hetty's feet, a red stain blossoming in the white robe over his heart.

CHAPTER 23



Felix gently uncurled Hetty's fingers from the pistol and passed it to Sergeant Downton before he bent over the wounded man. Stephen's saber still remained in the chair Hetty had been sitting in, its blade buried too deep in the wooden frame to be removed except by a saw.

Felix and Magdalen, Hetty and I circled Stephen Pascoe. From the corner of my eye, I could see Downton and his men examining the bundle Stephen had carried with him to the end, casting frequent, curious looks toward the dining room, where the little cat family sheltered.

Safe among the sheltering legs, Isolde was frantically washing Panic and Dove, as if to reassure herself they were well and alive. Cheddar watched closely, frequently extending a paw to push one or the other kittens back into their mother's grasp when they threatened to escape. From their nonstop chatter, it was obvious the kittens had thoroughly enjoyed their adventure.

"The White Lady's heart is well and truly broken now," Pascoe said weakly. His cough brought up a gout of blood that stained his lips.

At the sound of his voice, Isolde stopped her bathing and pinned Stephen with her blue-green eyes. A low, eerie growl thrummed.

Stephen turned his face away. A welter of scratches marked his cheeks. "Kittens," he said, lip curled. "Who would have thought? They came at me like a swarm of bees."

Felix's face was ironed of any reaction. Then he asked, "Stephen, were you Phillip's partner?"

"Partner? That feeble minded fop?"

The renewed violence in the dying man's voice made my lips skin up over my teeth in an instinctive snarl. I made sure I was between him, and Magdalen and Hetty, standing with their arms around each other.

"That would mean he had the brains to contribute something. *I* was the mastermind behind the guinea runners!" Stephen gasped in pain but regathered himself with a visible effort. "Phillip—my dear father—" his lips twisted, "had run through every penny of his own and was close to bankrupting the Kemyel lands, though of course they weren't truly his in the first place. When his sister finally got tired of the complaints from home and decided to come herself in person and demand an accounting from Phillip, we knew we had to do something. Especially since he'd been signing her name on drafts on the Cavendish bank, withdrawing gold in smaller amounts and smuggling them out of the country for the last year. He might convince Felicia that blood was thicker than water, but the bank and the Alien Office wouldn't buy that.

"At their reunion, it seems Auntie Felicia had an unfortunate little accident." Stephen's chuckle was humorless and horrible to hear. "Of course it was up to me, Stephen, as always, to come up with a way to deal with it. We buried her, but we were stuck with trunks and baskets and cartloads full of her feminine fripperies. That was when I came up with my—my brilliant—plan —" Stephen stuttered to a stop. His lips parted stickily.

Silently, Magdalen took a basin and cloth from Mrs. Tregurtha and pressed the moist cloth to the dying man's lips. She and Felix exchanged an unspoken communication. A doctor would never reach them in time, even if anything could have been done for Stephen.

Though talking clearly caused him pain, Stephen seemed driven to speak as if he too knew he had only minutes of life remaining. "In the years I'd been on my own in Paris, I'd developed skills and made some rich and powerful friends, even some *imperious* friends, shall we say? I thought up a way to become rich and powerful myself, and never have to crawl before the likes of Phillip Pascoe to beg for my due ever again. All Phillip had to do was let me dress him as Felicia and then do a bit of playacting. Heaven knows, he spent enough time in London at the theater and dangling about after actresses."

"You no longer have your lisp," Felix observed. "Was that a bit of playacting of your own, Stephen?"

"Naturally. I simply put on the manner and affectations expected of a French hairdresser. Sometimes hiding in plain sight is the best disguise. And then, Felicia's collection of Italian potions and drugs helped. The Italians are geniuses when it comes to poisons, you know."

"Yes, that is what one hears," Hetty murmured. Felix raised his brow at her, promising a future conversation. The older woman returned a tiny, elegant shrug. Magdalen watched their interplay, bemused.

