

Once again, an interruption saved Josiah from his uncertainty. Hurried footsteps crunched on the walkway in front of the house, and someone pounded on the door with great urgency. He heard Grumble pass from the kitchen through the length of the opposite parlor to the door. Quick words were exchanged, then the servant knocked on the parlor door and entered, followed by a tall, skinny boy of about sixteen who looked ragged and near to overcome with exertion.

“Sir.” The boy paused for breath.

“He says he has urgent news of Miss Caroline,” Grumble broke in.

“I was with Miss Caroline last night.”

“What?” The word fairly exploded out of Carter’s mouth.

“We, Miss Caroline and I, sneaked into the Falls Inn last night, to see the Greek treasures.”

Edwina stirred excitedly on the bench.

“What?” Carter repeated with only a little less fire in his voice.

“And something happened... I don’t know what. I woke up and everyone was gone. And...”

“What, boy?”

“Other people... men... are missing. They say... they say...” The boy looked from one face to another in the room, as if unable to find anyone to whom he could impart his story.

“Come on, out with it!” Carter moved forward, apparently ready to throttle the tongue-tied lad.

“They say it were pirates. They say Caroline was taken by pirates!”

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By

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LANGLEY'S CHOICE

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the volunteers at Maryland Romance Writers. Without the shared support,

information and all those writing challenges, this book would be only a disjointed collection of pages moldering in the bottom of a file drawer.

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Most of all, I have to thank my family—Jim, Trent and Meg—for loving me, supporting me and not complaining when forced to live on a steady diet of cold cereal, sandwiches and leftover fishsticks.

Chapter One

Something smelled terrible.

The stench forced Caroline awake, though she wished it hadn't. Her head felt like it was spinning and growing steadily larger. And pounding—as though an army of servants was grinding with mortar and pestle inside her head.

When she pried her eyelids apart she could see nothing but inky blackness. Where was she? Was the room really moving?

Caroline tried to sit up, but found the sickness was not confined to her head alone. Bile rose in her throat and threatened to choke her, so she lay still again, leaving just the dizzy headache to contend with. She turned her head slowly and tried to see.

No smell on earth could be this horrid; she must be in hell. This suspicion was confirmed by the sudden realization that tiny mites were tracing paths up her arms, down her legs and even into her hair. Caroline pushed herself up, fighting off waves of nausea as she scratched at her skin.

Why was the floor moving? Was it the rum Jimmy had insisted she drink to fit in with the men at the Falls Inn? Was she still there, thrown into the cellar of that wretched place as a common drunkard?

She shuddered. How would she get back to Hill Crest before anyone noticed she was missing? Was Jimmy here, too?

Suddenly, she heard a scraping noise from above, and a small patch of light streamed in through an opening in the ceiling. A large man descended a ladder Caroline had not noticed earlier. Light framed his dark, bearded face like a halo. The voice accompanying the face was less than angelic, however.

"Well, one of you lot are awake at last. Too strong he made it," the man grumbled to no one in particular. "Waste of good rum. You there, boy, go help the cook. Time to earn your keep."

Caroline looked around hopefully. The boy he was talking to must be Jimmy. But the eyes staring out over the beard were fixed directly on her. As she looked down to avoid those eyes, she saw she was still wearing the boy's costume she had borrowed from Jimmy for their adventure at the inn.

Suddenly, it all started to make sense. The light coming through the square hole in the ceiling was sunlight. A background noise, of which she had only been dimly aware, now sounded like the splashing of water against wood. She was on a boat. And whoever had brought her here thought she was a boy.

This was unacceptable!

Caroline did the only thing a lady could do under the circumstances. She fainted.

At least, she intended to faint. Her sickened body collapsed back onto the deck willingly enough, and she closed her eyes in anticipation of peaceful oblivion. But she was uncomfortably aware that she remained very much awake. The smells of the small room assaulted her nose again, and she heard the man with the dreadful eyes huff in disgust as he poked at a few of the men sprawled on the floor around her. Questions rose in her mind with a dizzying hysteria. Caroline decided she really should be able to faint this time.

Josiah Throckmorton wiped the sweat from his eyes and lifted the hat that seemed to sink lower and lower on his head with each step. He stopped walking. Pushing the wet strands of hair as far from his face as he could, he raised his eyes to the sky. A dull, hot light confirmed what the motionless air already told him: no rain today.

He replaced the soggy hat on his head and continued up the path from the river landing, marveling that water could condense on every inch of his heated flesh, that steam could hang in the very air and yet the skies could refuse rain to quench the thirst of the living things below.

Even the river reflected this perversity. When Ellis had tied the small skiff to the dock, he had been forced to reach up so far he almost tumbled out of the boat. The man seemed to know no more about boats than Josiah did—less, even, since Josiah had at least learned *wherenot* to stand in a small river craft. And yet Ellis had professed to a lifelong expertise with boats. Either the man was a liar simply trying to avoid his work in the fields or an exceedingly slow learner.

The path Josiah trod up from the dock now veered into even more heavily wooded terrain. Shade from the trees brought relief to eyes sore from squinting through the bright haze, but it did not seem to cool the air at all. Josiah looked around almost suspiciously; by all rights, there should be a cool breeze in the woods. Where was it?

He slapped a young branch aside with disgust. No breeze, no rain. He needed water for his animals and for his house, but that could be brought from the river, if necessary. Water for the fields was a much greater concern. Tobacco did not need an excessive amount of rain, but it needed some. They had not had any for weeks.

He tried hard not to think about the money he had borrowed to build a separate kitchen for Hanset House (and how he hoped to soon change that lowly descriptive to a more dignified “manor” or “estate.”) His prospects had looked bright and promising in the spring, when all thoughts centered on the anticipated end of “Queen Anne’s War,” as they called it here. Peace would re-open the continental tobacco market and bring stability and prosperity back to this tobacco-dependent society.

Josiah had put aside all thoughts of practicing law, which he had found objectionable enough in London and feared to find even more so in the unruly and inconvenient provincial courts of the colony. But if he could not bring in a good crop this first year he would need to ply his legal services at the next assizes to

keep his debts in check. An unpleasant prospect, to say the least.

He kicked at a stone in the path and noticed, with some dismay, that it had left a small scratch in his best pair of shoes.

If he did not muse on the pitiful weather or the disastrous effect it might soon have on his affairs, to what else could he turn his mind? He did not care to dwell on the upcoming interview at Hill Crest.

Josiah scrambled over a newly fallen tree trunk blocking his way, taking care not to dirty his waistcoat or snag the new "French" lace edging his shirtsleeves. The lace was probably a none-too-accurate counterfeit made by a woman in Dorset; but he had paid as much for the order as if it had been genuine, and it was rare and valuable enough even as a copy.

Just as he touched safely to the ground, an errant piece of bark made a vicious grab at his best silk stockings and succeeded in creating a large, unsightly ladder down his left leg. He cursed softly. He should have come by horse rather than by the river. The trip by land was longer, of course, but well-worth the effort if it kept his clothing intact.

This would be only his third visit to Hill Crest since John Carter had accepted the proposal of marriage offered to his daughter Caroline. Josiah earnestly dreaded the prospect of spending another hour in the crowded family parlor surrounded by his future family-in-law. The sisters—there were far too many sisters—would giggle and joke among themselves at his expense. He had been certain of such ridicule before; but now that he was to appear before them in ruined stockings and hair sagging with perspiration, his certainty grew into an overpowering gloom.

Even Caroline might join in her sisters' untoward mirth; she did not always show the respect he had hoped for from his bride-to-be. Her attitude would improve after the marriage, he was sure.

For the hundredth time, he replayed the scene of the engagement in his mind.

"Would you, Miss Carter, do me the honor of taking my hand in holy matrimony and joining me as mistress of Hanset House?"

He had uttered the words with rare eloquence, on bended knee, his hands clasped in the ancient posture of all true lovers. Caroline smiled all the while with a radiance so overpowering he had to look away. She herself looked away several times, covered her mouth with her hands, and at one point even appeared to almost choke with emotion.

"I am flattered, Mr. Throckmorton, at your generous proposal, and I accept...only, I ask that you give me some time first. I wish to give my preparations the proper attention."

"Certainly, Miss Carter, I would be only too pleased to oblige you in any way. Shall we say...October?"

"Surely, sir, you would not want to interrupt the work of your plantation at such a time."

Ah, she was so considerate!

"Perhaps December, then?"

“Mr. Throckmorton, would you wish to be married in a sea of cold mud?”

“I see. We shall have to wait until . . . April?”

“Or May. Much as I am grieved to say it.”

Oh, how truly selfless she was, putting the needs of his business and the comfort of her wedding guests ahead of her own happiness. And her desire to delay the wedding to give her preparations proper attention—surely that must be a sign of her esteem.

If only she would refrain from giggling with her sisters.

Josiah swallowed hard and tried to clear his throat. He had to admit that the prospect of facing a parlor full of giggling girls did not trouble him as much as the anticipation of the few awkward words he would have to exchange with Charles Carter, Caroline’s elder brother.

The actual words would be of no real consequence; at each meeting, Charles met him with a searching gaze that thoroughly unnerved Josiah, though he was his superior both in years and in social rank. Charles always seemed to be looking for something in him, and Josiah knew neither what it was nor if he had it to find. More than anything else, it troubled him he could be so distressed by this unspoken questioning. Why should it matter what this boy thought of him?

After all, John Carter was willing to trust his eldest daughter to him and that was all that really mattered. Yes, Josiah could face this interview, and the many that would follow before the marriage in the spring, because the patriarch of one of the most important families in the region esteemed him for a son-in-law. True, the family was of humble origin. But they had been in Maryland for nearly sixty years and now had substantial holdings. Their estate was one of the finest in the colony.

In Maryland, it seemed, money was as important as family. Even more so, perhaps. At home, in England, it had always been enough simply to be a Throckmorton. Here, Josiah’s standing depended on the precarious financial status of his plantation.

As he looked down to step around a twist of branches in the path, he admired the new etched buttons on his waistcoat and smiled. He would rise above this difficulty. The Throckmorton family had held landed estates for centuries. And with his sister’s new connections. . . well, Charles Carter certainly could not look down his nose at him.

Josiah stood a little bit taller after this last reflection, causing a twig to snap sharply against his hat. As he emerged from the woods near the top of the hill, he took a deep breath before making his final approach to the house.

Freshly painted and recently enlarged, the manor house at Hill Crest plantation remained a thoroughly unimpressive structure to Josiah’s eyes. In England, a yeoman farmer might have been proud of such a house, but a great landed family would scorn to dwell in such a place. Yet the Carter house, with but four rooms on the ground floor, an untold number of irregular chambers upstairs and a handful of unpainted outbuildings scattered randomly about the yard, was one of the finest Josiah had seen in Maryland. Disgraceful really. His family would be horrified to learn of the impoverished colonial lifestyle to which he had subjected himself.

Uneven footsteps responded to his knock, and soon a short male servant opened the door.

“Good day,” Josiah began without much thought. “I have come to call on Mr. Carter.”

Instead of opening the door, the servant glanced backward nervously.

“If it is inconvenient. . .” Josiah’s voice trailed off. The door remained essentially closed, an unusual practice in this informal society.

The servant then backed up, opening the door and motioning him inside. John Carter stepped forward to greet his guest with a strange expression on his face. A smile appeared, too late to look convincing, but it was enough to tell Josiah he had better not inquire too closely into his host’s affairs. If Carter wanted to pretend everything was pleasant, it was his guest’s duty to play along.

“Welcome, Mr. Throckmorton. What an effort, to visit in this heat.” After shaking hands, Carter gestured to a leather chair next to an open window. “Please take a seat. I’ll send for some refreshments.”

He looked in vain for the servant, who had somehow already managed to disappear. With a frown, he reached over to a small table, picked up a palm-sized brass bell and rang with three sharp jerks of his wrist. The sound reverberated surprisingly sharp and loud in the still air, making Josiah flinch ever so slightly. Carter then turned back to address his guest.

“Did you come down alone today?”

“No, I. . .” Josiah paused as the chair cracked rudely under his sudden graceless assault. He really needed to pay more attention to his manners, especially in company. These days he seemed to move about with all the elegance of a stable hand. An adolescent stable hand. With rickets and clubfeet.

His reflections on the oafish nature of his physical being halted abruptly as he realized he had not finished his reply to Carter’s question.

“I left my servant down at your Landing with the boat. I’ve heard too many stories about pirates taking anything that comes within their grasp.”

John Carter laughed. “Well, sir, you’ve no need to fear for pirates in these waters. No pirate would venture this far north up the bay.”

“I thought it best to take no risks. . .” Josiah finished lamely. Carter was laughing at him again, ridiculing him as a newcomer unfamiliar with the practicalities of the geography. “I suppose you’re right. We are nearly two hundred miles from the mouth of the Chesapeake. The risk of being trapped by Her Majesty’s patrols would be too great.”

He sighed with this admission but felt he had regained some ground by demonstrating a familiarity with their position with respect to the mouth of the bay. He looked at Carter, expecting him to proffer another nugget of conversation, but the older man suddenly seemed half-lost in a daze. His host came to himself quickly, though, when he saw Josiah pull unceremoniously at the silk cravat around his neck.

“It is hot, indeed, sir.” He rang the sharp little bell again. “Confound these people. Their service grows more lax by the day. Always dreaming of their own plantations, I dare say. I’ve a year left in Grimble and his wife, and I’m coming to think I may get little of it.” Carter waited as the door opened and the eager

servant hobbled over. "I'm considering moving some of my best slaves into the house and returning the servants into the fields. I would advise you to do the same. The indenture is worth nothing near the end of its term here in the house, where the work is easy. But if they could be set to clearing a field—ah, Grimble, there you are."

He looked up as if he had just noticed the servant's appearance. "Cider, and quickly if it's not too much trouble. Take the chilled crocks from the spring."

Looking suddenly very glum, the ungainly Grimble hurried out of the room.

Josiah had tried to not to register shock at his host's treatment of the servant but realized he must not have succeeded when he saw his future father-in-law don the look of pedantic authority he so often assumed when sharing his wisdom on the subject of Life In Maryland.

"You must, sir, put these people in their place to get your money out of them." Carter punched the air with two fingers to emphasize his point. "It is the only way. Your investment only lasts for the term of the indenture. You give them clothes, food and shelter for years, and then suddenly, when their term expires, without so much as a 'by your leave,' they're demanding their freedom dues and threatening to sue if you don't release the corn on the spot."

Josiah was well aware of the economic expediencies of an indentured labor force and had no intention of associating with servants as social equals. But to equate them with Negro slaves? He felt incapable of such an insult. His servants would be free one day and soon. They might address him in the street. He could not act as though they were no better than barbarians from Africa.

He noticed his host grinning at him again and realized that one large strand of hair, dampened with sweat, had uncurled onto his forehead. He stared at it briefly with cross-eyed disgust before brushing it back with a quick snort.

"I fear I shall never become used to this weather. It has been so confoundedly hot."

"Sir, it's not the heat, it is the humidity in the air that troubles you. And you will become seasoned to it after a time. This is your first summer here, is it not?"

"It is. Though I confess it seems I have lived here much longer."

"Your family, too, must feel the absence most keenly. You've heard from them in the recent post from England, no doubt. I trust they are all well?"

Grimble entered and attempted to serve two mugs of cider with inconspicuous efficiency, but the noise he made in the process made him even more obtrusive than usual. Carter gave him a sour look as he departed, then smiled and continued his inquiries with deliberate casualness.

"Your sister, Lady Davenport, is all settled into her new home?"

So, Carter was giving full consideration to this new connection!

"Yes." Josiah tried to match his host's casual tone. "Although she believes her husband may be named to a post in France, and she fears she must prepare to be uprooted at any moment."

"Yes, of course, with the treaty, relations will be reopened all over Europe."

“And trade opened as well. Which is good news for us all.” Josiah sipped his cool drink and, for the first time, felt himself relax just a little. Carter seemed to fully appreciate Josiah’s important new brother-in-law. Frankly, he was best appreciated from a distance such as this—Josiah enjoyed the connection now that it stretched over an entire ocean. Time spent in the company of his sister had always been odious enough; the addition of Sir James made it doubly so.

With reluctance, he set down his mug and sat up stiffly. It now seemed time to address the purpose of his call.

“And how is your family on this warm summer morning?” he asked, willing himself to smile pleasantly.

The smile was not returned by his host. Carter sat back in his chair. “All well, quite well, with the exception of Caroline.” He paused, as if searching for something. “It seems she is... indisposed this morning. I’m afraid we shall have none of her company today.”

“Oh, I am sorry to hear it,” Josiah responded, although he felt strangely relieved. He picked up his cider and took a great draught. A tremendous weight seemed to have been lifted from his shoulders.

“Mrs. Carter and my other daughters would be most pleased to see you, I’m sure. Charles is out with the overseer discussing the next clearing. With the ground so dry, there’s little enough weeding for our people, and we’d best keep them busy.”

Again, Carter was giving instruction on the topic of servants and slaves. However little Josiah knew about running a tobacco plantation, he certainly knew plenty about servants. But “Yes, of course” was all he could say with any degree of politeness.

He gave a small sigh as Carter stood and gestured toward the more intimate family parlor.

“Shall we join the ladies?”

The giggling sisters. But, to Josiah’s surprise, the prospect did not set him on edge as it had earlier. He even looked forward to seeing the youngest, a girl of about nine who was always trying to act as if she were wise in the ways of the world, and succeeded in unwittingly embarrassing herself with entertaining frequency.

No Charles, he thought, to explain his relief. Or was he instead relieved he would not have to meet with Miss Carter this morning? He pushed that disturbing thought out of his head as the door closed behind them.

Chapter Two

Edward Talbot stood at the rail of his sloop, staring out toward the horizon of distant trees lining the shores of the Chesapeake Bay.

None of them knew. Or, if they did, no one objected. All of his men had returned to the *Osprey* after the stop in Elkridge Landing. So, if they had figured out they could be counted pirates for taking that last cargo after the treaty had been signed, none of them cared enough to desert. And once the new recruits from the tavern were trained he would have a full crew once more.

But what was he going to do with them?

Edward began to pace on a section of the deck, taking only a few steps before the confines of the small space forced him to turn about.

Opportunities for privateers in peacetime were virtually nonexistent. Although the *Osprey* had to be one of the fastest vessels on the coast of the Americas, its room for cargo was limited. If he chose to take his sloop into some private trading ventures beyond the royal customs agents, he would have to choose his cargo carefully to make any money at all. And the very idea was distasteful. He couldn't bear to turn his *Osprey*, his bird of prey, into a glorified merchant brig.

Without even closing his eyes, he envisioned the gunports sliding open in unison and the cannons pointing out like a row of black iron teeth, grinning at their helpless victim. No one ever expected the *Osprey* to carry the firepower of a large ship. She was designed to chase, attack and intimidate. If he couldn't chase and attack enemy traders, he would have to chase and attack someone else.

Privateers were sometimes authorized to capture pirates in the Caribbean and along the Atlantic coast. In this inconvenient time of peace, pirate-hunting suddenly seemed his only viable option.

He would continue south to one of the islands of the West Indies, or perhaps one of the closer southern colonies, and petition the governor for a letter of marque to capture pirates.

Edward stopped pacing and straightened, enjoying the stretch in his shoulders and the back of his neck. The sea air felt clean and fresh, so unlike the close, heavy atmosphere in the river at the head of the bay. He was always surprised to discover how keenly he enjoyed returning to sea. Gradually, though, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that two seamen were following his movements quite closely. How long had they watched him pace? He wheeled around, took two quick strides, and glared into their faces.

“Have you no duties to attend to?” he roared, gleaning every possible advantage from his only slightly superior height.

Probably not was the answer that immediately sprang into his mind. Discipline had grown weak during the drawn-out time of illness and refitting the ship. These two were gunners mates; and with no action at hand, they probably had not been given sufficient standing orders at sea. This would explain the unhappy condition of the deck.

He narrowed his eyes. Smithson and Quigley. Both experienced seamen, they could have looked around and seen fifty tasks that needed attending. Without orders, though, they chose to play a waiting game. Not a good sign.

Edward pointed to the deck. “I want it white as the queen’s bottom,” he ordered. “Every day. And if it’s not, the cat will be waiting.” He smiled, with the merest gesture toward the cat-o-nine tails hanging from its customary perch.

One of the ship’s boys met him as he headed toward his cabin. “Mr. Hardey sends his respects, sir, and asks if you would be so good as to meet him in the hold to review the new men.”

Accustomed as he was to the often unpleasant smells aboard ship, Edward couldn’t help but wrinkle his nose as he climbed down into the hold. His first mate, Hardey, had anticipated this reaction; already he had a seaman at work with a bucket of water in the far corner.

“On your feet,” Hardey barked when he caught sight of his captain.

No one moved. A couple looked up in bleary-eyed confusion, and the first officer answered their mute questions with a swift kick.

“Stand at attention for Captain Talbot.”

One man tried to stand up then lurched forward as the vessel rolled slightly. Another at the back started to inch upward, clinging desperately to the bulkhead. Hardey swore at them under his breath, threw an apologetic glance to Talbot and reached down to haul up the man nearest him.

“You’ll be on your feet and at attention for your captain, so you will, or you’ll all be flogged!” Hardey loosed his grip on the man with such force the poor fellow flew backwards. The crumpled human missile smashed into his unfortunate companions just as two more were attempting to stand.

Caroline woke with a sharp pain in her head and a boot in front of her face. Unaccustomed to viewing footwear at such close range, she stared at the scarred leather, trying to figure out what it was. The mysterious object moved away a few inches then started abruptly back toward her face as its occupant scrambled to rise. Caroline rolled quickly away and pushed up on one elbow. Ugh, the stench was unbearable. She had to get out.

There was a dull pain in her stomach, and her head swam a little when she stood up. In just a short moment, though, her vision cleared, and she found she could walk. She stepped gingerly over a man in funny-looking homespun clothes. He looked vaguely familiar, but she would ask later. Now she needed air.

“Excuse me.” She waited impatiently for a gentleman blocking the ladder to step aside so she could climb out.

“Damn your impudence, boy!”

Caroline heard the words from behind, and very loud, too, but she did not turn to see who was being addressed in such a rough manner. She could see the sunshine above and felt the first shimmers of cooler air sweep her face.

Suddenly, her arm was jerked backwards and the rest of her body followed awkwardly, landing in a heap below the towering form of a rough and very angry-looking seaman. It was the one who had called her “boy” earlier. Surprise, for a moment, kept her quiet.

“Stand in the presence of your captain!” the man roared, gesturing toward the gentleman at the ladder.

She stood up, but with no intention of deference. “Keep your hands to yourself, sir, or I will have the law on you.” She had practiced this speech at home before sneaking out to the tavern, intending to use it as a last resort if she should find herself in trouble. At home, her voice had sounded mature and commanding.

Hardey laughed. “Hear him squeak! The captain is the law here, little mouse, and you’d best pay proper respect or the cat will find you!”

Having apparently put himself in a better humor with his own joke, the first mate turned to see who was next to be bullied into shape. But Caroline was not done with him yet.

Or perhaps she was. She knew not what to say and found, when she looked around the room, that no one expected her to say anything. All the men, including the gentleman at the foot of the ladder, watched the rough seaman as he poked and prodded at a poor laborer, trying to get him to stand at attention properly. Some laughed, but not at her. Here she was, standing disheveled in this ridiculous boy’s costume, and no one paid any mind. Why? Did they really believe she was a boy and that it was normal for her to be here?

It was amazing. They thought she was a boy destined for ship’s work. She, an accomplished lady of one of the first families of Maryland. She, who was soon to be married and mistress of her own plantation. They thought she would make a good sailor!

As Caroline gradually recovered from her incredulity, she almost wanted to laugh at the cleverness of her deception. Her plan had worked! They thought she was a boy! But her sense of accomplishment quickly turned sour. How insulting. They thought she was a boy. She looked around vaguely for something in which she might view her reflection. She must look just awful. It was probably better they thought her a boy, because she would make a rather wretched lady in this guise.

Indignation faded into fear. What would they do if they found out she was a woman?

Caroline shivered, despite the heat. Her prepared speech, and the ability to call out a name well known in the county, would not do much to protect her here. She was on a ship, and it was moving. Ships, even small ones, could not travel upriver from Elkridge Landing. So, they were sailing away from her home. How far had they already come?

At once Caroline felt very small and very alone. Her eyes stung as she blinked back sudden tears.

“Welcome aboard the *Osprey*, men.”

Caroline turned her head slightly to see the gentleman who had blocked her way earlier take several quick strides from the ladder to the center of the dank room.

“I am Captain Edward Talbot and this is my first officer, Jonathan Hardey.” The captain gestured in sweeping motions with fine, almost delicate hands. He finished with a disarming smile. “Your colonial governments need my services, and I need your service. Together, we will stem the plague that has ravaged the commerce of these waters, putting the health and wealth of every dweller of the colonies in jeopardy. The *Osprey* is a hunting vessel, and we will teach you all to be hunters.”

The pause for effect succeeded in inciting curiosity in Hardey, at least, as to where they were headed. He had wondered about Talbot’s intentions. The man was no merchant, and if he had intended to put the *Osprey* in trade, surely they would have taken a cargo of lumber at Elkridge Landing. Was his captain planning to “serve” the government by smuggling?

“We will be hunting pirates,” Edward continued in answer to his first mate’s unspoken question. “Hardey, assign these men to their posts. And give orders to begin drilling in a quarter of an hour.”

Chapter Three

Josiah noticed a dull thumping sound as they approached the door to the family parlor, and the source of the noise became apparent as he followed John Carter into the room. One of the sisters, Edwina perhaps, was kicking her heel dully against the scratched front leg of the bench on which she sat, absently

twisting a loose strand of dark hair around her finger. A neglected sampler threatened to tumble from her lap to the floor with every kick.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, Mr. Throckmorton,” announced Mrs. Carter with elaborate formality. “Girls!”

This was directed at her daughters with a motion indicating they were to stand in the presence of their guest. Edwina was the last one to her feet.

“How d’ye do, Mr. Throckmorton?” A different girl, this one tall with red-and-gold curls, held out her hand and giggled. Josiah tried to remember her name? Johanna? Georgetta?

A smaller girl with straight red hair advanced slowly toward him with a show of formality that managed to exceed that of her mother. “Good day, Mr. Throckmorton. It is a pleasure of unequaled...magnifitide to have you visit us this day.”

Josiah forced himself to keep a straight face as he took her hand. This was Johanna, Caroline’s youngest sister. “The pleasure is all mine,” he said with as much grace as he could muster. He found he had to assume a wooden expression to keep from laughing in the poor girl’s face.

He next turned to Edwina. She approached but kept her gaze directed at something over his left shoulder.

“Good day, sir,” she mumbled as she pulled her hand away from his.

Edwina apparently wasn’t in a giggling mood today, so this would go easier, Josiah thought. With Caroline indisposed and Edwina sulking, the other two would have to twitter on their own.

As they took seats in the small parlor, Josiah noticed the youngest sister was anxious to ask a question but knew her mother or father must begin the conversation. Her impatience made her bounce a little in her seat.

“Mr. Throckmorton tells me he has had a letter from his sister, come in with the *Canary*,” Carter began.

“We were fortunate enough to receive correspondence from my family in London as well,” Mrs. Carter neatly interrupted, apparently anxious not to be outdone by her future son-in-law.

Conversation then languished as Josiah stared at the small portrait of Carter’s father hanging over the mantel. The portrait was crude, but even so, the painter had captured a determination in his subject’s eyes Josiah found fascinating. And puzzling. This man in the portrait had doubled the size of the Carter plantation, and the added income from his efforts had enabled his son to enlarge the house to its four-room layout. He had driven himself hard, and yet left it for his son to reap the reward. Why?

It was his turn to say something.

“Um, yes.” What had they asked him? Had they asked him anything? What were they talking about?

“Your sister, then, is well?” Mrs. Carter’s curiosity saved him from his carelessness in attention. He had expected questions about his sister.

“Eleanor—Lady Davenport is quite well, thank you. She expects her husband to be assigned to a post

on the Continent now that the war has ended. As I told Mr. Carter.”

“I do hope she is finding married life agreeable, if it is not forward of me to say so.” Mrs. Carter smiled a little too broadly.

“Um, yes, most agreeable, madam.” Josiah felt heat rise to his cheeks. References to marriage made him uncomfortable, but they seemed inescapable in this close colonial society.

The tall girl with the handsome face and red hair suddenly burst out with a loud giggle and held her needlework up to her face. Her mother frowned. Josiah tried again to remember her name... Alfreda? It was some boy's name with an “a” at the end, of that much he was certain. All the daughters after Caroline had been given boys' names, as if that would ensure the presence of a male heir should something happen to Charles.

Georgiana, that was it!

“Does she send news of your brother?” Mrs. Carter asked, drawing Josiah's attention back to the conversation.

“A little, madam. He, like the planters here, is looking forward to a reopening of the markets on the Continent.”

Georgiana nudged Edwina, who had stopped poking listlessly at her sampler and now stared out the window at a large tree full of apples. She turned in response to a few whispered words from her sister and snorted with laughter. Josiah sighed. So, he wasn't to be spared their ridicule on this visit, either.

Mrs. Carter turned a stern eye on her indecorous daughters; and Georgiana, apparently tickled beyond the power of speech, mutely pointed at something near Josiah's head. He looked up and turned around, seeing nothing but the rough plaster ceiling and walls. Had she been pointing to his head? He touched the back and felt a leaf crunch under his fingertips. How long had he worn that in his hair? Good God—it must have wagged like the tail of a dog every time he'd turned his head!

He looked at Johanna. She, at least, would be too anxious of any news from England to giggle at him.

The girl saw she finally had his attention and, with a quick glance at her mother, began her inquiries. “Have you an order in from London, Mr. Throckmorton?”

Josiah assumed the Carter family had placed an order with their London agent that was far greater than his was likely to be, with his smaller household.

“Yes, Miss Johanna, and all satisfactory.” He didn't want to admit in front of his future in-laws that he believed his London agent had cheated him horribly, sending inferior goods and charging outrageous prices. The waistcoat he received had been the wrong color and sewn for a man twice his girth. And the French lace—well, though probably not French—had looked fine enough, but he received only half the quantity he had ordered. And now some of that was already ruined. He glanced at his sleeve ruefully.

“Well, I must tell you that our order was most disunsatisfactory.”

Mrs. Carter gave her youngest daughter a sharp look but said nothing.

“My new gown is far too short and not fashionable in the least,” the girl continued. “Georgiana's gown is

cut too low, Mama says, and is simply scandalitious! Georgiana says she doesn't mind, though, and believes it to be the new fashion and that we simply don't know here in Maryland. Have you seen the new fashions? I'm most anxious to see what the ladies in London are wearing this season."

Her questioning at an end, Johanna sat back and looked hopefully at Josiah. However, with no female members in his household save for his servants and slaves, he could no more impart news of ladies' fashion from London than he could give news from the northern colonies.

"I'm sorry, Miss Johanna, I took no ladies' gowns with my last order."

"Were there any ladies on board the *Canary*?" Johanna was not giving up.

"Did you see the ship land?" Edwina asked, taking an interest in the conversation for the first time.

"I arrived shortly afterward. To inspect my order." In truth, he had grown a little bored and had welcomed the news of the ship's arrival as an excuse to leave the cramped house and monotonous work of his plantation.

"Is the *Canary* a large ship?" the girl continued rapidly. "Does she carry any cannon? Are there any monkeys?"

Josiah was not prepared for the barrage of questions, and he fairly gaped, not knowing which to answer first. In a moment, he forgot them all. "I'm sorry?"

"Monkeys," she repeated, looking into his face for the first time. "Did you see any monkeys on board?"

"Last year the girls saw the captain of a ship at the Landing walking around with a monkey on his shoulder. Since then, they have assumed monkeys are to be found on most ships, at least those of any importance." Carter smiled genuinely for the first time that day.

"Alas, no, Miss Edwina, I saw no monkeys." Her crestfallen face gave Josiah a sudden inspiration. "But, of course, I did not go below deck, so..."

"So, there may be one you have not seen. May we go down to the Landing this afternoon, Father, may we please?"

"Oh, yes, Father, may we?" Georgiana joined in, pausing a moment before chortling in anticipation.

"Further news from London would, I think, be forthcoming from such a venture," Johanna chimed in, carefully weighing each word.

John Carter had anticipated these requests from the moment he heard of the ship's landing yesterday. He was frankly surprised it had taken the girls this long to ask. They had been to see another ship only two days' earlier, so that may have sated their curiosity somewhat. That vessel, however, had disappointed them—a small, undistinguished sloop that had been beating about in colonial waters and had no news or goods from England. There was some story about treasures from the Greek islands, though, which had kept the girls gossiping with the servants all afternoon.

But what should he do? He had planned to take the family out to the Landing, but with Caroline missing,

he did not know how to proceed. He looked at the imploring faces of his three younger daughters. They all believed Caroline to be ill and sleeping in her small, closet-like bedchamber upstairs. Her mother, too, believed the story; Carter had persuaded her that Caroline suffered an ailment spread by bad air and that he had survived the same illness as a child and was the only one suited to care for her. His wife's fear of the tropical diseases of this land, still alien to her after more than a quarter of a century, would keep her away from Caroline's room for a little while longer, at least.

Should he tell them? He could not until Throckmorton took his leave. Should they make the outing? Well, he could at least say "yes" until Throckmorton was gone. Then he would decide whether to tell the rest of the family that Caroline was not in her bedchamber this morning and had not been seen by any of the servants since last night.

The girls looked at him expectantly. Georgiana had a twinkle in her eye, and Carter knew she was hoping to spot a handsome captain on deck. Johanna, of course, craved a fresh source of news, any news, and Edwina—well, who knew what Edwina was interested in. She wanted to go, that was plain enough.

"Well, Mrs. Carter, what do you think of this proposed outing?" He scarcely turned toward his wife before he began making mental plans to leave. His wife would be just as anxious as the girls, although she would likely be looking for prosperous potential sons-in-law rather than monkeys or Greek trinkets.

All this time, Josiah sat uncertain. Was he included in this outing? He enjoyed visits to the Landing when a ship was docked. The increased activity made the settlement seem so much more civilized, and the ships themselves bore a rough yet graceful beauty. He wouldn't mind setting out to sea himself, he thought, were it not for the responsibilities of running his plantation. The seasickness that had kept him confined to his berth for the better part of his voyage from London last year flickered only faintly in his memory.

He suddenly found all eyes on him. Was he expected to take his leave? Offer to accompany them? What did they want him to do? What did he want to do? He cleared his throat and looked at the picture of the Carter ancestor. He cleared his throat a second time.

Once again, an interruption saved Josiah from his uncertainty. Hurried footsteps crunched on the walkway in front of the house, and someone pounded on the door with great urgency. He heard Grumble pass from the kitchen through the length of the opposite parlor to the door. Quick words were exchanged, then the servant knocked on the parlor door and entered, followed by a tall, skinny boy of about sixteen who looked ragged and near to overcome with exertion.

"Sir." The boy paused for breath.

"He says he has urgent news of Miss Caroline," Grumble broke in.

"I was with Miss Caroline last night."

"What?" The word fairly exploded out of Carter's mouth.

"We, Miss Caroline and I, sneaked into the Falls Inn last night, to see the Greek treasures."

Edwina stirred excitedly on the bench.

“What?” Carter repeated with only a little less fire in his voice.

“And something happened...I don’t know what. I woke up and everyone was gone. And...”

“What, boy?”

“Other people...men...are missing. They say...they say...” The boy looked from one face to another in the room, as if unable to find anyone to whom he could impart his story.

“Come on, out with it!” Carter moved forward, apparently ready to throttle the tongue-tied lad.

“They say it were pirates. They say Caroline was taken by pirates!”

Chapter Four

Caroline’s hands hurt, and a rotten smell seemed to follow her throughout the ship. She had been fighting back tears all day, but now she no longer felt a need to fight. Her life was over.

She still wasn’t sure how she had ended up on a ship, and she hadn’t taken much time to ponder the question. An endless day of pulling on heavy ropes, moving piles of cannon shot, breathing gun powder and being lambasted and ridiculed at every turn had reduced her world to the confines of this stinking mass of wood on water. She would never get out, and she didn’t care. She wanted only to be left alone in the anonymous darkness.

After a few minutes of rest on the deck beneath the hammock that had been assigned to her, Caroline noticed that her stomach hurt. She wanted to eat, but the food they had given her earlier was tough,

inedible and smelled as bad as everything else on the ship. She had eagerly drunk the ration of water that was offered. It seemed fresh, though the shared cup was filthy.

After she had drunk the water, someone poured another liquid into the cup, which she downed with the same enthusiasm, only to spit it out immediately with a hoarse cough. The men around her laughed heartily, a reaction that was becoming all too familiar—her every movement seemed to be met with laughter or derision.

The second drink in the cup was grog, it seemed, and others were more than happy to drink her share. She let them—the stuff was almost as bad as the fiery liquid she had drunk at the Falls Inn. That evening's adventure seemed like another life.

No, *this* seemed like another life. She was not supposed to be on a ship. She was supposed to be home at Hill Crest, leading her sisters on visits to her Aunt Bennett's home and choosing dinner menus with her mother. She was supposed to be starting the preparation for married life with Mr. Josiah Throckmorton. She was supposed to be working on the fancy needlework that would trim her trousseau. Mistress of her own plantation, that was her place, directing the servants and placing the orders for goods from England. She would host gatherings and dances and would find suitable husbands for all of her sisters.

Of course, the house on the Throckmorton plantation did seem a bit small for entertaining, but she imagined there might be just enough room for a dance if she did not invite too many couples.

Mr. Throckmorton had named his home Hanset, after an estate of his mother's family in Kent. The whole property had been known as Langley's Choice before that and was still known as such to most neighbors. No one blamed Mr. Throckmorton for changing the name of the plantation, though, since Mr. Langley had shown his choice to be a return trip to England.

But now Hanset was so far away. She would never get back. Tears sprang out in force, and Caroline let go, no longer fearing someone might hear her crying and discover she was a girl. They obviously didn't think she made a very good ship's boy. Her life could not get worse. She would simply wither away from sadness and lack of food, and they'd have to land on shore to bury her body and then, maybe, someone would learn of her identity and bring the sad story home to her heartbroken family.

What must her family think? They knew she was gone, of course, but did they know what had happened to her? No one knew she and Jimmy had planned to sneak into the Falls Inn. But Jimmy wasn't here. Throughout the day her eyes had scanned every face in the ship, and he wasn't here. Why?

"You. . ." Her mind reviewed all the colorful insults she had heard since her arrival on the ship. "Bastard," she finally whispered. It wasn't colorful, but it was coarse and, in Jimmy's case, probably accurate.

"This is all your fault, and you're back home safe in your bed." She reached up and smacked the hammock above her fiercely. She couldn't sleep in that thing. Curling back up on the deck, she tucked her chin into her chest. Would he tell them what happened? Surely not—he would be whipped.

What had happened to him? It wasn't fair. This was his idea. He had told her the stories he'd heard about the treasures the sailors would show at the inn—and possibly a monkey, too. He had gotten the clothes for her. It was his fault. And now she was suffering all the punishment.

The ship rolled heavily, and something brushed against Caroline's back. Rats! Ugh! Then she felt a stream of water trickle along the deck as the pitch changed, and she hastily scrambled up and tried once again to slide into her hammock. Fortunately, the berth above hers was empty at the moment so she had

room to maneuver. With relief, she found that this time she was able to stay in the middle of the hammock and could thereby avoid rolling out the other side onto the wet deck. She would be fine as long as she didn't move.

What could she do? Hill Crest, her father, Edwina—everyone and everything seemed so far away, and they grew more distant each minute. Forgetting the need to stay rigid in the middle of her hammock, Caroline curled her head to her chest and shook with quiet sobs.

On his way through the fo'c'sle, John Hardey heard the crying. *It must be the boy*, he decided. *I'll let up a bit tomorrow, and the lads'll do likewise*, he promised himself. Seamen expected a lad to grow up far too quickly. A boy needed a bit of comfort now and then until he was full grown, and he wouldn't get that at sea.

Hardey went over to the hammocks and knelt to give a quick word of cheer to the boy. Regular deep breathing showed he had already cried himself to sleep.

“Good lad!” he whispered. “We'll make a seaman of you yet.”

Josiah was truly at a loss what to do. Upon hearing the news of Caroline's abduction, Carter had sent a servant to bring Charles in from the new fields. Charles had then insisted that Josiah accompany him to the landing to question the innkeeper.

When they reached the Falls Inn, a youngish girl, probably the innkeeper's daughter, answered their questions about his whereabouts with complete diffidence. He would be back “sometime,” she said, and she “was to stay here until he returned.” That was all she knew.

Charles had charged off in search of the proprietor, leaving Josiah to “guard” against his return. Now the innkeeper was back, and Josiah was distressed to realize he did not know what to say to him.

“Ahem,” he finally managed as the man stooped to pick up a small cask near the door.

The proprietor of the Falls Inn rewarded his guest with a sour look. “The public room ain't open.” Without waiting for a reply, the man hoisted the cask to his shoulder. Brushing past Josiah, he headed for a door at the back of the room.

“Wait, please, Mr., uh, ah...” Though not a frequenter of taverns, Josiah had certainly heard the proprietor's name; moreover, it was printed in careful letters on the sign outside, a sign which he had just examined for a quarter of an hour while waiting for Charles to return.

But it was no use—the name absolutely escaped him. “Sir, if I, uh, may beg a moment of your time, I would like to ask you some questions. If I may, please, sir. I would be most grateful of, uh, a word with you.”

“In a while. I'll be back.”

This wasn't going well at all. Josiah had the vague sense he should be outraged at this man and should demand to know immediately what had happened to Miss Carter. The innkeeper, quivering with fear and

perhaps remorse, should beg his forgiveness and swear to help recover Miss Carter at all costs.

But that wasn't happening. He had practically begged the man for an audience, and quivering deference seemed unlikely from him on his return.

He spun around with determination. The man was an innkeeper, by God, and Josiah was a man of property. He could show this man his place.

He took a deep breath to calm his frayed nerves and forced himself to view the situation as if he were representing a client before the bar.

What did he need to learn from this questioning? The men who were in from the ship last night, the name of the ship and its homeport, whether the innkeeper had seen any questionable characters, what time he closed and if he had noticed anything unusual as the men were leaving. Had he noticed the boy servant and Miss Carter? Why was the boy left behind? Josiah realized that, with the innkeeper's gruff attitude, he would have to keep his questioning brusque and quick to get the answers he needed.

Having taken mental inventory, he now felt better prepared.

"What do you want?" The growl indicated the innkeeper had returned in even a less hospitable mood than before.

"Mr., uh..." Why hadn't he checked the sign while the man was in back? "Sir, I have a few questions about the, uh, proceedings in your establishment last evening," Josiah stammered.

His host said nothing.

"I, uh, understand, sir, that the crew of a ship was here drinking last night?"

"Yes, there's a ship's crew in here drinking more nights than not. If you ever paid us a visit you'd know that. Anythin' else?"

"What ship was it, sir, and from what home—"

"I don't know. Sailors talk a lot. I can't keep 'em sorted out."

"Oh, uh, I see." This wasn't going well—again. "Did you see a girl in here last night?"

"I don't allow girls—or women—in the tavern, 'cepting my daughter Amy. The men'll have to go elsewhere for that."

Josiah reddened when he caught the man's meaning. "No, I mean, a nice girl, refined, uh, clean..."

"Nice girls won't be seen in taverns, Mr..."

"Throckmorton, Josiah Throckmorton."

"Oh, you're the one what bought old Langley's place so he could go running back home to the queen." The innkeeper laughed.

"Old Langley? Oh, yes, Langley's Choice. Yes, I purchased his plantation from England. And then, I,

uh, moved here.” This questioning was not progressing as Josiah had hoped. How did they get onto the subject of his plantation?

He’d try again. “So, Mr., uh, sir, did you notice anything unusual last night?”

“No.”

“Nobody...acting strangely?”

“They all do act strangely with the rum, Mr. Throckmorton. It’s not my job to watch out for ’em.”

“Um, yes, I see.” Josiah noticed the innkeeper had been slowly inching toward the door.

“Well, if there’s nothing more I can you do for you, I need to take care of some business elsewhere.” The proprietor was almost at the door now.

“Yes, well, thank you and good day to you.” Josiah had to let him go, really; the man obviously had pressing business to attend to.

After a few moments, he took a deep breath and followed him out the door. Noticing the innkeeper was nowhere in sight, he sat down on the steps outside with some relief. Sweat ran in heavy streams down each side of his face, and the back of his shirt and waistcoat felt wet through. One long piece of hair poked into his left eye.

“I’m told he returned to the inn.”

Josiah heard Charles Carter’s voice before he saw him come up from the side of the building, accompanied by an unknown gentleman in a speckled waistcoat.

“Ah, Mr. Throckmorton. Did you see Mr...?” Charles glanced at the name on the sign. “...Stowe?”

“Yes, I did.” Josiah had seen him and in fact, had talked with him. But he was going to be embarrassed to admit how little he had learned from the exchange.

“And did he see Caroline last night?”

“He says women and girls are not permitted entrance to the tavern.”

“Well, we knew that, Mr. Throckmorton. That’s why she was dressed as a boy. Remember, Jimmy Dyer told us?”

Josiah hadn’t asked if the innkeeper had seen any boys. “Yes, of course” was all he said.

“Did he see any boys?” Charles continued.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, did he notice anything unusual at closing time?”

“Nothing that seemed unusual. To him.”

“Hm, and what time did he close? We’ll see if anyone in the vicinity noticed anything.”

“I don’t know.” Josiah had forgotten to ask. “I did not see a clock in the establishment.”

“Most people in Maryland do not own a clock, Mr. Throckmorton, but they judge time well enough.”

“Yes, of course.”

“I’ll ask him.” Charles Carter turned to enter the inn, but Josiah held up his hand.

“He has gone. He had other business.” He now felt very glum.

Charles miraculously appeared to brush off his annoyance. “Please forgive me, gentlemen, I’ve neglected to make introductions. Mr. Throckmorton, this is Captain Johnson, master of the *Canary*. He overheard my inquiries concerning Mr. Stowe and the ship that left before light this morning, and graciously offered his assistance. Captain Johnson, Mr. Throckmorton of Lang—Hanset Plantation. Mr. Throckmorton is engaged to be married to Miss Carter.”

“Please allow me to express my deepest...concern, Mr. Throckmorton. I will be pleased to be of service in any way possible.” The master made a quick but elaborate bow.

“Captain Johnson can give us some information about the ship which left so mysteriously.” Charles lowered his voice. “Two of his own men are missing as well.” He glanced at the doorway of the inn. “Perhaps we’d better step inside to continue our discussion?”

“The tavern is closed,” Josiah protested, but Charles had already led the ship’s master through the doorway. Josiah had no choice but to follow and found, to his consternation, that the innkeeper’s daughter was more than willing to serve them drinks and offered to bring food from the kitchen as well.

“Thank you, this will be all we need.” Charles smiled as the pox-scarred girl passed around three tankards of rather warm ale. She curtsied and retreated to the bar with light steps. “Now, Captain Johnson, what can you tell us about that ship?”

“Well.” Though his name was English, Captain Johnson drew out his words through his nose like a Frenchman. “I had to look at her closely, you see, because this is a small landing.”

“Yes, yes.” Charles gestured anxiously for him to get on with the story.

“A small sloop, of the type built in Bermuda. For privateers...” The captain paused dramatically. “...or pirates. Her rigging was most strange for this type of vessel. She carried rigging for sails she would not need, as if she were disguised. A fast ship, I believe, if rigged differently. And her name, well, she wore the name *Helene* painted on the stern, but on the larboard side I could see the name *Osprey* had been painted over.” The captain leaned in closer. “I believe she may be a pirate vessel. Perhaps the crew captured the *Osprey* and have tried to change her name.”

Pirates again. Josiah felt the hairs raise on the back of his neck. He took a slow breath. “Surely, pirates would not venture so far into the bay?” he suggested, discounting the precautions he had taken in fear of their presence just this morning.

The captain shrugged and drained his ale. “They have not so far, I believe. But with the war over now, anything...” He looked at his empty tankard. “Anything is possible.”

Charles motioned for the girl to bring another pint, and Josiah looked at the man's empty tankard in amazement. He had taken no more than two or three sips from his own.

But before the barmaid could bring the captain's second drink, a sudden influx of angry voices announced the presence of new arrivals, driving all thoughts of drink from anyone's mind. The innkeeper led the procession into the room, although he actually backed in, arms raised to ward off the wrath of three women and an assortment of older children. All of them seemed to be trying to talk at once.

"You were the last one to see 'im," one woman burst out. "You must know where 'e's gone!"

"My John wouldn't just leave!" another woman insisted fiercely.

So, others were, indeed, missing. Josiah glanced quickly at Charles then turned back to observe the women. Could they learn more about the disappearance without disclosing Miss Carter was gone?

"Ladies." Charles gracefully stood and aligned himself near the party of confusion. "May I be of some assistance?"

One woman curtsied. "Thank you, Mr. Carter, sir. Our men are missing, and we think Mr. Stowe knows where they are."

"They all came here last night to see the Greek treasure that was to be shown for a shilling's worth of tobacco," another woman chimed in. She turned and picked up a boy who was rather too large to be picked up and kissed him. "Something's happened, and we must know. Somebody told us there were pirates here last night."

"Mr. Stowe," the third woman asked with steely calm, "did you have pirates in your public room?"

The innkeeper tried to diffuse the situation with a laugh. "And would I know a pirate if I did see one? I ain't never been on the seas. And could you believe, pirates at the fall line. None would be so stupid."

His audience did not look convinced.

"Captain Johnson has been telling us most interesting tales about the sloop at anchor when he arrived," Charles said. "The sloop mysteriously left early this morning, probably not long after this tavern closed. Do you know of it?"

"Yes, a ship. Like any other. I can't be particular over details." The innkeeper looked at his fingernails closely.

"Did you advertise a show of Greek treasures in the public rooms?" Josiah asked, speaking up for the first time.

"Men brag about their belongings. People talk. I didn't promise nothing." Angry looks from around the room prompted the innkeeper to continue. "Some brought in their baubles, and lots came to see. They gave me a little extra for letting 'em use the room."

The first woman stepped up to face the innkeeper directly. "Did pirates take our men, yes or no? We'll have the law on you, Mr. Stowe, if you harbored pirates in your public house."

"I saw no pirates!" the innkeeper insisted. "No pirates. And your men are probably out sleeping in the woods somewhere. There was a lot of drink about last night, and some of it was...stronger'n usual." He flushed a little, appearing to regret that last admission.

Josiah was the only one who noticed. "Why was it stronger than usual, Mr. Stowe?" he asked quietly.

The innkeeper said nothing for a moment. "I don't know. Some fool put too much rum in the punch."

"But don't you keep the rum bottles, Mr. Stowe? This is your inn, is it not?" Josiah continued.

"Well, ah, someone must have gotten one away from me, ah, see?" The innkeeper was starting to sweat noticeably. "I'd had a few sips myself. It was crowded, hard to see..."

"No one would have expected a strong punch at your inn, Mr. Stowe, from what I've heard. And no one could have made it strong but yourself."

"It was the regular punch, but the heat...the heat was deadly fierce!" The innkeeper brightened as if struck with sudden inspiration. "Ah, the heat was dreadful. It bested me, by God, and I left it for the girl to clean up." Stowe smiled.

"So, you say you were not here when the last man left." Josiah spoke steadily, relieved that his experience in questioning witnesses was finally now in evidence. "How many were here when you left?"

"Oh, lots of men, room full."

"Surely, some of them must have seen you leave. Who was here, then? Can you give me any names?"

"Well, ah, the heat and all, I was, ah, well...no."

"I see. No one at all?"

"No one, Mr. Throckmorton."

"Thank you."

"Ladies," Charles moved toward the door, "we bid you good day. May the Lord bring your men back home soon."

Josiah followed Charles and Captain Johnson out the door and down the dusty street in silence. Before he had quite realized it, they had made their way down to the waterfront and were preparing to step down the gangway onto the *Canary*.

Chapter Five

Caroline shook herself awake with a jerk. Something extraordinarily large seemed to be suspended right in front of her face. The room was very dark, and a musty, sour smell filled the air. And her back hurt.

Everything, even the mysterious form above her face, seemed to sway with a slow, creaking rhythm.

Once she recovered from the shock, however, Caroline felt strangely relaxed. The smell of the room was not pleasant, but it seemed familiar, unthreatening. Even the strange snores seemed harmless. After all, her maid snored so fiercely the sound traveled from her garret room clear down to the back parlor, and even Johanna snored at times. Caroline started to drift back to sleep.

But the snores around her now were not those of her Irish maid nor of her sister.

Caroline's comfortable, half-awake sensation faded rapidly. The snores of unknown men surrounded her now—and one of those men slept suspended from a hammock only a few inches from her face. She was alone on a ship full of strange men, about as far from decent society as she could possibly imagine.

She would have to escape.

From the way she had been ordered around yesterday, Caroline could see they expected her to work. They needed her to work.

That's why they took us. The idea suddenly seemed to have been obvious all along. The captain needed slaves to work his ship. Nothing had been said about getting paid for "hunting pirates," as he had so enthusiastically described their mission. And if the captain had wanted to hire seamen, he could have called at one of the bigger ports. He must be using them as slaves.

So, if the captain needed her and the others to move the sails around and wash the floors and make the cannons work, then he would probably not be too agreeable if she simply expressed a desire to leave at the next port.

Caroline twisted a piece of hair around her finger as she thought about a means of escape. She could sneak away when everyone was sleeping. She wasn't sure how long she and the other "slaves" had been asleep before their crude introduction to the captain, but she thought it had been at least two and possibly three days. Yesterday made four. Even if they had a lot of water stored in casks, it wouldn't keep for

much more than a week without starting to smell a little funny. Bread wouldn't keep much longer, either; so unless they had a bread oven on the ship, which she doubted very much, they would have to stop soon for bread and water. Then, when everyone was asleep, she would sneak upstairs and—

And what? How would she get off the ship?

Well, it wouldn't be moving—that would make things easier. There might be a gangway to a dock, like ships often used at Elkridge Landing. Then again, there might not. When the Landing was busy, she and her sisters often saw small boats rowed out to bring men and supplies to ships that could not get up next to the dock.

Well, if she couldn't walk off the ship, she'd just have to jump and swim. It wouldn't be too far, and she did know how to swim a little. In the summers, she and her sisters often paddled and splashed in a small pool near one of the tobacco fields at Hill Crest. And it would be easier to swim in the boys' clothes she had on now than in the heavy old dresses they wore in the pond at Hill Crest.

Caroline felt much better after having decided on a plan of escape. She just needed to wait until they stopped for water. Slowly, ever so slowly, she allowed the rhythmic symphony of snores and creaks to hypnotize her back into sleep.

Something grabbed her elbow.

“Dyer!”

Caroline turned toward the voice in confusion. Then she remembered—she was supposed to be Jimmy Dyer. When asked her name, she had given Jimmy's because it was the only masculine name she could think of.

“You're on watch now.”

A boy not much bigger than she was gestured toward the hatch and moved away to grab the elbow of another sleeper. Caroline got up slowly, feeling as if in a trance. She was on watch! What did that mean? It was still dark outside—how could she watch anything? Surely, they didn't expect her to wash things or fire cannons in the dark? And she hadn't had any breakfast.

She was still staring uncertainly at the hatch when someone gave her a shove from behind.

“Move along, smartly, now. This is my watch, and I won't have no slackers!” It was the big man from yesterday who spoke, and Caroline shivered. But he smiled and pointed up. “Come on, you've had four hours' good sleep.” Her evident confusion must have amused him. “Four hours on watch, four hours off. Your turn, little mouse!”

She had watch every four hours? She didn't find the period of sleep overly generous, as this Mr. Hardey apparently did. As she climbed the ladder to the deck, though, something occurred to her that was far more distressing than the thought of interrupted sleep.

Every four hours meant someone was on deck, “watching,” presumably, all the time, even at night. How was she going to sneak off the ship with a deck full of sailors watching her?

She pondered this question as Hardey assigned the men on his watch to their posts.

“Dyer, starboard bow.” At her blank look, Hardey pointed to the front of the ship, on the right-hand side. Starboard, larboard, she couldn’t keep them straight. And why didn’t they just call the front of the ship “the front of the ship” instead of giving it a fancy name like “bow?”

When she got to what she supposed was her proper place, Caroline turned around to see what the others were doing. A few had managed to station themselves close enough together to carry on a conversation in low voices. The man nearest her stood with his hands in his pockets, staring out at the waves in the dark water. Caroline turned and did likewise.

It was amazing. The sky was dark, and the sea was dark, but somehow they were different shades of dark. It was easy to see where the sky ended and the sea began. The round, full moon glowed high in the sky like a pearl set on a pillow of velvet. As Caroline watched, clusters of stars appeared to gradually grow into place. The moon and its light seemed very high and very far away, yet the light spread like a canopy, enclosing all the sea beneath its serene folds. Vast under the canopy of light, the sea was empty, save for the waves. *And this ship*, Caroline reminded herself, realizing that she and it were part of the picture.

She had never seen anything so large as the sea or sky that night. True, she had looked at the sea and sky during her long day of drilling, but her mind had been too occupied with her own misery to consider the vast elements surrounding her new environment.

It was breathtaking.

Eventually, she began to notice other details. A soft breeze playfully ruffled her hair. The movement of the ship had a rhythmic sound, a steady creak that never quite went away. The air felt warm and pleasant, and despite the sea spray, Caroline felt much warmer than she had huddled in her damp hammock inside the ship. And certainly much happier.

Could I stand here forever? she wondered. All thoughts of home, escape and even breakfast receded into the farthest corner of her mind.

“G’morning, Dyer.”

Caroline turned, her contented reverie broken by the appearance of a dark-skinned seaman. Muscles under the short sleeves of his rough shirt made him look powerful, much as she always expected sailors to be, even though he was a little short.

“Hardey likes us to move places during watch, to keep us awake. You’re to move astern.” He motioned to the back of the ship.

Did he say “astir” or “astern?” Caroline couldn’t be sure. There was no mistaking the gesture, however, so without a word—she was afraid her voice would betray her sex and so spoke as little as possible—she moved in the direction indicated, grabbing at the side every now and then as the ship rolled more aggressively.

She wasn’t sure just how far “astir” she was supposed to go. She slowed as she approached two men, one of whom she recognized. He had been taken from the Falls Inn, and she may have even seen him somewhere near the plantation. Perhaps he was one of the smaller planters who visited her father to sell tobacco or place orders for goods from England through her father’s agents.

“Aye, you’re a new one, too,” the other man, the “real” sailor, addressed her as she approached. She

opened her mouth to reply then closed it and merely nodded her head.

“I’ve been telling yer man here, and he didn’t know and you might not, either, that it’s strictly ‘no purchase, no pay’ on this ship. Ya got to know that and ya got to understand it. ‘No purchase, no pay.’ Every man has to work his damnedest or we don’t none of us get nothin’. Not even the cap’n!”

Leaning into their faces to emphasize these last words, the seaman spun on his heel and walked several paces forward before taking his place silently at the rail.

His words, apparently intended to illuminate matters for the new crewmen, only made them more confused.

“What does he mean, ‘no purchase, no pay?’” asked the fellow captive from the Falls Inn. “I didn’t think we were to be buying anything on this ship. I thought we were chasing pirates.”

Caroline broke her vow of silence. “I didn’t think we were to be paid anything. I thought we were slaves.”

“As good as, anyway,” her companion agreed. “I’m Samuel Carpenter.” He held out his hand, and Caroline realized she was expected to shake it. Like another man.

“I’m Jim Dyer,” she answered, trying to deepen her voice.

“It’s funny,” Carpenter said, looking out at the dark water, “how quickly it all goes. I came over this water and worked my term and earned my land, my own land, my own plantation. And now, it’s gone.”

“Where’s your place?” Caroline thought she overdid the gruff voice a little that time.

“Near Hunting Ridge.”

So, it was not particularly near Hill Crest. Where had she seen his face?

“And you,” Carpenter continued, “what have you left behind?”

“I, uh, work on the Carter plantation, Hill Crest. I’m new to it.”

“Carter! Why, I worked at his sister’s plantation, Longacre. I saw Mr. Carter and his family on many occasions.”

So, he had seen her, too! If he recognized her, though, he gave no sign. And she remembered now seeing him answer the door at Longacre. Her Aunt Bennett liked to keep a “manservant” in the house, though it was a tremendous extravagance when so many male workers were needed in the fields. For years, after every visit to her Aunt, Caroline remembered her mother would frequently entreat her father to purchase a manservant for Hill Crest.

“When did you take your own place?” Caroline asked, as nonchalantly as possible.

“This last year. The house is barely done. And I had hoped to be married soon.”

And so had I. Caroline started feeling sorry for herself once again.

“How many of us did they take, d’ye know?” her companion asked, after a pause.

“I counted...” Oops! She used her normal voice! “Uh, about ten of us.”

“D’ye know anyone else?”

“Well, one face looked familiar,” she replied. *Besides yours*, she finished to herself. She probably shouldn’t have admitted to knowing anyone.

“I think at least two of them were from that other ship,” her companion continued.

Do seamen do this to each other frequently? Caroline wondered silently. “They’ve kept us all apart since yesterday morning,” she finally said, “so it’s been hard to tell, hasn’t it?” And just then she saw they were going to be separated again.

“To your posts, men. Move along there, you.” A tall, gaunt figure with long scraggly hair gave Caroline a push toward the stern with rather more force than was strictly necessary. She hurried along to keep out of reach of a second push.

She stopped at a spot that seemed about equidistant from Carpenter and the seamen stationed in the stern. The sea and sky still made a pretty spectacle, but it somehow didn’t seem as mesmerizing now. How long could she hide her identity? She wondered what she looked like as a sailor. Could she see any of her reflection in the water? No.

Caroline looked out for a long time, not really seeing anything. Then, something started happening in the sky. Glimmers of color appeared at the horizon, changing even as she watched. Red, pink, orange, blue... the sky began to fill with color, lightening, brightening and—of course. The sun was rising.

