

## *Chapter One*

**ZANE MAXWELL DIDN'T GRASP** how long he had been hanging from these chains. It felt like an eternity, but he perceived it only to be a few days. A few hazy days at that. How he got himself in this predicament was unknown to him. He only knew he betrayed his best friends to end up here. Here on this godforsaken hovel of a ship, chained to the walls. Zane's wrists were raw from chafing against the metal chains. His wounds were cut open with blood soaking along his arms. His body beaten and bruised from every angle. But it was not only his blood covering his body, his enemy's blood covered him too. The only regret consuming his thoughts that it wasn't the blood of death. He learned Shears still lived, lived long enough to keep him prisoner on this poor excuse of a ship.

Zane lifted his head to look around the hold. The pit of the ship was as disgusting as the rest of everything else Shears owned. Rats were crawling around biting at his ankles wanting something to fill their bellies with, he kicked out at them. He watched as they scurried to the pile of rubbish in the corner. The walls were lined with mildew from where the water seeped in through the bow of the ship, as it was doing now. To think his dear friend Ivy survived being held captive on this ship. How she endured the suffering he would never understand. While they threw her overboard and left her for dead, it was the best thing that happened to her. When he had found out what Shears had done to her, he remembered attacking him, only for Shears to laugh at him. During this whole time, everybody had been pawns in Shears's game of hell.

Leaning his head against the wall he thought of how he could escape. Maxwell laughed to himself as he realized he had gotten himself in way over his head. All for what? Praise, recognition from the Crown as a job well done. Since he attacked Shears intending to kill him, he gathered he couldn't talk his way out of it this time. Every other time he fooled Shears

into believing he was a double agent. At least he killed Gold Tooth, Shears's largest man. With him gone, he might be able to fight his way off this ship.

Hearing footsteps coming downstairs to the ship's hold, he hung his head pretending to be unconscious. He listened to what sounded to be four sets of feet. One had a lighter tread than the others, he couldn't afford to peek without blowing his cover. He had to wait for them to show themselves.

"Madam, you cannot come below deck," Shears's deck hand explained as he chased her down the stairs.

"Why not, what are ye hiding? Since ye say ye do not have my shipment, ye must carry cargo ah might be interested in buying."

"Nothing is for sale here. Now you must leave. Captain Shears will contact you in a few days."

"I think not, I have already been waiting for two full days. Ah noticed yer ship docked here fur longer."

"The Captain will be in touch soon."

"What of my shipment? What is yer excuse this time? I'm thinking yer Captain has proven false on his claims to provide me with the firearms fur our cause."

"We have them ma'am."

"Tsk, Tsk, Tsk, how ah hate when I am addressed as ma'am. It makes me sound so old. Am I old Gregor?"

"No, Mac yer definitely nae old."

She laughed, a soft husky laugh at that. Something in her voice touched Zane from across the hold. He wanted to catch a glimpse of her. Her wit and sarcasm were lost on Shears's man, but not on him.

"Ower 'ere Mac, looks lik' thay git themselves a prisoner," another voice beckoned for her to come over.

He heard her walk across the planks towards him. Maxwell could sense her eyes piercing his soul as she looked him over from his hanging head to his rat bitten ankles. He could imagine her touch as if she was caressing every part of his body. He didn't need to raise his head to sense her perusal. Who was this mystery woman? When she touched him, it took everything he had, not to react to the power of her touch. The only thing she did was to trace her fingers softly across the raw openings of his wrist. While it should sting, it soothed. Maxwell let out a moan at her gentle touch, hoping she didn't hear. But she did. Lifting a finger under his chin she raised his head. He met her eyes as his head rose, the darkest green eyes he had ever seen, gazed back at him. They appeared to read his mind as well as his soul. They searched for the answers, she already knew, but wanted him to admit to. He shuttered his gaze, rocked to the soul of her awareness. He didn't possess all the answers, and those he did they weren't for her to discover.

It wasn't only her touch and the gaze in her eyes which took his breath away. Her hair was a deep shade of red that hung to her waist. It was unusual for a woman to wear her hair loose and flowing unless in the privacy of her own bedchamber. But she was no lady, she was beyond bold. He detected she was Scottish, her speech held an accent which slipped out every now and again. There was no gown that hugged her body, but trousers molded to her legs, begging for somebody to strip them off her. They shaped and hugged her derriere. It was the blouse she wore, white cotton that teased open to display her breasts that drew his attention. They gleamed under the dim light the lanterns provided. Who was this sensuous creature?

“What do we have here? I take it Shears doesn't care for this bloke much does he?”

