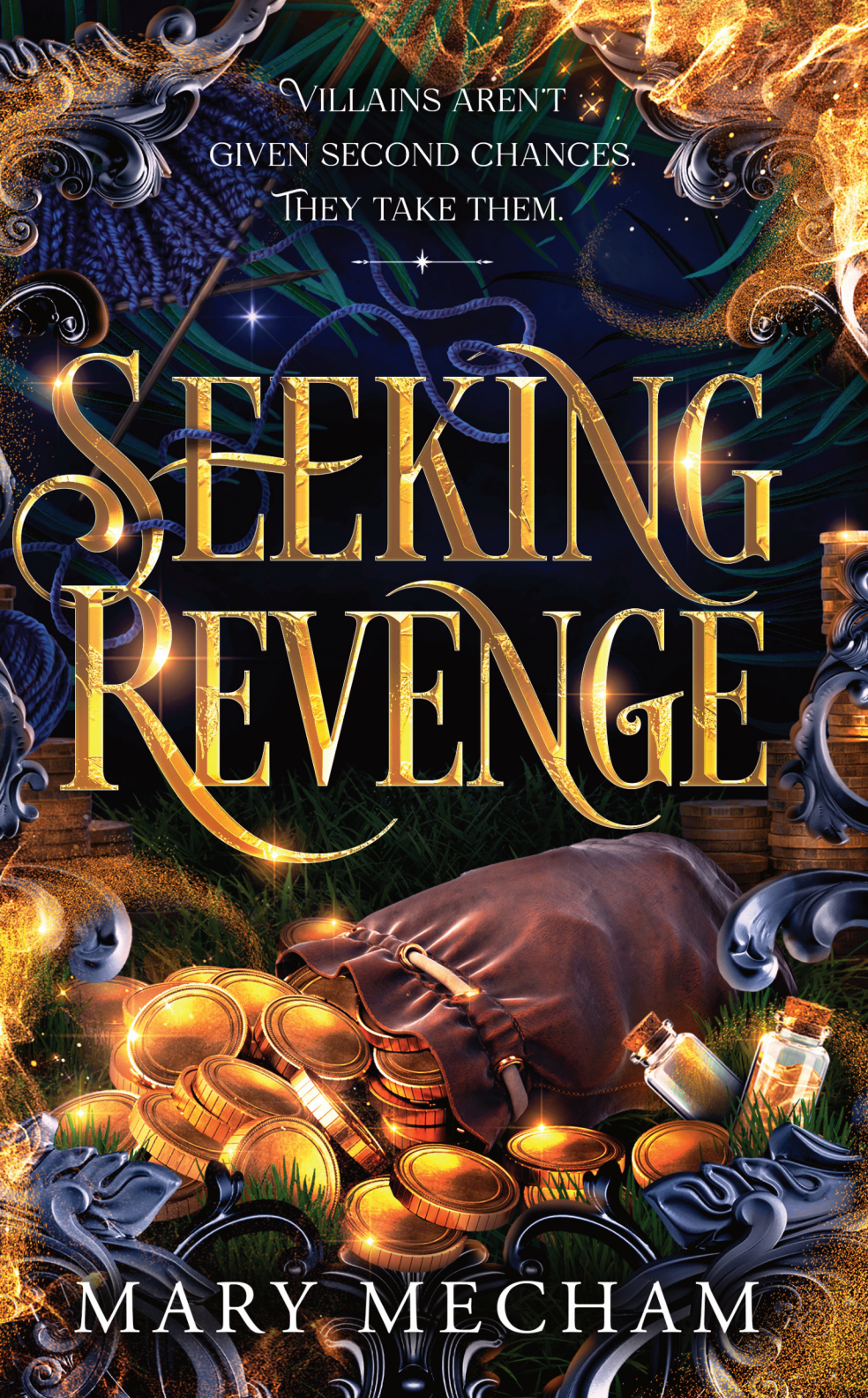




VILLAINS AREN'T
GIVEN SECOND CHANCES.
THEY TAKE THEM.

SEEKING REVENGE

MARY MECHAM



CHAPTER 1



Dark red stained the bandages wrapped around my leg as the thick, crimson liquid pooled on the ground beneath me. I sat, clutching my knee and panting for breath, beside the broken-down cart on the side of the lonely forest trail. Tears streaked my face as I looked up at the coach trundling up the road.

