

THE WHALER'S TREASURE



CAROLINE WARFIELD

Copyright 2017 by Carol Lynn Roddy, writing as Caroline Warfield

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in a review.

ISBN 978-1976014987

Cover art: *Port of Tallinn* by Alexey Bogolyubov, 1853 (Kadriorg Art Museum, Estonia)

Note:

In the spring of 2017 I offered the right to specify elements for a made-to-order story that would be the exclusive property of the winner for three months as the grand prize in a contest. This story is the result.

✿ Created with Vellum

The Whaler's Treasure

With the fruits of a successful season safely stowed, whaling captain Robert Thorpe reaches a milestone. The treasures of the sea will buy him a ship, with enough left over to purchase a house and find a wife. He has no lady in mind, but the tavern wench who catches his eye is surely the wrong woman for him.

Forced to work in her stepmother's tavern, Beth Gordon faces gossip and lies that shred her hopes for a proper marriage. She has met only one man worth knowing, and he believes her a strumpet. If only she could return to her grandmother's home in the Highlands.

Dedication

*Written to order for Claire Phillips with gratitude for her
interest in my work*

CHAPTER 1



The table by the back wall of Gordon's public house gave sitters the best view of the door and today it was as crowded as ever. Beth Gordon skirted it as much as she could, but she couldn't avoid the sound of Wat MacPherson's voice. The old reprobate loved an audience, for certain, and today he was in rare form.

She stole a glance his way once or twice—enough to know that Wat had at least one of the American seamen's rapt attention. The thought sickened her, particularly when the old man moved on to one of his favorite topics.

"Name's Gordon, ye ken? The old duke left more than one bastard about Moray, I tell you." She didn't have to look to know he nodded in her direction when he said it. MacPherson's faux whisper carried to every corner of the tavern. Most of the patrons had heard it all before, but it hurt all the same. "Looks like the young duke, don't she?"

One of the men turned toward her, a familiar gleam of speculation in his eyes. *If the mother, then the daughter. Apples don't fall far from the tree.* The other glowered at MacPherson

as if he found the gossip distasteful. Well he should! Distaste didn't mean he didn't believe it, however.

Beth turned to the diners closer to the door, longing to escape, and smiled at the miller and his son, while she served their midday bread and mutton stew. The father glanced away as if embarrassed, and she didn't linger. The usual noontime crowd generally looked at her with a mix of pity and curiosity although disdain frequently followed.

She scurried into the kitchen and untied her apron just as her brother Alec slammed down the wood he carried in. His stormy expression, one that threatened trouble, met her welcoming smile.

"I don't care what Mam says. Someone needs to shut MacPherson's mouth," he growled. Dawning manhood had given him inches in recent months, and he had taken on an aggressive sense of protectiveness toward his sister.

"You know what your mother says," Beth reminded him. Her stepmother claimed stories about Beth's parentage gave the tavern some notoriety that helped business. She let the rumors fly and forbade them both to speak of it.

"But Gran says—"

"It doesn't matter, Alec, truly." She silenced him with a hug. He and Gran were her only supporters.

MacPherson's stories about Beth held not one drop of truth, but they took legs and ran through the village. Never mind that half the people of Glenlivet were named Gordon. Never mind she had her father's eyes. Never mind her mother had been a woman of impeccable virtue. Still the stories traveled.

Alec opened his mouth to argue, only to shut it again when his mother bustled into the kitchen.

"Two more bowls," she demanded, glaring at Beth who meekly ladled out two bowls of stew and began to cut off thick slices of bread.

“Nae so thick!” the woman chastised. “Are y’ trying to beggar me?” She loaded the bowls and bread on a tray. “And where is yer apron? The lunch rush isnae over.”

“Those will be the last two regulars. If we have stragglers Alec can handle them. I am due at Mrs. Haggart’s boarding house.”

“Yer a fool Elsbeth Gordon. You natter on about yer precious reputation, but invite more scandal. Shouldn’t be nursing those seamen, should ye? Th’ two out there told the room how ye helped.” She shrugged a shoulder to indicate the Americans and managed to make *help* sound like Beth had let them all bed her.

Beth faced her down with a stony look. “Who’s to blame for scandal, Janice Gordon?” she demanded.

Her stepmother looked away. “Go if you must,” she spat, and she bustled through the door with her tray.

Deep down Beth suspected Janice not only permitted rumors about Beth to spread, but that she might have actually started them. Whether she did it to out of spite toward her stepdaughter or to savage the reputation of Beth’s mother, her predecessor, who held John Gordon’s heart until the day he died, Beth couldn’t say. Perhaps it was simple greed, and she honestly believed the notoriety had value.

Beth sighed. “Alec, Mrs. Haggart may need me to stay late tonight. I suspect your mother has forgotten.” Janice cooked dinner, but she relied on Beth to serve. “Can you wait tables if I’m not back on time?”

The boy frowned, making his distaste for women’s work clear.

“I’ll make it up to you, I promise. I’ll carry water in tomorrow.”

“Did Mam agree to that?”

“Didn’t ask her, did I? This is between us.”

“I’ll do it. I don’t think you should be working in the

public room at night anyway. I've seen how the men look at you." His frown deepened.

When did Alec grow up enough to know about men's looks?

"You should go home to Gran," the boy went on.

"Your Mam says no." She gave him a cheeky grin to turn the subject. "Besides, how will I meet an eligible man in the Braes?"

"So says Mam. How does she think you'll meet a decent one in a tavern with all the talk she lets fly, I wonder?"

She gave him swift hug and went out the kitchen door before he could see her face. He worried for her future. She worried for his. If he created a row with MacPherson Janice would beat him, and he'd grown big enough to fight back. She couldn't shake the thought that Alec hated the tavern as much as she did and resented that his mother took him out of school to claim his work. What if he runs off? What will become of him then?

Distracted, she came around the side of the tavern without looking, failed to notice the two men coming out the front, and slammed into the hard chest of one of them. She teetered backward and almost fell until a warm hand reached out and grabbed her elbow.

"Th—"

She stuttered to a stop. The dark eyes of the man who had glowered so fiercely at Wat MacPherson gazed steadily back at her, and she felt her cheeks heat, unable to pull her eyes away. She had seen him before, she realized, when he came to check on the men recuperating at Mrs. Haggart's boarding house. *His* men. Captain Thorpe—that realization intensified her discomfort. She tore her eyes from his penetrating gaze, murmured an apology, and rushed away only to regret the impulse.

You bungled that you daft girl. You just convinced those strangers you lack wits entirely.



ROB THORPE WATCHED the trim figure of the girl scurry down the street, momentarily distracted from business.

“Skittish as a stray cat,” his brother Matt murmured.

“She is that,” Rob answered without taking his eyes from the girl.

“Might be worth enticing her to hand, though,” Matt said with a sly grin.

Rob shot him a reproving look. “Do I need to remind you you’re married?”

They started toward the docks and the Molly Jane, sitting low in the water, her hold filled to the deck with casks of oil.

“Of course not. Just keep your promise to get me home to her by end of year. I was thinking you should do the enticing. If that old man is right she might not take much convincing.”

“I’ve watched her helping out at the boarding house, nursing our men. She doesn’t act like a loose woman.”

“Appearances can deceive,” Matt said with an elbow to Rob’s ribs.

“You’ll never let me forget that woman in Cape Town will you?”

“She made a man out of you, didn’t she?”

Rob didn’t honor that with an answer. It had been different sort of tavern, and he’d come out of the experience sporting a sick head, an empty purse, and a monumental distaste for the furtive, grubby sort of coupling.

The smell of the whaler reached them well before they came to the docks. Unpleasant it may be for others, to Rob it had the pure odor of riches. They’d done well. Two thirds of the oil was spermaceti, which always commanded a premium price, and an even greater treasure lay locked in his cabin, enough to buy his own ship and pay others to chase the whales.

They ought to be three quarters of the way home to Nantucket by now, not stuck in some fishing village in Scotland waiting for their stricken harpooner and his own brother-in-law, the ship's cooper, to heal from their disastrous encounter with the chains from the cutting platform.

As it was Rob dreaded telling Mary Watkins, the surgeon's wife, that her husband had gone overboard, swept away when ropes gave way while the men were peeling off great sheets of blubber. He lay under the sea off Iceland. Rob's decision to try for one more catch in the north had been a disaster. *Greed Rob, pure and simple*. Still, the Molly lay heavy in the water and many a Nantucket family would rejoice.

The two men walked in deepening silence, a state the vociferous Matt Thorpe could not long tolerate. "Ease up, Rob. The love of a good woman would do you wonders," he said with a grin. His eyes took on a dreamy cast.

