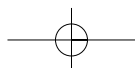
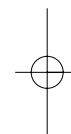
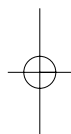


PART ONE

Edinburgh,
Spring 1822



CHAPTER ONE

At first he was grateful for the heat. It crackled up from the hearth, warming his stiff legs and arms. His whole body was numb with cold and fatigue. How many chimneys had he clambered up over the course of this long week? His sister always told him how good he was at his numbers but he had lost count somewhere in the middle of this bitterly cold Saturday afternoon.

It was hours since he had last eaten and his belly ached with hunger. He tried once more to free his right foot, trapped by an awkward bend where one of the many chimneys in this grand house joined into the main shaft. Pain shot up his leg. Then, like a hundred jagged needles, it exploded into every corner of his skinny frame.

His master roared up at him. 'Get a move on, laddie! Or I'll put more coal on the fire!'

The boy had to wait for the spasms of agony to subside before he could speak.

'Ma foot's stuck!' he sobbed. 'I cannae move it!'

'Ye'll hae tae move it! Unless it's a roastit erse ye're wanting! Get on with it, ye wee bugger!'

The child tilted his head back, whimpering as the rough stone penetrated his hair and scraped his tender scalp. All he could see was a small rectangle of inky-black sky. The short winter's day was already over.

A narrow tongue of flame licked past his feet, searing his bare

18 MAGGIE CRAIG

calves and singeing his tattered trousers. He yelled in pain and panic. Aware of freedom and fresh air a few tantalising feet away, he tugged again at his trapped foot. His scream of pain echoed up and down the chimney.

A moment later he heard a fierce, spluttering hiss. Realising the fire had been doused with water, he let out a panic-stricken moan. His master must ken fine what that would do. The child wet himself. As the warm urine coursed down his legs he found space in one corner of his mind to be ashamed of the fact. Only wee bairnies peed themselves. He was six years old and should be long past that.

Plump white tendrils of smoke snaked up from the grate. Two separate tentacles slid into the boy's mouth and nose, intertwining at the back of his throat. It was like having a fusty old blanket forced into his mouth. The acrid smoke rose further, stinging his eyes and the delicate skin that surrounded them like a swarm of malevolent wasps. Tears streaked the soot which coated his smooth young cheeks.

He began to cough, knowing that opening his mouth could only make matters worse. Breathing in smoke was what had killed his pal Davie last year. Once it had cleared, the boy had been dispatched up the shaft to push the lifeless body out onto the roof beside the chimney tops. Davie had been all floppy, like a grubby rag-doll staring up at him out of empty eyes. There were nights when the boy couldn't get that picture out of his head.

He wondered dimly if they would hack his foot off to make it easier to move him. He'd heard tales of things like that happening to other chimney boys.

His head was swimming, poisoned by the smoke which was slowly suffocating him. He couldn't breathe properly. Even with his bony little chest heaving and his heart hammering like a

ONE SWEET MOMENT 19

drum, he couldn't catch one decent breath.

Maybe he should stop trying. Close his eyes and allow himself to be spirited away. He sighed, allowing his mouth to fall open and admit the deadly smoke. He was feeling real hazy now, losing his awareness of where he was, even of who he was.

Yet a tiny window of lucidity remained. Pushing back the smothering grey curtains and his fading consciousness, it allowed a picture of his big sister Kate to flash into his head. Tears were streaming down her face. They had told her he was dead and she was weeping for him. Weeping sore and hard and moaning his name over and over again. *Andrew, Andrew, Andrew...*

His mind cleared and his determination returned. 'It's all right, Kate,' he muttered, gathering his strength about him. 'Ah'm no' deid yet!' All he had to do was free his foot. Clamber up the chimney to the outside world, freedom, life and Kate.

He braced himself, tugged harder on his trapped foot. Pain zigzagged once more through his small frame. He couldn't thole this, he really couldn't! Except that he had to. Kate would be so sad.

He yelled out another defiant 'Ah'm no' deid yet!', then screamed in agony. He tried to say the words again but his voice faltered and cracked before he was halfway through.

'Ah'm no...'

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe he was already dead. That was his last conscious thought. Although as everything faded, he could still hear his sister's voice, frantically calling his name.

Andrew, Andrew, Andrew...

CHAPTER TWO

‘Ah’m no’ deid yet,’ he muttered, thrashing his small head from side to side in his anxiety to transmit that message to his sister. ‘Ah’m no’ deid yet, Kate. Dinna be sad. Please dinna be sad...’