"How did you use the poison? The victims had been killed by saber blows," Felix asked.

"Phillip didn't poison them, he just used enough of the powder to make them drowsy and slow. Phillip wasn't much of an athlete. No muscles to speak of, arms like buggy whips. The perfect figure to portray a lady, but he'd never best any normal man in a sword fight without a bit of an equalizer."

Cheddar and I exchanged glances. He gave me a slow blink, acknowledging my scent work.

“So the guinea running was your idea, working with your French friends with imperial connections. Phillip went along with the plan because he needed to restore the money he’d stolen from the Kemyel estate. And you could use his murder of Lady Felicia as additional pressure to keep him under your thumb.”

Stephen shrugged, grimacing a little as the gesture pulled at his wound.

Magdalen knelt beside him. “But how did Phillip, or Phillip as Felicia, convince my father to take the gold for you?”

Stephen waved a hand weakly. “That was simplicity itself. Felicia was the chief trustee of the Cavendish Bank. We just had her demand an inventory and inspection upon her return to the country. There was Henry Haven, the comptroller, the person whose job it was to escort her, and the perfect subject for Felicia’s wiles.”

Stephen’s expression softened for a moment. “Poor man. He really had no defense. I didn’t lie to you that day in my shop. I am a true artist. When I finished making up Felicia, she was breathtaking. And Henry, dear, vulnerable Henry, was lonely. So desperately lonely.”

Magdalen turned her head but I sensed the pain that washed over her. Hetty laid her hand on Magdalen’s shoulder and her niece reached up and gripped it.

“A few teas, then an intimate dinner or two *a deux*, and with the help of some of Felicia’s Italian potion in his tea and wine, Henry was telling her,” he snickered, “ah, him, everything we needed to know including the security arrangements for the vault and the date of the next shipment from the mint. Phillip gave Henry an extra dose of the potion that night and arranged for his snuffbox to be left behind in the empty vault. Incrimi-

nating evidence indeed, since it was so unique, and guaranteed to convince Henry to keep his mouth shut. He was supposed to help us move the gold down here and stow it while we waited for the next new moon and the final French cutter to escape with it.”

“What went wrong? Did my father change his mind?” Magdalen broke in.

Stephen’s face contorted. “No, that pathetic worm turned on us!” He pulled the damp cloth from her hand and wiped his face. “It turns out he hadn’t been knocked out completely by that last dose. Perhaps he’d built up a tolerance for it, or he was growing suspicious. On the night of the robbery he stole Phillip’s reticule. It seems there’s no honor among thieves, just as that old saying goes. He found the little packet of wax and resin and powder I’d given Phillip, all the things Phillip needed to maintain his disguise, plus the drugs. Somehow Henry figured out our little charade. He’d even gotten his snuffbox back, some idiot friend in the bank who felt sorry for him.”

“That’s why you needed the box so desperately, isn’t it?” Hetty rested her hands on the top of her walking stick and leaned over Stephen. “My brother had engraved the initials of your top-ranked French partners along with the Pascoe coat of arms inside the lid. And he filled the box with samples of your cosmetic preparations and the drugged potion. We smelled the wax and the powder when Grim first brought the box to us but we couldn’t imagine what Henry had been doing with it. That box was the final proof of your treason.”

“He said he’d give it to the authorities unless Phillip and I testified about our little smuggling enter—” Stephen’s face contorted as a wave of pain twisted his body. He gripped Felix’s lapel in his hand. “But he was already working with you, wasn’t he?”

Felix nodded. “Is that why Phillip killed Henry Haven? To keep him from going to the authorities?”

“That and to get the snuffbox back. But he killed Henry too

soon. I told him to find out where Henry had moved the gold, first. As usual, my dear feckless papa had no tolerance for difficulty. He drugged Henry thinking that would loosen his tongue. Instead it made Henry obstinate. And Phillip lost his temper."