Rob clapped him on the back. "We'll get you home to Maud soon. Clarke and Farley get better every day." Rob envied him his Maud. "Easy to talk about a good woman when you've already found one. Have mercy on the rest of us. Besides, you said good woman not tavern wenches."

Matt was right about one thing. Rob had been fifteen that day in Cape Town and his childhood ended there. He thanked the good lord it hadn't put him off women entirely. He promised himself he'd look for a wife after this trip. If profits were what he expected, he would be able to manage it. One thing he knew for certain.

When I look for a wife she won't come from a dockside tavern.

CHAPTER 2



Grey light filtered through the curtains in Mrs. Haggart's second best guest room, enough to wake Beth in her uncomfortable place in the chair, but not enough to see clearly.

In the weak light of morning she listened to the snores of the two injured men and tried to quiet the questions that tormented her all night. No respectable woman nursed men alone at night; Janice had the right about that much. Beth suspected Mrs. Haggart only asked her to do it because Beth had no reputation worth salvaging. The old woman craved a night's sleep after two weeks of nursing. The captain paid the woman well for it, but Beth knew it exhausted her. At least she spared Beth some coin for her help.

When did I give up on myself? When did I allow folks to tell me my reputation wasn't worth tuppence? I deserve better. Gran told her that in any case.

She glanced over when Mr. Farley tried to turn over, groaned at the pain in his leg, and fell back. He didn't wake up. The ship's cooper had told her he was the "cask maker and all around carpenter," during a quiet moment when the

pain was at bay and the laudanum had not yet taken hold. He spoke of the wife and children who waited for him in Nantucket and treated Beth with respect. The other man, Clarke, had not.

The rising sun warmed Beth's face. She stood in the window for long moments watching Speyness come into focus bit by bit. She turned her thoughts to other sun rises, the morning rays moving down the western hills in the Braes of Glenlivet when her mother still lived and her Da still tended his father's sheep. It may be a universe away, but the place lodged in her heart.

"Stop yer dreaming woman and give me some meds!" Clarke's glittering eyes had even less warmth than his voice.

"You must eat something first, Mr. Clarke."

"Nasty one you are. As mean as you are wanton."

A gasp choked back any reply she might have made.

The man snarled at her again. "Sitting up with two men all night, in your chair like a tease. Hard woman you are."

"Hard I may be Mr. Clarke, but I don't deserve your bile. Your own captain ordered we cut back the laudanum you get. Take your anger up with him."

"Robert damned Thorpe don't care nothin' about his men. Keeps the best of our takings to hisself, locked up in 'is cabin. He probably hopes I die here so that's one less share to dole out. Greedy bastard." He spat, but lying on his back as he was, his spittle hit his own face.

Beth grabbed a soft towel and wiped the disgusting mess off. "Try not to injure yourself while I fetch your porridge," she said, treating him to her fiercest frown.

"Ignore Clarke. He only likes what he can harpoon," said the other man.

Beth turned to the kind man and put an arm under his shoulders, helping him to sit, propped up against the bed. She smiled down at him. "I expect you're hungry as well."

“Thank you Miss Gordon. Porridge will suit fine,” Farley said.

“I’ll send the stable hand up to help you with your personal needs as well,” she said directing all her attention toward Farley.

When she stepped out the door, she heard Clarke shout, “Hey, ain’t you goin’ to help me sit up? You leaving me here to suffer?”

Hurrying to the kitchen, she found Mrs. Haggart looking rested and porridge bubbling in the pot.

“How are our patients,” the woman asked.

“Farley is peaceful and well. Clarke could choke on his own venom.”

Mrs. Haggart stiffened. “Was he disrespectful? Beth I’m sorry I—”

Beth raise a hand to still the woman. “He’s a horrid man but an injured man. We’re paid to nurse him, not to put up with his nonsense. I left him flat on his back.”

Mrs. Haggart’s lips twitched, hiding a grin, when she called out the kitchen door to the stable hand to see to the men and the chamber pot. She came in to put a bowl of steaming porridge in front of Beth.

“I’ll fetch them breakfast when Sam is done, don’t you fret. You did your duty, and I’m grateful for the rest.”

Beth finished up moments after her employer climbed the stairs. A knock on the door surprised her before she could leave. She opened it to find one of the two men from the tavern, the younger one, she thought.

He gave her a cheeky grin and an entirely inappropriate appraisal. “Matt Thorpe at your service, Miss. I’m here to see our men.”

“Then you best get to it,” she snapped “and stop your ogling. I don’t need it, and it does your consequence no good.”

She stood aside and he passed her with a cocky salute, chuckling up the stairs.

A sudden need for clean air and sunshine over took her. Beth left and turned away from her stepmother's tavern toward the hills above Speyness.

I won't let any man make me ashamed. Not today, not any day. I don't deserve it.



THE PATH to the headland above Speyness cut steeply upward, around a copse of stunted pine, and through a thicket of gorse wrapped with blooms and shining yellow in the morning sun. A sharp turn toward the left brought Rob to the rocky outcrop at the top after a fifteen-minute climb. Before him spread the sea, a blanket of blues and greys that rippled in the sun. He longed to capture the wildness of it.

Wind whipped his hair, a cold bite in it, even in late summer. If he wanted to paint this day—his excuse for coming up here—he needed to find a sheltered spot, or his easel, small and portable, would never sit securely. A little used path led to the right and downward. He had gone but a few steps when another sight stopped his breath.

The woman from the tavern, still as the stone she sat on, gazed out to sea. She had pulled her knees up and wrapped her arms around herself. Rob could see a three-quarter angle of the woman from where he stood, her left arm, the side of her face, and—saints be praised—the back of her neck. Her blouse slipped every so slightly in the back giving him a view of shoulder and the gentle curve upwards to her hairline. She had pulled her curls up into a knot, but two or three threatened to rebel.

Colors ran through his head. He would need several to begin to capture that hair, golds as well as reds, a mahogany

brown, and perhaps some sienna. His fingers itched to paint. The rest of his body twitched as well with less innocent intent.

His pack made no sound when he dropped it to the ground, or, if it did, the sound was lost in the wind. The woman didn't hear the movement any more than she heard him approach. A small voice in his head reminded him he should alert her to his presence. He took out his notebook and began to sketch instead, quickly setting down the curves and graceful lines of her. Not one sharp angle met his practiced inspection; not one appeared on paper.

In moments he had a rough sketch. He began another and, in his haste, made an error. He moved sideways for a better angle, stumbled into the scraggly gorse to the right of the path, and yelped when it pricked his arm. His alarmed subject leapt to her feet and spun around. Her chest—under a disappointingly modest blouse and bodice—heaved.

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Pulling blasted spines from my damned hand,” he snapped.

The tavern wench—for that's what she was, he reminded himself—lifted her chin and looked down her nose. “I'll thank you to mind your language in front of a lady,” she said.

Lady? Ha!

“And what are *you* doing here?” he retorted. “Shouldn't you be working? Looking after my men, serving ale, or something?”

“I sat with your disgusting seaman all night, I'll have you know!”

“By yourself? No lady would—” Even a crusty sea captain knew ladies didn't nurse men without a chaperone.

“Don't you dare criticize me!” Her entire body shook with indignation. Her distress—and awareness of his growing

desire for the woman—shamed him. He ought to have let her know he was there.

Having no defense for that, he blurted out the first thing that popped into his mind. "James Farley is not disgusting."

Her shoulders sagged. "No he is not. He has been entirely respectful. Mr. Clarke, however is a despicable toad, a foul-mouthed dog, an odiferous snake, a, a..."

Rob's lips twitched. She described Alger Clarke perfectly. He couldn't stop the grin. "He is all that and more," he said.

"You agree?" she asked, astounded.

"If he has treated you disrespectfully, he'll be dealt with."

"Why do you keep him on your crew if he is so horrible?"

"He can harpoon a whale as well or better than any man alive. At sea we don't worry much about respect for women."

"He called you a greedy bastard," she said, coloring at her own boldness.

"Did he now?" Rob had wondered how long it would be before Clarke made trouble over the ambergris locked in the captain's cabin. The thought sank away for later; for now, the sight of rosy cheeks distracted him.

"I don't think you should trust him," she went on.

"I don't. What is your name?" If Mrs. Haggart told him, he'd forgotten it.

When she didn't answer, he went on. "I know this isn't a proper introduction, but there's no one here to do it for us."

She looked around as if some companion might appear to do the pretty. A well brought up young lady oughtn't be alone with him like this, but then, she wasn't one, was she?

"Beth Gordon," she said at last. She glared at him as if that should mean something. What had the old man in the tavern called her?