She had seen the sun rise before, certainly, but at home it simply seemed to peek through a heavy screen of trees. To see the full sun appear majestically over a clear horizon was something else entirely. Even the water seemed to change hues.

I’ll burn as red as an Indian, Caroline thought suddenly. Her mother’s training, tucked away inside her head, flashed out a familiar warning: “Protect yourself from the sun.”

Instead, however, she looked directly at the rising red orb as if trying to burn the impression into her eyelids.

She needed to protect herself, all right. But she imagined that, for the time being, the sun would be the least of her problems.

Chapter Six

"So, it's settled, then," Charles was saying to the captain. "We leave in three days." He stood up to shake hands.

This was all happening too fast for Josiah.

Charles had arranged passage on the *Canary* for himself and his future brother-in-law to the mouth of the bay. At Norfolk, he planned to hire a vessel of some sort to locate and rescue his sister. Charles had apparently assumed that, as her future husband, Josiah would wish to join the expedition.

Josiah had wished no such thing. It was horrible to think that his bride-to-be had been taken, possibly by pirates. But he couldn't just leave his plantation and sail off blindly in search of her. The expedition could take years! His plantation needed tending; his finances needed strengthening. He could not afford to hire a ship, even a small one, to search the seven seas for this mysterious pirate ship.

And how would they deal with these brigands, even if they did find them? He had no training in a soldier's arts and neither, he presumed, had Charles. It was best to leave such matters to the professionals. The queen's navy was trained to chase pirates; he and Charles should send word to the Admiralty through proper channels and request that Her Majesty's navy undertake the rescue of Miss Carter. And the others who had been taken, of course.

These thoughts, the only proper course of action, boiled in Josiah's mind as he and Charles carefully made their way out of the master's cabin and through the rather treacherous innards of the ship. Charles's plan seemed more ludicrous with each step they took. Hire a ship, indeed! Why, the passage to Norfolk alone was costing them nine hundred pounds of tobacco. He was very nearly in debt, especially now with his latest order of goods from England. It was impossible. What business had two planters chasing lawless seamen across the water?

As if to accentuate these difficulties, Josiah lost his footing while climbing the ladder to the deck and slipped, bruising his chin and arm. Madness! He did not belong on a ship.

Josiah imagined the best way to put a request to the Lords of the Admiralty concerning Miss Carter's abduction by pirates would be to contact the local Customs agents at Elkridge Landing. Word of the incident would then spread, of course, putting her family to a great deal of shame and embarrassment. But it couldn't be helped. The secret could only be kept so long, anyway.

This afternoon he really needed to inspect the leaves in the lower hundred acres. This area had been planted first and should be ready to cut and hang to cure soon, if Josiah's calculations were correct. He had tried to adjust his estimates to factor in the recent lack of rain, but it was difficult to be certain, particularly in his first year.

Josiah realized Charles was saying something to him as they walked toward the business establishments of the Landing.

"I'd like to get off sooner, of course, but Captain Johnson says he needs three full days to get all of the lumber and provisions on board, and I do trust in his judgment."

Josiah didn't trust his judgment. He didn't trust anything about the man. Nine hundred pounds of tobacco for a passage to the mouth of the bay! No wonder he had offered to help Charles. He was making a killing off them.

"And the three days should give us plenty of time to get affairs in order before we depart. This could take some time, you know." Charles spoke as if he were referring to the necessity of sitting through a slightly longer than average sermon on Sunday morning. He had no idea what he was getting into. And Josiah meant to ensure he was not dragged along on this disastrous misadventure.

He stopped walking.

"Mr. Carter." The intensity in Josiah's words caused Charles to turn with a puzzled look. Josiah tried to make his voice less anxious as he continued. "I...don't think this is a good idea."

"Do you think we should try to leave sooner? If we took a boat down to Annapolis we might sooner find passage to Norfolk, but I'm not sure it's very likely."

"No..." Josiah found the words slow in coming, despite his resolve. "I don't believe we should...we should just run off in a ship like a couple of cavaliers." To his great surprise, Josiah found that his words sobered Charles immediately.

"I confess I did not stop to seek counsel on my plan. I was so certain, though, it seemed the only thing to do."

"Counsel, yes. Let's go speak with your father and seek out those with authority to speak to the Admiralty."

Charles wore a distant look in his eyes. "Will you excuse me for a moment, Mr. Throckmorton?" He turned and disappeared into a clump of trees before Josiah could answer.

Now what was he supposed to do? He could return to speak to John Carter at Hill Crest, or he could return to his own plantation, a prospect that grew more and more appealing as the minutes passed and Charles failed to reappear. He had business to attend to. Surely Carter or his son could contact the authorities without his help?

Still, Josiah decided to wait a while longer, since Charles had implied his absence would be of short duration. He paced back and forth in the dust, staring at the uneven clapboards on the small warehouse building in front of him.

"I am at peace now, Mr. Throckmorton." Charles's sudden reappearance startled Josiah once again.

“I’m sure we are in the right.”

“Mr. Carter?”

“Our plan to hire a vessel at Norfolk—it is the right way,” Charles continued.

Our plan? Josiah grew alarmed. “But...but we were going to seek counsel, to talk to the authorities...”

“You were right, dear sir, about the need for counsel. And now I am confirmed and our mission cannot fail.”

“You are confirmed?” This was crazy. Charles had walked off into the woods. With whom could he have spoken?

“Yes. In my prayers, I entreated the Lord to guide us in our search, to show us his will for the rescue.”

Josiah looked at him incredulously.

“I closed my eyes and soon felt a deep sense of peace. I saw a vision of clouds and then a ship sailing the ocean, and far off in the distance, another sail on the horizon. And I knew.”

Josiah still stared.

“We are proceeding just as the Lord has planned.”

That was it? Charles had gone into the woods, talked to God and had a vision of a ship? And just like that he was ready to risk both of their lives—and their fortunes—on a foolhardy rescue attempt?

“Mr. Carter...” Josiah thought frantically. How was he going to stop this? “Certainly, we must speak with your father first?”

“We must, certainly,” Charles agreed.

They headed down the hill toward the skiff that would take them back to Hill Crest. Surely, the boy’s father would see reason.

“It seems the only logical course of action,” John Carter sighed as he turned to his writing desk. Josiah and Charles watched silently as the elder Carter pulled forth a sheet of creamy white paper and sharpened the point on the quill pen nearest to his reach. As though they had never seen the writing process before, the younger men simply continued to watch while he removed the stopper from a jar of ink, dipped his pen and scratched several lines onto the new sheet of paper. After he had sanded the page, he folded it into thirds and rang for Grimble.

This can’t be happening, thought Josiah. They were headed on a madman’s chase that was liable to be the ruin of both families. He had expected John Carter to dispute his son’s rash plan, or at least to question him closely, thus giving Josiah the opportunity to point out some of the plan’s obvious flaws. But Carter had merely listened and agreed, as though he trusted his foolish son implicitly.

Charles eventually stood, walked over to a large framed map that decorated the south wall of the room

and began studying the features of the Chesapeake Bay and the coast of the Americas.

Grimble arrived and was sent to fetch a lighted candle to melt the sealing wax.

After the servant had closed the door, Carter turned back to face Josiah and Charles. "I've written a letter of credit to be drawn against my account with our London agent. The name is well known—you should be able to draw funds when you reach Norfolk."

"Thank you, sir," Charles answered.

"Now, it's growing late. I know Mr. Throckmorton must have needs to attend back at Hanset. You both have a great deal to do to prepare for your departure."

Gradually, the group moved toward the front door, and Grimble seemed to appear from nowhere to hold it open. As he reached the door, too full of dismay to utter another word, Josiah felt a hand on his arm.

"Thank you, Mr. Throckmorton." Carter's voice cracked as the strain of the day's events finally took its toll. "For your help with my daughter's... predicament." He gave what was no doubt supposed to be a reassuring smile, but tears showed in the corners of his eyes.

Josiah said nothing as he left, afraid that any words might bring tears to his own eyes—tears of frustration and rage at his own inaction. Why had he failed to object to this plan? He had good reason to object. It must have been fear—or rather, unwillingness to appear a coward, though his own plan made more sense.

He had to admit waiting for action from the Lords of the Admiralty could take years, and with so few ships patrolling the waters of the American colonies, the chances of one of them finding Miss Carter were next to none. By the time they found her, she might well be dead—or worse.

But what could *he* do? He was not a hunter, and though a fighter at times, he was trained to fight with words, dodging verbal feints with the intricacies of legal machinations. And lately, it seemed that when his own interests were involved he couldn't even manage to string together a coherent sentence. God help him! If he lacked the power to refuse to join the Carter family on their risky adventure, how was he to stand up to a crew of pirates brandishing pistols and knives?

Josiah pulled the covers over his head to block out the first rays of light shining through his bedroom's single window. An open window allowed cooler air in during the night—on the nights when there was cooler air—but with the shutters open, the sun was an early visitor.

Josiah understood that many in agricultural society, both here and home in England, adjusted their days to the sun. They rose together and often ended the day together. He found this habit thoroughly distasteful. He was accustomed to rising no earlier than eight o'clock, and while in London had maintained a regular schedule with his morning toilet, breakfast and work. The schedule varied little and had nothing to do with when the sun was shining or whether it was shining at all—which, in London, it frequently was not.

Here, people often rose so early he was likely to have callers while in the middle of his toilet. He nevertheless refused to adjust his schedule. To rise with the sun seemed so... uncivilized, and frankly,

uncomfortable.

This morning, though, even the covers and the feather pillow failed to satisfactorily block enough light to permit him to go back to sleep. He reluctantly admitted he should get up—he had much to do to prepare to leave the plantation in the hands of his overseer while he sailed the seven seas with that fool, Charles Carter.

But when Josiah did get up, it was only to close the shutters to his window. He dove back into the bed, causing the cords supporting the mattress to creak alarmingly. Suddenly, he felt the middle part of his body sinking toward the floor. He tried to turn over and found it very difficult, as his feet were now elevated much higher than his torso. When was the last time Betty had tightened the bed?

With difficulty, he pulled himself over the side of the bed onto the floor. The feather ticking sagged in the middle at a ridiculous angle. From his vantage point on the floor, Josiah could see that the cord holding up the featherbed had split into two sections. The knot had come undone from one of the split ends. What a sorry way to set up a bed!

He noticed that a thick layer of dust had been disturbed by his footprints when he walked to the window. How long had it been since Betty had dusted his room?

If the servants managed his affairs this poorly right under his nose, what would happen to the house while he was gone? And what about his tobacco fields? He needed this first crop to be a success. Now he would not be here for the harvest, and the all-important curing and prizing. His vanity refused to allow him to comfort himself with the reflection that he was essentially ignorant of the processes, while his overseer had been working on tobacco plantations for ten years.

Josiah looked at the remains of his bed. There was no way he could go back to sleep. He had to face this day.

Edward paced the deck restlessly, failing to find refreshment in the salt breeze. His backers would be expecting something soon from this voyage. With the war over, his father and the associates who put up the money to buy and outfit the *Osprey* would know that all letters of marque had been called in. They would expect him back in Dublin soon with their share of the profits.

Edward looked back on the accomplishments of the last year with no small amount of pride, but he understood his backers would expect him to return with more than just a few good stories for the fireside. All of the plundered cargoes had been sold, and although he had set aside a portion of the proceeds for his father and the others it wasn't enough to reflect his success as a privateer captain. He could spin tales of bad luck for his backers and secretly keep the remaining proceeds for himself, but then he would appear a failure in the eyes of Dublin society.

He simply needed more.

His crew, too, needed an incentive. All this time at sea, the men had taken no salary. They earned only their share of whatever prizes the *Osprey* captured, and as of now, they didn't have authority to capture any. It was not a healthy atmosphere for a ship—no common enemy as in a war, no prospect of riches or even wages. Men had turned pirate with less provocation.

In fact, they technically were pirates now, all of them. Would it be so very difficult to...?

Lord, no. Then there could be no chance of returning home to acquire an estate to rival that of his brother.

He would obtain a new letter of marque, then, to hunt pirates instead of the queen's enemies. Maybe he wouldn't even have to go so far as the West Indies; one of the colonial governors on the mainland might grant such authorization. Perhaps one of these governors would be so anxious for his services he wouldn't even expect Edward to pay for the letter.

So, which colony should he approach? Virginia was closest, of course, but the colony was so tied to England he doubted her governor would dare to break wind without permission from Parliament. Edward smiled; he found that observation quite witty.

Next would be North Carolina.

"You there, boy." The lad looked up after a pause and responded to Edward's gesture with irritating slowness. "Send Mr. Hardey my compliments and ask if he would be so good as to meet with me in my cabin as soon as possible."

Edward hoped Hardey knew the capital of North Carolina.

"Enter," Edward replied to the knock on the door of his cabin a short time later.

"Good mornin', Captain." Hardey stepped into the room with a smooth pace that contrasted sharply with his rough, angular appearance.

Edward was leaning over a tattered chart spread on a small table. "Mr. Hardey, I need your counsel."

A smile tugged at the corner of Hardey's mouth.

"We need to plot a course for the capital of North Carolina," Edward continued.

One eyebrow arched slightly upward in surprise, but otherwise, Hardey remained still.

"This chart is not as much help as I had hoped. It refers simply to the colony of 'Carolina.'" Edward moved aside to allow his first officer to examine the chart.

Both men studied in silence, each hoping for the other to display some knowledge of exactly where, along this unpromising coastline, they would have to try to land.

Finally, Hardey spoke. "I must admit I am not familiar with the coast of the Carolinas at close range. I know it by reputation to be treacherous in large portion, and I believe the northern colony lacks a good deepwater port. Without such an obvious center of trade, I have no idea where they'd put their capital."

Edward pushed the chart away in disgust. "Frankly, Mr. Hardey, I'm not sure there *is* a capital of North Carolina."

Hardey looked as though he wanted to ask why his captain had chosen that ambiguous destination, but as usual he held his tongue.

"We will seek a letter of marque from the governor of North Carolina to take pirates in his coastal waters," Edward explained. "The coastline is full of shallow inlets, but the *Osprey* is..." He paused to think of a word that would convey a sense of small size without betraying a lack of significance. "...maneuverable enough to weather the coast well. With no cargo, we have a shallow enough draft, and I'll trust you can keep us off any sandbars that come our way." He smiled reassuringly.

Hardey did not return his smile. His face took on a grim expression as he looked down at the chart once more.

"And, of course," Edward continued, "once we have the authorization from the governor we can really hunt wherever we choose. We'll report, from time to time, what we've taken, and he will never know whether the brigands came from his waters or someone else's." He smiled again. "The best part, of course, is that we shall have an honest claim to all that the pirates have taken, and any reward money that may be offered. We'll return to Dublin as heroes. Very wealthy heroes, at least you and I."

Edward would have enough to keep a mistress in town and one in the country, as well. And perhaps he could downplay the actual success of the venture; it would reduce the appearance of his success, of course, but it would enable him to reserve a larger portion for himself without the knowledge of his backers.

Hardey did not look convinced.

With a small sigh, Edward brought himself back to the present and rolled up the frayed chart. He took a couple of paces to the rear of the cabin, ducking slightly to avoid smashing his head on the beams above.

"The drills yesterday, Mr. Hardey, were not what I had hoped. But, they were, frankly, what I

expected. You've left them skylarking around on deck when they should be drilling. Even the experienced crewmen are woefully out of practice with the guns."

"Aye, Captain."

"The new men?" Edward left the question open.

"Only two of them from the *Canary*, Captain. Both seamen. The other eight, all from plantations."

"Any skilled labor?" Edward hated the sound of forlorn hope that had crept into his voice.

"No carpenters or coopers," Hardey replied, "although one man says he knows some carpentry. And no surgeons."

"Damn." Edward grimaced. "I didn't expect all of our new recruits to be experienced seamen, but I had hoped to acquire at least one man with carpentry skills." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "We should never have allowed that carpenter we hired at Annapolis to leave the ship."

Hardey looked at him sharply but said nothing.

"This man who says he knows something of carpentry," Edward continued, "get him to work with Adams fixing the worst of the storm damage. As for the others, you may assign them to the posts you think fit best. We will begin more drills in a half an hour. No guns, today, though. I first want to make sure our new seamen won't run us aground on the godforsaken coast of North Carolina."

They would leave tomorrow. Josiah had packed a trunk with what he could only guess he would need during the next several months. Who knew how long they'd be gone? He stood looking at the contents spilling out over the sides. Two trunks, perhaps? He chewed on his thumbnail absently. He really didn't need to bring four waistcoats. And while he wasted time fretting over details of his wardrobe, he should instead be finishing the instructions for Ellis, his overseer.

He cast a disparaging look at the trunk and headed downstairs, nearly tripping on the narrow winding stairs as he did about half of the time. He passed through the main room of the house and into a smaller room he referred to as "the Library." This small, unheated parlor was actually too uncomfortable to be used for much of anything, other than storage. It was cold in winter, obviously, and had so little ventilation as to be unbearably hot and a damp haven for mildew and insects in summer.

Nevertheless, it was a second room, and Josiah was determined to use it. He pulled out the instructions he had started for his overseer and sat down to write.

After a few minutes of staring at an ominous dark patch that appeared to be growing on the baseboard, Josiah began to examine his pen and decided it needed sharpening. For that matter, his knife needed sharpening, too—he couldn't very well run off in search of pirates with a dull knife. He called for Betty; and when she arrived, wiping her blackened hands on her apron, he handed her the knife and asked her to sharpen it "at once." She fairly glared at him, and he thought of the heavy whetstone in the yard with some guilt. Then he waved her off.

After she left, with mumblings of protest and ill will surrounding her like a cloud, Josiah resumed staring at the dark blob on the baseboard. He started to turn his attention to a fingernail then instead picked up

all of his papers to move to the comfortable table in the main room. Since Betty now did the cooking in the new kitchen outside, the main room was relatively neat and quiet. Still, Josiah hated the thought some visitor might come and find him working in the same room where meals were taken, like a common planter.

He looked again at the instructions for Ellis. He certainly hoped the man could read. It had never occurred to him to ask before. Good God, what if no one in the household could read? Josiah stood suddenly and looked out the window to the nearest fields, as if he could detect literacy at two hundred yards.

Calm down, he told himself. Ellis could at least read a little—he had been making entries in the account books as long as he had worked at Hanset. After dinner Josiah would take a leisurely stroll to the fields and would broach the topic of the instructions with his overseer. It was not seemly for a gentleman to get too anxious, and as he prepared for his present adventure, he was most desirous of retaining the demeanor of a gentleman in this forsaken wilderness.

A sharp knock sounded on the door, followed by the cheerful voice of Charles Carter.

“Mr. Throckmorton, are you at home, sir?”

There was no time to retreat to the other room. Josiah hastily shuffled his papers into one haphazard pile in the hopes of making it look as though he had merely set the work down on his way to his library. Without Betty, he realized he would have to open the door for himself.

“Ah, Mr. Carter. What a pleasant surprise.” It was a surprise, at least. Josiah invited his visitor to take a seat on the bench across the table from where he had been sitting. “May I get you some refreshment?”

“Thank you, no.” Charles had taken one step into the room and remained standing, with the door open. “I’ve only come to tell you that Captain Johnson desires to leave at daybreak, so you may wish to send your luggage along this afternoon to be stowed on board.”

“Oh. Ah, thank you.” Josiah tried to hide his displeasure at this development. The captain’s plans had originally called for a departure on the later tide, and Josiah had counted on the extra time to finish ordering his affairs. A heavy sigh escaped before he was even aware of it.

Charles stepped back to the doorway, then turned and smiled. “Be not afraid; neither be thou dismayed; for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”

Josiah looked at him strangely.

“The Book of Joshua, Chapter 1, Verse 9. The Book will make a good companion on our journey. Good day, Mr. Throckmorton.”

Josiah remained frozen in amazement even after Charles had gone. The boy was quoting scripture to him? And what was this, “be not afraid?” He was not afraid. Certainly not. He was merely...anxious...concerning the preparation of his plantation.

Josiah sat back down at the table, sifted through the pile of papers to find a clean sheet then picked up his quill. “Last Will and Testament of Josiah Hanset Throckmorton,” he wrote.

Writing to his sister and brother would be the most difficult task of all. Naturally, Josiah saved this job until the very last, and it was late at night as he watched the candles burn lower and tried to compose a satisfactory-sounding letter for what seemed like the four-hundredth time that day.

Fatigue finally forced an uncustomary bluntness upon him.

“My Dearest Eleanor,” he wrote, “I am writing to inform you that my affairs in Maryland require me to travel at some length and I will be out of correspondence for an unknown period of time. Should you need to contact someone on my behalf, you may write to John Carter of Hill Crest Plantation. You recall that I am engaged to marry his daughter, Miss Caroline Carter, next year.”

He sat back and read it. Not bad. He had included the necessary message with no hint of the scandal that was likely to erupt from the incident. He had been so concerned about how to describe the reason for his departure but now saw it was not necessary to mention that fact at all.

“I do hope that you and Sir James are well and that my lords at Whitehall do their duty and appoint him to the position you find most desirable.”

He probably should have put that earlier in the letter, or at least the general wish for their health, but it was too late. He had not another piece of paper left on which to start anew; indeed, he had written his sister’s name and address on the top of this page earlier in the day and was now forced to use it even though a large grease stain now outlined the left margin. His fastidious sister would not be pleased, but he was past caring.

Josiah copied the same text onto the page he had addressed to his brother and folded and sealed both letters.

He was ready.

Captain Talbot had beautiful dark eyes. Caroline had noticed his eyes when he'd called her to deliver a message to Hardey, the big coarse sailor who had made fun of her so many times. "Mr." Hardey, as she was supposed to call him, apparently held a position of great authority on the ship, and everyone did what he ordered without asking questions. Even she had stopped asking questions. The first couple of times, he had merely laughed and said something disparaging about her being a little mouse. Then one time, he cuffed her across the face so hard she had spun into the deck rail. He warned her then that questioning an order was a flogging offense. Caroline did not know what flogging was, but she assumed it was not pleasant. Not much on this ship was.

After telling Mr. Hardey the captain wanted to see him, Caroline returned to the section of the deck she had been scrubbing with holystone and seawater. She hoped Captain Talbot was still on deck; she wanted to see his eyes again, just to be sure. She thought they were probably dark brown, but they could be a very deep blue.

He was nowhere to be seen. Caroline sighed and plopped down to her knees then looked at her hands. As rough as those of any slave in the fields. Since she had left home so many days ago, she had not seen her reflection, other than as rough shadow cast in the cloudy salt water of the ocean. She guessed that by now she must surely look the part she was learning to play as a sailor boy. The skin on her arms was red and freckled, even though she kept her sleeves rolled down as much as possible when out in the sun. Her face must show even more evidence of the sun, for her hat seemed to provide little coverage. Her lips were dry and cracked, and sometimes even bled a little. She tried not to think about her hair, which was clumped into dry, hard strands. It was pulled back out of her sight, but she could see what the sun and salt water had done to the hair of the men around her.

She looked around for the captain one last time. He had dark eyes and a very fine nose, she decided. Rather patrician. He must be of noble lineage to have such a distinguished profile and such delicate hands. Those hands, which moved in eloquent, flowing gestures when he spoke, were so unlike everyone else's on the ship—even hers, now. That meant he had never been a common sailor or laborer.

Caroline knew that officers in the queen's army came only from good families, and she assumed the same must be true of officers in the navy. But, though this ship flew the British flag, it was not a naval ship. The crew seemed to be some type of pirates, or perhaps smugglers. Why else had they kidnapped her and the men at Elkridge Landing? And surely men of good family did not command pirate ships!

So how, then, did this noble-born gentleman end up in such suspicious circumstances? Caroline began to imagine all sorts of tragedies befalling his family in Ireland—she'd heard enough to know most of the ship's crew had been assembled in Dublin, and assumed the Talbot family to have, at one time at least, possessed an immense estate in the Irish countryside. Perhaps an evil uncle had assumed control of the family holdings during his father's absence in King William's war. Or perhaps his father had died of fever and his mother remarried an evil man who forced him (and maybe brothers and sisters) to fend for themselves on the streets. This might explain taking to a pirate's way of life—he was doing it to support his poor younger brothers and sisters back home.

If that were the case, she could almost forgive him for taking her and the others from the inn. And they weren't being held as slaves, after all, because they would receive a share the same as the other men who had not been, as the seamen said, "pressed into service."

Caroline was still not sure what they would receive a share of, however. Captain Talbot had said they would be chasing pirates. The ship carried several cannon, and they had practiced using them. So, if they were going to fire cannon at the ships they chased, they would surely hit them and they would sink. What use was a share of a sunken ship?

Still, he was captain and everyone accepted the promise of a share without question, so she assumed he knew what he was doing.

“Not finished there, boy?” An abrasive voice broke into her reverie. Caroline looked up at the sailor who spoke—not Hardey, fortunately—and then down at the section of the deck she was scrubbing rather ineffectually. Of course, she wasn't finished! They never finished scrubbing the deck.

“Wipe up there,” the abrasive voice ordered, “then go below and help the cook.”

Caroline looked at her bucket wistfully. She disliked scrubbing the deck, but at least out here she enjoyed the fresh air and felt the comfort of a vast sky overhead. Down below it was all stink and darkness, and she wanted to have as little as possible to do with the food.

But she knew better than to balk at an order. As a ship's boy, she had to take orders from everyone. At least, if she had to be subjected to the orders of all men on the ship, she would rather it be as a servant boy than as an unprotected lady.

Below, she found the cook needed some assistance with the duff pudding for the midday meal. He was trying to pour flour from a cask into a small sack, but his hands shook so badly he could hardly hold the cask and bag in any kind of proximity for pouring. A frighteningly large fire burned on the small stove, sending hungry tongues of flame licking upward toward the exposed wood above.

“Dinnertime soon, and the cap'n must have his duff.” Bretton, the cook, laughed as he tried to aim the stream of flour into the bag Caroline now held open for him. “And it's not ready!” He laughed again. “One for me, one for the bag.” He splashed a prodigious amount of some strong-smelling liquor from an open bottle into his mouth and then into the sack in Caroline's hands. Then he chopped off several small pieces of suet and added them to the mixture. He took the sack from her in one hand, picked up the bottle in the other and leaned against the bulkhead.

“Fetch a cup of water from the open one,” Bretton instructed merrily. Caroline followed his vague gesture and found the open cask of water to which he referred. She saw two others sealed. Surely, the water in them would not be usable much longer, and then they would have to head for a port. She hoped it would be a big town where she might be able to obtain some proper clothes before beginning her return trip to Elkridge.

After she carefully delivered her dipper-full of water, Bretton knocked it into the bag, spilling about half, and sent her for another by gesturing with the liquor bottle. The gesture brought the bottle halfway to his mouth, and he completed the journey with a smile.

When the rest of the water had been added, he handed the bag to Caroline and attempted to tie it closed with a piece of dirty twine. It was an agonizingly slow process, and after about the seventh attempt, Caroline sighed in exasperation.

The cook yanked the sack from her arms and held out the grimy piece of twine. “So, you can do better?”

With relief, she took the twine and tied a neat knot, closing the bag securely.

Bretton scoffed and pulled at the knot, undoing it completely. Caroline's pride at finally having been able to accomplish a task evaporated before she could even swallow it.

"A granny knot, you ninny," Bretton jeered. "If ya can't even tie a square knot, you don't belong on a ship." He shoved the bag back into her hands and knotted it with the same motions she had used.

It was her turn to jeer. "Look here, now..." But the knot stayed fast while she tugged on it, though it looked just like the simple knot she had tied a moment before.

"Ooh, it's magic." The cook began a strange sort of dance, amused at her confusion over the knot. He shook the bag a couple of times and dropped it into the kettle of boiling water over the roaring fire.

"Well, you'd better watch that fire, anyway," Caroline muttered, knowing Hardey had warned the cook at least once to keep the flames lower. Maybe she could somehow draw the first mate's attention to Bretton's infraction. After all, even an inexperienced sailor like her realized fire was a serious danger aboard a wooden vessel. She would only be protecting her own interests if she did something that got the cook in trouble for his carelessness.

After a few moments' meditation, however, she could think of no pretense to lure the first mate into the galley.

"Nature calls," she announced, using the ever-handy excuse to get out. Once away from Bretton's ears, she would find Hardey and tell him the cook wanted him to see the rations he'd just opened.

Just as she got to the ladder to the hatch, however, she came face-to-face with Captain Talbot. Should she say something to him about the fire or the drunken cook?

She looked into his eyes and found she could say nothing whatsoever. They were brown eyes, a warm, rich brown fringed by dark curling lashes. She stood stock-still and completely forgot where she was going or why.

He seemed to be staring back at her, too. Their gazes remained locked together in the dim light, and Caroline felt as though it took a great deal of effort to breathe.

"Were you sent to fetch me, boy?" the captain asked.

Here was her chance.

She said nothing.

Gesturing toward the water dipper in her hands (which she had intended to return and had completely forgotten about), the captain asked if the cook wished to see him.

Here was the perfect chance to advise the captain about the dangerous fire and get even with Bretton for his boorish behavior. When she opened her mouth and tried to form words, though, no sound came out. She looked down in embarrassment.

And now the captain would leave! She'd lost her chance and looked like a fool in the bargain.

But he surprised her. "Are you well, boy?" the captain asked gently, placing his hand on her shoulder. "These past few days have taken much from you, I know."

His voice warmed her like the spring sun. He cared about how she felt! As she thrilled at the touch of his fine hand on her shoulder, he removed it and gave her a pat on the head.

"It will all seem second nature soon." He smiled. "And then the hunt will begin, and we'll all have some good fun!" With that, he turned and ascended the ladder with easy grace.

Caroline was on her way back to the galley to return the dipper when shouting and commotion erupted on the deck above. The few sailors who had been resting or working below quickly dashed by her and up the ladder.

"Land ho!"

Chapter Nine

Josiah pulled away from the uncomfortable something that was shaking him awake. It was too early to get up, still dark and the air a bit damp and cool. Sleep had eluded him for so long, and now that he finally had it, it was being wrested away. His haggard mind felt the injustice most keenly.

"Sir, you said you was to leave at half-five. 'Tis past that now." Betty scowled at him from the side of the doorway as she spoke.

Ellis stood next to his bed, still shaking his arm. "She asked me to accompany her, sir. It being your bedroom and all."

Half-past five? In the morning? Why on earth would he have asked to be awakened so early? Then his gaze landed on the open chest waiting by the door. The *Canary* was to leave with the early tide this morning.

Josiah sprang from the bed with uncharacteristic speed. After the remarks Charles Carter made in parting yesterday, he was most anxious to show he was not afraid to make this rescue venture. Tardiness could be equated with reluctance, if not outright cowardice.

Josiah was not used to having servants help him dress, but they were there and might as well be made useful. "My waistcoat, Ellis, if you please." He looked at Betty and thought for a second. "Coffee," he ordered.

While Ellis reached for the waistcoat, Josiah scooped up his stockings and shoes. What was missing?

"Your breeches, sir?" Ellis handed those to him along with the waistcoat.

"Very good." Josiah realized that the process of dressing was improved little, if at all, by the presence of an audience. "That will be all for now." He nodded toward the door.

His hands twitched slightly as he knotted his cravat; it was certainly due to the difficulty of dressing by candlelight. Where was his hat? Downstairs. Good. He was ready for his coffee. He descended the stairs with self-assurance.

"Have you anything else to add to your chest, sir?" Ellis asked.

Josiah's sudden burst of confidence faded, and his mind began to race. Did he have everything? He stepped into the library. Did he need any of his papers? He hadn't even looked through his library to see what personal effects he might need to take with him. A sense of panic welled up inside of him. Taking time to go through the papers would certainly make him late to the ship.

Then, as he thought of Charles calmly waiting on the *Canary*, the confusion and worry suddenly subsided. He was done packing.

"No. You may lock it and load it into the skiff. I'll be along momentarily."

"Coffee and breakfast 're ready, sir," Betty hollered.

Josiah stepped back into the warmth of the main room and eyed the mug of coffee eagerly, casting only a cursory glance at the plate of fried mush, bacon and toast. He wasn't hungry, but he remembered enough of the horrid food on the voyage from London to realize this might be his last chance at a decent meal for many months. Although he had never really considered Betty's cooking to be much to begin with.

Josiah poked at the burnt edges of his mush, wondering if the insides were even warm. Who knew when he would again taste a hot breakfast or drink real coffee? He drank a long swallow, even trying to enjoy the sensation of burning his throat. Then he looked around the room.

He had always hated this house. So small, so crude, though by local standards it ranked above average in size and nicety of finish. All of his interior walls were plastered—downstairs, at least—and the trim and cornices in the main room were finely carved. With the furniture he had brought with him, the house took on a local brand of elegance, and most visitors seemed duly impressed.

He sighed and looked back at his breakfast. The house still seemed to him a shabby cabin, meaner than the cottage of the poorest laborer back home. Until recently, cooking had been done in the best room! Perhaps it would not be so dreadful after all if he were to return from his "adventure" to find the house decayed or burnt to the ground. He could start over and build a proper house. Or he could return home.

Josiah had not seriously thought of returning to England before, but it began to seem like a viable option now. Both Eleanor and Richard, his older sister and brother, had indicated in their latest letters that his uncle, Robert Throckmorton, had taken ill. Eleanor even noted he was not expected to recover. Uncle Robert now had no male heirs, since his son John had himself died of an illness last winter. His estate was entailed to the males of the family, and so would pass to Richard.

It would be most natural for Josiah to return and manage his uncle's Hampshire estate on Richard's behalf. He did not know if his brother would agree, of course. The estate in Hampshire was not as substantial as the main Throckmorton estate, but it was substantial enough, and Richard enjoyed exercising control over people and property. Probably, if he did allow Josiah to manage it, he'd give such minute instructions as to leave him feeling absolutely powerless. But Josiah would at least have a comfortable house, competent servants and, certainly, a better style of life.

He watched Betty try to shoo three flies out the window opposite.

"Damned buggers, get on there." She slapped at one on the windowsill then wiped her hands on her apron.

Josiah pushed his breakfast plate away. He tried to savor the last few mouthfuls of coffee but found himself munching on the grounds. In vain he looked around for a clean napkin.

This country was too rough, refinement too rare. Certain aspects of life he had always taken for granted were simply not here. There were no towns to speak of, and no proper roads to reach them had they been there. If he needed a new hat or gloves he could not ride into the haberdashery in town and purchase them; he had to place an order with his agent in London and wait perhaps a year to get them.

The appeal of the civilized life back in England grew stronger as the likelihood of losing everything he had gained on this frontier loomed ahead in the form of the two-masted brig waiting in Elkridge Landing.

Josiah set down his coffee mug and stood. It was time to go. What did he have to lose, after all? His overseer would make sure the crop of tobacco was harvested, cured and prized correctly, and that was the only valuable asset on the plantation.

Actually, though, he did have several valuable slaves and servants with useful years left, and these might be gone when he returned. The furniture, plate and books, too, were quite valuable when he thought about it. But no one in the immediate neighborhood could steal his household effects, of course, because they would be recognized were they to show up in someone else's house.

"Well, Betty, I am off. Please give my farewell to Priscilla and remember that you are to see Ellis for your instructions." Josiah smiled curtly at her, picked up his coat and walked out, trying to give the door a confident slam behind him.

His thoughts, however, did not sound with the same confidence. In what was certain to be a lengthy absence, his goods could be moved and sold some distance away. He imagined Betty and the others dividing his belongings and scattering into the hills.

In the light that was just starting to break through the trees, Josiah could see the tobacco in the fields, raising full, fragrant leaves toward the sky. The sight of the dead hulks of girdled trees, pointing upward like decayed fingers, nearly made him shudder. He paused for just a second then continued down the path to the river.

The sound of his feet crunching on stones seemed uncommonly loud in the early quiet. A sudden snort made him jump slightly, but it was just one of the pigs. He could dimly see it chasing one of its fellows into the brush. Would the servants butcher and eat them the moment his ship set sail?

Similar thoughts plagued Josiah all the way to the Landing. Ellis rowed in silence; Josiah pictured his skiff lying at the bottom of the river, rotten and full of holes. He could imagine, on his return, not even being able to find his plantation, with the pier rotted beyond recognition and no sign of habitation visible from the water.

When he ran out of property to destroy in his siege of mental devastation, Josiah turned to predicting the damage that was sure to be inflicted on his person by this adventure. Before they even reached the high seas, the diet of awful ship's food would shrink him to the size of a beggar, and he would probably get scurvy and lose his teeth.

Every day during his passage from England he had examined his face in a small mirror, peering anxiously to detect any signs of illness. He had frequently scanned the sky for clouds and tried to keep attuned to any change in the wind. If the ship were to start pitching wildly, he had not been sure if he should go below to keep from being washed overboard or stay on deck and make ready to jump before the vessel could be sucked under the waves.

The more Josiah thought back on those memories and the anxious days of the crossing, the more he grieved. He had forgotten how truly miserable he had been on that ship. And now he was heading out to sea again to chase after dangerous men.

He felt rather than saw his boat strike the dock. Ellis stood a little too quickly, and the skiff rocked violently back and forth while he struggled to tie it fast. After a pause and an almost imperceptible sigh, Josiah stood and steadied himself to make the great step onto the dock. He heard grunts and scraping sounds behind him as Ellis struggled to move his chest of goods from the bottom of the open boat up to the dock. Josiah did not turn around but merely continued his plodding progress toward the waiting ship.

“Good morning, Mr. Throckmorton,” Charles Carter hailed from the quarterdeck as he approached.

Josiah said nothing until he had walked up the gangway onto the ship, traversed the length of the main deck and come to stand at the base of the quarterdeck.

“Good morning, Mr. Carter, Captain Johnson,” he said quietly, bowing slightly to each man in turn.

An officer who had apparently been overseeing the last-minute loading of supplies ran up behind him demanding to know his business but stopped mid-sentence after seeing the captain tip his hat in unconcerned greeting.

“Welcome aboard, sir,” the officer said apologetically.

“My luggage.” Josiah gestured back to the unfortunate Ellis, who appeared to be in great danger of tipping off the gangway and into the water with the heavily laden chest. Finally, it hit the deck with a loud

thud. The officer looked aghast.

“Your personal luggage, sir? Would these be items wanted on the voyage?”

“Why, certainly, man,” Josiah snapped in reply, “my clothes will be wanted on the voyage!”

“I'm sorry, sir.” The officer glanced toward his captain, who wasn't paying the least bit of attention. “It's just that, well, you are Mr. Throckmorton, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“Well, Mr. Throckmorton, your quarters have not enough room to stow this chest.” He looked helplessly at his captain but again received no notice.

“What the devil do you expect me to do about it? I must have my clothes for the voyage. It is not my fault or my concern that you have selected a cabin of—of—of insufficient size.” Josiah punched his words with all the pent-up anger at his own impotence in being swept along on this foolish trip.

The unhappy officer beckoned a sailor and ordered him to see if Josiah's trunk would fit through the hatch.

When Josiah saw that arrangements were being made to accommodate his luggage he should have felt soothed, but found he did not.

“Well, man!” he yelled at Ellis. “Do you plan to sit on the dock until my return? Get on home with you and attend to your responsibilities.” He stared angrily at his servant as the man headed back to the skiff, cast off his short line and began to row toward Hanset.

Josiah felt himself growing hot, as though he were literally seething. He paced a few steps to calm himself and looked up to see Charles Carter coming toward him, hand outstretched in greeting.

"Good day to you, sir. We are well ready for this voyage, I think."

Josiah remembered that at their last parting Charles said something about being afraid and dismayed, so he must show no sign of fear or dismay or it would be taken as a weakness. His resolve to appear calm actually did calm him a little.

“Good day, Mr. Carter. I trust all of your family were well when you took your leave?”

“Yes, all well except for Caroline; she has been indisposed these last several days.”

Josiah simply nodded. The pretense of Miss Carter's illness was easily maintained, although thoroughly unnecessary. He imagined everyone on the ship and, indeed, everyone in Elkridge Landing knew they were setting off to rescue Miss Carter from pirates. He probably should have said something expressing his concern for Miss Carter's state of health, but it seemed absurd to continue to inquire after an imaginary ailment.

Frankly, he was annoyed with Miss Carter and rather hoped she was in an uncomfortable state of health. Her recklessness was going to cost him everything, and her family as well. What had she been thinking? Sneaking into a tavern dressed like a boy. Was this the behavior of a lady? The lady who would be mistress of his plantation? Josiah was surprised to find he really did not care whether they brought her

back or not.

Chapter Ten

It was a small sight to cause such commotion. A thin bump on the horizon, barely noticeable. But all men who were not on watch stood as if glued to the railing, even though only a few days had passed since they sailed out of the bay into the Atlantic.

The open water of the ocean didn't really look any different from that of the bay, but it felt different to Caroline. The featureless horizon of the ocean beckoned with the promise of other lands and civilizations.

From the time they were girls, she and Edwina had spent many rainy afternoons examining the map hanging in the family parlor, taking turns tracing the thin line of the Patapsco River to where it widened into the Chesapeake Bay six miles downstream. A few days ago, she had finally sailed into that bay, and the difference was enormous—more startling than she had ever imagined.

Since the map showed the long, tapered bay emptying into an ocean so much larger, Caroline had expected to feel something even more spectacular when the sloop had finally headed into the Atlantic. But physically, she hadn't noticed much change. The water stretched endlessly on all sides, and she felt small and transient in comparison—but not much smaller than she had before.

Now that she was in the ocean, though, she could imagine the coasts of Europe and Africa in the distance. Just beyond the horizon lay the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome, and the centers of power and fashion, London and Paris. To the south lay lands of warm waters and exotic fruits. The horizon held no trees, no tobacco fields; and beyond it, she knew, were cities with painted houses and streets teeming with life. A ship could take her over that horizon.

She joined the seamen's silent vigil at the rail.

"North Carolina."

The muttered voice shattered her vision of the Paris streets.

North Carolina was simply another English colony very much like Maryland—only worse. Tobacco and even fewer people. No cities. It would be an endless sea of trees, like home.

Caroline sighed and stared at the dark strip of land.

Hardey had questioned a few of the experienced seamen in the crew and found one man who had served on a ship that had actually been inspected by the governor's secretary in Bath, North Carolina. From this information, the first mate had been able to chart an approximate course for the capital. Stories the seaman had told of the treacherous coast gave him cause for concern, but what was more troubling was the reason for the ship's inspection. It was a smuggling vessel, and the governor had insisted on receiving first choice of the smuggled merchandise before allowing the ship to sell her wares to the public.

What kind of dealings could they expect from this governor? Hardey had expressed his worries to his captain, but Talbot seemed to pay no mind. Before they actually sent in a landing party, however, he wanted to try again.

Several hours later, a lookout spotted the settlement they hoped was Bath, and Edward issued orders to drop anchor and prepare a landing party. Hardey could wait no longer.

"Captain Talbot." He rushed up as soon as he heard the rattle of the anchor chain. "May I have a word with you?" He glanced at the figures lining the rails around them. "Alone, please, Captain?"

"If you insist." Edward spun on his heel and walked briskly toward the hatch leading to the cabins below, obviously peeved at the delay.

Once below, Hardey chose his words with care. "Captain, the information we gathered from Justin was not promising. Landing near Bath will be a difficult and dangerous affair." Seeing these words had no deterrent effect, he continued, "Moreover, this Governor Eden does not appear to be the sort likely to issue a letter of marque against pirates."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, Captain."

"So, you're advising me to abandon my plans, yet you pose no alternative?"

"We could go to Jamaica, Captain, or perhaps South Carolina."

"That would delay our start by several days or even weeks. And we have no guarantee that governors elsewhere are not as corrupt as Eden appears to be. No, no, I have thought this all through. If we offer Eden a ten percent share of the prizes I'm sure he will most gratefully accept. We will, after all, be doing him a favor in protecting the shipping off his coast."

Talbot was already ushering him out of the cabin; Hardey knew there was nothing more to be said.

Though North Carolina ranked as perhaps the least inspiring place on Earth for her at that moment, Caroline still hoped to be chosen to go ashore as one of the landing party. She joined the crowd of eager volunteers as Captain Talbot handpicked a crew to row ashore. Gazing at his profile, she willed him to look at her.

“Taylor, Aldercroft, O’Toole...”

But, one-by-one, he called out names and did not even turn in her direction. He would take eight, and seven men had already been selected.

Then Talbot looked directly at her. Caroline’s heart seemed to stop, and she felt a warm smile start across her face.

“Dunworth.”

A man stepped around from behind her. Caroline closed her eyes and ground her teeth together, desperate to stop the tears that pushed against her eyelids. But she felt foolish standing in self-imposed darkness in the midst of all the commotion. She opened her eyes. Blinking quickly to keep back the tears, she tried to move to a more secluded spot where she could master her emotions in private.

“Bring us back some good rum, d’ye hear?”

“Aye, if there’s any left after we’ve done.”

“A few women, then, at least!”

The sense of joy on deck depressed Caroline. She was not part of the landing party. She would not get her chance to escape. And Captain Talbot had looked right into her eyes and had not chosen her. It was not an oversight; it was a direct denial of her unspoken yet obvious request to join the group going ashore. Why had he said no? It would have been better if he had never looked at her at all.

No...no...no...is all Caroline heard with each pull of the oars as she watched the open boat inch through the water toward the shore. The captain sat straight and looked almost tall. Before the boat drew too far away, she could see his face light up with a grin as he said something to one of the men. After she could no longer make out the expressions on his face, she could still see the wind rustle the dark waves of hair and the lace on his collar.

She went down to lie in her hammock until her watch was called.

Edward hadn’t made it through the landing with as much grace as he would have liked, and his shoes and stockings were soaked with saltwater that squished with every step he took up the sandy street. It would make for an undignified entrance.

Nevertheless, he was here. And he drew closer to action with every step.

The small village of Bath had no official government buildings. In fact, all the buildings were barely deserving of the designation, being little more than ramshackle huts vying for the honor of being the first to blow down in the coming hurricane season. One hut, however, boasted more activity than the others and seemed to play host to a fair number of parasitic-looking figures lounging in the shade of a front awning. This would at least be a good place to start.

“Pardon me,” Edward addressed one of the parasites, “I am looking for Governor Eden. Is he to be found in this town?”

“Charlie?” The man nearest Edward spit out a brown stream. “Yeah, he’s in there with Tobias.”

“Thank you.” Edward started forward to knock on the door but found his progress suddenly halted by the man, who moved with much more speed than his appearance suggested him capable of.

“He might not want visitors right now.”

“Governor Eden and Mr. Knight might be discussing...official colonial business,” a second man explained. “We would be more than happy to give him your name and see if he is home to callers given the time of day.” The man looked at his comrades and gave a little snort that was almost a giggle.

“Do you have a card, sir?” a third man asked, sputtering with laughter.

“An appointment, you must make an appointment!” the first man added, laughing even harder.

Edward smiled and stepped back just far enough so the men no longer appeared to be actively blocking his progress toward the door. “Gentlemen, please be so good as to inform your governor that Captain Edward Talbot of the sloop *Osprey* seeks an audience with His Eminence at his convenience. Alas, I have no card, but I see you have no silver tray for conveying it to His Eminence. Perhaps it is being cleaned by one of the servants?”

All three parasites laughed, seeming pleased Edward had joined in their mockery of society and officialdom.

This was unlike any government Edward had ever seen, at least in appearance. But it was what he should have expected from an uncivilized colony like this. Eden should be only too happy to take a share of prizes from the *Osprey*.

The first man stepped back to the door and rapped it with the side of his hand. “Charlie, there’s a captain here to see you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Murphy,” a voice called from inside. “You may enter, Captain.”

After Edward’s eyes adjusted to darkness inside, he walked over and bowed to the short man who walked forward to greet him. “Captain Edward Talbot of the sloop *Osprey*, at your service,” he announced.

The man to whom he had introduced himself wore a brocade waistcoat and an elaborate wig, which was crooked. As if he realized what Edward was thinking, the little man reached up with a quick gesture and flicked the wig into its proper place as he turned and introduced his companion.

“Captain Talbot, may I present Mr. Tobias Knight? Mr. Knight is the Secretary of the Colony and

Collector of Customs.”

“At your service, Mr. Knight.”

“Please, take a chair, Captain Talbot,” the governor said, resuming his seat and gesturing toward a leather chair opposite his own. The chair smelled of mildew and rocked as though one of the legs was shorter than the other three.

“What brings you to see us today?” Knight asked as the governor pulled out a tobacco pipe rolled in padded silk.

“I have a proposal for the governor, but as it concerns commerce and you are an officer of the colony, I would be pleased to discuss the matter in your company.” Edward hoped his displeasure at Knight’s presence was not obvious. The secretary might object to the plan or, at the very least, demand a share of the prizes for himself. He took a deep breath and continued. “My Lord Governor and Mr. Secretary, you are no doubt aware of the increase in piracy in your coastal waters?”

“Yes, Captain Talbot,” remarked the governor, speaking somewhat through his pipe.

“I propose to place my sloop at your disposal to rid your waters of pirates.”

“Rid us of pirates, Captain Talbot?” The governor appeared amused.

This was not the reaction Edward had expected. Did the governor think he was not up to the task? “Yes, My Lord Governor. My sloop, the *Osprey*, served under a letter of marque in the late war with much success. That success can now be turned to the matter of securing domestic shipping. If you would issue a letter of marque authorizing me to capture pirates preying in your coastal waters...” Edward could have sworn he saw Eden and Knight exchange amused glances before resuming their stoic audience. “...then I will devote the efforts of my ship and crew to protecting the safety of your waters.”

“From pirates, Captain Talbot?”

“From pirates, My Lord Governor.”

“And you seek a letter of marque from the governor allowing you to capture pirates and keep their plundered cargoes?” the secretary asked. “How much are you willing to pay for this privilege?”

“Mr. Secretary, since I offer my services to your colony without charging you a fee, I would hope you would allow me to provide them without charging me one”

“Hmm.” The governor appeared to frown as he puffed on his pipe.

“You would, of course, be entitled to the royal prerogative.” Edward had hoped he would not have to resurrect the practice of paying ten percent of privateer earnings to the Crown. In recent years, the government had been so eager to enlist the service of privateers it had stopped requiring them to turn over the royal portion, which had been nearly impossible to collect anyway. But by offering the governor ten percent when the government was no longer entitled to it and would not have to account for it to the royal exchequer, he was effectively offering a bribe. The governor would get ten percent of the prize money for his own pockets.

Edward paused—there was always a chance his bribe would be met with righteous indignation.

It was not. Governor Eden slowly rocked in his chair, chomping on his pipe thoughtfully. Secretary Knight looked at his governor, then at Edward, and appeared to grow anxious, shifting repeatedly in his seat. When the governor stood to knock his ashes out the window, the secretary finally spoke.

“Will you grant us some time to discuss your proposal, Captain Talbot?”

“Of course. I am at your disposal.” Edward wondered how much time Knight was talking about. Something wasn’t right.

“We will only be a few minutes, Captain,” the governor said, and nodded him toward the door. “Why don’t you go to the coffeehouse for some refreshment and call on us again in, say, half of an hour?”

Edward had no choice.

The “coffeehouse” turned out to be the largest building in the settlement, though, if anything, it was less impressive than any of the other structures. Its framework seemed to remain standing only because it would require too much effort for it to fall down.

Coffee was not available at the coffeehouse, but the establishment did offer four kinds of rum, and one of the men on the porch had enthusiastically recommended the punch. Edward passed on the suggestion and instead took a dram of plain rum. Then he headed for the nearest chair and sat down heavily.

They were going to reject his proposal. Why? He hadn’t offended their sensibilities with his bribe, that much he could tell.

He stared straight ahead with his eyes out of focus, taking little notice of his surroundings. But the surroundings soon forced themselves on his attention. The “coffeehouse” was full of men, which was very surprising at this time of day. It appeared as though an entire ship’s crew were on leave and had descended en masse to drink the day away. It was a pretty rough crew, too. Edward now noticed weapons in evidence all around—nearly every man wore a knife or a pistol or even a brace of pistols across the shoulders.

Where had these men come from? They were certainly not tobacco farmers. But his sloop was the only seagoing vessel in sight.

“’E took the best boots, though, the bugger.”

“Aye, and the best of the stockings and britches!”

“Yeah, well, they say Eden gets the first pick of the lot when you bring your cargo to 'The Poor Carolina.’”

The conversation around him drifted to Edward’s attention. When he heard the governor’s name, he listened more closely.

“Well, I won’t drink ’is health, anyway. ’E took too much!”

“We don’t need ’is pardon this time.”

“Aye, there’s no one about to bring us in.”

“We should ’ave asked for a vote—we can careen the ship somewhere we ain’t got to pay first!”

“Quartermaster said the waistcoats and boots and the like brought in a fine sum.”

“And the tea, I heard. Quare stuff, that is. Drink made from leaves.”

“Forget the cargo. I wanna know what happened to the goods we took from the gennelman. I heard he had jewels and wigs and pots o’ money.”

“I wouldn’t mind a jewel or two myself.”

“They’d look right beautiful around your monkey neck.”

It was now past the time for Edward to return to meet with the governor, but he wanted to know if what he was hearing was really as it seemed. It almost sounded like a crew discussing the plunder from a raid. With no legitimate privateers in the water, the only crews taking prizes would be pirates.

Did his ears hear correctly? Was Eden taking a cut from their plunder? That seemed incredible. It was one thing to take a share from smugglers, who were, after all, merely merchants seeking to avoid undue taxation. It was something else entirely to profit from outright piracy. He must have heard the name wrong. But there was something said about a pardon...

These disturbing thoughts accompanied Edward on his walk back down the sandy street. And where was their ship?

When he reached the awning at the governor’s house, he looked at one of the men on the porch and gestured toward the coffeehouse. “Their ship? Where is it?”

“Fiddler Cove,” the man replied. “Best spot to careen in the colony. Only costs a bit.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Edward remarked dryly as he stepped past the man to knock on the door.

“You may enter,” called a voice.

“Ah, Captain Talbot.” The governor gave him a full smile for the first time that day—a slow, unpleasant smile revealing a mouthful of stained teeth. “We thank you for your generous offer to protect our colonial waters. However, we have decided it would not be appropriate to issue a letter of marque at this time.”

Edward had expected this answer, but he found it difficult to swallow all the same. “May I ask My Lord Governor why it would be inappropriate to issue a letter of marque against what surely you must consider to be...” He raised his eyebrows slightly. “...your enemy?”

“My dear captain.” The governor chomped on his pipe again. “It would not be appropriate because there is simply no need of such service.”

“We have no pirates in these waters,” the secretary added. “Your sloop is the only vessel on our horizon.” He grinned.

“We are a poor colony, indeed,” the governor continued apologetically, “and have nothing of value which would attract pirates. So, I am sorry to decline your offer, but I fear I must.”

“Then I see that our interview is at an end. Good day.” Edward was halfway up the street before he paused to take a breath.

The seamen waiting on the beach for Edward’s return had spent the better part of the morning speculating about what business their captain could have in this crude village. They could all tell the business had not gone well when they saw Edward approach them, his heels digging into the sand at a furious pace. As he drew closer, they saw a black scowl and each man tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

“Shove off,” Edward roared. He spat toward the village before climbing into the boat to head back to the *Osprey* .

Chapter Eleven

“She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her.”

The words woke Josiah from a fitful sleep; he had dreamed of rescuing Caroline Carter. In his dream, he had stood on the deck of a huge ship as it rolled back and forth in the waves. Miss Carter had fallen into the ocean and was waving her arms desperately for help. He kept trying to throw a line out to her, but his throws always fell short. When the sound of Charles’s voice broke this vision, Josiah jerked up, breathing hard.

“Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.”

Peace? No. Worry, nothing but worry. Worry about saving her, worry about her respect...

“The Lord by Wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens.”

Wisdom? There was no wisdom in any of this. That was the trouble.

“So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble.”

“Charles, what are you doing?” Josiah was now fully awake and fully aware that Charles Carter was reading something aloud by the light of a sputtering candle.

“Nightly devotions,” Charles replied. “When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.”

“I was not afraid. And, for that matter, my sleep was not sweet. I was having a rather unpleasant dream. But at least I was sleeping, which I am no longer. Now I am awake with the same wretched headache that brought me down here in the first place!” Josiah took a perverse pleasure from knowing his angry tirade had halted Charles’s endless stream of Bible reading.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you, Mr. Throckmorton.”

“Yes, well, are you finished with your devotions now, Mr. Carter?”

“Two more verses, if I may, sir? A reading from the Book of Proverbs really helps me put the events of the day in perspective and prepare for the morrow.”

“Yes, I see. Get on with it, then do put out your light.”

“Thank you. ‘Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. For the Lord shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.’ Goodnight, Mr. Throckmorton.”

Afraid. Fear. Again. Was Charles Carter trying to mock him?

“Mr. Carter, what were you reading just now?”

“The Book of Proverbs, Chapter 3. I left off with Verse 26.”

“Why did you choose that particular selection?”

“Of late, I frequently start or end my day with readings from Proverbs. These last few days, I have chosen my selections at random.”

“At random? So, you don’t know whether you will be reading about fear or retribution or...” Josiah tried to think back to sermons he’d heard to remember some Biblical themes “...salvation?”

“It is all about salvation, Mr. Throckmorton. But no, when I choose verses at random as I have these past few evenings, the selection of topic usually comes as a pleasant surprise.”

So all the discussion of fear must have been a coincidence.

The deck swarmed with pirates, all brandishing heavy, curved cutlasses. They roared and screeched; hands that weren't carrying swords waved pistols. Then they all turned and looked at Josiah—and giggled. Every one of the faces was that of Miss Carter.

The giggling grew louder and more raucous. Some of the Miss Carters doubled over with laughter, others pointed with their swords. One of them used her sword to shove him against the railing of the ship. Three more of them, still laughing, pushed him over the side. He screamed and flailed and...

...found himself sitting up in his berth.

It was dark, and a damp, rotten smell filled the air. But everything was quiet. No roaring pirates, no giggling Miss Carters. Just the steady creaks and groans from the ship as she moved peacefully through the bay.

This voyage was destined to be unbearable. When Josiah was awake, a cracking headache split his thoughts into useless fragments, making him long for peaceful sleep. Now worries doomed him to torture in his sleep as well. He didn't even want to think about what that last dream might mean.

He sat up and smoothed the hair back off his face. It was hot in the small cabin; perhaps his head would ache less in the cooler air outside. He had not undressed, since he feared they could be roused at any moment to find the ship in danger. Quietly, he slipped on his shoes and crept out of the cabin. Charles appeared to be sleeping sweetly, just as he had prophesied in his nightly devotions.

Outside, Josiah could not see any lights from the shore, but he did not know if that was because no one was awake in the vicinity or because the ship was now too far out to see any of the shore. Either way, it was lonely. He sighed.

What was he doing here? How would they find Miss Carter? And then—the dream forced him to address it—what would he do when they found her? Could he still marry the girl? She had behaved so irresponsibly. And so wickedly. And so defiantly. Would she fit into his household? Into his life?

Polite society would be repulsed by her escapades. There was something unacceptable, almost unclean, about a woman who would so flaunt tradition and common sense. And time spent among brigands would make her even more repugnant to society. And he must, after all, move in society. She would not be accepted by anyone, ever again.

So, why was he here? If he really didn't want her back and, indeed, felt it might even be better for her if she never came back to face life as a social pariah, why was he here? Maybe, when they reached the mouth of the bay, he should simply turn around and head back to his plantation.

He found, with surprise, that the idea did not even vaguely appeal to him. He had set out on this journey to help Charles Carter bring his sister home. And even though he didn't know how they were going to do it, he somehow felt he owed it to Charles to see the thing through. At least, for a while.

Josiah breathed the wet, salty air and shrugged. His head still ached a little, when he thought about it, but it did not drive him mad as it had earlier. It felt good to move his shoulders. He glanced around to see if anyone observed him, and finding that none of the few seamen on deck looked in his direction, he lifted his arms to the night sky in a slow stretch. Then he shook his head briskly from side to side and wrung his wrists a few times. He would have stamped his feet as well but did not want to risk waking someone or

calling attention to his exercises.

Instead, he took a few brisk steps, landing as softly as he could. Only a little headache remained; perhaps he would now be able to sleep. Charles was sleeping sweetly, he remembered, so he, too, would think of “sweet sleep.”

Words carry so much power, Josiah realized as he lay almost comfortably in his berth the next morning. His thought of sweet sleep had worked magic. He had fallen into a deep slumber soon after he lay down and awoke refreshed with no thoughts of bungled rescue attempts or mocking piratical ladies dressed in boys’ clothes.

Bright light filtering into the cabin indicated a morning well under way. Presumably, his cabin-mate was out making plans of some sort—or reading his morning devotions or his mid-morning devotions or his late-early-mid-pre-noon devotions. But no, the small, worn Bible lay on the tiny shelf next to Charles’s berth.

Josiah stretched languidly and enjoyed the graceful, rocking motion of the ship. He should rise and find some tasks to attend to. As a passenger, though, he didn’t see he had much to do on the ship until they arrived at the mouth of the bay. He should probably discuss plans with Charles, but that certainly wouldn’t take all day.

Breakfast would be nice about now. The nine hundred pounds of tobacco paid for meals on the passage, but no one would deliver those meals. If he wanted some breakfast, he would have to get it himself.

Josiah sat up, put his feet in his shoes and stretched again. The Bible on Charles’s shelf caught his eye. What were those magic words again? Something about sweet sleep. He should look up the whole verse.

He glanced at the door, expecting to see Charles enter just as he reached for his book. Then he chuckled. Charles always seemed to be telling others about the Holy Scriptures; he would no doubt be pleased to see Josiah pick up his Bible.

A ribbon bookmark opened to a section of the Book of Proverbs. Josiah scanned a few lines: something about the bread of wickedness...envying the oppressor...then he found it—Proverbs 3:24.

“When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep shall be sweet.” Josiah read the verse four times then closed the book to see if he could repeat it from memory. Good. He would be able to sleep tonight as well!