"What about Adam Merrick?" Magdalen put in. I leaned against her, listening closely.

"More of the same," Stephen dismissed the killing lightly. "Phillip sent his creature Merrick to search the cottage for the snuffbox. I suppose Merrick found it and tried to blackmail Phillip, so Phillip killed him. Not altogether a bad idea to dispose of a servant who'd grown troublesome, but then Merrick's dog stole the box."

Stephen gritted his teeth. "That dog even dug up the Emperor's agent. I killed that one myself, you know. Want something done right, do it yourself, as they say. And then those cats," his lips drew back in a snarl as his eyes passed over Cheddar. "Everywhere I turned, they vexed me. Sneaking about Kemyel Hall, snooping at the tavern, getting into my belongings and stealing from me. They haunted me. Me, the White Lady..." His satiric laugh ended in a bloody gasp for breath.

"Ah well," he snickered unpleasantly, "I'm dying for my crimes, but you haven't had it all your own way either, have you, Major Abbey? You still haven't got the snuffbox. My French partners will be safe from your Alien Office, and Henry Haven will still be believed to be as much a traitor as Phillip and I."

Magdalen pressed her hands to her face and turned into Felix's arms. I let my lips draw back so Stephen got a glimpse of my fangs.

"All my life, nothing and no one was for Stephen. Not even my father." He moved his legs restlessly, his movements coming in jerks as if he could not feel them. "Did you know he even embezzled from me? Stole a few coins out of each of the smaller shipments. That's why the emperor sent that agent in the first place. Wanted to know why the count was short. No one knows

what it was like, with a father like that. That's why I did it. But no one understands," Stephen whispered.

Magdalen knelt on Stephen's other side and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Stephen, I understand. Now."

He rolled his head in his direction but his glazing eyes stared off somewhere over her shoulder. "What would you know of me and what my life has been like? What I've had to do to survive?"

"I know you have never been able to claim your true identity. Your father was foolish and selfish, and you had to grow up alone and fend for yourself. Then when you made your way here at last, you discovered he was someone quite different than you had ever imagined or hoped. The reality of who he was killed your boyhood dreams. You felt you had to..." Magdalen seemed to be searching for the right words. "Make up for his mistakes. I understand because that's why I'm here too. Trying to put my father's mistakes right."

Magdalen laid a gentle hand over Stephen's where it rested over his shattered heart. "It's time to lay down that burden. You're only responsible for your own actions. You can still ask for forgiveness and receive mercy from your heavenly father."

Stephen Pascoe drew in a long breath. For one moment I hoped, and I prayed. If even a lost soul like Stephen Pascoe could be redeemed, then something would have come out of this series of events that would comfort Magdalen, Hetty, and Felix when they remembered it in the future.

But Stephen only shrugged his shoulder from under Magdalen's hand. "I can't feel my hands or feet," he complained. His arms moved bonelessly, one of them draping the edge of the white robe he still wore across part of his face.

Magdalen brushed it aside for him. A puff of wind set the turnip lanterns in the trees bouncing, casting leering shadows on the dying man's face. "Stephen," she asked, "why did you resurrect the old tradition of the White Lady of the Pascoes?"

Was it just to keep people from catching the guinea runners using the Kemyel Crease tunnel?"

With a supreme act of will, Stephen Pascoe focused his gaze. "Oh, we figured we could trust to the tradition of free trading for silence. Most folks in these parts are wise enough to keep their mouths shut when they see men unloading boats at night. No, it was the tunnel. It'd developed a habit of caving in, that's why it hadn't been used for so long. When we resurrected it, I resurrected the White Lady, too, to keep the kiddies away. I didn't want some child crushed to death just because it took a mind to exploring." His lips twitched in the barest approximation of a smile. "I'm not a monster, you know."

AFTER STEPHEN HAD BEEN CARRIED AWAY, the broken window boarded up and the sitting room tidied of glass and restored to comfort, Felix bowed in his seat toward Hetty, where she sat taking tea with the rest of us before the newly made up fire.