"Pleased to meet you, Beth Gordon." He gave her a slight bow, more of a nod of the head. "I'm Captain Robert Thorpe of the whaler Molly Jane."

She seemed to calm a bit, but made no reply. When Rob picked up his painting supplies and started into the clearing, she took two steps away.

“Careful!” he called. The edge loomed beyond her.

The chin rose again defiantly. “I’ve been coming up here since I was ten years old. I well know where the edge is,” she told him.

As he moved toward the flat rock she had been sitting on, she moved around it. They stepped as if they were engaged in some circle dance, one that continued until her back faced the downward path and his faced the sea.

Skittish as a cat, Matt had said. Rob had to agree.

“Don’t leave on my account. I came up here to paint,” he said.

“Paint?”

He leaned over and pulled his brushes and pallet from the pack. “Paint,” he repeated.

The expression on her face remained dubious, as if she believed a sea captain incapable of art. “Then I’ll leave you to it,” she said, turning on a swish of skirts.

His gaze devoured her lovely neck, her graceful back, and the flare of her hips as she started down the path.

Perhaps his brother was right. It might take effort to entice one as skittish as this, but Rob suspected it would be well worth the effort. He might just have to try. She had fire under that prim bodice and he couldn’t resist it.

CHAPTER 3



The smell of the docks crowded with fishing boats always curled Beth's nose. With a whaler in town, it smelled far worse than usual, when she plunged on. Alec had come this way, and, if she didn't find him, they would both get one of Janice's vicious tongue-lashings, if not worse.

She came upon him in earnest conversation with a lanky man she recognized as the captain's brother.

"Alec, what are you doing here?" she called.

"Beth! This is Master Thorpe, first mate of the Molly Jane," he replied. "Mr. Thorpe, this is my sister, Beth Gordon."

"We've met," she murmured, glowering at the man.

"Pleased to have a name for a pretty face."

They spoke simultaneously. Matt Thorpe laughed at that, but Beth felt her face burn.

Thorpe put a hand on Alec's head. "I was telling this lad he needed to talk to his mother before he thinks about going to sea." The smile he turned to Beth held a fair helping of kindness and no disrespect.

Alec's expression, pained and pleading, tore her heart.

"His mother will never allow it," she said sadly, "And I would hate it. What would I do without you Alec?"

"I can't stay here Beth. I can't. You know how she is. She'll keep us both 'til our hair turns grey or work us to death before it does."

Beth thought of the stripes across his back, hidden by the shirt he wore, and knew he told the truth. Janice's temper grew worse every day.

The first mate's thoughtful eyes watched Alec closely. "How bad is it?" he asked softly, compassion softening his face.

"Bad," Beth answered.

The man put a hand on Alec's back as if to soothe him, and the boy winced. Thorpe's head bobbed up toward Beth. "Bad. I see," he said.

"I can talk to the captain about you, but what of your sister, lad?" he asked.

"Beth can go to Gran," the boy replied, looking to Beth for confirmation.

She shook her head.

"Gran?" Thorpe looked at Beth.

"Our father's mother. She lives inland, in the Braes of Glenlivet. She has a small croft and some sheep."

"But you'd rather not go there."

Would she? However lovely the place, it had little to offer her. Still, Janice had poisoned Speyness for her.

"You should go, Beth. Mam can't stop you. She'll tie you to the tavern, or—" Alec stumbled over his words and reddened. "Worse." He finished.

"Worse?" Thorpe asked.

Before Beth could answer or bring her blush under control a bigger problem loomed.

"Got visitors do we Mr. Thorpe? Keeping 'un for your-

self?" The harpooner, Clarke, leered at her from the rail of the Molly Jane above. He limped to the gangplank keeping his eyes on Beth all the way down. "Didn't know the tavern wench made visits."

"You were set to swabbing the forecastle, Clarke. Captain warned you to treat the local ladies with respect or taste a lash." Thorpe said through gritted teeth.

Clarke snorted at the word *ladies*. "This un's a witch and make no mistake. Might want to talk to that old woman in the tavern about her."

Thorpe took a step toward the man. "You heard the captain's orders."

"Which orders are those?" boomed a voice from the ships rail above. Clarke cringed, but the scowl never left his face.

Captain Thorpe stood with arms akimbo, fists on his narrow hips, shoulders wide. Beth wondered how the man became even more attractive in the three days since their encounter on the cliffs. His brown eyes and finely boned face had haunted her nights as it was. She watched, fascinated, when he swung over the rail, pushed off the side, and jumped gracefully to the dockside.

"Would it be my work order you need reminding?" he demanded of Clarke.

"Nurse woman said I had to rest a few more weeks," Clarke whined. He pulled a brown bottle and took a deep swig to emphasize his point.

Laudanum. Beth guessed he'd be passed out on the fore-castle within an hour.

"She said to keep you off the rigging. Perhaps you can help the cook the rest of the voyage. You can take a cook's helper portion when we get to Nantucket."

Clarke shot him a hateful look.

"Go on with you," the captain said.

Gratitude allowed her shoulders to relax and her

breathing steady when Clarke obliged. The man made her skin crawl.

"Thank you, Captain Thorpe," she murmured. Rob Thorpe's sympathetic eyes caused other delicious reactions to flood through her belly. She broke eye contact and turned to her brother.

"Thank Mr. Thorpe, Alec. We best get back before your mother knows where you've been," she said.

"But I want to ask the captain!" Alec retorted.

"Ask me what?" the captain demanded.

"Not today," Beth insisted. *Not ever*, she thought. "Come with me now." She led her reluctant brother away, her thoughts in disarray. She wondered what worried her the most: Clarke's obvious lust, or Robert Thorpe's gentle, tempting eyes.



"WHAT WAS SHE DOING HERE," Rob asked, watching the boy and his sister walk away deep in conversation.

"Came to fetch the boy. She fears for him."

Rob turned to Matt, brow raised.

"His mother beats him," Matt said, and told him what he'd seen. "We could use a half deck boy and this one has bottom. I'd take him."

"What does his sister think about that?"

"She hates the thought of losing him. Can't blame her. I think they look after each other. It appears like no one else does."

Rob made no reply; he watched the girl disappear around a corner onto the main street. He forced his gaze away and turned to his brother only to encounter speculation writ large on Matt's face.

"What?" he demanded.

“Seems like you’ve changed your mind about that ‘enticing.’”

“If I have? I thought it's what you wanted.”

“That was before I met her. That one needs kindness, not enticing.”

“What makes you think I can’t do both?”

He took four steps toward the main street before he shouted over his shoulder, “Keep an eye on Clarke.”

They ducked into the tavern before he could catch up, and Rob couldn’t say why he succumbed to the impulse chase after them. Perhaps he meant to apologize for Clarke, as if pride didn’t slam that hatch closed. Perhaps he ought to talk to the boy. One thing seemed certain: he wanted to ease Beth Gordon’s distress, a thought even more ludicrous than the first two. Clarke at least was his responsibility, and the boy might prove a valued addition to the crew. The woman was neither.

Fixed to the spot, unwilling to go back, Rob stared at Gordon’s place. That’s what the townsfolk called it, “Gordon’s place,” there being no sign to indicate a name or other designation, and, from the look of it, the tavern didn’t deserve one. Situated at the far end of Speyness on the lone business street, it sat across from a livery in the shadow of a two-story building with a chandler’s shop below and the shopkeeper’s storage above.

To Rob’s eyes the tavern crouched on the road front like a tired beggar too weary to entice coin from sympathetic travelers. The door hung loose, soot darkened the windows, and the roof sank in the middle, offering chancy protection at best. Smoke bellowed from the chimney at the rear, however, and the smell of everlasting mutton stew wafted toward him. He’d been told as soon as he arrived that he might find better fare at the inn along the Spey “a wee bit down” the road to Fochabers. He never found time to check.

With Clarke back and Farley a week from travel, he ought to be in his cabin looking to charts and weather. He ought to be supervising the repairs to the damaged spar. He ought to be watching Clarke like a sea-hawk. If Mistress Gordon beat her son, it was no business of Rob's. Nor did Beth Gordon's distress belong to him.

An immense weariness of soul weighed him down. He moved closer to the door of the tavern, scanning the peeling plaster and stained whitewash across the front. No run down alehouse could offer him solace. If he needed rest, his paints awaited him. On the Molly Jane. In his cabin.

Beth Gordon didn't belong to him.

Rob cursed himself for a fool, put out a hand, and went in.

CHAPTER 4



“**O**w! You’re hurting me.”
“I’ll hurt ye, ya thankless brat. Where’d ye go when y’ought to be fetching firewood, eh? Went to the shore to look for drift ye said. Came home empty didn’t ye?” Janice gave Alec’s ear another twist and the boy’s knees started to give, but he righted himself.