He carefully replaced the book on the shelf. Leaving the cabin, he was surprised to find the air did not smell as foul as usual. He climbed the ladder to the upper deck without slipping and enjoyed a flood of sunshine.

At the beginning of the voyage, the captain had expressed some concern about the weather; in a few weeks they could expect hurricanes. But Josiah saw no cause for worry today, and in another day or two they would be off the ship. The expected storms might well be over before he and Charles found a ship for hire. Weather should be the least of their problems.

He spotted Charles talking to one of the seamen and waved a cheerful greeting as he headed in their

direction.

No one had seen Captain Talbot for several hours, and the murmuring among the seamen grew ominous. A few of the rumors reached John Hardey through one channel or another, and included that the captain had made a deal with the Governor of North Carolina to smuggle tobacco past customs agents; that he had fallen in love with a local trollop and would keep the ship in Pamlico Sound until she agreed to accept his advances; that he had contracted the pox and was hiding in his cabin, drinking himself into a stupor; that he had lost his wits and blown his brains out with a silver-handled pistol. This last rumor seemed particularly unfounded, since a gunshot would have been noticed in the relatively tight quarters aboard the *Osprey*.

The reality had to be better than the rumors, and Hardey believed the confused crew deserved to hear at least some of it. He could say nothing, however, without the captain's permission.

When he feared he should wait no longer, he approached the captain's cabin, trying to put as much deference as possible into the soft knock on the door. "Captain Talbot, may I have a word with you?"

There was no sound at first then a shuffle and a scrape of glass on wood. "Hardey?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Enter."

The captain had been drinking, a fact attested to by an open bottle of rum on the table in front of him. But Talbot rarely got drunk, and he did not appear to be so now. Yawning, with his hair askew, the captain looked as if he had just awakened from a nap.

As he stepped closer, Hardey could see that the bottle still held most of its contents. The chart they had examined earlier lay near the bottle; angry-looking circles had been scratched around the Carolina coast.

"Excuse me, sir, the men await their orders."

Edward just looked at him for a moment. "We did not get a letter of marque from the Governor of North Carolina." He corked the rum and stood, his shoes scraping the floor as he walked over to replace the bottle in a small locked cabinet.

"Shall I plot a course for Charles Town?"

"No, this entire coast is corrupt. I wouldn't trust the Governor of South Carolina any more than the thief who calls himself Governor of the northern Carolina. We'll head for the Caribbean."

"Yes, sir." The captain had not dismissed him, so Hardey remained at attention, waiting.

"See to it, Mr. Hardey."

"Yes, sir." This time, Hardey turned to go, and had almost reached the door before he heard the captain speak again.

"He profits from pirates, Hardey."

The first mate turned around and waited for Talbot to continue.

“He makes deals with them, takes a cut of the plunder, issues them pardons.”

“Sir?”

“Governor Eden. He sells them pardons, lets them careen in safety and drink and whore freely in his taverns.”

Hardey did not know what to say and so kept silent, as usual. His look, however, apparently prompted Edward to continue.

“He won’t issue a letter of marque because it would end his personal source of revenue. He’s scum, Hardey, he and his ‘secretary.’ Too slippery to hang.” Edward paused again, looked down and combed his fingers through the dark tangles of his hair. Then he looked up suddenly. “But I’ll find someone who will issue a letter of marque. And then we know where to come to find the pirates.” A note of vengeful triumph sounded in these last words.

“Jamaica, Captain?”

“See to it!”

“Sail ho!” The cry rang through the *Osprey* at first light. Captain Talbot called for his glass and examined the vessel for a long time. No one spoke above a whisper. At this distance, only the captain could tell if the sail on the horizon was that of a merchant ship or a navy vessel—or something else. After a while, he turned and handed the telescope to his first mate.

Silence reigned for several more minutes while Hardey formulated his opinion. He handed the glass back to Edward. “Brig, English-built, less than one hundred tons, no colors raised.”

“Yes, and her mission?”

“Well, the obvious assumption is that she is a British merchant ship bound for North Carolina or the Chesapeake Bay with a cargo of goods from London.”

“Yes, that would be the typical assumption, wouldn’t it?” The captain smiled wickedly.

“You don’t think so, Captain?”

“That ship’s on a nor’westerly course. England is far to the north of us. Do you really think a ship bound for the Chesapeake Bay from England would come so far south before heading north again?”

“Well, sir, ships sometimes do make directly for the West Indies before continuing up to the bay.”

“I know that,” Talbot snapped. “This ship may have come from the West Indies, but I do not believe it is headed for Virginia or Maryland.” He paused. “I think this is one of Governor Eden’s new ‘associates’ coming to do business in North Carolina.”

Hardey raised an eyebrow. "A pirate, Captain?" He put out his hand in a mute request for another turn with the telescope.

"Yes, Mr. Hardey. She is carrying too much armament for a merchant vessel, and, as you can see even more clearly now, she is not a navy ship."

Hardey could see through the glass that the sparse crew on deck contained no uniformed naval officer; moreover, the very paucity of crew itself indicated that the ship was not of the royal navy. But if a small crew was a sign a vessel was not a naval ship, it was also a sign it was not manned by pirates, since pirate vessels tended to be even more tightly packed than crowded naval ships. Both pirates and warships needed crew to man the guns, and pirates needed boarding parties. Merchant ships, by contrast, usually sailed with as small a crew as possible. So, unless the vast majority of the crew of the approaching vessel were belowdecks, the ship was almost certainly an ordinary merchant ship.

"Captain," Hardey said, trying to keep his uncertain voice as low as possible, "it's an awfully small crew for a pirate ship."

"Yes, they'd like it to look that way, of course. They are no doubt aware we are observing them."

Hardey looked through the glass again. Heading southeast, the *Osprey* was on a course to meet with the unknown ship nearly head-on.

"What are you proposing to do, Captain?" he finally asked.

"To find out what she's up to."

Caroline had been ordered to help mend torn sails with two other seamen, and the sighting of another ship had not relieved them of this duty. Nevertheless, they, like members of the crew who were not on watch, split their attention between the sail on the horizon and the conversation between the captain and first mate. This left almost no attention for the job at hand, but for the time being, no one seemed to notice.

Captain Talbot held an arresting pose at the railing, his face lifted into the brisk wind. His gestures spoke of confident excitement. Caroline eventually could not draw her gaze away from him, even to look at the other ship, which claimed an equal share of everyone else's attention.

Mr. Hardey did not seem to stand as tall as usual. He hunched over, squinting frequently through the captain's glass.

Would the captain never turn around? She wanted to see the sunlight dancing in his eyes. Had she been closer, she would have had to stifle the sudden urge to reach out and brush back a loose strand of dark hair that curled around the side of his face.

"You, there! D'ye think those sails will mend themselves while you gossip like a bunch o' fishwives?"

With a sigh, Caroline abandoned her study of the captain's fine profile and resumed her attempts to poke a fat needle through impossibly dense canvas. Her fingers ached. Three bells on this watch had already passed since they'd started work on the sails, and she had almost nothing to show for it except bruised and bleeding fingers.

Hardey's voice called the hands on watch to positions to make a change in the sails. Caroline remembered roughly where her station was, but she could never remember what to do when the different commands were given. After some angry pointing and yelling, the changes were apparently completed to satisfaction. The ship had started turning, and now they seemed to be going in nearly the opposite direction—away from the other ship.

"I'm not sure I understand, Captain." Hardey shook his head.

"If they follow us, you see, then we must assume they are pirates. They'll think we are running in fear, and that we will make an easy prize."

This made no sense to Hardey. The *Osprey* had reversed course to nearly match that of the unknown ship. So, if the other ship followed, it would simply be holding more or less the same course it had followed since they first sighted it. But he felt he could question no more. The captain practically barked his words, making his aggravation with his first mate plain enough, even to the men.

"I see, Captain," he said at last.

"Take in some canvas, I want to give her a chance to catch us. Then clear the deck for action."

"Aye, aye, Captain." This would be good practice, Hardey reminded himself. And he hoped to God it was just practice.

The other ship was chasing them. He had been right! Edward's orders brought the *Osprey* about on a north by nor'westerly heading. The other ship had been sailing directly to the northwest, so since it now followed them, it had changed course and was no longer headed for Governor Eden's haven in North Carolina. They must hope to overtake and capture them; there was no other reasonable explanation.

Edward allowed himself a small smile when he looked at Hardey issuing orders with a face so grim. His first mate would never admit he had been wrong. The *Osprey* was being chased by a pirate ship, but soon Edward would turn the tables and show his teeth to the pirates. And then, whatever they had was his.

All he had to do now was wait while his crew ran out the guns and his pursuer caught up.

"Ship ahoy!"

Edward had rather expected the other ship to fire a shot or raise a black flag as it approached; instead, someone from the other ship had called out the traditional greeting of merchant ships in passing.

"Hulloa," he answered.

"What ship is that, pray?" Still no sign of aggression. When were they going to act?

Edward decided he had to continue to play along as though this were a friendly exchange between two

unarmed ships. “The sloop *Osprey*, from Dublin, bound for...” Jamaica wouldn’t sound right. “...South Carolina. Where are you from?”

“The brig *Fortune’s Fancy*, from London, bound for Norfolk.”

That, of course, was the pretense of the vessel. But when would she try to attack?

The shouted exchange between the two ships ended, and the other ship continued as though intending to proceed on her way.

This was the moment for Edward to fire a broadside—all his starboard guns would bear, but only for perhaps another minute as the other ship pulled ahead.

He noticed that the *Fortune’s Fancy* had not run out her guns. Were they hidden? It would probably not be impossible for a pirate crew to hide below deck with the guns prepared but somehow camouflaged.

Fire or wait? She might not, after all, be a pirate ship. But if he waited, and the other ship fired, the *Osprey* would take a hit before his crew could even get off a shot. His ship and crew would be severely damaged, perhaps destroyed.

The moment passed. The ship must, indeed, be an ordinary merchant vessel on a run to Norfolk. Edward tasted blood and realized he had bitten his lip in frustration. He turned away from the wind to spit then turned back to see his prize sail on, not the pirate he had hoped for but still tantalizingly close at hand.

The *Fortune’s Fancy* would no doubt carry a valuable cargo of some sort, and he could easily take her by surprise and—

A distant scream interrupted his thoughts.

Hardey sighed as he moved to act. One of the powder monkeys—Dyer, the new one who reminded him of a mouse—had somehow managed to catch a sleeve afire. Someone had not taken proper care with the slow match, or perhaps the boy had simply not watched where he was walking. As he moved forward to assist the lad, he made a mental note to find out the responsible parties and mete out punishment. This sort of sloppiness could not be tolerated.

The boy screamed as he waved his arms, purely an instinctive reaction. While instinctive, the waving action was not helpful, since it merely fanned the flames to greater heights. Hardey pulled off his jacket and, in one fluid motion, brought it down over the boy’s head, pinning his arms down at his sides. He wrapped the material tightly around the boy, pressing thoroughly on all sides to smother the fire.

When he was sure the flames had been extinguished, Hardey released his hold and eased the lad to the deck. Then he crouched to take a closer look. Dyer lay curled up, trying to control quiet sobs as he cradled his burned forearm.

Or, rather, *her* burned forearm. The “little mouse” was a woman.

Twice in his career, Hardey had seen girls try to join a ship’s crew by dressing as boys. One had run away from an unhappy home, but she was retrieved and dragged back by an irate father only a few hours

after making her appearance at the dock. The other had drilled with the crew for several days before she was discovered and put ashore with a few pence to help her get back to her family. Women had no place in a ship's crew.

"Dyer?" He wanted to see her face.

"Yes, sir?" The girl sat up and scrambled roughly to her feet, wincing only slightly.

She appeared older than the two girls who had failed in their attempts to go to sea. Dressed as a boy, she looked fourteen, perhaps fifteen. But if she were cleaned up and dressed in women's clothing, she might be eighteen or nineteen. What were they going to do with her?

"This way, Dyer." He motioned her toward his cabin. "We've no surgeon, and your arm doesn't look bad enough for the carpenter—fortunately for you, as we haven't got one of those, either."

She sniffed but said nothing.

"I've a makeshift surgeon's chest in my cabin. I'll see to the arm for you."

Again she said nothing, but he heard the sound of her quiet footsteps behind him.

As he realized why he could hear her footsteps, he smiled. While the gun crews remained at ready, they had not been given orders to fire. The deck was not filled with smoke and splattered in blood; there was no roar and shriek of firing guns. The captain must have decided not to attack.

Now all he had to worry about was the presence of a woman on board.

"We will probably need a fairly small vessel," Josiah announced before taking his first mouthful of boiled pork at the captain's table. He was surprised both by his sudden conviction about the ship and by the quality of the pork, which differed little from that provided in the common mess.

"A small vessel?" Charles asked. "To chase armed pirates?"

"Armament may turn out to be important," Josiah explained, "but before we even get to that question, we will need to find the pirates. Which means we will need to ask for information. I imagine we will need to put into shore frequently to find out what ships have landed or been sighted. A smaller vessel, a small sloop, perhaps, would be better able to navigate in coastal waters."

"Yes, you're right." Charles smiled. "And it should be easier to find a small sloop to be hired, don't you think, Captain?"

"Eh, well, perhaps yes and perhaps no." Captain Johnson looked as if he were considering whether to offer his own, larger ship.

"We must compile a description of the pirate ship," Josiah continued. "Information could be reported to our agent in Norfolk while we're at sea."

"Yes, I see. Then, if we've no leads, we return to Norfolk." Charles paused then speared a piece of meat with sudden inspiration. "We could offer a reward for information!"

"No. We'd never get the truth."

"Well, I suppose you'd know better, having been in a business with so many dishonest men."

Josiah knew Charles was referring to dishonest adjudicators, but he nevertheless smiled at the insult to his former profession.

"Ah, trust me." Josiah raised a glass of unexpectedly good claret. "If we offer a reward, every downtrodden rascal within fifty miles will bring us a story that's long on creativity and entirely wanting in facts!"

He took another sip of his wine, and Charles did the same. The only sound in the room came from the captain's plate, where he tapped his biscuit absently while chewing.

Josiah and Charles stared at their host, wineglasses poised in mid-air. The captain grinned. "It gets the weevils out, you see, if you knock it about a little first."

Both Josiah and Charles looked at the half-eaten biscuits on their plate with some dismay. Josiah felt a little queasy and took another mouthful of wine, but found he could not swallow. Charles quickly spit his mouthful of food into his napkin.

Their host began to laugh with such force that he spewed a mixture of wine and partially chewed food bits across the table in an arc of heavy spray. "Ha, there's no need for that, now, Mr. Carter, Mr. Throckmorton. We've only been out these three days; these biscuits are quite fresh. I knock..." and he demonstrated his technique, "...all the time out of habit. I am sorry if it disturbed you." He laughed again and wiped a tear from the corner of his eye. "When you've been at sea a while longer, maybe you won't

mind the creatures in the biscuits. Fresh meat, eh?"

"Yes," said Josiah, finding that he was finally able to swallow again, "but we'll save the choicest ones for you, of course."

"Ha! Of course." The captain gestured to his servant for more wine. "If I may be so bold, gentlemen, once you find the men who have taken Miss Carter, what do you expect to do?"

Josiah and Charles immediately looked at each other; they had not yet discussed this. Josiah was fairly certain, from the way this adventure had proceeded so far, that Charles's plan in this regard would differ significantly from his own. Remembering his earlier feelings of frustration and helplessness, he decided to speak first this time.

"We will ransom her, of course."

Charles looked stunned. "Ransom? I don't know. It seems so sordid—unworthy of her, somehow. And cowardly."

"Unworthy of us, is that what you're saying?" Josiah countered.

"Well, yes."

"So it may seem." Josiah paused and then leaned forward to make an analogy. "If a neighbor had taken some of your cattle from the field, you would ask him to return them, and then sue or perhaps threaten to settle the matter with your pistol if he did not. You would not buy them back, because he had taken them wrongly to begin with. Is that what you mean?"

Charles paused in thought for a moment. "Yes, that's it exactly."

"Very well. Now, why—assuming it were not a mistake—why would your neighbor take something that did not belong to him?"

"I suppose he must have found himself in need."

"Yes, and if that's the case, if he fancies himself in need, to which would he respond most quickly: a request to return the cattle, a threat of future harm if he does not return the cattle or an offer of payment if he returns the cattle on the spot?"

"The offer of payment would be most attractive." Charles took a thoughtful drink from his glass. "I see your point, but I don't care for it. I don't like making deals with dishonest men." He slammed his palms down on the table in a rare show of temper. "They should not prosper from their wickedness!"

For once, Josiah felt that he was in a superior position. Charles had reached a stumbling block in his plans, and it appeared to drive him mad with frustration. He must have wanted to chastise the pirates, show them that no good could come of their evil.

"True, it does not seem fair. But, Mr. Carter, is it more important to deal justice to the pirates, or to bring back your sister?" Josiah realized he had not said "my betrothed," or even "Miss Carter." This had become a quest to help Charles Carter rescue his sister. Nothing more, nothing less.

The silence was complete this time; the captain's biscuit long devoured, his fingers remained motionless

beside his plate.

“You’ll need gold.” The captain’s voice broke into the stillness. “They won’t take letters of credit.”

At a gesture from Hardey, Caroline sat down on the battered chest at the end of the berth in his small cabin. The insides of her legs felt chafed from the rough fabric of her trousers. How was it she should notice this minor sensation when her arm throbbed so?

Thinking about her arm only increased the pain. She looked down at her lap instead, forcing herself to concentrate on her trousers. At first, wearing them had left her feeling both naked without her skirts and, at the same time, heavily encumbered by extra fabric around her legs. But now she was beginning to enjoy the freedom from skirts, and especially from stays.

A clattering sound broke her concentration; she looked up to see Hardey rummaging through a chest slightly smaller than the one on which she sat. She thought of bandages and her arm again. This time, she would focus her mind on... Captain Talbot. He had passed them as they’d headed toward the cabin.

“Do you need assistance, Hardey?” the captain had asked.

How very thoughtful!

“No, Captain, not just yet. This injury is a small enough matter.”

The captain had continued on without another word, and Caroline had wished she could ask him to come back. At the same time, she was glad she could not. She’d wanted him to hold her arm as she climbed down the stairs—but she feared she might have swooned or said something embarrassing if he had.

All at once, as she looked at her dirty trousers, Caroline longed to be draped in voluminous silk skirts. She wanted to feel clean and to have her maid curl and pin up her hair.

The last time Mary had curled her hair, Georgiana had whined horribly the whole time because she’d wanted hers done first. And Edwina had poked at hers, saying she looked like she had sausages hanging from her head. Johanna had started to pontificate on her views of how women would be wearing their hair this season in London. Caroline had simply run from the room.

Her sisters were impossible to live with. She really didn’t miss them at all, not even Edwina.

And she didn’t miss Mary, who always picked her nose and too often smelled of the wild onions she liked to chew.

Caroline sighed. She wanted the comforts of home. But she didn’t really want to be at home. With a start, she realized that even if she were at Hill Crest this very minute she would not have remained there much longer. She would have soon moved into the home of Mr. Throckmorton.

Caroline thought of the thrill she had felt when Captain Talbot touched her shoulder, and of the way she had wanted him to take her arm and help her down the stairs. She had never wanted Mr. Pole-legged Throckmorton to touch her shoulder or help her down the stairs. She did not want him to touch her at all. Ever.

She looked at her arm and decided she could bear the pain without flinching or forcing herself to concentrate on other matters. She smiled at Mr. Hardey as he prepared to tear a long strip of linen into a bandage. He was saving her. Captain Talbot, and Mr. Hardey and the others had saved her from the monotonous bickering of home and the horrors of a marriage to ridiculous old Mr. Throckmorton.

“Now, then, little miss, we need to talk,” Hardey began as he stepped over to her with the bandage.

“Sir?” Caroline held out her arm in response to his gesture and picked away the pieces of fire-blackened cloth that used to be her shirtsleeve. Some of the pieces were very small.

Hardey paused, as if waiting for her to say something. “Miss?”

After another pause, she looked up at him in alarm. “Did you call me ‘miss?’” Caroline realized she could add, “My name is Jimmy and I’m a boy,” but what would be the use? It was obviously not true—so obvious, in fact, that she had been surprised her secret had lasted so long. She thought of silk skirts again, and of dancing with Captain Talbot. Her limbs and head felt heavy. A chill passed over her and she closed her eyes.

“I must explain,” she said, but at the same time, she lay her head down on her undamaged arm.

Hardey took up her injured arm to inspect the burn. Blisters ran the length of it, but none looked too serious. Had the ship been full of illness or under attack, her wound would have received no attention at all from a ship’s surgeon. Today, there was time to apply a little salve and bandages.

Her arm felt hot. Gingerly, he touched her forehead and found it cold and clammy. Her eyes, only halfway open, stared ahead without focus, as though she had fallen into a trance. The girl would need to rest.

With great care, he picked her up and carried her to her hammock. He returned to his cabin to fetch a small blanket, rather moth-eaten but not too dirty. This he draped over the girl, taking pains to tuck the blanket without touching her body.

He would need to go talk to the captain, but given their recent confrontation, he wondered if it was the right time. Talbot wasn’t going to like this.

“How are you feeling, Miss Dyer? May I get you some water?”

Caroline awoke to find herself in a small, lumpy bed in a part of the ship she had never seen. The captain stood by her side, ready to wait on her as if he had been her servant.

“Captain, I’m sorry.” Her throat felt tight and dry; it was hard to speak. “I don’t know how I came to be here, and...” Wait. He had called her “Miss.” The captain knew she was a woman. And with sudden certainty, she knew she was lying in his bed. She tried to get up.

“Please, Miss Dyer, do not try to move just yet. You’re not well.”

“But, Captain, I must...”

Must what? She stopped trying to get up. What would happen now? Here she was, an unprotected woman on a ship full of men, lying in the captain's very bed.

His face showed one, perhaps two-days' growth of beard, and his collar hung loose at the top. He smiled and drew a chair up next to her. Warmth spread through her like a bolt of lightning. He was going to take her hand, and her fingers tingled in anticipation.

"Miss Dyer, I am very sorry we have brought you into these circumstances."

"Captain Talbot, I should first tell you that my name is not Dyer. I am Miss Caroline Carter of Hill Crest." She glanced at her hands, which remained available and waiting so near to where he sat. She wanted to add "and I'm not sorry you brought me into these circumstances," but she kept silent, still hoping he would take her hands in his.

"A gentlewoman of property. This, then, has been an even greater affront than I had feared."

"You could not have known, Captain." Caroline apologized as if she had enticed the captain into taking her and the others from the inn. "You found me dressed as a boy, in a tavern filled with men."

"Well, Miss Carter, and now you're dressed as a boy on *aship* filled with men. And that is why we will have to put you ashore as soon as we reach a suitable settlement."

Put her ashore? She gaped at him in surprise. Then she turned away, twisting her fingers in the hem of the gray blanket that covered her.

She must go back? Now? To Georgiana and Mary? To Mr. Throckmorton? She must return to her small, uncultured life of trees and scattered ugly houses with no chance to see the great world that lay beyond? This ship, this crew, Captain Talbot himself had given her the opportunity to experience more—and now he was going to take it all away.

"Are you ill, Miss Carter?"

"No." But she couldn't bring herself to turn back and look into those beautiful dark eyes.

A door creaked open.

"I believe the young lady is asleep, Captain."

Caroline realized she must be awake to have heard the words, but she lay still. With her face turned toward the bulkhead, the speakers would not know.

"If she's asleep then she won't be disturbed if I collect my charts. I need to determine where to set her ashore." The irritation in the captain's voice made Caroline cringe beneath her blanket.

"No, Captain, of course not." Hardey's words were loaded with deference.

"A damned nuisance having her aboard."

"Yes, sir."

“How are the men taking this?”

Hardey paused for some time before replying. “As well as can be expected, sir.”

“Which means?”

“It’s bad luck, or the men believe it’s bad luck, to have a woman aboard when we’re out at sea.”

Caroline nearly snorted aloud with derision. She was not bad luck. Nothing bad had happened! And they’d had excellent weather. She had brought good luck, if any at all.

“Well, she won’t be aboard much longer. I, for one, will be grateful to have my cabin back. But I can’t very well put her in with the men again.”

Caroline felt tears filling her eyes again.

“No, sir.”

“It is odd that none of us noticed, is it not, Hardey?”

“Indeed, Captain, though such things have happened before. She kept the ruse going for quite some time. A hard worker. Strange, with her being a lady and all.”

“There are no true ladies in the Americas, Hardey. They all toil like slaves. Even so, look at her. She’s tiny. Can you imagine her grinding corn or butchering a hog or whatever these colonials do on their crude plantations?”

No ladies in the Americas? Butchering a hog? The very idea! Captain Talbot obviously had not much contact with decent society in the colonies.

Caroline prepared to sit up and give him a very elegant speech concerning the superiority of society in the colonies—but stopped herself. An angry tirade would only reinforce the captain’s misguided beliefs. She would instead show him a how a colonial lady behaved.

She lay still and pretended to sleep until she heard the door close. Then she got up and started trying to make herself look a little less like a ship’s boy.

Chapter Thirteen

Josiah sighed with relief as he pulled himself to the top of the rope ladder and swung his leg over the side and onto the deck of the weather-beaten sloop. It had been difficult to even grasp the ladder; the small boat in which he had stood pitched wildly in waves that seemed close to, yet moving in entirely different directions from, the waves controlling the larger vessel he was attempting to board. But he had managed, and even dared hope he had not looked too ridiculous in the process.

Tiny drops of water wet his eyelashes, drawing his attention to the darkening rain clouds in the sky. A distant-sounding splash made him look back down quickly—Charles had apparently not been as fortunate in his ascent up the side. This was surprising. Charles had always struck Josiah as the very paragon of frontier hardiness and athletic ability. He watched as two men on the boat plucked Charles from the water by the back of his coat and hoisted him up to the nearest rung of the rope ladder. He climbed the rest of the way slowly but without incident and grinned when he was at last planted firmly on the deck and caught Josiah's eye.

“Well, there's my bath for the season over with, anyway.”

“And your clothes washed in the bargain.”

“Yes, so they are.” Charles held his arm over the side and tried to wring out his sleeve. “My compliments, Mr. Throckmorton. You made the feat appear simple.”

Josiah smiled uneasily, uncertain whether Charles had really paid him a compliment. Had the climb seemed easy to Charles merely because the young man figured that if Josiah could do it, anyone could?

He brushed this thought aside. Raindrops fell heavier now, and his energies would be better served finding shelter and sending someone to alert the captain of their arrival.

The captain would not be expecting them, but he apparently welcomed men of trade to come aboard unannounced as standard practice. So they had been informed, anyway. Two men at the Boar's Head in Norfolk had, in two independent conversations, suggested that they “go see Spittel on the *Sea Lily* .” The captain kept his small sloop at anchor in the channel and sent crewmen into town to do business for him. Word had it that the captain's superstitions kept him from setting foot on dry land, at least in the vicinity of Norfolk.

“Didn't expect someone from the *Canary* .”

Josiah and Charles turned to find that the man they sought had silently materialized behind them.

“Most of my business comes from out in the open waters. I don’t get many callers from up the bay.”

Charles looked at Josiah uncertainly. Should they apologize for appearing when he hadn’t expected them?

The captain gave them no time. Squinting at the sky, he waved them toward the hatch. “Ugh. Come along below, then, mates. M’ tobacco won’t light in the rain.”

Josiah had thought the *Canary* was cramped and smelly, but it seemed a perfumed garden compared with the *Sea Lily*. Darkness prevented him from seeing clearly where they were headed, but the clutter of unknown objects on either side kept him from going in any direction other than that taken by the captain. He realized they’d reached their destination only when he ran smack into the captain’s back, and a moment later felt Charles’s hands probing his hair.

“It’s me, Mr. Carter. We’ve stopped.”

“Sorry, Mr. Throckmorton.”

They could hear the captain fumble with a latch of some sort, then a door squeaked and Josiah noticed the man had moved forward.

“Do you suppose their eyes get used to this?” Charles asked in a whisper. Obviously, Josiah wasn’t the only one who found the interior of the sloop extremely dark.

“Sirs, ye can enter now.”

They could hear him, hear the click of his pipe against his teeth and even smell his sour breath. But as Josiah and Charles inched forward in the dark, they could not see the captain.

“I’ll send for a candle, will I?” Without waiting for a response, he bellowed, “Martin, bring a candle!” in a voice so powerful Josiah could have sworn he felt the deck quiver a bit at his feet. “Sit down, if ye please, sirs.”

By this time, Josiah had discovered the table. He felt his way around to a chair. It was missing at least one spindle, but the seat seemed steady enough. When he tried to pull it away from the table, though, it moved only about three inches before the rear legs struck something behind. Pushing the table forward slightly and sucking in his breath, he could just squeeze into his seat.

He realized his eyes must have adjusted to the darkness somewhat because he could now see Captain Spittel’s face across the black expanse of table. To his left, Charles had managed to find a chair but seemed hesitant to sit down.

“Hrrriow,” said the chair.

“That’s just old Barnaby, don’t let him be in your way.” The captain slid down and kicked at Charles’s chair. “Get along there, you!”

Small patches of white on a black mass of fur flashed across the table, landing on the topmost of several wooden crates piled at the corner to the right of Josiah. At that moment, a skinny seaman stepped through the doorway and stopped. Light from the battered lantern in his hand illuminated his long, yellow teeth.

“Captain?” He held out the lantern.

“Thank’ee, Martin. Close the door, will ye, on the way.”

“Aye-aye.”

“You have business, I believe, sirs?” The pipe clicked on the captain’s widely spaced teeth. “Ye be looking for passage? For yourselves? A cargo?”

“Yes,” Josiah said quickly. Passage—that didn’t sound too risky. “We are seeking passage for ourselves to . . . ports south.”

“And return,” Charles added. “We will have one additional passenger with us. Perhaps more, if you’ve room?”

“Aye, we can accommodate several men, if ye’ve no great cargo. What’ll ye be carrying?”

“I have a sizeable trunk.” Josiah wanted to make sure the crew wouldn’t balk this time when he presented his luggage.

“And I’ve a few small chests,” said Charles.

“Just your personal effects, sirs? Should be fine, fine. Ye can see we’ve plenty of room here.”

They could, in fact, see very little, but what they did see indicated the captain would have been hard-pressed to find room for the personal effects of a field mouse. Nevertheless, they both nodded.

“What ports south, sirs? And with whom will ye be meeting, if I may be so bold?” The captain smiled, showing more open space between his teeth than either Josiah or Charles had seen anywhere since they arrived on board.

Neither man answered; neither had any idea where they were really headed. Josiah knew they would have to stop frequently along the coast, but the quest could take them halfway around the world. If they weren’t going to be honest with the captain about the type of ship they were following, they at least needed to give him some idea of how far they would ask him to travel.

“Charles Town,” Charles finally said.

Josiah nodded. Charles Town, South Carolina, was the only sizeable port between Norfolk and the Caribbean; it would be a logical destination. “Perhaps Nassau,” he added, as offhandedly as possible. The island of New Providence was administered by the governor of South Carolina, so he hoped it wouldn’t sound too distant.

“Nassau?” The captain shifted his pipe. “What business do ye have in Nassau?”

“Ah, well, Mr. Carter’s sister is . . . ah, visiting friends in Charles Town, and they had some plans to visit the family’s estates on New Providence.” Yes, this sounded plausible. Josiah’s story gathered momentum as he continued to devise it. “Mr. Carter and I have come on a sad errand. We must cut short the young lady’s visit to return her to her mother, who has taken quite ill and is not expected to recover.” Josiah glanced quickly at Charles, willing him to look sad at the prospect of his mother’s demise. “So, you see,

we do not know whether we will find Miss Carter in Charles Town or on New Providence and therefore cannot say for certain what our final destination will be. And..." Would this be too much? "...there is some chance that the family, the uh, Pierrepoints, will have themselves started up the coast on a journey. So, we had hoped to stop in a handful of ports along the route to see whether their vessel had been sighted."

That should cover everything. Would the captain believe that last part? Josiah wished he'd quit while he was ahead. The last segment of his story really seemed quite improbable.

The captain clicked his pipe again, then took it out and tapped it in his hand. His chair creaked a few times.

"Passage to Charles Town and Nassau will cost ye fifty pounds in gold. Each, mind you."

"And passage home for Miss Carter?" Charles asked eagerly.

"We'll discuss that when we see where we find Miss Carter." Another smile from the captain. "Are we agreed, sirs?"

"Done." Charles's expression showed relief. Josiah wished the two of them had discussed the matter first before agreeing. He wasn't at all certain about the *Sea Lily's* ability to handle the chase, but he supposed they would find it all but impossible to find another captain so gullible as to accept their story about Miss Carter visiting friends in Nassau or Charles Town.

"We will make arrangements with our agent to have the gold ready for our return to Norfolk," Josiah said finally.

The captain stopped filling his pipe with tobacco and set it firmly on the table. "Oh, no, sirs. You'll pay me now."

"Now?" Charles seemed taken aback.

"If we pay you in advance, what guarantee have we that you will carry us to Nassau and back, as agreed upon?" Josiah asked.

"Ye have no guarantee, 'cept my word. Ye can ask in No'fo'k. My word is good."

Ha! Nobody in Norfolk had even set eyes on the man these ten years. How could they trust his word? But Josiah did not want to insult him. "It would not be prudent business practice for us to pay you before receiving your services."

The captain stopped smiling. "And it would not be, how did you say *prudent* business practice for me, sirs, to go without the money. I guarantee I'll take you wherever you need to go. But ye can't guarantee ye'll be alive to pay me when I return to No'fo'k."

Charles eyes widened with surprise at the captain's blunt words, and Josiah had to clench his hands to keep them from trembling. They said nothing, however.

The captain looked at each of them in turn then finished filling his pipe. "There's accidents at sea, of course. And diseases. 'Specially in the islands."

He said no more. For a moment, Josiah feared he knew the true danger of their mission. But he was apparently only weighing the risks of an ordinary sea voyage.

As much as he disliked the idea of paying for services up front, Josiah could not argue with the captain's logic, especially when he knew that something more than accidents or illness might prevent them from paying on return. They would have to trust him. He saw this same resignation in Charles' eyes when he turned toward him.

"We agree," he said at last.

"Tomorrow we will make the arrangements with my agent," Charles finished. "When can we leave?"

Hardey reached a hand down to Caroline as she climbed to the deck. Two men smiled at her, but many more scowled or turned away.

She gazed out to sea. The South Carolina coast looked essentially the same as that of North Carolina, with a few more trees and slightly fewer sandbars. A small wisp of smoke drifted up in the distance. She could see no buildings. Were they just going to strand her on the beach?

"No, I want to stay here," she whispered, squeezing her eyes to hold back tears.

"Ah, miss, we won't leave you here alone. We will find you a settlement. You'll be among good people."

"Mr. Hardey." Caroline felt suddenly mad with desperation. "May I not stay on the ship and earn my way? You know I can work."

He laughed a little. "And now what work would a woman—an honest woman—do aboard a ship?"

What could she do? They would probably never let her do heavy "man's work" again, but she knew the female servants at Hill Crest worked hours as long and hard as any of the men. What did they do?

"I can cook for you. I can do the sewing and mending." This wasn't strictly true; Caroline had never tried to actually cook at all but had frequently planned menus for the household. And the only sewing she knew consisted of decorating thin pieces of fabric with fanciful designs. Her other skills seemed even more useless on a ship: she tended one of the most elegant knot gardens in the colony, she could read Homer in Greek (very slowly) and she could play the flute, a little. So she contented herself with a more general assessment of her skills. "I know I can earn my keep. Have I not thus far?"

Hardey appeared to stifle a laugh. "A ship is no place for a woman, miss."

"It has been a place for me these several days."

"But, miss, the men didn't know, of course. Everything has changed." He colored a little. "You would not be safe here, or happy."

"Very well, Mr. Hardey. I shall ask the captain myself." Surely, if there was any trouble from the men, he could protect her.

No sign of him to larboard, but when Caroline turned the other way she saw him at once, scanning the shore with a glass.

She felt very fluttery, as though she couldn't breathe right. Willing her heart to slow down, she took a deep breath and put on her best smile.

"Captain Talbot, sir?" She walked over to him at the rail with small, deliberate steps and kept her voice soft and gentle. "May I have a word with you, sir?"

"Ah, Miss Carter." The sun sparkled in his dark eyes when he smiled.

Caroline grasped the rail to steady herself. She smiled at him through fluttering eyelashes then looked away toward the shore. "Oh, is this South Carolina? It looks a harsh place. Captain, I must admit I am a little frightened to be set down in such a place."

"I believe, Miss Carter, that we are not too far from Port Royal. I've sent a party in the cutter to investigate those fires over there, see?" His arm brushed hers as he gestured toward the distant smoke.

She looked at him again before turning her gaze to follow his outstretched arm. "Are there Indians on these shores, Captain?" Her voice trembled as she spoke, and she added a shudder for good measure. Was that too much? The few Indians she had ever seen at home, old braves traveling from plantation to plantation to hire themselves out to hunt game, had been objects of ridicule. Were the local Indians more fearsome?

The captain's eyes widened, suggesting she had raised a valid objection. Then he stared at the shore for a while in silence. "The party will make sure it's safe," he finally said.

Caroline answered with an exaggerated sigh. "It is so very far away from home." A small tear crept to the corner of her eye, and she gave an almost imperceptible sniff before closing her eyes.

When the captain turned to face her again, worry lines creased his forehead. He was weakening in his resolve to put her ashore here. She had made him feel guilty. Caroline felt a little cheap and almost dishonest, but if it worked, well...

"Yes, Miss Carter, it is a long way from your home. I am truly very sorry." He turned abruptly and walked away.

Could he just leave her here? He wouldn't even think about it until the party returned from shore. Edward hurried down to his cabin but found nothing to do once he arrived. He walked two steps and turned, hands clasped behind his back. He needed to write to his father; he needed to find a carpenter for his crew. Two more steps, then another turn. He needed to secure a new letter of marque and find a way to make the venture profitable again.

She would be lucky to make her way safely to Charles Town, much less back up the Chesapeake. Could he leave a lady in this position? It seemed all wrong. Of course, it was all wrong to have a lady on a fighting ship. She would be in the way. She would not be safe, even when they weren't fighting. Well, it was his ship, and he could keep her safe, if he chose.

She had a nice, neat figure and an intelligent, if not beautiful face.

Ah, no. She was Miss Carter, a lady, not a mistress. A wife would be safe with this crew, but, of course, he could not marry a colonial. Perhaps, if they all thought she was his wife...

Edward's eyes focused on his writing desk. The report to his father, long overdue, hung heavily, almost palpably, over his head. Two quick steps to the desk and a sheaf of paper, a bottle of ink, a pen. He sat and admired the fine point on the pen.

She was so small and fragile. He had taken her so far from her home. He should take her back to her family. A gentleman could do no less.

Edward settled down to his report, highlighting his earlier successes, giving poignant descriptions of the tragedy of the illness and expenses suffered by the crew and describing the letter of marque he had obtained to hunt pirates in the colonial waters. Certainly, he would have such a letter from one of the governors by the time his father received the report.

When he had finished, his hand was cramped. He felt tense and hunched, as if the act of writing had somehow shortened him into a stump. He stood and stretched, sideways so he wouldn't slam his arms into the low deck above. The letter would have to be posted from Charles Town. So, when the scouting party returned, they would weigh anchor and head toward the more sizable settlement.

Surely, from Charles Town, Miss Carter could obtain passage back to her home. He could feel at ease leaving Miss Carter in Charles Town.

And while there, he could seek a letter of marque from the governor. He thought back to his interview with the governor of North Carolina—the squalid, smoky room, and the mean, unfinished buildings of the ramshackle town. Charles Town would be different. Edward remembered pleasant buildings, substantial houses and real shops with imported goods. Nothing elegant, but certainly the closest he had come to civilization in the colonies.

He smiled at the prospect of spending a little time in civilized company. In his vision of the Charles Town streets, he suddenly pictured Miss Carter emerging from a shop arrayed in a gown of some light, silky material.

Was he crazy? No. Any fool could see she was attracted to him. Perhaps, before he left, there might be time for a little fun.

Chapter Fourteen

"Cheer up, sir, we should sight Charles Town in another day, maybe two." Captain Spittel took a few thoughtful puffs on his pipe, then squinted at the sky. "If this wind don't turn on us."

A brisk wind had propelled the *Sea Lily* quickly, if roughly, down the coast of North Carolina. From his usual position at the railing amidships, Josiah halfheartedly listened to the captain's banter as he waited for the inevitable.

There would be periods, sometimes hours, of smooth sailing when he could hold his head high and walk steadily with the even roll of the ship. But much of the time he clung to the rail, waiting to vomit the meager quantity of biscuit and salt pork eaten at the previous meal. The actual sickness wasn't too hard to bear. It was the waiting, as waves of nausea cascaded through his body, that was so difficult, and, when he had the energy to think of it, embarrassing.

So, they might reach Charles Town tomorrow. And then what? Josiah had hoped they might make some intermediate stops on their journey to see if anyone had sighted the pirate ship, but Spittel had fairly laughed off that suggestion (once they'd paid him).

"No decent people to ask, between Norfolk and Charles Town," he'd explained. "And no decent people between Charles Town and Jamaica," he'd added, casting an amused glance at Charles on the other side of the deck. "Visiting plantations on Nassau, ha-umm. Maybe Jack Bye's tart sister, not your sir's."

Then a sudden wave of nausea had drawn Josiah's attention away from his discussion of their voyage, and so the matter stood—they were bound for Charles Town only.

Once in Charles Town, they could. . . make inquiries, Josiah supposed. And sleep in a real bed, walk on floors that didn't move, and, for that matter, eat food that didn't move. Although the provisions were supposed to be fresh from Norfolk, Josiah had already spotted a few weevils in his breakfast biscuit and did not even want to try any more pork. He could hang on for one more day.

"Jack, the bosun's mate, says it's coming on hurricane season," Charles remarked cheerfully as he joined Josiah at the railing. "Can you imagine how the seas must look in such a storm? All lightning and wind, with roaring waves? Jack said he'd seen the decks near to vertical, swept clean like a dustpan. Imagine, seeing God's hand in action in such a fantastic manner."

Charles demonstrated with his hands, and Josiah turned and stared up at him in disbelief. The man actually hoped he'd get to see a horrific storm at sea. Did he not think *he* might get "swept clean" off the

ship?

“Good Lord, Mr. Carter, you can’t be serious?”

“Serious?” Charles asked.

“About wanting to see the hand of God brush us off the deck in a storm.”

“Ha, well, I suppose you’re right. After all, no one can see the face of God and live, so I’m not sure we’re meant to see his hands, either. Hmm, I wonder if that is why a fantastic storm can take so many lives. We cannot live after seeing the hand of God in action?”

Josiah turned back to watching the waves.

“Still,” Charles continued, “you must admit it’s an intriguing prospect—waves able to dash to pieces the strongest work mankind has to offer, the hand of God destroying the works of the hands of man. . .do you think we’ll get to see it?”

Josiah tried to ignore him.

“Aren’t you just the least bit curious, Mr. Throckmorton? To see such a storm?” Charles seemed to inch closer with each word, and Josiah finally decided he’d had enough.

“No, Mr. Carter, I am not curious, not in the least. I do not want to see a hurricane. I do not even want to hear about a hurricane. I want to see the hand of God keep the deck of this ship steady long enough for me to be able to walk across it without falling into something.” He looked around darkly at the casks, crates and other items that had left bruises after their sudden meeting with his arms, legs and torso.

And, he added to himself, I’d like the hand of God to settle my stomach, just for once. It was impossible to think straight, let alone speak civilly, when he felt so churned up inside.

“Ask and it shall be given you, Mr. Throckmorton,” Charles murmured softly as he drifted to the stern to watch the men heave the log.

And is God your personal servant, Mr. Carter? Josiah thought as he heard Charles glide away. You can order him about, and guarantee his compliance? You’re always so certain, so confident in your God. Just for once, I’d like to see your God desert you. If I ask for that, will it be given me? You need to see what life feels like for the rest of us.

A particularly strong wave set the ship askance, forcing him to lean over the side once more.

Several minutes passed before Josiah realized why the view from his berth appeared different this evening. The candle burned straight. Almost proud in appearance, it bore a thick, steady flame without the usual drips of wax clumped on all sides.

The cabin felt secure and peaceful. And Josiah’s head felt clear, his stomach calm. They had reached smooth seas at last. Did this change mean they neared the coast of South Carolina? He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, enjoying the unusual sensation of comfort.

For the first time in days, he thought of the life he had left back in Maryland. It would be time to harvest soon; he hoped his overseer was keeping a close watch. The house was certain to be a mess, but then, it didn't much matter—no one would see it. Most of his servants would probably continue to work for a while. Later, after he and Charles had been absent some time, the servants and slaves might be tempted to escape. Or perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps they would make their move right in the beginning. In any case, he could do little here to stop them.

Josiah glanced at his companion, who read his nightly devotions in silence. He had expected to have his new sense of peace buoyed by the usually sanguine countenance of Charles Carter. Instead, Charles wore a worried and distraught expression as he stared down at the print-filled pages. So, Mr. Carter was not as confident as he always seemed!

He knew he should not have wished harm on the younger man simply because he always seemed so sure of himself. Obviously, his devotions tonight did not fill him with confidence. The unusual calm and the quiet candle mesmerized Josiah into speaking where he would normally remain silent.

“Do you miss them, Mr. Carter?”

Charles looked up in alarm, as if wakened from a bad dream, then gave a sad smile. “I do, Mr. Throckmorton. I do, indeed. And, of course, I share your grave concern for Caroline. We shall soon find her, I have a sense, but in what condition I cannot guess. Our situation can never be as it was before.”

Did this mean her family would not expect him to marry her once she returned? Relief and guilt washed over him like a warm ocean wave, soothing yet leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He would not have to marry her. But would this leave her in a difficult position?

If so, she had no one to blame but herself. How could he possibly marry a girl who would sneak out of the house in men's clothing at night? She would not be a suitable wife for a planter of any station whatsoever. She had been touched by such a low element...

And touched in what ways? he wondered grimly. Her lively, intelligent face and diminutive posture might prove most attractive to coarse men of the sea. Rather unlike what they would be used to seeing, certainly.

Josiah had not really considered before the dangerous, unhappy situation Miss Carter endured. She must have been terrified. Even now, what horrors did she suffer at the hands of the rascals? She could be in fear for her very life. And she must certainly fear she would never be able to make her way back home.

A soft *whump* interrupted his contemplation as Charles closed his book and sighed. “May I?” he gestured to the candle.

“Please. Goodnight, Mr. Carter.”

Charles extinguished the candle, and the ensuing darkness made him suddenly seem very far away.

“We may raise Charles Town tomorrow, Mr. Throckmorton.” The voice in the darkness brought back a sense of closeness.

“Do you, Mr. Carter, think she knows we are coming?”

“I don't know.” Charles paused a great while before continuing. “I believe she has great faith, but only in

me—and you, too, of course, sir. What I mean is, her faith is misplaced. Faith in God would serve her better in these dire straits.”

“But faith in you, faith in us, will give her hope. We are coming, and we will find her.” Josiah surprised himself with his conviction as the unexpected words came out in the darkness.

“What comfort can there be in the works of fallible man? ‘And in that day thou shalt say, O Lord, I will praise thee: thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedest me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid: for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.’ But I fear she knows not the words or the faith. If I could will to her those words...” Charles paused again, and then said softly, “Caroline, oh, think back on your lessons, and they will serve you well. ‘The Lord is my strength, the Lord is my strength...’”

Josiah felt there was nothing more he could say—Charles no longer spoke to him, but to a sister some unknown miles away. The sound of those soft, prayerful entreaties quietly lulled him to sleep.

Caroline braced for the worst as the shop matron brought out a large mirror. She had scrubbed from head to toe earlier in a private room at an inn not far from the waterfront but had refused the offer of a looking glass and even avoided seeking her reflection in the pewter breakfast plate. Now, though, she could put off the moment no longer. The task of dressing was complete, and everyone awaited her approval.

At Captain Talbot’s request for “something suitable to outfit the lady,” the shop’s proprietor had produced a gown ordered last season for a client who “forgot” to pay. Though the dress was far from a perfect fit, a few quick snips and tucks made it passable. The fabric felt wonderful and fresh on Caroline’s skin, but the most enjoyable sensation came from the “new gown” smell—a scent she had never appreciated before. Perhaps she had never worn a gown made of such fresh and heavily sized material. She reveled in every crackle and crunch.

Sleeves made of a light, gauzy fabric covered her sunburned arms, and a thick salve that had been sent up to her at the inn with other mysteriously procured toiletries had already done wonders to smooth her overworked hands. A girl in the shop had taken pains to twist Caroline’s hair in a new fashion that reduced the need for curling irons. Finally, the shop matron had passed along a secret for toning down the red of skin exposed to too much sun—a white paste blended carefully around the face and neck.

Caroline knew the shop matron and the girls really only wanted her cursory approval of the dress; but when she looked in the mirror, she would be viewing not only her person and apparel, but also her face and, indeed, her new self, and she feared to find a frightening spectacle in the glass.

She was quite surprised, therefore, to find a rather familiar face looking back at her. Her complexion looked blotchy, but the eyes were hers, not the wild eyes of a whorish adventurer. In fact, the new hairstyle looked rather becoming; it made her face seem more refined and almost elegant.

Or was it the gown? The dress not only felt different but looked different than anything she had ever worn. Caroline stood a trifle more erect as she looked in the glass and noticed she seemed to move more slowly, as if trying to impart regal grace to every gesture.

“It looks well on you, Miss Carter. Does it not, Joan?” The shop matron turned to the petite girl who had fussed so nimbly with Caroline’s hair.

“Indeed, the style is most becoming, Miss Carter.” The girl nodded her assent.

“I know little of styles, but I find the color pays a very pretty compliment to your eyes, Miss Carter. Sea green, I should perhaps say.”

All three women turned in astonishment to see Captain Talbot standing just inside the open doorway. The mantua maker’s shop was a purely feminine realm. Although it was not uncommon for a man to place an order for a gown, as Captain Talbot had done when he escorted Caroline into the shop, it was most unusual for one to return and comment on a fitting.

Young Joan writhed with embarrassment and looked desperately at the open door. The shop matron, too, cast an unhappy glance that direction, but the heat of the day made it incumbent to allow for as much ventilation as possible. So, rather than withering in her discomfiture, the more experienced matron took advantage of the unexpected opportunity to close the sale and get on with her next business.

“I am so pleased to find that we are in agreement, Captain. Shall we have the other...” A quick glance focused everyone’s attention on a small pile of ragged clothing in the corner “...articles wrapped and returned to the sloop?”

Caroline felt heat rise in her cheeks. What must these women think of her, having come dressed in such rags? She was a lady, but no one would believe her—she’d first appeared as a ship’s boy and now must look like the captain’s whore. Ladies did not wear boy’s clothing and ladies did not travel without a chaperone. And no one could mistake Captain Talbot for a chaperone.

“We’ve no need of the old clothes.” Edward pulled a few coins from the drawstring purse at his waist. “This was the agreed price, was it not?”

“Thank you, Captain. And do come again, Miss Carter. Will your stay in Charles Town be a long one?”

Caroline had to struggle to keep tears out of her voice. “I think not, Mrs. Cook. I must return home soon. Good day.” The last words were flung over her shoulder as she turned and headed through the door.

I must return home soon, I must return home soon, I must return home soon... The words echoed in her head with each footfall. She had bounded down the steps and several paces up the street before Captain Talbot caught up to her. She wobbled a bit as her pace slowed.

“Miss Carter, please, the day is too warm. And...” Edward waved up toward the buildings at the end of the street. “...you do not wish to continue in this direction.”

Caroline stopped and looked up at him. “I must return home soon,” was all she could manage to say. She took his proffered arm and they turned and walked up the street together in silence.

They strolled past shops and coffeehouses and inns, the society of which Caroline had dreamed for so long. She gazed at each edifice with resentment, as if the buildings deliberately withheld the joy she had expected at such a moment. Gradually, though, she realized she did enjoy the strong, steady feel of the captain’s arm linked in hers. Their paces matched, step for step, in an easy, graceful rhythm.

Caroline almost giggled when she thought of the one time she had tried to stroll arm-in-arm with Mr. Throckmorton. His arm had trembled, as with some sort of palsy, and he had kept his gaze fixed on the

uneven ground, constantly warning her of rocks and other pitfalls in their path. Fortunately, he had abbreviated their outing on account of pressing business.

Yes, this was nothing like a walk with Mr. Throckmorton through the gardens and fields of Hill Crest. Gratitude welled up inside her, and Caroline smiled and began to pay closer attention to the spectacle of Charles Town.

The smile seemed to melt the silence. “Ah, yes, Miss Carter,” Captain Talbot continued as if a quarter of an hour had not elapsed since her last sentence, “although you must return home rather soon, it would be a shame, would it not, to leave Charles Town without savoring some of the town’s pleasures?”

Caroline’s smile widened. She did not know exactly what Captain Talbot had in mind, but at this moment, she didn’t really care. She would enjoy herself and enjoy the town. Home was something she could think about later.

Chapter Fifteen

What questions need they ask? Should they inquire if anyone had sighted a woman dressed in boy’s clothing? If they simply asked about a boy, certainly no one would have noticed—working boys in cheap clothing filled the streets of this provincial town.

Josiah tried to remember if there were any distinguishing features to describe Miss Carter’s face or figure. To his horror, he realized he could not even bring her image to mind. She was shorter than he, certainly, as most people were. She had hair that was neither too dark nor too light, with perhaps a reddish sparkle in the sunlight. A hazy impression started to form in his mind. She usually wore her hair curled—but, of course, it would not now be done up as it was at Hill Crest. Her eyes were... a light color... probably, but he could not be certain. She had two of them, that was all he had particularly cared about. But to describe her to others he needed specific characteristics.

She was slight of build, and always seemed to move very quickly, he remembered. And she laughed a lot, sometimes an annoying giggle, but often an open, engaging laugh.

“Fishoystersclams! Fishoystersclams!”

The words drew Josiah’s gaze to the men hawking wares further up the street. Charles Town did not appear to be much of a town, but he had to admit he saw more signs of commerce here than he had in any previous settlement he had visited in the colonies.

He turned to allow Charles to catch up with him. Lost in thought, both men had said nothing since they arrived on shore a quarter of an hour ago.

“Mr. Throckmorton, I believe we should separate to begin our inquiries. Would you be so good as to secure lodgings for the night? We can meet at sunset at...” The younger man’s eyes were also drawn to the commerce up the street. “...at that tavern, there. The one with the brick front.”

Josiah turned back to look at the appointed building just in time to see a man hurled unceremoniously out the door into the street. Would he appear a coward if he suggested a rendezvous with less volatile patrons? “I’ll meet you in front of the building,” he promised.

Charles’ attention then focused in the opposite direction. “If you don’t mind, Mr. Throckmorton, I’ll begin this way.”

Before Josiah could answer, he headed off toward a group of plainly dressed gentleman conversing on a side street several yards away.

Josiah walked slowly up the street. He had hoped to discuss some questions or strategies they might employ in their search. However, pride held his tongue—after all, Charles had not asked him for advice, so how could he admit to the younger man that he, the experienced barrister, could not figure out what questions to ask in their search. If Charles could do it on his own, he should certainly be able to do so as well.

Only now he felt he couldn’t. It was too awful. What was he looking for? An effeminate ship’s boy? Or, taking the matter one step further, a woman in rags, from a ship full of men. What would that make her? He couldn’t ask. He didn’t want to know.

Josiah closed his eyes and tried to swallow the lump rising in his throat. When his eyes opened, he realized he was now quite close to the tavern Charles had appointed as their meeting place in a few hours’ time. At least he had been given the task of finding a room. He could make a thorough search of any establishment with rooms for rent without making awkward inquiries. In fact, he could start right here.

Josiah had no sooner lifted his foot to step toward the door when the sound of breaking glass, followed by laughter and a sharp wail, made him take an awkward hop backwards. He struggled to regain his balance and immediately began to look for another prospect for lodgings. To be thorough, he would have to research the tavern with the glass-breaking patrons, but there was no reason he had to research it first.

In fact, he could start by looking for the nicest, most comfortable, or at least the cleanest-looking establishment.

It was not a long search. There were few enough places advertising hospitality, and fewer still he would

have cared to set foot in. The most likely prospect seemed to be a small building not far from the waterfront where a stout, plain woman offered rooms and meals but permitted no beverages stronger than cider or ale.

"I've five rooms," she explained in hoarse drawl. "Three're lent to gentlemen and the fourth to a . . . a lady. I've one left. It's the hottest chamber, but there's two beds, and you'd have room for three or four gentlemen, sir. More, p'rhaps," she added with a grin, "if they're your girth, sir."

"Hm, yes." Josiah took a deep breath and wished the shadow he cast on the opposite wall did not bear such a close resemblance to a poker. "We'll take the room. There will be just *two* of us Miss, uh . . ."

"Cheesewringer, and it is Mrs. Cheesewringer, though my poor John is long gone now." She gave an exaggerated sniff. "The fever and ague gripped him soon as we landed in this swampy country. I've been running th' place on my own these ten years."

Josiah heard two more sniffs, and saw Mrs. Cheesewringer dab at her eyes with the corner of her apron, though what she was trying to absorb appeared a mystery, her eyes being as dry as baking stones.

"Yes, then, well, how much for the room? We'll take supper elsewhere." Josiah assumed they had better patronize as many establishments as possible to further their inquiries.

"Three shillings each for the private lodging, another six pence for hot water in the morning, and a shilling each for breakfast, first night in advance."

It seemed high for these primitive accommodations, but then, everything in this backward land seemed to cost ten times more than it was worth.

"Yes, fine." Josiah handed the requisite coins into her outstretched palm. "Mrs. Cheesewringer, we will be conducting business in town. Mr. Charles Carter and Mr. Josiah Throckmorton, if you would be so good as to accept any messages or callers for us?"

"Deed, I would, sir."

"Our luggage will be sent around directly." Or maybe not so directly, but Josiah hoped he could bribe someone to bring it sometime during the afternoon. "Good day."

He was almost out the door before he heard the hoarse drawl again.

"Beg your pardon, sir, are you Carter or Rockmarn?"

"Josiah Throckmorton, at your service, madam." When Josiah saw the grin on her face again, he added a big flourishing bow and grinned himself. As he walked away, he suddenly became aware of the smell of good food, and wished he had not been so hasty in deciding to have supper elsewhere.

"Good afternoon, miss."

"Good afternoon." Caroline paused, sensing she should say something before continuing up the stairs to her room. Though her landlady appeared to be busy polishing, she looked at Caroline with a twinkle in

her eye and seemed to be near to bursting with the need to talk. "Have you, uh, had a pleasant morning, Mrs...?"

She looked around but saw no indication of the proprietress's name. The omission appeared not to be noticed, however, as her landlady immediately took up the invitation to reply.

"Ah, yes, miss. Now, well, it's been a bit hot, and my back is aching something awful, but what's to mind when I've all my rooms rented. And the best is..." She looked quickly toward the empty doorway. "...I've just rented the worst room for three times the normal rate. A tall gentleman, all arms and legs with the Queen's English on his tongue, didn't even look at the beds!"

She gave a little laugh, and Caroline felt obliged to at least smile, though she did not really share her landlady's humor at the prospect of cheating some poor gentleman out of his money.

"And he's paying extra for the breakfast, too, ha! I probably should have charged more for the morning wash water. Next time, next time."

Caroline didn't even want to smile at this. She remembered how the landlady had quoted a rate—she couldn't recall the amount—when they arrived, and how Captain Talbot had laughed, put a hand on the woman's shoulder and quietly but very sternly told her he had no time for her nonsense. They seemed to come to an agreement rather quickly after that—Caroline had not much cared at the time. All she had wanted was the chance to get away by herself, and the small, plain room they had given her upstairs suddenly seemed like heaven.

Thinking back on their entrance now, though, she felt a little uncomfortable. Her room was directly across from that of the captain. What must this woman think of her?

"I'm afraid I am a little fatigued, and it is so hot. If you will excuse me, Mrs., uh..."

"Cheesewringer. Henrietta Cheesewringer."

"Mrs. Cheesewringer, if you will excuse me, I'm going to go up to my room." Caroline glanced around, as if to emphasize the fact she was going to her room alone. "In case I should fall asleep, will you be so good as to knock on my door at sunset?"

"Yes, certainly, miss."

She had been pulling her way through waist-high weeds in mud, struggling hard to take each step and sweating so much that perspiration dripped heavily onto her sleeves. Up ahead, she could barely see the figure of a rider dressed in a black coat, cutting his way through the fields to the sea beyond. He seemed more distant with each minute, and she grew frenzied in her efforts to catch up.

Suddenly, the figure halted, turned toward her, and reached out a hand in welcome. She laughed then; the task of plunging through the mud and weeds became almost joyous. Every few steps, she would look down to watch her dirtied hands as they pulled the weeds aside, and then she'd look up again to see the figure appearing closer and closer...

Someone was tapping on the door; Caroline sat upright. No weeds blocked her way, only a brown blanket entwined with her arm. She closed her eyes then opened them again. No mud, no ship, just the plain dark room with a shuttered, musty smell. She was in Charles Town, at an inn, and soon she would be going to the theatre with Captain Talbot!

The tapping at the door continued. "Miss, miss? Are you about? 'Tis nearly sunset. Miss, miss?"

"Thank you, Mrs., uh, thank you, ma'am." Caroline felt a little dizzy as she made a sudden move toward the door, opening it just in time to stop her landlady's hand from beginning another round of taps. "Thank you for waking me. Would you be so kind as to bring me a pitcher of water?" She looked toward the dusty basin on a stand in the corner. "And a flannel and towel as well, please?"

She did not know if the inn was regularly in the business of supplying linens to its patrons, but she hoped she might be made an exception, having nothing but her new gown and chemise with which to wash and dry her face.