"Lady Balfour, something tells me I have you to thank for Captain Ambrose arriving just in time to prevent the French cutter from escaping with the gold. But the Admiralty had denied my request for naval support. Most adamantly. How did you manage it?"

Even in the slanting light of the flames and the slanting flicker from the turnip lanterns, we could see the color rise into Hetty's cheeks. She waved a hand in dismissal. "Let us just say, never underestimate the power of a woman with a wide social acquaintance—who is ambitious for her son's career."

Magdalen sucked in her breath. "Uncle Romney's sister? But I thought you were not on speaking terms after my father's disgrace."

Hetty shrugged, a small gesture of elegant nonchalance. "My sister-in-law Stella, Lady Ambrose, was quite willing to resume speaking with me—and anyone else who mattered—relent-

lessly, incessantly, once I told her what a coup this operation could be for a newly made young captain's career. Today a sloop, tomorrow a ship of the line, if Lady Ambrose has her way."

Felix pressed a kiss on Hetty's hand. Then he sighed. "A fine result for His Majesty's navy. I wish it had been as complete a success for the Coastguard."

"I'd like to contradict you there, sir, with all respect." Downton stepped forward, Stephen's leather saddle bags over one shoulder, a small object in his outstretched hand. The diamond set into Henry Haven's snuffbox shot a rainbow of light over us. "We found this in the bottom of Stephen Pascoe's saddlebag. From the cat hair caught in the hinge and the interest this little mite is showing in it," he pointed with his chin to Panic, standing on hind legs against Downton's pant leg, reaching upward, waving his tiny paws toward what Downton held in his hand, "looks like these animals haunted Pascoe to the very end."

Mine, mine, Panic squeaked. I found it hidden in the hairdresser's satchel so it's mine now! Give me the pretty box!

Mama, I told him to give it to Papa so Papa could give it to Miss Magdalen or Major Felix. Dove marched into the middle of our group, little tail quivering upright in a demand for attention. I told him we couldn't keep it, that it was dangerous and the humans needed it, to make life safe again for everyone. But then Panic almost got caught by the hairdresser so he hid with the box inside some leather bags. When the man started to take the bags away, I knew I couldn't leave Panic on his own, so I jumped in the other side.

Complainer! I got the box to Papa and the humans just like you said I should, Panic crowed, chest puffed out with self-importance. You just didn't like the bouncy ride along the way.

It wasn't the ride I minded, it was the sudden stop at the end! Dove sassed.

If it weren't for my idea of riding in the leather bags, we wouldn't

have been close enough to stop the man from hurting Mrs. Hetty, Panic said.

That was exciting, wasn't it? Dove's eyes got very wide and the fur of her tail stood out like a bottlebrush.

The humans laughed. They might not understand what was said, but the kittens' pride and excitement was irresistible. Hetty scooped up the kittens, holding them against her cheeks. "My little guardian angels," she said.

"Every single one of them," Magdalen said from the circle of Felix's arms, her gaze falling on us like a benediction.

The winds had pushed the stormfront down the coast and the first thread of pearly blue heralded the approaching dawn. The wide, fresh expanse was too appealing to resist for my humans, still wide awake after their brush with death. Felix on Argo, with Magdalen on Gaiety, rode slowly along the smugglers' path toward the cliff top. Cheddar and Isolde padded side by side over the cropped turf, Panic and Dove following in fits and starts as a blowing leaf or rustle in the grass caught their attention and spurred a brief hunt.

Once, as the feline parents stopped to watch their kittens play, I saw their tails, one orange striped and sleek, the other luxuriantly plumed with white, entwine in a cat's kiss. I panted in happy anticipation. Perhaps there would be more kittens in the spring for me to nurture and instruct.

Magdalen asked, "What will happen now to Lanthorne Cottage? Must it be torn down?"