“Stop it Janice, he’s but a boy,” Beth shouted. She schooled her voice to soften, trying to sound businesslike. “Do you want to drive the customers away?”

The back of her stepmother’s hand snapped Beth’s head backward.

“The two of ye eat more’n y’earn me,” Janice snarled, grabbing Alec’s shoulder in a pincer grip.

“Stop it please, his back—” Beth reached out to pull Alec away, but hesitated to challenge Janice’s iron grip. Her cheek burned from the assault.

If Janice knew what distracted Alec, she’d beat him far worse. “It was my fault. I saw him and distracted him. I—” Beth trashed about for an excuse.

Janice reeled on her.

"And what were ye doing? Displaying yerself to the fishermen? Or was it to the Americans? If ye think to sell yer wares, missy ye'll owe the coin back to me. Don't ever forget."

Shame washed through Beth. "I will never!"

"And mores the pity, Miss High and Mighty," Janice spat shoving Alec toward his sister. She opened her mouth to spew more venom, but an authoritative voice cut through the commotion.

"What is happening here?"

Beth spun to see Rob Thorpe in the kitchen door. When had he come in? She covered her burning cheek as if to hide the handprint she knew must be there. She pulled herself away from his scrutiny only to face Janice's speculative expression.

Was her stepmother considering a way to avoid his condemnation or to turn the encounter to her advantage? Beth couldn't say. Neither she nor Janice answered him. Alec broke the silence.

"Captain Thorpe!"

Beth groaned. If she did nothing Alec would beg him for a spot on the Molly Jane in front of his mother and bring both of them nothing but pain. She shot the captain a pleading look, glancing at her brother and back to him.

"Thank you again, for assisting my brother when he, er, fell," she improvised.

His brows drew down and she held her breath. Alec looked confused, but the thunderous expression on his mother's face kept him quiet.

"It was my pleasure," the man said at last watching Beth carefully. "I came to make sure the boy is safe." He shot a pointed glance at Janice before turning his heated gaze back to Beth. "You seemed upset, as well. I couldn't leave a lady in distress."

Janice looked from one to the other, eyes glittering. Beth couldn't bear to look directly at either one of them. She pulled Alec toward her in a one armed hug. "I'm well, as you see," she said, avoiding eye contact. "But I have the lunch to prepare, so if you don't mind..."

"Lunch is an hour off," Janice said. "And you well know I do the cooking." She gave Thorpe an arch look. "Beth's job is to see the customers satisfied."

A sharp elbow hit Beth's ribs. "This man's a customer, Elsbeth. See to his needs."

See to his needs. Her stepmother managed to squeeze meaning into the phrase that caused Beth's stomach to sink.

Janice ignored her. "You just take a seat, captain. Beth will fetch you what you need."

Captain Thorpe withdrew into the public room. Beth followed before Janice could say more. *I'll fetch him ale, but if he expects more I—*

She had no idea what she would do. Through the gloom, Thorpe looked back at her with troubled eyes.



THREE DAYS later Rob still didn't know what he ought to have said to the girl after the scene in the kitchen. The ale had been stale, the server remote as the hills, and Rob a worthless boor. He knew himself for a tongue-tied fool.

Her humiliation had left him unable to put two words together when she set the tankard down. She had bolted before he could gather his thoughts. Even now a shaking hand through already disheveled hair brought no relief, and he glowered up at the ceiling of his cabin still seeing her stricken face in his mind's eye.

The nasty handprint on the girls face had sickened him, but not as much as the slattern's hints and accusations. Beth

Gordon could no more flaunt her femininity at men than she could fly. She didn't flirt much less attempt to "sell her wares."

Rob had bigger problems than the tender feelings of a girl from a tavern, however. Someone had tinkered with the lock to his cabin while he was ashore that morning and no one admitted to it. Threats hadn't worked.

A preemptory knock interrupted his thoughts. He barked, "Enter!" His brother Matt slouched in and sank to a chair looking grim.

"Well?" Rob demanded.

"Nothing. Not one man admitted to seeing anything. Every one of them was on duty or asleep, or so they claim."

Rob clenched his teeth in frustration. Matt's friendly approach hadn't worked either. "The stuff belongs to all of us. Most of them don't begrudge one another their share," he ground out. The thought that one of his crew, Nantucket men all, might try to cheat their fellows struck him to the heart.

"Clarke would. Ambergris is worth its weight in gold."

Rob grunted. He knew that statement to be literally true, and they had stumbled on over six pounds of the stuff. A fortune! Between that and the preponderance of spermaceti oil in the hold they'd made one of the richest hauls Rob had ever heard about. Every man of them would get a fair share based on position in the crew.

"Clarke," he agreed. "No proof though."

"He's been spinning up some of the ordinary seamen about the size of their shares since you threatened to cut his." Matt leaned forward abruptly. "Have you checked it carefully? He wouldn't need to take much. He could cut off a good sized chunk, go over the side and disappear into Scotland before we could stop him."

"Where would he sell ambergris?"

"The coast is thick with ports. He'd find a buyer soon enough. Check it again."

Rob crossed to the chest pushed up against his bunk and chased the ship's cat from the lid. The beast had taken to haunting the chest, drawn he suspected by the odor. Rob took out the heavy key and unlocked it for the third time that morning. The odor of feces and fish—the odor of money—slapped him in the face. Not one but two big lumps of ambergris lay inside.

Matt turned each one over, examining them thoroughly. "Nothing is missing. Whoever tried the door didn't get in this time, but the longer we sit in port the greater the temptation to just batter the door down, grab it, and take off. We need to sail, Rob." He lifted the pesky cat as it tried to crawl inside and closed the lid.

"We can't leave Farley." The cooper had lapsed into fever two days before. Rob wouldn't leave any crewmember behind, much less his sister's husband. Longing for home almost crushed him, though, longing and weariness. He couldn't heal Farley, prove Clarke tried to break in, or shake Beth Gordon from his mind.

"One of us needs to be watchful on board at all times," he said at last. "Can you stay for a while if I go ashore?"

"Sure, but what are you going to do?"

He needed to lock up Clarke before he corrupted the crew. He needed to decide what to do about that abused boy at Gordon's. He needed to get on with his life. "I need to paint," he said. All the rest meant trouble for certain.

He picked up his paints and gave his brother a half-hearted smile. "I'll be back by mid-afternoon." Matt waved him on.

The higher Rob climbed—and the farther he got from the Molly Jane, Alger Clarke, and Gordon's place—the better he felt. His gloom subsided and his pace picked up. He might

have believed he left his cares behind if he hadn't peered around every turn hoping for a glimpse of Beth.

"You're a damned fool Thorpe," he muttered as he neared the top. Fool he might be but his heart gave a leap when he turned to the overlook and found her sitting as she had been before, on her smooth rock looking out to sea.

"The sea is calm today." His words startled the girl and she rose to her feet.

"Captain Thorpe!" Her cheeks burned red obviously embarrassed. He wondered if his sudden appearance or the memory of the scene he had witnessed caused her discomfort. He longed to ease it, but stared tongue tied for a long moment, fascinated by ruddy cheeks, auburn locks flying free in the wind, and eyes the color of the sea.

"You brought your paints again."

He peered down at his haversack as if surprised to find it there. "So I have." He dropped it.

"I'll leave you to your painting," she said. She approached the path, but his equipment blocked her way. When she began to skirt it, he reached out to grip her elbow."

"Miss Gordon, I—" Eyes, wary and much deeper blue close up, gazed back at him. "That is, your mother's words were grossly unfair to you. I know you would never, that is..."

"Stepmother." She didn't look away.

"I beg your pardon?" His gaze dropped to her mouth as if to understand her words.

"Janice Gordon is Alec's mother, but she is not mine." Her chin rose marginally, enough to show she had backbone. Her courage drew him to her. *Hell, Thorpe, all of her attracts you like bees to honey.*

She nodded to his hand on her arm as if to remind him to release her. He slid his hand down to her wrist but kept a gentle touch. He couldn't let go any more than he could pull

his eyes from her face. She stilled, watchful but unafraid. When he leaned closer she didn't withdraw. Wariness remained in her expression—curiosity as well. He saw neither fear nor rejection, however, when he slowly lowered his mouth to hers.

A sample only. One gentle taste.

Her mouth moved, tasting him back, and his resistance fled. When he ran his tongue along the seam of her lips she gasped and he took advantage, sliding in to taste more deeply and explore. Her moan of pleasure inflamed his senses. When he pulled her closer she clung to him, but a moment later she pushed against his chest, and he pulled back immediately.