‘Andrew! Wake up, Andrew!’

His head stopped moving and his eyes snapped open. In her white nightgown and greeney-blue tartan plaid, the rippling waves of her auburn hair loose about her face, Kate was standing beside his bed holding a crusie lamp. She leant over him to place it in one of the small niches that dotted the chilly stone wall behind him. Low though it was, the vaulted ceiling that topped it was lost in the gloomy shadows above their bright heads.

Andrew stared up at her, blinked, and registered that the smell of smoke in his nostrils had been replaced by the stink of the fish-oil that fuelled the lamp. Coming up like the blade of a pocket knife being opened, he uttered an incoherent cry and threw himself into his sister’s arms.

Five minutes later, Kate was still sitting on the edge of the narrow wooden bunk which formed her brother’s bed, holding him close and murmuring the same reassuring words into his thick, soft hair. ‘You’re safe, Andrew. You’re oot o’ the chimney and you’re never going back up one. You’re far too big a laddie to climb up chimneys now. Far too big,’ she repeated, knowing from heart-

ONE SWEET MOMENT 21

breaking experience those were the words which would soothe him the most.

She hadn't asked if it had been the usual nightmare. It always was. Four years on and her wee brother was still reliving the terror of that awful day. Sometimes he went for weeks or even months without the nightmares but sooner or later they always came back to torment him.

Unseen by him, her head over his shoulder, Kate wrinkled her nose and sniffed.

Aye, he had wet the bed again, but she would ignore that for the moment and sort it out later. He would go as red as his hair if she said anything: the same way he reacted when cruel people mocked his lolling gait. He had escaped from the chimney by bending his leg as no leg should be bent. It had never recovered from the damage, leaving it badly wasted and, as a result, Andrew was lame.

Her arms tightened around him. At times like this, the memory of what he had endured – and seemed condemned to re-live, over and over again – made her so angry she could hardly breathe. He had been whole and sound and healthy before he'd been forced into working for that brute of a chimney sweep.

Kate's head snapped up. Well-oiled though the lock and hinges of the vault's gates were, she heard the whisper of sound as one was pushed open, brushing the straw that covered the earthen floor. She knew that sound too well. A tall and jagged shadow leapt onto the wall.

The man casting it emerged from behind a stack of whisky casks, ale barrels and bottles of claret. They were stored in a wooden framework that lifted them clear of the straw-covered floor. That protected them from the constantly rising cold and damp, an unpleasant fact of life for those who lived in the honeycomb of vaults and chambers inside the South Bridge.

22 MAGGIE CRAIG

It was a bridge with no river flowing through any of its nineteen arches. At right angles to the Royal Mile, spanning the long valley running behind Edinburgh's High Street, it linked with the North Bridge to create a straight and level road, which eased the passage of foot and horse traffic between the Old Town and the New. Almost as soon as the South Bridge was completed, lofty tenements had been built against both sides of it, closing its arches forever to daylight and fresh air. Only one remained open, through which the ancient thoroughfare of the Cowgate straggled.

Michael Graham's feet crunched in the straw as he drew nearer to Kate and her brother. Small tunnels erupted as startled mice scampered to the furthest extremities of the chamber. Kate narrowed her eyes in response to the abrupt increase in illumination. Trust him to be using a lantern with a good tallow candle inside it. Normally they saved those for The Pearl Fisher and its customers.

'In the name o' God,' he growled. 'Ah doot they'll can hear that blasted bairn oot in the Cowgate!'

Feeling Andrew's body tense, Kate shifted him so his head lay on her right shoulder, shielding him from their uncle. Michael Graham had always been too free with his hands: in more ways than one.

'He's all right now,' she said hurriedly. 'It's time tae get up anyway. Aunt Chrissie's got the porridge on.' She nodded in the direction of the grilled gates. The unmistakable aroma of simmering oatmeal was wafting up the underground close that gave access to the individual vaults of the bridge. With no natural light and precious few timepieces between them, it was one way this subterranean community knew morning had arrived.

Kate and Andrew slept in the second vault in from the street, where most of the valuable alcohol was stored. Their aunt and

ONE SWEET MOMENT 23

uncle had a room across the close on the ground floor of the building that sat on the corner of the Cowgate and Niddry Street. They did most of their living in the tavern, ready at any time of day to welcome the thirsty men who might step in from the Cowgate in search of refreshment.