"Why, yes, miss. I'll have Annie bring you water and towels. Would you be needing some refreshment, too?"

Caroline nodded gratefully. "Yes, that would be lovely."

"I'll send up a cup of cider, then."

After the landlady departed, Caroline closed the door and sat down on the bed with a sense of rapture. It was so peaceful, so restful to be here. She had the whole room to herself. A servant would bring her water and a drink. True, the cider in Charles Town tasted rather wretched, but it was infinitely preferable to rum and salty water.

She lay back on the bed and let her gaze follow a crack in the plaster ceiling. No one seemed to expect her to do anything. It was a truly blissful sensation, so unlike life on the ship.

Caroline frowned at that realization. Life on the ship had been hard, and she didn't miss being there. But she had thought she preferred being on board the ship to being at home. At home, where she had...her own small room, and servants to bring her cider and towels.

So, which did she want?

Town. She wanted to walk down the streets of the town with Captain Talbot, to go to the theatre and have a late evening supper; and then, when they came back to the inn, he might even kiss her. He must find her attractive, at least a little, or he would not have bought her the dress and proposed this outing.

Caroline sat up quickly again when she heard a strong kick on the door. "Yes?"

"Your towels and cider, miss. And water."

When Caroline opened the door, she was surprised to look into the dark face of a young Negress, who was balancing water and cider precariously with towels draped over both arms. Caroline stood speechless for a moment, leaving the girl with her awkward burden, until some sense of decorum returned.

"Come in, please. May I...?" She feared that if she reached out to help, she might upset the whole

balance.

The girl skillfully unloaded her cargo, and Caroline soon had pitcher in basin, towels neatly hung at the side and a mug of cool cider in her hand.

“You be needin’ anythin’ else, miss?” The girl waited quietly by the door.

“Are you Annie?” Caroline had never seen a black slave in a house setting before. She had expected “Annie” to be a young servant lately over from Cornwall or Ireland, perhaps. At Hill Crest, all the slaves worked in the fields and slept in separate buildings away from the house. They kept to themselves, and often spoke in strange words Caroline could not understand. Yet here was a slave working quite satisfactorily as a maidservant. Caroline studied the girl with interest as she drained her mug of cider.

“Would you care for ’nother, miss?”

This was most gratifying. Caroline could not remember a time when a servant had actually offered to bring her something. “Yes, please. And, if you don’t mind, I need some help lacing my gown.” Would this girl have any idea how to fasten all the laces and buttons on the new gown? Caroline hoped she hadn’t embarrassed her by asking.

“Cert’ly, miss.” Annie started tugging and fastening with confidence, but it soon became apparent she was not used to such duties.

“I think if you pull that one . . .”

“Yes’m.”

“And . . . now this one over here.”

“Yes’m.”

“Ouch. There, I think that does it.” Caroline had no mirror, but what she could see of the dress looked correct, and it pinched in all the same places it had earlier when she first put it on. “Thank you, Annie.”

“Yes’m. I’ll bring you ’nother cider, now.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you.” Caroline pondered the girl’s enthusiasm for her duties as she waited for Annie’s return. Did she work more cheerfully because she was resigned to her fate instead of anxiously waiting for the freedom at the end of an indenture? No, that made little sense. If anything, contemplation of her position should make the girl belligerent rather than cheerful.

So, what was it? She pictured Annie draping the towels over the washstand. She moved with health and vigor, and her dress had been in better shape than many of Caroline’s own gowns. She must have good food and shelter, then, and care was taken in the matter of her clothing.

Caroline could certainly not say the same for her family’s slaves at Hill Crest. The servants slept in the house and ate the family’s food. By law, they had to be provided with certain clothing—her mother had complained of this often enough.

But the slaves had no such protections, as far as she knew. Perhaps, if they were dressed properly and trained in the ways of the household, they might prove more satisfactory in the house than the

ill-mannered servants they had of late.

No, her mother would never permit slaves in the house. But when she got home, she would take a good look at the slaves at Hanset. Perhaps some of them might be trained to work in the house.

This was the first time in many days she had thought of returning to Maryland and becoming mistress of her own plantation. Now that it seemed so far away, why did she think of it again?

“Miss.” A sharp knock followed the sound of Annie’s voice. “Captain Talbot is waiting downstairs for you.”

Caroline opened the door and looked at the mug of cider Annie held out to her. “My hair!” She put up her hands, but could not see without a mirror. Were any stray pieces sticking out? “My shoes?” She looked around and saw them near the bed. “I need a small rag for my shoes!”

“Yes’m.”

“And tell Captain Talbot I’ll be down directly.”

The slippers they had procured from somewhere this afternoon were quite elegant and covered with beautiful beads, but they were too big for her, and the left one frequently slipped off as she walked. Why hadn’t she thought about fixing it sooner? She would hate to miss the start of the performance.

A few minutes later, she made her awkward descent down the narrow stairs and found Captain Talbot waiting in the parlor.

“Good evening, Captain.” She hoped her smile looked elegant and engaging.

“Good evening, Miss Carter. I trust you had an enjoyable afternoon?”

“Very restful, Captain, thank you.” She waited for him to take her hand.

“Let us go, then.” It was not until they reached the street that he offered his arm. “It’s just up here a bit at Eberly’s. It won’t be real theatre, of course. They have no theatre building in Charles Town. But Hathaway and Dursten are from London and their players are said to be quite excellent.”

“I’m sure,” was all Caroline said, but she knew it would be wonderful. She had never seen theatre of any kind before, the settlement at Elkridge Landing being too small or too remote to attract any professional players. To see the words of Shakespeare or Dryden brought to life must be simply marvelous.

A breeze from the sea felt fresh on her skin. She watched it ruffle the loose strands of hair around the Captain’s face.

He frowned. “Is something wrong? Do I have something on my face?”

“No.” Caroline giggled at his sudden concern. “The wind mussed your hair a bit, that’s all.” She propelled him forward toward a growing crowd at the end of the street. He did cut a fine figure. She knew the two of them looked well together. And she was going to the theatre, at night, in a town.

When they neared the end of the street, though, she found the “theatre” a little disappointing. A row of

torches set around a makeshift platform made up the stage, while people of all descriptions sat on the ground passing cups and bowls around. A man up on the stage was saying something, but it was difficult to hear with all the revelry among the audience.

Caroline wrinkled her nose at the noise and the smell, and the captain led her around so they were upwind of the crowd and clustered among a more attentive group of patrons. When she looked down with dismay at the prospect of dirtying her new gown by sitting in the dirt, he took off his coat and spread it as a rug for her. His gallantry produced a nearly audible sigh from her. This was the life she had been meant to lead.

Or perhaps there was a bit more to hope for yet. The theatre repertoire proved to be even a greater disappointment than the setting. The performance consisted for the most part of a series of convoluted monologues combining famous lines from the plays of at least four or five different dramatists. At the end, when the two famous players took the stage, the audience enjoyed some witty dialog and a couple of energetic fights. But the attempt at a heroic death scene never captured their fancy, and the dying speech was interrupted several times by calls from the audience urging the dying player to “pick up your sword and fight the bastard again.”

Thus the evening entertainment ended on a comic note. Despite her disappointment at the quality of the theatre, Caroline was in a gay mood as she and the captain stepped back onto the street.

Then she caught a glimpse of a face. It couldn't be... the narrow, drawn face, the sad puppy eyes, all at a height well above most of the other men in the crowd dispersing from the makeshift arena. Josiah Throckmorton was here, in Charles Town, at this very minute, and probably looking for her. This was simply unbelievable. It was impossible.

The uneven torchlight made it difficult to see clearly; it must have been someone who looked like him, perhaps even a distant relative.

Caroline took a deep breath and looked all around her but did not see the face again. Most likely she had imagined it. Was it a guilty conscience trying to haunt her as she walked down the street arm-in-arm with another man? After all, she was still engaged to Mr. Throckmorton, although it seemed the Caroline Carter who was betrothed to Josiah Throckmorton existed in another life and could not possibly be her any longer. Perhaps he considered the engagement a thing of the past as well. But then, why would he come looking for her?

That he hadn't, of course, was the logical answer. She merely imagined he had. Did she want him to come looking for her? Of course not. She wanted to stay with Captain Talbot and see exotic ports. She did not want to return to life in Maryland, even if it were to become mistress of her own plantation. And she did not want to share her life with fussy old Mr. Throckmorton. He would certainly never come all this way to look for her. The trip might interrupt his weekly whist match. He would run the risk of dirtying his stockings. And he might catch a chill or fever. No, he would never come all the way to Charles Town to look for her.

Would anyone?

Her father, certainly he would miss her. Might he...?

“Miss Carter, Miss Carter?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“You were positively lost to me for a moment, there. Would you care to take some supper at Campbell’s Tavern? Or are you ready to retire for the evening?”

“Supper would be lovely, Captain.” As long as she did not see any more faces in the crowd, she wanted to stay out as late as possible, make this night last forever if she could. She did not want to think about what might happen tomorrow; it would certainly be less pleasant than what was happening right now.

Chapter Sixteen

What a sorry excuse for theatre that had been! All that ranting and prancing and roaring. But the crowd, when they had paid any attention to the stage, had seemed to enjoy the performance immensely. Fortunately for his own sensibilities, Josiah had missed the better part of the drama and had concentrated most of his energies on scanning the faces in the crowd for Miss Carter or her brother. Charles was supposed to have met him at the site, but the performance had ended nearly half an hour earlier; and he still saw no sign of his traveling companion.

He sighed. He knew Charles had been as diligent as he in making inquiries, so he could not feel slighted. Still, he was discouraged. To begin with, he knew he had been less than assiduous in his search; in fact, it was almost as if he were avoiding the task.

Moreover, Charles seemed to have found another topic of inquiry which absorbed nearly as much of his attention as his search for his sister. It was quite peculiar. The two times Josiah had met up with him, he had found the younger man engaged in serious discourse with two or more gentlemen of austere dress. It had not seemed like the casual conversation of a man making inquiries about a lost relative. Once or twice, Josiah had heard them speak of “the Lord’s will;” and while they could have been explaining that God wanted to punish Charles’s sister for her iniquitous adventures, he guessed that Miss Carter had not played the central role in the conversation. Charles was engaging these men in discussions of theology of some sort. Meanwhile, Josiah waited.

He was standing near the edge of the makeshift arena, watching the faces of passersby as they moved through the glow of the torches, when Charles finally arrived.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Throckmorton. I was engrossed in conversation and lost track of the hour, I’m afraid.” He looked around with embarrassment. “The performance has been over for some time, has it not?”

“Yes, Mr. Carter, it has.”

“Yes, well, then, shall we go on?”

“Indeed, yes.”

“Please, sir, lead the way.”

“Well,” Josiah began as he eased away from the tree trunk against which he had been leaning, “I believe I’ve visited all the public establishments in town, except for Campbell’s Tavern, Farthings—whose patrons seem to be excessively fond of breaking glass—and the Shrewsbury Coffeehouse. You were headed in that direction when we separated; I assume you’ve made inquiries there?”

“I have,” Charles answered somewhat sheepishly.

“And?”

“No sign of her, I’m afraid.”

“And? Where else have you been?”

“Well, I’ve been, uh, speaking with local gentlemen all day at . . . various places, and—”

“Have you been to Campbell’s or Farthings?”

“Ah, no.”

“Well, shall we try Campbell’s?” Josiah really did not relish the thought of walking into the bawdier Farthings house this late in the evening, when the patrons would have even more empty rum bottles available for breaking.

“We might, sir, but Farthings is closer, and it does appear to be a larger establishment. Our time might be better spent there.”

Josiah could not argue with that logic without feeling like a coward. “Yes, you’re right, Mr. Carter.” He yawned, an action that contrasted strangely with the knot of anxiety in his stomach. Why had he waited until this late to go into Farthings? “After this, I’m afraid, I shall have to make an evening of it. We can inquire at Campbell’s tomorrow.”

Walking through the dark later, the crushed shell of the street crunching under his footsteps, Josiah touched a sore spot on his head and winced. “I believe I’ll have a rather unpleasant bump on my head

tomorrow, but other than that, I appear to have emerged unscathed. How did you fare, Mr. Carter?"

"You mean from the, uh... yes, well, no major bruises, at least, none that I've noticed yet, all limbs present and accounted for and—oh, one cut on my arm here. Seems to be bleeding a bit. The true question is, did we learn anything?"

"Besides the fact that Farthings is not an establishment we'd particularly care to frequent on a regular basis?" Josiah replied. "No, I don't think we did. The men in there were too drunk to see anything and too drunk to remember it if they *had* been able to see anything. The rum was rather better in there than in the other houses, though, I must say."

Charles gave him a smile. "I think they put less of the salty local water into it."

"Yes, that would explain the copious quantities of broken glass and the loyalty of the patrons."

When they had attempted to leave the first time, several men had insisted, quite pointedly, that they remain in "the best damned tavern in all the colonies." Though annoyed at first, Josiah had found their loyalty rather amusing, even after he learned the men expected Charles and him to each stand them a round of drinks in the "best damn tavern in all the colonies."

Eventually, these loyalists had found a new game to play—poking fun at comrades who had fallen senseless in the corner—and Josiah and Charles were able to leave without being further accosted.

And now it was back to... back to... wherever that house was, with the widow and the smell of good food—though it was now too late to find any. Josiah realized he felt terribly hungry all of a sudden. The only thing to do was hurry back and sleep till it would be time for a big breakfast.

It seemed to be taking an awfully long time to get there.

"Are you quite sure this is the correct street, Charles?"

"Well, ah, yes..." Charles spun around and looked, a bit unsteadily. "A street, with houses... how many can there be?"

"What do you mean, 'how many can there be?' This is Charles Town. *Atown*. Towns have quantities of streets. But then, you don't have any real towns in Maryland so you wouldn't know that."

"I object, sir! I do, indeed, know of towns. Why, Elkridge Landing—"

Josiah snickered.

"—perhaps is not exactly a town, but Annapolis, St. Mary's, Joppa *Town*..."

"I do hope Joppa is actually a town, for I shall have to spend a deal of time in that vicinity if I take up the practice of law again. We've been down this street three times if we've been down it once," Josiah announced with a yawn.

"Right. Turn here, then." Charles pointed down a side street.

"Are you sure?"

“Not at all.”

“Good, then it’s probably the right street.”

“Thank you for that vote of confidence, Mr. Throckmorton.”

“For God’s sake, Charles, after all we have endured together, you should be able to address me by my Christian name. If you can remember it, that is.”

“Well, then, Josiah, what do you say? Is this the house, or isn’t it?”

“I believe you have found it,” Josiah announced warmly. “*We* have found it.”

“Oh, now you’re to take all the credit, when I’ve done all the work,” Charles said, assuming a tone of mock injury.

“Work? Leading us down the same street three times?”

“Well, at least I was leading us somewhere. You would still be walking in circles if—”

Both men froze.

“Caroline?” Charles recovered his voice first. “Caroline, is it really you?” He rushed toward a young lady seated on the porch of the guesthouse. “Oh, thank God. I feared we should never find you. But I vowed...” He turned back and motioned to Josiah. “We vowed we’d not rest until we found you, though it should take years. And yet God has led us to you so quickly. And He has kept you safe.”

Charles stopped at the foot of the porch steps when he suddenly noticed what Josiah had taken in at first glance—the young lady had been engaged in an intimate *tete-à-tete* with a strange gentleman. In fact, she had practically been sitting on the lap of this gentleman, and it was her flirtatious giggle that had first drawn her to their attention.

But she wasn’t giggling anymore. She had practically leapt to her feet when Charles approached, her hands in front of her face as if in horror. Then she turned and bolted into the house.

Josiah looked at Charles. Had they just seen Miss Carter? Surely not. She might have wanted to run away from him, but she certainly never would have run from her brother. The young lady on the porch must have been a stranger; Charles’s effusive greeting no doubt frightened her off.

Josiah started to climb the stairs, pulling Charles along beside him. “I believe, Charles, that you are mistaken.” He turned to the gentleman on the porch and forced a smile. “I am afraid we both mistook your companion for a Miss Caroline Carter, who visits in town. She does not yet know of our arrival and we had hoped to surprise her.” He prodded Charles. “Obviously, we surprised the wrong young lady, eh?”

Although she did look a great deal like Miss Carter.

Charles looked around, dumbfounded. “Why did she...?”

Josiah stepped toward the stranger with his hand outstretched in greeting. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure of your acquaintance, Mr...?”

“Everett. Edward Everett, at your service, Mr...?”

“Throckmorton, Josiah Throckmorton. And this is Charles Carter. I am...acquainted with Miss Carter’s family in Maryland, and I, we, came to...visit, as I said.” His earlier glibness seemed to elude him now.

The girl had looked so very much like Miss Carter, and obviously Charles seconded this opinion.

Josiah tried to focus on the conversation at hand, but he could think of nothing else to say that would not make the situation more awkward—and it remained awkward for some moments after. Charles stared at the seat lately vacated by the young lady, while the mysterious Mr. Everett watched them both with a curious half-smile on his face.

Finally, Josiah had had enough. “Gentlemen, the hour is late and the mosquitoes most trying on the patience. I intend to retire for the evening. Perhaps we might renew our acquaintance at breakfast?”

Mr. Everett bowed and motioned for them to lead the way into the house. As it was too late to wake the landlady, Everett opened a desk drawer, removed two keys then turned to Josiah. “Your room, Mr. Throckmorton?”

“The garret, if you please. Thank you.” Josiah took the proffered key and a candle from the desk then gestured for Everett to take the lead up the stairs.

What if the young lady were, indeed, Miss Carter? Did she share a room with this Mr. Everett?

That gentleman stopped before a door on the second floor and unlocked it. Josiah paused unsteadily and pretended to busy himself with something on the bottom of his shoe while he watched Everett enter his room. The small room appeared empty, though it was difficult to be certain in the dim light. Other doors indicated the presence of the two additional guest rooms on this floor—had Miss Carter run to one of these?

After Mr. Everett closed his door, Josiah walked toward the other two rooms and stood uncertainly. Should he wait here until morning, just in case Miss Carter was here?

“Trust in the Lord.” Charles put a hand on his shoulder. “She will be kept safe until morning.”

Josiah did not answer. He was tired. He was confused. Sleep—and oblivion—was the only idea that held any appeal. And yet, could he leave her here, within reach of this unknown man? But, of course, if the young lady was not Miss Carter...

“Trust, Josiah, trust. Come.” Charles motioned up the stairs.

Josiah still held the key in his hands. How could he trust? Look what had happened so far. But the words *Be not afraid* came into his head, and he remembered the peaceful moments on the ship when he had repeated them to himself. He would take courage in the words again.

To Josiah’s surprise, it had not been difficult to sleep. The next sensation he noticed after blowing out the candle was the warmth of morning sun through the eastern window. It was just after dawn, and the bright sun remained low in the sky.

He had a taste in his mouth like dry leather, and he looked around in vain for a pitcher of water. He stood and stretched, gingerly touching the lump on the back of his head where an overzealous patron at Farthing's had hit him "accidentally" with a chair leg. Then he looked over at Charles, to see how badly he had been cut by the broken bottle he had "accidentally" backed into. The younger man was sleeping closely entwined in a linen sheet, however, so Josiah could not see his injured arm.

As he started to yawn, another scene from the night before suddenly flooded into his memory, and he found he had to sit down to keep his head from spinning. Miss Carter might be here, in this very house, and yet—she had acted so strangely. Surely, the young lady could not have been Miss Carter.

With the rum, the late hour, the dim light of the candles on the porch... it had only looked like Miss Carter.

Certainly, Miss Carter would have been overjoyed to be rescued from her ordeal. The young lady on the porch last night had been less than pleased to see them. Therefore, it could not possibly be Miss Carter.

Josiah breathed easier with this conclusion. No need to wait outside her door now; in fact, he thought with a grin, she would be even more frightened at this attention from strangers in daylight. He looked over at Charles and decided to let him continue sleeping while he procured some water and ordered breakfast.

On his way back up the stairs, with the smell of bacon in his nostrils and a girl at his heels bearing towels and water, Josiah was in high spirits. They had, after all, survived a grueling journey—no, two difficult journeys—at sea, and now they had lived through yet another trying ordeal in the taverns of Charles Town. They might be off to Nassau soon, and untold horrors might await them on the high seas, but so far they had fared admirably. Of course, they hadn't learned much. But they had not expected the expedition to be swift or simple. *Be not afraid*, the voice in his head had said last night, and, by God, the voice was right. The morning showed he had little to fear.

By the time he reached the garret, Josiah was actually whistling, albeit rather fitfully, with his mouth being so dry.

"Josiah?" Charles sat up in bed. "You seem so wonderfully cheerful. Have you seen Caroline this morning?"

Josiah waited as the girl deposited the water and towels with silent efficiency. Only when she had closed the door behind her did he answer. "No, I have not seen Miss Carter this morning. And I do not believe that we saw her last night, either."

"What?"

"I do not believe the young lady we confronted on the porch last night was your sister," Josiah announced with certainty.

"What do you mean? Of course, it was Caroline." Charles swung out of bed and landed with an angry thud.

"Can you really be so certain? Listen, by the time we returned last night it was very late, and very dark. There were two, perhaps three candles lit on the porch, so we had little light to see by. And, to be

honest, we had, shall we say, imbibed more than a little rum?"

"Well, yes...but she looked so much like Caroline!"

"Did you get a full look at her face in the light? Remember, she covered her face soon after we saw her."

Charles cringed. "Yes, I remember. But her voice, I know I heard her voice."

"You heard the young lady giggle. Now, you have four sisters, and they all tend to giggle at times. Can you honestly say that you can tell one sister's giggle from another?"

"Well, perhaps not, but...it was Caroline. I am certain of it." Charles began to walk toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs. To talk to her."

"For God's sake, man, put your breeches on first!"

"What? Oh." Charles looked down in annoyance. Though his shirt reached to his knees and covered him as well as any dressing gown, it would, indeed, have been embarrassing to be caught in the public rooms wearing nothing else.

Josiah tossed Charles's shoes and stockings over as well. "If you insist on accosting this young lady further, you had better be fully clothed."

Charles dressed in hurried silence. "It is Caroline, and I will speak to her." He punctuated his remark with a jarring slam of the door.

Josiah began washing up and thought of breakfast waiting in the parlor.

Josiah had just finished a second slice of beautifully toasted bread and was reaching for the pot of preserves to spread on a third when Charles appeared with a look of utter despair on his face.

"Don't worry, I shall have the girl bring in some more toast, and I believe I've left you some of the excellent bacon and sausage, too." Josiah laughed, but Charles did not even crack a smile. "It's not Caroline, is it?" he said softly. He understood Charles's disappointment, to feel that they had come so close—

"No, it *is* Caroline, I am even more sure of it this morning. But she won't talk to me."

"What makes you believe the young lady upstairs is your sister?"

"I recognized her voice again."

"But you said she wouldn't talk to you. How could you hear her voice?"

"Because she told me she wouldn't talk to me!"

“What?”

“She told me she wouldn’t talk to me.”

“She *told* you she wouldn’t—?”

“She said she didn’t want to talk to me and told me to go away.”

“I see. And from that you inferred she must be your sister?”

“Well, she said that rather frequently back at Hill Crest.” Charles suddenly adopted a high falsetto. “Go awaaayeeee!” Then he dropped back into his normal baritone. “I’d recognize that whiney tone anywhere. It is Caroline, I tell you.”

“I see.” Josiah munched thoughtfully. “Perhaps she’s given her name to the landlady?” But he didn’t think that was likely. “Perhaps her companion of last evening would give us her name? Or…” He was almost afraid to say it “...perhaps she might speak to me?”

“It’s certainly worth a try. She might be angry with me for some reason. But she will be cordial to you, won’t she?”

Josiah wiped his fingers on a coarse but clean linen napkin and stood. Before heading upstairs, he turned toward the kitchen, which was connected to the parlor by a terrace in back of the building.

“Hullo in the kitchen?” He could not remember the name of either the serving girl or the proprietress. “We’ve another for breakfast.” He smiled as he passed Charles. “Which room is it?”

“To the right of the stairs.”

“Thank you. Enjoy your breakfast, and I shall put this matter to rest momentarily.” He headed up the stairs with more energy than usual.

Once outside the young lady’s room, however, his bravado faded. Who was this young woman? What on earth would he say to her?

He paced a few times, started to knock and then continued pacing. At this rate, he would certainly attract attention from her gentleman companion across the hall, and his situation would be doubly embarrassing. He knocked at the young lady’s door.

“Pardon me, miss.”

No answer.

He knocked a little louder, looking behind to see if he had roused Mr. Everett. “Pardon my intrusion, miss. Might I perhaps have a word with you? In—in the parlor, not in your room, of course.”

“Please,” a small voice answered from the other side of the door, “go away. Please leave me alone.”

A shiver ran down his spine. Josiah could not be entirely certain, but the voice did sound like that of Miss Carter. He felt he had no choice but to obey the timid plea.

As he walked slowly back down to the parlor, he realized with some curiosity that her refusal to talk to him had not greatly surprised him. It was as if he had been expecting all along to be rejected by her one day, and its coming was almost a relief.

Suddenly, he was certain, as Charles had been, that the young lady upstairs was Caroline Carter and that she wanted nothing to do with either of them.

He and Charles both grew increasingly anxious to talk to the mysterious Mr. Everett. When they learned he had breakfasted and gone out hours earlier, all they could do was remain and wait for his return. At one point, after they saw the serving girl carry a breakfast tray upstairs, they decided to try to speak jointly with Caroline again, but the girl informed them firmly that "The lady say she 'cepting no visitors this mornin'."

And so they waited, and paced. The day grew warmer; they ceased to pace. Josiah tried to pass the time with a book from the landlady's meager collection but found himself reading the same line over and over. The sight of him reading apparently inspired Charles to go upstairs for his Bible, and though Josiah heard him pause in the hallway outside Caroline's room, he heard no knock.

After his return, Charles settled back into his chair in the parlor. Within a few minutes, the familiar pages of Psalms left him visibly calmer. Josiah glanced at him in envy.

Be not afraid?

No, he was not afraid, just anxious. But what was anxiety if not fear in a subtle disguise? Very well, he would let the words calm him. *Be not afraid*, he repeated to himself. But the phrase didn't seem to mean much in the light of day. He needed a few more words to put the idea into context.

Josiah looked at the book in Charles's hands but was too embarrassed to ask to borrow it. Instead, he casually roamed the room to see if the proprietor had a Bible. To his surprise, he found one. It was mildewed and obviously old, but the text remained legible. He sat down with the book, after first looking around to see if anyone were watching. Where had he seen that helpful quote, "Be not afraid, etc. etc. etc.?" The Bible was a lengthy book, and he could find no discernable index.

He opened the volume and turned a few of the heavy pages. "Eleazar begat Phinehas, Phinehas begat Abishua, And Abishua begat Bukki, and Bukki begat Uzzi, and Uzzi begat Zerachiah..." This definitely was not the section he was seeking. Josiah opened to another page. "And if thy oblation be a meat offering baked in a pan, it shall be of fine flour unleavened, mingled with oil. Thou shalt part it in pieces, and pour oil thereon..." Josiah looked at the cover. The book was starting to read like a cooking text. Did Charles really study these words every night before retiring?

He looked toward the empty doorway again and sighed. Presumably, this Everett would return, at least to collect his luggage. But what if he did not? What if he left his belongings behind? What if he sent a servant to collect the luggage?

Josiah felt his muscles tense, and could no longer bear to sit still. After several steps and a deep breath, he reminded himself that no one, servant or otherwise, could collect Everett's belongings without being seen by himself and Charles, and if someone came, they could ask of Everett's whereabouts. Or, if he would not disclose the man's whereabouts, they could follow him covertly.

Might that not be dangerous though, especially in a frontier town such as this? The rough seamen, hunters and planters made up a formidable enough population, but the addition of quantities of

savage-looking Indians gave the town a thoroughly unsettling air. Josiah touched the bump on the back of his head, looked toward the doorway again and resumed pacing until the beads of perspiration on his brow made him stop. Again.

He sat down and picked up the old Bible. ““Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear...”” These words, now, would be of some use. He decided to repeat them over several times in his mind before continuing with the next section. ““Though a host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though a—””

“Josiah!” Charles motioned toward the doorway as Mr. Everett stepped into the room.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen.” The long-awaited personage said nothing more.

“Might we,” Josiah licked his dry lips, “might we have a word with you, sir?”

“Concerning...?” Mr. Everett asked politely.

Charles took a fierce step toward the man. “Concerning my sis—”

“Concerning the young lady, your companion on the porch last evening.” Josiah gave a pointed look to Charles as he interrupted him.

“You wish to speak with me about the young lady?”

“Yes. Please, take a chair, Mr. Everett.”

“Thank you, but I would prefer not to enter into a discussion here.” He glanced meaningfully toward the stairs. “Would you be so kind as to meet me at Campbell’s Tavern in a quarter of an hour?”

“As you wish.” Josiah replied. “Campbell’s Tavern.”

“Thank you, gentlemen. Now, if you will excuse me...”

“Of course.”

Josiah and Charles watched him ascend the first flight of stairs then scrambled up behind him as quietly as possible, only to see him walk into his own room without so much as looking at the door across the hall.

Chapter Seventeen

Caroline rolled over on the bed and opened her swollen, tired eyes to stare once again at a crack that ran the length of the ceiling and reminded her of the Patapsco River on the map at home. Then, she turned back onto her stomach and stuffed her face into a musty-smelling feather pillow. That wouldn't do, either.

She got up and started to walk around, but there was really very little to do in the room, and she was rather sick of looking at it. She sighed and sat down on the bed. Sad as she was, she had cried enough already. Now it was time to do something. But what?

The short shadows outside her window announced that the hour was probably just past midday. Little wonder then that she was starting to get hungry; she had eaten only a few bites of the breakfast Annie had brought up this morning. Would she bring up some dinner? Caroline could not go down for it herself, of course. She was a prisoner in her own room.

She nearly laughed at the romantic imagery of it. Like Anne Boleyn, a noble prisoner in the Tower, locked away from the world, except that she had made this prison for herself and she could, if she chose, release herself.

But she chose not to.

If she went downstairs, if she even agreed to speak to Charles and Mr. Throckmorton, they would take her home. She could certainly never convince them she wanted to stay with Captain Talbot, and with no money or friends, she doubted she would get very far if she tried to run away.

Unless she posed as a boy again and ran off on another ship...no, that would never work. She could not go back to that life of labor and uncertainty under the constant threat of the lash.

Perhaps she could run away with the captain, offer to serve as his—dare she think it?—his mistress on the ship. Could she really do that? Live with a man without the blessing of marriage?

Caroline didn't know. But her options seemed rather few at this point. Without a dowry, what incentive would the captain have to marry her? She did not want to go back to Maryland and marry Mr. Throckmorton. And she certainly could not stay locked in a room in Charles Town forever.

Maybe she could convince the captain to marry her. Maybe he would take her back as a member of his crew. She simply had to talk to him. But he had not been to see her all day.

Then, as if in answer to her unspoken prayer, she heard crisp footfalls up the porch steps, and soon heard his familiar warm voice in the parlor downstairs. She could not quite make out the words, but it was obvious he was speaking with Mr. Throckmorton.

The footsteps soon came again, only louder this time, and with a thumping heart, Caroline realized the captain was at last coming up to talk to her. She smoothed her hair and dabbed at her eyes, wishing Annie were nearby to help her tighten and straighten her gown. She could not afford to mind these details, now, though, and certainly he had seen her under much worse circumstances.

She held her breath, waiting for the knock. The door across the hall closed, and the footsteps...seemed to be getting farther away. Down the stairs and away. With a little cry of dismay, Caroline ran to the window and looked out to see the captain walk up the street and turn the corner.

Why, why had he not come to see her? The look in his eyes yesterday, and last evening, had been unmistakable, or so she had thought. And where was he going? Not back to the *Osprey*, certainly, for he had turned away from the waterfront.

Her questions compounded when she saw her brother and Mr. Throckmorton follow him up the street only a few minutes later. They also turned at the corner. They had not left the inn all morning. Where were they going now?

Caroline kicked at the washstand. Why had he not come to see her? She would have to remain here, a prisoner in her room, until—

But Charles and Mr. Throckmorton had left also hadn't they? At the very least, she could descend to the dining room for something to eat without risking a confrontation.

Or she could leave the house entirely.

Josiah found himself annoyed, rather irrationally, when they entered Campbell's. The tavern was by far the most genteel establishment he had encountered in Charles Town, and he wished he had discovered it sooner. The fact this Mr. Everett was familiar with the tavern only added to his vexation.

The aforementioned gentleman stood when he saw them arrive. "Welcome, gentlemen. Do sit down." He gestured broadly toward two waiting chairs. "A bowl of the house punch, if you please." This last remark was directed to a man at the back of the room wiping his hands on his apron.

As Josiah sat down, he took mental note of the amenities of the tavern that made it contrast so sharply with the other crude colonial establishments in town: plaster walls, carved woodwork, cloths on the tables set with food—he even noticed patrons eating with forks. However, he was somewhat taken aback when the barman brought the punch bowl and asked if they wanted cups for drinking; had he really expected them to pass the bowl around like a pack of groundlings?

Charles seemed hardly aware of his surroundings; his eyes were focused on Everett as if he were trying to pin him to the wall with his gaze alone. He stood for some time, in defiance of the invitation to sit, before finally taking a chair.

Josiah stopped examining the room and took a closer look at the mysterious Mr. Everett.

No one spoke for several moments, as if waiting for one of the others to make the first move.

Then Charles could restrain himself no longer. "Why do you have my sister locked up in an inn?"

Josiah groaned inwardly; this was not the preferred method of questioning a potentially hostile witness.

“I beg your pardon?” Everett smirked.

“My sister—what have you done with my sister?”

“First, perhaps, we should clarify our inquiry, Mr. Everett.” Josiah interposed. “Mr. Carter and I believe the young lady in whose company we met you last night is Miss Caroline Carter of Hill Crest, Maryland. Would that be a correct assumption?” He motioned for Charles to keep quiet. And he watched Everett’s reaction.

“To be perfectly honest with you, gentlemen, I cannot be entirely certain of her identity myself, having only lately come into acquaintance with her. She may very well be the Miss Caroline Carter you speak of.” Everett leaned back, and his leer widened into a grin. “But if she is your sister, Mr. Carter, why will she not speak with you?”

“I don’t know.” Charles pushed his cup away. “I don’t know why she refuses to speak with me. I don’t know why she refuses to speak to Mr. Throckmorton, to whom she is—”

“Mr. Everett,” Josiah interrupted, drawling slowly on the name as if challenging its veracity, “exactly when did you become acquainted with Miss Carter?”

Everett picked up his cup, regarded the contents with mild distaste and put it down again before replying. “I befriended the poor girl several days ago. I found her standing near the waterfront in rags, with no money and no friends. The victim of a shipwreck, was what she told me.”

“I don’t believe you,” Josiah said quietly.

“Well, you don’t have to.” Everett took a drink this time.

“Sir.” Josiah leaned into the table. “I don’t know who you are, but I do not believe you gave us your real name because I believe you are the very scoundrel who absconded with Miss Carter and several men from Elkridge Landing.”

“Absconded? What makes you think so?”

“If you had just met the unfortunate Miss Carter in Charles Town, she would have reported the story of her capture, and you in turn would have reported it to the authorities. No, I believe you made her acquaintance much earlier, and it is entirely due to your wicked actions that she is held here.” Josiah kept his voice low but firm.

“But she holds herself here. I have no key to her room.”

“You’ve done something to her!” Charles accused. “You’ve put a trance on her.”

“I’m not a conjurer. I’ve put no spell on her; she simply chooses to remain in her room. Near mine.” Everett sat back a little.

“You’re not denying you brought her here? And the others?” Josiah continued.

“Would you believe me if I did?”

“Then bring them all to us. Now.” Josiah felt his heart racing as he made his demand.

“Why should I?” Everett countered languidly.

“Because if you don’t, we shall report you to the authorities.” Josiah’s voice started to rise.

Everett laughed. “Go ahead, go right up to the governor’s house. In fact, I’ll go with you. I’ve only just returned from a visit with the governor myself.”

“You have?” Josiah swallowed. “To what purpose?”

“He commissioned me with a letter of marque in service of the colony.”

“Yes, well, when word of your treachery in Maryland reaches officials in this colony...” But Josiah knew the pirate would be long gone by then. “We shall stake our word against yours, then, if you don’t return Miss Carter and the others to our care.”

“As I’ve said before, Miss Carter is free to hand herself over to you if she chooses, and she apparently does not. In any case, my ship stands at the ready. While you plead your story with the governor, we sail out with the tide, and with Miss Carter, who seems most anxious to accompany me.” Everett sat further back in his seat.

This hurt, but Josiah could ignore it for now. “What do you want?” he said, finally conceding to the superior bargaining position of his opponent.

“I’ve become quite fond of Miss Carter, and the other new members of my crew.” Everett picked up his cup and studied it for a moment. “But I could perhaps be persuaded to part with their company...for a small price.”

Josiah coughed slightly at this, even though a ransom had originally been his own plan. He was being asked to buy back his betrothed. But it made sense. The cost of paying off this pirate would no doubt be less than the cost of continuing the chase should he depart with Miss Carter and the others. He could, however, see a potential flaw in the sale. “And if Miss Carter does not agree to your bargain with us?”

“I will deliver her to you safe and sound, you may be certain of that.”

“We could simply abscond with her ourselves, you know!” Josiah was getting angry. Did this pirate think he and Charles were totally incapable of action on their own?

“You could, indeed. Perhaps.” Everett assumed a sad look. “But the others would be lost to you...and to their families.”

So, now he was being asked to buy them all back. “How much?” Josiah asked quietly.

“One thousand pounds. In gold.”

Charles paled, and Josiah found it very difficult to breathe for a moment. Yet, as great as the price was, they both knew the letter of credit they carried would authorize such a sum, if necessary. The expense would cripple the estate, perhaps ruin it.

“Charles, I believe this must be your decision.” Josiah finally said.

“Well, yes, but one thousand is too great a sum.”

“For your dear sister? Surely, no price is too great!” Everett smiled.

“We can give you four hundred, sir,” Josiah said. Now that Charles had consented to the transaction, Josiah felt empowered to handle the price negotiations.

“Four hundred? That would hardly buy my crew a round of drinks and women in Nassau. I will concede to accept a little less than a thousand, nine-fifty, perhaps...”

“Five hundred, in gold.” Josiah offered.

“Eight hundred.” Everett did not sound quite as firm as he had at the first.

“Six hundred, in gold, delivered this afternoon, and we won’t report your whereabouts to the authorities,” Josiah said with confidence.

“Done.” Everett offered his hand to seal the bargain.

“When and where?” Josiah eased back from the table just a little.

Everett turned to look at the handsome clock on the mantle. “Have the money by four of the clock.”

“Very well.” Anxiety came through in Charles’s voice as well as on his face.

“Barring unforeseen circumstances,” Josiah felt compelled to add.

“Good. Four o’clock, then, at the waterfront, across from the Indian trader.”

“Four of the clock,” Josiah repeated firmly.

Everett touched his hat and immediately left.

Josiah let out a long sigh. How in heaven would they be able to raise that much gold in two hours? And his move could seriously damage the Carter family’s estate.

No, it had not been his move. It was Miss Carter who had forced them into this awful position. Her ridiculous action was to blame for any financial suffering her family endured. She would have made a ruin of his household finances, too, had he actually married her.

“Well, Josiah, had we not better go find a factor or an agent, or someone who has some money?”

“We need to find *everyone* who has some money, Charles.”

“Six hundred pounds?”

“It could have been worse.”

“Yes, it could have been worse for you. It could have been your money.” But Charles smiled, showing

he was not bitter in the least. Since the punch bowl had been amply paid for, the two men left without any word to the proprietor.

“I thank God,” Charles continued once they were in the street. “I really do, that we have found Caroline, and I thank God again that we can now take her home. But I am so saddened to see the change in her. I dare not contemplate it.”

“This is not the time and place for rumination, Charles. Besides, once she is returned to her home, her family...you’ll see. Things will be as they were.” But, of course, Josiah knew they could not be. Not at all.

Chapter Eighteen

Caroline did not remember exactly how to get from the inn back to the *Osprey*, but she knew she could easily find her way to the waterfront; and from there she hoped she might locate the ship without too much difficulty. Her only true concern was to avoid being sighted by her brother or Mr. Throckmorton. Since she did not know where they had gone, she had to keep an eye out for them.

The decision whether to take dinner at the inn or escape to find Edward had been an easy one, but now Caroline wished she had at least asked for a biscuit to nibble on the way. The smell of bread baking in one of the nearby houses made her mouth water. She did not want to go back, however, and run the risk of being forced back into her room by the return of Charles or Mr. Throckmorton.

Several minutes later, as she drew near to the water and could clearly see the different vessels at anchor, she realized she could have crept into the inn’s kitchen from the back and thus avoided detection if her brother had returned. She sighed. Though she could no longer smell the baking bread, she saw a small child sitting on a doorstep eating a very appetizing plum and fought the urge to snatch it and run. She forced herself to turn away and keep her eyes focused on the ships.

After sighting the *Osprey*, Caroline next looked for a convenient place to wait for the captain. In an alcove between two small buildings, she found the perfect resting place—a small section of low-growing weeds provided a shady place to sit where she would be hidden from the casual glance of those passing in the street. At the same time, she could observe the street well enough that Captain Talbot could not pass without her notice. She sat down to wait and resolved not to think about bread or biscuits or any other kind of food.

Ugh. Something was crawling up her arm *again*. Caroline brushed off the offending insect with a violent sweep of her hand and stood up in disgust. She stomped a few times and decided she simply would have to move around a little more.

Back and forth in the narrow space between the clapboard buildings, back and forth until she'd had enough of that, too. A rare breeze came into her enclosed walkway, lifting her spirits with its fresh scent: the scent of bacon frying somewhere nearby. But where?

Caroline scanned the waterfront—no sign of the captain. Time enough to leave her post for a few minutes. But, of course, she had no money. She took quick inventory of her new gown—two small buttons and some lace that might be cut off without leaving a noticeable gap. Perhaps she might find someone willing to trade the buttons or lace for some food. She turned away from the water and followed the smell of bacon.

“I’m sorry, suh, she not in her room.”

“What?” Edward had been thinking carefully of various arguments he could make to persuade Miss Carter of the need for her to return to Maryland with her brother. If necessary, he would promise to come back for her.

But now it did not matter what eloquent strokes of genius he had devised to convince her—she was not here to be convinced. And he was supposed to take her to the waterfront in a less than an hour.

“Are you sure?” Edward advanced toward the serving girl, who had been sweeping the landing near Caroline’s door. “Are you absolutely sure she is not in her room?”

The girl cringed at the menace in his voice. “Yessuh, I jus’ swep’ her room not a minute ago.”

“I don’t know if I believe you.” But he had to, essentially. What was the other option? To believe that Miss Carter was in the room hiding from him? After all, he had knocked loudly enough to wake the dead. Edward took another step toward the girl. “If she comes back here, tell her she must return to the ship at once. At once, do you understand me?”

“Yessuh. At once, suh.”

“I’ll send someone for my luggage. Where is your mistress?”

“In the kitchen, suh.”

“Fetch her at once; I need to settle the bill.”

“Yessuh. At once, suh.” The girl was halfway down the stairs before her broom hit the floor.

Edward placed the coins on the counter, made a crisp bow and left the inn without another word. Where could Miss Carter have vanished to? Perhaps she wanted another dress or a hat or something. There was only the one shop in town capable of making any women’s finery, so if that were her mission, he should be able to find her quickly enough.

But the shop girl had not seen her, and Edward detected no sign of her in the streets he’d passed through. The hour was drawing close to four. He would have to go to the waterfront to make sure Hardey had the Maryland men ready for the exchange. Then they would simply have to delay the exchange until someone could find Miss Carter. And he would miss the tide. Damn her!

As he drew closer to the appointed meeting place, he saw the Carter boy and Throckmorton, along with several unknown men. A hundred yards away, Hardey waited, pretending to busy himself with a line from his open boat.

Keeping as far away from the exchange point as possible, Edward motioned for Hardey to come up to him.

“Captain?”

“Have you got the men ready?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Good. I cannot find Miss Carter, and, of course, we need to return her to her family. I want you to leave Knightly in charge of the other men and take a small party out to search for the girl. Bring an extra sail. When you find her, don’t give her time to ask questions—wrap her up and bring her along to the exchange point.”

The only sign of Hardey’s surprise was a brief widening of the eyes. “Aye, Captain.”

Edward sent him on his mission with some misgivings, but he quickly pushed them out of his mind. After all, while ambushing the girl and bundling her into a sail was not the most genteel means of persuasion, it would be the quickest. And since her absence from the inn had made speed such a necessity, it was really her own fault.

He glanced down to where Carter, Throckmorton and the others had gathered. It was probably almost four o’clock now. He would have to announce postponement of the bargain.

Stepping up into full view of the party further down the street, Edward started toward them with unhurried, confident steps. As he drew nearer, they advanced to meet him.

“Where is Caroline?” Charles demanded.

“Gentlemen, we have run into an unforeseen difficulty,” Edward began, keeping his voice as mild as possible.

“That would be...?” Josiah asked.

“Miss Carter has left her room at the inn and cannot be found anywhere.”

Josiah scoffed. “Oh, come, sir! You can’t expect us to believe that story!”

“You need not believe it, gentlemen, but I assure you it is the truth. Please, send someone to the inn. You will not find her there.”

“Well, of course not; you’ve taken her somewhere else.” Charles’ voice shook with frustration.

“I suggest you speak with the serving girl. She can tell you I sought Miss Carter less than an hour ago, and that she was not there. I left word for her to meet us down here if she returned.”

“I’ll go, Josiah,” Charles said quickly. “You make sure this scoundrel doesn’t run off with everything.”

“Yes.” Josiah did not want to stay; he did not trust Everett, and he did not trust the men who had come down to the waterfront to help with the gold and valuables. He imagined that, once Charles had gone, they could quickly form a deal amongst themselves and disappear. But he could not admit this. So, he stayed and hoped Charles would return soon.

“I trust all the gold is in order?”

Josiah was startled by the sound of Everett’s voice. He had somehow assumed that everything would remain at a standstill while Charles searched for his sister. “It—it is.” He swallowed and looked around as if he should wait for Charles to reappear before he made his admission. “We have collected gold worth six hundred pounds. However,” he glanced at the odd assortment of boxes and bags at his feet, “not all of the gold is in coin.”

“Oh?” Everett stepped forward and began a casual inspection of the gold. “How much is in coin?”

“Two hundred.” Josiah felt beads of perspiration suddenly burst forth on his forehead.

“Only two? And the rest?”

“Rings, buttons, neckchains, earrings, a cup, two small plates...and some other objects...these gentlemen will testify to the value.”

“Yes, I’ll bet they will. What other objects do you have?”

“A—a candlestick...” Josiah combed his memory to think of the other objects they had collected during their frenzied afternoon. “A patch box, two snuff boxes, some thimbles...”

“Worth six hundred pounds?” Edward said skeptically.

“And...a chamberpot,” Josiah admitted with as little fanfare as possible.

“*Achamberpot*?” Edward’s roaring laugh made Josiah color immediately. “What am I to do with a gold chamberpot, I ask you, sir?”

Although Josiah decided he would like to see the pirate wear it jammed onto his head, he refrained from

saying so. "It's gold," he eventually said. "It can be melted into a more...conventional shape. We found ourselves rather pressed for time this afternoon."

"I will have to inspect these items," Edward announced.

Josiah looked around nervously, certain that thieves waited on every corner to make off with the gold the minute it appeared in view. "Should we not go somewhere more private?"

"My ship, perhaps?" Edward grinned.

"Not exactly." Josiah looked to the other side. "Let us move up there." He indicated a point about a hundred yards up the street. "Between those two buildings."

"Fair enough." Edward waved down the street to Hardey.

A minute later, as they entered the alcove, Josiah turned back to make sure the collection of gold objects remained intact.

"Eeah!"

A short yelp made him turn around just in time to see Miss Carter step back in surprise.

Edward gestured for Hardey and ducked back into the street, out of her sight.

"Miss Carter! I—we—all of us have been searching for you." Josiah stepped toward her, and she backed further away. "Are you ill?"

Miss Carter looked at the other men who had followed him into the alcove. "I'm looking for someone. I need to speak with someone." She ignored Josiah and continued to scan the faces of the men crowding into the small space.

"Please, Miss Carter, do not fear. We will get you home safely." Josiah took her arm in a gesture meant to be reassuring.

"No!" She pulled away. Suddenly, a large piece of canvas descended over her head. After a brief struggle, the seamen who had come around the other side of the building succeeded in bundling her into the sail and hoisting her into the air. Muffled screams escaped through the canvas.

"Bloody hell!" One of the seamen dropped his end of the bundle and kicked it. "She bit me!"

Josiah looked at the sail; he saw no more signs of a struggle and could hear no more screams. He turned to Edward. "Sir, I protest! What are you doing to this poor lady?"

"I will deliver Miss Carter to the place of exchange, as promised. This," he gestured to the sail, "was the most expedient means of persuasion. Now, I need to make sure that *your* bundles contain enough to fill *your* end of the bargain."

Josiah stood aghast as he watched Edward quickly rummage through all the gold items they had so carefully collected during the afternoon. He really could not just leave Miss Carter wrapped up in a sail under the care of unknown seamen, could he? On the other hand, they did not have much time, and, for whatever reason, Miss Carter did not seem anxious to join them of her own free will. Perhaps this was

the best means of “persuasion” after all.

“Hmmm, yes, this will do.” Edward started to distribute the items to waiting crewmembers.

“But, sir, we do not yet have the other men!” Josiah protested.

“You will. Hardey, have the Maryland men brought out of the boat.” Edward turned to the seamen holding the bound form of Miss Carter. “And you men, take care with your cargo. It’s heavy, and I don’t want you to tear the sail.”

Josiah thought this seemed all wrong, and yet he could not think how to set things to right. Still, the end result did seem promising. So, he watched to see that the gold and Miss Carter were carried safely from the alcove down to the wharf. Not long after, Charles caught up with the procession of bundles headed down the street.

“What is happening?” the younger man asked. “I could not find Caroline at the inn—it was just as the man said. What are you doing?”

“The exchange will go forward, Charles.” Josiah felt as if he were speaking from outside himself. His own voice sounded distant to his ears, and the whole proceeding suddenly seemed to be part of a dream.

“What? Have you taken leave of your senses?” Charles reached out a hand to stop Josiah. “Caroline is—”

“Miss Carter is here, and we are ready to complete the exchange.” Josiah continued walking.

“Where? Where is she?” Charles demanded, looking around.

“She is ahead of us. And we will all be back on the *Sea Lily* soon. On our way home.”

“Thank God!” Relief and exuberance showed in Charles’s face as well as his voice.

I doubt very much that God had anything to do with this, Josiah thought dully as their strange procession neared its end.

Chapter Nineteen

That smell again. And her bed was moving, rocking like a cradle. With the sense of waking from a recurring dream, Caroline opened her eyes and found, to her surprise, that she could see. Red and orange beams from the early sun filled the cabin with a warm light, illuminating piles of books, papers and all manner of assorted objects in various states of wear. She was definitely on a ship, though not 'tween decks as she had been on the *Osprey*. The only cabin with light on that ship had belonged to the captain, so she was now likely in another captain's cabin.

Caroline sat up suddenly. So, where was this captain? Her head throbbed with pain, and she gripped it with both hands as if to squeeze the ache away. She noticed a large lump near her left ear. What had happened to her? Rum could not be the culprit this time; she had avoided the evil liquor with a fervency approaching religion.

She tried to recall her movements to account for her present state. She had gone down to the waterfront, she had been looking for Captain Talbot and then Mr. Throckmorton had discovered her hiding place and...that was about all she could remember. Something had covered her, tried to smother her. She had screamed and felt hands on her body and something over her mouth, and she'd clamped down her jaw, like an animal trying to free itself from a trap.

That was all.

Caroline looked around the cabin. The covering, whatever it had been, was nowhere in evidence. Only a small shred of blanket lay on the cot at her side; it was barely enough to wrap up an ear of corn, let alone a grown girl such as herself. Or, rather, a grown lady.

She felt a chill creep over her, and she lay back down on the cot, wincing as the tender spot on her head hit the ticking. Mr. Throckmorton must be responsible. He must have taken her and put her on this ship. Had he hit her? Had he forcibly dragged her inert body to the ship? No, certainly not. He would pay somebody to do those things.

So, the ship must be headed home, and she would then be safe. Caroline turned her head to look out the windows in the stern. The light, still glowing orange and red, eased her sense of despair a bit. She tried to resign herself to her fate as an ordinary planter's wife. After all, the freedom had been too good to last. She sighed.

Then a picture came into her mind: Captain Talbot at the rail, coat undone, the wind ruffling his hair. She sighed again. A planter's wife, in theory, she could perhaps be. But in actuality? After this, could she marry an ordinary planter? To wit, could she marry Mr. Throckmorton?

Marriage had always seemed the way to escape the daily monotony of life at Hill Crest, and the means to freedom and adulthood. She had always known she would marry a gentleman with his own plantation, and then she would preside over functions at her own house and would not have to share servants with her sisters. When Mr. Throckmorton had arrived from London last year, the girls had been overjoyed by their good fortune, for everyone was certain he would wed one of them. As the eldest, Caroline had

seemed the most logical choice.

Though she'd been anxious to have her marriage settled, she had soon learned Mr. Throckmorton was not at all dashing or heroic. In fact, he had turned out to be rather awkward and shy. So, she had felt in no rush to spend all her time with him. She wanted to enjoy the role of the betrothed young lady, secure in her future yet free in the present.

And she had enjoyed the freedom a great deal. Perhaps too much. The escapade at the Fall Inn had taken her far beyond what a lady should ever...and yet, if she had not...

Caroline's eyes scanned the planks above her head, but Captain Talbot's face danced in her vision. Would she never see him again? What would she have to do to get back to him?

Could she marry anyone other than Captain Talbot? Caroline closed her eyes. She did not think she could.

After a minute, she opened her eyes. Would she, then, be doomed to end her days as a spinster, the unmarried aunt, forever a burden to her brother's family? This prospect sounded equally bleak.

To push those thoughts from her head, Caroline rolled out of her cot to a stooped standing position and moved unsteadily over to the windows to contemplate the comforting red sky. She shivered in the strong breeze and for the first time regretted wearing a fashionable gown. The borrowed laborer's clothes she had worn aboard the *Osprey* would have better protected her from the surprisingly fierce wind ripping in gusts through the open windows.

Josiah yawned and stared blearily into the mug of brownish liquid that passed for coffee on the *Sea Lily*. From a certain angle, it looked just about like coffee, but if he lifted the cup anywhere near his nose the illusion vanished. He sighed and wrapped his hands tightly around the scratched sides of the mug, determined to enjoy at least the warmth of the strange brew sloshing around inside it.

Why was air so chilly this morning? They had left Charles Town feeling the same sluggish heat he had known in Maryland, and once at sea all had relaxed in the cooler, fresh sea air. But now that air had changed from refreshingly cool to uncomfortably chilly. His alleged coffee seemed to grow cold even as he held it.

Josiah decided to toss the contents over the side and headed for the lee of the sloop so he would not have the liquid blown back into his face. When he turned back from the rail, the sensation of the wind full in his face nearly took his breath away. It was just a gust, but a discomfiting sensation, nonetheless.

As he moved to a more sheltered part of the deck, he noticed another disturbing feature of the weather. The sky glowed with an unnatural red light. Josiah shivered slightly. He remembered a sailor on the passage from England saying that a red sky in the morning was some sort of bad omen. Or was it a red sky at night?

He started to walk, but in the small space he could really only take one or two steps before turning. He felt like he was spinning in a circle, so he made himself stop. Perhaps the red sky omen was simply another tale told to frighten passengers.

But he thought not. The sailors, he noticed, also watched the sky with unusual interest. And they seemed

uncommonly silent this morning—no whistling, and no skylarking.

This silence made the whistled tune he suddenly heard behind him seem spooky, and he whirled around almost expecting to see a ghost.

“A pleasant morning, Josiah, is it not? Look at that sky. Only the hand of God could paint with such a vibrant palette.”

Leave it to Charles to find beauty in such a sinister omen. “Or on such a large canvas,” Josiah responded, looking overhead warily. “I believe, Charles, that we may be in for a storm.” As he grabbed a rail to steady himself, he thought back to their earlier conversation and hoped Charles would be content to have seen the hand of God paint the sky and not desire to see the divine hand stir up a fantastical storm.

Charles laughed as the pitch of the deck suddenly shifted, knocking him into Josiah. “Yes, it does appear to be getting a bit rough!”

The angle of the deck reversed, and both men scrambled to keep out of the way as the sailors shouted orders about reefing the lug fores’l and other nautical mysteries.

“No rain yet, though,” Charles continued.

Josiah turned to look into the wind and saw the sky had grown noticeably darker in just the last few minutes. He felt a drop of water hit his cheek. Spray from the sea? Looking over the side, he could see the waves were, indeed, almost coming close enough to reach them on deck. Should they go below? He felt another drop hit his face, then another. It was still hard to tell if the drops were of rain or spray, since the wind whipped from the side with such ferocious gusts. They should go below.

“All hands! All hands on deck!” The voice swept through the dark, cramped spaces ’tweendecks, and the few crewmembers who were not already on deck rose wearily from their berths and headed for the gangway.

“I think we came down just in time,” Josiah announced, pushing a damp lock of hair from his forehead.

“Sirs.” A figure paused respectfully before Josiah and Charles as they sat on a crude bench. “The cap’n has asked for your presence on deck, as well.”

“What?” Josiah wondered if he had heard the man correctly. Did the captain expect them to go outside in the storm?

“Please, sirs.”

“What? Why? Is this some kind of a sailor’s joke?”

The seaman’s voice grew apologetic. “If you please, sirs... we have not enough hands for this storm.”

“You what?” Josiah still could not believe his ears.

Charles’ eyes widened briefly, but he stood as if to demonstrate readiness for the challenge. “Yes, of

course.” He gave Josiah that searching look he always found so unnerving. “Shall we, Mr. Throckmorton?”

Josiah closed his mouth, wondering just how long he had sat there with it gaping. “After you, Mr. Carter,” he finally said, lurching wildly in his attempt to stand up.

“All hands! All hands on deck!”

Caroline heard the distant summons several times and tried to enjoy the fact that she could ignore it. As a prisoner, or, at most, passenger, on whatever vessel this was, they could not expect her to report on deck for duty.

But what vessel was it? What if Captain Talbot had taken her, moved her to another ship to confuse Mr. Throckmorton and her brother? Or what if Captain Talbot had been taken prisoner as she had been. Either way, he could be aboard at this very moment.

If he were, she could prove her worthiness to him by coming out on deck to help in the storm, even though she owed no official duty.

In the creaking darkness, Caroline climbed carefully up the ladder then braced herself before pushing up the hatch. Water immediately filled her eyes and she wiped them frantically, trying to see. With her eyes closed, she pulled herself out onto the wet, heaving deck. For several minutes, she remained curled up on her knees, too unsteady to try to gain footing in the blinding rain and spray. After a time, she found she could keep her eyes open without pain, and she scanned the deck, looking for Captain Talbot.

Was that Mr. Throckmorton near the rail? He was not looking at her, fortunately. What was he pulling on? Why was he out on deck in this storm? And was that Charles with him?

A seaman of some apparent authority shouted orders to them then moved farther astern. Caroline would talk to the sailor, volunteer for duty and try to find out whether Captain Talbot was aboard. She stood up and carefully picked her way across the debris on deck. It was slippery but steady enough so she did not have to grab hold of anything to keep her balance.

Then, suddenly, the world flipped upside down. Caroline felt herself tumbling through air and water. Once, twice, she bumped on something solid but could not grasp anything. She caught a breath that was half-seawater, and felt herself choking. She kicked but could not scream. And then she realized she was in the water.

Clinging to the stays, Josiah stood frozen in horror. One moment, Miss Carter had been coming toward them. Then the ship had pitched wildly and a wave had crashed across the deck, sweeping her over the side.

“Caroline!” Charles screamed, his voice instantly carried away by the wind.

Both men could see her head emerge from the water about twenty feet away, then a wave tumbled over her and she was lost to view.

Charles scrambled across to the other side of the deck, climbed up onto the bulwark and dove into the sea. This action seemed to free Josiah from his paralysis; he ran to the sailor at the wheel.

“Stop the ship! We need help!” Josiah pointed to where Miss Carter and her brother had disappeared into the sea.

“What?”

“Help, we need help. They’ve gone over. You must go and get them!”

“Are ye daft, man? If they’ve gone over, they’re gone.”

“No! They’re out there, and someone must go out and save them.”

“We’re none of us goin’ out into that. We’ve our work cut out to keep the *ship* from goin’ over.” The helmsman turned his face away.

Josiah could see no one else who might help. What could he do by himself? In desperation, he pushed the helmsman aside and grabbed the wheel. “Stop the ship! You must help me get them!”

“Heave to!” A voice ordered from behind him. “All right, sir, if ye want to try, ye go yourself.”

Josiah looked at the captain then moved to the rail, suddenly feeling quite sick as though his insides were being squeezed with a vise.

With the rising of the next wave, he could just see one head in the water. But it did not make sense to just jump in; he would be no better off than they. Josiah looked around and spotted a coil of thin rope. Seizing it quickly, he uncoiled it and tied one end to the rail. He kicked off his shoes and tore off his coat, then fumbled frantically on the deck for the other end of the rope. This he tied twice around his waist. Then he gripped the rail, pausing to look down at the gray waves pounding furiously on the side of the ship.

Be not afraid.

Josiah heard the words in his head almost as though Charles were standing next to him, reading nightly devotions into his ear. He looked out—was that Charles in the water or Miss Carter? *Be not afraid.* Josiah closed his eyes and jumped.

The shock of water jarred him senseless for a moment. Eventually, he gasped and forced himself to breathe when he could get his head far enough above the water to do so cleanly. Once he had mastered the art of breathing, he tried to look around.