She removed his hand from her arm and stepped away, pain marring her features. "You said you knew I'd never...I'm not. That is, neither my mother nor I—"

Unshed tears gleamed in her eyes when she rushed past him and ran down hill, ripping his insides apart, and he cursed himself for a bully. He meant to reassure her that he believed in her, but he caused her to think the opposite.

I meant no insult. Never that! One thing came into sharp focus. *Not all tavern wenches are the same. One, at least, is a total innocent.* He'd bet his share of the Mary Jane's haul on that.

Rob leaned over and the stuffed brushes and paints that had fallen out back into his haversack. He put it all aside; there'd be no work today. Visions of Beth Gordon aboard ship and on the streets of Nantucket took hold of him and he couldn't shake them.

Perhaps his brother had the right of it. He needed a wife. He could marry the girl and take her away from here. Dare he ask her? Would she come?

He shook his head to clear the foolish notion as he sank onto the rock still warm from her body. Three weeks ago he didn't even know her. When he leaned forward, elbows on

knees, sun gleamed off an object at his feet, something the woman dropped when he startled her. He leaned over to pick it up and let out another curse. The shiny object was a cross at the end of a loop of beads.

A rosary? Not only a tavern wench, but a papist! She couldn't be a less suitable wife for a Nantucket captain. He dropped his head to his hands and groaned.

I should fetch Farley and sail away from this pestilential place. I owe it to my investors. I owe it to my crew. But what did he owe Beth Gordon?

CHAPTER 5



A farm wagon, rough planked and open, blocked the entrance to Gordon's tavern when Beth stumbled around the corner, her breath heaving from her precipitous flight from Captain Thorpe. Auld Dougal Hambly had slipped by the excise men with a shipment of whisky from the Glenlivet again.

She reached a shaking hand to the shaggy beast still hitched to the rickety conveyance. "Ah Balloch, you are a sight for sore eyes." His tangled mane and dusty coat brought tears to her eyes. "What news of Gran?" she asked running her fingers through tangles and rubbing her nose on his. "Still keeping you working hard, eh? You look none the worse for it." Indeed he did not. The beast may be aging, but he stood proud, strong, and well. She hoped Gran could say the same.

The old horse blinked at her and nestled her hand. "Want a treat ya greedy dobber?" she laughed. "I'll have to see what I can snatch from the kitchen under Janice's nose." She smiled at the thought that Dougal would have news of the Braes and of Gran.

She found him in the kitchen shouting at her stepmother and almost turned away when she heard her mother's name.

"Yer a lying bitch Janice Morgan, not fit to touch the hem o' Alice Gordon's cloak."

"I'm a Gordon y'old fool, and don't forget it," Janice shouted back. "He married *me*. He got his only son on *me*. He left me this tavern and all that's in it including his worthless daughter."

"Aye, I heard the stories yer telling about Elsbeth and Alice. Heard them meself. Yer a jealous strumpet and that's a fact, spreading poison like a slitherin' snake about a bairn who did y' no harm."

"She's nae bairn! The girl's old enough to earn her keep."

"I heard how ye want her to earn that coin. Boys from down th' way told her grandmother too."

Gran knows what Janice has been saying? Beth groaned, drawing all eyes to herself. "Gran knows, Dougal?" she asked out loud.

"Aye, Beth," the old man said sadly. "She heard the stories."

Beth had not thought she could feel any worse. All of Speyness believed that Janice's lies or at least thought they held the ring of truth; Rob Thorpe believed her to be a loose woman; and now Gran knew of the stories. Her heart felt cold in her chest, frozen in despair. She wrapped her arms around herself as if to protect the frail organ.

Dougal took a step toward her. "Ne'er think she believes the lies, Lass! The auld woman is that angry. She want's ye back home where people love ye as they ought."

"Gran wants me home?" She glanced up sharply.

Her grandmother hadn't interfered when her stepmother insisted that she stay in Speyness after her father died. She had actually encouraged Beth to believe her chances of a good marriage would be better in town than in the Braes of

Glenlivet, isolated as it was. *More fool she. The only man I've met worth knowing thinks I'm a strumpet.*

An overwhelming desire to see the mountain slopes and pastures of home wrapped itself around her. She could leave the tavern. She could escape Janice. She could avoid Rob Thorpe's advances. Ruthless honesty told her she had fled her own weakness in response to his intense gaze, gentle fingers, and searing kisses, not from the captain himself. The man had awoken hopes and longings, ones with no good ends. His kisses put her heart in danger, and probably the rest of her. Aye, she could run from that too.

Still she hesitated. Thoughts of Alec tugged at her. He would have to fend for himself, but maybe it was time. She thought of his conversation with Matt Thorpe. The lad stood taller by the day, and he would find his own way, perhaps faster than Beth could. Her mind settled on one thought, home.

"I'll go Dougal. I'll go with you now."



THE MOLLY JANE'S first mate knew his duty to the crew and the voyage, and its captain did too. But Matt Thorpe cared for his brother, and wasn't above telling him what he needed to hear. Rob had come down from the hills in a state about that slip of a girl from the tavern and Matt accused him of being in love. At least, it felt like an accusation.

After two days of watching Rob mope, he sat in the captain's cabin with a cat in his lap and lost his patience. "So marry the girl and bring her home with us!" he shouted, provoking Rob to list all the reasons why that was a bad idea. He didn't deny he'd been thinking about it.

"A papist?" Matt stilled the hand that had been petting the cat, but quickly resumed his tirade. "So what? You don't

believe that nonsense about pagan rites and devil worship do you?"

"Of course not. But what will Father think? Image what Abigail will have to say." Their older sister held all who deviated from strict Congregationalist tenets to be in thrall to the devil—her brothers included.

"Abigail and that stiff-rumped reverend she married complain no matter what we do. Besides they live in Salem. Father would be delighted if you brought home a wife. He's complained these past three years that you're past the age to settle down. He's tired of the empty house."

"A wife, yes, but a tavern wench?"

"Beth Gordon may work in a tavern, but she's a respectable girl and well you know it. Father will see that right off."

"Perhaps, but it isn't that easy. We barely know each other, and I can't stay until we do. You said it yourself. The longer we're here, the greater the temptation the ambergris is to the crew and any townspeople who get word of it. I can't linger long enough to court her properly."

"I know you, and I've watched you around her. You'll not be able to let this one go. I may not know Beth as well, but I've seen how she looks at you and I've watched her nursing Clarke and Farley. She's a treasure."

Rob shook his head. "Marriage is complicated. What about religion? The islanders may not hold Abigail's narrow views, but there's nary a Catholic church on Nantucket."

"Does her faith matter to you, Rob?"

"No."

"Then what do you care about the islanders? Is it Beth's view that worries you? You can find her a place to worship on the mainland."

He chewed on that thought. *If she marries me she'll have to move far from what she holds dear.*

“Yes, it does. I would be asking a lot.”

“So far you haven’t done any *asking* at all. When did you become a coward? Ask the woman, Rob. The worst thing she can say is no.”

Rob reached under his desk and pulled out a flask of rum. Laughter burst from his brother at the sight. “This is indeed a momentous discussion,” Matt teased. Rob wasn’t much for spirits, but he kept a flask for those rare occasions when the voyage got heavy to bear.

Rob poured a tot in his mug and stared into it lost in thought. He raised it to his lips and slammed it down.

“I owe her an apology at least,” he said, rising. “I took advantage.”

Matt raised a skeptical brow but kept silent. He released the squirming cat and pulled the tot of rum closer.

“I best seek her out and ask her pardon sooner rather than later,” Rob said. He stalked toward the door.

“You do that,” Matt muttered. “And Rob—” he called.

Rob turned to see Matt down the rum in a one swig. “Ask her.”

Rob didn’t get far before Alec Gordon confronted him. The boy crept down the dock looking about as if he feared discovery. When he spied the captain he threw himself at him and launched, wide-eyed, into a desperate plea to be taken aboard the Molly Jane.

Rob steadied the boy, holding on to both his shoulders. “We can talk about that later. For now I need to see your sister. Is she at the tavern?”

“She’s gone.”

“What do you mean ‘she’s gone’?” Rob demanded looking up at Spey Head.

“Gone home to Gran. Auld Dougal Hambly made his deliveries, and she went home to the Braes w’im. Mam is that angry about it. Spitting mad and I’m the only target at hand. I

need to get away, captain." The pain in his eyes hurt Rob, but not as much as his words.

He rose up but kept one hand on the boy as much to steady himself as to comfort the lad. *Beth, my Beth gone?* He had driven her away. He didn't even question when she had become *his* Beth.

Is that my answer? He turned back toward the Molly Jane pulling the lad with him, an arm around the boy's skinny shoulders.

"Are you certain you want to go to sea? It's a hard life," he warned.