Felix reined Argo to a halt before he answered. Even in the faint remnants of starlight, I could see his shoulders raise and lower as if he had drawn a deep breath. "I will complete my report in the morning, but I am recommending it be confiscated by the Crown."

"Oh."

His eyes slid toward hers. "To be put into service as the new Coastguard residence and headquarters. The Coast-

guard's preventative squadron in Penzance has been asking for reinforcements for over a year. Mousehole is the ideal location."

"Oh?" Magdalen's voice rose with hope.

"I'm confident Superintendent Wickham will accept my recommendation. Though the Pascoe ring has been smashed, the vacuum will soon be filled by others willing to turn traitor for the riches they can make on the guinea run. Napoleon's hunger for gold is endless, as is the greed that raises in some men." Felix fell silent. "Mousehole will be a busy station."

Argo pawed a forefoot. *Go on, then, Felix*, he nickered deep within his chest. *Never known you to hesitate before the charge like this.*

I don't believe he's had much experience in these types of skirmishes, Argo. I flicked my tongue over my nose, tasting the emotions around me. *His feelings are so strong, and so new to him, he's having to feel his way.*

Nevertheless, I'd appreciate a bit of action. I'd like him to get on with things before I grow another gray hair in my tail. Argo shook his head, rattling his curb chain for emphasis.

Never fear, I'll nip it out for you, Gaiety whickered.

That's quite enough from you, young lass. Argo laid his ears back.

"That's enough from both of you, Argo, Gaiety," Felix reproved the horses mildly.

I cocked my head in surprise. Every once in a while the humans were remarkably perceptive. Was it possible? Could they, someday, somehow, learn to understand sophisticated communication such as ours?

Cheddar padded up. *I know what you're thinking. The answer is 'no.'*

But what Felix just said, Cheddar, it was almost as if he understood. I nudged the cat with my snout to make my point.

Cheddar pushed my nose aside with his paw, his claws

shielded. *They've trouble enough communicating clearly with their own kind. Haven't we had to clear up the results of that for them?*

I suppose. My ears fell. But just think, Cheddar, to have your dear master know you as well as you know him...

In the first place, cats don't have masters. We have servants. At times, highly agreeable ones. Cheddar's cheeks plumped into a smug smile. Speaking of which, did I tell you what Hetty made for me? Here's a hint: it's purple, it's velvet, and it's stuffed with duck feathers.

That's three hints, and yes I saw your new cushion.

Cheddar rubbed against me. Don't be sad, Grim. If the humans are slow, that only means they need us all the more. The Lord of Creation gave us the duty to guard them, guide them, and teach them the meaning of love.

I touched my forehead to Cheddar's briefly. Thank you, friend, for reminding me.

Felix clucked to Argo and our little parade set off again. "I'll also be making another recommendation about the cottage," Felix said. "I believe it too will be accepted, since in the same letter I'll be accepting the permanent assignment the Superintendent offered. My home will be in Mousehole from now on." He turned and looked at her, almost shyly.

Magdalen turned to look at him silently. Her wide eyes shone as bright as Henry Haven's diamond.

Felix went on, less certainly. "I'm recommending the cottage be renamed the 'Henry Haven Memorial Coastguard Station.' Your father will be laid to rest with honor in a plot beside the cottage. His sacrifice will not be forgotten."

Magdalen began to cry silently.

Argo snorted in disgust. *Well that went well, Felix.*

"Magdalen?" Felix swung out of his saddle and stood looking up at Magdalen. "Are you crying because you do not like my idea for the renaming? Or that I'm staying in Mousehole?"

"I'm crying because I like both very much," Magdalen

whispered.

“You’re crying because you’re happy?”

Magdalen gulped, then she slid down off Gaiety’s back and into Felix’s arms. Wisely, in my considered opinion, Felix did not pursue this contradiction. He just wrapped her inside his cloak and held her close. I wished I could tell Felix what I sensed of Magdalen’s feelings. But that was a gift only she could give him, and he in his turn must find the courage to open his own heart to her.