The waves had made it difficult to see from the side of the ship; from the surface of the water where he now struggled to stay afloat, the waves made it nearly impossible to see. What could he do now? All three of them would drown. He had been a fool to jump in! But he had not been a coward, he reflected, finding it odd he could think about such things while working so hard to keep his head above the stormy waves.

He settled into a steady rhythm of treading water and reaching up for big gulps of air between waves. But his arms and legs soon grew heavy and cold—how long could he continue?

Caroline coughed and tried to take in as much air as she could before the next wave engulfed her again. Though she had untied and kicked free of her petticoats, her wet clothes weighted her like a stone. Her legs ached more with each kick, but she dared not stop. She had seen Charles dive in after her, and she would not stop until he reached her.

Could she hold on that long?

She had pushed back that thought each time it started to surface, but this time it fully burst forth into her mind. When would he reach her? She had not seen him since he'd plunged into the water near the ship. He had seemed so close. She had tried to swim toward him, but it had taken all of her strength merely to keep her head above the water; and she had made no progress toward him or the ship.

And now the ship seemed much farther away. Were they all going to leave her here to drown? Caroline tried to call out, but her words came out as a mere gasp. Over the roar of the wind and waves, no one would be able to hear her. Where was Charles?

She sputtered and coughed again as water raced down her throat. She could not see! She was sinking! What had happened? Had she stopped kicking? She tried to kick again with renewed vigor. Rain suddenly poured more heavily from the sky, as if from a bucket, stinging her eyes. She squeezed them closed.

And now, in the darkness, it suddenly all seemed too much. She was so tired, and so cold, and there was no one to help her. She would stop. *Dear God*, she prayed, *please let me end this now*. But it was too cold to stop. She kicked in despair. Wasn't it supposed to be easier to give up?

Caroline then noticed the rain had lightened, and she could open her eyes.

She saw the most extraordinary sight. Not Charles, but Mr. Throckmorton pushed his head out of the water several feet in front of her. He flipped his hair back from his face and blinked his eyes several times then began paddling toward her. Mr. Throckmorton? In the water? Had he fallen in, too? She tried to swim toward him.

"Miss Carter?" he yelled over the howl of the wind. "Here!" He pulled a rope up from the water. "Take hold of this line." He looked toward the ship and paused for a moment. "I'll pull us back in toward the ship."

It was awkward and slow, but putting one hand over the other, Mr. Throckmorton inched them back toward the ship. Caroline still drew as many mouthfuls of water as of air, but she kicked to keep from being a dead weight on the line.

Then they began to move much more quickly. She looked up and saw their line was being pulled in by men aboard the ship. They were going to be safe!

But where was Charles?

Chapter Twenty

Caroline's eyes burned dully, as if the tears that had seeped out all morning had drained them to dry, hot cinders inside her head. She continued a plodding course up the path from the landing, staring at the ground as if it took all her effort to put one foot in front of another.

Then a breeze swept through the woods, rustling the leaves high overhead and cooling her tear-stained face. Caroline lifted her head and closed her eyes, letting the wind soothe her eyelids and cheeks. Refreshment seemed to spread through her body and into her soul.

She opened her eyes. It felt wrong to enjoy the breeze. She should be feeling this pain, all of it. Charles was dead, and it was her fault.

The worst of it would come soon, when she reached the house. Even now, as they drew near, Caroline turned with every crunch of leaves, expecting to see her brother ride out from behind the nearest tree. *He's not here; he's gone forever!* her mind screamed with each step. But she could not vent these screams, though they pounded inside her head in an endless echo. Hot tears again streamed down her face in silence.

And then she was home. In the clearing, her sisters, her father, her mother, her aunt and the servants all swarmed around her. Dear God, and he wasn't there. There was no Charles—and there never again would be. A stifled sob escaped her lips.

The days of crying in solitude on the ship had seemed endless and wretched, but this was far worse. She was hugged by the women all around her but could not return any embrace. There was much talking and confusion, smiles and some tears. Did they know? No, they could not know. She had only just arrived.

How would she tell her father?

She bit her lip and looked around, determined to find him. He must be told first, no matter how difficult the task.

"Caroline, oh, Caroline, my darling, we are so very happy to see you!" But her mother was crying as she

reached out her arms. They exchanged a brief, wooden embrace.

Her father next came toward her, looking suddenly very old. Caroline had never envisioned her father as an old man; it frightened her. How could she tell him now? "Father, I've—I've..."

He reached out and pulled her into a hug.

"Oh, Father, I—I don't know what to say," she cried into his shoulder. "Charles is—"

"I know, my child, I know. Charles is gone."

"You—you know?"

"Yes. Mr. Throckmorton came and spoke to your mother and me, shortly before you arrived."

"So, you know? And...he did?" Caroline had been vaguely aware Mr. Throckmorton had left the ship before her. She assumed he had been anxious to see how his plantation had fared in his absence. Now, she looked toward the house and saw him standing discreetly by the door. He tipped his hat and nodded at her before turning to speak to one of the servants who had just come out.

Relief flooded through her as tears poured out in force. They all knew. He would never come back. And they all knew.

"Well, do you not think we had better all go back inside?" Caroline heard her mother's voice rise pointedly toward her, but she refused to look up or move toward the house as her aunt and sisters did.

"Caroline," her mother hissed into her ear, "please, not in front of the servants, not in front of your aunt."

Caroline ignored her and continued to cry on her father's shoulder.

"Look at your nose! You are blubbering like a street beggar. I do not wish you to disgrace yourself any more than you already have. Mr. Carter, take your daughter into the house."

Caroline allowed herself to be propelled toward the house but turned her head to the side to avoid looking at her mother. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Jimmy Dyer standing with a group of servants near the stables. But she couldn't blame this on him anymore. She had wished this adventure on herself. And nothing good had come of it.

Inside the house, she glanced around at the countenances surrounding her, some sad, some anxious. She could face none of them. This was all her fault. She turned and bolted clumsily up the nearest flight of stairs, tripping over her skirts in her haste. In her room, she collapsed on her bed and pulled the covers over her eyes.

Josiah rode back toward Hanset alone, grateful for the lengthy exercise. The road, really only an old Indian trail, wound erratically through the forest, requiring him to duck his head continually to avoid low-hanging branches. Moreover, it took a fair bit of concentration to keep his borrowed horse on the poorly marked path.

All of this enabled him to avoid giving full rein to the unpleasant thoughts that haunted the edges of his

mind. What would be left of his plantation? What was left of his plans? If he had no viable plantation, how could he marry? And whom would he marry? Miss Carter was obviously no longer a suitable candidate.

What would he say to her father? He could not discuss the matter this day, or anytime soon—it would be improper so soon after...

And that was worst of all. Josiah felt like he had been kicked in the stomach every time he thought about Charles. His absence left a painful void—and one completely unexpected. He had come to treasure Charles's companionship far more than he realized.

Josiah thought back to episodes with Charles—their entrance aboard the *Sea Lily*, their first meeting with Captain Spittel—and it seemed as though they'd never happened, or had happened only in some hazy, dreamlike netherworld.

Was it not hypocritical for him to miss Charles? He had never really liked him, had he? He had put up with his company out of necessity only, hadn't he? Well, yes. And no. He had begun to admit he admired the forthright, courageous young man. There was something to be learned from him. And Josiah had felt privileged to think he could count himself among Charles's friends.

But that was all over and done now. Friends he had none of, at the moment. He sighed and urged the horse to go faster.

He felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck as the moment of truth approached. He would view the plantation not from the creek, as he had always imagined, but from the overgrown road, thanks to the horse borrowed from the Carter stable. All the fields he passed thus far were worn out from the greedy tobacco plants, already abandoned by the time Josiah had purchased the estate. The newer, cultivated fields lay on the other side of the house, so the first thing he would see of value would be a tobacco barn.

It should be full of tobacco, hanging to cure in the crisp, fall air. Or, if it had dried quickly, the plants could already have been taken down and piled up to sweat. In any case, the barn should be full of tobacco.

And the fields should not.

This was all assuming Ellis, that fool of an overseer, had followed his instructions and directed the harvest and curing on time. This was all assuming Ellis was still here. That all of them, servants and slaves, were still here.

The horse snorted as he and his rider came out into a clearing before the tobacco barn. Josiah's heart sank. He would not find tobacco hanging from the roof of this barn, for most of the roof had caved in. Though he wanted to ride on to the main part of the plantation, a morbid fascination forced him to stop and examine the damage closely. He touched the rotten boards with his fingers. A large bird's nest was nestled comfortably in the rafters. The barn had not been used this season. It decayed in silence, like a fallen tree in the forest.

Josiah rode on, now allowing himself to imagine the worst. The house would be...caved in? Closed up? Picked apart? No—burned, he decided. With only the stone chimney standing and a few bits of broken crockery and charred furniture scattered on the crumbling foundation. But the new kitchen building would not be burned, it would still be standing. Everything in it would be gone, of course. Maybe a bird's nest in the fireplace. And the slaves' quarters would be—

It was no use imagining the quarters because he was now within sight of them. They looked the same as when he had left. Vacant, as should be with all hands working at midday, but well kept, with tidy garden rows stretched out behind. Someone still tended these gardens. Josiah grew a little hopeful.

The springhouse and smokehouse also remained standing; at least, as much as they ever had. And then he reached the main clearing. It all seemed to be there. A comforting stream of smoke curled upwards from the kitchen chimney. He rode the last few yards with a sense of anticipation then dismounted and tied the horse to a small sapling.

“Betty?” he called into the kitchen as he approached. Without even waiting to get inside, he looked around at the other buildings—and stopped in his tracks. He could tie the horse up *in his* stable. He could walk in and sit down on a chair *in his* house. Or he could walk into this kitchen and get a bite *of his* food from *his* servant. It was all still here! And it was all his.

His decision, however, as to which building to visit first was made for him when Betty poked her head out of the kitchen door. “Mr. Throckmorton, sir? We was expecting you from the creek. Didn’t that boy come down with the boat?”

“Yes, and he’s helping the Carters with their luggage. Are you well, Betty? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost. Not expecting to see me again, were you?” Josiah smiled.

“Ah, no, sir. I mean, yes sir, we was expecting to see you again. ’Course, we were. We knew you’d be back, and this soon, too. It’s just...”

“Yes, go on.”

“When I heard the horse, you see, I thought it was that rogue Ellis come back to take more.”

“What?” Josiah’s smile vanished.

“Ellis—he run off with the horses.”

Horses gone. And the tobacco? “When did this happen?” Josiah gestured for Betty to head back into the kitchen as they spoke.

“Weeks and weeks ago. Right after you left.”

So, the tobacco would have been left to rot in the fields. Josiah felt a sudden weakness in his legs and was relieved when he could take a seat in front of the worktable. He was equally grateful the dim light in the kitchen would make it difficult for the servant to see the anguish on his face.

“I am glad to see that you are well, Betty.” He forced himself to look up with a smile. “And the others? The people?”

“Well, Ellis is gone, o’ course, but Priscilla is still here, and as healthy as she’s ever been, which isn’t saying much, but if she’d eat a little more food and drink a little less cider in the evenings—”

“Yes, yes.” Josiah had been made fully aware many times of the shortcomings of Betty’s assistant. At least she was still here. Her indenture had more time left than any of the others. Except the slaves, of course. Their lifetime indenture made them the most valuable, at least in theory. To Josiah they seemed so

exotic, so foreign, that he was uncomfortable speaking to them. He supposed he didn't really trust them. But under Ellis's direction, they had always done their duties in the fields so he'd had no cause for worry. With Ellis gone...

"And the people? Are they...all well?"

"Yes, your slaves are all fine now. We had some down with fever weeks ago but all recovered, 'mazing enough." She looked at her master pointedly. "They're all still here."

"So, Ellis is the only—"

"Ellis is the only bad 'un." Betty gave him a funny smile.

"And I left him in charge, didn't I?"

"Yes, sir." She sat back and her smile broadened.

"Yes, well, I won't do that again."

"Thank you, sir. And the next time?"

"The next time I go away on business, you shall be in charge, Miss Betty, at least of the house. But, don't get your hopes up. I've no plans to leave again for some time." And by then, he'd have better found a new overseer, someone who could relate to those mysterious people in the fields.

The fields. He should go see them. What were the people doing without an overseer to direct them? Did they leave each morning to go picnic in the fields all day on the pretense of working?

He stood to leave. "Thank you for your kind welcome, Betty. Please give my regards to Priscilla when she comes in."

"Yes, sir."

Josiah knew he should ride the horse to the new fields; it would take much longer to walk. But he was almost afraid to face what he feared he'd find: tobacco and corn rotting in the fields, slaves idly picking apples and playing some sort of strange tribal games. So, he told himself the horse needed a rest and started out on foot.

As he passed through more of the fallow fields, high with grasses, he could eventually see the next tobacco barn. He let out a small sigh of relief when he saw the building remained at least intact, but the real question was whether it was empty. Through the wide-spaced rough planking on the sides, he thought he could see the plants hanging, but it was hard to be sure. He nearly sprinted the last few feet toward the building.

Tobacco plants hung from the walls, ceiling, and rafters of the barn. Evenly spaced rows of plants hung from every available inch of space in the building. When Josiah came out the other side of the barn, marveling at this unexpected good fortune, he received an even bigger shock. A new tobacco barn had been constructed several hundred yards away. Was it his? It had to be; it was on his land.

He realized he had moved into the cultivated fields as he approached the new barn. All the tobacco had been harvested. And the new barn, like the first one, was full. He reached out a hand to touch the drying

leaves. The edges felt crisp, crumbling slightly in his fingers. He knew that if fully cured, they should be brittle, but he did not know just how brittle. The whole leaf, or just the edges?

“A’most ready. A few more days, mebbe a week.”

Josiah turned around to see who had spoken.

“Welcome home, suh.” A short, wiry black man took off his hat and bowed briefly toward Josiah. When he stood again, Josiah studied his face. He looked familiar; the man must be one of his people.

“Thank you, uh...” It had been Ellis’s job to know their names.

“John, suh.” The man gave another brief bow.

“Thank you, John.” Josiah cleared his throat. “When Ellis left, did you...?” He gestured to the tobacco hanging on the walls around them.

“Yes, suh.”

“Well, thank you. You saved the harvest.”

The slave looked at his master with a puzzled expression. “Course, suh.”

“I owe you a great deal.”

John cast his gaze down in response.

“Your competence will not be forgotten.”

“Thank you, suh.” The slave still did not look up, and Josiah did not know what to say next. After a moment, he simply turned and walked out. He supposed he should go see what was happening with the corn, but he did not want to. He felt he could trust John to oversee it, at least for today, at least until he found a new overseer. When the next convoy from England came in, there should be a good selection of servants. Or perhaps he could hire a free laborer as overseer.

He pondered the desired qualities in an overseer and considered where to obtain horses to replace those taken by Ellis as he walked back to the house.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Another ship arrived, sir, later in the day yesterday. After the one which brought Miss Carter."

John Carter looked up at Grimble in silence but made no move to reach for the letter on the tray, though the servant fairly waved it under his nose.

"Another ship? From England?" Mrs. Carter rose from the bench in the other room where she sat with her daughters. Hurrying through the open door, she reached for the letter on the tray. "Mail from England?"

Grimble nodded.

"Mrs. Carter, if you please! I believe you'll find that letter is addressed to me!"

The sharp rebuke from her husband sent her back into the family parlor without another word.

"Thank you, Grimble. You may put it there." John Carter waved a hand toward his writing desk. After the servant left, he looked at the letter but still made no move toward it. Instead, he picked up his Bible and again tried to read passages from the Psalms. He knew Charles had taken great comfort from them, but the words ran together before his eyes.

Caroline sat up to ease the congestion in her head. Parting the bed curtains, she slid off the bed and sat in the chair before the small window. Through the diamond-shaped panes she could see the bare, dark skeletons of trees highlighted against the gray sky. A cold wind had blown up during the night; she shivered as gusts of wind whistled around the window frame.

Then she opened the window. She must face the cold, as Charles had. Charles at the bottom of the cold, dark sea.

Now she was the oldest. Should she take charge, help run the plantation as he had done?

Good heavens, no. She was a lady. She could take charge of nothing, except perhaps the dinner menus. Wherever had such a foolish idea come from?

But, as the oldest, she did owe a duty to comfort her parents, especially since it was all her fault. Tears blurred the scene before her eyes, and she looked back at the bed. Before she could collapse onto her pillow again, she stood, closed the window and headed toward the stairs with resolute steps.

Bypassing the family parlor and her sisters, mother and aunt, Caroline slipped through the dining room

into the front room, where her father customarily sat. He, too, was staring out the window at the bleak sky. She curtsied and took his cold hand in hers.

“Good afternoon, Father.”

As if he saw very little that was good in it, he refused to answer her greeting. He did squeeze her hand, however, and with half a smile motioned for her to take a seat in the chair next to his.

Neither spoke for some time. At first, Caroline took great comfort in simply being with her father, and she was thankful he had invited her to stay. The sound of shrill voices in the next room made his peaceful company even more inviting. After some minutes, however, the quiet began to feel oppressive, as if he used it to keep her at bay. She longed for him to break the silence.

When he did not do so, she looked around for something with which to divert his attention. She discovered a tray with a letter, untouched, on the writing desk.

“Have we had a letter, Father?”

“We have. I have.”

“May I ask who from?”

“From London.”

“Yes, but from whom in London? It is not Mother’s family, is it?”

“No, it is not. But I don’t know exactly whom it is from. I do not recognize the sender’s name.”

“But aren’t you the least bit curious?” Caroline’s voice rose in disbelief and excitement despite her gloomy mood.

“No.” Her father stared out the window again.

“Why not? How can you hold a letter addressed to you from a stranger in London and not want to know what it says?”

“I believe I know what it says.” He still looked away.

“You do? How could you? You said you didn’t even know whom it was from.”

After several more moments gazing out at the lengthening shadows, her father turned to her and spoke in a soft voice. “I’ve been expecting a letter such as this.”

“A letter such as what?”

“I knew it would come from a stranger. We’ve taken credit from the same house for so many years, for ever so many years, before you were born. My father, and my family...but I knew the letter would come from a stranger.”

“What letter? And what does this have to do with credit?”

“Credit, my dear, is what enables you...” He looked at Caroline’s somewhat faded gown. “...or at least your mother and sisters to wear the latest fashions from London. Or a reasonable facsimile thereof. Credit purchased slaves for our fields, china for our table, curtained bedsteads for all of you children. It purchased the very chairs on which we sit. Credit has brought us a great many wonderful things. But I’m afraid that lately we have not been giving credit her fair due.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry; I wax poetic, and badly, too. We have not been paying enough on our debts these last several years. I believe it has now come back to haunt me.”

“But, Father, why?” Caroline looked around the room. She did not pretend to understand the economics of the plantation, but it did not seem to her that they lived an extravagant life, certainly not compared to what she had glimpsed on the streets of Charles Town.

“Our tobacco sold for practically nothing during the last few years of the war. I’ve known this, and should have required us to economize. Now, I fear it is too late.” He sighed and looked away again. “I learned yesterday that Charles incurred some rather weighty debts, too—on my behalf, of course.”

“Charles?” Caroline wondered how Charles could have run up debts. He did not gamble on horse races or cards, he did not drink to excess—or rather, he had not done those things. Now, of course, he could do nothing. She felt tears start to return and began to blink very fast.

“Well, my dear, I suppose I had better see what this stranger from London has to say to me, had I not?”

“Yes, Father.” Caroline sniffed.

“Would you like to break the seal?”

She had to smile at this. Obviously, her father still remembered back to when she and her sisters begged for the opportunity to break the beautiful wax seals on his letters. When they grew older, they would take turns melting sealing wax onto folded pages of paper, seeing who could make the most interesting impression in it with objects from the house or yard. One time, her father had been furious because they’d used up all his wax with their games. They’d used quite a bit of paper too, she realized. Her father had simply ordered more. Was this what he had meant about the need to economize?

He still held out the letter.

“No, Father, you may open your own letter. Would you like me to give you privacy to read it?”

“I see no need, since I have already told you what I believe it contains.”

He sat down with the folded pages and soon became absorbed in the words. From the expression on his face, Caroline guessed he not told her the full extent of the letter’s contents. When he finished reading, he let out a long, low breath and sat staring at the signature for some time, as if willing it to life so he could speak with the author. Then he returned to the first page and read the letter again, even more slowly this time.

“Father, are you ill? May I get you something?” Caroline had never seen her father look quite so frail before.

“No, no, I’m quite all right. It’s just that this stranger has made a request which I had not expected.”

“A request, Father?”

“Yes. He wants me to come to London.” He looked aghast, and a note of despair had crept into his voice. “And this is without even knowing of the debt in Charles Town!”

What was the debt in Charles Town? And what would be so horrid about a trip to London? Caroline could not bear to bring up anything having to do with Charles Town, but the second question was easily vocalized.

“Would it be so bad to go to London, Father? Indeed, we could all go—think how Johanna would enjoy such an experience. So would we all! Mother could see her family again, and—”

“Stop this, you foolish girl!”

“What?” Caroline sat back abruptly, hurt by the unaccustomed sharpness.

“I cannot go to London. None of us can go to London. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“This gentleman...” Carter waved the letter through the air roughly. “...says he wants to speak to me in person about the family’s financial position. I believe that is rubbish. I believe he wants me to come over so that he may all the more easily clap me in debtor’s prison.”

"Priscilla, get in here this instant!"

The angry screech was not what Josiah would have chosen to wake up to, but Betty, yelling out the open door downstairs, had given him no choice.

He found it nearly impossible to get back to sleep once awakened these days; too many thoughts preyed upon his mind. Perhaps bed curtains would better keep out the noise? They would certainly keep the bed warmer at night. He made a mental note to order some with the next London ship.

London ship. There had been a ship in from London two days ago and he'd had no correspondence, which was odd. He would usually have at least one letter from his sister and something from his factor or someone else vaguely connected with his plantation.

Pulling on a warm pair of breeches, he tried to shrug off the omission. After all, he did not particularly enjoy the letters from his sister. And no news was good news, as far as his financial affairs went. But he did feel a little left out, disconnected from family and business in England. Had they forgotten him?

Josiah hurried downstairs and decided to order chocolate for breakfast, just the thing to counter the chill in the air.

"I need the key, sir." Betty held out her large palm.

The key?

"Oh, yes." Josiah wondered where on earth it was. The chocolate, like the sugar and coffee, was kept in the locked drawers of a small chest. Betty usually held the keys, but before he had left on the *Canary*, he had given all the keys to Ellis. Josiah groaned. He would never get his hot chocolate now.

"But the coffee? How did you make coffee yesterday?"

"That lock don't work," Betty answered flatly. When she saw her master's face contort with worry, she added kindly, "No one but you likes the coffee anyway, sir."

"Oh. But the chocolate?"

"Don't break the lock, sir, if that's what you're thinking."

"Right. Will you check Ellis's quarters to see if perhaps he left the keys...?"

"Certainly, sir." Betty walked purposefully over and opened the door, but instead of stepping outside, she hollered out for her assistant. "Priscilla! Damn that girl." She turned back toward Josiah. "'Scuse my language, sir, but if you must know..."

Josiah tried hard to look as though he did not have to know.

"If you must know, I believe that she's—"

"Yes, yes. I know." Betty believed Priscilla spent far too much time with the slaves, and she insisted on passing along every sordid detail she could possibly imagine. Josiah did not want to know. It was embarrassing, really. If Priscilla chose to eat and sleep with the slaves, it was none of his concern, so long

as she was careful and did not end up—well, he did not want to think about it. And he didn't want to be constantly reminded of it by his housekeeper.

“But she's not doing her share of the work, sir.”

“Now, that *would* be unacceptable. Send her here. I'll have a word with her.”

“Right, sir.” Betty smiled gleefully as she went to the door again. “Priscilla!”

Josiah felt his ears ring. “Perhaps, Betty, you could go fetch her, since you believe you know where she is.”

Betty huffed outside, leaving him to enjoy the quiet. Even without a mug of chocolate or coffee, it was nice to sit before the warm fire, safe and secure in his own home.

The peace didn't last long. First the nagging, unpleasant thoughts returned. When was he going to speak to Carter about his daughter? What would he say? Where would he find another wife? Where would he find another overseer?

He stood and went over to the locked chest of drawers. The first one he tried was, indeed, unlocked and contained a bag of coffee and a miniscule quantity of tea. He tried the next drawer very slowly, and his hopes soared as it moved a fraction of an inch. Then it stopped, held fast by the old lock. The others were the same. He looked around for something he might use to pick the lock; spying an article on the floor that looked like a small metal pin or skewer, he dove under the table to retrieve it.

The door opened, and a waifish feminine voice called out hesitantly, “Mr. Throckmorton, sir?”

“Yes,” Josiah said from under the table.

“Betty said you wished to see me, sir?”

“I did, Priscilla.”

“Do you... want me to come down there?”

“No! Good Lord, no.” He emerged with his prize and placed it carefully on the table. “You see? And now I—” Josiah watched with dismay as the metal pin rolled off the table and back into the corner. Enough was enough. “Fetch my keys,” he ordered. “They're in Ellis's quarters.”

“Sir?”

“The keys should be in his room. Get them and bring them back. Then we'll talk.”

“Yes, sir.” The girl spoke with polite deference but made no move to curtsy before she exited. Now that he thought of it, Betty never curtsied, either. He should probably instruct them—house servants required a certain amount of social grace. Even in a house this small. After all, someday it would be larger.

But he'd have to find a new overseer first. And he could no longer put off his conversation with John Carter. He would go today, right now. Or rather, he would go as soon as he finished his conversation with Priscilla. Well, and after that, he would probably have to talk to Betty. And he probably should go see how much corn remained in the fields.

No. That, at least, could wait. He would talk to John Carter this morning. Right after breakfast.

Where was his breakfast?

Betty marched in with a plate of cold mush, burnt bacon, cornbread and a dish of oozing purple jelly.

“What’s this?” Josiah wrinkled his nose and waved toward the plate.

“Breakfast, sir,” Betty answered somewhat indignantly as she deposited this repast on the table.

“No, I mean the jelly. You know I prefer honey on my cornbread.”

“It’s in the drawer, sir. With the sugar.”

“Oh.” Josiah poked at the offending dish with his spoon. It was probably blackberry. He hated the way all the little seeds got stuck in his teeth.

“It’s my best jam, sir. Blackberry. I once won a prize for it back in Dorset, sir.”

“Blackberry, eh? Well, that’s splendid.” He could tell he had hurt the woman’s feelings. He hurriedly spooned a big, unappetizing mound onto a square of cornbread and took a large bite—and was unable to suppress a small wince at the sensation of seeds sliding down his throat.

Betty turned without another word and stalked toward the door, only to meet face-to-face with Priscilla as she returned from her errand.

“Hrumpf,” the housekeeper announced, and her assistant stepped aside to let her return to the kitchen.

“Beg your pardon, sir.”

“Yes.” Josiah wiped the rest of the jelly off the cornbread with his napkin.

“The keys was not in Mr. Ellis’s room, sir.”

“The keys *were* not, Priscilla.”

“They weren’t?”

“Yes, they *were* not.”

“Did you know they wasn’t there?”

“They *were* not. Were not.” Josiah laughed. “And yes, actually, I did have a pretty good idea you wouldn’t find them there. But we had to check.”

The young servant looked at him strangely but said nothing. He took a few more bites of his breakfast in silence, thinking about the most likely place to find duplicate keys. Reluctantly, he had to admit the Carter plantation would be the best place to start, though they had no blacksmith to make copies. If one of their keys matched the lock on the drawer, he could have a copy made elsewhere.

Priscilla coughed quietly, and Josiah decided he had left her standing long enough. “Priscilla, I hear you have not been doing your fair share of the household work. Is this true?”

“Yes, sir, I believe it is.”

He fairly gaped in surprise. He never expected anyone to admit to an accusation. It seemed to go against the very laws of human nature. “You admit you are not doing all that your indenture calls for you to do?”

“Probably not, sir.” She was starting to look rather miserable.

“Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“I’ve . . . I’ve not been well, sir.”

Josiah eyed her a little suspiciously. She looked well enough, if paler than he remembered. Although, she did appear rather frail. “Betty says you need to eat more.”

“I try, sir.”

“Well, do try. It’s your duty to try. Consider it part of your chores.”

“I will, sir.”

“Good. That will be all—except, Priscilla, please do try to come when Betty calls you. You owe her the respect of higher rank, just as you owe it to me.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Please take my plate into the kitchen when you go.”

As soon as Josiah nodded her dismissal, she reached swiftly for the plate and disappeared out the door. He followed her to the doorway and watched to see how Betty received her when she reached the kitchen. However, she did not go to the kitchen. Instead, she dropped the porcelain plate as if it had been made of tin and fled several feet away into the trees. She then fell to her knees and appeared to retch into a tuft of weeds. So, she indeed had not been well. This could be troublesome. A sickly servant would be a drain on his resources; a dead servant would be a totally wasted investment. She still had nearly four years left in her indenture.

He waited until he saw her retrieve the plate and head for the kitchen before closing the door.

Now he could turn his thoughts to the matter of ending his engagement. And borrowing a key.

Though he would have preferred the shorter trip by river to Hill Crest, Josiah felt he really must ride over and at least offer to return the horse. With his own gone, he hoped to borrow the animal for a time, but if Carter insisted he return it—well, he would be embarrassed to have to send for the animal.

Branches snagged at his hair and coat periodically during the ride. Had he been wearing a periwig, it would have probably taken a permanent home in one of the trees. His stockings, though, fared better than they had during his earlier walk up the steep path from Carter’s dock.

After dismounting and leaving the horse in a vacant stall in the stables, Josiah smoothed his hair back as best he could and tried to tuck in one piece that had come loose near his face. He brushed the loose leaves from his coat then stamped his feet and shook himself a few times to dislodge any more that might remain unseen. He had no wish for a green tail this time. If he did see the sisters, he wanted to give them no reason to giggle.

He knocked, and blinked in surprise when John Carter himself answered the door.

“Good morning, Mr. Throckmorton. Or I believe it is afternoon now?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, sir.” Josiah wondered if he would even be invited inside; his host seemed frozen in the doorway.

“Please, come in.” Carter slowly moved aside and urged him through the door. The house seemed unusually quiet. What was missing? There was no sound of conversation or movement from the family parlor, and no laughter from the back of the house. After a moment, the noise level did increase; Josiah heard the sound of pots crashing, then a scream and someone crying.

Crying. Of course—the girls would be crying for Charles.

“Would you care for some refreshment, Mr. Throckmorton?”

Josiah smiled gratefully. “If it would not be too much trouble.” The long ride had left a dry, dusty taste in his mouth.

John Carter picked up his bell, looked at it sadly for a moment then rang as usual. In the back of the house, a door squeaked open.

“But it’s not fair! You make me do everything!”

“It’s your turn, you—”

Another squeak indicated the door had shut, preventing Josiah from eavesdropping further on the argument. A moment later, Miss Carter stepped through the doorway into the main room where he and his host sat.

“You rang, Father?” She wiped her hands on her apron and blushed as she looked from her father to Josiah. Her gaze quickly turned back to Carter.

“Yes, my dear. Would you be so kind as to bring us two mugs of warm punch?”

“Yes, of course.” She kept her eyes focused on her father’s face then turned abruptly and headed to the back of the house.

After some moments, Josiah realized his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it without a word. Carter answering his own door. His daughter waiting on guests. Where were the servants?

He looked out the window, as if he expected to find them congregating on the lawn. The stable had been empty, too, he remembered. He gazed about the room—everything appeared essentially unchanged, and he could hear only an occasional clanging noise from the kitchen.

Carter tapped the arm of his chair absently, and, after some time, finally broke the silence. "Mr. Throckmorton, I think I know what brings you to Hill Crest."

"You do? Oh, yes, that. Well, actually, I have come to beg a small favor of you first."

"A favor?" Carter's eyebrows arched in surprise. "In what way may I be of service?"

All at once, Josiah felt alarmingly foolish. "I need to borrow—"

"Put that down. You've ruined everything!"

"I have not! You were the one—"

The kitchen door squeaked to a close again.

Josiah cleared his throat, taking perhaps rather longer than was necessary, as he watched for Miss Carter to appear. "I, um seem to have run into a bit of difficulty at home and was wondering whether I might borrow..."

She walked into the room slowly, almost majestically, carrying two steaming cups.

"That is, I need to borrow a key—"

"A key, Mr. Throckmorton?" Carter sat forward in his chair, his eyebrows evidencing disbelief once more.

"Or perhaps two or three. It should not be difficult to find a match."

"You came to borrow a key?"

"Yes. Oh, and a horse."

Miss Carter placed the mugs gently on a side table and curtsied first before her father, then Josiah. Then she turned gracefully and swept back toward the dining room at the back of the house.

Josiah nearly sighed aloud. If only he could get his servants to behave so...regally. He had never noticed the grace in Miss Carter's carriage before.

"You came to see me about a key and a horse, is that it?"

"Well, of course..." He looked toward the back of the room where his betrothed had just disappeared. "...there is one additional matter."

John Carter sat back and paused for moment. "Under the circumstances, Mr. Throckmorton, I believe you should be released from your engagement to my daughter."

Josiah felt his breath catch in his throat. He had not expected Carter to be so blunt. There had been a lot of unusual circumstances, certainly, and he had the feeling he didn't know the half of them. Moreover, he himself had fully intended to end the betrothal. And yet, it sounded very callous, somehow, to simply break the engagement like this.

“Perhaps, sir,” he began as he leaned back, attempting a nonchalance he did not feel, “we might simply consider the engagement postponed. Indefinitely.”

“As you wish.” Carter tapped on the arm of his chair again several times before he continued, looking outside in the direction of the stables. “The horse belonged to Charles.” He stopped tapping and simply stared out the window for some moments. “I will be selling him soon, before I leave for Joppa Town.”

“Joppa?” The county seat, and many miles distant. Carter would only travel to Joppa if he had pressing legal business. Josiah thought of the missing servants. Had Carter run into trouble with debts? A sudden idea struck him. “How fortuitous. I happen to be planning a trip to Joppa myself. Perhaps we might travel together?”

“I believe that may be arranged.”

“Good. And I’ll need a horse for the journey, so if you would be willing to sell—”

“Yes, yes, of course. I had been planning to leave tomorrow or the day after. Can you be ready that soon?”

Absolutely not. “Er, yes, I should be. Let us say, the day after tomorrow?”

Carter glanced at the forgotten mugs of punch on the table. “I suppose we might offer up a toast.” He walked over to get the mugs and handed one to Josiah. “To a safe trip and the successful completion of our business.”

Whatever that may be, Josiah said to himself as he honored the toast in silence.

"Has he gone?" Caroline waved her sister to the window while she stood as far back from it as possible.

"Yes, Caroline. You may come out of hiding," Edwina grumbled in reply. "Now, help us grind this corn. Why are you so afraid of Mr. Throckmorton all of a sudden?"

"I am not afraid of him. I just don't want him to see me this dirty." Caroline looked down at her spattered gown and apron.

"He's seen you a lot worse, I'd imagine."

"And so has every man on that pirate ship," Georgiana added darkly.

"It was not a pirate ship! We fought *against* pirates. The men on that ship are all..." Caroline thought of Captain Talbot issuing commands on deck. "...all heroes."

"Ha!" Georgiana sniffed. "Heroes don't go around kidnapping men—or ladies dressed like men—from taverns!"

Caroline started to speak but could think of no good answer. In her mind, she had long ago excused the captain's behavior, but her reasons for doing so did not really bear repeating.

So, rather than answering, Caroline merely gave her sister a sour look and went to the mortar full of dried corn. Raising the pestle, she smashed it into the hard kernels, expecting to shatter the corn into meal with one angry blow. Instead, she banged her hand painfully on the side of the mortar. Several kernels of corn shot out into the air. She pounded a few more times—not as hard—and then peered into the bowl. There was perhaps a light dusting of cornmeal around the edge. How much would they need to make bread? Was there any way to prepare the corn without grinding it first? However had their cook managed this every day? Had she had one of the men grind corn for her?

"We shall learn how to make wheaten bread. It must be easier," Caroline announced.

"Yes, but Mother says we need a hot fire in the bread oven, and that takes ever so many hours," Johanna wailed. "I don't understand why Bridget can't make bread for us anymore. Why did she have to leave?"

"Because, you ninny, we're poor now." Tears welled up in Georgiana's eyes.

"Does Mother know how to bake bread?" Edwina had been looking out the window but turned back with sudden energy. "Maybe she can help us."

"Mother has a headache—" Johanna began.

"I do not believe she has made bread," Caroline interrupted, "but before Father added on to the house, they used to take meals in the kitchen on occasion. She saw the cooking done, so she must have noticed a few details. I think she should help us."

"You leave her alone. She's sick. You made her sick." Johanna slammed a turnip and knife down on the table and disappeared up the back stairs.

“Get back here and help!” Caroline started to follow, but Edwina stopped her.

“Let her go.” Edwina shrugged. “She’s just a child. She doesn’t understand.”

“I don’t understand, either. If we could afford a cook, and a housekeeper and maids for all those years, why can’t we afford at least one servant now?” Georgiana flopped onto a bench with great drama.

“Nothing has changed. We still grow tobacco as we always have.”

“We do,” Caroline snapped back, “but it’s not bringing in enough money!”

“What? Why?” Georgiana sniffed.

“I think,” Caroline said as she sat down next to her sister and tried to speak with more kindness, “that perhaps in all those years of having a cook and a housekeeper and maids, we spent more money than we should have, more money than we had.”

“How could we? We spend less than our Aunt Bennett. We must. She has one more house servant, and her gowns are much finer than ours.”

“Yes, but Aunt Bennett has money from her husband’s family. Our family has none.”

“I still don’t understand. Where did all the money go?”

“We never had it. We borrowed money from men in England to buy our clothes and our servants, and we sent them tobacco to pay them back, but we never sent enough. Or they didn’t earn enough when they sold it—I’m not sure I understand the matter entirely. But Father did say we are terribly indebted to these London men and—” Caroline stopped herself before scaring her sisters with talk of prison. “He will have to go to the court in Joppa Town soon in an effort to . . . sort things out.”

“Joppa Town?” Edwina came over and sat near her sisters. “I’ve never heard of that. Where is it?”

“I’m not sure, exactly. Father says it’s a new town near the mouth of the Gunpowder River.”

“That sounds rather distant.” Edwina sniffed and made a face. “Is something burning?”

“Oh! The roast!” Caroline dashed over to the fireplace. A large hunk of pork had fallen from its spit into the very heart of the flames. “Ooh, help me, help me get it out!”

Georgiana looked around helplessly for something to poke into the fire. Edwina grabbed a long-handled skillet and started jabbing into the flames. “I’ve got it—ouch!” She dropped the skillet into the fire on top of the roast and stepped back, sucking on the side of her hand.

“I think I’ve an idea!” Caroline grabbed the fire bellows. “Georgiana, give me your apron.”

“Why? What’s wrong with yours?”

“It’s wet.”

“So?”

“So, I’ll burn myself. Trust me, I’ve learned that lesson well enough. Now, give me your apron. You certainly aren’t using it.”

“Oh, very well. Here.” Georgiana relinquished her apron with a wild throw, nearly sending it into the fire. Caroline caught it awkwardly then rolled it up around her left hand. With that hand, she plucked the handle of the skillet from the flames and held it steady; then with the other hand, she used the pointed end of the bellows to push the burning meat into the skillet. Carefully, she dragged the whole mess out onto the hearth.

“Eew, Caroline,” Georgiana wrinkled her nose. “Did you have to stick the bellows into the meat? It’s all greasy and black.”

“Well, so is the meat. No one will notice.” Caroline snatched a toasting fork from its hanger, bent down and started prodding at the charred roast. “If there’s anything left worth eating, that is. What’s so funny?”

“You are!” Edwina giggled and turned to Georgiana. “She was too embarrassed to let Mr. Throckmorton see her in a work apron. And now look at her—all dirty and crouched over the hearth like an old witch!”

Caroline looked down and saw that her apron and gown were spotted with soot, ashes and grease. Her arms were nearly black in places—and her face? She could only guess.

As she touched her forehead she felt little bits of her hair crumble away. She had singed it. It should have felt awful, but somehow it was really very funny. “I think I shall have to see myself before I clean up. Will you fetch me a glass, Edwina? Perhaps you can bring down your pastels and sketch my portrait!”

“Ha! Well, here, you’ll need this for your portrait.” Georgiana handed her the bellows as though it were a sword. “All hail Lady Caroline, Defender of the Roast!”

“I believe you should bow in my presence, madam.”

By this time, all three sisters were laughing so hard they collapsed on the floor in front of the fire. Each glance at the remains of the roast sent them into renewed peals of mirth.

How had this happened again? Josiah sighed as he slid off his new horse. How had he managed to get drawn into the Carter family’s troubles, requiring a costly and lengthy excursion from home? This time, he could not blame Charles, unless he were secretly directing matters from beyond the grave. Josiah shivered, despite the warm sun.

He had no idea what had made him volunteer to accompany John Carter to Joppa. Having no taste for the legal practice he had given up in London and no legal business of his own, he would have been content to remain as far from Joppa as possible. And, in fact, his plantation was about as far from the county seat as it could be without being in another county.

What had made him do it?

Pity, he supposed. Carter had looked so old all of a sudden. And it was hard to see the family trying to operate without their accustomed help. The sight of Miss Carter answering her father’s bell like one of the servants had totally unnerved him.

Yet, why was it so upsetting? In other households daughters waited on their parents and guests, and helped in the kitchen and gardens, too. Why was it so disconcerting to see Miss Carter in that role?

A small scream greeted him as he entered his house. Priscilla stood with her hand on the knob of the opposite door, writhing in pain as Betty held her other arm twisted tightly behind her back.

“You’ll not leave, I say, until you tell him,” Betty snarled. “Go on, girl, confess!”

Josiah winced. He did not want to hear another recitation of Priscilla’s indiscretions. “Please, Betty, Priscilla, I’m sure we can discuss this another—”

“But, sir, you must hear,” Betty insisted. “It concerns you.”

He sighed; he would have to hear this out. “Well, yes, then, go ahead. Priscilla?”

The girl emitted an aura of pure misery. “There’s two letters come for you, sir. I’ve placed them on your desk.”

“Ah, very good. Is that all?”

Betty gripped the girl’s arm a little tighter. “Tell him *when* they came.”

Priscilla looked down. “Two days ago, sir.”

“What?”

“A messenger brought them from the landing the day before yesterday, and the girl here set them aside and did not take the time to tell anyone.” Betty set Priscilla free with a vicious shove. “I only found out because the messenger came back today for his fee. She’d forgotten that as well.”

“Fetch the letters, Priscilla,” Josiah said quietly. He felt sorry for the girl, having to work with the overbearing Betty, but neglecting her duties was a serious offense.

She scurried out and back into the room in a matter of moments and handed him two thick folds of paper, the top one sealed with an elaborate mark. A letter from his sister.

He glanced at the two servants. He could not sit down to read in their presence, yet he did not wish to leave the warmth of the fire in his main room to read in the damp, unheated “library.”

He nodded curtly. “Thank you both. You may go.” When he saw Betty was about to protest, he added, “I will mete out punishment later. At the moment, I have business to attend to.”

He sat down at the side of the table nearest the fire, leaning close to read his sister’s feathery scrawl. When he finished, Josiah let the letter drop to the table and grabbed his head with both hands.

Early spring. His sister and her husband would be here by early spring—and likely sooner. The letter announced they would sail with a small winter convoy headed for Virginia.

Why had he volunteered to go to Joppa? It would be too late to retract his offer now. Perhaps he could stay in Joppa and insist his sister visit him there. Then she need never pass judgment on his plantation.

His plantation. He would be leaving it again without ever having sorted out the mess from his last absence. He still had no overseer, and now there was no time to hire or buy another. Could he trust John to sweat and prize the tobacco into hogsheads? If not done properly, it would spoil on the journey to England, and all his profits for the year would be lost.

But he didn't really have much choice.

Sighing deeply, Josiah picked up the second letter and broke the seal. The correspondence came from a house of business with an unfamiliar name. After wading through flourishing lines of salutations and compliments, Josiah reached the substance of the letter and felt his blood run cold.

He was in debt. The tobacco shipment of last year had not earned enough to pay for the goods ordered from London.

He, Josiah Throckmorton, stood in debt to creditors in London. Moreover, the creditors were strangers, his factor having sold the debt to some unfamiliar firm. He fairly chafed at the indignity. What would his sister say if she knew that, even with his reduced standard of living, he had not been able to turn a profit on his plantation?

"He's here!" Edwina turned from the window gleefully and nudged Caroline, who stood pondering the contents of a large pot next to the hearth. "Don't you want to see?"

"See? No. I'm not going to see him, and he's not going to see me. Besides, we are no longer engaged, remember? He's only coming to do business with Father." Caroline went to the shelves and selected a wooden trencher she thought would be just big enough to hold the ham that cooled in the pot. She had boiled and cooled it as instructed in a small volume of cookery her father had miraculously produced from his shelves earlier in the day. Now that she had written instruction, she could manage any domestic task with ease.

The next step was to take off the skin. Caroline looked at the wet ham dubiously. How did one take the skin off a ham? Stabbing a long fork into the meat, she took up a knife and tried to slide it under the skin. The knife slid off the outside and clattered to the floor. Caroline picked it up, wiped it on her apron and tried again. This time, the entire ham scooted off the trencher and plopped into a pile of ashes near the hearth. It was too big to wipe off with her apron. Maybe she could dunk it back in the cooking water to rinse it? But she had planned to use that water to make soup. She could, however, take the ham outside and pour some of the cooking water over it.

Stabbing the recalcitrant ham with another fork, she picked it up with both fork handles. "Edwina, bring a pitcher of water and come outside with me," she ordered.

"Why are we going outside? I thought you didn't want to see Mr. Throckmorton."

Caroline glanced out the small window. She could see no sign of Mr. Throckmorton or his horse—Charles's horse, as she would always think of it. The horse could be in the stable, and Mr. Throckmorton in the front room. Or, if his errand had been a brief one, he might have already left. Either way, she could safely step out for a moment without risking a meeting.

She lifted the door latch with her elbow and pushed her way out, backside first. "Edwina, come this

instant! He's not out here at the moment but may soon return."

"Good afternoon, Miss Carter."

Caroline felt her cheeks flush, and she wanted to run straight back into the house. Instead, she took a deep breath and turned, trying to muster as much grace as she could.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Throckmorton," she replied. Her former betrothed bowed courteously and she began to curtsy from habit, until the ham in her arms quickly reminded her of the impossibility of this feat.

Now her face felt positively hot. Here she stood, in dirty working clothes, holding a sooty ham and no doubt covered with soot herself. Mr. Throckmorton, by contrast, wore stylish traveling clothes and looked rather elegant. Caroline dropped her gaze.

"Here's your water. Where do you—" Edwina charged out the door and had to stop abruptly to keep from ramming into her sister, who had barely moved beyond the doorway.

For a moment, no one spoke or moved.

Then Edwina shivered. "Um, did you want me to pour this water...?"

Caroline turned to her sister. "Yes, yes. Mr. Throckmorton, if you will excuse us?" Now she had to look at him. What would she see in his eyes? Disgust?

No, it was pity. But then—

"Please, allow me." He reached out to take the unwieldy ham.

"What? No, no." Caroline tried to step back, but her sister blocked that retreat.

"I insist." He took a step closer.

"But your clothes..." She moved to the side.

"Will only get dirty as soon as the horse crosses the first stream. Please."

Something in the tone of his voice made her look him fully in the face, perhaps for the first time.

"Allow me to dirty my clothes for a worthy cause." He smiled gently, as if he enjoyed rescuing maidens from difficult hams.

"Very well, sir." Caroline fought the sudden urge to giggle. "I surrender the prisoner unto you." She thrust the ham at him and took a quick step away, watching to see how he would react. She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

"Whoa! And a fiendish one he is, too." Josiah still smiled a bit, but his brow furrowed in concentration as he struggled to keep the ham from slipping out of his hands.

Caroline stepped forward again and reached out to help, ashamed that she had not been more careful in handing off the mess. When she saw that Josiah had regained control of the slippery meat, she relieved

her sister of the water she had been holding.

“Thank you, Edwina. Why don’t you go back inside now?”

Edwina stopped shivering and stayed to watch.

Caroline and Josiah moved toward each other and nearly collided.

“The prisoner is ready for his sentence, Madam Executioner.” Josiah held the ham as far away from his coat as he could. “I believe he has been sentenced to a shower.”

Caroline smiled but said nothing in reply. Carefully, she tipped the pitcher of water over the ham and succeeded in rinsing off at least half of the ashes and soot without splashing Josiah. She turned, handed the empty pitcher to Edwina then stepped back to retrieve the ham. Unfortunately, Josiah moved forward at the same moment and the two of them did collide this time, with a ham sandwiched neatly in the middle.

“Oh, it’s all over your coat!”

Josiah glanced at the big sooty smear with momentary dismay; then his face brightened. “I surely would have done the same thing at some dingy inn, or…” He paused and glanced at the dense growth of trees less than a stone’s throw away. “…wherever we sleep tonight.”

“Tonight? You travel today?”

“Yes. Your father and I start for Joppa this afternoon.”

“My father? This afternoon? But that can’t be? Surely…” Caroline looked at the house. Turning back suddenly, she grabbed the ham and headed toward the kitchen. “Edwina, get the door for me,” she ordered. After a moment, she called, “Thank you, Mr. Throckmorton,” but did not look back before she hurried into the house.

As she brushed past the chairs at the dining table, Caroline’s gaze went immediately to Charles’s place. Empty, as they all were now, but his would never be filled. He would never again sit at their table. Caroline felt a lump grow in her throat as she pushed the door open into the front room.

She found her father in his usual place, but he was not engrossed in a book or working on his accounts. Instead, his hands lay motionless in his lap, and he stared out the window as if watching for someone. She stood a few paces away in respectful silence. After a time, she wondered if he had heard her enter. She moved to the side and took two steps on an extremely squeaky floorboard.

“Ah, Caroline, my dear.” He turned to her and smiled. “You look a fright. Surely, your mother is not working you so hard in the kitchen?”

Caroline glanced down at her dirty arms and gown. Her mother never would have let her appear in such a distressful state. “Mother has not been near the kitchen all day. I believe she has a headache.”

“Again?” Her father arched one eyebrow in mild surprise.

“Again. It makes no difference, now that I have your book.” Caroline gestured toward the shelves and smiled her thanks. The smile instantly faded as she remembered the purpose of her visit. “Mr.

Throckmorton says he is riding with you to Joppa, and you leave today.”

“Goodness, my dear. Whenever did you see Mr. Throckmorton?”

“Is it true?”

“And looking like that, too? My heavens! If that isn’t enough to scare a gentleman off—”

“Is it true? Are you leaving today?”

“Yes, yes, all true enough. Mr. Throckmorton accompanies me to Joppa, and we leave this afternoon. As soon as I finish instructions for Harper.” Carter looked over at his desk. “I just need to add a few more—”

“How can you leave today?”

“We must, my dear. The assizes begin soon, and it will take many days to ride all the way to Joppa.”

“Ride? Why do you not take a boat?”

“The route overland will be more direct, although certainly not as easy. And we do not have a vessel large enough to comfortably travel such a distance, and we’ve...” He sighed. “...no means to rent one. Besides, I...” He looked out the window again, and Caroline knew the real reason he did not wish to travel by water. Charles’s face appeared in her mind, and she blinked to keep back tears. Her father, too, looked as if it took a great deal of effort to keep his emotions in check. And he looked so old.

She took his hand impulsively. “Father, you will need someone to assist you. Take me. Please.”

“No, no, Caroline. You could not possibly—”

“I could, Father, I know I could help.”

“Yes, you can help by staying right here at Hill Crest.”

“No, Father, I can help you in Joppa! I can help you on the journey, I can—”

“Caroline! You have done enough journeying for one lifetime! You need to stop thinking about what *you* want to do and think about what the rest of us need.”

She snatched her hand away and hugged it to herself as if she had been slapped. After a moment, she rocked back on her heels as she watched him warily.

“I need—I really and truly need—you to stay at Hill Crest. There is much to be managed, and so very little I can trust to an indentured overseer in my absence. The new tenant family will arrive soon to farm the western fields. Someone must see to their needs. And to the needs of Harper and the field hands we have left.” Her father blinked then continued quickly. “Charles would have managed these things. Now you must.”

Caroline felt tears spill out of her eyes. Of course, she could not travel to Joppa. It was her traveling that had caused so much grief. And she was needed at home, that was obvious. Her mother rarely left her room these days, and her sisters wandered the house in aimless circles, consenting to work only when

hunger drove them toward the kitchen. If left alone, they would all starve within the week.

“You see that, don’t you?” her father asked gently.

“Yes, Father. I’m sorry. But I was worried about you making the journey alone—”

“My dear, I shall not be alone. Mr. Throckmorton accompanies me. He is a barrister, and I am sure I can trust him to represent my interests most handsomely. He did take care of you, remember?”

Caroline recoiled a bit when she thought of being bound in a sail and carted off to the ship like a wild animal. If that was how Mr. Throckmorton took care of people, she could not imagine her father would fare well on his trip.

“I am not sure you can trust anyone too closely,” she said, reaching out again to take his hand. “Do take care of yourself, Father.” She thought of debtor’s prison and shivered.

“I shall, I shall. And we will be home before you realize we’ve gone.” He smiled.

But neither of them looked convinced.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Earlier, Josiah had not given much thought to the prospect, since all his energies had been consumed with making plans for the trip to Joppa, leaving instructions for the servants and the disquieting visits to Hill Crest. But now, as the horses picked their way slowly along the overgrown road, he had plenty of time to think about whether he should move back to England.

His deliberations started about a quarter of an hour into their journey to Joppa, after he and Carter had finished exchanging pleasantries and observations about the weather they were likely to have. Lulled by the easy rhythm of the saddle and the steady cascade of leaves from the trees, both men fell into solitary reflection.

Josiah was then hounded by a nagging, disagreeable thought that he had pushed to back of his mind. What was it? Oh, yes. His sister and her husband would be coming to Maryland as part of some sort of inspection tour.

Instead of being posted abroad, his brother-in-law had apparently received a position in the Customs House. So, rather than enjoying a sinecure in one of the elegant capitals of Europe, Sir James was forced to face the rigors of travel among the primitive tobacco colonies. Josiah had to smile to himself at the thought; James Davenport had scarcely lifted a finger in service to his country before, despite the numerous appointments he had held. Now, even if he accomplished nothing on his tour, he would at least have to lift several fingers just to get himself to shore. He would be utterly disgusted and overwhelmed by the rustic conditions.

And his sister! Why on Earth was she traveling with her husband? The journey would be difficult enough for a gentleman, but for a lady accustomed to luxury and ease! Josiah could think of no possible reason for her to accompany her husband unless they were planning to stay in the colonies. That did not seem likely, since she had hinted he should accompany them on the return trip to manage his ailing uncle's estate. In fact, the idea of his sister remaining in the colonies was simply unthinkable. She would faint away the moment she first set eyes on a shoddy Maryland planter's house.

His, for instance.

Hill Crest was a little better. Having been built on a stone foundation and enlarged with a relatively solid addition, the house was stable and almost respectable, for a family of small means.

His own house was not respectable or even secure. After viewing the neat construction of the new tobacco barn and comparing it with the sagging structure of his house, Josiah had suddenly realized the problem. The wood posts and sills had been sunk directly into the earth and were, by this time, probably fairly rotten. He could expect the house to collapse within a few years, perhaps sooner. Maybe even before he returned—

A sudden crash in the nearby woods interrupted his thoughts a little too realistically. Josiah yelped and yanked hard on the reins, causing his horse to rear. When both he and horse had recovered their composure, he looked over and saw that a vine-covered tree trunk had collapsed harmlessly several feet away. He coughed to cover his embarrassment as Carter turned his horse and rode back toward him.

"Mr. Throckmorton! Are you harmed, sir?"

Josiah felt his face flush and sought to turn the subject as quickly as possible. "Please, uh, sir, do call me Josiah. We shall be traveling together many days, and as I am now rather well acquainted with your family—"

"Yes, of course. But whatever happened? I've never seen that horse behave so. Did you see a snake?"

"Uh, er, no. It was that tree." He gestured to his left and noted with chagrin that it was really no more than a sapling. "The fall startled me—and the horse."

Carter laughed. "That was quite a 'startle,' Josiah!"

"Sir." Josiah drew his horse right up next to Carter's for his confession. "I was thinking of my house. It is in a rather sorry state. I fear it may need some major reconstruction..." He trailed off vaguely in shame. This was, after all, the house he would have brought Miss Carter into.

"Should be about ready to collapse within a year or two, I would think," Carter replied matter-of-factly.

"What?"

"Let us ride." Carter nudged his horse forward. "The road gets wider up here, we can continue our conversation."

"You think my house is going to collapse?" Josiah yelled incredulously.

"Well, yes," Carter called back.

"Why?" Did it look that bad?

"It's about due. Langley built the house about eight years ago. A house such as that only lasts about ten years, less if a big storm hits."

"Only lasts ten years!" Josiah realized he could stop shouting now that the trail had, indeed, widened and Carter had waited for him to ride up alongside. "But why?"

"Surely you've noticed, Mr. Throckmorton—"

"Josiah."

Carter ignored the correction, "—that your house lacks a true foundation."

"Of course." Well, he *had* noticed, if only recently.

"I'm sure Langley planned to build a new house when this one collapsed."

"That's ridiculous."

"Not really. He would have planned a new house closer to the fields under cultivation. The fields nearest the house would be used up by then. Are they not nearly so now?"

"Well, yes." Josiah had already admitted rather more than he wanted to, and it seemed Carter could guess at much more. His position fell with every admission.

Of course, he remembered almost with a laugh, it didn't matter anymore. Carter's position had to be worse than his. And he was not going to marry the man's daughter in any event.

"So, you should begin scouting sites for a new house. This is a good time of year to do it; you see the lay of the land better without all the growth on the trees."

Again Carter was lecturing him on what he should do with his plantation. But he did have a point; if Josiah was going to have to build a new house, he might as well put it closer to the fields. Except that the

new kitchen would then be left behind and the expense of it would be a total waste. The kitchen had a stone foundation. As did Hill Crest.

“Why do you not move your house every ten years?”

Carter grinned. “My mother refused. A wall collapsed in one house and smashed some of her best crockery. After that, she insisted my father build a solid house and stay put. So, now we ride farther and farther each year to get to the new fields. But the china stays in one place.”

“Indeed,” was all Josiah could think to say. What a bizarre culture! Houses built to last only a few years. No wonder Langley’s Choice had seemed such a bargain when he arranged the purchase. The house had been worth virtually naught.

“You would perhaps be more comfortable in a house built as Hill Crest is.”

“Yes, undoubtedly.” But he would be even more comfortable in a house built as his family’s houses in England were. With questionable solvency, no engagement, no overseer and virtually no house remaining, would this not be an opportune time to leave? He could start over in England.

“You might even choose to consult a book on architecture. I did, of course, before constructing the addition on Hill Crest, but my options were somewhat limited, since I wanted to keep the new part of the house symmetrical with the old. It gives the old place a dignified air.”

“It does, sir.” Rectangular, yes, Josiah thought. Dignified, no. The house looked as if a giant wooden crate had fallen from the sky. It was rough and unpolished, and did not seem to fit together quite right. Dignified, ha! Carter had never seen a proper English house.

The two men rode in silence for some time, Josiah thinking of houses and Carter’s ignorant pride in his own family home. “Tell me, sir,” he finally said, “if you were offered another plantation, a plantation with a better house, would you take it?”

“Very likely.” Carter paused. “But my grandfather came to Maryland with barely a shirt on his back. After he worked off his indenture and received his acres, he built a successful plantation for himself. His son—my father—traded it for more land further upriver. Then he added to the estate, and now we have—”

Carter stopped suddenly, the look of pride vanishing from his face.

Josiah felt ashamed, as if he had goaded the man into facing his own failure. The gray pallor that stole over Carter’s face was almost too much to bear. What could he say?

“Sir,” he confessed, “I’ve just now discovered myself in the same straits.”

“What do you mean?”

Josiah cringed but pressed ahead with his admission. “I’ve had a letter from creditors in London. The crop last year did not bring in enough; my plantation is now in debt.” He could barely get out the words, so great was his shame.

“Yes. By how much?”

Startled, Josiah looked up. "By more than fifty pounds, I believe." The amount had not much mattered. It was the loss, the indebtedness, that was so painful to bear.

"Why, that can be made up in but one year, if the markets are good. 'Tis nothing at all."

"But my concern is not profitable. And I am in debt to a firm in London previously unknown to me."

Carter laughed, a little harshly. "Your inexperience shows again, Josiah. Debt is no stranger to any of us here. Nearly every planter, even on the biggest plantations in Virginia, runs a debt with his factor in London."

"Continually?"

"More or less. If the market were strong for many years in a row, some might pay off their creditors entirely. Most would simply order more servants or slaves to clear and plant more land. Or order more goods." Carter cleared his throat. "The latter route is not so healthy."

"No, I would imagine not," Josiah replied absently as he envisioned an endless chain of debt stretched across the Atlantic Ocean. How could anyone live in such a state and maintain any sense of dignity? "Does it not bother you, this perpetual debt?"

"It does now." Carter gestured toward their path. His voice grew soft. "I never expected to encumber the estate so heavily."

Josiah wanted to ask just how heavily the estate was burdened, but he dared not.

"And when news of the debt from Charles Town arrives," Carter continued, "I believe all may be lost."

Josiah winced. The debt from Charles Town was his doing. Charles had wanted no part of a ransom. If he had followed Charles's wishes, as he should have done, they would have confronted the blackguard outright and obtained the freedom of Miss Carter and the others honestly. And cheaply.

A voice in the back of his head told him this was not true. Had they confronted the pirate he would have left or, worse, fought them. But Josiah was not certain. At the time, he had trusted his own judgment over that of Charles, but he now realized Charles had proven wise in many ways.

