

Chapter 1

GLASGOW, 1806

I FEAR I WILL NEVER see the Highlands again. No more scent of hay and heather rising sweet on the summer air alongside my father. No birdsong filling my ears as I till the stone-scrabbled land, planting barley and wheat. These simple things of my old life, gone forever, missed with a fondness I never felt at the time.

Now? Naught but dust, the clatter of looms and the strands of cotton that rise above the mill floor, twisting like spider-webs. There are no wildflowers, no songs in the mill, just the cursing of angry foremen as they hit us, urging us to work harder, to clean the jammed machinery, to weave faster, to make money for the laird.

Fourteen hours a day we toil, my mother, father, sister and I. Fourteen hours of sweat and aching bones and back-breaking labour, on a machine as hungry for life and blood as it is for the cotton that comes on the ships from America.

I haven't lost any fingers yet. Or my life, unlike the lass who worked next to us. Her name was Emma. She was fifteen like me, from Aberdeen, a thin girl, tall, with green eyes and hair the colour of ripe summer corn.

It jammed, the loom she worked with her family, and she was sent to clean it. She reached into the works with her slender arm and as she did, the machine sprang to life. Her hand caught in a cog and she was lifted into the air, dragged screaming and writhing into the wheel.

She died in front of her family, crushed to death, begging for help that did not come. And when the foreman finally arrived? He pulled her wrecked, twisted body from the guts of the loom and fined her parents a day's wages for disrupting production.

A year has passed since I last saw the mist-shrouded flanks of the mountains that rise above the black waters of Loch Tay. A year since the men came with clubs and guns and letters of eviction. Our farm leased by my family for five generations, now too valuable for people, turned over to sheep.

Our old cottage is gone. Burned to the ground. Our cows? Shot by those smirking men who said the same fate would greet us if we ever returned to the Highlands. Now? We live in Glasgow, all four of us in a wee dingy room in a soot-

stained brick tenement on the south bank of the River Clyde.

Our water comes from a well on Caledonia Road instead of the stream that ran clean and clear beside our cottage. Our toilets? Clay pots, their stinking contents thrown out into the street when they are full. This is how we live, that is until this cold April morning when, shivering and weak from a fever, I struggle to get ready for work.

My father takes one look at me and shakes his head. "Nae. Stay home, lad. Ye'd do more harm than good, the state yer in. And yer sister will keep an eye on ye too; ye could both use the rest."

I mumble a farewell and go back to sleep, hardly feeling my father put an extra blanket on my body and my mother kiss me goodbye. I slumber until just past noon and would have slept longer still had my sister Libby not shaken me roughly awake.

"Duncan, get up. Something's happening, there's a commotion outside."

"What's going on?" I ask, shaking the cobwebs from my head.

"A dinnae ken. Something terribly exciting by the sounds of things. Let's go and see."

We slip down the narrow staircase to the street, and it's then I see the smoke. "The mill! It's burning to the ground!" yells a small boy. There are many cotton mills in Glasgow but the only one within a short distance of our house is Hamilton's Cotton Mill. Our mill.

I rush forward, a sense of dread rising in my stomach. I turn the corner and see the place engulfed in flames. Huge columns of thick, choking smoke fill the air, and handfuls of dazed, ash-covered workers who'd escaped the inferno gasp for breath on the street.

In full panic I speed towards the main gates. "Mother! Father!" I cry frantically as I search the crowd, but my parents are nowhere to be seen. Panic threatens to overwhelm me until Libby catches sight of Angus Drummond, a Highlander who works in the mill and lives in the room next to us.

"Angus! My parents?" I beg. "Where are they? Have ye seen them?"

"In there." The old man points a trembling finger towards the inferno. "A beam fell down across the door! They're trapped, lad! I tried to help but there's naught I could do."

"Nae!" I push my way through the crowd towards the fire, sheltering my face from the flames and the billowing black smoke. Libby catches up to me and holds tightly to my arm.

"Duncan! Stop! It's too dangerous!" I shake free of her grasp and stagger forward towards the gates, fighting the waves of heat that water my eyes and make me gag for every breath. More than twenty yards from the main gates I'm forced to stop, and then, with a realization that hits me like a fist, I know my parents will never escape the flames.

I collapse, weeping. Libby sits beside me as we watch helplessly while the huge mill burns until nothing remains but a pile of ruined brick and charred timbers.

“Out of my way!” I lift my head to see a rider on a fine black horse quickly approaching. The horse whinnies to a stop in front of me, and a fat, toad-like man, looking ready to burst through his expensive clothes, climbs down from the saddle.

Cecil Hamilton, the rich English owner of what had once been the most profitable mill in Glasgow, waddles through the crowd, jowls bouncing, sweat glistening on his fat face as he swats at people with his ornate walking stick. “My mill!” he cries over and over in his strange English accent. “It’s gone!”

I feel a sharp pain on my arm. Through tear-filled eyes I see Hamilton glaring angrily at me, his walking stick raised to strike again. “What the devil have you got to cry about?” he demands.

“My family was in there, my laird,” I choke.

“Your family was useless Highland trash! They probably started the fire in the first place. They deserved to die. Now get out of my way!”

Before Libby can move, Hamilton strikes her hard across the back with his stick. My sister cries in pain and falls onto the blackened cobblestone street.

In a flash, my grief is replaced with blinding rage. I grab the walking stick from his fat hands and with a hard clean whack strike Sir Cecil Hamilton squarely across his head.

“Don’t ye touch my sister!” I scream, landing blow after blow on the Englishman. Hamilton stumbles and falls to the

ground, screaming for mercy, but I can't hear a word and stop only when the strong hand of Angus Drummond stays my arm.

“Nae! Duncan! Stop fer guidness sakes!” Angus pleads. In shock I drop the stick and stare blankly at the crumpled form lying still on the ground. “Ye nearly murdered him, lad! Ye’ll hang fer this if ye’re caught. Flee! Flee fer yer life!”