"It's better than what I have now," Alec replied, hope flowering in his expression.

"Come talk to the first mate," Rob said. "If he's good with it, I'm good with it." He and Matt had already decided to sign the boy on, if only to get him away from his mother, but it wouldn't hurt to lay some stern warnings about the reality of a whaling ship on the lad.

"Tell me one thing. Where exactly is 'home?'"

CHAPTER 6



“**T**here’s Mister Thorpe, over there.”

Rob looked where Alec pointed. “That’s the forecastle,” he said absently, his mind roiling. *What is Matt doing? Who is guarding my cabin?* He spun on his heels toward his brother.

“Forecastle,” Alec repeated, skipping to keep up.

At the sound, Matt looked up holding a hammer in his hand. He waved it at his brother cheerfully.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Rob roared. “I left you in my cabin.”

“Repairing rotten boards. Farley won’t be fit for carpentry even after we get him on board. I can’t have the captain sinking his precious knee through a hole can I?” he gave the board a good whack to punctuate his point.

“You just now noticed it needed doing?”

“I didn’t notice at all. Sweeny told me, and I thought I better take a look.”

As second mate Sweeny should have been aware of any repairs. Why didn’t he say something sooner? Something about it bothered Rob.

Matt pulled off a half rotten board and waved it at Rob. "He was right too." He said tossing it aside. He laid new wood in its place.

"Who is guarding my cabin?" Rob demanded.

"Speck. And the cat," Matt replied hammering the new board in to place. "You weren't gone long. Did you find her and 'apologize?'"

"Don't be daft. As you said, I wasn't gone long, but you sure didn't stay where I told you."

Looking satisfied with himself, Matt stood up. "You worry too much." His brows rose when he saw Rob's companion. "What's this, Mr. Gordon? Have you decided to sign on?" Matt asked.

"Yes, Sir, if you will have me."

Matt glanced up at Rob for approval and then put out his hand. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Gordon. We'll need to sign some papers."

"Will I be a harpooner?" Alec asked eagerly. Laughter burst from both men.

"Not so fast, Lad. You start as a half-deck boy, the lowest of the low, the one who does whatever anyone tells him. Still want to sign on?" Matt asked.

"Yes Sir. You said 'start.' I'll learn fast enough."

"That you will," Rob said. *Alec Gordon will have my job some day if he stays ambitious and keeps out of trouble.*

"May I stay now?"

Something in his eyes made the brothers glance at one another and nod. He needed their protection, and he'd just earned it.

"You show our half-deck boy the crew's quarters and set him to work, Mr. Thorpe," Rob said, being formal for the boy's sake. "I'll—"

Muffled shouts came from the far end of the deck. Matt took off at a run. Rob told Alec to stay put and sped after

him, straight toward the captain's cabin. When Matt flung the door open, a man erupted at a dead run.

"Stop him," someone shouted as he shoved past Rob and Matt.

Alec dove at the fleeing man, threw his body against him, and knocked him to the deck. Within seconds Matt had his knee on the dastard's chest, and Rob entered the cabin, pushing a seaman in front of him.

"What goes on here?" he demanded, one hand on the seaman's chest. Over the man's back he saw two others pulling something up through the window.

"Sweeny, Sir. He's getting away. We caught him lowering the ambergris to Clarke." At Rob's look of surprise he went on. "We been watching them, Sir. Knew they were up to something."

Rob looked up to see his crew pull a large bundle in through the window. From the size and the smell, their treasure seemed intact. He pushed them aside and peered out. Clarke had picked up the oars to row away, but whether weak from his illness or dopey from laudanum, made little progress.

"Hand me my pistols—top drawer of my desk."

Caleb Ledbetter, who appeared to be the leader, obeyed quickly. "You gonna kill 'im, Captain?" he asked.

Rob didn't answer. He aimed for the bottom of the boat and shot a hole in it. The second pistol did even more damage. Clark began to panic.

"Don't just stand around gaping! Get over the side and grab him." Ledbetter drove the men from the cabin at a dead run. The bundle of ambergris lay at Rob's feet, but something else took precedence. A man lay shoved against the wall in a pool of blood. He pulled Speck, the guard, over to his back to find the man's throat cut. Rob felt for a pulse, but he knew death when he saw it, and there was nothing he

could do except make sure Speck's mother got his share of the haul.

He cursed under his breath. *Those two will swing for this and the world will be better for it.*

When he locked the valuable cargo back in its chest, the ship's cat emerged from his bunk and settled itself on top. Rob shook his head at the animal, almost admiring her ability to look out for her own interest.

He emerged from his cabin to see Alec sprawled on the deck holding himself up with both hands behind his back and trying to catch his breath, and Matt still holding Sweeny down.

"Clarke?" Matt asked.

Rob nodded. "He had a dingy tied astern. Sweeny tried to lower the ambergris out the window to him."

"Did you shoot the snake?"

A grim smile broke Rob's control. "I blasted a hole in the boat. He's sinking fast. The crew will take care of him.

"The ambergris! Did it go down with him?"

"You think I'd be this calm if it did? It's safe in the cabin. The men pulled it back before the scum could secure it. It seems they'd been watching the pair of them for the past week, sure they were up to something."

A half-hour later Sweeny and Clarke, who looked a bit worse for his handling by the crew, had been secured. Rob looked the other way; if the pair were roughed up a bit in the process, he didn't need to know about it.

"Can we hang 'em, Captain?" Ledbetter asked.

"Alas, no. We're in port. Speyness has a fine gaol, however, and I expect local justice will handle them," Rob replied. He turned to Alec. "Well done, Lad. Sweeny would have gotten away if you hadn't knocked him down. You've earned your keep already. Mr. Ledbetter, consider yourself

second mate for the remainder of the voyage.” The man beamed.

“Take our new half-deck boy here, and show him the ropes,” Rob added.

“What about the prisoners?” Ledbetter asked. Rob looked around at the eager faces of men ready to frog march their prisoners to gaol and thought rapidly. He let out a breath and ordered one of them to sit outside the cabin. “Stand honor guard by Speck’s body until the authorities come.”

He turned to his brother and gestured to the men. “Can you lead this navy and their prisoners to the proper authorities?” He indicated Alec. “Our new half-deck boy knows the way.”

Matt’s eyebrows rose. “What are you going to do?”

“I have business with the tavern keeper.”

CHAPTER 7



The smell of scones baking and the ring of laughter filled Gran's kitchen and spilled out into the yard where tables were being set up, plank boards long enough to accommodate the entire population of the valley. The ladies of the Braes worked in harmony to prepare a feast. The priest would arrive in three days, and, though no particular feast arose on the calendar to celebrate, celebrate they would.

"How long has it been, Gran?" Beth asked.

"Too long," the old woman replied hefting a crock of bread dough to her kitchen table. Trim at seventy, Mairi Gordon had begun to slow, but only so much that close family noticed. She still managed the croft and its livestock, and she determined that a celebration would be held at her premises to welcome the return of clergy. "After all," she said, "I have the return of my Elsbeth to celebrate as well."

"And how long is too long?" Beth persisted.

"Th'auld priest stopped comin' six months ago. Couldn't manage the hills."

"He likes his snug house in Aberdeen. Always liked his

creature comforts did Father Walker," one of the women chimed in to a chorus of genial laughter.

"It's takin' 'em long enough to find us another," a young woman sighed. Morag Gordon had married one of Beth's cousins while she was gone, and now she dangled a baby in her hip. Beth reached for the little one and smiled when he went to her willingly.

"We always had a priest once a month," Beth observed.

"Aye. The folk of the Braes have ever stayed loyal to the old religion, and the Church well knows. We hid Scanlan from the Hanoverian troops up the old smuggler trails for a century until the Sassenach changed th' laws and they built a proper seminary in Aberdeen," Morag went on. Scanlan, the underground seminary, had closed thirty years before.

"Didn't ha' to worry none about priest then. They were thick in the gorse," Gran grumbled.

Beth wiped spit from the baby's mouth. "So now we kill the fatted calf, and the whole valley turns out."

"More like the fatted lamb," Gran snorted pounding two fists into the dough.

"The whole valley, aye," Morag said. "And folks line up for sacraments. That wee one you hold has waited for baptism these months. We'll keep the man busy, and that's no lie," she went on cheerfully.

"Beth, give that wee one back to 'is mother and help me knead this bread," Gran said. "The rest o'ye, scrub those tables and get the yard raked. We have lanterns to trim, linens to collect, and food to store."

