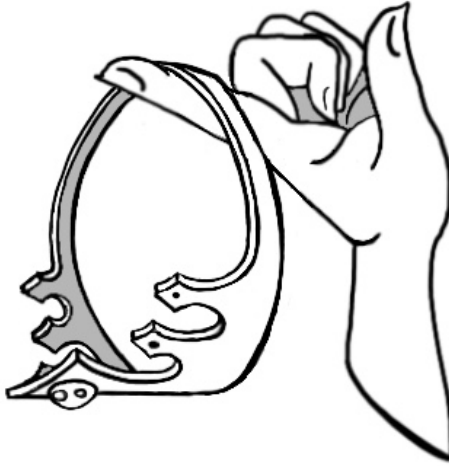


Chapter 1:

BOOTS NOT MADE FOR RUNNING



As the body sank beneath the churn of the ocean, it painted the foam pearls pink. The accusatory moonlight of the full crescent searched, but the waves stretched across the deck of the ship, grabbing at the evidence as if to hide that as well. Sea water and blood soaked into the soft leather of her shoes. Without a thought, she threw them overboard. Regret penetrated the mist. How was she to replace them? She couldn't be so wasteful anymore.

Waves rocked the ship, and she stumbled back. Blood circled her toes like sharks. A lantern glow splintered through the deck beneath her. She was caught between it and the moonlight as if the light itself knew what she had done.

She ran.

Quieter than the creak of the ship or the stretch of the ropes, she ran across the deck and hid. Clouds swallowed the moonlight as the sky broke and rain washed away the remains of her broken promise.

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CRACK! The ceramic tile splintered beneath the pointed heel of her boots. Ailyanna pitched to the side, almost tumbling off the roof. Arms spinning, she pulled herself back upright. The high noon sun glinted off the lake, the smaller fishing ships moving like flies around the merchant ships. Beyond the lake, the snow-capped peaks of the mountains towered over the gentle rise of the city itself. As she caught her breath, the shrill off-key whistle of the constabulary shrieked behind her. *Fate!* Ailyanna hoisted the layers of petticoats and ran. Her boots were designed for stepping out of carriages, walking around carefully manicured gardens, or at most dancing at a ball. Not fleeing across the rooftops of East Bayside.

The day had been so promising. An older lady with more money than sense, Ailyanna's favorite sort, was close to gifting her access to her jeweler. Just a few pieces and then she would have been able to disappear. Another step closer to her ticket out of Edaven. Instead, constables had been at the door, with a drawing of distressing resemblance to Ailyanna. This was the fifth con in a row that she'd had to abandon without pay. It was as if luck had abandoned her.

On Ailyanna's right, the constables ran along the streets below, bellowing at her to stop. She spun to her left and huffed it toward the chaos and safety of the Rot. These estates with their wide streets, large gardens, and long roofs were filled with pampered prey, but they made for poor cover. In the distance, she could make out the clustered buildings that had grown on each other like fungus. Tunnels and laneways had been built without a care. She could lose her pursuers in there—she'd done it a hundred times. She could do it again.

"Halt!" That voice wasn't just any constable, it was *the* constable.

Ailyanna knew some of the constables out of professional obligation, like Broken Nose with the bad right leg who always ran into walls if she pivoted fast enough, or Stench, who always gave up when she entered the sewers. But *the*

constable, the Bloodhound, was impossible to ignore. As tall and broad as a man, with short red hair that made fires seem dim, along with a singular obsession of bringing Ailyanna to justice.

“Are there no other criminals for you to catch?” Ailyanna called over her shoulder as she dropped onto an ornate stone wall. Without even a wobble she was across in a single leap to the roof of the neighboring estate. The canoodling couple on the garden bench gave a shout behind her, and the tap of her heels was joined by the thud of a boot. Not a fashionable boot, but a heavy-soled one, designed for chasing criminals.

The Bloodhound had climbed up. Her blue constable’s coat flapped in the wind, the light catching on her golden captain’s badge. The freckles on her pale face softened her in the same way a bow on a bull’s horn softened its point.