For instance, Charles had insisted they start out after his sister rather than wait for help from the authorities. And now she was home safe. If the family had followed Josiah's wishes, they would still be waiting for word from London, and Miss Carter would be prisoner on a pirate ship somewhere on the Spanish Main. Charles's quick action had saved his sister.

And the words he had seemed to pluck miraculously from the Bible also showed a wisdom beyond his years. Josiah wished he had listened to him more. Then at least the Carter family would not be in danger of losing everything.

He could no longer see his companion's face clearly in the fading light. He shivered; a cold wind had begun to whip between the trees, and with the sun down, the air chilled rapidly.

"I'm afraid we shall find no inn on this part of the road," Carter noted. "But I believe there is a plantation not too far ahead where we may sleep tonight."

“Are they relatives or friends?”

“Neither. But ’tis no matter.”

“What? Are we to simply knock at the home of some stranger and ask to spend the night?”

“I confess I had never thought of it in that way. But yes, that’s what we will do.”

“And they will let us in?”

“Yes. We would do the same for any traveler at Hill Crest, except there is no need, since we are so close to the inn at the landing.”

Josiah tucked his coat more tightly around his neck and rode in silence. He had thought he understood this place, Maryland. But after nearly a year in residence, he still felt like a total newcomer. He could never get used to it.

Several minutes later, when they rode up to seek shelter in a small, dark building that made his own house seem like a palace, he felt even more convinced. He would never get used to this colony.

But then, he didn’t have to.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"You need more firewood, Caroline," Johanna pronounced with finality. "Mother says you must make the fire terribly hot."

Caroline glanced at the woodbin in dismay. Only a few stray pieces remained. The insatiable fire had gobbled up vast quantities of wood, yet still the oven was not ready for baking.

“Is it not hot enough?” Edwina wiped sweat from her brow. “I believe there must be enough heat to bake here, outside the oven. We’ve been feeding this fire for hours.”

“I know, yet we’ve not baked so much as a small tart.” For what must have been the fiftieth time that day, Caroline looked down at the cookery book displaying the receipt for Beef Steak Pye. “More wood it is, then. Will you come with me, Edwina?”

She pulled her cloak off a peg by the door and headed outside.

Both sisters walked toward a broadax embedded in a nearby stump. They stared at the hefty tool in silence for some moments. Then Caroline turned and began to look around.

“What, sister?” Edwina grinned. “Do you think someone will just appear from behind the nearest tree to offer to split our firewood?”

“No.” Caroline was not sure exactly what she was looking for. She only knew that, although her time on the *Osprey* had accustomed her to manual labor, she did not believe she could swing an ax without great danger to life and limb and very little danger to the wood. But who would know how to wield an ax? “There is no one here, except ourselves, the new tenants and the field slaves we were able to keep. Of course! One of them will certainly be able to chop the firewood.” She began to look around again.

“So, where are they, then?”

“I have no idea where they work today. Let’s see, it is too cold for them to be in a tobacco fields.”

“Surely, the tobacco must be harvested by now.”

“Yes, and the apples, too.” So what else could they be doing? “Do you not find it disconcerting, Edwina, that we do not know what work is done at Hill Crest?”

“Yes, I suppose.” Edwina poked at the handle of the ax. “Father and Charles always kept the servants and slaves busy, I know that.”

“Yes, but busy doing what?” Caroline started away from the stump, heading toward the gate to her knot garden. “The only crop we sell is tobacco, at least, I believe it is. But we raise other crops for ourselves.” She stopped and held the gate for her sister. “I just can’t remember what else we grow here.”

“Besides weeds, you mean?” Edwina gestured at the disorderly tangle in the ornamental garden.

Caroline rolled her eyes then turned and walked up the garden path with small, deliberate steps. “Let’s see, what do we eat?” Visions of pastries danced in her head. “Apples...”

“You’ve already mentioned them.”

“Yes, I know. Hmm. So many of the other fruits and vegetables come from the kitchen gardens, and those are tended by the house servants.”

Edwina sighed. “Not anymore.”

“Well, the slaves wouldn’t be tending them, in any case. Now, there are some other fruit trees further from the house, and the slaves would care for those. But, of course, not at this time of year. Perhaps they have to feed the pigs?”

“No, the cattle and pigs forage for themselves. And I should warn you, there is a boar with a nasty temper who now spends most his time just over there.”

“Where?”

“Under that shrub.” Edwina pointed to a large boxwood outside the fence.

Caroline looked for the animal but, from her vantage point, could see only the lower branches of the boxwood moving rhythmically, as if the shrub were breathing. “Very well. Obviously, the slaves aren’t tending him at the moment.” Of course, the slaves would have to kill animals once in a while and do... whatever it was they did to get meat out of them. “Could the slaves be killing a pig somewhere? Or did the house servants do that? You know, we always went to visit Aunt Bennett on butchering days.”

“Only because you and Georgiana insisted that we leave. I wanted to stay and see all the blood.”

“You wouldn’t like the smell any more than the rest of us and you know it. Anyway, as I recall, Mother never gave us any choice in the matter.” And so the butchering process remained a mystery, one Caroline did not wish to contemplate in detail. Because if the house servants had done it before... “What else do we eat, Edwina?”

“Hmm. Sometimes we have fowl—a goose, or duck or turkey.”

Caroline closed her eyes. “Yes, but Charles usually hunted for those, did he not?”

“He did.”

“But surely, he did not go alone; a servant or slave must have accompanied him.” Caroline opened her eyes. “Slaves would not be out hunting on their own, though. They are always kept closely supervised. The overseer—what is his name, Harper? He will know where the slaves work today. Why did I not think of this sooner?”

“So, where do we find Harper?”

Caroline looked at her sister without replying then reached over to pull out an unsightly dead vine. It slipped through her fingers. She sighed. “I’m hungry. I’m hungry, and I’m tired of cornmeal.”

“Perhaps we might find the slaves in the cornfields?”

“I want to make that pie, with a real flour pie crust.”

“Or perhaps in the wheatfields?”

“Which do you want to check?”

Edwina smiled. “The wheat is closer.”

“Very well.” Caroline watched her take several unhurried steps before she herself turned and went in the opposite direction. Her pace quickened when she at last saw the field of tall, shriveled cornstalks ahead. Corn remained in the field, so the slaves were probably in there somewhere, picking it.

She approached nearly at a run, so focused on her goal she was only dimly aware of voices coming from a different direction until she reached the edge of the field. She slowed and listened. The only sound from the corn was the rustling of dry stalks in the wind, but she could definitely hear voices from somewhere through the woods to her right.

Caroline turned and began walking with care, straining to hear the noises over the crunch of leaves under her heels. Gradually, the sounds grew louder and more distinct. Through the trees, she could see the dark form of a building, a tobacco barn. Could they be prizing the tobacco already?

As she drew near the barn, she suddenly heard a man curse fiercely. She froze in her tracks. Should she enter unescorted? But who could escort her? The sound of laughter soon followed the curse, and Caroline took that to be a good sign. She continued on timidly.

Peeking through the doorway, she saw a dark woman, one of the slaves, she assumed, standing in a cask, carefully laying hands of tobacco down inside it then walking on them. The laughter, and cursing, too, probably had come from another corner of the barn, where several men pushed at some kind of levered contraption in another cask. The device compressed the tobacco down farther, and it seemed to take an awful lot of effort.

The process was rather fascinating. Caroline knew the tobacco had to be prized into hogsheads for shipment to England, but she had never seen it done.

“Scuse me. Good morning, Miss Carter.” Harper, the overseer, took off his hat and bowed awkwardly, nudging the other men to do the same. The three slaves had no hats, but they all tried to bow as they had seen their boss do. Caroline pulled in her lips to keep from laughing at the clumsy display of chivalry.

“Well, now. And what brings you to see us this morning, Miss Carter?”

As much as she had enjoyed watching them work, she realized they probably would not enjoy having her watch them. And she should get back to work herself. “I need someone to split wood for the kitchen fire,” she announced.

“Very good. Leda!” The Irishman turned not to one of the male slaves, as Caroline had expected, but to the woman who stood in the cask opposite. “Go chop firewood for Miss Carter.”

Caroline started to object, but she saw the other woman did not. Instead, she hopped lithely out of the cask, slipped a pair of worn leather shoes onto her bare feet then came to where Caroline stood near the doorway.

As she approached, Caroline nearly gasped. This woman appeared not much older or larger than herself. Could she really handle a broadax? She looked over at the overseer to question his selection, but he misinterpreted her inquiring gaze.

“Go on. We can cover her share of the work here, don’t you worry.”

“Thank you,” she found herself saying as she turned to go. Harper obviously knew this woman better

than she did, and if he thought she could split wood, then she probably could. Had she chopped wood while she lived in Africa? Or had she come from the West Indies? Caroline wished she had the nerve to ask.

The woman—Leda—accompanied her in silence during the long walk back to the house. Caroline could think of many things she wanted to ask the exotic foreigner behind her, but something held her back. Was it proper for her to speak in conversation with a field hand? Did she even speak English? And, most awful, would the woman resent her?

Mary, the girls' former maid, had shown little respect for Caroline and her sisters. The way she had looked darkly out of the corners of her eyes while addressing them and pulled their hair a little more than was necessary while brushing it all spoke of a resentment that would not have been tolerated had respectful white servants been easier to find. Her father had said the selection of indentured servants grew less attractive every year.

Resentment from a slave, a servant bound for life, would be only natural, but that did not make it any more pleasant. So Caroline avoided looking her full in the face.

When they reached the house, she gestured toward the ax and looked around for a source of wood. Leda took the ax and continued walking. Wordlessly, Caroline followed her toward the quarters. There stood an enormous stack of logs and a sizeable pile of split wood.

“You need wood now, miss?”

Caroline took a step back in surprise as the woman turned to face her. “Yes.”

“Take dis. I'll chop more fo' us later.” Leda pointed at the pile of split wood, and Caroline scooped several pieces into her arms. She started back toward the house and had nearly reached it when she saw the woman at her side carrying a bundle of firewood wrapped in rough cloth. At the door, she lifted the latch with her elbow and held the door open for her silent companion, who swiftly deposited her load of wood into the empty woodbin. When Caroline added her pieces, she realized Leda had carried at least twice as much.

“I'll get more.” Leda turned and left.

Caroline sat down, ready for a rest after her exertion. They had wood! Now they could make pies.

She reached for the cookery book. Would she make the steak pie first? As she started to page through receipts, she felt in need of something to drink. Cider would be nice, but she did not want to take the time to go get it. She took a mug over to the water pail—a good cup of cold water would do just as well.

But the dipper clanged sadly in the empty pail when she picked it up.

Caroline fumed and threw the pail down on the floor in disgust. Whoever emptied it was supposed to go to the well to draw more.

“Georgiana—Edwina—Johanna!” she screamed at the top of her voice. No one answered. Caroline stalked out of the kitchen and up the back stairs. The girls, or at least one of them, would be sitting with her mother in her room.

“Caroline,” her mother called from her curtained bed, “it is good of you to come and see me.”

“Yes, well, I hope you’re feeling better today, Mother.” Caroline looked disdainfully at the large pile of wood next to her mother’s fire. So, that’s where it had all gone.

“I am better, but only a little. It saddened me to think my eldest daughter had not the time to visit her ailing mother.”

“I’m afraid I had pressing business.” Caroline looked pointedly at Johanna, perched on the foot of her mother’s bed. “We ran out of firewood for the kitchen fire. Johanna said we would need a great deal of wood to bake.”

“And so you do, my dear. I am so glad Johanna is being helpful.”

“Well, she’d be more helpful if she accompanied me downstairs and refilled the pail of water she emptied.”

“I did not empty it,” Johanna protested. “Georgiana did.”

“No, I did not,” Georgiana responded from her seat by the fire. “There was still water left after I was done.”

“Yes, but not enough for a mouse,” Edwina piped up as she entered from the hallway.

“Edwina, whatever has happened to your hair?” her mother demanded.

Edwina squinted at the hairs in front of her face and patted the top of her head quizzically.

“It’s sticking out every which way. You look like you’ve got a frightened cat on your head,” Georgiana declared. “What have you been doing?”

“Yes, what have you been doing?” Caroline felt rage creep into her voice. “I thought you were helping me search for the slaves.”

Edwina shrugged. “The wheatfields were empty—harvested quite some time back—so, I came inside. I’ve been reading in my bed.”

“Why not in here by the fire with us?” her mother asked.

Edwina shrugged again. “I was under the covers. It was plenty warm.”

“Fine,” Caroline snorted. “You’ve been reading. Johanna has been talking to Mother and I imagine Georgiana has spent the better part of the morning choosing which shade of crewel to use for the roses in her embroidery.”

“I have not!” Georgiana retorted.

Caroline ignored her. “Doesn’t anybody want to eat?”

“Heavens, yes. But no more mush, please.”

“No, I cannot stand another bite.”

“Is dinner ready?”

“No! Dinner is not ready!” Caroline roared. “The *fire* to cook dinner is not even ready. And dinner will never be ready unless I get some help in the kitchen.”

“Oh,” her mother sighed softly. “I never raised my girls to do the cooking. Servants should manage the kitchen.”

Caroline tried to keep her voice calm. “Mother, we do not have servants to manage the kitchen anymore.”

“I try not to think of it.” Her mother lay back on her pillows and closed her eyes. “I am so very sorry, girls.”

“Oh, Mother.” Tears edged Georgiana’s eyes.

“I am sorry, too. But if we don’t think of it, we will starve up here,” Edwina announced quietly. “I’ll help you, Caroline.”

“Thank you.” Caroline flashed her a grateful look. “Georgiana? Johanna?”

“Oh, very well.” Georgiana stood with reluctance.

“Someone must stay and keep Mother company,” Johanna insisted. “May I, Caroline?”

Caroline forced herself to smile, and the effort made her feel as if her face would crack. Was this the first time she had smiled all day? “Certainly, you may keep Mother company, after you take care of a few household duties. All ladies have a responsibility to take care of their houses, you understand.”

“Yes...” Johanna slid off the bed looking doubtful, but she followed Caroline out the door. “What sort of household duties, Caroline?”

“Very well,” Caroline said to her sisters as they assembled obediently around the worktable. “We shall divide this receipt into different tasks, and each of us shall have a different job to do. We shall have our beefsteak pie in no time at all.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderfullius,” Johanna gushed. “What task can I do, Caroline? I’m hungry.”

Caroline leaned close to her book to concentrate on the receipt then read aloud, “‘Cook some bits of suet or other shortening in a large frying pan, then brown the steak with a finely chopped onion.’ Very well. You may chop an onion. Finely, please.”

“And where do I get an onion?”

Caroline groaned. Why could she find nothing in her own house?

“Oh, I know,” Edwina announced. She hopped over in front of the firebox and lifted out a piece of the floor. Underneath was a small root cellar full of onions, potatoes, turnips and other vegetables. She

grinned. "It's like a dungeon, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Caroline, smiling easily this time. "Let us release some of the prisoners, shall we?"

"Ooh, may we have carrots with our pie?" Georgiana asked.

Caroline looked at her book. "There are carrots *in* the pie."

"Well, may we have some more carrots outside the pie?"

"Why?"

"I want them cooked with molasses."

"Mmm. That will be delectableful." Johanna licked her lips.

"No. We are almost out of molasses. We need to save it to have with the mush," Caroline said.

"Well, I'm tired of mush," Georgiana said. "We don't want any more mush, do we, ladies? So, we don't need to save the molasses."

"Yes, we do. We might want it for something else. The carrots will be just fine with gravy inside the pie."

"Well, I want carrots with molasses and so does Johanna. By what right do you reign over us all, Queen Caroline?"

Caroline decided not to answer that last remark, although she felt her father had in fact given her the right to effectively reign over the household. "Fine. You may cook the carrots any way you wish."

Georgiana's smile of triumph quickly faded as she examined the carrots Edwina had pulled from the root cellar. "They're so wrinkly and dirty," she muttered. "What is wrong with these carrots? They're supposed to be smooth and orange."

Caroline smothered a chuckle. If Georgiana had spent any time working in the garden, she might have realized that some vegetables need to be peeled. But she said nothing, enjoying her sister's obvious distress.

"Shall I peel them carrots for you, Miss Georgiana?"

The four sisters turned as one to see who had spoken. When they saw Leda standing next to the woodbin, the three youngest sisters gaped as if simultaneously struck with apoplexy.

Caroline, however, felt struck with sudden inspiration. "Please do, Leda."

"But, Caroline," Johanna said under her breath as Leda stepped over to the water pail to rinse her hands, "she's...Mother would not want her in the house!"

"Shush," Caroline retorted as Leda came back toward them.

"Shall I draw more water, Miss Carter?"

“Thank you, Leda. That would be welcome.”

“Caroline!” Georgiana hissed. “Those dirty slaves should not be in the house!”

“She’s no dirtier than you are,” Caroline responded, “and I’ll wager she knows how to cook better than any of us.”

“But...in the house!” Georgiana moaned.

Another inspiration struck. “In Charles Town, you realize, black slaves do all the housework for ladies of fashion,” Caroline said in an offhand manner.

“Truly?” Edwina asked.

“They do, indeed. Ladies find their slaves have a much more respectful attitude than that displayed by the typical indentured servant, such as Mary.” None of the sisters had liked Mary, so Caroline thought this observation would seal the argument.

All remained silent in thought until Leda returned with a dripping pail of water.

“Will she always fetch water for us?” Johanna whispered.

“If we wish her to, yes,” Caroline replied.

“But how do you know she can cook?” Georgiana demanded.

“Who do you think does all the cooking for the men in the quarters?”

“Well, perhaps we sold all of the women slaves who could cook!”

“Georgiana, see reason. She can’t know any less than we do. She won’t mind getting her hands dirty.” Caroline smiled ever-so-slightly. “And she can make the carrots look smooth and orange.”

Georgiana threw up her hands in exasperation. “Ooh, very well. But Mother won’t be pleased.”

Johanna began to look worried.

“Mother need not know, at least not at first.” Caroline found herself thinking aloud. “Leda will teach us what we need to know to run the household, or at least prepare food. By the time Mother has tired of her headache—”

Johanna opened her mouth to object, but Caroline continued. “You know very well that when the prospect of some entertainment comes along, Mother’s headaches always disappear. And by the time this happens, we will know what we need to know, and Leda may go back to working in the fields. Or,” she said, glancing slyly at her sisters, “if we find we enjoy having help in the kitchen, we convince Mother to let her stay.”

“That sounds reasonable,” said Edwina. Johanna nodded meekly. Georgiana gave the newcomer a suspicious glance then looked down at the carrots in her hand and nodded her assent.

“Very well. Leda!” Caroline closed her cookbook as she motioned for the woman to step over to the

table. "Show us how to make a beefsteak pie."

Chapter Twenty-Six

"This is Joppa Town?"

"Yes, sir. Ain't it a fine courthouse, sir?" The man fairly beamed with pride as he looked across the muddy street to a new, two-story red brick building.

"Yes, but where is the town?" Josiah looked around in consternation. Clustered around the simple brick courthouse were numerous ramshackle huts where rum and less potent drinks were being served to men standing or sitting in the street. It appeared as though the proprietors of these ill-constructed establishments lived in them as well. There were no other houses in sight, and, more strangely, no shops or even offices for barristers and clerks and others in the legal profession.

John Carter motioned for him to come out into the street, so Josiah picked up the ridiculously expensive tankard of cider he had just purchased and walked over to where Carter stood reading a list of notices posted out in front of the courthouse.

"I don't know any of the justices this term."

"What?" Josiah was still looking for signs of the promised town.

"I said I don't believe I am acquainted with any of the justices sitting this term. The last time I attended, when the court sat at Simm's Choice, one of the justices was from our part of the county. This term, they all appear to be northern men."

“Is that a problem?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s just interesting, that’s all.” Carter took a sip of his drink and looked around thoughtfully. “It’s good to see the courthouse finished at last.”

“Yes, but where is the rest of the town?”

“Well, here, of course.”

“This isn’t a town.”

“Well, what do you need a town for?”

“Towns have shops, and—”

“What do you need from a shop? Didn’t you just get an order in from London in August?”

“I don’t need a shop. I was just trying to explain that I expected Joppa Town to have buildings other than a courthouse.”

“Well, they’re building a gaol.” Carter gestured to a plot of land next to the courthouse.

Josiah just sighed in response. There was no town. He certainly could not expect Eleanor to meet him here. He would have to help Carter complete his business as quickly as possible so he could return to Hanset and prepare for her arrival.

He looked again at Carter, who sipped his drink with apparent calm as he watched the preparations for court days around him. Only a nervous quiver in the man’s knee betrayed his apprehension. “Did you see your action posted?”

“Yes. I don’t know the justice. He’s from the Provincial Court, riding the circuit, of course, so I shouldn’t expect to know him.” Carter smiled, but he took a bigger draught of his drink and began to shift from side to side.

Josiah well understood his anxiety. A debt action this large would have to be handled by the higher court justices during one of the assizes rather than the county justices who handled matters of everyday business. It could not be a comforting thought. He glanced around for an idea to change the topic of conversation.

A slovenly woman emerged from a thicket of trees several yards away, tightening the laces on her bodice as she walked. She brushed a few leaves from her skirt then headed toward one of the drinking establishments at a deliberate pace. Not much food for conversation there, at least none that Josiah wished to bring up with the man who was supposed to have become his father-in-law. That reminded him of Miss Carter and her struggle with the uncooperative ham. An unexpected chuckle escaped his lips.

“What?”

“Oh, I was just thinking of something mildly amusing.”

“Well, what was it?” Carter smiled plaintively, asking him to share the joke.

But he couldn't admit he had been laughing at the man's daughter. "Oh, it was nothing, indeed. Just a little domestic difficulty. Trouble with a ham."

"A ham?" Carter looked around, as if trying to see what had inspired Josiah to think of hams.

"Er, yes. I must have been thinking of dinner. Will we find any in this 'town?'"

"I dare say we will. James Goodwin sets a fair table for his guests, and his wife is a most excellent cook."

"Oh?" Josiah was pleased Carter at least seemed to know where they would dine in this rustic settlement, but he doubted they could expect much civilized hospitality anywhere nearby.

"Yes, and, indeed, it is time for us to be setting out, else the best beds will be spoken for." Carter drained his tankard and looked as if he expected Josiah to do the same. Josiah took a deep drink, decided the rest of the cider was not worth the effort and gestured for Carter to lead the way to return the tankards and collect the horses.

The ride to the Goodwin house was long and silent. Josiah could think of nothing to say to cheer his companion; the effort to make even idle conversation seemed too great. Oddly, it reminded him of dining at his sister's house in London, of the awkward time after dinner when the ladies would retire to discuss whatever ladies discussed on their own and the gentlemen, often only Josiah and his brother-in-law, would drink their port in silence. Josiah would ask a few questions about the crown's interests, and James would answer, sometimes at great length; but he would find his attention starting to drift. Before he knew it, his brother-in-law had ceased talking, and silence reigned once more.

It was difficult then to think of anything else to ask, for Josiah was always certain he would insult his host by asking about something that had already been discussed at length. James never proffered questions of his own; and so they would sit, waiting for the proper amount of time to pass before they rejoined the ladies.

He felt nearly the same sense of guilt now, though he did not think he had been particularly inattentive to any of Carter's remarks. He simply could not think of anything to question or discuss that would not bring up unpleasant thoughts. Their entire acquaintance rested upon a series of awkward events: the engagement, the voyage with Charles and now the business of this trip.

Moreover, Josiah realized he felt increasingly guilty about the Carter family's financial straits. To be sure, he was not responsible for their excessive household spending, but the debt incurred in Charles Town was his doing entirely. At that point, Caroline had been his responsibility. But what could he do? He was himself in debt. It made his head ache just to think about it.

A gust of wind suddenly whipped a loose strand of hair into his eyes. He pushed the errant wisp behind his ear and blinked at the bright sunlight. The shadows were growing longer, but the sun still glowed in a radiant blue sky. It seemed fresh, as if the wind had blown away all dullness and impurities.

The bright sky and the bracing air all seemed worlds away from the somber, formal dining room in London where he had just imagined himself. There would be many more such evenings, he supposed, when he returned to England. Perhaps not, though, if he managed his uncle's estate and did not spend the

whole winter season in London.

And, of course, his sister and brother-in-law could not invite him to dinner in London if they were out traveling to all parts of the world on colonial inspection tours.

Eleanor in Maryland. The thought remained inconceivable. Josiah wished Carter's legal business had come at a time when the Provincial Court met in the capital city of Annapolis. The journey would have been no longer; and while by no means a true city, Annapolis would have afforded enough civilized amenities for Josiah to entertain her there, and thus avoid the embarrassing visit to his plantation.

"Josiah!"

Carter had slowed his horse to allow Josiah to ride alongside where the path widened on the right; the shouted warning was necessary to stop him from plowing directly into Carter's horse.

"My apologies, sir." Josiah felt himself flush slightly as he reined in his mount and steered to Carter's side.

"I was thinking of legal business," Carter said, and glanced over at him as if to make sure Josiah was not about to suddenly ride his horse off the road. "Your legal business, to be specific."

"My legal business, sir?" Good grief! What was his legal business in Joppa supposed to be? He had forgotten entirely that he had professed to have any.

"Yes. I know not whether you need local counsel, but if you do, I heartily recommend James Goodwin. He speaks well before the court and even has a copy of Lord Coke's Reports."

"Did he study at the Middle or Inner Temple?" As an alumnus of the Middle Temple, Josiah felt the students of the latter institution suffered a lower quality of legal education.

Carter just looked at him quizzically. "Temple? He didn't study at a temple. He's an attorney," he sniffed, "not a priest."

Then it was Josiah's turn to look puzzled. Carter was recommending that he use a mere attorney, hardly more than a scrivener, to represent his interests in court? "He is not a barrister, then?"

"No, no, we have no need of such here. I suppose there must be one or two in Annapolis."

"And your attorney, this Mr. Goodwin, argues cases before the court?"

"Yes, most expertly."

His ignorance of local procedure notwithstanding, Josiah would have sooner eaten his hat than allowed a mere attorney to advise him on a legal matter. He did, nevertheless, have to be polite. "I shall look forward to meeting him."

"Yes, I imagine you could find quite a lot to discuss with him, with your legal experience. He's most quick-witted and really quite knowledgeable. Once, when he was arguing a case for a neighbor, I saw him look up a case in Coke's Reports and quote the law, the actual law, to the justice."

"Once?" A sharp intake of breath caused Josiah to swallow a great gulp of air before replying further.

“Yes, it was magnificent.” Carter smiled at the memory.

“Only once did he quote the law?” This made no sense. Josiah knew that every point in a good legal argument must be supported by legal precedent or statute. Sometimes finding the marked pages in the books in the heat of argument could be the very devil—he was forever forgetting which point came from which volume. But he never would have considered making a point without precedent to back it up.

“Well, yes.”

“What did he say the other times he argued before the court?”

“Oh, well, very clever things. He speaks most sensibly, without the flowery words some attorneys use to try to impress their clients.”

Josiah could scarcely think of a positive reply. “Indeed” was all he finally managed before lapsing back into silence. If for some completely horrid reason he did need to seek advice on a matter of Maryland legal procedure, he would seek out one of the attorneys that used “flowery words,” no doubt Latin legal terms with which Carter was simply unfamiliar.

“It’s not much farther now, and a good thing, too. I have a most rapacious appetite.”

“Will we be dining with this attorney in his house?” This would be completely foreign to Josiah’s experience, but it made sense. The attorney could not possibly have an office out in the middle of a wilderness without some habitation nearby.

“Yes, of course. The Goodwins provide the best bed and board you’ll find on court days. Though now, with the court moved, it’s rather inconvenient. Since I must meet with him in any event, I decided it was just as well to ride out here and lodge in comfort. I hope you do not mind. You may move your accommodations closer to the courthouse tomorrow if you find it better suits your purpose.”

Josiah merely nodded. Since he had no true purpose, except to try to assist Carter, it mattered not where he stayed for the duration of the court.

But why was Carter’s attorney running an inn as well? He did not hold high hopes for either his host’s hospitality or his legal acumen.

Josiah found his hopes for a decent dinner, at least, rising substantially soon after they came into sight of the Goodwin house. Silhouetted against a sky that was rapidly fading to a dusky twilight purple, the building looked substantial and symmetrical. Large chimneys at each end sent plumes of smoke twirling into the night.

As they drew up close and dismounted, the door to the house opened, and the sound of laughter and the scent of well-seasoned meat cascaded toward them. Josiah breathed in the wonderful smell with great relish then immediately stopped, ashamed of his coarse behavior. Carter seemed not to have noticed.

“Mr. John Carter, I do believe it is!” a woman fairly shrieked in greeting from the open doorway. She quickly shook the crumbs from a cloth, tucked it under her arm then held out her open hands in a gesture of greeting. “Come in, come in, the night is getting on a chill, it is, and you’d best get by the fire.”

Who was this woman? Surely, this common workwoman could not be the wife of the attorney Carter had so highly praised. And yet, he had said the Goodwins offered room and board on court days, and this woman could be pictured as an innkeeper's wife, if one did not have high expectations of the inn. Perhaps she was a servant, a very forward servant.

"Mrs. Goodwin, you worry overmuch! My bones are not yet so old they need protecting from the night air." Carter stepped up to her, took her hand and gave it a kiss.

Josiah couldn't believe his eyes. He could have sworn he then saw Carter reach around and pinch the woman on the backside.

She squealed pleasantly. "Ah, well, you needn't try to prove anythin' to me. You seem fit enough, and I'll take your word for the rest!"

"Mrs. Goodwin, I must introduce you to my companion." Carter waved Josiah to come closer. "Mr. Throckmorton, may I present Mrs. Goodwin, who has graciously opened her home to me on many occasions in the past."

The woman giggled then stepped slightly away from Carter to make a brief curtsy. Josiah felt his cheeks flush and hoped no one would be able to notice in the dim light.

"Mrs. Goodwin, may I present Mr. Josiah Throckmorton of Hanset Plantation. He is... a neighbor of mine."

Josiah bowed slowly, trying to compose himself as he looked down at the planks of the front porch. Was there something between this woman and John Carter? "Your servant, Madam," he said as he straightened.

"Oh, well, now, if you're my servant, I'll put you to work, you handsome devil!" Before Josiah could even think to reply, his hostess linked her arm through his and began to drag him toward the front door.

Carter laughed. "I see you're quick to throw me over for a younger man, Mistress Goodwin, but the night has many more hours yet and I will win back your favor 'ere we set off to bed."

Josiah had been looking back to Carter for help as he was propelled into the house by this strange woman; but he soon realized he could expect no help from his companion, who seemed suddenly as crazed as the hostess herself.

It was no better inside. There were more people gathered in the main hall of the Goodwin home than Josiah had seen together in one room anywhere in the entire colony. A surprisingly high percentage of them, he noticed, were women. Trenchers of food and tankards of drink perched on every available inch of space that was not filled with humanity.

Carter stepped between Josiah and Mrs. Goodwin and spoke to her, having to lean in close to be heard over the noise of the other guests. Josiah stood alone, trying to adjust to the sudden change in environment.

People pressed against each other on all sides, owing to the tight space in the room; but there was an added element of closeness not called for by the tight quarters alone. Men and women touched each other freely, a hand on an arm here, an arm around a waist there and more than a few apparent pinches

and giggles. Louder laughter, too. Some couples sat on the stairs, and as he watched, another pushed past them up the steps and out of view.

Had they entered a brothel?

“Ah, court days, there’s nothing like ’em”

Josiah felt his arm being tugged again and noticed that Mrs. Goodwin had reappeared at his side. Reluctantly, he accompanied her toward a doorway at the back of the room. Carter was nowhere in sight. He held back a little as they approached the next room, not even wanting to consider what they might find; but to his immense relief, he discovered his hostess had drawn him into the kitchen. She gently released his arm and patted his hand.

“Your neighbor has gone looking for my husband, but he will be back soon enough. James won’t want to talk business long this evening; after all, it is the first night. While we wait for them I had hoped you might help me fix up a plate or two for your supper.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Josiah said, and then was immediately surprised at having done so. Never in his life had he served food for himself or anyone else. Yet, under Mrs. Goodwin’s tutelage, it seemed most natural to take the proffered trencher from her hands, scoop into it a large ladle of stew from a steaming pot over the fire and top it with a large hunk of cornbread.

His hostess pointed to a crude bench not far from the fire. “You may sit in here, if you like, and eat while the food’s still hot.”

Josiah glanced back into the room from which they had come; it seemed noisy and crowded and, indeed, it would take a deal of effort to find a place to sit. The seat by the fire in the kitchen, humble though it was, offered a more pleasant alternative. “Thank you, Mrs. Goodwin.”

Taking his seat, he glanced around in vain for a fork. “Have you a fork I might use?”

“A fork?”

“Never mind,” Josiah said in response to his hostess’s blank look. He had always traveled with his own before and wished he’d remembered to do so this time. “Might I trouble you for a spoon, Mrs. Goodwin?”

She fished around in a pot of water to retrieve a spoon, which she handed over with a smile. “If you’ll forgive me, I need to get some of these washed up.” She gestured toward a pile of dirty trenchers and assorted kitchenware.

“Please, do not mind me.” Josiah was grateful no one would see his attempt to eat without proper utensils. With a bit of effort, he managed to maneuver all but the largest chunks of food onto his spoon. Then, with a sigh, he ate the last bites with his fingers. In a sudden vision, he pictured his sister sitting down at table and being expected to pick up her food with her fingers. He smiled and then belched, horrifying himself with the rude noise. His hostess only laughed.

“I’ll take that as a compliment on my cooking, shall I, Mr. Throckmorton?”

“Um, yes, do,” Josiah said, feeling heat rise to his cheeks once more. “A most excellent meal.”

“Do have some more.” Mrs. Goodwin put down the pan she had been scrubbing and ladled out another generous portion of stew.

“No, I would not care for—” Josiah started to say, but he closed his mouth as his hostess deposited the stew onto the wooden trencher in his hands. He almost never ate second servings. This time he realized he wanted to, even without a fork.

Just as he was trying to balance a large chunk of turnip on his spoon, Carter stepped into the room. “Oh, there you are. Found a good place by the fire, I see.” He smiled broadly at Mrs. Goodwin. “I know I see something I want.”

“Go ahead, help yourself. It’s my best squirrel stew.”

Squirrel? Josiah coughed.

“Oh, the squirrel. Yes, I want some of that, too.” Carter reached across Mrs. Goodwin as she scrubbed her pan, planted a kiss on the top of her head and grabbed a clean trencher.

They were eating squirrel? Those rodents that looked like rats with inflated tails? Josiah put his trencher down on the bench next to him.

“Well, you can serve yourself now.” Their hostess pointed to the kettle full of stew that had, up until a minute ago, smelled almost heavenly.

“And the other?”

Mrs. Goodwin laughed heartily. “You’ll have to wait. I have a husband who’s everywhere, you know.”

Josiah thought he was going to gag. He had eaten two large servings of a stew made from an animal that was essentially a colonial version of a London rat. And the respected John Carter was making lascivious remarks to his married hostess, a woman who, while bearing a warm temperament and friendly smile, also bore fewer teeth and far more girth than could have been considered remotely attractive.

“Why, what’s the matter, dear boy? You look positively ill. I’ll fetch you a glass of wine straightaway.” Mrs. Goodwin set down her pan for the third time and disappeared through the door before Josiah could object. A glass of horrid colonial wine, homemade with a variety of inappropriate local fruits and too much sugar, was the last thing he wanted.

He looked at Carter, who had dished out a huge portion of stew and was eating contentedly with his fingers as he stood in the doorway, watching the drunken antics of the guests in the next room.

Had Carter lost his wits? Eating like a barbarian, flirting shamelessly with a married woman practically under her husband’s very nose and now tapping his toes to the beat of some primitive sort of music from the next room, looking for all the world like he would throw down his food and dance at the slightest provocation.

After their hostess had squeezed in through the doorway (getting her bottom soundly pinched for her efforts) and handed him a pewter cup filled with something purple, Josiah began to wonder if it might be he who was losing his wits. The unknown purple liquid actually tasted rather good. And it had been kind of his hostess to get it for him.

“Thank you,” he said as he brought both his trencher and the empty cup over to where she sat washing dishes. He was surprised to feel a sudden urge to kiss her on the top of her head. He shook his head to try to clear it. Nothing was making sense.

“We’ve saved the best beds for you and Mr. Carter.”

“You have?” What had made this woman think of bed all of a sudden? “How—how did you know we’d be coming?”

“My James told me we was to expect him, when he saw Mr. Carter’s name posted on the courthouse door.”

“And—and me?”

“Well, we weren’t expecting you, of course, but young Charles usually accompanies his father, so we saved two beds.”

Josiah expected her to ask why Charles had not come this time, but she did not.

“Would you like me to show you up?”

“No! I mean, that is, not just yet, anyway.” It was still early, and, at the very least, Josiah wanted to find out what business Carter had managed to discuss with his attorney. And ashamed as he was to admit it, he wanted to see what form of low behavior Carter would sink to next.

He headed back to the main room, where drinks flowed freely, to see if he could find any more of the mysterious purple wine.

Water sloshed rhythmically in the pail as Caroline carried it over to the kettle hanging near the fire. By the time she had finished pouring it into the cooking pot, all thoughts of beef soup were replaced by the memory of pouring pails of salt water on the deck of Captain Talbot's ship.

Where was that deck now? Was it as clean as when she had scrubbed it? Well, she didn't really care about that. Where was the ship? And where was he? A face came to mind, slowly, more slowly than she would have liked. A face framed by waves of dark hair. Dark eyes... were they brown or deep blue?

She couldn't remember.

In fact, the whole face was a little hazy. But she did remember fine, elegant hands and a voice that was strong and clear, almost musical.

It was funny—she had not thought of the *Osprey* or Captain Talbot for so long the whole episode almost seemed unreal. It was as if she had read a book describing the adventures of another; she remembered the events, but they seemed to have happened to someone else.

Now, though, as she looked around the kitchen, her surroundings seemed equally unreal. Had she been peeling potatoes? Had she been slicing onions and grinding corn and spices in this room? What about her books? What about her sewing? What about her visits to Aunt Bennett? What had happened to her life? Since the servants had been sold, she had been away from the plantation only once, to attend church near the landing.

Leda came into the room and quietly deposited a load of firewood in the woodbin. "Miz Carter, you'll have to move dat kettle closer to de fire if you wants it to heat."

Was she really allowing one of the slaves to tell her what to do?

This could not be.

Caroline cast the wooden pail into a corner and ran up the stairs to her bedchamber. The room felt tiny; the four walls and the low, angular ceiling seemed to press in on her from all sides. Bright color glowed through her small window; and she very nearly reached out, as if she could grab on to it. Instead, she dashed down the other stairs, took her cloak from its peg in the parlor and raced out the front door.

A brisk wind blew her hair in all directions so that she had to brush it back from her eyes to see. She ran uphill, pushing as hard as she could, until it hurt to breathe. Then she slowed her pace to a walk but kept moving forward, trying to beat back the hysteria rising in her mind.

This is not my life!

The view from the top of the hill was familiar and calming, despite the fierce gusts of wind and the leaden sky overhead. Caroline stopped walking and took a deep breath as she looked around her. So many picnics she had taken on this hill with her sisters, using a broad, flat rock as their table. When they were small and brought their dolls up for supper parties, they had used large fallen branches for seats.

With the leaves off the trees, the small valley below spread out before her, looking the same as she had always known it. This was her place.

At least, it had always been her place. She had grown up on this land. And lately, she had become closer to the land and the plantation than ever before. But was she to stay here? Did she want to stay?

Did she have any choice?

A panic started to rise up inside her again, and she felt as though she would run in circles, screaming her unanswered questions.

Instead, she sat down.

She would get no answers with panic, no answers with screaming. No answers with running.

“Listen, Caroline, you must be still and listen.”

She felt as if Charles had spoken directly into her mind.

“Your prayers are but half-finished—you recite words as if in a race and give no chance for a reply!” He had said as much to her nearly every week when they had been younger.

But she hadn’t been praying this time. And Charles wasn’t here.

Nevertheless, she stayed on the ground and tried to calm her breathing, tried to quell the urge to run. And though she didn’t try to listen for the voice of God, as Charles would have wished, she hugged her arms to her chest and tried to take comfort from the sound of the wind in the trees.

“Trust in God’s will.”

Charles’s words kept reintroducing themselves! He could be so dreadfully annoying; why, here he was, pestering her from beyond the grave.

Yet he had no grave—no proper grave—only water.

Had that been God’s will? Had it been God’s will that they be reduced to paupers?

Had God willed misfortune on them?

Or had they brought it upon themselves? Caroline thought of her father’s face as he talked of the mounting debts. He had recognized his mistakes and regretted them, but too late.

And her mistakes? Charles was dead, and her engagement was at an end. With a start, Caroline realized that if she had not behaved so imprudently, if she had simply married Mr. Throckmorton when he had asked and not drawn out the engagement and tried so hard to seek adventures, her marriage to him could have saved her family. He had family money and a sizeable plantation; the attachment would have solved her family’s financial problems.

Being married to him could not have been any worse than living with her sisters, which she would now have to do forever, probably. None of them would have enough money to marry anyone.

Caroline bowed her head. *What have I done?* But she halted the waves of self-pity that again threatened to engulf her.

What do I do now?

“Trust in God’s will,” Charles would no doubt tell her. Yes, but what was God’s will?

She had never particularly thought about it before.

His will probably did not call for her to set out on a privateer’s ship seeking adventures on new horizons. But perhaps it did. Perhaps she was meant to discover or explore.

More likely, it was God’s will that she spend her days cooking and cleaning and doing the dull, repetitive work she had hitherto avoided. After all, the one thing she did know about God was that he wanted them to attend church, and church was dull and repetitive.

Charles had always enjoyed church. Had he seen something in it she did not? He had probably known God’s will. To know it would make it easier to trust in it, she supposed.

Caroline realized the damp ground had wet her gown through to her shift, and she was getting cold. The light had faded from the winter sky so it would be hard to see among the trees. And she was hungry.

Obviously, she had no choice at the moment but to go back to the house. If she had to trust in something, she could call it God’s will. She could look for God’s will. She could look for God’s will in the bottom of a cooking pot.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Good morning, Josiah. I trust you had a pleasant sleep?"

Josiah was surprised to find Carter up and dressed ahead of him. When he had gone up to sleep, he had left the man engrossed in a game of cards that had promised to go on half the night.

“Yes, sir, I believe I did.” He winced as a sharp pain coursed across his temple.

Carter chuckled. “I’d stay away from Mrs. Goodwin’s black currant wine tonight if I were you. The headache is always twice as bad the second day.”

Josiah didn’t remember drinking that much, but he didn’t have the energy to object to the assumption he was suffering the effect of too much wine.

“Something to eat—and drink. That will be the remedy. You must come down at once.”

Carter seemed unusually enthusiastic this morning; indeed, he had seemed so ever since they arrived. He appeared to be enjoying himself immensely, which made no sense for a man facing debtor’s prison.

Josiah waved him toward the stairs. “I’ll be down directly.” He thought hopefully of the restorative power of coffee then remembered the lack of forks the previous night. Forks were still considered an unnecessary “English” accessory by many in this colony, as was coffee, so if they had none of the former he doubted he would find any of the latter. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to get up and ask.

He recognized Carter’s voice as he walked into the main room.

“I believe business was off a bit last night from what I recall from previous years, was it not, James?” Carter punctuated his question by taking a big bite from a turkey leg.

“Ah, perhaps, but ’tis no matter. I won enough at cards to make up the difference! Good morning. You must be the esteemed Mr. Throckmorton.”

Josiah was a bit taken aback at being addressed so suddenly. “At your service, Mr...?”

“Goodwin, James Goodwin.”

“Thank you for your hospitality, Mr. Goodwin.”

“You are most welcome, sir. I understand that you are the legal expert in our midst.”

“I’m hardly an expert, Mr. Goodwin.” Josiah picked up a tankard from a side table and headed over to the table where the other two breakfasted. “I enjoyed a very limited practice at the bar in London before deciding to visit Maryland.” Visit? Had he really said “visit?”

His host passed him the pitcher from the middle of the table. Josiah resigned himself to the fact it would probably not contain coffee.

“Your admittance to the bar itself makes you a rare expert, in this county, at least. Not to mention the education preceding such honor.”

Josiah set his drink on the table with a little more force than he’d intended. Despite the pleasant conviviality of his host and others in the room, he was growing annoyed. He wanted toast and bacon and coffee for breakfast. Instead, somebody had merely laid out cold cuts of meat from last night’s supper

and filled a pitcher with watered-down rum. It was thoroughly unpalatable, yet the few other men in the room seemed to eat and drink with great relish, Carter included. And Carter seemed ten years younger and infernally cheerful.

Then there was the picture of the local legal practice, which was shaping up to be unbearably primitive. No barristers, barely educated attorneys, no one bothering to cite the law and litigants more concerned about whether they knew the judge than whether they could secure adequate representation. He could never work within this system, and yet he must if he was going to help Carter.

“Josiah!”

He realized he had been staring at his distorted image in the pewter tankard and jerked his gaze up to look at his companions. “Yes?”

His host grinned at him as he held out a trencher of turkey. “Your thoughts have taken you some distance from us, I believe.”

“What? No...” Josiah reached out to take the proffered breakfast. “No, my thoughts were, indeed, here.”

“Well, then,” Carter interposed with a smile, “your attention certainly was not. I was asking you where your business takes you today.”

A good question. A very good question, since he had still not come up with a pretense for his visit to Joppa. He did not want Carter to think he’d come all this way merely to assist him. He put a big piece of dark meat into his mouth and chewed as slowly as he could.

“I think I would like to consult with you, Mr. Goodwin, if I may. I am not quite sure just how to proceed. With my business.”

He looked around. The room was starting to fill with men eating, drinking and smoking, all in what seemed to be unusually high spirits. It was as if he’d walked into a festival of some sort. He certainly did not want to discuss business here. “Have you chambers near the court or an office...?”

“I’d be happy to meet with you upstairs, if you’d like. This morning?”

Good grief! Had this man no other appointments? “Er, yes, that would be most kind of you to make room in your schedule on such short notice.”

“My pleasure.” Goodwin wiped his fingers on a napkin and stood, looking at Carter. “I have some accounts to settle while everyone is still relatively sober. Will you excuse me?” Then he turned to Josiah. “Shall we meet upstairs at my desk in an hour?”

“Yes, of course.”

“After you meet with Goodwin,” Carter said, and gestured to the stairs, “let us ride back to the courthouse. I expect we’ll see a little more activity today, and the court opens session, too.”

What other kind of activity was Carter referring to? After his behavior last night, Josiah didn’t know what to expect from him.

“Yes, I would like to see the court in session.” He thought of the woman coming out of the woods yesterday. He didn’t want to evince an interest for anything other than purely legal spectacle.

Why was Carter smiling so broadly?

“Josiah, my boy, you look far too glum for court days. You’re going to miss all the fun if you’re not careful.”

“Fun?”

“Yes, fun.”

Court and fun were concepts that bore no relation to one another in Josiah’s experience. “You come here for fun?”

“In a sense, yes. These days, I don’t generally undertake the trip unless I have business in the session, since it is such an inconvenient journey. But when I was Charles’s age I managed to find an excuse to come to every session. And in those first few years after my marriage I believe I would have sued *myself*, if necessary, to justify the trip. There was always a baby crying and at least two children fighting somewhere in the house. For the chance to get away alone, it was worth every hardship of the journey. And the entertainment here, well, it may have fallen off a bit in recent years—it’s been a while since we had a good horse race, and the cockfights really aren’t what they used to be—but it still helps to knock the cobwebs out a bit. Just being here makes me feel young again.”

Carter did look younger; suddenly, the behavior he had displayed since their arrival seemed less incredible. He revisited his youth with every trip to his attorney. Odd, but then, from the attorney’s point of view, it would be much more pleasant to deal with clients who came anticipating a sense of renewal rather than clients bent on seeking revenge or defending against a loss.

Carter *had* come here to defend against a loss, though, a catastrophic one. And he was clearly avoiding the prospect for as long as possible.

Josiah looked at his drink and sighed.

“I don’t suppose rum is much in fashion for breakfast among gentlemen these days,” Carter said sympathetically.

“No, indeed, it is something I have not encountered before.”

“Perhaps Mrs. Goodwin might fetch you some more of her wine? Or at least some cider.”

“Yes, perhaps.” Josiah looked around vainly for someone he might send to the kitchen. He really was very thirsty, and the watered rum tasted revolting at this hour of the morning.

“But, you know,” Carter laughed, “when I was Charles’s age, it was rum for breakfast every morning!”

Josiah forced out a polite laugh and excused himself to head for the kitchen. When Carter had been Charles’s age, the colony must have been even more primitive. The face in the crude portrait on the parlor wall at Hill Crest came into his mind—Carter’s father, and grandfather, too, had worked so industriously to ensure their family’s prosperity. Their lives must have been filled with discomfort and hardship, for they seemed to spare few comforts for themselves. They sacrificed themselves for the next

generation, and now that generation had lost it all. Had all the sacrifice been for naught?

There was no sign of Mrs. Goodwin when he entered the kitchen, but a young girl chopping turnips at the table looked up and bobbed a curtsey. "Sir?"

"Ah, yes. I was hoping I might be able to get something to drink."

The girl sniffed and put down her knife. "I'll get you some rum, will I, sir?"

"No, no, I...do you have any coffee? No, well, nor chocolate, either, I suppose?"

"We've rum, sir, and cider, some wine—but that's locked up—and perry."

"May I trouble you for a cup of water, then?"

"Water, sir?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes." As he looked more closely at her face, Josiah could see the girl's eyes were red and swollen, and tracks left by tears stood out plainly on her cheeks. He remembered Miss Carter's face looking that way the few times he had seen her on deck on the voyage back to Maryland. His own had probably looked the same.

For some reason, he now felt the urge to cheer this girl up. "Have you not heard of water here in the colonies? Incredible substance, really. Light, clear, it falls from the sky." He demonstrated with a fluttering motion of his hands, and the girl smiled a bit.

"We English invented it, you know."

That remark earned him a small chuckle.

"We had to, really, after inventing the sailing ship; we needed something to put it in."

The girl laughed as she took a dipper full of water from a pail near the door and poured it into a tankard.

"You're laughing! You do not believe me! I say, you're enjoying the use of that table well enough. We English invented tables and turnips, too."

The girl smiled shyly as she handed him the water, and Josiah bowed as he accepted it. On sudden inspiration, he took a farthing from his pocket and handed it to her. "For your gracious service."

"Thank you, sir!" The girl looked at the coin with reverence.

As he walked back to his table, he thought about the remarkable reaction to his small gratuity and realized it may have been the first time the girl had ever been given a coin. In this society, everyone paid with notes of credit for tobacco, and coins were a rare item. In fact, he had perhaps been unwise to part with one of his so frivolously.

But it had made her so happy.

He felt, strangely enough, as if he had accomplished something.

As he sat down, he noticed Carter now seemed more reserved and serious—more his usual self, he supposed. They sat for some minutes in silence. Josiah thought of the girl and how simple it had really been to make her forget her troubles, or perhaps even banish them. After all, if her troubles had been monetary, hard English currency, even a tiny bit of it, might buy a solution.

“Good day, John Carter! I have not seen you in many sessions!” The voice came from the foot of the stairs as the speaker started toward them with heavy, clunking footsteps. He reached out a hand to Carter and then turned to Josiah. “Surely, this is not young Charles?”

“Oh, no. Mr. Throckmorton, may I present Obadiah Greensleeves.”

The big man with the heavy shoes reached out to shake Josiah’s hand and gave him a toothy grin.

“Mr. Greensleeves, may I present Mr. Josiah Throckmorton.”

“How do you do, sir?” Josiah tried to speak without wincing, hoping the man would let go of his hand now that introductions were complete.

“Does Charles accompany you this trip? I swear I do not believe I would recognize him after these many years.”

Josiah looked at Carter, who had trained his gaze out the window silently. Without looking at anyone, Carter spoke in a low voice. “My son Charles is dead. He was killed in an accident last month.”

After a moment, in which the visitor thankfully said nothing, Carter turned away from the window to look first at Josiah then at his old acquaintance. “Mr. Throckmorton, my . . . neighbor has his own business at court this term, so we travel together.”

“So sorry, I am, ’deed, so sorry to hear it. My condolences, Carter.” Greensleeves exchanged a quick handshake with Carter, made his apologies then faded quickly to the other side of the room.

Carter fixed his gaze out the window once more, blinking rapidly in what Josiah guessed was a desperate effort to hold back tears.

“Can I get you something, sir?” he asked, feeling helpless. It would not be as easy to make Carter forget his troubles as it had been to vanquish those of the girl in the kitchen.

The feeble question remained unanswered, and after some time of sitting in silence, Josiah decided he should leave Carter to himself and see if it were near the time of his appointment with the attorney.

“Please, stay a moment yet,” Carter said hoarsely as he pushed his chair back from the table. “Thank you for coming with me on this expedition. You’ve been very kind in your attention, Josiah, which I do appreciate.” The older man looked him full in the face. “The trip has brought back a great deal of memories for me, as you know. Some have been pleasant, some not so. Thus am I grateful for your company.”

Both men looked away from each other uneasily. Josiah did not know whether to attempt to leave again; actually, he felt a little taken aback by this unaccustomed display of emotion and did not quite trust himself to stand immediately. After a moment, he sensed Carter had more to say. He sipped his water, grateful it did not taste of mold.

“Charles did not enjoy court days. On his first few trips, I daresay he simply found them dull. On his last trip in particular, though, he voiced a deeper sense of disapproval—disapproval of men’s behavior, mine included, I suppose.” Carter looked at Josiah and smiled sadly. “I believe for a time I rather enjoyed being here without him.”

“It is not so, now, though.”

“No, indeed,” Carter sighed, “it is not.”

Josiah marveled at the waste of it all. The work of Carter’s grandfather and father, the sacrifice of Charles, all for nothing. No doubt, Charles would have had an answer ready to refute that conclusion, though. Probably something about God’s hand or God’s will and a reason for all things that men cannot fathom. He knew ministers said some such thing from time to time.

Very likely when they had nothing else to say.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“My hands are tired. May I stop and go see Mother now?”

“What?” Caroline gave her youngest sister a cross look. All her calculations of quantities of molasses and spices and cooking times vanished with the interruption. “No. You have a whole pile of apples left there to peel.”

“But I’*mtiired* . Ever so.”

“I understand, Johanna. You may go upstairs to rest when you are finished.”

“It’s not fair. You just don’t know how tired I am.”

“Yes, I do know, because I’m that tired, and Edwina and Georgiana are that tired.”

“But it’s not fair!” As her wail reached a near-deafening crescendo, Johanna’s flailing arms upset the pile of apples next to her on the bench, scattering them to the far corners of the kitchen floor.

“Pick those up,” Caroline said in a low voice, gritting her teeth. “Every last one.” When her sister made no move, Caroline raised her voice to wood-splintering levels. “Pick them all *upnow* !”

“You make me do everything. You don’t do anything.”

Caroline looked at the pile of peeled apples before her and thought about how she had spent the last several days—no, weeks. She stepped toward her youngest sister with every intention of throttling her so the whiny words would be choked back inside forever. By the second or third step, she had reduced her goal to merely giving her sister a thorough shake. With the last step, she mustered the control to keep her hands at her sides, though she nearly shook with the effort. She even managed to contain the angry words she wanted to rain down on Johanna, focusing her energy instead into a look of white-hot anger.

Johanna ceased whimpering and stared at her oldest sister in fearful silence. Georgiana knelt on the floor and began to pick up apples. Edwina soon followed.

“I’m going to see if Leda needs any help with the straw.” Caroline flung the words out quickly before turning and bolting out the door. Cold whipped through her garments as if she were wearing nothing. She knew Leda would not need any help gathering straw, for she had said they needed only a little. But Caroline did not want the other girls to see her cry, and she had been so afraid she might. Even just thinking about it made the tears gather in the corners of her eyes.

She had just gone around the corner of the house when she saw Leda returning from the barn with an armful of straw. “Do you need any help carrying the straw? Do we need any more?”

“No, Miss Caroline.” Leda looked her up and down, no doubt noticing her tearful eyes and shivering frame, but she said nothing more, only inclined her head slightly as if to indicate they should both head back toward the house.

Caroline wiped her eyes with her hands and took a deep breath before stepping back inside.

She did not know what the straw would be used for and, as usual, kept her curiosity to herself so as not to risk a look of disdain from her more knowledgeable slave. When Leda began putting handfuls of straw inside all of the pots and kettles they had gathered for making applesauce, however, Caroline at last felt compelled to speak up.

“Do you mean to mix that in with the apples, Leda?”

“It will keep the ones on the bottom from burning, miss,” Leda answered without looking up from her task. When she finished, she looked at the apples left to be peeled then out the window. “The day’s getting on. If we’re going to get it started today, we’d best get finished with the peelin’.”

Without another word, she reached out for Johanna to hand over her knife. Johanna looked at Caroline for approval, and Caroline nodded. The young girl gratefully surrendered her knife and tripped out the

kitchen door toward the stairs.

“Which apples are the sour ones, Miss Caroline?”

Caroline could not answer; she had never thought about whether an apple was sour unless she accidentally bit into one. “I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“The sour ones need more heat. They go on the bottom of the pot.”

Caroline looked at her sisters and at the piles of identical-looking peeled apples surrounding them. Unless they took a bite out of each one, she could have no idea of their sweetness.

“Edwina? Georgiana? Have you any idea which are sour?”

Edwina bit into the one she was holding. “This one isn’t. And it looks just like... all these others.” She giggled and took another bite.

Georgiana started to giggle, too. “Shall we taste them all?”

Caroline looked at the nondescript hills of apples and found that she, too, had to smile. “We could, I suppose.” As she picked up the nearest sample, it slipped from her fingers and hit the floor, bouncing once before rolling under the kitchen cupboard. “Or we could try dropping them. I’m guessing that the sour ones bounce higher.”

Leda looked at her as if she had suggested asking the pigs to make applesauce.

“I don’t know which are sour, Leda, and unless you have some means of telling, I suggest we simply place the apples in the pots at random and trust providence they get cooked sufficiently. If not, well,” Caroline said, grinning, “I don’t believe any of us are hoping to win any prizes for our cooking. At least not this year.”

Leda nodded, perhaps a little too readily, at this last remark.

Caroline attempted once again to calculate the amount of molasses they could spare for the applesauce. She was trying to conserve on their use of imported goods such as sugar and molasses but locally-made substitutes were of such inferior taste her mother had never even ordered the servants to make any of the tart apple-molasses, dried pumpkin or maple sugar that was used to sweeten dishes in more economical households. Leda had explained they could make these things, but it would take time. She then offered a supply of apple-molasses she had made for her own use, and Caroline was struck by her generosity.

The receipt called for a pound of molasses, and they were using far more apples than specified in the receipt, so she would certainly have to increase the sweetening. But she could scarcely spare a whole pound of molasses, let alone more. So, how much apple-molasses would they need? By what degree was it less in sweetening power? And then how many more apples were they using than were called for by the receipt? Caroline felt a pain start to grow behind her eyes.

“It’s time to add the molasses now, Miss Caroline.”

Once again, the calculations flew out of her head like a flock of disgruntled birds. “Very well. I can spare about half a pound of West Indies molasses.” She sighed and looked up at Leda. “I have no idea how much of your apple-molasses we will need to make up the difference.”

“Do you want me to fetch it now, Miss Caroline?”

“Yes, please.”

When Leda closed the door behind her, Caroline decided to take advantage of a rare opportunity to sit still and do absolutely nothing. Her neck felt sore, and she tilted her head from side to side, trying to loosen the stiffness. She looked at the door. She got up, looked at the receipt and tried again to figure out how much molasses to add to each of the five pots of apples. They weren't even close to being the same size.

The pain behind her eyes grew, so she moved away from the cookery book and tried to put aside all thoughts of molasses. She picked up some stray bits of peel and core from the floor then looked at the door again.

“Mmm, this is delicious.” Georgiana smiled at her breakfast plate and took another bite of cornbread and applesauce.

“It is exquisite,” Johanna raved between mouthfuls.

Edwina said nothing but did look up and nod in agreement.

“Well, it took three days, but you finally managed to cook something decent,” Georgiana remarked as she helped herself to another serving from the bowl on the table.

“We managed to finally cook something decent,” Caroline corrected. “We all did this together. With Leda's help. It was she who provided most of the sweetener.” *And peeled the majority of the apples, and told us how to cook the sauce*, she added to herself. Without Leda's help, they would be starving, no doubt about it. But this was the first cooked item where they had all worked together successfully, and she hoped each of her sisters would feel some pride in their accomplishment.

Pride in making applesauce? She could see taking pride in completing an intricate needlework design or mastering a difficult passage in music or language translation, but taking pride in making an ordinary household commodity? Well, it was there, whether it made sense or not.

In fact, Caroline felt a sudden urge to invite someone over to enjoy the applesauce with them. But when she thought of their friends and acquaintances and even relatives, she could think of no one whom she could invite in their humbled circumstances.

She began to poke listlessly at her cornbread, letting the applesauce seep through to create a soggy mess on the plate. No visits to Aunt Bennett, no visits to neighbors after church, no dinners or dances. The mess on her plate began to remind her of a receipt for a fancy dish she had seen in the cookery book, “A Pupton of Apples.” Caroline pushed aside her plate and reached for the book. Yes, the breadcrumbs were not of wheat as called for and would be mixed in a little earlier than described in the receipt, but if she added butter and dusted it with sugar, she might be able to turn their simple breakfast into a true English dessert. Johanna would love that.

Reaching for her plate again, she was struck by another happy thought. She had not yet paid a call on the new tenant's wife, so this would be a perfect opportunity to share some of the excellent fruits of their

labor with someone who must certainly be in need of decent food.

“Edwina, will you accompany me on a walk?” Caroline waited for a response.

“Yes, certainly, Caroline.”