There were plenty of thirsty folk within the South Bridge too, even if their purses were on the lean side. The next chamber up from The Pearl Fisher's two vaults housed a tannery, and the one beyond that an illicit whisky still. This wasn't a place where the law held much sway. Beyond the whisky still, in vaults subdivided by a few filthy sheets, lived a dozen individual families, evicted from their former homes when unemployment, illness or injury had thrown the main breadwinner out of work.

In the deepest recesses of the bridge lurked a rough lodging house, occupied by a shifting population of men and women with hard and shuttered faces. How any of them scratched a living was a question other folk who lived in here thought it wiser to leave unanswered.

Andrew had to pass all of these dark spaces on his way to work, heading for the top of the bridge by a succession of rickety wooden staircases, which rose through holes in the stone floors to give access to its three different levels. Hampered as he was by his lameness, Kate knew he was often nervous as he made his slow and halting way past them. That was always worse on the mornings after he'd had one of his nightmares.

'Want me tae walk ye up tae your work today?' She whispered the words into his hair but Michael Graham heard them all the same.

'Ye'll dae nae such thing, miss,' he barked. 'Are ye rearing a milksop here?'

For a moment Kate neither moved nor spoke. Within the protection of her arms, Andrew shifted. She knew he was

24 MAGGIE CRAIG

struggling to get his courage up, forcing himself to tell her he could easily walk up through the bridge on his own. Lifting her chin from where it was resting on the top of his head, she turned and looked at their uncle.

Over-fondness for the food and drink dispensed at The Pearl Fisher had thickened his waist and coarsened his features but he remained a strong and powerful man. Much though she hated to admit it, she could see too that he retained remnants of roguish good looks. In his youth he must have resembled a handsome gypsy.

Watching his cronies and those he strove to impress respond to the ready smile and the immense affability he could adopt when he chose to, Kate had often wondered why so few of those folk seemed to register the air of menace he also carried about with him. To her it was always there. Sometimes she had the fancy she could see it, a great swirling cloak as dark as his black-hearted soul.

If it wasn't for him, Andrew's leg would be strong and undamaged. If it wasn't for him, Andrew would never have become a chimney boy in the first place. If it wasn't for him, Andrew wouldn't be tormented by these awful nightmares. If it wasn't for him— Anger broke over her like a storm-tossed wave.

'I'm walking my brother up tae his work.' She gave each word its full weight, positioning them like bricks in a wall: a defensive barrier between her and her uncle. 'It'll no' take me long.'

Her heart was pounding like a demented drum when, horribly, his hated features relaxed into a leering grin.

'Right fierce wee thing when ye put your mind to it, eh, Kate?'

She continued to hold herself erect, her face impassive. Concealing her emotions from him had become second nature.

'Ye'll be needing the key.'

'Leave it on my bed.'

ONE SWEET MOMENT 25

‘Take it from me.’ He held out his hand to her and she leant over and grabbed the big key lying in his open palm. She wasn’t quick enough to stop him from squeezing her fingers with his. The unpleasant smile curving his fleshy lips grew wider. He knew exactly what his touch did to her.

Kate wrapped both arms once more about her brother and waited for their uncle to go. When he did, leaving them with only the feeble glimmer of the crusie lamp, she listened as she always did until she heard the sound of his footsteps retreating behind the stacks of casks and barrels.

‘Kate?’ Andrew’s voice was muffled. ‘You’re squashing me, Kate.’

Relaxing her grip, she stood up, let out a shaky breath and put a smile on her face for her brother. Kate had nightmares too. Only hers happened while she was wide-awake.

CHAPTER THREE

'I'm sometimes a wee bittie feart up here,' Andrew confided as he and Kate stepped off the final wooden staircase of their ascent. It was very quiet on the topmost level of the bridge, a place of criss-crossing passageways, dusty stone turnpike stairs falling away into blackness and a succession of locked doors.

You seldom saw a living soul in this part of the bridge but those locked doors told their own tale. They secured and concealed things some folk didn't want others to know about. As her brother tucked his hand into hers, Kate gave his fingers a reassuring squeeze. 'There's nothing here that need worry you, Andrew.'

'I dinna like all the doors.'

'I ken whit ye mean,' she said, as her lantern struck needles of light from the gleaming metal padlock that secured one of the doors. 'But it's your own imagination that's scaring ye. No' anything real. Try tae think o' it that way when you're feeling nervous. And here we are.' The workshop door stood ajar, allowing her to see that Andrew's master had lit the lamps within it. 'Ye'll be fine now.'