Morag reached for her son. Beth kissed his blond locks and handed him over with a sigh. The young mother's shrewd assessment caused Beth to drop her eyes. "You need a bairn o'yer own, Beth" Morag whispered. For a moment a memory of Rob Thorpe's shock of black hair flitted through her mind, and Beth feared Morag would go on. She left

without another word, however, shouting a greeting to the women outside.

Beth reached down and picked up another crock of dough from the warm stones near the fire. She slammed the dough onto the table with more force than needed.

"Knead it, lass, don't kill it," Gran told her.

Long moments passed in which Beth pounded the dough as if she could indeed injure it, as if she could beat her unruly emotions into place. Gran's kitchen had proven to be as warm and welcoming as she hoped, as nurturing as she remembered. It represented safety and freedom from her stepmother's crude suggestions. Why didn't it heal her heart?

"He's a bonny lad, Morag's son," Gran said at last.

Beth nodded morosely. Holding the boy gave her joy, and handing him over had shuttered it, leaving only her aching emptiness. *Will I ever have one of my own? A home to call my own?*

"Any woman would be happy to have one such," Gran went on. "I had hoped—"

"The answer doesn't lie in Speyness, Gran," Beth snapped, impatient with the old woman's hints. She swallowed hard, Rob Thorpe's gentle eyes vivid in her memory.

Gran sighed. "Nae. Not while Janice Gordon torments you there."

Not when the only man I've met worth knowing thinks I'm a strumpet.

They worked in companionable silence for the better part of an hour. Beth's mood failed to lighten, but Gran didn't push her any further. When the last of the loaves went in to bake they joined the women finishing up the work outside.

"Time enough the day before to set the linens and bring the trenchers, I think," one said, and Gran agreed.

"You all have cooking in yer own houses to finish tomorrow, no?" she said. A chorus of agreement answered her.

"Has anyone seen to Scanlan?" Morag asked, as the others began to disperse.

"Is it needed? I thought it was in disuse," Beth asked. She had been in the habit of wandering up to the old place to think and to pray as young girl. While not quite a ruin, it showed signs of its age and neglect last time she saw it.

"Aye, but he'll want to have a look. He may want to say Mass in th'auld chapel."

Beth hadn't considered Scanlan. The circuit priests held services in Gran's croft in her childhood.

Gran watched Beth thoughtfully. "That might be so, Morag. There's time tomorrow to have a look. Will ye see to it, Lass?" When Beth remained wrapped in her own thoughts, Grand went on. "It would be a help if ye'd go up."

Beth raised her head and blinked to clear old memories and dismal thoughts. Morag and Gran's stared back at her, identical expressions of concern marring both faces.

"Scanlan? Aye. I'll go up and see what's to be done." *Maybe the old place will help me find some direction for my life.*



THE SOUND of music floated up from the valley and into the gap in the hills through which Rob rode, tired and achy on a borrowed horse. There was little call for riding on Nantucket and less on a whaler. Every bone in his body protested the unaccustomed motion. When his companion trotted up beside him on a little pony, he pulled his complacent mount to a halt, grateful for a rest. They had followed the Spey to Fochabers, past the current Duke of Gordon's highland stronghold, and set out over the hills two days before.

"Ye hear it? That would be Dougal and his fiddle," Alec said rising in his stirrups. "Look. There! Do you see that

croft? That be my Gran's. My cousin Finn owns t'other up the rise beyond and—"

"Whoa. Not so much. You can introduce me later," Rob said.

His artist's eye examined the vista below, trying to absorb this place Beth called home. The hills to the east lay in shadow with a lemon yellow sun hovering above them. They would, he knew, turn golden when that sun rose higher and began to sink below the hills to Rob's back. Between the mountains a lush valley spread out in so many shades of green that he regretted not having more words for the color, and his finger itched for his paints. He realized, with a flash of memory, it looked very much like Settler's Notch, a valley he had painted one summer in Vermont.

Signs of habitation came to him. Grey lines marked off color changes—stone walls, he expected—and clusters of white shapes moved here and there, sheep no doubt. He could just make out a handful of stone buildings scattered far and wide, including the one Alec called Gran's.

"Do you see it?" Alec asked again, puzzled at his distraction.

"I see it." Smoke rose from a chimney of the little house, the warmth and welcome of it called to him. He nudged his horse forward and Alec gleefully rode ahead.

They approached a farmyard bustling with activity and flowing with conversation. Rob hung back, leaned on the pommel of his saddle, and watched person after person greet Alec with a smile, a slap on the back, or sometimes a hug. The fiddler dropped his bow and grinned at the boy before taking up his music, a jauntier tune this time.

A grey haired woman, tall and erect, approached Alec with open arms and engulfed him in a loving embrace, the like of which Rob would bet his share of the cargo that the boy had never gotten from his own mother. Alec wiggled

free to drag the woman toward Rob who slipped off his horse to await the introduction.

"This is Captain Thorpe, Gran. I'm a member of his crew," Alec crowed standing a bit taller.

The woman cast a sharp-eyed glance at her grandson and back to Rob. Good manners won out. "Welcome and well met, Captain Thorpe. There's a story here I vow. I'll hear it later. Come sit. You must be hungry from your journey."

With a glint in her eye she gave Alec a pointed warning. "We'll sort out this 'crew' business after." She drew the boy and their guest toward a table.

Food, drink, and an onslaught of welcomes overwhelmed Rob. He met the apparent guest of honor, Father McPhee, 'th' priest from down Aberdeen,' being chief among them. McPhee greeted him politely before one of the women drew him into a conversation about services and sacrament. The priest raised a rueful eyebrow and excused himself politely.

Dougal, Morag, Finn, Alice, Douggie—cousins all. The introductions came faster than Rob's ability to do more than nod and murmur thanks. He couldn't remember one from the other a moment after he met them. It didn't help that he darted glances here and there to search for familiar auburn hair. He found plenty of it on the cousins but none atop the shining eyes he longed to see.

Where is Beth?

Wherever she was, she didn't seem to be in Gran's yard. His eyes wandered toward the house and back down to the meal set before him in disappointment. He took a shuddering breath, raised his tankard of ale, and glanced up to see Gran peering at him intensely. He forced a smile.

"Is the stew not to yer liking, Captain?" she asked.

"On the contrary, it tastes as good as than any I've ever had. I'm weary 'tis all."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow, but let it pass. "What have you to do with my grandson," she demanded.

Eyes the same sea blue as Beth's held his, the same pride and intelligence looked back at him. He didn't dare try to cozen this woman.

"He came to us and begged us to take him aboard. His mother—" Rob stuttered, studying the woman for signs of distress. He met strength and went on. "Welts covered his back and bruises his shoulder. Someone had to protect him." He concluded. "We signed him. He doesn't know she took 200 pounds to let him go and not contest the contract."

Gran shook her head, lips pinched in grief. "She's gotten worse, has Janice. My son kept her under control but since he died..." she shrugged. "Vicious witch. Thank you for looking after 'im."

"We'll treat him well," he assured her. "If you know about Janice then do you know—"

"What she says about Alec's sister? Aye. Lies all of it. Alice was a true and loving wife to my son who'd never give another man a look. And the auld duke? May have betrayed that evil wife of his, but he was faithful to Jane Christie. Married her when the duchess died, dint he? My granddaughter—" she broke off abruptly and raked Rob from crown to table top with her shrewd eyes.

He swallowed hard, and opened his mouth to tell her he knew Beth to be a respectable girl, but faltered. He reached in his pocket instead, pulled out the rosary, and set it on the table. "I came to return this to her," he said.

The old woman's sight misted over. Whatever he expected, it wasn't that. She fingered the green granite beads carefully. "My husband gave me this on our wedding day," she said, her voice thick and hoarse. "I gave it to Beth in hopes—"

She stopped abruptly, blinked to clear her vision, and

leaned over. Her stormy eyes pierced him to the heart.

“Tell me Captain Thorpe: are you the reason my Elsbeth moped about my house like her dog vanished and the hens quit laying this past week or more?”



DAWN CAME SLOWLY deep in a glen, high on the eastern slopes. Beth hunkered by her fire long after the sun lit up the western hills, longer than she should. She promised Gran she'd be home by noon that day, and she had little else to do for Scanlan.

She had swept the floors and chased the birds from the rafters the day before. She could do nothing for the rotting timbers around the window frames or the cracks between wood and stone that let in the mice. The old building deserved better. Five generations of seminarians risked life and freedom to study here, as far from the bloody British as they could get thanks to the second Duke of Gordon. Signs of ruin showed, but she'd done her best. The chapel at least looked fit if Father McPhee decided to come up for more than a look around.

With nothing left to do, thoughts of a certain sea captain haunted her night. Snatches of sound from Dougal's fiddle, brought on the wind, did little to help. She needed to go back down, shake off her disappointments, and take up life in the Braes.