We walked on slowly, down to where the coast curved back on itself and we could look across the little expanse of beach and sea to Lanthorne Cottage on its little promontory. Lights winking, snug and safe, it signaled ‘home’ as surely as any lighthouse.

Home. The place where I had finally learned and fully tested the meaning of love. When nothing and no one else were what they seemed, the power of love had remained true and trustworthy. My love for Magdalen and Hetty, theirs for each other and for me, and the sacrificial love of Henry Haven for his family, and for his country.

Then there was the other kinds of love I had discovered: the loyalty and friendship of Cheddar and his feline family, the horses, even Cicero, Mrs. Tregurtha, and Sergeant Downton too. Perhaps the Creator had given me a family after all, and I hadn’t been able to see that because I had been expecting members of a family to look like each other. Tonight I realized it was not the outward appearance, but the inner bonds of love that formed a family.

And Felix? He had turned out in the end to be exactly what he first appeared to me, a man of honor, courage and deep feeling. I wondered if Magdalen realized that too, and would allow the power of his love to draw her into a new bond, a new family of their own.

We walked down the low cliffs to a series of tide pools. One

of them, larger than the rest, shone like a gleaming mirror in the pale dawn, reflecting the new moon amidst twinkling stars. I heard Magdalen draw in her breath in wonder. Hand in hand they strolled to the rocky edge. Had they looked behind them, they would have seen a semicircle of animal spectators, as Cheddar and Isolde with their kittens joined me near the horses. Not a sound did we make as we crouched in the marsh grass, all ears cocked toward the humans.

"I'm not a Cornishman, but I have learned one or two of their traditions since I've been here," Felix said.

"Just one or two?" Magdalen teased.

He touched the tip of her nose with a gentle finger. "Perhaps even three things. But for tonight, the most important thing I've learned is about All Hallows Eve."

Magdalen's voice carried her smile to our ears. "A soldier, a spy catcher, and now a student of local traditions? Most impressive."

Felix took Magdalen in his arms. "I've learned that if an unmarried woman looks into a mirror on All Hallows Eve, she'll see the man she is going to marry. We have the remains of this night, and it seems to me the moon and stars have done excellent work providing us with a mirror." Felix's voice was gently earnest. "Will you look now and tell me what you see? *Who* you see?"

A trailing breath of wind carried Magdalen's whispered answer away from us and drew a veil of cloud across sky, dimming the tidal mirror and turning the couple at the water's edge to dim silhouettes. But none of our night-wise eyes missed the movement as Magdalen turned her face upward for Felix's kiss.

The burst of our joyful noise made the humans turn, as we each barked, meowed or neighed in celebration of the new bond of love we had witnessed. But the sweetest sound of all was the loving laughter from the humans in our midst.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON THROW A
DOG A DEAD MAN'S BONE

*Brandy for the Parson',
Baccy for the Clerk;
Laces for a lady, letters for a spy,
And watch the wall, my darling, while the Gentlemen
go by!*

From 'A Smuggler's Song,' *Puck of Pook's Hill*, Rudyard Kipling

This novel is a work of my imagination. I peopled ('animaled'?) it with personalities spun out of the creative woolgathering of a lifetime of reading, travel, and the good fortune to interact with (and often eavesdrop on, I admit it!) interesting characters.

But I always find that truth is stranger than fiction, so my works all sprout from those delightful sidelights or hidden byways of history. In this case, the improbable idea that smuggled English gold was used by Napoleon to fund his wars against—you guessed it—England. Then, because I write mysteries, I ask: "What unique motivation would I have to kill someone at this time/place/event? And what unique ways to detect and catch me would an investigator have?"

The more I dug into the guinea run, the more perfect it became for the backdrop against which my valiant chocolate Labrador hero, Grim, and his animal and human friends would stop a murderer, while discovering things about themselves they'd never have known otherwise.

