

Chapter One

“She’s not keeping up,” Alana yells out to her sister.

Karlyn looks back to her, her horse further ahead on the trail. “That sounds like her problem. Tell her to pick up the pace if she doesn’t want to be dragged back to town.”

Alana twists herself on her horse and yanks the rope. The girl falls forward. Alana stops before she is hauled too far. Her sister is not going to enjoy more delays, but the girl has been constantly walking for two days since they captured her. She’s going to need a rest.

“What is going on back there?” Karlyn yells out.

Alana can tell Karlyn’s temper is beginning to flare up, and wants to avoid as much of the annoyance as possible. They’ll unwind once they return to town and turn in the bounty. Fresh beer, hot food. Alana shakes her head. *We’re almost there.* “It’s about time we break for a rest. We can hobble the horses and eat while we still have the shade of the forest.”

It’s not the best excuse she’s come up with on the spot, but it’ll have to do, *unless of course Karlyn is feeling like a belligerent—*

Karlyn yells, “Fine, we’ll stop for a meal. Once we’re done eating, we’re back to the road.”

They slow down. Alana dismounts her horse and unties the rope. The captive shambles to the nearest tree and slumps against it. *At least the break will be good for her.* Alana ties the girl to the tree, and leads her horse away to where Karlyn has set up at.

The day is decent, and the land has treated them well since they arrived. Alana wonders how long their good fortune will last. It would be prudent to save their reward for the future. They have enough of a stash to last them a week.

Alana rummages through her bag for food. She pulls and unwraps a loaf of bread from its cloth. Perhaps this idea wasn’t the most sound. She can barely conjure an appetite. If Karlyn notices her not eating, she’ll not hear the end of it for weeks. Best have some bread now and stop the hunger later. With a great effort, she tears apart the stale loaf. Alana pulls out her flask and hands Karlyn her piece.

“Should we give some to the girl?” Alana asks.

“What for?” Karlyn rips off a chunk and sticks it in her mouth. “We don’t offer final meals, and we’ll be in town by tomorrow. I think we can make it tonight if we keep a strong pace.”

A day’s travel doesn’t sound so bad, but even she is feeling the ache in her back and legs. Karlyn’s kept quiet since they captured the girl. It’s not just Karlyn. Both of them have become more reserved the past week. All this wandering is having a toll on them. Alana bites into her bread.

Karlyn squints at her. “You’re not hungry. You have that look in your eyes as you’re sitting there. I can’t believe you’d make us stop for her.”

Alana struggles as she swallows her mouthful as fast as she can. “Where did this accusation come from?”

Karlyn groans. She stuffs the remainder of his bread in her pocket and stands up. “Don’t try to hide it, from me of all people. You’ve been like this since we seized her, which wasn’t without its problems. You wouldn’t be so nice if you were the one dragged down a river.”

Alana throws her hands in the air. “Listen, the girl isn’t going anywhere. Congratulations, you ran her dry. She couldn’t escape if she wanted to.”

“Is that what you think?” Karlyn picks up her crossbow. “How about we put our assumptions to the test? You say we should go easier on her while I think she can walk the entire damn path back home. Let’s see how appreciative she is with your kindness, release the bonds around her hands.”

Alana laughs at her. “You can’t be serious.”

"I am. I know the act. She's hurt and can barely walk. She'll run as fast as she can if you give her the chance. Do it and watch."

"And what do I get if I'm correct? There's not a lot on the line regarding you."

Karlyn raises her eyebrow. "I'll keep my mouth shut all the way until we get our reward. It doesn't matter how long we're out or how many rests you feel inclined in taking."

Anything to quiet her down. Alana puts down her food and heads toward the girl. It's not possible for her to have any energy. The girl had only run from town a day before they arrived and got the job, and she left on foot. They were forced to ride all over the damn woods and rivers until they caught her, and Karlyn has been incessant in making it back to town. The girl might try to run and fumble, but that's about it.

Alana reaches the tree. She bends over and unsheathes her knife and starts cutting the bonds free. The rope strands start to break apart as she applies more pressure. As the rope is cut, Alana starts to speak to her about this wager.

The girl punches Alana in the stomach. Alana topples over and a knee slams into her nose. Lights flash and it hurts to breathe in. Alana holds her sides and face as she lies on the ground. She watches as the girl takes off running in the distance. A bad judgment call.

Alana rolls over to see her sister staring down on her. "I told you she'd be a runner, didn't I? Unbelievable what a little acting will do to you. You're lucky she didn't go for your dagger."

"Fine, fine. Get her or we'll lose out on the reward."

She watches as Karlyn walks over to her horse and pulls a bolt for her crossbow. Alana starts to pick herself up from the ground. Those punches were surprisingly strong for such a small woman. She's going to hear about this incident whenever they get in an argument. "What's taking so long? She's going to escape at this rate."

"No, she's not," Karlyn responds.

The girl has covered a lot of ground since Alana last saw her. It'll have to be a good shot and . . . Alana shakes her head. Karlyn loads a bolt in to her crossbow and takes aim. Alana follows the trajectory as it fires off the shot. It flashes through the trees and lands in the girl's back. She falls to the ground.