“To call on the new tenant’s wife?”

“Oh, must we? Why can we not simply go for a walk?”

“Have we a tenant, Caroline?” Georgiana put down her fork.

“What’s a tenant?” Johanna asked through a mouthful of food.

“A tenant is someone who pays us to use our land,” Georgiana explained to her youngest sister, “so we will have more money coming in. Does this mean we can buy back some of the servants now?” she asked Caroline.

“Hardly. We will receive rent from the tenants for the land they use, but we will no longer get to sell the tobacco from that land, the newest fields. I think we will probably end up with less money.”

“Then why have we taken a tenant?”

“Father explained that now that we have sold some of our slaves, we do not have nearly enough hands to work the available fields. Rent from the tenants is better than nothing. Unless you want to work in the new fields?”

Georgiana shuddered. “No, certainly not. Imagine, a lady working in the fields.”

Leda worked in the fields, Caroline wanted to say, but she kept her thought to herself. She had a pretty good idea how Georgiana would respond.

It was dark inside, and Caroline’s eyes seemed to take a great deal of time to adjust to the lack of light. The house had no glass in the windows, and the shutters were closed nearly all the way in an effort to keep out the wind. She felt, rather than saw, that she and her sister were being urged to move closer to the fire, and she took a few small steps in that direction.

Gradually, as her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she could make out the rough outlines of the room. A cask stood on its end seemed to serve as a worktable near the fire. A thin straw mattress was propped against the opposite wall, and a smaller one lay on the floor with a baby in the middle. Against another wall, two crates placed end-to-end formed a bench. Two young boys rolled back and forth across them, poking at each other with sticks, announcing, “I have mortally wounded thee” and giggling fiercely.

The tenant’s wife, who had introduced herself at the door as Molly Johnson, shushed the boys and turned to her guests. “I thank you kind ladies for visiting; it is an honor to be called upon by such fine people.”

“Indeed, the honor is all ours. We are most pleased to welcome you to Hill Crest.” Caroline proudly held out a large crock of applesauce.

“I do thank you, Miss Carter.”

“It’s applesauce. We have just made ours for the winter.”

“Again, I do thank you. I have not been able to make any this fall, and my supply from last year will not last much longer.”

She had applesauce left from last year? How much had she made?

“Would you be so good as to join us for our dinner? We were just about to sit down, and I would be so very honored to have guests.”

Caroline and Edwina looked at each other somewhat dubiously. Where would they sit? What could there possibly be to eat in such a house? But their refusal to accept the invitation might insult the new tenant.

“Yes, of course,” Caroline answered. “Will Mr. Johnson be joining us?” Where on earth would he sit if he did?

“Oh, no. He will be out until it grows too dark to see.” While she said this, Mrs. Johnson pulled out a handful of napkins and a stack of wooden bowls from inside the crates on which the boys had been playing. She set them on the cask then pulled out two trestles that had been stored folded in a corner. On top of those she quickly wrestled into place a section of wood that appeared to be several planks crudely fastened together, as if to make a sign or box lid. She pulled one of the crates around so that each one formed a bench seat on the side of this makeshift table, bent over to give the baby a kiss and a tickle then stood and distributed trenchers and napkins about the table with a speed Caroline found dizzying.

“Please, ladies, do take a seat. I know it is none too comfortable. You must excuse us.”

As Caroline sat down on one end of a crate, she felt the other end tip up slightly into the air. The result was a largewhump when Edwina took a seat next to her. Caroline giggled, despite her determination to retain her demeanor as the elegant lady of the plantation.

Her hostess seemed not to have noticed. She bent over the fire, flipped several somethings cooking in a three-legged skillet then straightened and tasted a spoonful of a mixture from a pot hanging further back.

“James, will you fetch some cider for the ladies, please?” she called without looking away from the fire.

The larger of the two boys trotted obediently outside and soon returned with a jug that seemed far too large for him to carry. He pulled a tankard off the makeshift table and carefully tipped the jug into it, spilling surprisingly little. Only when he was finished did Caroline consider she might have offered to help him.

“Here, Miss Lady,” he announced, proudly holding the tankard out to her.

“It’s Miss Carter, James. You must call her ‘Miss Carter,’” the boy’s mother said from in front of the fire. “And her sister is Miss Edwina Carter.”

The boy smiled bashfully and ran to give his mother a hug. His younger brother soon followed.

“Shush, now, get back to the table. Don’t leave our guests alone.” As she ushered the boys back to their places, she balanced a number of pieces of fried pork rind on a spatula. These she deposited in a trencher on the table before she spun around and began making gravy in the skillet.

Caroline watched closely. Leda had shown her how to make gravy at least three times, and yet she had not managed to create more than a mess of watery sauce filled with mysterious blackened bits and lumps of uncooked flour. To her mortification, she realized as she watched that this tenant woman could tend to the gravy with only one hand, as she had taken up a pair of tongs in the other to remove the lid from a large pot standing in the coals. She quickly shook off the additional coals that had been heaped on the lid, set the lid aside and used the tongs to remove biscuits from the pot to a basket at her side. After giving the gravy perhaps no more than a minute of her full attention, she took up a wad of rags and moved the skillet out of the coals.

“I thank you ladies for your patience,” she said, coming toward the table with the basket of biscuits. She picked up two trenchers from the table, spun back to the fire and quickly served up a mound of turnips from a hanging pot and a dollop of thick gravy. “Please, help yourselves to pork and biscuits,” she urged as she placed one trencher in front of Caroline and Edwina and the other in front of the boys.

Edwina looked at the scarred wooden substitute for a plate then dubiously at her sister. Caroline realized she, too, had been staring dumbly at her meal and smiled quickly. “This certainly smells delicious.”

Everyone watched her expectantly, and she looked around in vain for a knife or fork. Then she looked for molasses or jam for her biscuit but saw none. How would she eat her gravy? What could she put on her biscuit? Why was everybody watching her so intently?

Caroline picked up the tankard of cider and took a drink.

“Mama, Mama!” the younger boy chortled excitedly. “Miss Lady drank out of my place!”

His place?

“Yes, we must consider it her place on the cup now. You may drink from a place next to the handle.”

“But that’s Papa’s place!” the other boy protested.

“He won’t mind sharing. Eat your turnips, Will.” This last remark was directed to the younger boy, who had piled his turnips into a mound that threatened to run over the edge of his side of the trencher he shared with his brother.

Caroline looked at the tankard in her hand and quickly set it down in the middle of the table. They would apparently all have to share it. She looked at the food set before her; apparently, that, too, was to be shared, but only with her sister. She took up a small piece of salt pork, grateful for at least one item of food that did not require an absent utensil or condiment.

Edwina quickly copied her move.

The pork was crunchy and surprisingly tasty, but the salt left Caroline very thirsty. She looked at the tankard in the center of the table. Did she really want to drink from the same cup as this family of strangers? Of course, she had shared a tankard with some truly foul men aboard the *Osprey*, so this certainly couldn’t be any worse.

Then she looked at the boys and saw that the younger one was slowly letting a mixture of turnips and gravy dribble out his mouth and down his chin. Perhaps she could wait until she returned to Hill Crest to slake her thirst.

Her hostess took a biscuit and scooped up a sizeable quantity of gravy from her sons' trencher before popping it into her mouth. Caroline looked at her sister a little sheepishly before doing the same. The wonderful taste more than made up for any qualms about the lack of eating utensils. Edwina scooped up a handle of mashed turnips with her fingers, grinned at Caroline and slid the whole mess into her mouth. Caroline decided she would at least use a biscuit to eat her turnips.

She looked up just in time to see the younger boy splashing his fingers joyfully in the remaining small pool of gravy on his trencher. Mrs. Johnson wiped her mouth, snatched the trencher away from her sons and began stacking up the remaining items from the table. Dinner was apparently at an end.

"Thank you for a delicious meal and very gracious hospitality, Mrs. Johnson." Caroline stood and looked at the door.

Edwina burped softly. "Yes, thank you."

"It was most kind of you to invite us to dine with you on such short notice," Caroline continued. The tenant could not have known they were coming; how was it she had prepared extra food?

"There, now, the honor is purely mine." Now that she could at last stand still for a moment, Mrs. Johnson seemed embarrassed.

She had not prepared extra food, Caroline realized suddenly. They must have eaten Mr. Johnson's share of the dinner. Would he have anything to eat when he returned home? She looked at the poor yet resourceful woman standing before her. Certainly, she would find something to prepare for her husband to take the place of the food her unexpected guests had eaten.

But Caroline felt she should make some restitution. "You must allow us to return the favor and do us the honor of dining with us one day next week."

Edwina looked at her incredulously.

"Oh, no." Mrs. Johnson shook her head. "We could not possibly—"

"Please, I insist. As residents of Hill Crest plantation, you are welcome in our home." Caroline felt very elegant extending such an open invitation, and she smiled and made a small curtsy. When she looked up, she noticed the youngest boy had a large quantity of something—gravy, she hoped—smeared across his face from his nose to his ear. Had she really invited these people to dine with them? What if they tried to drink from her mother's cup?

"I'm afraid we must be about our business for the afternoon. I hope you will excuse our early departure." She edged toward the door.

"Now, certainly, Miss Carter. I have been so honored to have you both as my guests. Boys?" Mrs. Johnson turned toward her sons; the younger one wiped his face with the back of his hand. "Please shake the Misses Carters' hands, and be sure to tell them how much you enjoyed their visit."

The older boy dutifully marched up and proffered his hand. "Thank you for visiting, Miss Carter and

Miss 'Wina Carter.”

The younger boy suddenly took shelter behind his mother's skirts. After she whispered in his ear, he called out a muffled, “Thank you.”

“You're most welcome,” Caroline replied, reaching to open the door.

Chapter Thirty

“Now, then, Mr. Throckmorton, in what way may I be of service?”

In response to the attorney's question, Josiah cleared his throat. His conversation with Carter had left him little time to conjure up fictional legal questions. What on earth could he ask?

“Well, um, let me first offer my thanks for your hospitality, Mr. Goodwin. I do believe we'd be at the mercy of the elements without your generosity.”

“Ha! Generosity, indeed. I believe I collect more for beds and meals than I ever could make as an attorney. You are most kind to say so, though, since I know there must be at least half a dozen houses closer to the new court by now.”

“Yes, well...” If there had been any decent houses in the vicinity of the courthouse, Josiah certainly hadn't seen them. “All that aside, I do believe your clients enjoy staying with you, despite any inconvenience.”

“They are a loyal lot, sir, that I cannot deny, and I have been grateful for their business these many years. Of course,” he said, smiling at Josiah, “I am grateful for new custom as well.”

Many years? “If you don’t think me impertinent,” Josiah asked, “how long have you worked with the Carter family?”

“Oh, my, many, sir, a score, at least. No, nearly twice that. No, perhaps not that many—”

“I see.” Josiah wanted to ask about the type of work the attorney had undertaken for Carter, but he did not wish to appear nosy or rude. “Do you have a challenging variety to your practice, Mr. Goodwin? Or does it tend to run to similar cases?”

“Challenging? Well, now, that is most prettily phrased. The cases can be more than I understand, at least as to understanding the law. But the desired result seems clear enough most of the time, so I—”

Josiah felt color rise to his cheeks. “You misunderstand me, sir! I did not mean to imply your practice was beyond your comprehension. I merely asked about the variety of types of action—criminal, equity and so forth. And then, I would seek your advice as to procedure in the county courts and assizes.”

“Variety? My heavens, yes. Well, enough for my taste, anyway.”

Josiah hoped he would eventually describe some of this variety.

“But compared with the legal undertakings you must have experienced in London, our courts must seem very drab,” Goodwin continued.

“Perhaps if you described some of your cases to me, I might be able to refute that assumption.” From what Josiah was beginning to discern about court days, *drab* was not exactly the word he would have applied.

“Cases?” Goodwin sat back in his chair and scratched his ear. “Well, there’s Carter’s business with the debts, of course, and I’ve got. . .” He paused and closed one eye while completing his mental tally. “. . . three—no, four—runaway servants this time. A master not paying the full allotment of freedom dues. One stolen cow, a flock of chickens worried to death by a dog, a borrowed horse never returned. . .”

A horse! Josiah could bring an action against Ellis for conversion of his horse!

“. . . a servant alleging abuse, oh, and a case of miscegenation. Bad one, that. Not looking forward to it.”

Why hadn’t he thought of it sooner? Even if he had not wanted to accompany Carter on his journey, he still should have planned to come to Joppa to sue his overseer for the loss of such valuable property.

“And there are, sure enough, many other debt actions this session. Carter’s is the greatest, though. I’ve advised him to have it removed to the Provincial Court in Annapolis.”

Josiah did not imagine anyone would know of Ellis’s whereabouts, but he could still enter judgment against him and—Provincial Court? His thoughts abruptly turned back to their original course. “Would such removal really be advantageous to Carter?”

“It will buy him some time.”

“But the justices in Annapolis, might they not be more strict about settling the matter according to terms from London?”

“Very likely.”

So, the change in venue would not really help in the end, only delay or perhaps even worsen the blow. Nevertheless, the prospect of a temporary respite seemed to have lifted Carter’s spirits.

Goodwin sat back in his chair and smiled. “Now, then, you really must tell me how I may be of service. What has brought you to Joppa this session?”

“A horse, Mr. Goodwin.” And, indeed, a horse had carried him to Joppa, even if a horse had not provided the justification for the trip initially. He might have originally undertaken the journey to help Carter, but now he could use the trip to help himself.

It would be laughably simple to have judgment declared against his former overseer. Collecting would be another matter, of course, but at least he would have done something. Josiah yawned as his horse plodded leisurely down the road from Goodwin’s house to the Joppa courthouse. A few stubborn brown leaves clung to the trees despite the brisk wind, and he wondered if they would remain in place all winter, refusing to accept the fact it was time for them to move along to the forest floor. When spring came with a crop of new greenery, the old brown leaves would have no place at all.

He looked at Carter sitting straight and tall on the horse ahead of him. How could the man have so much energy after so little sleep and a breakfast of cheap rum? Josiah thought longingly about the warmth of a London coffeehouse on a cool morning and the smell of nearly burnt coffee beans. It had been an eternity since he had enjoyed a cup of good coffee, and it seemed another might pass before he did so again.

Betty could never get the beans roasted right; as with bacon, she seemed to burn half while leaving the other half sorely undercooked. By rights, some of it, even a small portion, should have come out just done, but that never seemed to happen. Josiah wished he could bring over one of the well-trained cooks from the Throckmorton house in Sussex. They could show Betty how to roast coffee beans over a slow fire and to tell by the scent when they should be taken off to cool.

Or he could show her himself.

Certainly not. He was not going to go around teaching the servants the things they were already supposed to know. It was somebody else’s job to teach them. Besides, he had never actually roasted coffee beans himself, and—

He was going back to England, anyway, wasn’t he? He could wait.

But in the meantime he could explain to Betty that—

Why did it matter? He wasn’t even anywhere near Betty’s miserable kitchen. He was out in a strange carnival land of frontier justice, where men brought their troubles before the courts in the morning and drank them away every night. Or rather, as soon as they left the courthouse, Josiah realized, as a man suddenly staggered across their path and disappeared into the dense greenery on the opposite side.

The growing sound of laughter and the music of a tin whistle indicated the “town” of Joppa must be near at hand. As if on cue, an opening appeared in the canopy of trees ahead; but before he could catch a glimpse of the courthouse or any of the other buildings, all the horses in the small convoy from Goodwin’s

house drew to an abrupt halt.

“Get your bloody arse out of the road!”

Josiah craned his neck forward to see the source of the disturbance ahead.

“Ahhh, get your bloody road out of our dance!”

Josiah could not see who was talking, but he could hear a lot of laughter in response to this statement. It sounded as if there were as many people blocking the road as were attempting to travel it.

His horse took advantage of the stop to graze on a few half-dead plants. Josiah observed this with annoyance, but when he looked up he could see a slight break in the trees about twenty yards to the right of the narrow excuse for a road on which they sat in a bizarre sort of traffic snarl.

“Take your trollops off to the side of the road somewhere. We mean to get through here.”

“Trollops? That’s an insult to these fine ladies. I believe you owe them an apology.”

Josiah stood in his stirrups—yes, it looked like they should be able to get to the clearing by picking their way through the woods on the right.

“Mr. Goodwin?” He could not see Goodwin, but he knew his host was near the front of the convoy.

“Fine. I’m sorry your women are trollops. Now, get them out of our way!”

“Mr. Goodwin!” Josiah tried calling a little louder, but it seemed useless. Everyone was engrossed in the brewing fight ahead. He roughly jerked the reins and led his horse into the woods, ducking as lower branches swatted his head.

The detour took less time than he had imagined. The horse instinctively chose the path of least resistance, and soon Josiah had emerged in the clearing on the other side of the “dance” that blocked the road. He was inspecting his hat for stray leaves when Carter drew up alongside.

“I rather think they want to fight, but I confess I’m not up for it.” He smiled, and Josiah was suddenly reminded of Miss Carter’s smile after they had struggled to subdue the uncooperative ham.

“Nor am I. Getting too old, I suppose.” Another man had also followed Josiah’s new trail out of the woods. “I imagine Goodwin is not anxious to be drawn into a brawl himself, although I daresay he enjoyed watching them try to start one.”

Carter laughed. “I believe they must start earlier each year.”

The light in his eyes again reminded Josiah of Miss Carter, although he remembered that her laugh had been much lighter, and quicker, somehow. He felt a little funny thinking about it.

Of course, he had only shared a laugh with her that one time. He had heard her giggle at him many times. That memory quickly destroyed the light, happy feeling that had started to envelop him.

He looked away from Carter. To his surprise, he found himself staring not at a featureless melange of trees, but into the eyes of a young girl. Well, perhaps she was not so young. She wore the décolletage of

a full-grown woman, but her wide eyes seemed childish and unsure. Too late, she changed her look to a nervous smile and tried to reach out enticingly.

“Care to take a ride, sir?”

Surprised at the sudden proposition, Josiah could think of no polite reply. “Ah...no.”

The girl’s smile disappeared, and the wistful scowl that replaced it reminded him of one of the Carter sisters, the sullen one. Elaina, was it? Ednora? It did not signify. The girl faded from his view as rapidly as she had appeared.

So, it was most puzzling when he found he was still thinking of her some minutes later as the group dismounted in front of the courthouse. The girl had not appeared to enjoy propositioning men, as others around him did. What circumstances had forced her into such a desperate, unpleasant situation?

“Debt actions are posted on this board, Mr. Throckmorton.” Goodwin pointed as he walked toward Josiah. “Criminal actions over there, and the remainder...” He took two steps past Josiah. “...right here. As you can see, Carter’s case has already been removed from the docket. A debt action of that size should have been brought in to the Provincial Court to begin with—surely, it is their jurisdiction.”

“Indeed,” Josiah mumbled absently. He supposed this would be a good time to speak to the clerk about adding his action for conversion. He hadn’t particularly liked the horse, but it was his horse all the same; and Ellis had no right to take it. And besides, the animal was worth a substantial sum, and he needed to conserve all of his assets if he was going to—

Going to what?

“What are you going to do, Mr. Throckmorton?” Goodwin blinked in the sunlight as he waited for an answer.

“Ah, I’m going in to see the clerk, to put the conversion action on the docket.”

“Good. Well, then, we will meet up later, I am sure.”

Both men tipped their hats perfunctorily as Josiah climbed the courthouse steps. Inside, a number of men were queued in front of the clerk’s table. He rocked back on his heels and resigned himself to a long wait in the cheerless room.

Why did he need to conserve his assets? What was he planning to do? The face of the nervous, smiling girl from the street flashed in his vision, followed by a vision of Caroline’s scowling sister. A girl driven to desperate means by lack of money. One day, that could be one of the Carter girls—even Caroline herself.

If Carter were placed in debtor’s prison, there would be no one to run the plantation, certainly no one with the skills and experience to reverse the fortunes of the estate and make the venture profitable. Charles might have managed quite well, but Charles was dead and the fault was Josiah’s. He should have jumped in first to save Caroline; she had been betrothed to him. And the size of the debt itself was largely owed to his improvident management of the pirates. It was his responsibility to put things to rights, to take the debt on himself.

But how could he? His own debts were mounting. He had not been able to manage his plantation during

the last several months...

Yet it had been managed well on his behalf, managed by a man he had never taken the trouble to know by name. Someone had watched over his interests. Now it was his turn to help the interests of the Carter family. And might not that Someone—Divine Providence, perhaps—continue to watch over his interests?

Be not afraid. The words washed over him like warm waves upon the sand. These were the words that had helped him before.

Only one man stood ahead of him now in the queue. From the corner of his eye, he saw Goodwin shake hands with a client and walk toward the front door.

“Mr. Goodwin! A word, if you please.” Josiah left his place in front of the clerk’s desk to catch up with Carter’s trusted legal adviser.

Chapter Thirty-One

Caroline pushed up her sleeves as she looked down into the icy cold water in the washbasin. Taking a deep breath, she splashed water onto her face, rubbed a bit of soap onto her fingers, transferred the slick bubbles onto her face then rinsed with several splashes of cold water.

Her nostrils filled with the smell of salt pork. It was funny how she had never noticed before that the soap always smelled of kitchen grease, but then, she had not been used to cooking until recently. Now, it seemed like she practically lived in a pan of frying grease at the edge of the kitchen fire.

She dipped her arms in the basin then soaped and rinsed them with the same speed. Her arm smelled of salt pork, too.

Despite the chill, she paused before pulling her sleeve back down into place. The old burns on her arm had healed well, certainly as well as could be expected, leaving puckered red marks that might not even be noticeable by the time warm weather came again.

But did it matter if no one could see the scars? She would not be attending dances; she would not be preparing a new gown; she would never be escorted to dinner. The scars on her arm told the whole story: her irresponsible venture to the Falls Inn, her hard days aboard the ship, the exciting and frightening moment when it appeared they might engage another ship in battle and then pain—the pain of the burns and the greater pain of betrayal when the captain told her he must put her off the *Osprey*.

But then there had been those beautiful days in Charles Town, escorted by the captain, almost a real lady in a real city.

Where was the captain now? Would he come to rescue her? After all, Mr. Throckmorton had stolen her away, hadn't he? Captain Talbot would not really have left her alone in Charles Town. No decent man could do such a thing to a lady. And he had certainly treated her as a lady those last few days. Well, he had perhaps taken a few liberties. She could not imagine Mr. Throckmorton trying to sit her on his lap as the captain had done on the porch in Charles Town, and by the look on her brother's face—

Charles. The scars told of her horrible betrayal of her brother. Her reckless adventure had cost him his very life. How could she face such a debt? She could not. That was why it had been so easy to busy herself with domestic duties. That was why she tried to keep the whole episode completely out of mind. Tears dropped heavily from her eyes as she pulled down her sleeve and turned away from the washbasin. Her brother had come such a long way, worked so hard to find her and then—she had refused to even speak with him!

Caroline sat down on the edge of her bed and brought her hands to her eyes, as if she could somehow squeeze the memory out of her head. She had pushed Charles away, acted as if she did not want him to find her. And, indeed, she had not wanted him to find her.

Yet, would she really have been happy, alone in a strange town, wondering if anyone had missed her at all? Charles had cared enough to risk his life for her, and her father had cared enough to jeopardize the family fortune. And Mr. Throckmorton, well, she must owe him some gratitude as well. Had he merely come to reclaim her as his property? If so, he certainly hadn't taken much proprietary interest since their return. So why, then, had he come?

She pushed the hair back from her face. It just now occurred to her that Mr. Throckmorton had undergone the same risk on her behalf as her brother had done. Because he had survived where Charles had not, she had never given a thought to his hardships. She had behaved as rudely to him as to her brother.

She groaned aloud when she thought of all the trouble she had caused. Where would it end? One innocent act, like a pebble cast into a pond, had sent forth ripples that escalated into enormous waves, destroying everything in their path. At least Mr. Throckmorton had not been destroyed. He still retained his fortune and his plantation. Now he would find another lady of proper station to take as a wife.

Caroline pulled the pins from her hair and began attacking the tangled strands viciously with her hairbrush.

“Mother is coming down!” Johanna fairly bounced with agitation. “Ooh, it’s so cold in here. May we not build the fire up more, Caroline?”

Caroline sighed with perhaps greater force than was necessary. At least Johanna had asked, and not simply emptied the woodbin as she had earlier. “If you are chilled, remove yourself to the kitchen. There’s a great enough fire in there.”

“The kitchen? Surely not, Caroline. Mother would never care to rest in the kitchen with the—” Johanna stopped suddenly.

Caroline felt the corner of her lip twitch upward. “There are few enough servants in the kitchen these days. I daresay Mother will find plenty of room on the bench near the fire.”

“But...Mother does not care for the kitchen. And Leda? What will she say about Leda?”

“She had better say nothing untoward about Leda, do you hear?” Caroline heard a surprising venom creep into her voice as she looked into her sister’s eyes. “Leda has kept us all from starvation. I will not have Mother or anyone else giving offense to her. Do you understand me?”

Johanna had taken a step back but made no answer.

“Do you understand, Johanna?”

The younger girl finally nodded, started for the door then turned back around. “She’s not going to be pleased.”

Caroline decided there was nothing she could say to answer that remark. It was true; her mother would not be pleased. But it was more important to protect the sensitivity of the only person in the household who held any useful skills than the imagined sensitivities of a lady who had been too lazy to take on any share of the work.

Was that fair? Was her mother really lazy? Was she not more likely just frightened at the change in her world?

Fear was no excuse, but it was an explanation.

In another minute, she heard her mother descending the stairs.

“I am not an invalid, Johanna. I can manage these stairs perfectly without your help and have been doing so since well before you were born—” The end of the sentence was punctuated by several heavy thumps.

“Mother, are you killed?” Johanna shrieked.

In a few strides, Caroline reached the foot of the staircase. “No, I’d say just uncomfortably bruised.” She bent down and offered her arm.

“What has happened to those stairs?” Mrs. Carter looked accusingly at the steps behind her. “They are much too shallow—and too steep—to traverse with any safety.”

“Yes, Mother.” Caroline started to pull her to her feet.

“My ankle is twisted, and I’m sure my back is quite ruined.”

“Yes, Mother.” Together, Caroline and Johanna succeeded in setting Mrs. Carter upright.

“And I am sure I shall never be able to walk again—”

Caroline pulled her into the room.

“—without a great deal of pain.” Mrs. Carter winced and waved her hand toward the nearest chair.

“Please, help me to this seat.”

I hope I never get to this state, Caroline thought as she and her sister heaved their mother into the leather chair. *I never wish to be old and always complaining. Or, when I am, I wish to have servants around me to take care of me.*

Of course, her mother had always had servants around to take care of her, and now she could no longer take care of herself. And she wasn’t old, strictly speaking, not at all. Her hair showed gray in only a few strands, and though her skin sagged it was not greatly creased.

Had a life of dependence on servants made her mother so very useless?

Caroline found she could no longer look at her. “I’ll get some more wood for the fire,” she announced suddenly and headed for the kitchen.

“But you said—”

“Never mind, Johanna. My mind has changed. Make Mother comfortable—read her a book or something,” she said over her shoulder.

As she returned with an armful of wood, she was struck by the peace of the scene before her. Johanna had drawn a chair up next to her mother’s, and they leaned in together studying a book on her mother’s lap. The murmur of happy voices drifted across the room, and Mrs. Carter even smiled as she looked up.

“A book of cookery! How delightful this is—the very thing for planning menus.”

“Yes.” The book had also proved invaluable *incooking* the food on the menu, but Caroline saw no need to belabor the point at present. “As a matter of fact, I could use your help in planning the dinner for tomorrow, when we entertain the first guests we have known in some time.”

“Have we guests arriving tomorrow?” Mrs. Carter looked around the dusty room in alarm.

“Only neighbors, Mother. They will not stay with us.”

“All the same, this room, this house, is such a mess. This will not do for guests. We must see to it these rooms are cleaned at once.” She stood abruptly and moved toward the door. “And the parlor with the dining table, what must that be like?”

Caroline stepped out to block her mother’s path. “I see that your back injury is healing nicely. You’ve

no need to disturb yourself—the other room is just as dusty. But it will not be of consequence.”

In fact, the room with the large table was in even worse shape. She had been taking meals in the kitchen with Edwina, while Johanna, Georgiana and their mother ate upstairs. The unused dining table had acquired quite a collection of odds and ends in the meantime, and the room had scarcely been dusted or swept in weeks.

“What do you mean, it will not be of consequence? Are we not having guests on the morrow? We cannot have them see the house in such a state. What will they think?”

“Mother, it does not signify,” Johanna interjected sadly. “It is only Mr. and Mrs. Johnson who dine with us.”

“Whom? I do not believe I am acquainted with a Mrs. Johnson.”

“No, indeed, Mother, you have not yet made her acquaintance.” Caroline picked up several books perched precariously on the edge of a shelf and began to slide them back into place. “She and her husband and family are the new residents at Hill Crest.”

“New residents?” Her mother looked confused.

“They are but tenants, Mother. And poor ones, from what I hear.” Johanna addressed this last remark to Caroline with a look of disdain.

“Tenants? We have tenants? And they come to dine with us?”

Caroline waited until she was certain her mother’s indignant outburst had concluded. “Yes.” She scooped an embroidered cushion up off the floor and replaced it on its chair. “Now, will you help me plan the menu?”

“Dining with poor tenants. I cannot believe it possible.” Mrs. Carter slowly sank into the nearest chair.

“You will find Mrs. Johnson’s company most enjoyable, I am sure,” Caroline said soothingly. “She’s...a most capable housekeeper, and...has a pleasant manner and is very deferential.” Caroline could see this last point, at least, seemed to calm her mother a bit. She picked up the cookery book from where it had tumbled to the floor and replaced it in her mother’s hands. “Now, I was thinking perhaps of an onion soup, then some fried trouts—”

“An onion soup? No meat? Isn’t that very mean for guests?” her mother objected.

“The book says this is called ‘The King’s Soup,’” Caroline reassured her. “And then a Sirloin of Beef en Epigram and a Sally Lunn.”

“Hmm, nice. It’s been far too long since I’ve had a decent bread.”

“And pumpkin fritters, and,” Caroline added, watching her mother’s reaction closely, “a salmagundi.”

“A salma-what?”

“Salmagundi.”

“Wherever did you get this book?” Mrs. Carter flipped to the title page.

“It’s not in the book. It’s a dish I tried in Charles Town. It’s popular with . . . people who travel frequently.”

“Yes, I think I’ve heard of it, Caroline.” Edwina entered the room eagerly. “Pirates brought it back from the Indies.”

“Pirates? Surely not. What would I know of pirates? It was eaten by the cultured people of Charles Town.”

“Well, with or without the salma-dish, I think it sounds like a splendid meal.” Mrs. Carter beamed with pride at her daughter’s menu planning. “It shall be the first we’ve had in some time. I shall be honored to preside.”

“What’s to be for dessert?” Johanna hopped up from her seat to look at the book.

“A Bon Chretien Pear Pye.” Caroline said triumphantly. “And we shall have a syllabub to drink.”

“Well, well, my dear. I believe the menu does credit to your training. It should be most fine to impress our guests and yet not so dear as to overtax our household expenses.” Her mother patted Caroline on the back of the hand as she spoke. “And now I believe I’ve had enough of work for one morning. Who will play me some music? Caroline? I’ve not heard your flute for some days now.”

“I’m sorry, Mother.” Caroline stood and looked toward the door, feeling suddenly as if little needles were poking in the back of her forehead. “Perhaps Johanna will oblige. Edwina, will you be so good as to join me in the kitchen?”

Edwina looked at her mother sitting with her feet propped up in her favorite chair then at Caroline’s tense posture. She nodded once.

Caroline sighed with some relief—at least she would have a little willing help with this venture. Her mother’s remark about the household expenses brought a sense of reality crashing down in front of her like the iron bars of a dungeon. Not overtax the household expenses, ha! They had already accomplished that feat. Now they could buy next to nothing and would have to make do with the stores they had. And the help—or lack thereof.

Leda had proven most proficient at preparing daily fare, but she certainly could not read the English cookery book and would be unlikely to be familiar with the fancy dishes Caroline had selected. The menu could be altered, of course, but it had sounded so elegant and exciting. . .

Well, she would ask Leda what she thought they could manage. As she headed through the kitchen, she turned to tell Edwina she was going out to the yard to fetch her. Maybe with a few substitutions they could—

As Caroline backed out the door, she suddenly remembered performing the same feat with a slippery, ash-covered ham. And then Mr. Throckmorton had appeared in the midst of the shameful disarray, and he had been so . . . sympathetic and helpful. Even amusing. Very unlike himself. Had he been drinking? No, that would have been unlike him, too.

She looked around as if she expected to find him outside the door once again, but there was no one in

sight. A gust of wind made her skirt flare out to the side then shifted and dragged a loose strand of hair into her mouth.

Why would she want to see Mr. Throckmorton? It was Leda whom she had wished to find.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Mr. Throckmorton. What is it, exactly, you are asking me to do?" James Goodwin sipped his tankard of ale before easing down to the ground with his back against a sizeable tree trunk.

Josiah took a deep breath. "I want you to arrange the assumption of the Carter debts, the crippling ones." Was he really doing this? This would surely ruin his plantation.

"Yes, I heard what you said, but I still do not follow."

Josiah realized he was thinking aloud as he paced in front of the attorney. "The debt is to be assumed by an alias, and you are to say...that it is a distant relative...in England...who hopes to enjoy future commerce or better yet, wants to ensure the propriety of the family name in the colonies."

"An alias?" Goodwin's eyebrows had drawn together almost in a single unbroken line. "And I am to inform Carter that it is a relative who has done this?"

"Yes," Josiah answered absently. His own family could absorb this debt; they would not like it and would certainly require him to give up his plantation and return to England, but he had already planned to do so, hadn't he? They would balk. His brother would complain. Eleanor would feel some disgrace, he was sure. But he could remind her that the disgrace of having a brother in straitened circumstances would

be ever so much more—

“But, Mr. Throckmorton, I still do not understand.”

“What?” The interruption made Josiah answer sharply; he was already planning what he would say in a letter to his brother.

“Who is to assume this debt? Are we to find a distant relative in England? It sounds as if we invent one.”

“Of course, we invent one.” Josiah stopped and leaned against a thick lower branch of the tree. “If Carter had an actual relative willing to take on his debts he would not be in this predicament.”

“Well, then, who is really going to pay this debt?”

Josiah looked at the attorney as if he were a student who had failed to grasp the same Latin conjugation for the seventh time in a row. “I am, sir. Why else would I have asked you to arrange the matter?”

The puzzled eyebrows detached into twin arches of surprise. “You, Mr. Throckmorton?”

Josiah nodded in assent.

“Whatever for?” The attorney grimaced at his inappropriate familiarity and hastily stood. “I beg your pardon, sir. It is indeed none of my concern.”

“No, it is not,” Josiah snapped, “and I’ll thank you to confine your questions to those necessary to complete the business of this arrangement. *Before* the end of the assize. I will, of course, provide you with the names of my guarantors in London.”

“Thank you, sir.” Goodwin bowed respectfully.

“I have further business to attend to this afternoon.” Josiah now felt uncomfortable. “May we continue this discussion this evening?”

“As you wish, sir.” The attorney bowed once more.

Josiah started away quickly and continued walking at a brisk pace, though he had no immediate goal in mind. He had been embarrassed by his brusqueness toward the attorney, and yet, he should feel no shame—the man was his inferior in society and education. He might with propriety speak to him however he chose. Nevertheless, he had been rude.

Or had he just been afraid of answering the man’s question?

Why in heaven’s name was he assuming Carter’s debts? An indescribable sense of conscience had seemed to drive the idea forward in his mind. It was the right action to take. It would save the family. It would save Miss Carter.

But it was no longer his duty to save Miss Carter. Had he not already done more than enough, risking life and limb on the long pursuit?

Josiah stopped walking and turned around. He had risked, yes, but he had lost little, really. A horse, a few months of his time—and what was his time worth, in any event? He started walking back the way he

had come. What did his time amount to? His plantation seemed to manage itself fine without him. The correspondence he kept was meager at best, and his visiting even less frequent. His studies amounted to little these last several years, and he paid only half-hearted attention to the books of business. His time was, then, not so valuable, to him or anybody else.

He kicked morosely at a stone in his path. Charles's time had been put to better use, he was certain. He had managed the work of the plantation, applied himself to his studies, even tended to a spiritual life. Catered to it, actually. The memory of Charles dashing off into the woods to consult with the Almighty made Josiah roll his eyes and almost smile. Charles had made so much more of his life; he had been more useful to his family, to society—and now he was gone, while Josiah remained.

It was not right. Of what use was he, a second son, not needed to run the family estate and unsuccessful in increasing the family fortune? He had, in fact, just committed to decreasing it. He suppressed a groan; in trying to be of service to friends, he was now burdening his own family.

The buzz of voices all around suddenly brought back an awareness of the courthouse surroundings. He would return to the queue before the clerk's desk and file an action to recover the horse. If his time was worth nothing, the horse, at least, had a definable price.

He looked up at the new brick structure standing starkly against the trees, as if it had fallen from the sky to fit a niche carved in the primeval forest. It was actually the nicest building he had seen in Maryland. And it was busy. Men milled about in quantity as far as his eye could see. Already the length of the docket had required the court to extend the planned duration of the assize by two days, and it could stretch for many more.

His time could be worth something here, in this building. Learned attorneys were a rare commodity in the county court, and educated barristers unheard of, confining themselves to more lucrative practice in Annapolis. If he opened a crude sort of chambers here, he could make his time worth a great deal. And he could start right now.

He looked around for a likely working area. There would be no office space, of course, such as he had enjoyed at his chambers in the Middle Temple. No decent buildings, no offices—he would be lucky to find a chair. But potential clients abounded.

Josiah headed to the place where the company from Goodwin's had left the horses tethered under the watch of a young servant. He had brought his traveling desk with him, so although he carried no legal texts, he would at least have pen, ink and paper at his disposal. As he walked, he reviewed possible sites to establish himself for the afternoon. It looked like he was going to end up plying his trade outside one of the makeshift grog shops that surrounded the courthouse. For some reason, that prospect made him grin.

The shop immediately in front of the courthouse door he rejected outright as being far too noisy. He eliminated the next as sitting on swampy ground—and there were, as far as he could detect, no chairs to be had anywhere. But the next in line might very well do. It was close enough to the throng of court business yet not boisterous, it was surrounded by firm, grassy ground suitable for sitting if necessary and, as he looked behind the counter, the barmaid looked at him and smiled. It was a genuine smile, revealing several missing teeth and unevenly dimpled cheeks. He would not have to worry about someone giggling behind his back if he set up shop here.

He smiled in return. "What establishment may I call this?"

"It is called Byrne's, sir, after my father." The girl widened her smile as she wiped a tankard with a dirty

towel.

“Thank you.” Josiah bowed his head in thanks and then hurried on to collect his supplies from his horse.

Josiah Throckmorton, Esquire

Late of Middle Temple, London

Litigants seeking representation

may inquire in Byrne’s.

Josiah blew impatiently on the ink, wanting to be sure that it was absolutely dry before he posted his hastily drawn advertisement on the board outside the courthouse. He had nothing with which to attach it, but by propping his notice between two others and securing it behind a loose splinter, he thought it might hold until tomorrow, when he could bring a nail from Goodwin’s.

Of course, he should tell Goodwin of his new venture. The man knew everyone in Joppa, and word would soon get around.

Was he really doing this? He had grown to dread the tedious practice of law, with all the research and odious translation of arguments into law-French, and here he wouldn’t know the procedure, the pleadings and—

Here he could do no research. He could be pretty certain he would not have to make any arguments in law-French. Latin legal phrases could be used to his advantage. He could remember enough precedents, surely, to get through basic common law actions, and if he didn’t he could...make up something. Isn’t that what most of the litigants were doing on their own behalf?

Josiah suddenly felt aware of his own heartbeat, but he decided it was not an altogether unpleasant sensation.

“Thank you, gentlemen. Now I’m afraid I need to accompany my party back to Goodwin’s, else I shall never reach my bed this night.” Josiah felt like he had been saying goodnight for the better part of an hour, yet was no closer to leaving.

“But, Mr. Throckmorton, I must tell you the particulars about the cow that’s gone missing. She weren’t just any cow, and I won’t take Hartford’s weedy tobacco in payment.”

“Yes, I understand, Mr. Tailor. You seek a remedy in equity. We’ll have it drawn up tomorrow.” Josiah stifled a yawn. “Please, I must not keep the others waiting any longer.”

“Throckmorton! Do you come with us or not, man?”

Josiah gestured toward the faceless summons shouted through the trees. “You may follow us back to

Goodwin's, if you wish. But I've no idea if they can give you a bed."

Without looking to see if any of his entourage would take him up on the offer, Josiah hurried toward his horse, swung himself into the saddle and hoped the group would proceed slowly for a while so he could strap his writing desk in place as they rode. He twisted around and, after a few fumbles with the strap in the darkness, managed to attach it awkwardly. When he turned back, he found the group had moved well ahead of him so that he had to nudge his horse to catch up.

Now that he had a moment to look back on the afternoon, he could scarcely believe the activity. Word of his advertisement had spread quickly. Since the court had set a fixed price that an attorney could charge to prosecute or defend an action, many men had decided they would like the services of a London-trained barrister for their four hundred pounds of tobacco.

Josiah could easily understand why. Of the three other attorneys he had spoken with, one was a former felon and another had been a dancing master. Next to dirt, even tarnished brass looked impressive.

He was a little concerned that his education might actually be turned to disadvantage; if a judge were jealous and felt threatened he might treat Josiah more harshly. And his unfamiliarity with local procedure still worried him, although he had been assured he would not be penalized. Of course, he had been assured of this by other attorneys, men who might plan to use this knowledge against him should they oppose him in court.

"Ahoy, there! Is't you, Mr. Throckmorton?"

Josiah turned to see several riders approaching the party. As they drew closer, he recognized the first as a man who had tried to speak with him at Byrne's. It looked like it was going to be a long evening.

Josiah stood and bowed before Judge Hammond for what must have been the twentieth time that day.

"If I understand the plaintiffs correctly," he began, "they allege that Mr. Newhouse violated the terms of their contract of indenture by failing to serve beef for their dinner."

"Or pork!" one of the lanky men at the plaintiffs' table called out. "We'd've eaten pork, too."

"Yes, and instead of meat he gave you beans, bread, fish, sugar, vinegar, oil and other provisions. Now, the terms of the indenture contract require Mr. Newhouse to provide 'a wholesome and adequate diet.' There is no mention of specific foods. Mr. Newhouse gave provision to these four servants from his own larder. He, in fact, had no meat for himself during the time at issue nor was he able to purchase any. He offered his servants the opportunity to leave the plantation, take the boat and seek to buy meat elsewhere, but the offer was declined. Instead, they remained at the plantation and refused to work."

"We were too weak to go, on account of no meat in our diet."

Josiah gave a tight-lipped nod before continuing. "Renaissance inventor, artist and man of science Leonardo da Vinci subsisted on a diet entirely devoid of meat, and he lived threescore years and seven—and managed to accomplish a great deal during those years. Moreover, Mr. Newhouse himself was able to work while consuming the diet with which you found fault. The provisions Mr. Newhouse provided more than satisfied the contractual requirements. Therefore, rather than expecting to be freed from the indentures, the servants in question are liable for punishment for refusing to work from October

fourth to the present date. A countersuit is so filed.”

He wondered if the clerk would wake the judge now that both sides had concluded their arguments.

“What? You sue us?”

“It’s not fair!”

“What is this noise?” The judge sat up and banged his fist against the bench. “I’ll have order in my court.” He looked at his clerk. “Now, then, what was this all about?”

The clerk leaned in toward the judge and said, “These four wouldn’t work because their master gave them no meat.”

“Wouldn’t work, eh? Can’t have that. Thirty lashes for each.” The judge put his head down and waved them off. “Bring the next case forth.”

“Mercy, sir, please, I beg you.” The biggest of the plaintiffs threw himself on his knees.

“Please take pity on a poor servant.”

“We’ll make up the lost time!”

The judge lifted his head and glared at the cowering servants. “You’re damned right you’ll make up the lost time. And enough extra to pay this fellow’s representation. But I’ll suspend the corporal punishment so long as you remain on good behavior. Next case, if you please.”

Josiah had to keep himself from shaking his head as he exited the courtroom with his triumphant client. The man had not needed his representation at all, since the judge heard not a single word of it. Yet Newhouse thanked him as profusely as if he had just saved him from the gallows.

He turned at a tap on the shoulder and greeted his next client. The turn left him slightly dizzy. He realized with a start that it was nearly dark and he had not eaten since breakfast, and little enough then, since he still had yet to develop a taste for cold meat and rum in the morning. His neck felt stiff. He wanted to tell this man to go away, yet his case would mean a little more of the debt erased, so Josiah forced himself to smile instead. He thought of Carter, riding back to tell his family the news of their good fortune, and the smile became a real one.

Chapter Thirty-Three

"None of you is unwell this morning, I hope," Caroline said as she stepped over to the fire to warm her hands.

"No, we are all quite well, thank you, Miss Carter." Molly Johnson ladled a cup of cider from a pot hanging over the fire and handed it to her guest. "Why would we not be?"

"After such a dinner, I had my fears for the digestive health of the general company."

Mrs. Johnson laughed. "Now then, I tasted nothing which might prove injurious, and, as you can see, we are all quite sound in body today." She gestured toward the two boys wrestling on the floor and the baby waving in gleeful amusement.

"Good."

"Although," the tenant said, looking carefully at her mistress as if sizing her up, "sometimes the serious sickness from food does not show itself for several days."

"It doesn't?" Caroline started to worry, then saw that the woman was jesting. "Well, if you do take sick, I'll be sure to make a potion for your remedy. And it will no doubt make you twice as ill!" She smiled. For some reason, it pleased her that her tenant felt comfortable enough in her presence to make such a joke.

"Will you take a seat by the fire, Miss Carter?"

Caroline nodded as she sipped her cider.

Mrs. Johnson quickly pulled a crate closer to the fire to serve as a makeshift bench. "I must again extend our most grateful thanks for your kind invitation to dinner yesterday."

Caroline sat and pulled her skirts into place. "The pleasure was ours entirely." Well, that was not exactly true; but she had enjoyed herself in the end, and she believed most of the company had as well.

"I especially enjoyed your soolma...soolmagani, was it?"

"Salmagundi. I rather thought that the best dish myself, although I daresay my mother and sisters would disagree." Her mother had turned quite red after tasting the dish seasoned with hot peppers from Leda's kitchen garden. Johanna had spit a mouthful halfway across the table then looked as if she would faint from mortification.

"It was most kind of Leda to watch the children so Mr. Johnson and I might enjoy a meal in the

company of adults. I do not believe we have ever had such an opportunity before.” The tenant began to blush. “And please do accept my apology for what young William said as we were leaving. I thought the Sally Lunn exceptionally fine, as did Mr. Johnson.”

Caroline laughed. “No, no, I'm afraid William was quite right. The bread was much better suited to be a boat than a foodstuff. That burned crust would have made it quite impervious to waves. I should have given him the remainder to let him see if it would float.”

“Nonsense, it was not burned. As I said, we quite enjoyed it.”

Caroline looked at Mrs. Johnson, daring her to tell the truth.

“Perhaps,” the woman said as she crossed her arms and pursed her lips, “the crust was a bit thick in places.”

“It was burnt. But then, suppose I was not trying to make a bread at all but was merely devising new toys for your sons' amusement?”

Molly Johnson chuckled. “Then I thank you.”

“Pity the pie wouldn't float.” Caroline gave a mock sigh and took another sip of her drink. “That would never have worked as a boat. To think I was actually concerned because I did not have the right variety of pear. As if anyone could have discerned the fruit in that soggy, burned mess.”

“No, no, it was all most delicious.”

“Except for the bread.”

“Well, yes,” Mrs. Johnson said, pursing her lips again, “the bread had a bit... too much crust.”

“And the pie.”

“The crust was a little underdone,” Mrs. Johnson conceded. “And tasted too much of pumpkin.”

“Now there—I have so little of West Indies sugar, and Leda assured me dried pumpkin would do to sweeten a pie.” Caroline grimaced, thinking of the almost bitter pumpkin flavor. “And then the onion soup had no flavor whatsoever.”

“It was an onion soup?”

“You see? But the receipt did not specify how many onions, just the quantity of butter, water, eggs and mace.” Caroline looked into her tenant's face as if she were making a confession. “And we hadn't any mace so I used cardamom seed.”

“Yes, I see.” Mrs. Johnson nodded too many times. “It was a most interesting soup.”

Caroline sighed. “Let us be honest. It tasted like buttery, perfumed water.”

“Do you really ask for honesty, Miss Carter?”

Now it was Caroline's turn to be taken aback. “Why, yes,” she said slowly. “I believe I do.”

“You’ve not done much cooking, have you?”

Something in the tone of voice made Caroline feel vaguely guilty, and she turned and took a few steps away before replying. “No. It was always...the servants cooked all our meals. My sisters and I were so busy...”

Busy reading books, taking walks, pretending to be princesses who sent knights off to fight in their honor. Her most useful contribution to the dinner table might have been a few freshly cut flowers, and she had expected high praise from the kitchen servants if she provided a couple of herbs for garnish. She had never even considered whether the herbs she brought in might actually complement a dish on the menu.

She saw Mrs. Johnson watching her intently as she walked back toward the fire. “Is it so obvious? Was the dinner really so terrible?”

The tenant pursed her lips again. “It was...unlike anything I have ever had before.”

“Ha! That was prettily phrased, I must say.” Caroline smiled tightly. “But I suppose it does not matter that I cannot cook a decent dinner. We shall never again have guests of any consequence, and I shall never preside at table at my own plantation—”

She very nearly clamped her hand over her mouth. What was she doing, revealing her own shame to a virtual stranger, and a tenant at that? And she had insulted the woman in the bargain.

“Please, forgive me, Mrs. Johnson. I—I spoke in haste and did not mean—”

“Ah, do not worry for my sake, Miss Carter. I understand you perfectly. We are not of your society nor do we expect to be treated as such. That is why we were so very grateful for your invitation to dine. But we do not anticipate another.”

Caroline did not know what to say. This woman, supposedly so much lower in station, seemed in reality far more gracious. And when she looked at the fire and thought about the woman’s cooking prowess and her gentle ways with her children...she seemed to know and accomplish so much.

This landless tenant, living in a house of but one room, could be truly considered accomplished. Embroidery and music lessons and the study of other languages—what need had any woman of these skills?

“I would not be concerned with society, Mrs. Johnson,” she said at last. “I believe society has got it all wrong. It valued me and my sisters when we had time to engage in useless enterprise and master worthless skills. But now, when we seek to acquire the necessary skills of survival, we count for nothing. The skills count for nothing. And yet, without them...”

“You count for nothing? Certainly not, Miss Carter. Your family and your good breeding makes you valuable to society.”

“Good breeding?” Caroline scoffed. “My grandfather was an indentured servant when he came to Maryland. Society does not value my family. Society valued our money, our spending and our clothes. Society desires ladies who have practiced music or spent hours drawing dreadful pictures. Without these, without the money to do these things, we do not belong in society.”

Mrs. Johnson started to answer then closed her mouth and quietly went to separate the boys, who were twisting the skin on each other's arms in an apparent effort to see who could cause the most pain.

"Give over, now, stop that. I see you must be in need of work to do. James, you may sweep; William, fetch us some water. We'll have our meal soon." She glanced nervously at the pots before the fire.

"Please, do not let me keep you from your work any longer." Caroline set down her mug near the fire. "I merely called to see that...you were all well."

"Thank you, Miss Carter. Might I see your cookery book one day, when it is convenient?"

"Why, yes." Caroline smiled as she stood at the door. "Of course. Perhaps we might attempt a new receipt together."

"I would be greatly honored, Miss."

Caroline felt her smile widen into a grin. "I thought we were to be honest with each other. You know how to cook; I do not. Therefore, the honor would be all mine!" She turned and skipped out before her hostess could make any more polite protests.

"Caroline! Oh, Caroline!" Johanna's shriek echoed across the clearing as Caroline emerged from the wooded path. The insistence in the voice made her hurry her steps, though it did come from Johanna, who was much given to excited outbursts.

She could now see three horses in the yard, surrounded by a veritable throng of people. Her father had returned! He was at least a week sooner than expected. In fact, with the specter of debtor's prison he had laid before her, she feared she might not see him for years. She ran the rest of the way to join the group, not caring that she would appear unladylike before the two guests.

"Father! It is so good to have you back with us." She hugged him as a little girl might do. "How is it you are back so soon? Surely, the court did not adjourn early?" Her father always stayed for the full session, which seemed to lengthen each year.

"Ah, Caroline, Caroline." He kissed her on the cheek. "I bring great news—and I could not wait for the end of the session."

"It is most wondrous, Caroline," Georgiana interjected. "Father says we have money again!"

"He has even bought two new servants already, and has ordered more!" Johanna bounced with excitement as she spoke.

Edwina laid a hand on her arm. She seemed to be the only one capable of speaking in a normal tone of voice. "You shan't have to work in the kitchen anymore, Caroline. We will be as we used to."

Caroline blinked, and suddenly felt as if her mouth had been hanging open for some time. "How can this be?"

She looked at her mother, who was enthusiastically giving orders to the woman and man who had accompanied her father home. They must be the new servants. How could they possibly afford new

servants?

Her father waved her concern away. "I will tell you the whole story presently."

"A relative has paid all those silly debts. So now we are rich! Is that not wonderful?" Johanna sighed with glee.

Relative? What relative did they have who could—or would—pay off such a large sum? Her father's sister, Aunt Bennett, and her husband owned a plantation somewhat larger than their own; but their household was just that much more grand, so that if her family's expenses exceeded their income her Aunt's probably did as well. Her father had no other family living, and her mother's family had no money to speak of. Who then could have paid the debt?

"Father, what relative is this?"

"Oh, Caroline, someone you do not know. Indeed, I do not know him—it is a distant relative of my family in England." John Carter turned and herded her sisters into the house before she could ask him anything further.

Why was she not overjoyed, as everyone else in her family seemed to be? She could rest; she would no longer have to work. There was no need to fret over her poor cooking skills. She would not need to worry if they had stored enough cooking grease and ashes for the soapmaking or whether the milk was enough to last through dinner or whether it was time to dip more candles. Someone else would now tend to these matters.

But that thought seemed very odd. It was her household—her mother's, really, but her mother would not care about such things. Shouldn't she know when they were ready to make soap or if they needed candles first? Shouldn't she know how much milk the cows produced and whether they ran low on West Indies sugar? How could she run a household if she did not know these very basic elements? How had her mother carried on for so many years in ignorance?

Her ruminations had carried her through the yard and into the front room without her really being aware of it.

"Mother?" She sought out her mother on the far side of the room, where she pointed out dusty corners to the newcomers. "Mother, may I ask you a question?"

"Certainly, my dear." Her mother beamed. "You may go ahead and get started on the dusting, Edward. Alice, you go on to the kitchen and see to some supper for us. We will expect nothing elaborate, of course, on your first day."

"Mother, when do we usually make our soap for the year?"

"Soap? Goodness, how would I know such a thing? You would have to ask Margaret, she's always had the keeping of the house." Her mother stopped, and then laughed as if she had just made the funniest joke in the world. "Oh, but Margaret is here no longer! I do not yet know who our new housekeeper will be, but I fear this Alice is too young and inexperienced for the task."

"Do you think?" Alice appeared to be a few years older than Caroline was herself; and she resented the implication that someone of her age was incapable of managing a house.

“Why do you ask of soap? We’ve enough to wash for a good while yet, surely?”

“I suppose. I had hoped to make some with a scent. Something to mask the smell of pork grease.”

“Make soap? You had planned to make soap? My poor girl, to what straits had we reduced you?” She gathered Caroline in her arms awkwardly and kissed her forehead. “You go and rest and think no more of such things. In a few days, I daresay this will all seem like only a bad dream.”

What was so very wrong with making soap? Caroline smiled absently at her mother and looked toward the stairs. She could rest. She needed to think about the housekeeper position.

And did her mother say the new manservant’s name was Edward?

Chapter Thirty-Four

At this rate, he could earn enough money to pay off the added debt in four years, assuming he did as well at each of the quarterly sessions. Josiah counted the notes again to be sure.

Could he do this again sixteen more times? And if the price of tobacco went down again, it would take longer, since his fees were pegged to the value of the local commodity while the debt was fixed in English currency.

Well, there was precious little he could do about it now. He had assumed the debts, and his name and signature could not be retracted now even if he wanted to. And he did not want to.

But he did not have to earn the money to pay this debt himself. It was silly to work so hard when all he had to do was ask his brother for... a loan of sorts. He’d never pay it back. He would be as irresponsible

as Carter. But it was his money, his family's money. Was not he entitled to a share of it? Borrowing from his brother was not actually borrowing.

"All business concluded to your satisfaction, Mr. Throckmorton?"

Josiah looked up from his papers and uneaten breakfast to see Goodwin take a seat across from him at the table. "Good morning, Mr. Goodwin."

"I see you've amassed quite a collection of fees this session. A most impressive showing."

"I would give half the stack for a decent mug of coffee."

"What? I don't understand the fascination with those bitter white beans."

"They're not white after you roast them. Have you ever tasted coffee?"

"Roasted, you say? I've not tried them roasted."

"What do you mean?"

"A client paid me in goods last year. A spool of lace, some excellent rum, salt and some spices and coffee beans, for which I'd really no use. But he insisted I would love the coffee so long as it was cooked in exceedingly hot water and served with plenty of cream. So we boiled the beans, and when we were certain they had been in the water long enough, we ate them mashed with cream."

Josiah winced. "I can see how that might sour you on the thought of coffee. It's a beverage, you know."

"Indeed?" Goodwin laughed heartily. "So, we threw out the good part, eh?"

"Actually, you needed to roast the beans before boiling them, so you probably had no 'good part.' But, sir, if you are ever in the vicinity of Elkridge Landing, you must pay me a visit. I will endeavor to return a portion of your hospitality, and," he said, smiling, "I am fairly certain I will always have a supply of coffee on hand. My servants find it most disagreeable, too."

"Very well, sir, you may expect to see me at your door at some point betimes." Goodwin took an enormous bite from a cold turkey leg.

You should not have issued that invitation. By the time he comes, you will already be back in England.

"Do you head back today?" his host asked between mouthfuls.

"What? Today? Good heavens, no." He meant to Hanset, of course. "That is, yes, I do," Josiah corrected himself. "As soon as I settle my accounts with you."

"Ah, good." Goodwin licked his fingers. "Let's see... we've a fortnight and three additional nights lodging and meals, stable for the horse and my fee for drawing up the papers for Carter's debts. That comes to..."

"You don't charge extra for hot water, then?"

"Hot water? Extra? You jest sir, do you not?"

“It is not an unknown practice.”

“Did you ever have any hot water while you were here?”

“Well, to think of it, not very often.”

His host laughed while he excused himself to see if he had any more papers requiring Josiah’s signature.

No hot water. That could explain why he felt so worn and dirty. He had assumed it was the unaccustomed business with so many men who bore so little apparent concern for hygiene. But weeks of hurried washing with cold water and too many nights in a hired bed had left him feeling positively wretched. He thought longingly of his own bath and bed at Hanset.

And then, in his mind, he saw a line of uniformed servants carrying kettles of steaming water up the stairs to pour water for his sister’s bath in Parkhurst. As a boy, he had come to dread the sight of that line—it meant that soon he would be called to stop his play and come for his bath, as well. His older sister had always gone first, and for that he had always been grateful.

Josiah picked up a scrap of meat from the plate in front of him and looked at it dubiously before eating it. He thought of eggs served on his mother’s favorite china. Then he thought of burned bacon and lukewarm mush in a smoky, dark room. His own smoky, dark room.

He stood, and suddenly felt it was time to be moving—now, this instant. Since he had already ordered the stable boy to have his horse ready and his belongings tied in place, he had no more to do than pay his debts to Goodwin and make his farewell.

“Thank you for waiting, Mr. Throckmorton. It is, indeed, fortunate you did so—I’ve missed this page entirely. You initial here.” Goodwin pointed to a place near the top of the page and handed him a nib and pot of ink. “Then sign at the bottom, if you please. If you don’t mind my asking, wherever did you come up with the name ‘Cheesewringer?’”

Josiah squinted in thought for a moment. “I suppose it was the first thing that came to mind when you asked for a second name for the Carter relative. I don’t really see why you needed a second name.”

“It adds to the verisimilitude of the story,” Goodwin answered. “Not that Mr. Carter seemed to need any. He accepted his good fortune without question and wasted little time putting his new credit to good use. You saw him leave with two servants that very afternoon, did you not?”

“Yes.” Josiah felt a little warmed just thinking of Carter jubilantly saying his goodbyes to all the company at Goodwin’s, pretending to be sorry to leave the festivities in full swing. He had been anxious to share the good news with his family. By now, they must all know, of course. Caroline would be a lady of leisure once more and would not be serving drinks to guests the next time he visited.

Would he visit again? Why not? He was a neighbor. And though now encumbered in debt, he remained a gentleman. Perhaps he could court one of Carter’s other daughters. Surely, they did not all have a penchant for dressing as boys and running off to sea.

That last night in Charles Town, he had asked her to call him Edward. He had beautiful dark eyes.

Caroline remembered that much but could not picture what those eyes actually looked like. She thought they had seemed deep, mesmerizing and absolutely unforgettable. However, she could no longer see them in her mind's eye.

"Mama! She's doing it again!"

Caroline rolled over on her stomach and covered her ears to drown out Johanna's voice, piercing even through the closed door.

"Edwina's reading Esquemeling's *Bucaniers*, and you said specifically we were not to read that pirate book any longer."

Caroline could not hear any of the replies, but one side of the conversation was more than enough to convince her she would find no more peace in her room that afternoon.

"Where are you going?" Johanna bounded up to her as soon as she opened her door.

"Out of doors." Caroline tried to squeeze past her to get to the stairs.