Here's some background I hope you'll enjoy learning about as much as I did:

What was the guinea run?

The smuggling trade in gold, from England to France across the Channel, named after the guinea coins that were the most common and negotiable form of the gold. Napoleon Bonaparte, crowned Emperor Napoleon I, had been at war against England and her shifting array of allies since 1803. By the time of our story in 1813, the French economy had nearly collapsed under ruinous taxation as Napoleon struggled to pay his mercenaries and supply his armies.

The guinea run was an ironic double burden on England. She was already providing the greatest and most consistent part of the funding among the allies.

The guinea runners traded in both directions. From France, they brought back spies, secret documents, and sensitive information. From his final exile on Saint Helena, Napoleon himself credited such smugglers with supplying him with all the information he had on England, and said they did 'great mischief' to the country.

Where did it occur?

Along the English Channel, from the tip of the Cornish peninsula in the south west (opposite Brest, including the port of Lorient, mentioned in our story) to Dover in the east (opposite Calais), plus dozens of small coves and inlets in between, both in England and France.

When did it happen?

From roughly 1803 to 1815, ended by Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in June 1815.

What is the difference between guinea running and smuggling/the free trade?

The guinea run was a specialty smuggling that rose to supply the unique needs of a specific time in history. Organized smuggling in the south and southwest of England, also known as the free trade, dates to at least the time of Elizabeth 1st. Smuggling and consumption of heavily taxed luxury goods—and evading scrutiny of forbidden or monitored communication— was widely condoned and well accepted. Some of those goods were considered essentials or nearly so, such as tea and brandy.

The free trade also provided fisherfolk and the coastal regions with consistent income that did not rely on the caprices of nature. The tradition of incredible seamanship meant owners of even the smallest craft could cross the Channel in all weathers and return successfully with highly profitable clandestine cargo.

Could people really be hanged for smuggling?

With the declaration of war in 1803, smuggling became an act of war, and to engage in it became treason. Both sides added military countermeasures. Penalties on the English side included being shot on sight, imprisonment in the infamous prison hulks, and even trial and execution for treason. In response, the usually peaceable smugglers added violent intimidation and murder to their efforts to evade detection and escape capture.

England's response reflected the very real fear that smuggling could precipitate an invasion. Napoleon had political, dynastic, and practical reasons for wishing to annex the wealthy nation to his empire. In my estimation, he also had strong psychological motives that made England so tantalizing to him, which my equine characters Patch and Argo express.

England's coastal defenses included towers and canals, the centralized control of Customs Service cutters and rowboats, and the initiation of the 'Preventative Forces.' Like the fictional Major Felix Abbey, these riding officers were usually military officers, often assigned the duty after their return home from fighting Napoleon in the Peninsular Campaigns. Again, I have performed a little imaginative psychoanalysis, but there is little doubt these officers would have been highly motivated to protect their homeland from the chaos and misery they'd seen Napoleon's invasions create in Spain, Portugal, and most horrifically, in Russia.

Is there really a place called 'Mousehole'?

There is, the name is pronounced 'Mowz'l,' and you should visit it if you have the opportunity. I've tried to do justice to this lovely village, with its jewel box of a harbor on one of England's most breathtaking coastlines. I believe you'll fall in love with it and its history as I did.

Mousehole was considered a hotbed of the guinea run. All the strategies I detail, including smugglers' windows, spotsmen, tunnels, caves and hauntings, are well documented tools of the smuggling trade. However, I've taken considerable creative license with the geography and other details, including reimagining Kemyel Crease, a real and a beloved beauty spot. I've also dug tunnels where they do not exist and built manor houses and cottages where they do not stand.

Aren't aliens and an Alien Office modern inventions?

'Alien' simply means a person from a foreign or outside place or nation. The Alien Office was formed in 1793 to monitor and control the influx of refugees from the French Revolution including suspected revolutionaries, anarchists, and spies. Its duties swiftly grew to the active surveillance—often including spying—of foreign people of interest.