“No, I do not madam. It doesn’t matter because he won’t be around for much longer to even matter.”

“Ahh, Captain Shears ye finally grace us with your presence. Ye know how I detest to be kept waiting.”

Zane was so distracted by the goddess before him he didn’t hear the clomp of Shears’s footfall as he entered the hold. Maxwell watched as the overweight captain limped over to the intruder on his ship. The man’s greasy hair hung in his face. He swiped a hand across, so he could view the lady. Shears held his hand to his side in pain as his eyes devoured her in lust. The captain’s eyes took in how her clothes molded her body leaving nothing to the imagination. Maxwell could see how Shears was distracted by her charms, but not enough for rage filled Shears’s eyes too. When Maxwell’s eyes moved to her, he noticed she had been aware of Shears’s presence the entire time. She raised her damn eyebrow at him and set her head in a small shake showing her disappointment in him for not being aware of his surroundings better. Maxwell cursed himself for his mistakes and blocked her beauty from his mind. He needed to focus to get himself off this ship alive.

Captain Shears bowed before her, “Please accept my apology.”

“Well I won’t, until ah see the delivery of my goods.”

“We ran into a problem with your shipment. You see, the gentleman before you, destroyed my merchandise.”

The green eyes raked over him in disdain and a flash of anger.

“How?”

“His friends and him work for the Crown, they destroyed every one of my loads the last few weeks. I stand before you to beg for a loan, to replenish my supply. There is a seller arriving in one month’s time. When he

has arrived, I will provide you with the weapons you need to carry out your plan.”

“I already gave ye a hefty sum and received nothing in return. Now ye have the audacity to ask for more money?” she questioned in anger.

As she spoke her two henchmen flanked both sides of her. Their size only dwarfed her but didn't take away her sense of control. If anything, they seemed to enhance her power. As her anger grew her brogue disappeared and her English became more direct. She was a professional and Maxwell was intrigued by her.

“As I said, one month and I will double your arms. Then we can destroy England.”

“Rumor has it that you are near destruction. That your whole operation is blown asunder.” She laughed her sarcastic laugh that Zane was admiring.

Shears scowled at her humor, puffing his chest up, he advanced towards her trying to threaten her. But she only stood there, her eyebrow rising at his advancement. Her men tightened themselves around her protecting her from him. She held her hand up halting them and they backed away from her. Not too far, but enough of a distance for her to show Shears he did not intimidate her.

“What are you implying, that I cannot destroy England?”

“The only one you are destroying is yourself. You ruined the destruction set-in play for your own agenda. For petty revenge against a French girl and her lover from what I hear.”

Shears whipped out his arm towards Maxwell, “His friends, madam. They set out to destroy us from the beginning. Even Maxwell here, betrayed us. He was on our side, but his love for Ivy Thornhill brought on the wrath

of her husband and brother. He double crossed us for a pair of thighs that will never part for him.”

She turned towards him, scrutinizing him for a reaction. To see if he would defend his friends. He spoke not a word.

“He ruined you for a lady married to another bloke. That must be true love. Was it worth it?” she inquired.

No answer uttered from his lips. He wouldn't be a pawn in their game. While she was a means of escape for him, he wouldn't give her any ammunition in this fight.

“Mmm, a question for another time. I would love to hear the back story on this, but I must leave. The docks are being patrolled and I won't have the guards catch me.”

As she continued observing him, Shears had come up behind her. He brushed the hair back from her face. She stood still regarding Zane; if he wasn't watching her back, he would have missed the repulsion that flashed in her eyes. It was gone in an instant to be replaced by humor. When she turned, her lips twisted into a smile at Shears, shaking her head.

“You know the rules Shears, you can look, but not touch. Now remove your hands from me if you want to continue to grace my company.”

Shears dropped his hands as her men pressed closer. One of them sent a hard elbow into his side. Shears gasped for air as it connected with his wound. Blood seeped through his shirt, soaking it to a darker red.

Her eyes viewed the wound then landed back on him, she tilted her head in question. Zane tilted his head in return; of course, who else. She nodded back her approval. Why that gave him justification he didn't know. Who cared if she approved that he tried to kill Shears. She was working alongside Shears, for the same revenge against England that he was fighting against to stop.

“Well since we appear to be at an impasse on the financial side of our agreement, I will take your prisoner here as collateral.”

“His Lordship is not for trade,” Shears scowled.

“But you see he is, you owe me money and weapons. You can provide neither. I will take him until you do. At that time, I will return him to you. If not, I will add him to my collection.”