“Help!” I shouted, waving a ripped cloth to get the driver’s attention. “Please, help me!”

“Whoa!” The driver pulled on his reins to stop the horses. “What happened, lad?”

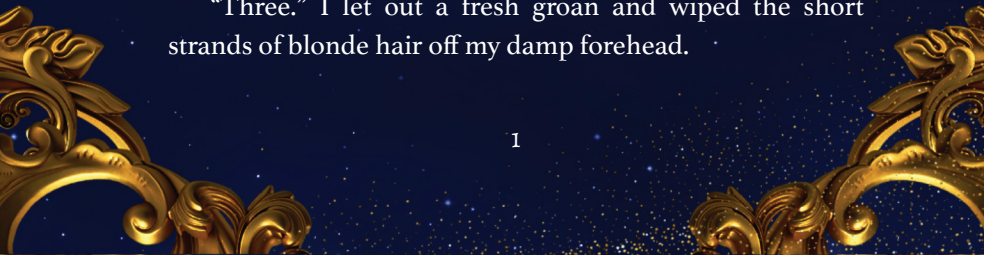
“My family was—” I let out a fresh howl of pain and increased the pressure on my leg.

“Hugh, why are we stopping?” A paunchy man stuck his head out the carriage window, then spotted me. “What’s wrong with you?”

“My family was attacked. Men in black masks...”

The man’s interest was caught. “How many men?”

“Three.” I let out a fresh groan and wiped the short strands of blonde hair off my damp forehead.



"Would you be able to recognize them or tell me which way they went?"

"Yes." My face twisted in agony. "Please, good sir, I'll do anything if you help me. They killed my family and left me to die."

"Guards! Help him into the coach!"

From the back of the coach, two men hopped off and came to assist me to my feet.

I winced and bit my lip as they pulled my arms over their shoulders, limping along while trying to avoid putting any weight on my bandaged leg.

"It's all right, son. We'll get you some help."

"Thank you," I whimpered. "I don't wanna get any blood on the seats, though. This is an awful nice carriage."



"Don't worry about that," the man inside said, patting the seat across from him. "Someone as wealthy as I am can afford good cleaners. I'm afraid I'll have to bind your hands, though. Just a precaution."

I cringed away from the guard. "Don't hurt me!"

He patted my thin shoulder. "I won't, son, I won't. This is just a precaution, that's all. Bandits are plentiful in these woods; we can't be too careful. I won't tie it tightly, and once we get to our destination, we'll make sure you're immediately freed. I'll be gentle and we won't hurt you."

"Okay," I told him with a tiny tremor in my voice, then allowed the guards to help me onto the seat and loosely bind my hands behind my back. "I saw what they did to my family and I wouldn't want that to happen to anyone else, especially someone as nice as you. I sure appreciate the help. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"There is, actually," the man seated across from me said, then leaned out the window to shout at his driver to continue on. The coach jolted into action and I let out a



small cry of pain. "What you can help me with," the man said, leaning forward without asking about my leg, "is helping me to find those three masked men. I've been looking for them."

"Are they friends of yours?" I asked, my eyes wide.

He let out a low chuckle. "The opposite, actually. They're criminals."

I tilted my head to the side. "Aren't you one as well?"

The man furrowed his brow. "What?"

I smirked. "I mean, I don't think you're a very clever criminal, if you're willing to pick up a bounty hunter off the side of the road."

Fear flickered in his eyes, but before he could draw breath to shout for his guards, I shifted my weight back onto my palms behind my back and kicked him directly to the side of the head with the boot at the end of my supposedly injured leg. He slumped, instantly unconscious.

"Never trust anyone," I hissed into his ear. "Trust gets people killed."

I shrugged out the knife I had up my sleeve, sliced through my bonds, then leaned out the window. "Excuse me! Sorry, but I just threw up! Can you stop for a minute?"

The driver slowed the horses down. I pulled the thick, soaked bandage from my leg, and when one of the guards came around to open the door, I hooked my elbow around his neck and shoved the wet bandages over his nose and mouth, taking care not to breathe in the odor.