“Can’t stay to chat, another time?” she shouted back behind her. The effort of the words made her lungs compress. The heavy footfalls of the captain gave a rhythmic pattern to the sharp click of her heels, and with each step, they grew closer. *Fate!* Ailyanna couldn’t catch luck today. The constable was right in her shadow. Her skin prickled, and Ailyanna ducked as a hand caught the air where her neck had been. A sharp pivot on her heel and she darted back the way she’d come, letting the heavy bulk of the Bloodhound propel the woman past her.

The easy path to the Rot was left behind her and it would be a scramble across the main street yet even dressed as an ornate cake she should be able to make it. Leaping, she skipped across the tops of columns where the ivy clung, chasing along walls and across the fountains. The wet hemline of her skirts worked harder to trip her. She shed what skirts she could and let them waft down to litter the gilded statues of the estates. At least the Bloodhound wouldn’t be able to follow such a path.

“Halt!”

What kind of creature was this woman?

Muscles aching, her lungs burning and sweat sticking the dress to her back, Ailyanna focused on her balance. The Rot was tantalizingly close. Soot thickened the air, the ever-present chorus of shouting from the market barkers rose over the wind. The roof tilted upwards. The fire in her lungs grew hotter as she forced herself up the slant at full speed. Above the peak of the roof, the burnished iron spire of the station box was visible. The box itself was little more than a small closet in the middle of the road, for a constable to oversee traffic. Its thin spire jutted into the sky with four splayed arms reaching out over the busy street, ready for streamers to be hung for festivals. Her last jump.

A gust of wind caught her back, pushing her forward, and she flew over the street. Her skirts dragged her down. Her palms scraped at the metal arm, fingers latching at the last moment, stopping her from plummeting three stories onto the stone below. Unable to keep the momentum to swing to the balcony across from her, Ailyanna dangled above the street like a limp flag.

Thunk!

The jolt rattled the spire, almost prying her grip free.

“You are under arr—”

“Piss off—”

A terrible metallic cry cut them off, the iron groaning beneath their weight as the spire buckled. It toppled, stretching out over the street and then catching on the balcony. Screws popped free of the stone and the balcony shifted, threatening to drop before catching on the bricks of the building. They dangled above the street, each holding one of the arms. Beneath them, people looked up in wonder as the carriages trundled on.

Ailyanna’s boot slipped free. It bounced on the stones and was crushed beneath the wheel of a horse-drawn taxi. Her stomach dropped into her legs. A fall

from this height— a broken bone? Almost certainly. A broken neck? A strong possibility. The Bloodhound pulled herself up. The iron arm of the spire nestled in her armpits, her face red from either exertion or anger. She glared at Ailyanna and shuffled toward the center, reached out, and tried to grab her. Ailyanna dangled, her knuckles white as she tried to kick the Bloodhound's grasp away. The two hung like the last leaves of fall in a harsh gale.

Below, the red roof of a taxi halted, and the driver stuck his head out the window to gawk up at them with the other bystanders. Ailyanna aimed, wished to luck, winked at the Bloodhound, and dropped. She tried to slow herself on the flag, but the distance closed in a blink. She smashed into the carriage roof, and a sharp and solid pain like a wall of knives hit her. Ribs cracked, threatening to snap entirely. Nausea roiled like a tide across her tongue. Ailyanna heaved herself off the side of the broken roof. Angry shouts followed her, and the world tilted, but all she needed to know was up from down and that the blurred mess before her was the laneways of the Rot.

Ailyanna's leg felt short, a hitch in her hip that wouldn't let her extend it fully, but she didn't care, she limped on. Someone screamed as a wet smack like laundry against a stone echoed behind her. She turned. Sprawled on the ground was *red*. Not the bright red of hair that shifted slightly in the wind, but the thick, viscous red that dripped and pooled through the crevices of the stone street.