Alana's not going to hear the end of this for some time. She grimaces as she holds her sides and stands up. The throb in her face slowly goes away. "Fine shot," Alana says.

"We've missed nearly a day's worth of travel because of this girl." Karlyn responds. She walks over to her horse and takes out a bag and a hatchet.

Alana says, "You know we're going to lose out on any extra because we're bringing her in dead, right? I'm sure they wanted her in one piece when we brought her in."

Karlyn closes her eyes and sighs. "She drowned their baby. They're going to give us the money regardless. Let's just hurry up and get this over with. I don't want to be out here any longer."

Karlyn walks to the girl. Alana feels a thickness in her throat as if someone stuffed down food and left it there. She went too far in letting this whole ordeal go. Alana opens her flask and takes a drink. Not much left. The next river they pass by she'll make sure to fill it up. She avoids watching Karlyn work as she takes the hatchet to the girl's neck, so Alana turns to the wilderness.

This countryside is beautiful. She wishes Karlyn would take the time to put her mind at ease and just enjoy the sights. Instead Karlyn constantly keeps her gaze on her feet. This job has made Karlyn more irritable than usual. She presses her thumb against her nose. *We're acting foolish.*

Alana has no idea where they've ended up, but people still have coin and need, and that agrees with her. Every place they've visited has been more and more dangerous. Alana hopes this perpetual wandering stops eventually. She needs to take this situation more seriously. Once they turn this girl in and get the reward, they'll rest, and drink, and stay at the town for the next week. No matter the offers that come their way.

Chapter Two

Karlyn hates the sound of this woman's wailing. She puts her hands in her pockets and tightens them into fists. It grates her ears and tries her temper. The employer and his wife give Alana the reward, but keep insisting for the two of them to stay. This woman will not stop crying.

Fortunately, Alana interrupts, telling the grieving parents that they have to leave and they are much too tired from the journey back. It doesn't help matters Karlyn insisted they ride through the night. What should have made them arrive quicker ended up just as long due to the distractions. Now she feels the tenderness in her back and eyelids.

They leave the house and walk back to the town of Keyfair. The morning light shines in their eyes as they go down the dirt path. Alana keeps hold of the pay. As usual, Karlyn was right, the parents not only paid the full amount, but gave extra given they returned so quickly. She clears her throat and spits on the grass. They could have been quicker.

Alana says, "How about we celebrate at the tavern?"

"I'd rather go to bed."

"Bed? We can't head straight to bed. We're in a lively town with some money to spare. I think a decent meal, some good drinks."

Alana always gets like this when she's worried about her. Never the one to deal with an issue directly, Alana tries to mask problems under drinking, parties, and dance, and for the most part she's right. Karlyn loses track of what's bothering her. Once she forgets, the worry disappears most of the time. "I'll have a drink," Karlyn says. "After that I'm going to bed."

"Fair enough."

When they enter the tavern, Alana wastes no time ordering the food and drinks. The mead fills into the mugs and splashes onto the counter as they are set down. It isn't long before Alana stirs up the other patrons in the tavern. *She always had a knack with people.* That's fine with Karlyn, as long as she doesn't have to speak with them.

They laugh and smile as Alana entertains them with exaggerated tales of their exploits. Certain stories don't deviate too far from the truth. Karlyn sips from her mug. It gives a crisp bitterness. She can't remember the last time she's had a drink to calm down. *Four weeks ago?*

She shakes her head. It was five weeks ago in that marshland. She used to enjoy tasting the selections of spirits and brews at all the places they pass through. *Today needs to end soon.* A man comes up to their table. He's finely dressed for the area. He looks around the bar, reaffirming something under his breath. "You two are the bounty hunters, right? You look like you fit the description."

Karlyn clears her throat. "It's good we fit your description, but I can't say we know anything about you."

"Durmont Plair. I heard you were the two who captured Barret and Deysi's handmaiden? Terrible business, terrible business."

Karlyn can live without the opening conversation pleasantries. This man wants to hire. Alana takes notice of him. She sits next to Karlyn and takes lead with the answer. "Cases like that always are. What have you stopped by for?"

His eyes go wide. "Did the girl ever confess why she did it?"

Alana takes a sip from her mug. "No. In a way that's normal. These things happen."

Karlyn knows that's an excuse. She can't remember the last time someone took another's life for no good reason. It just doesn't transpire, most of the time they have a damn good reason. She and Alana have a good impression it was an affair with the husband, but it's none of their business. They were hired to bring her in. Nothing more.

Durmont Plair says, "I need someone found. Barret and I have known each other since we were young, and if he says you are the best mercenaries he's ever encountered, I take that as the highest compliment to be given. I have a dilemma I need solved myself."

Alana sits back into her chair. "That certainly is heartwarming, but I'm afraid my sister and I are not offering our services at the moment."

Karlyn looks over to Alana. This was not the response she was expecting to an offer. They don't turn down offers too often.

Durmont shakes his head. "But you must, I have an urgent need, it concerns my daughter. She's missing and I need someone to retrieve her. I'll pay handsomely."