'Aye,' her brother agreed. 'On ye go, Kate. I'm no' wanting tae make ye late at the fish market.'

'A wee hug first?' she asked, bending forward and setting the lantern on the earthen floor. 'You're no' too big a boy for that?'

'I'll never be too big a boy for that, Kate.' He bestowed one of his big, beaming smiles upon her, although after a moment or

two he issued a laughing complaint. 'You're squashing me again!'

Kate let him go and stooped again to pick up the lantern. 'I'll likely no' be able to get away tae meet ye tonight. We're aye real busy at eight o'clock.'

'I'll be fine, Kate. Honest. And ye're right. It is my ain imagination that frightens me. No' a few blootered folk I hae tae dodge on my way back doon. Even wi' my gammy leg, when they're fou I'm a hale heap quicker than them. And, aye,' he added with another smile, pre-empting the words hovering on her lips, 'I'll mind and lock up behind me.'

'You're too smart by half,' Kate said with an answering curve of the mouth. As soon as she heard him turn the key she wheeled round and hurried back down through the bridge. In theory, she could have walked along a corridor, mounted one of the turnpike stairs, gone through a close on the next floor up, stepped out onto South Bridge Street and been at the fish market on the other side of the High Street within minutes.

In practice, even supposing there weren't more locked doors barring her way, the thought didn't even occur to her. The worlds of South Bridge Street and the Cowgate were as distant from one another as the Earth was from the Moon.

The road that ran along the top of the bridge was home to the most exclusive shops in Edinburgh. Having deserted the Old Town for the New a generation before in search of air, light and space, the gentry returned for its education and to do its shopping.

The booksellers, stationers and publishers indicated the proximity of three esteemed seats of learning: the High School, George Heriot's School and Edinburgh University. Sharing the top of the South Bridge with them were hatters and glovers, shoemakers, dressmakers, drapers and the saddler's where Andrew worked.

28 MAGGIE CRAIG

Apart from a handful of adventurous shop assistants, publishers' clerks and students, few of those who worked or shopped up above would have dreamt of visiting the murky man-made canyon of the Cowgate. Fewer still would have contemplated investigating the mysterious and shadowy community that lived within the South Bridge.

Kate's own route to the fish market took her up the steep brae of Niddry Street. She kept to the lee of the buildings, picking her way round the piles of stinking rubbish that littered the causeway. They might be living in an age of change, great wonders happening all about them – or so one or two of the regulars at The Pearl Fisher were always telling her – but Edinburgh's citizens, at least here in the Old Town, continued to dispose of their household waste in the old-fashioned way.

At ten o'clock at night they opened the windows of their towering tenements and hurled it all into the street below: vegetable peelings, ashes from their fires and the contents of their chamber pots alike. Folk wending their way through the city at that hour had to hope the traditional warning cry of 'Gardyloo!' would be given in time for them to duck into the shelter of a nearby doorway. Early risers like Kate had to watch where they put their feet.

It took most of the night and well into the morning for the scavengers employed by the Town Council to clear up the accumulated nastiness that littered the narrow streets and closes. The people who lived in those gave the resulting heady mix of aromas a rueful nickname: the flowers of Edinburgh.

As she emerged onto the windswept ridge of the High Street, Kate shivered. There was a snell breeze blowing up from the Firth of Forth this fresh April morning. She pushed her two big wicker baskets into the crooks of her elbows and paused for a moment to adjust her plaid. Worn now like a shawl crosswise

ONE SWEET MOMENT 29

over her body, she pulled its ends more tightly through the thick brown leather belt that spanned her trim waist.

On the edge of South Bridge Street, she was obliged to stop to allow two early morning riders to trot past. She watched them go, the iron-shod hooves of their horses striking sparks from the few patches of clear cobbles.

She could never stand here without thinking of Andrew toiling away under the roadway, cutting and stitching leather in the saddler's basement workshop all day long. Summer and winter alike he worked by lamplight, buried alive within the innards of the South Bridge. His sister's mouth settled into a determined line. Not for much longer.

For Kate Dunbar had a plan, one that was going to get her brother and herself out of the South Bridge and away from their aunt and uncle for ever. All she needed now was the courage to put it into operation.

'Away in a dwam, lass? It's ower cauld tae stand still for ower long this morning, I'm thinking!'

Kate returned the cheeky smile the passing carter was throwing over his shoulder at her. Like most of the folk who were up and about at this hour, they knew one another by sight. 'You're no' wrong,' she called after him.