He struggled and fell backward, thrashing for a few moments before lying still.

"Hey!" the other guard shouted, pulling a thick baton from his belt and advancing.

I pulled a loaded blow gun from my boot, aimed, and let out a puff of air. The feathered dart flew through the space



between us and stuck in the side of his neck, just barely puncturing his skin, but it was still enough.

He gagged, ripped it out, and ran at me. "You brat!" he howled, taking a swipe with the baton.

I pressed my thumb to my nose to taunt him, wagging the rest of my fingers, then ran around the back of the carriage. He followed, but within twenty seconds, he dropped to his knees and passed out.

My gaze turned to the driver, who had gotten down from his seat and was watching with wide eyes and an open mouth.

"Your turn," I told him. "Do you want to do this the hard way or the easy way?"

His eyes darted down to my perfectly functional, uninjured legs. "What...?"

"Not everything is as it seems." I pulled another dart out of my boot.

"But...but you're just a boy," the driver squeaked, backing away. "Why are you doing this?"

"It's nothing personal," I told him. "Just business."

He turned and ran, but another quick puff of air sent a dart flying into his retreating back, through his thin tunic. Amused, I carefully put my dart gun away and watched him run until he staggered and dropped about two stone throws away.

"I'll tend to you on the way out," I said with a chuckle in his direction, then patted the horses. "And I'll get you two going in just a minute here."

I rolled the guards' bodies off the road and covered them with a few branches. When I came back, the man inside was beginning to stir.

"Oh, good," I told him as I knotted rope tightly around

his hands and legs. "It's always more interesting to talk to my targets before I hand them over."

"Target? Who sent you?"

"My employer. You've had a price on your head for a while, Silas."

"How do you know my name?"

I grinned. "I know more than that. You've been involved in the illegal slave trade with Ebora for some time now, haven't you? About twenty-five years?"

His face went pale. "No."

My tongue clicked the top of my mouth. "I shouldn't be surprised you're a liar as well. It seems that your mother didn't teach you anything at all." I clapped my hands together. "Now, I have a generous proposition for you and I want you to listen very closely. I'm about to ask you a question. If you can answer correctly, I'll allow you to go free. If you can't help me, you get taken to my employer and I collect your bounty. So either way, I win, but I promise that you will want the former option."

Silas glowered.

"About fifteen years ago, a family in Ebora was captured and sold into slavery—a father, a mother, and a teenage girl named Nora. There was also a six-year-old girl who was left behind. Did you sell them? And if so, who did you sell them to?"

"That's it? That's all the information I get? That's impossible to say; I can't remember."

"So you're choosing to be handed over?"

"No, no. Just give me a minute to think."

I tossed my knife into the air and caught it. "Want me to help you remember? I would gladly do so."

Perspiration broke out on his forehead. "I remember, I remember! I picked up some families in Ebora, but I always

split them up and sold the slaves separately. The adult women I usually sold to the slavers. They have a warehouse somewhere near the docks here in Berkway."

"And the others?" I asked coldly. "What of the other family members?"

"The men I would usually sell to the work camp outside Eбора's capital."

"And the girl? She would've been about fifteen or sixteen years old."

"I...I sold all the young women to a man named Roderick Vane, but I don't know what he did with them after that." He rubbed his sweaty cheek against his shoulder. "I swear I'm telling the truth."



I looked at him and saw the face of a coward. Criminals were all the same. They would turn their best friend over if it meant saving their own skin. My lip curled in disgust.

"Will you let me go?" he whimpered. "You promised."

I casually retrieved the stained bandage I'd had on my leg when they picked me up. "Did you know that siren's blood will knock a grown man unconscious within seconds when smelled? Siren voices work on our ears, but their blood works just as effectively. Inhaling this will send a person into dreamland for hours."

"You promised," he reminded me in a small, child-like voice. "I told you the truth."

I leaned in close. "And I believe you. But I'm a criminal, just like you. And criminals can never be trusted."

With that, I shoved the cloth against his nose. After holding his breath and trying to resist for a few moments, he slumped back to the floor of the coach.

I placed the cloth right under his nose where he lay.

"The funny thing about that six-year-old girl who got



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left behind,” I hissed at Silas’s immobile body, “is that she grew up and vowed revenge.”