Water from the burn came easily to hand to douse the fire. She bundled the few supplies she brought with her in her plaid, scooped it up, and walked around the stone building to start downhill.

Below her a solitary figure plodded slowly upward following the smugglers path through sheep meadows and across one burn and another.

Gran must have sent someone up to bring me home.

As he came closer she could see the man stood taller than her cousins and possessed a head of black hair. When he gracefully leapt over a stone fence instead of climbing the stile as any intelligent local—aware the sheep leave ‘gifts’ for the unsuspecting in the fields—would have done, she knew him to be a stranger. Her heart began to pound.

Moments later the stranger paused to look up the hill, at Scanlan first and then at her. He hastened his pace, and her heart rose to her throat. No stranger this. When he broke into a run, Beth stumbled to the stone bench in front of the ruin, no longer steady on her feet, and sat, her bundle forgotten on the ground.

Rob Thorpe came over the rise only moments later but to Beth the wait felt like an eternity.

And how did he know—? Gran, of course. But why is he here?

She opened her mouth to greet him, but the words stuck in her throat. He appeared to be similarly stricken and stood a few yards away, his breath heaving. The sight of him lifted the cloud of despair that had chased her to Gran’s. Nothing had changed, but the mere sight of the man drove her common sense to the wind. If he took liberties she would gladly give them this day. If he did not, she might be forced to take them herself.

“Miss Gordon—Beth,” he said at last over deep breaths. “I came to apologize.”

She blinked at him. *Apologize? He rode up from Speyness and climbed the mountain to apologize?*

He took a few steps closer, wary and watchful. “Would you mind if I sit?” He gestured behind him. “The walk..”

Beth jumped and wiggled to the side. “Of course, you must be exhausted. Lowlanders aren’t used to the climb.”

When she moved as far to the edge as she could, he sat far on the other end. To avoid her or out of consideration?

She wasn't sure, but he looked much too far away to suit Beth.

"Rob, I—"

"Let me talk first. As I said, I came to apologize. I took liberties with you that day in Speyness."

She shook her head to deny it, and he put up a hand to stop her.

"I did. Worse, I'm afraid I gave you the wrong impression."

Of course. He didn't really want me. He just meant to steal a kiss.

Rob ignored her frown. "I intended to reassure you that I knew your stepmother's stories for the lie they were, and that her implication you should—"

He colored deeply. Somehow his embarrassment lessened hers. His next words came in a rush. "Well, that you ought to offer yourself to me in any dishonorable way was deeply wrong. You said you would never, and I knew it for truth. You are kind, generous, and, and—well, innocent."

Beth's eyebrows rose.

"I meant only to reassure you. To tell you that you had my respect. Instead I did the opposite."

He doesn't believe those vile things about me! Joy flooded her.

He ran a hand over the back of his neck, staring at his knees, a gesture Beth found adorable. She scooted a little closer.

"It's just that you looked so..." His eyes widened when he looked up and saw how close she sat. His voice dropped to a whisper. "...so lovely. Those sea blue eyes. Your hair—" he lifted a trembling hand and touched a lock of her hair that had come loose, blowing in the wind. "So lovely," he repeated in a throaty murmur. Neither looked away for a very long time. When he swayed forward and Beth held her breath, anticipating his kiss, he suddenly pulled away and stood up.

“Your grandmother says this is a church of some sort,” he said gesturing to the building.

Shock at the sudden change forced her to swallow. Her words came out hoarse. “A seminary, really, but yes, there’s a chapel inside.”

“Papist—I mean Catholic?”

“Aye. The Braes have always kept to the old faith, in spite of it all. Priests come here when they can to celebrate Mass, and give the sacraments.”

“Like Father McPhee?”

“Aye. He’s here?”

Rob nodded. “I met him. He found my stories of the whales amusing.” He grinned at her and then turned serious.

“Sacraments you say. Does that include marriage?”

“Aye, that as well,” she gulped. His intense gaze made her grateful she still sat.

He cleared his throat. “I’m not a poor man, Beth. There’s enough in the Mary Jane this time that, added to my savings, will enable me to buy my own ship and stay in port, growing fat on my investments.”

She furrowed her brow trying to sort out his conversation, which seemed to dart from one thing to another.

“Not that I can promise I will, mind,” he added with a grin. “I love the sea and can’t give it up entirely. But I can afford a house in Nantucket. Or New Bedford if you prefer. I hear there is a your sort of church there.” His expression took on a note of pleading.

If I prefer? What is he saying? Hope burst into flame.

“Nantucket and New England have rugged beauty as does the sea, but it isn’t the same as—” He made an expansive gesture that encompassed the hills and the valley below. “I need the sea, but we can holiday in Vermont if you—”

“What are you saying? I don’t understand.”

His head dropped back and he stared at the sky before

looking ruefully at her. "I'm bungling this." He took both her hands and pulled her to her feet so that she stood a foot from him, her hands safe in the warmth of his.

"I'm saying I can't leave Speyness without you. I'm saying I want to yank you from your Gran and this place."

When she hesitated without responding, he tipped his forehead to hers. "I'm saying I love you Beth Gordon, more than life itself. Will you marry me?"

She slipped her hand from his and cupped his face. "Yes," she breathed, "Oh yes. I thought you would never—"

His mouth on hers cut off her last words. The realization that he might silence her that way often in the future was her last coherent thought before she gave herself up to his kisses. She looked forward to it. Indeed she did.



MCPHEE MARRIED them the next day on his own authority, "and Sassenach laws be damned." She embarked on the Mary Jane the day they returned to Speyness.

Aside from a twinge of regret that Gran never saw her babies when they came, she lived happily in Nantucket the rest of her days. Their house there proved to be all Beth needed, and Rob, though he never shared her faith, saw to it she and the children sailed to the mainland for services as often as weather permitted.

Alec went to sea with Matt Thorpe and in due time captained a ship for Thorpe Brothers Maritime himself. As to Rob, one voyage away from home convinced him he didn't need to sail away to love the sea. All he needed to be happy was a walk with his family along the shore, their snug home, and the arms of his tavern wench.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Traveler, poet, librarian, technology manager—award winning and Amazon best-selling author Caroline Warfield has been many things (even a nun), but above all she is a romantic. Having retired to the urban wilds of eastern Pennsylvania, she reckons she is on at least her third act, happily working in an office surrounded by windows where she lets her characters lead her to adventures while she nudges them to explore the riskiest territory of all, the human heart. She is enamored of history, owls, and gardens (but not the actual act of gardening). She is also a regular contributor to History Imagined, a blog at the intersection of history and fiction, and (on a much lighter note) The Teatime Tattler, a blog in the shape of a fictional nineteenth century gossip rag.

You can find her here:

www.carolinewarfield.com/

<https://www.facebook.com/carolinewarfield7/>

ALSO BY CAROLINE WARFIELD

The Children of Empire Series (1832-1840)

Three cousins torn apart by lies and deceit work their way back home from the far corners of empire.

The Renegade Wife

A desperate woman on the run with her children finds shelter with a reclusive businessman in the Canadian wilderness. But now she's gone again. Can he save her before time runs out?

The Reluctant Wife

A disgraced Bengal army officer finds himself responsible for two unexpected daughters and a headstrong, interfering,—but attractive—widow. This time, failure is not an option.

The Unexpected Wife

The Duke of Murnane seeks escape in service to the crown in the drug ridden, contentious port of Canton, only to find his problems waiting at the end of the earth. Can love bring him back? (Available May, 2018)

The Dangerous Series (Regency Era)

Dangerous Works

A little Greek is one thing; the art of love is another. Only Andrew ever tried to teach Georgiana both.

Dangerous Weakness

A marquess who never loses control and a very independent woman spark conflict until revolution, politics, and pirates, force them to work together.

Dangerous Secrets

When Jamie fled to Rome to hide his shame he didn't expect a vicar's daughter and imp of a niece to take over his life. Will his secrets destroy their chance at love?

The Holiday Collection

Lady Charlotte's Christmas Vigil

Love is the best medicine and the sweetest things in life are worth the wait, especially at Christmastime in Venice for a stranded English Lady and a handsome physician.

An Open Heart

She may not celebrate the same holiday as others at the Regency house party, but the banker's daughter knows she can treasure her heritage and still reach out to people of different traditions. If only she can convince her beloved to have an open heart!

A Dangerous Nativity

With Christmas coming, can the Earl of Chadbourn repair his widowed sister's damaged estate, and far more damaged family? Dare he hope for love in the bargain?

(Prequel to both the Dangerous and Children of Empire series)

Anthologies

A Holiday in Bath

Holly and Hopeful Hearts

Never Too Late (November 2017)