Shears observed the two men flanking her side. Zane finally regarded them too. They weren't any ordinary henchmen, the brutes almost looked too handsome. They were tall with wide shoulders with muscles stretching the material of their clothes. Their long hair pulled back showed off chiseled cheekbones. As he looked closer at their hands, Zane saw the sheer brute of her guards. They were the hands of warriors. Rough and calloused they displayed signs of demanding work and defense. Defending her. He could tell their loyalty by their protectiveness towards her.

“Why don't we continue this discussion in my cabin? I am sure we can figure out an agreement.”

Her husky laughter filled the air again, “Now Shears you understand I do not mix business with pleasure.”

“You mix it with your own guards.”

When she walked around her henchmen, she ran her hand along their muscles, squeezing pressure on them. Her fingers trailed against their chests. They never moved or reacted to her touch, standing as silent statues. Zane ached for her to caress him again. How could they not react? Her presence was making him hard as stone. From her long red hair to her husky laugh he felt an attraction to her. He shook his head, struggling to get his thoughts under control. He shouldn't be desiring a lady who was in cohorts with Shears. They must have knocked him on the head harder than he thought.

“My relationship with my guards is different Shears, you know the guidelines on doing business with me. Now is your crew releasing my prisoner or do my men need to take the chains off him?”

“As I told you before, he is not for sale. I have my own plans for him and they involve a long, slow death. One act I will enjoy watching my men perform on him.”

“Now Shears, do not make me press my issue here. Either your men pull him down now or I will give the signal for the rest of my men to join me.”

“You have no other guards here madam,” Shears smirked.

“Do you think I came onto your ship without an army of protection? Never take me for a fool Shears, that will be your first mistake. Your second mistake will be for me to repeat myself.” She arched her stunning eyebrows at him.

Shears scowled as he motioned for his men to cut him loose. His men unlocked the chains around his wrists. They dropped to the hardwood planks with a thud, the chains rattling when settling on the floor of the ship. They weren't finished with him though, each of Shears's men made sure they landed a blow to his sides as he became free.

Zane grunted as he fell to the floor. His legs gave out from underneath him, weak from hanging for days. His numb fingers rubbed at his sore wrists, pressing the raw flesh back into place. A hand lowered to help him to his feet. A soft delicate hand slid into his palm beckoning him to rise. He slid his rough palm into hers, feeling the comfort of home. He let her help him rise to his feet. She slid her arm around his waist and took his weight against her own. She was no lightweight miss. He could feel her strength as she guided him from Shears's ship. Her arms squeezed him

lightly as she bantered with Shears, “Yes, I think he will be a nice addition to my harem.” She laughed to herself as they climbed the stairs.

Shears followed them to the top of the deck. His men gathered around him as they viewed them disembarking from his ship. Her men circled around them as they made their way along the dock. Shears noted she was too protected to execute his revenge. He would find her when she was alone and vulnerable, and then she would be his. When he captures her away from her henchmen, he would bring her back to set sail for the unknown. He missed out on that sweet Ivy Thornhill, but he would own MacKinnon. Even if he had to tie her to his bed to make her his. Her sassy mouth wouldn't protect her then.

Shears watched as Maxwell made his escape. He wasn't finished with him either. He would kill him before this month was out. His back up was coming and he would destroy them. The only thing he took pleasure in was that she held the key to Maxwell's search for the treasure and Maxwell didn't even know it. That was a bit of sweet revenge.

“Have the boy bring me a bottle of whiskey to my cabin and follow them. I want them watched until they make their return. And for god's sake do not get caught. Report back to me in the morning.”

Shears staggered back to his chamber sprawling out on a chair. His cabin boy raced in after him carrying the bottle. He was a small lad no older than six. His clothes hung on him, torn into rags. Not one spot on his body was clean, he was covered in the same grime which decorated the ship.

“Here you go Captain.” The lad rushed to his side to please him.

Shears grabbed the bottle and swatted him across the face, taking out his anger on the boy. He swigged back a drink as he kicked the young lad.

“Get the hell out of here you gutter swine.”

The young boy ran out of the cabin as fast as he could; for fear of how the Captain would harm him. When the Captain was angry, it was always best not to be in his line of sight.

Shears leaned back in his chair drinking from the bottle. He lowered his hand to his side, wincing from the pain. When he raised his hand, it was coated in blood. He snarled as he watched the blood dripping from his fingers and swore his revenge on Maxwell. The Earl double crossed him for the last time. His snarl quickly turned into a smile as he began to plan his revenge on the spy and the ravishing redhead he escaped with. Neither one of them would survive what he had in store for them.