The blood ignored the lean of the street, fought against the slope, and crawled toward her. Long fingers of death that knew its way home. Ailyanna shambled toward the body. *She can't be dead, no, no, she can't be.* Ailyanna fell forward and pulled the constable over. Blood stained her hands, and she choked back bile. The constable's face was a mask of red, pulsating from a gash on her forehead. Pulsating. Dead blood didn't flow. She was alive. Oh, thank the Bryn! Ailyanna exhaled and almost crumbled.

Alive meant she was a threat. She felt her body pulled away as if she were slipping from her skin, numb to the pain. Her fingers tensed and spasmed as they tried to reach for the woman's neck. Muscles strained as if they might rip free from her bones. Ailyanna clawed back into her body, pushing her hands against the Bloodhound. She moved clinically across her. Broken ribs but the lungs were okay. She pushed against the collar bone and the woman let out a cry, her back arching as she snapped back to consciousness. The two locked eyes.

Rough hands pulled Ailyanna back into the street and a cudgel cracked against her skull.

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It was a setback. It would delay her plans by months, but that was all it was. A set-back. Ailyanna kept telling herself this as she bounced in a windowless box of a carriage. It pulled to a halt and sudden sun burnt her eyes. She only had a second to take in where she was. The castle, not the constables' station? She'd never been a guest of the royals before. Perhaps the three successful escapes from the station house cell had given her such illustrious lodgings. Maybe she would dine with the king himself? Silly half-thoughts ran through her mind, spiraling out like glass fracturing from the aching base of her skull.

Taken into the dungeons, Ailyanna was stripped and searched. The female constables searched in places she'd never thought to hide things. Ailyanna refused to let herself fall into natural embarrassment. The guards worked with all the sensuality of plucking a chicken carcass clean. They didn't need so many hands holding her. The welts of purple that ran along her side functioned as a guard unto itself. One guard reached for her hair and Ailyanna breathed hotly onto the woman's fingers.

“Sorry, your cold fingers were too enticing,” she said, her voice sultry and her gaze stretching along the guard. The constable flushed slightly, her mouth twitching into a smile. Good. The key to the cell was almost in her hand already.

“Go,” one of the other constables said, staring at the woman whose embarrassment deepened. Ailyanna glanced at the faces of the others, and she suspected that woman wouldn’t be back on guard duty. Fingers ran endlessly through the flattened waves of her brown hair, each pin was pulled free and taken, and then the fingers checked again three times after her last pin was found just to be sure.

The castle dungeons were worse than she had expected. She’d never realized the simple cells at the new station house were such a luxury. Manacled to the wall by her wrists, she tested the length of the chain. It was long enough for her to eat but not enough that she could stand. In the dark, the cold stones almost glowed blue once her eyes adjusted. The only sound was the steady drip of dark water that seeped from the roof, catching in a small puddle. A rat scurried up to drink. It stared at her with its beady eyes till she kicked it away, reminding it that she was not its next meal.

Ailyanna’s hair fell limp around her, not even a ghost of the elaborate styling she’d worked so hard at. She’d been given prisoner breeches and a shirt in place of her luncheon dress. Slumped against the wall, face coated in sweat and grime, she knew she looked hopeless. Good. Let them underestimate her, let them think her broken. It had never taken her longer than a week to break out of a cell, so this would be no different.

A guard would get sloppy, reveal themselves to her, and she would dig her claws into whatever weakness she found. Maybe they were insecure and would get close to prove how strong they were against a chained prisoner. Maybe they felt bad about their work and sought to provide a little kindness. Maybe they would

simply be bored and find a friend in her? For now, they only entered with food. As soon as one of them stayed for only a breath, she would be able to find the loose stone in their person and topple them completely. That was what she did.

Ailyanna leaned her head against the wall. Cold sunk its tiny teeth into her. She'd hardly recovered from the fall, but the cold had helped ease the swelling. In vain, she tried again to find a way to settle her wrists so that the metal didn't scrape away her skin. As she moved, her smile dropped away. The rat lay dead. Its carcass was bloated on the rocks as if it had drowned itself in the shallow puddle, those beady glass eyes staring at her.