This was a natural extension of England's long centuries of expertise in spycraft, dating to at least Francis Walsingham, known as Elizabeth the First's 'spymaster.' The Alien Office has

been called the first modern form of the British secret service. William Wickham was appointed superintendent in 1794 and was credited with developing the intelligence cycle of information collection and analysis. I fictionally extended his term in office. In actuality he resigned from the Alien Office in 1802 after he was appointed a Privy Counselor and Chief Secretary for Ireland, no doubt another posting where his intelligence skills would be useful. For those who find the business of spying distasteful, it's interesting to note the indications Wickham maintained a moral center. In 1804 he resigned his position, calling the laws governing Ireland 'unjust, oppressive, and unchristian.'

Is Stargazy Pie real?

Most definitely! The delicacy is traditionally eaten on December 23rd, or Tom Bawcock's Eve, which celebrates the legendary Mousehole fisherman who sailed out in the teeth of a fierce storm to bring back fish to feed his starving village. His catch was baked into one huge pie for the village to share. This dish is too evocative of Cornwall and its sea faring tradition, not to mention too tempting to my feline main character, not to include in this story, so I hope I will be forgiven for fiddling with the calendar.

Oggies and hevva cakes are also real, and really delicious, traditional foods of Cornwall.

All the animals that appear in this work are based on those I have known and loved over the years. The current members of my FurRensics Team, Jocko the black Labrador and Ambrose the Siamese, were especially patient with me, enduring mummy's sudden counting of paw pads, staring at them when they sniffed, ate, expressed themselves or otherwise went about their animal business, and (usually) looked interested when I asked them, 'What would you do if—?'

While the animal characters' thoughts and actions are

creations of my imagination (and fond wishes of my heart) I tried to be true to our furry companions' capacity for selfless loyalty and unconditional love. I pray these fictional pets will amuse, encourage, and even inspire you, as they have me.

With warmest regards,
Hillari DeSchane

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A CHRISTMAS TAIL

A Regency Holiday Mystery



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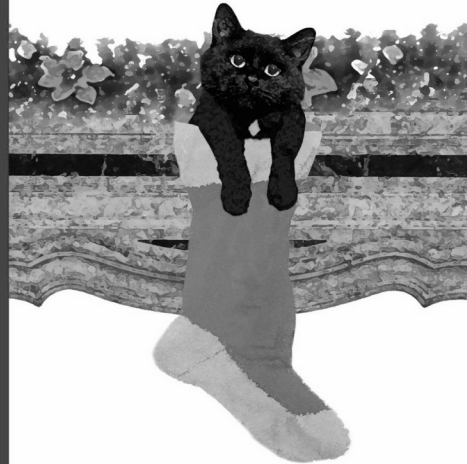
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hillari DeSchane is an award-winning author, journalist, and speaker who has been widely published in print and online. Hillari's cozy pet mysteries combine her four favorite things: the Regency era of Jane Austen, mysteries, travel, and pets. She also writes human interest, and pet-related features for magazines and websites.

When not traveling internationally to gather material for her novels and articles, Hillari enjoys hiking with her dog, gardening (also with her dog) and cooking (supervised by her cat.) She lives in Central California with her 'FurRensics Team' Jocko the black Labrador and Ambrose the Siamese cat.

Her first cozy pet mystery, *A Christmas Tail: A Regency Holiday Mystery*, received a Certificate of Excellence from the Cat Writers Association of America. Her current and upcoming releases include *Throw A Dog A Dead Man's Bone* (October, 2020) and *A Christmas Stalking: Another Regency Holiday Mystery* (November, 2020.) All Hillari's books are family-friendly offerings from Trinity Rose Press and available in print and ebook. Follow Hillari at hillarideschane.com, [Facebook@hillarideschaneauthor](https://www.facebook.com/hillarideschaneauthor), or visit her author page on Amazon.