Her oatmeal-coloured skirt swirling around her calves, she zigzagged her way through the muck and rubbish and, with the ease born of youth and familiarity with her surroundings, plunged down the stinking and precipitous gully of Fleshmarket Close.

The steps brought her first into the meat market that gave the close its name. She hurried though the pens and stalls clustered below the North Bridge, glad they were empty. She didn't like to see the animals waiting to be slaughtered, especially the cows with their big sad eyes. She always thought they had sensed what

30 MAGGIE CRAIG

was about to befall them and were sorrowfully resigned to their fate.

Something warm, furry and very alive streaked across her feet. Glancing down, she saw a striped cat with a silvery mackerel clamped between its jaws. A string of curses which would have made a sailor blush was being hurled after it. Kate grinned when she saw the tabby loup up onto a high wall far above the reach of human arms and settle down to enjoy her booty.

‘If it isn’t the bonniest lassie in Edinburgh come tae buy oysters from the ugliest auld fishwife!’ Her weather-beaten face set off by the dazzling whiteness of her ruffled mutch, the woman who had called down the blood-curdling curses on the cat let out a great belly laugh. One of the fishwives up from Newhaven, she wore the same distinctive costume as every other woman selling her husband’s or son’s catch this morning: a white apron and short striped flannel skirt puffed out with several petticoats, topped by a dark shawl and that extravagant headgear.

The small linen cap that kept Kate’s exuberant auburn tresses off her face was much simpler in style, although every bit as clean as the fishwife’s, as was the capacious apron she wore tied around her waist. She liked to keep herself and her clothes as clean as possible, even if her skirts and bodices were always threadbare and well-mended before her aunt could be persuaded to put out the money for cloth to enable her niece to stitch new ones.

‘You’re no’ really grudging one wee cat one wee fish, are ye?’

‘Ach, we all hae tae eat,’ came the philosophical agreement. ‘Will your auntie be needing the usual today, dearie?’

Once the order was given and Kate’s baskets piled high with oysters and herring and haddock, the woman reached up and pinched her smooth young cheek. ‘A complexion like a bowl o’ cream,’ she pronounced. ‘Ye’ll be looking to get yourself a

husband soon, young Kate. A fine rich merchant perhaps? Or a student at the University who's coming out to be a lawyer or a physician?

'That'll be right,' Kate said, counting out coins into a palm the colour and texture of leather. She slid the draw-string purse from which they had come back into the big front pocket of her apron and batted a question back to the fishwife. 'But d'ye no' think a lawyer or a physician might be looking for a wife who's got some brains in her heid?'

'Having no book-learning doesna make you daft,' came the shrewd response. 'You'll make some young man a fine wife.'

'How about me then, Kate?' At the next stall, a lad in a rough tweed jacket and a yellow muffler took a break from stacking flat wooden boxes and batted luxuriant brown eyelashes at her. The fishwife shot him a withering glance and extracted a clay pipe from a pocket somewhere within the voluminous folds of her striped skirt. 'The lassie's no' that desperate.'

'She'd never go hungry,' he retorted. 'I'd aye keep her fed.'

'Aye, but with fish, ye great lummox. She's sick o' fish. We're all sick o' fish.' She winked at Kate. 'Ye'll find a better man than that, lassie.'

Kate took the banter with good grace. She would never marry, but they weren't to know that. Raising her head to prospect for a new customer, the fishwife offered a nugget of news to the departing one. 'Have ye heard, lassie? They say the king might be paying us a visit this summer.'

Kate raised her baskets and her eyebrows. 'Us?'

'Edinburgh,' supplied the young man behind the fish boxes. 'Seemingly he's tae mak a visit tae his northern capital.' The words were pronounced with cheerful sarcasm. 'Something for the gentry only, I'm thinking.' He flashed her a grin. 'No' for the likes o' us.'

32 MAGGIE CRAIG

‘Aye,’ Kate agreed. ‘Somehow I dinna think His Majesty will be calling in for a wee refreshment at The Pearl Fisher.’

With the sound of laughter ringing in her ears, she made her way back towards Fleshmarket Close. A few moments later, on the point of turning the corner from the High Street into Niddry Street, she heard her name being called.

‘Miss Catriona!’

That could be only one person. Kate pirouetted like a dancer on a music box, her laden baskets swinging out in response. Even as she turned, she realised she was now on the horns of an exquisite dilemma.