"As I said—"

The man interrupts Alana by pouring coins onto the table. The pile clanks and grows into a small hill. Karlyn glances to anyone who's seen the gesture. Her hand holds the hilt of the knife on her belt. No one seems to pay attention to their table in the corner. It's one thing to say you have money. It's another to make it easily reachable.

The same thought appears to be on Alana's mind. She covers the money with a tablecloth. "We'll need a moment to decide. Stay here while we talk things over."

The walk over to the bar. Karlyn makes sure she's a fair distance away before she grabs and pull Alana close. "What are you doing?"

Alana arches her eyebrow. "Nothing. What do you mean?"

"Don't act stupid." Karlyn checks again if anyone is drawing near to their conversation. "That's a lot of money we'd be leaving on the table. It can set us up for a good long time. Why are you turning it down?"

"Hey, it's not about the money. If you forgot, we were paid earlier today. We haven't had an actual bed in days, barely a hot meal, and we've gone through a lot of shit by cleaning up other people's troubles. I'm sure his daughter is beautiful and wonderful, but she's not our problem. He can hire somebody else. This," she holds up her mug. "Will help us stay more than happy in warm beds at night. That's what we need right not."

It's not the money, but it is the money. Right now, Karalyn doesn't want to eat or drink, it's not tiredness. She wants the certainty they don't need to struggle for food and room. This conversation is building a pressure in her head. "I don't like this attitude. Something isn't right."

Alana brushes Karlyn's hand off. "What's your problem, don't you want to slow down for just a little?"

"Our issue is we don't know where we're going to be tomorrow or even a week from now, and that is a lot of money to be leaving on the table. It hasn't happened yet, but there will be a time where this won't come as easy for us. We're taking the job."

She pushes Alana away and gets up from the table. Karlyn grits her teeth as she walks to Durmont. "We'll do it."

Chapter Three

They sit down to discuss Durmont's contract. Alana asks, "What's the problem you're facing? How did this all come about?"

The girl's father seems to have calmed down since they agreed to the job. He still hasn't stopped glancing at Karlyn and Alana, and he's constantly rubbing his hands as if they are cold, but he collects himself to speak. "I don't know. Three weeks. One day she was home and the next she was gone."

Alana pulls the barmaid over and orders a strong drink. She arrives with a mug with a dark mixture that Karlyn wants no part of. Her first drink is languishing on the side of the table. The new order is placed in front of Durmont. "Relax," Alana says. "Start us at the beginning so my sister and I know what we're dealing with."

"My daughter isn't the first. She's been gone three weeks. Other girls have gone missing here and other villages. There was a traveling bard the other men recount, I saw him. They said a bard placed a curse on them. They just end up leaving. Some in the middle of the night, others just stop working and walk like they were possessed. I thought it was superstitious nonsense, didn't pay any mind to what others were saying. Then she was gone and—" He takes a long drink from his mug.

Alana nods in response. "So, it's more than one girl. What's a number we should expect?"

"More than a dozen," he says.

Karlyn glances over to Alana. This was getting more troublesome by the moment.

Alana asks, "How have that many women been taken and no one's gone looking for them? Surely it can't be that difficult to track. The more people, the more trails."

"That's the point I'm trying to make. We have sent others after someone. Some mercenaries were hired and were said to have gone looking for the bard when this first took place. You are not the first hires I sent out. Two weeks ago, I had one man go out. He said he was confident of where my daughter was, and the other girls as well. He left and never came back."

"You didn't pay him up front by any chance?"

He takes another drink. "No, I fear the worst, and if that happened to him . . ."

Karlyn grabs the sides of her mug by the tips of her fingers and slowly spins it. A missing mercenary doesn't mean much. Anything could have come up that stopped the mercenary from returning. And at the same time, it opens up terrible possibilities.

Alana keeps the conversation going. "You're probably right on that assumption. I can see why you'd be so worried." Alana slams Karlyn's back. "Nothing has ever stopped us before."

It's always the theatrics with her. This man doesn't need any more reason to hire them. He actually dumped the payment in front of them in full and in advance.

"Good," he says. "You're putting my mind at ease, slightly."

"That's what you're paying us to do. If you can tell us where the mercenaries were told to look, my sister and I will follow the same trail and see what we find."

Karlyn starts to tally up all the details. Girls are missing. Previous hired mercenary, *missing*. Gone long enough to presume the worst, *but not long enough to give up hope*. Most likely dead, or sold, *which at the end of the day means the same thing*. It's contained in the local region, *wherever this place is*. She can't be expected to remember all the names of each land they find themselves in. Finally, he gives them the directions.

Alana's heels start tapping on the floor. Not much left to go in this conversation. "Before we leave, I have one last question to ask. How long ago did all of this take place? And I mean exactly from the first reports?"

Durmont looks up at the ceiling and grinds his teeth. "I'd have to say, two months ago. Why, does that tell you something?"

Of course, it does. Some of these people can be so thick. Karlyn tastes her drink. His mind must be in too many places at once. This will go right past him without him noticing a thing.

Alana responds, "I'm just getting an understanding of the situation. Don't worry, we'll be back soon with your daughter."