"May I come?" her sister pleaded with her best smile.

"No." Caroline paused for a moment. "Yes. You must come. I insist."

The smile immediately faded. "Oh, good. I'll have to get my cloak first."

"Very well. Please hurry." Caroline tapped her foot as she glanced down the stairs.

"Oh, it may take me a while." Johanna clutched her hands in her skirt and twisted them into the fabric. "I think I need to mend a hole in it first."

"You can wear it with a hole."

"Oh, no, it's ever so big a hole, it's hugeormous. I could not be seen with such a hole in my cloak."

"Why don't you wear Georgiana's, then?" Caroline almost had to bite her lip to keep from smiling.

"Oh, well, it has a hole in it, too, I'm sure. She was just telling me. And so, if you cannot wait, well then..." Johanna kept her gaze on the floor.

"Fine. I will simply have to go by myself." Caroline huffed down the stairs in feigned irritation, trying to keep her laughter in check until she was out and away from the house. It was getting far too easy to control her sister.

The cold made her shiver a bit, but the bright sun gave an illusion of warmth and lifted her spirits after so many days of chilly clouds and drizzle. With no particular errand, Caroline was free to spend the afternoon as she wished. She started to skip a little as she passed the neglected skeletons of plants in her knot garden. Next year, she could return the herb garden to its former ordered beauty. Perhaps she might add some of Leda's peppers.

She was as free as a bird! The temptation to run down the slope from the garden to the woods was too great. She spread her arms and, enjoying the great length of their shadows in the afternoon sun, dashed

down the hill in long strides, feeling as though she would become airborne with every next step.

“Ha-ha! Look at Miss!”

“You a bird, Miss?”

Caroline turned at the sound of the young voices and caught sight of the Johnson boys just as the world slipped out from under her and she found herself staring up at the sky. Her hands and backside were mired in a large streak of mud. For a moment, she felt too bewildered to sense anything else. Then the cold, oozy feeling of mud between her fingers made her cringe.

The boys laughed. “Miss is a mudhen!” one of them cried.

They came closer, dragging the carcass of a turkey between them. When they reached her, the younger one reached down to dip his end of the bird into the mud. “We ’ave a mud’en, too,” he called out joyously.

Caroline felt her laughter erupt like a fountain. A little mud never did anyone any harm, even if it had probably ruined what remained of her best petticoat. She had already ordered two new ones and a new bodice, and she could make do until they arrived.

“Tell me, young gentlemen,” she said as she moved over to the grass to wipe the mud from her hands. “Why do you bring this bird to me for a mudbath?”

“This is a gift from Father. He says you have no brothers to hunt fresh game for you.”

The giggles evaporated from Caroline’s throat, and she had to swallow several times before she could answer. “Thank you, James. And, please, thank your father and mother. We are most grateful for your generous gift.”

“But why can your father not hunt for you as ours does?”

“Oh,” Caroline began, swallowing the lump in her throat again, “my father is aged, and his eyesight is not well enough to enable him to shoot. And I did have a brother who used to hunt game for us, but he died.” She hurried on quickly. “So, I will wait till one day I have boys of my own to hunt game for my table. Or perhaps you will hunt game for me when you are grown.”

“Oh, yes! And Father says I am almost grown. So, I can hunt for you very soon, likely in a fortnight,” James assured her proudly.

“I grown, too. I hunt, too,” William insisted.

Caroline smiled, despite her guilt and sadness. “You will both be my hunters, and quite soon, I am sure.” She kissed them each on the top of the head. “Now you had better return to help your mother and father. I am sure they cannot be without you for too long.”

“Oh, no. They cannot.” James’s eyes widened at the realization. “Come on, Will. Goodbye, Miss!”

“Bye, Miss!” the younger boy echoed as he waved a dimpled hand in farewell and trudged off behind his brother.

Caroline watched them until they disappeared into the trees. Then, a gust of wind reminded her that her clothes were wet through in places. Dirt had seeped under her fingernails and into the lines in her hands. She hoisted the turkey carcass into her arms and started back on the long, uphill walk to the house.

The sound of voices and horses hooves thudding on the fallen leaves made her look back cautiously to where the path joined the road at the bottom of the hill. She wanted to see which of her neighbors were out and whether they headed to or from the landing, but she had to take care to be far enough away to keep them from observing her disgraceful appearance.

To her horror, the horses turned from the road onto the path, and a rider hailed her before she could slip into the trees. Another headed right up to where Caroline was pressed against a tree, fervently wishing she could hide behind it.

“We seek the home of Josiah Throckmorton. I believe it is Hanset Plantation. Is this the right...” The man looked around with disdain. “...road?”

Before she could reply, Caroline noticed the other riders had followed the first up the path to where she stood. Two ladies and two gentlemen made up the party, all rather splendidly dressed. One of the ladies had covered her face with a traveling mask. Caroline wished for a sudden storm to obscure their vision and wash away her mud. Or perhaps, if she stepped aside, the force of her mortification might be enough to send the tree crashing down in their midst.

But, of course, nothing happened, and all four of the imposing riders looked to her impatiently for an answer.

“N-no. This is the road to Hill Crest.” Caroline took a deep breath. “If you go back to the rolling road...” She released her grip on the turkey with one hand so she could point toward the bottom of the hill, “...and continue away from the landing, you will come to a road that leads to Hanset.”

The masked lady let out an exasperated groan and lifted her mask slightly so she could speak. “And just how are we supposed to find this road? Have you no markers in this colony?”

“Is there perhaps a landmark for this road?” asked the better-dressed of the gentlemen.

“Yes, er...” Desperate to make her escape, Caroline could think of no landmark she could readily describe to visitors. “There is a large tree at the base of the road,” she began lamely, inching backward as she spoke. “The branches grow lower on the trunk than on most other trees. And there are not so many roads between Hill Crest and Hanset. You will find it. Please excuse me.”

Dropping the turkey, she turned and bolted up the hill as fast as she could, ignoring the derisive laughter that followed her. Only when the sound of horses' hooves had long since faded did she dare look back.

Chapter Thirty-Five

"Eleanor! Why, what a pleasant surprise! And Sir James. I never dreamed you'd have arrived in Maryland before my return from the assizes."

And for that Josiah felt fortunate, because it would have been a most unsettling nightmare if he had. He looked around the main room of his house in disbelief. Every inch of horizontal space, save the floor, had been covered with a cloth of some sort, as though his sister and her husband could not deign to sit on the bare wooden benches or look at an uncovered tabletop. Two leather chairs in the corner had been covered with fur-lined cloaks. He could not tell what other articles they had used to transform the space nor had he time to guess.

"We wanted to surprise you, dear brother," Eleanor said as she came close for a perfunctory embrace. "Though I daresay we were very nearly foiled in our efforts. I did not think we should ever find your plantation. Have you no roads in this colony?"

"None that you would recognize as such." Josiah smiled and bowed to his brother-in-law. "I hope the difficulties of your journey have not been overmuch, James?"

"Indeed, it has been a most trying excursion thus far." James Davenport looked around the room gravely. "And it shows no sign of growing more comfortable."

"Where is that girl?" Eleanor said to no one in particular. "Nearly a quarter of an hour has passed since I sent her back to the kitchen. It is not as though she could have gotten lost."

"I am sorry to hear it." Josiah continued looking at his brother-in-law. "But hopefully, you will not have to endure the rigors of travel through the colony for much longer?" He tried to keep his voice from sounding too eager.

"Josiah, your kitchen is that building out there in the yard, is it not?" His sister waved regally toward the door. "So, she had not far to go. Such an inconvenience."

"Perhaps you could send your maid to fetch her."

"Kate? Dear me, no. She has far too much work with my clothing upstairs. I could not possibly spare her. Besides, it is the duty of your servants to visit the kitchen." Eleanor arched an eyebrow, clearly indicating her opinion of Josiah's servants. "And we've not had a hot dish or drink since we arrived."

Josiah winced slightly. How long had they been there?

“Not that it would be of much importance,” Eleanor continued airily. “The inferior food and drink here is perhaps best swallowed cold so as to dull the senses. Oh, you poor boy. Had we only known what you were suffering. . .” She patted his hand. “I’m sure you haven’t any tea, for I know it is not popular here with these colonials, but surely you must have some chocolate and coffee. But when I asked for a warm drink this morning, your girl brought me cider. Imagine, serving cider to Sir James and myself.”

“I hope you did not take offense, Eleanor?”

“How could I not? Cider! As if she were giving refreshment to a stray beggar!”

“Cider is a most common drink here. People of all stations drink it without shame. It is rather good, actually.”

“Hmmpf.”

“And, as you mentioned, not much else is—of domestic drink, anyway.”

Eleanor looked at him then pointedly turned away and stared at the door, as if she would bore a hole through it with her eyes.

“What has happened to your house, Josiah?” his brother-in-law asked with concern. “Was it a fire? Or I have heard the storms may do fearsome damage.”

“My house?”

“Yes, it must be dreadful to have to live in servant’s quarters like this. When did it happen?” Davenport looked at the disguised bench behind him as if he were almost willing to sit down on it.

“Well,” Josiah began, taking a seat on the covered bench opposite, “I must confess that this is, indeed, my own house.”

“What?”

“Surely not, Josiah. This. . .this. . .” His sister appeared for once to be at a loss for words. “This *cabin*? You have lived in this building for an entire year?”

Josiah smiled, finding he rather enjoyed her discomfiture. “Has it been so long? I do believe it has. The whole experience has been rather refreshing, I find. We are so often out-of-doors here.”

“I see.” Davenport appeared to weigh this bit of information, but his wife was not impressed.

“Well, of course, you are out-of-doors,” she snapped. “Even when you are inside you may count yourself as taking the air, so much of it blows through your walls, particularly upstairs.”

Upstairs? Of course. If they had been here for some time, they would have seen the upstairs rooms with their unplastered walls and sparse furnishings. They would have even had to sleep in those rooms.

“But, Josiah, you are no outdoorsman,” his sister continued pointedly. “You care nothing for the pursuits of hunting and fishing. How can you live as a rustic?”

He stifled a sudden urge to pack his sister into a trunk and shut the lid. "Perhaps I did not care for such pursuits in England, dear sister, but here, on the frontier, life is different. There is bigger game, more sport to be had." He stretched luxuriously before the fire. "I find this life rather suits me."

It was true the animals seemed bigger than in England, and there were certainly more of them, but he had hitherto taken no more interest in hunting them here than he had at home. Still, he might, someday.

"Hmm. Josiah, I might enjoy a bit of sport. Perhaps we might get in a day of shooting while I am here." Davenport rubbed his hands together. "On a day when it is not so blustery."

"Certainly." How on earth was he going to be able to assemble a hunting party sufficient to impress his brother-in-law? "When we are able to make the time for it, of course. There will be certain invitations we must not ignore, and then, I imagine your duties will take you to other places."

Davenport refused to pick up the hint.

"I say, what game do you find most attractive at this time of year, Josiah?"

"What? Oh, I don't know. Deer, bear, uh, large birds... What places will you be inspecting on your trip?"

"Bear! That should be quite a challenge. Have you shot many?"

"Oh, no more than the usual. You will need to travel to Annapolis at some point, I assume?"

"Annapolis? Yes, of course, I shall have business in the capital. We had planned for Eleanor to stay with you. Assuming that is convenient."

"I should welcome the chance to visit so intimately with my sister. But, as you have observed, I cannot offer her the comforts to which she is accustomed, so perhaps she might prefer to continue with you."

Eleanor chose that moment to sigh and flutter dramatically into a fur-draped chair. "This adventure has been most trying on my strength. I fear it will take me years to recover."

"Indeed, I fear for your health myself. I must ask you, Eleanor, whatever induced you to make such a journey in the first place?"

"It is my duty, sir, to accompany my husband, to lighten his burden."

Josiah looked around at the trunks and other luggage his guests had stuffed into the two downstairs rooms and could only guess at how much more lay upstairs. "I can see you lighten his burden considerably, dear sister. But the risks of travel, the discomforts—surely, you are not expected to endure this for the sake of your husband's business?"

"Travel is becoming quite the fashion, Josiah, now with the war over. I daresay Eleanor will be the envy of her circle when she returns with souvenirs of her visit to Maryland."

Josiah clenched his lips together to keep from smiling. His sister had embarked on a journey to cater to whims of fashion and had obviously gotten quite more than she'd bargained for. However, his brother-in-law would not have undertaken the expenses of such a trip without good cause.

“What business brings you to Maryland, James?”

“A general reporting of the health of the colony and the tobacco exports. Lord Baltimore urges daily that the colony be returned to proprietary rule, and I daresay the crown will give in, eventually. But I, and others with ties here, have been, shall we say, encouraged to visit and report on the true state of affairs before the parties can agree to terms.”

Josiah nodded. That made some sense. But—he suddenly realized it was growing dark outside. His sister still impatiently awaited her warm drink, and he should offer his guests some late dinner, or supper. He only hoped Betty and Priscilla could still cooperate enough to put together a decent meal.

“Oh, thank heavens.” Eleanor smiled as the door opened and Priscilla and Betty paraded in, heavily laden with bowls, tankards and platters. “I am so very grateful to you for your kind attentions.” She stood and reached out for the tankard Priscilla held toward her. “Warm cider. How very thoughtful of you.”

“Have we no chocolate or coffee to offer our guests?” Josiah put in quickly.

“Welcome home, sir.” Betty bowed her head and lowered her substantial frame in a quick movement that could perhaps have been taken for a curtsy. “Yes, we’ve both coffee and chocolate, same as when you left. I had no idea they were wanted.”

Josiah looked at his sister, to all appearances the picture of serene contentment as she sipped her cider. “I would like a mug of coffee, if you please, Betty. And you, Sir James?”

“The same, Mr. Throckmorton.”

“Shall I set out the dinner first, sir?”

“Yes, please do, while it is still hot.” He noted with satisfaction that Priscilla had already distributed his best plates and napkins around the table. Now, she placed a fork carefully at each place, stealing glances at Eleanor all the while. She looked from his elegantly dressed sister to him with some puzzlement, which changed to embarrassment when she realized he was watching her.

“Welcome home, sir. I’ll fetch a plate for you and a tray for the servants upstairs,” she muttered quickly before she turned and dashed out the door.

With evident resignation, Sir James and Lady Davenport sat down to their dinner.

“Did you say there would be invitations soon, Mr. Throckmorton?” Davenport asked as he watched Betty deposit a charred roast on the table.

Betty looked hesitantly at Josiah. “Will you carve, sir?”

“I would ask my guest to do the honor. Would you be so kind, Sir James?”

“Of course.”

He nodded to Betty, and to his great relief, she appeared to understand she was to move the roast in front of the guest. Unfortunately, she did so by merely shoving the platter across the table, leaving a

greasy stain on the tablecover in its wake.

“Thank you, sir.” Josiah hoped someone had sharpened his carving knife recently, but from the difficulty his brother-in-law was experiencing, he realized his hope was in vain. He motioned for Betty to come closer.

“Please have all the knives sharpened. Tomorrow,” he said quietly.

“Yes, sir.” Betty dished cooked squash and potatoes onto the plates then passed around a basket of only slightly burned corn muffins.

“Thank you, Betty. That will be all for the moment. I’ll ring when next we need you.”

“Ring, sir?”

“The bell, Betty.” Josiah pointed to a long-neglected bell on a shelf near the door. None of his servants had ever responded well to its summons, and he hadn’t attempted to use it in nearly a year. But with his sister in the house, he felt his usual custom of yelling out the window would hardly be appropriate.

As soon as Betty had closed the door behind her, Eleanor put down her fork. “Josiah, whatever has happened to your hair? Where is your wig?”

“It has been given a decent burial, I assure you.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“It became ragged rather quickly, I’m afraid. And there is no one in the vicinity able to dress them. And I had forgotten to bring any powder.” He smiled. “You would have been scandalized at the sight of my wig, Eleanor.”

“Even so, could you not order a new one? Must you wear your own hair like a common laborer?”

“Let me see. You’ve already said that I live like a rustic so I suppose it makes sense I appear like one as well. Are you going to start in on my clothing, or will you wait for dessert for that?”

“Your traveling clothes are adequate, I suppose.” She prodded a bit of squash with the flat of her knife and looked at it dubiously.

“Eleanor, in this climate there is a deal of heat and moisture and even more of insects. My wig was new when I arrived yet was soon ratty and filled with bugs. A replacement would be in the same condition all too soon, without a wigmaker near at hand to keep it in repair. Someday, Elkridge Landing will attract such a tradesman, and then I will be first in line to be fitted for a new wig, I promise you. But in the meantime, I have grown rather accustomed to my own hair.”

“Then I suppose all the gentlemen in Maryland wear their own hair?”

“I cannot speak for all of them, of course. But enough of them do. I will not embarrass you, dear sister. At least, not on account of my hair.”

Eleanor started to roll her eyes then stopped with a sigh.

“Ahem.” Davenport put a napkin to his mouth. “Did you say something about invitations to dine?”

“Of course. Once word of your arrival has spread, all of our neighbors will want to make your acquaintance.” Josiah looked over toward his writing desk. It was time to spread the word.

Chapter Thirty-Six

“May I read it, Father? Who is it from?”

“It’s from Aunt Bennett.”

“No, it’s from Father’s lawyer. We must have another relative giving us money!”

“I believe,” Caroline said quietly from the edge of the throng surrounding her father’s chair, “you’ll find that letter is from Mr. Throckmorton.”

“Do you know his writing so well?”

“He sent her love letters all the time. She could recognize his writing at fifty paces.”

“The messenger,” Caroline said, raising her voice to be heard above the giggles, “rode in on Disciple, the horse we sold to Mr. Throckmorton.”

Despite her attempt to appear as the wise, disinterested older sister, she felt warmth rise in her cheeks. Mr. Throckmorton had not sent her love notes of any kind, but he had written her short notes on occasion; and she did recognize his writing. Why did he write now?

“Very well.” John Carter cleared his throat and looked around at his daughters with a mock sternness he could not maintain. “Since you will give me no peace, I shall read it once to you all aloud and then have done with it. One time only, mind you.” He ruffled the paper dramatically. “My Dear Sir, I am pleased to inform you that I have the honor of hosting my brother-in-law and sister, Sir James and Lady Davenport, on the occasion of their visit from England. Having heard much of your family, they are anxious to make your acquaintance. We will be at home to callers the afternoon of Wednesday and Thursday, if this should be a convenient time. Very truly yours, your most humble and obedient servant, Josiah Throckmorton.”

“My gown cannot possibly be ready by then.” Mrs. Carter looked up from her stitching with alarm. “Might we wait until next week?”

“I do not think that would be appropriate, Mrs. Carter. Surely the gown you wear now will be sufficient? It is only Mr. Throckmorton.”

“But Lady Davenport and Sir James! I cannot appear before them in this.”

Her husband looked at her and said nothing.

“The seamstress at Longacre is reworking two of my gowns at this very moment. One might perhaps be ready by Friday.” She looked hopefully at her husband.

“Might we come with you, Father?” Johanna asked.

“Yes, I’ve nearly finished with the lace on my gown,” Georgiana added.

“This is so much nonsense.” Carter slapped the letter against his hand like a judge pronouncing sentence. “I shall go alone to wait on Mr. Throckmorton’s guests. Then I will issue an invitation for them to dine here the next week, and you may all sew your fingers to the bone in the interim.”

“Yes, an excellent idea! Ouch, there, I have gone and pricked my finger. Would one of you girls be so kind as to finish this edge for me?”

Mrs. Carter stood and held up the piece of trim she had been working on for the better part of a week. Caroline and Edwina looked at each other as if in mutual agreement, and continued patching their stockings. Georgiana reluctantly took the finery from her mother’s hands and set down her own work.

“Thank you, Georgiana, my helpful girl. I must go upstairs and inspect my stockings. Can anything be done with my shoes, I wonder? We will probably all need new stockings and where will we find them on such short notice? I wonder, indeed.”

Her mother had just started up the stairs in her fit of nervous musing when Caroline decided to be a little bit wicked. “Don’t forget the menu, Mother,” she called out.

“Oh, my heavens!” Her mother fell back into the room. “The menu. However will we plan it in time? And we’ve no housekeeper yet. Oh, the menu, and stockings and—next week, did you say?”

“Next week,” Carter answered firmly. “We’ve no idea how long the guests may be staying at Hanset.”

“Oh. Oh, my heavens.”

“Go see to your stockings, Mother. And then you’d better have a rest,” Edwina suggested cheerfully.

“Yes, of course. Oh, my heavens. Next week.”

Caroline put down her needlework and rubbed her eyes. The frenzy of sewing had continued without interruption for days, starting right after the news of the arrival of the elegant guests at Hanset. There would be dinners, perhaps even a dance, and the ladies at Hill Crest had not had time or money to rework their clothing until very recently. So, every minute of daylight was put to use with a needle.

The light had just about vanished now, though, and she could put down her work with good conscience. She had darned so many holes that, when she closed her eyes, the image of frayed fabric appeared in her mind.

Georgiana and Edwina had ceased their work some minutes earlier; only Johanna still squinted determinedly at a piece of lace for a sleeve. For the last half-hour, she and Georgiana had speculated about the latest changes in fashion, hoping to incorporate the most recent trend into their reworked gowns.

Caroline suddenly realized she did not want to hear one more word on the topic of clothing until at least the next day. She looked at Edwina, who slouched, as much as her loosened stays would allow, back on her seat.

“I rather think the sleeves will have a bit more fullness to them now,” Edwina speculated thoughtfully.

“Et tu, Brute?” Caroline mumbled under her breath. “I’m going to have a word with Father before supper,” she announced as she stood and moved toward the door to the main room, where her father read in solitude. She nearly sighed as she thought of her proposed conversation. It was a subject she feared to raise, yet she feared even more to leave it unaddressed.

“Father?” she began softly as she shut the door behind her. “Might I speak with you for a moment?”

Her father looked up with an expression of annoyance, but the creases in his face soon melted into a smile. “Of course, Caroline.” He reached over to pat the chair next to him. “Take a seat.”

“Thank you.” She sat and tucked a few loose strands of hair under her cap.

Her father looked at her expectantly; then, when she failed to speak, he began on his own.

“Well, miss! We find our circumstances a great deal more pleasant than during our last intimate conversation, do we not?”

“Yes. That is to say, I hope so, Father.” Caroline felt she would have to speak slowly to keep all of her words from tumbling out at once. “That is the subject I wished to speak to you about.”

“My dear, you look concerned.”

“I am, Father. Our expenses—are they not as great as before? We have as many servants, I believe, perhaps not in the fields but then, we have not so much land now we’ve a tenant, and it’s true we have no housekeeper yet, but I assume we plan to acquire one and I do not believe—”

“Caroline, please, calm yourself.”

“I’m sorry, Father, but with new gowns ordered, and work by Aunt Bennett’s seamstress and then the new kitchen provisions and the dinner next week—”

“These are but trifles, girl. The usual expenses, necessary to the function of a gentleman’s household.” He spoke sharply, as if he were reprimanding an errant young child.

Caroline did not want him to lash out again, but she could not calm her fears so readily. “Father,” she said at length, “are these not the same expenses that put us so dangerously in debt before?”

“Why, no, of course not.” Carter eased back in his chair. “We have learned from our misjudgment, curbed our expenses—admirably so, in fact.”

“Have we, Father?”

“Indeed, we have. And, in any case, the expenses that made our debt so grievous are not to be repeated. Our ordinary debt was a little excessive, but tobacco prices will rise and the increase would have covered us. It was the extra expense only that caused us real worry.”

“I see. And the housekeeper?”

“Another of the necessary expenses.”

“I am not so certain of that. But what did you mean about expenses not to be repeated?”

Her father leaned forward and took her hand. “I do not wish to upset you. It is from a time best not spoken of.”

“Oh? Oh.” He must mean the expenses incurred when Charles and Mr. Throckmorton had followed her to Charles Town. They had even had to hire a ship—no trifling expense, certainly.

“But don’t worry. It was worth every penny of ransom we paid to that pirate to have you home unharmed.”

Ransom? “You paid a ransom for me, Father?” But hadn’t Mr. Throckmorton stolen her from the alley?

“Yes, yes, that pirate threatened to run off to Nassau or some such place with you and the others if he were not paid in gold. But that’s all over and done with now, and you are quite safe.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Caroline felt as if all the breath had suddenly rushed out of her body.

“There, there, Caroline, you needn’t worry.” Her father hugged her in an awkward fatherly embrace, patting her back as he spoke. “The pirates haven’t followed you. We gave them what they wanted. They have as much gold as we could amass, and by now they’ve spent it, but they won’t trouble to come back this far, not with other, richer targets down south. You can forget about them.”

“Yes, Father.”

“And thanks to that Cheesewringer fellow in London, we can all forget about them.”

“Cheesewringer?”

“The name of the relative in London who managed the debts on our behalf.”

“Was it not a Carter if it was of your family?”

“Oh, I think his name was Robert Cheesewringer Carter, or something much like. It does not signify. Our thanks have been expressed, of course. Goodwin handled all that, and I’m sure he wrote the name out properly. Is it not a prodigiously funny name, though?”

“Indeed it is. Yet I believe I may have heard it before, although I cannot think where. Perhaps in a play?”

“Well, you’ve read a deal more of them than I, so that would—”

A swift knock interrupted him, and a head appeared from the parlor. “We are called to supper, Father,” Georgiana announced.

“Thank you. We will be in momentarily.”

She nodded and closed the door.

“Do you think you can compose yourself for supper, Caroline?”

She nodded.

“We need say no more on the subject of the expenses, then. Such worries are a thing of the past.”

She nodded again then stopped. “But...the housekeeper...”

“What of it?”

“I believe we are better off without one.”

“How so?” He stood and motioned her toward the door.

“The duties of a housekeeper,” Caroline said, rushing through the speech she had rehearsed in her head, “are tasks with which my sisters and I should be familiar. We will need to understand how to run our own households when the time comes.”

“I can see some sense in that.”

She smiled.

“In any case, that is your mother’s affair; it should be left to her discretion.”

Her smile vanished. “Father, I—I do not think Mother would agree with me.”

“Then I am afraid I must side with Mrs. Carter.”

“But, Father, the events of the past months have shown deficiencies in our education about the household. If the affairs are all managed by a housekeeper, we shall—”

“Yes, I see, I see. I will give the matter consideration. But it is not worth waiting supper over.”

“No, sir.” Caroline followed her father into the next room, grateful she might yet succeed with her plans concerning a housekeeper.

The warmth of that thought faded, however, as she sat down to the table and remembered the earlier parts of the conversation. She had too much food for thought to have any thoughts for food, and most of her supper returned to the kitchen untouched.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

“So we dine at the Carter home on Tuesday, at the Telford home on Thursday and then you said there is to be a dance?”

Josiah looked up from his papers when he realized some response was required of him. “The dance will be on Saturday, I believe. It is held in your honor.” He hoped contemplating that tribute would occupy his sister for a least a few minutes.

With Sir James inspecting the landing, Eleanor had been left to amuse herself for the day, a task for which she seemed ill-suited. She apparently expected to engage her brother in conversation during the entire period of her husband’s absence. If she mentioned clothing one more time, Josiah decided he really would lock her in a trunk until James returned.

She began to circle the room restlessly, causing certain floorboards to creak at uneven intervals. When

the creaking became unbearably annoying, he looked up from his account books again.

“Perhaps you might enjoy a walk outside, Eleanor?”

“In the snow? The wind is too cold. It would make my nose red.”

“Who is there to see if your nose is red?”

“Oh, ’tis so true. There is no one to see. However do you keep from going mad with boredom? Whatever do you do with your time?”

“Some of us have work to do, Eleanor.”

“How very odious for you. You should come back home with us. Then you should never have to worry about work.”

“I find I rather enjoy it.”

Eleanor actually shuddered. “This climate has addled your mind, Josiah. You do not care for work, you never have. You enjoy the finer pursuits, like reading, and discourse among educated minds.”

“Yes, well, I have not time for those things at present. I need to put the accounts in order before I give instructions to my factor.”

His sister began to stamp her feet as she circled. “How you can stand to sit and write in this cold room is beyond me. Father’s study was always the warmest room in the house. And James keeps a fire going in our library all the day, just in case he finds the need to tend to urgent business. Here, I believe the ink would freeze in your pen before it reaches the paper.”

Josiah sighed; he’d had nearly the same thought only a few minutes earlier. He could stand the chill if he became engrossed in his work; but with his sister’s interruptions, he could not concentrate. He put down his pen and stood abruptly.

“I’m going out. If you need me, send Betty or Priscilla down to the quarters.”

He saw her nod her assent as he pulled on his cloak and gloves. Then he was free.

After the darkness of the closed-up house, the bright sun reflecting off the crusty snow nearly blinded him. Since he could scarcely see to walk, he paused for some moments. The cold air felt sharp in his lungs, but it brought him a sense of freshness, as if it cleaned out all the dark, dank sensations from his very soul. After a few such breaths, his eyes focused clearly, and he suddenly felt ready to make a new start.

A new start at what?

The feeling remained, nonetheless. He headed toward the slave quarters at a brisk pace. Although he still was not quite sure what he was going to say to John and needed to fix the words clearly in his mind, all he could think about was the prospect of parading with his sister from one engagement to the next in a social whirlwind.

He had not attended many social occasions in the last year, and although he had considered them a bit of

a chore back in England, he found he now rather looked forward to a bit of frivolous amusement. Eleanor's visit could turn out to be most enjoyable.

Of course, the first event was merely a dinner at Hill Crest, which promised little in the way of real entertainment. It portended an afternoon of giggling sisters and not much chance for agreeable conversation.

Or did it? Caroline did not seem to giggle so much anymore, although he remembered her laughing. But she'd been laughing with him, not at him, hadn't she? Had they not shared the joke? He felt a peculiar warmth thinking about their last meeting. Very pretty teeth showed when she laughed, and the smile alone somehow made her eyes sparkle.

Had he noticed that when they were engaged? Josiah could not remember.

Their engagement seemed so unreal now, and yet it could be reinstated. The rather elastic colonial society might be prepared to forgive Caroline's indiscretions, now that her family's wealth was restored. Marriage to her would not greatly lower his standing in the community.

But this was so much nonsense. He was heavily in debt; it would be foolish to marry now. And he would probably be moving back to England, where an association with Caroline would reduce his position considerably.

Besides, she had never really cared for him to begin with. That much was made plain by her conduct in Charles Town.

Josiah took a deep breath. Now, he understood the sense of a fresh start. The upcoming round of social engagements would give him a fresh opportunity to look for a new future wife—if he did not choose to do that in England.

The sound of voices and laughter drifted out of the shuttered windows as he approached the largest of the slave quarters. He decided to knock before entering; it was his building, of course, but not his home, and he would not feel right walking in unannounced.

More laughter and a variety of eager greetings answered his knock, but Josiah felt almost guilty when he opened the door, for the surprised faces and fading smiles that greeted him indicated they had expected someone else, someone with whom they would feel at ease.

The room was crowded and warm. Men and woman who had been embracing or sitting together instantly jumped apart. Backs straightened, and eyes were turned away. One girl disentangled herself from the throng and stood against the wall as if she dared not move. It was Priscilla.

"Please excuse me for interrupting your Sunday," Josiah announced quietly. He found it hard to look around with most of the people in the room staring at the floor. Only one person met his gaze. "I would like to have a word with you, John, if I might?"

He held open the door for the man who had served as his unofficial overseer since Ellis's illicit departure.

The two walked some way in silence. Josiah wanted to get far enough away from the quarters that the people would not feel constrained by his presence on their one day of rest. He kept walking until he had his thoughts fully composed then looked around to discover they'd covered half the distance to the river.

“John?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You know I had planned to hire a new overseer to replace Ellis but was unable to do so before being called to Joppa on business.”

“Yes, sir.”

It was time to turn and walk back toward the quarters. Slowly. “Well, it was perhaps a fortunate happenstance. After giving the matter some thought, I’ve come to realize that you are the most appropriate man for the job.”

“Me, sir? Oh, no.”

“But you have, in effect, taken on the position and managed business admirably in my absence.”

“Business, sir? I don’t know business. I can’t write nor figure.”

“No, perhaps not, but I mean the business of the harvest, prizing the tobacco and so forth, and managing the people...”

John looked at him quizzically.

“What I mean is, you know what needs to be done, and you direct the workers to do it. That’s what an overseer does, and that is what you have been doing at Hanset these many months. You are well qualified to be overseer here.”

“But Ellis, sir, was always goin’ on ’bout books and numbers. He spent a great deal of time with ’em. I don’t know dat business.”

“Perhaps not, but I’m not at all sure Ellis did, either. He left the accounts in a frightful state.” Josiah smiled. “I should be handling those myself in any event. It is my plantation, after all. From now on, I shall take over the accounts, and you shall carry on as you have done but know I am trusting you as overseer.”

“Thank you, sir,” John said quietly. He looked over at his quarters as they approached.

“And, John, as overseer, you will be paid.”

“Paid, sir?”

“Yes, I’m not certain yet as to the amount,” Josiah said, hurrying his words, “for I need to finish straightening the accounts, and I have incurred some debts. But an overseer must be paid.” He looked at the slave to whom he owed so much more than a future promise of salary. “Of course, it will soon amount to enough to buy your freedom, and then you may decide if you wish to stay. But you may go ahead and move into Ellis’s—the overseer’s—house now, regardless.”

“Thank you, sir. Indeed, I thank you.” John bowed.

“And I thank you. You have kept my plantation together despite my earnest efforts to mismanage it into

bankruptcy.” He tried to laugh, but John looked at him too steadily, no mirth in his eyes, only patience. It would not have been seemly to thank the man again, so Josiah simply bowed in return and walked quickly back toward the house.

“Mr. Throckmorton, sir!” Betty leaned out the kitchen door as if she were a large cat waiting to pounce on an expected mouse. “Might I speak with you, sir? It is most important.”

Josiah stifled a curse. With his sister’s visit, he was certain Betty had no shortage of items about which to complain. She could start in now and not finish until next week. Nevertheless, he would have to listen to at least some of his housekeeper’s grievances.

“Yes, Betty, certainly.” He held up his hand as she started out the door. “I’ll come in. I know you’ll have a good fire going.”

“Yes, sir.” She grinned as she held open the door.

Josiah sat down on a stool that was near enough to the fire to be warmed by it but not close enough to be engulfed in ashes and grease if a gust of wind should suddenly blow down the chimney. “Now, then. What request of Lady Davenport’s has given you grief?”

“Lady Davenport, sir?” Betty looked almost in awe. “Oh, why nothing, sir. She has been the most perfect angel of a guest. You are most fortunate in your relation, sir.”

“Indeed. Well, then...this important matter?”

“It is Priscilla, sir.”

Josiah had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“I think, sir, that she is...that is, I am fairly certain, sir, that she is...”

Josiah knew what she was going to say, yet he just looked at her, forcing her to say it aloud.

“I believe she is with child, sir. By one of the slaves, sir.”

He would have to make some answer. Priscilla was his property for the next four years; by law she had no right to impair her ability to work. Betty, the obedient servant, wanted to see Priscilla, the wicked servant, punished.

“This is a serious matter, Betty,” he finally said.

“Will you prosecute, sir?”

Josiah hated the look of glee barely concealed in her eyes.

“I don’t know.” He stood. “It is none of your concern, in any case.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, sir. It is my concern if she’s not here to do her work. Will you buy a new servant, sir?”

“No, I’ll not buy a new one soon. Perhaps one of the slaves can help you, if necessary.”

Betty looked at him darkly but did not dare answer any further.

He slammed the door behind him. Betty created her own problems, and now she could decide whether to accept help from people she considered beneath her station or whether she would take on the extra work herself. That was her concern.

But he would have to decide what to do about Priscilla. In Joppa, he had seen cases, and even brought one, against a pregnant servant, and he wanted as little to do with such a matter as possible. The accusation, the shame and general spectacle of it all sickened him. The judge—and the spectators, too—had seemed to demand the repetition of every sordid detail and had forced witnesses to speculate on rumors of lewd behavior of people only remotely connected with the defendant.

The punishment was worse. If the man involved owned property he could pay a fine. But such men never seemed to be implicated. The only other choice seemed to be a public whipping for the servant and the father of the child. That spectacle had proved as popular as the trials. Then the servant would have an extra year added to her servitude to compensate her master for lost time.

Even greater punishment could be possible in Priscilla’s case because this pregnancy involved miscegenation. Relationships between blacks and whites could be punished harshly indeed.

If he brought the matter before the court, would Priscilla protest? He could not imagine the shy girl defying him in a court of law but neither could he be sure she would willingly confess the name of her lover. It would have to be proven, with all the attendant speculation and evidence of wanton behavior.

He thought of the boy with whom Priscilla had been sitting when he walked into John’s quarters. Both he and Priscilla were so very young, and now about to become parents—if they survived the punishment.

Josiah had never given much thought to having a child, other than to suppose he would likely have a family when he married. And some children would likely die of disease, but perhaps one or two might grow to adulthood and carry on the family name. They might even become interesting companions.

He pictured Priscilla and the boy, whose name he did not even know. They must be scared, certainly. The whole business of childbirth and raising children was risky enough without the threat of prosecution. He could not bear the thought of adding pain and torment to that fear. Still, disobedient slaves and servants required punishment to deter others from following suit.

He needed to keep his thoughts clear and businesslike. He would treat his people justly, but he must maintain discipline.

Why, now, could he not stop thinking of fatherhood?

Chapter Thirty-Eight

"They're here! The horses are in the yard," Georgiana called from the window.

"Look at that magnificent hat!" Johanna exclaimed. "Ouch, Georgiana, you're leaning on my hair."

"Sorry, Johanna. My, but her skin is so fine. She must never go out during daylight," Georgiana mused.

"How can you tell from up here?" Edwina asked with disgust.

"And through those dirty panes of glass," Caroline called from the landing. "Come, girls, we must not keep our guests waiting."

"But, Caroline, do we not wait upstairs to make an entrance after they arrive?" Johanna asked.

"We do not." Caroline directed her youngest sister down the stairs then followed her. "Making an entrance, as you say, would be very poor manners for anyone, and very foolish for poor colonials in the face of English guests. We allow Lady Davenport to make an entrance."

"And I've no doubt she will," Edwina whispered.

"Edwina, please, control yourself, or you shall have me giggling throughout the dinner," Caroline begged with a grin. "Now that I am twenty, I do so want to prove I am quite done with giggling."

"I shall take that as a challenge," Edwina answered wickedly.

"Oh, do not!"

"But I shall wait until the second course, or perhaps the third, if I find myself in a kindly temper."

Caroline rolled her eyes but stopped before the first giggle could escape her lips. Though she feared making a fool of herself before the elegant Lady Davenport, for some reason she was in a joyful frame of mind, anticipating the afternoon with pleasure. After all, if she made some sort of mistake it would be known only among the immediate family. Conduct at next week's dance would be an entirely different

matter, but there would be time enough later for worry on that account.

A knock sounded on the front door.

Despite her insistence that her sisters not make an entrance in front of their guests, she nevertheless was anxious that they be arranged in an informal tableau when the door opened, sitting around the table in the main room playing at lanterloo.

“Sir James and Lady Davenport, and Mr. Throckmorton,” Edward announced in his most formal lisp. They stood and exclaimed surprised greetings, as if they had not been watching their guests’ every move for the last ten minutes.

As Caroline streamed forward with her sisters, she looked around for her father—surely, he should make the first greeting. But she had been so concerned with arranging her sisters she had not noticed her parents were nowhere to be seen.

“Welcome, Sir James, Lady Davenport, and Mr. Throckmorton.” Caroline wished her voice did not sound so birdlike. She curtsied as deeply as her stays would allow. “We are honored by your visit.”

Since she could think of nothing more eloquent to say at the moment, she moved aside for the others to make their greetings. She felt her own speech to have been grossly inadequate and tried to think back to the words of greeting used by her tenant, which had seemed very pretty at the time.

Her sisters had just finished when Caroline heard footsteps on the stairs. She gritted her teeth. Her parents were making an entrance.

“Sir James, and Lady Davenport! We are most extraordinarily delighted to have the pleasure of your company on this fine afternoon.” Her father showed a leg, and her mother curtsied so low Caroline listened for her stays to snap. While they apparently remained intact, Mrs. Carter had, in fact, sunk too far and needed her husband’s assistance to rise without tumbling over.

Caroline could feel her face flush. She glanced at Lady Davenport to see whether she was amused or annoyed by this spectacle. To her horror, she found Lady Davenport was ignoring her parents and staring pointedly at her.

She said nothing for several interminable moments. “Have we not met before, miss?” she finally queried.

Caroline realized, probably too late, that her mouth had dropped open at the sound of Lady Davenport’s voice. She was the woman who had asked for directions that muddy, rainy day. “I—I do not believe I have had the pleasure.”

How could she have been so obtuse? Of course, that would have been Josiah’s sister, or some member of her party. Caroline was struck with the sensation that even the roots of her hair must be blushing.

“Please, forgive me, I have been remiss in making introductions.” Mr. Throckmorton stepped forward with a concerned smile. “Lady Davenport, this is Miss Carter.”

Caroline bowed, and looked up to see that Josiah’s sister regarded her with barely concealed surprise. Lady Davenport kept her voice even as she replied, however.

“How do you do, Miss Carter?”

Mr. Throckmorton hurried on. "Sir James, may I present Miss Carter? And Sir James and Lady Davenport, Mr. Carter, Mrs. Carter, Miss Georgiana Carter, Miss Edwina Carter and Miss Johanna Carter."

"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Sir James bowed smartly.

"I am sure I am charmed to meet you all." Lady Davenport made an elegant curtsy Caroline imagined she might have seen in the courts of Europe. And this lady had seen her covered with mud, running through the trees like a half-witted servant.

Lady Davenport had recovered her poised smile only a few seconds after her brother's hurried introduction, but those few seconds of incredulity had seared into Caroline's memory most painfully. This lady must think her unworthy of even dining with her brother, let alone marrying him.

Of course, she was not going to marry him, so it would not matter. Would it?

"Are you quite well, Miss Carter?"

Caroline had not realized she had been staring at the floor, and she looked up to see that the only eyes on her now were those of Mr. Throckmorton. They were a clear, pale blue, like faintly tinted glass. His sister had eyes of the same hue; Caroline could yet envision her stare.

But now her sisters crowded around their English guests, blocking Lady Davenport from Caroline's view with a wall of laughter and compliments. She looked away from their backs gratefully and took a glass of punch from a tray offered by their new servant.

It was time for polite conversation. "Your sister favors you in appearance, Mr. Throckmorton," she said before she took a sip of her punch.

"What? Oh, perhaps. We, my brother and sister and I, all tend to favor my mother's side of the family. So I am told." He smiled. "But my sister has been at times called a beauty, and that has never been said of my brother or myself. So, the resemblance must go only so far."

"I would not say so." Caroline leaned to the side to get a better look at Lady Davenport, who held the other ladies entranced with some sort of story. The little bit of hair she could see peeking out from beneath the woman's wig appeared to be the same light-brown color as her brother's. Both shared a tall, slender build and a long straight nose. The nose gave Lady Davenport a most elegant profile.

She looked back at her companion. "Turn your head to the side, Mr. Throckmorton."

He gave her a puzzled look but complied without a word of protest. "Is this sufficient, Miss Carter?"

Caroline laughed softly, hoping the sound was not too undignified. "Yes. I believe your profiles compare. There is perhaps more resemblance than you realize."

"In appearance, I suppose, there may be." Mr. Throckmorton glanced at his sister's animated features as she regaled her hostess with her stories. "In temperament, we have always been so different I daresay I've never given much thought to any similarities we might share."

"You may well share more in temperament as well."

“I believe I am supposed to take that as a compliment?”

Caroline gestured to the admiring throng around his sister. “Why, yes, of course.”

“Then I will—if you say so.”

“Whatever do you mean, Mr. Throckmorton?”

“Let me put it thus: if I said you resembled your sisters in temperament, would you be pleased?”

Caroline started to answer and found she could not, with any degree of politeness.

“Would you agree?” Mr. Throckmorton continued.

“Certainly not. We are very different in temperament.” Imagine being compared to those weak, over-indulged. . . “I see your point, Mr. Throckmorton.” She knew she wore a most unladylike grin. “Even if I am like them to the least detail, I would not wish to be reminded of it.”

“Quite so. I would not care to acknowledge such a resemblance to my sister in the first place. So, let us say, then, that we each have a . . . unique temperament within our respective families.” Mr. Throckmorton held up his glass of punch for a toast.

“Yes, I concur. A superficial resemblance only.” Caroline clinked her glass against his and wondered irrelevantly what her own eyes looked like in the fading afternoon light.

“Such elegant manners,” Georgiana sighed as she slipped off her shoes and sat down before the fire in the large bedchamber the three younger girls shared.

“Have you ever seen a more beautiful gown?” Johanna looked at her own sadly and then looked up at Caroline staring into the fire, only dimly aware of her sisters’ conversation. “Do you think our Nell could curl my hair in that style?”

“No, Lady Davenport wears a wig,” Georgiana answered for her. “Your own hair could never look so elegant.”

“They say that ladies with elaborate wigs sometimes have to sleep with wire cages over their heads to keep out the mice,” Edwina said with a gleam in her eye.

Johanna grimaced. “Do you think Lady Davenport gets mice in her wig?”

“Caroline?” Edwina poked at her older sister with a hairbrush. “Will you not ask Mr. Throckmorton if Lady Davenport has brought a cage for her hair?”

“Edwina!” Johanna wailed.

“Oh, don’t worry, Johanna. Lady Davenport’s wig is not so large as ladies’ wigs were in years past. There is hardly enough room for more than a few bugs.” Edwina started to pull the pins out of her hair. “I’m sure the ladies of Europe have had enough of tall wigs. I cannot imagine wearing such an

uncomfortable thing.”

“Nor I,” Georgiana agreed.

“But if all ladies in polite society wear them?”

Edwina grimaced as she yanked on a twisted strand. “I don’t ever think we shall have to worry about what happens in that sort of society. Maryland will never be like England. Do you not agree, Caroline?”

“Do you?” Johanna asked anxiously. “Do you not rather think Elkridge Landing will grow to be like London?”

Caroline looked into the fire and did not answer.

“I believe Caroline wants to wear a wig as tall as this room,” Edwina said in a loud voice, “and we had better call on Mr. Throckmorton and tell him to order one from London. His sister can select one for us.” She looked over at her older sister, but Caroline did not respond. “I say, let us all go over now in our nightclothes, except for Caroline. She may ride as Lady Godiva.” Edwina grabbed the back of the bodice of Caroline’s gown, which had been loosened but not yet removed.

“Stop it! What are you doing, Edwina?”

“So, you do not wish to ride to Hanset as Lady Godiva, then?”

“No, for heaven’s sakes, no.” Caroline looked at her sister as if she had sprouted horns. “Whatever are you talking about?” She slipped off the loosened bodice, stays and skirt, and covered her chemise with a dressing gown.

“It does not matter, since you paid us no attention,” Edwina huffed as she tied her own dressing gown around her waist.

“I am sorry, Edwina, if I am not very good company this evening. Perhaps I had better go to my own room.” Caroline stood and folded her bodice and skirt carefully.

“No, stay for a few minutes more, Caroline. Please?” Johanna begged.

“A short while only, then.”

“Whatever has you so preoccupied tonight?” Georgiana asked.

“Oh, I suppose the same as yourselves. We do not often see the likes of Lady Davenport, do we?” Caroline smiled, but felt she could not fully enter into the dissection of their guest. She had seen the likes of Lady Davenport. In Charles Town, she had seen such elegance on several occasions. But thinking of Charles Town made her think of Captain Talbot.

“Did you not think Lady Davenport the most polite and elegantest lady you have ever seen?”

“Yes, Johanna.” Captain Talbot had said he had a special regard for her. Captain Talbot had told her she was beautiful, and said he would find it hard to leave her to return to the *Osprey*.

“And do you not find Sir James very handsome?”

“Yes, Johanna.” Captain Talbot had very nearly convinced her to let him escort her back to her room.

“And to think, they almost became family to us.”

“Yes, Johanna.” And then he had sold her. Sold her back to her old life. “What did you say?”

“Lady Davenport and Sir James. They would have been your sister and brother, and therefore ours by extension.”

“Oh, yes. I suppose so.”

“Why did she look at you so strangely when they first arrived?” Georgiana asked. “That was not so very polite, was it?”

“No, but I suppose she must have been surprised. Perhaps I was not what she had hoped for in a sister.”

“How could anyone think such a thing?” Johanna demanded. “You are the oldest, the smartest and, saving Georgiana, the prettiest of all of us.”

Caroline smiled and hugged her sister. “Thank you, Johanna. But I believe Lady Davenport has seen many ladies who are smarter and prettier than any of us.”

“And older,” added Edwina.

“And older, and wittier, too, I daresay.”

“Well, it does not signify. I would not care to have Lady Davenport as my sister.”

“I thank you for your loyalty, Johanna.”

“I do not think we need Lady Davenport, either,” Edwina concluded. “She poked at all her food before eating it, as if she was afraid it might come back to life on her plate.”

“I noticed that myself. I could not decide if she was distrustful of the food or just trying to show off her expertise with a fork, thinking that we might not know how to use such elegant utensils.” Caroline giggled, despite her earlier resolve to be more dignified.

“And,” Georgiana added, “she had that most hideous scar on her cheek.”

“Was that a scar? I thought it was a mole.”

“I know not what it was, but you’re right, it was dreadful. But she cannot help it, I suppose.” All the same, Caroline was glad it was Lady Davenport who wore the ugly scar and not her brother, who had actually looked rather handsome this evening, though not dressed nearly so elegantly as his be-wigged brother-in-law. Caroline felt her scalp itch at the thought of wearing a wig.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

"Such vulgar entertainments. And the girls are all so very coarse and unrefined. Their mother is even worse, I daresay."

"So, you had a good time this evening, then, Eleanor?"

"I should say not." Josiah's sister pulled off her fur muff and slapped it on the table. "The company was insufferable, the setting even more so. Do you not know anyone of society in Maryland, Josiah?"

"The company *was* rather common for us, Josiah." His brother-in-law stretched out his hands before the fire.

"Well, there is to be a dance next week, at which you will meet all the families of the neighborhood, including the Carrolls." Josiah inspected his shoes for mud and decided whatever was there would dry and fall off soon enough. "And we will dine with them at a later date. You won't find much better company in this part of Maryland. Of course, they are Catholic..."

"Well, that's nearly as bad. Did you not investigate this neighborhood before you bought your plantation? How can you live with these low planters? How could you even consider marrying one of them?" Eleanor shook her head and looked at the mug of cider Priscilla had set down for her as soon as they walked in the door.

"I will admit their speech and dress and..." Josiah looked at the walls. "...the houses and so forth are not what we are used to. But that does not indicate a deficiency in the people themselves."

"Oh, but it does, you see." James turned away from the fire and took a step closer to him. "Refinement, as reflected in speech and manners and appearance, indicates that a sufficient quantity of time has been spent improving the mind, cultivating a love of beauty and reflecting on the higher things."

"What higher things?" Josiah had never noticed any improvement of mind in his sister all the years he had known her, and thus far had detected none in her husband, either.

“The highest, of course. Beauty and grace and . . . refinement,” James finished, a little lamely.

“So, if they are not dressed correctly, then people do not have enough time for discourse on beauty. Is that correct?”

“No, no, Josiah. You have oversimplified the case. You’ve reduced the sentiment too far; it does not carry its full meaning.”

“Well, you had better be careful when you talk about ‘reflecting on the higher things’ in this region, or you will likely be taken for a Quaker or some other religious enthusiast.”

“Good heavens!” James’s eyes widened in a rare expression of surprise. “Have they really such people in these environs?”

“I believe there is a Society of Friends meeting house not too far from the landing. Would you care to put in an appearance on Sunday?”

“Josiah, please, enough of your nonsense.” Eleanor emptied her mug of cider into a corner of the fire. “You have been too long among them, that is plain. It is a good thing we arrived to save you from a disastrous marriage to that Carter daughter.”

“Our engagement was put off well before your arrival.” He realized he was clenching his jaw.

“Oh? I wonder why?” Eleanor set down the mug carelessly. “Well, perhaps your reason has not completely left you.”

“But, as a matter of fact,” he continued, feigning a yawn, “I had considered asking her father to set a date.”

“Don’t be a fool.”

“What is your objection to Miss Carter? That her clothes are not fine enough? Her house not large enough? Is her hair of a color not in fashion this season?”

“You are being ridiculous.” Eleanor threw herself into the chair Priscilla had carefully covered with a fur cape before she’d retired to the kitchen.

“Am I? Would you not prefer for a sister a lady whose dress will never be as fine as your own? You would, thereby, always show off to advantage.”

“The trouble, dear brother, is that Miss Carter is not a lady at all.”

“What do you say?” Josiah stiffened, his feigned attitude of nonchalance altogether gone. Eleanor did not yet know about the episode with the pirates, did she?

“You heard me perfectly well. There is not a lady in her whole family. Why, this evening’s vulgar display alone should be enough to prove the point.”

He relaxed somewhat. “What would you consider vulgar about the dinner? I thought the meal rather good.”

“Yes, the food was well enough, but think of the conversation. It was so uncivilized.”

“Nonsense. Everyone was perfectly civil. Jovial, even.”

“That’s just the point. Mrs. Carter and her daughters laughed at everything I said as if I were entertaining them on the stage.”

“I am sure they only did it to gratify you.”

“Well,” Eleanor said, pushing a dampened curl back into place, “I found it most disconcerting. In any case, the entertainments after dinner were even worse.”

“Oh, come, now, Eleanor, certainly, the music was quite simple, but it was executed well. You cannot deny that.”

“Frankly, Josiah, I did not notice. It was too vulgar, I could not stand to listen.”

“Vulgar?”

“Two of the girls played a flute, blowing their cheeks out in a most unbecoming manner. How could you not take offense?”

“I suppose I never thought of it as offensive.” He thought for a moment. “They have not many musical instruments here that I’ve seen. Would it be better for them to learn no music at all?”

“Necessity is no excuse for vulgarity,” James said, nodding as he bolstered his wife’s arguments.

Josiah raised his eyebrows but said nothing. His sister and brother-in-law made less sense now than ever he could remember.

“You see, Josiah? Coarse laughter, musical displays in poor taste and gambling at cards.”

“You play at cards, Eleanor. And I’ve known you to wager and lose with some regularity.”

“I play whist, Josiah. The Carters invited us to play all-fours, a most inferior game. And I believe they were playing an even lower gambling game when we arrived.”

“What does it signify, Eleanor? Perhaps the customs are different in Maryland than those you are used to. Had you not considered that?”

“Oh, indeed, you have been here too long, you poor boy. It must be that fever we hear so much about.” His sister nodded conspiratorially at her husband.

“Josiah, these people are English, as we are, but they are an inferior sort, having never set foot on proper English soil.” James paused to take a pinch of snuff. “We set the custom, and they must follow. It’s quite simple, really.”

Josiah took a slow breath to keep from snorting aloud with disgust. It was not at all simple, though in fairness he supposed he had thought the same at first. The colonists had not the resources to replicate life in England, but they seemed to be making an effort to acquire those resources. In the meantime,

allowances had to be made. Of late, he had been so occupied with the concerns of business he had not spent much time thinking of what he missed of England.

Other than coffee. He still missed that with great frequency.

“Would anyone care for coffee?” he offered suddenly. Betty would get better at making it if she had more practice.

His sister sniffed. “I will take some chocolate, Josiah, if you have any.”

“I do. James?”

“I will have coffee, also.”

“With this wind, I’m afraid they won’t hear the bell. I’ll just tell them we require two coffees and another warm cider.”

Eleanor looked at him darkly.

“That is, a chocolate. Why you do not tell her of your distaste for cider yourself I cannot understand.” He put on his coat and cape and started for the kitchen. As the door shut behind him and a wet wind smacked him unpleasantly in the face, he remembered one of the problems he had thus far managed to keep from his mind by planning a hunting trip for his brother-in-law.

What should he do about Priscilla?

He opened the kitchen door and saw no one at first. The dim glow of the banked fire cast little light in the shuttered room, and no candles burned on the table or in the loft where Betty and Priscilla slept. Or at least where they were supposed to sleep. Priscilla had obviously taken to sleeping elsewhere on occasion.

Josiah rubbed his eyes in an effort to stop that line of thought.

“Is there something wanting, sir?” Priscilla slid off a stool set beside the fire, clutching a bit of needlework in her hands.

“Ah, it’s you, then, Priscilla.”

“Betty is asleep, sir.” The girl looked up to the loft and spoke in a voice scarcely above a whisper. “I hope I might be able to help you without disturbing her.”

“Yes, yes.” Josiah followed her gaze to the loft and noticed the sounds of snoring just barely detectable over the rattle of the shutters at the windows. “Certainly, you should be able to.”

He stopped. Actually, Priscilla probably did not know how to make coffee. He could do with just cider himself, but he had already offered coffee to his brother-in-law, and he hated to provide more fuel for the argument about the inferiority of life in the colonies. “Do you know how to make coffee?”

Priscilla looked down. “No, sir.”

“Very well. Can you make chocolate?”

“I believe so, sir. But I’ll need to see if we’ve milk enough.”

“You do that. And then...we shall figure out how to make coffee.” Had he heard himself correctly?

He smiled at Priscilla as she put on her cape and went to fetch milk. He was going to help one of his servants prepare an item for his table. How very odd, and yet—why not? Was it better they should simply not ever drink coffee? Or wake Betty to prepare a beverage that was certain to be worse than whatever he and Priscilla conjured up? No. Although such behavior flew in the face of tradition, it made more sense that he show Priscilla how to roast, grind and brew the precious beans. Then she could take charge of its preparation in the future.

Until...

Josiah gulped. This would be the best time to talk to her. Betty’s snores assured him they would not suffer interruption from her, and eavesdropping by anyone else was unlikely.

But what was he going to say? He felt a sense of uncertainty start to spiral up inside him as he paced the room. What was he going to say? How could he possibly maintain discipline without cruelly harming his people? She would return at any moment, he must have an answer, yet—

Be not afraid.

Those comforting words always seemed to appear when he was becoming paralyzed into inaction. And thank goodness, they did. He would not be afraid—there had to be a compromise, and he would puzzle it out.

Josiah took a breath and started a fresh consideration of the problem. Some discipline, or at least some action, was called for. If Priscilla’s condition took her out of his service, she owed him the value of that service. But would it profit him to have her humiliated and flogged? Certainly not. Would it deter others from similar wrongdoing? Well, he had no female indentured servants other than Betty and Priscilla. The slaves were encouraged to reproduce. So, there would be nothing to be gained by corporal punishment or a public lawsuit.

The law would award him an extra year on her indenture if he brought her before the court. Perhaps she might agree to add a few extra months to her indenture, to make up for whatever time was lost?

Priscilla stepped in quietly with a pail of milk. After setting it down, she hoisted another pail, this one full of water, and poured some into a hanging pot. She raked the coals and added more wood to the fire. Then she crept up the ladder and returned a moment later with Betty’s keys.

“I’ll get the chocolate, coffee and sugar,” Josiah offered. “Please prepare another pot of boiling water and a shallow pan to roast the beans.”

When the grated chocolate was simmering with the water and milk and the roasted beans had been crushed and set to steep in boiling water, he called Priscilla to stand opposite him at the table. Then he cleared his throat and looked to the fire, again as if hoping for interruption from a flaming pot; but the beverages simmered without incident. He cleared his throat again.

“Priscilla, Betty has told me about...about your condition.”

The girl looked down at her hands folded in her lap.

“Do you deny it?” Josiah felt very harsh as he heard the words come out, as though he were a judge passing sentence on a condemned prisoner.

The girl continued to look down for some time without speaking, until Betty’s snoring and the gentle hiss of the pots over the fire began to sound deafening. When Priscilla finally looked up, her eyes reflected the fire like glass, but no tears had yet spilled out.

“No, sir.”

“I will not prosecute,” he said kindly, and he knew then he absolutely would not, even if the girl refused to agree to serve extra time. “And I will not make this news public, though I suppose I cannot stop others from talking.” He looked up at the loft and immediately wished he had not. It was unfair to criticize one servant in front of another, and for behavior not yet committed. “In any case, I would hope that, in fairness to your contract of indenture, you would agree to serve additional time if warranted by the consequences of your...condition.”

“Time, sir?” Priscilla held up a single finger. “One year, only, sir?”

“Perhaps less. Very likely so.”

“Yes, sir.”

She had agreed! She had admitted the charge. He could now rest at ease; the matter was settled.

But instead of getting to his feet to go, he asked another question. “About the boy, your...the father of the...” Josiah did stand now, and he paced a couple of steps away before facing her again.

“Yes, sir?”

“He will still be here when your indenture is up.”

“I understand that, sir.”

“What will you do?”

“I’ll work for wages, sir.” She looked around. “Somewhere. Then I’ll buy his freedom.”

He could ask where she would live—any wages she would earn would barely cover a roof over her head. It would take years to earn enough to buy the freedom of the young, strong boy with whom she was apparently determined to stay. But he did not ask. When the time came, she could stay with the boy in the quarters at Hanset, if she desired.

“There are those,” he said, and looked up at the loft again, “many people, in fact, who may shun your company.”

“They do already.” Priscilla also glanced at the loft then turned her gaze back to Josiah frankly. “I mind it not, sir. I have found my place elsewhere, sir.”

Josiah contemplated the girl in silence for some moments. What a life she had chosen for herself! But he

knew not what kind of life she had left behind in England, either. No one who was happy with his life there would move across the ocean.

“Very well, Priscilla, so we are understood. Our agreement will become known when questions are asked...” Josiah stopped himself before he could look up this time. “. . .and I will expect you to honor it. If you do, you need fear no further punishment.”

“And...Benathi?”

Was that the boy’s name? “I see no need to punish anyone further, so long as the work gets done.”

“Thank you, sir.” The girl flashed a crooked smile, momentarily transforming her pockmarked face with a radiance that made her appear decidedly not of this world. Then she frowned; the illusion disappeared, and she looked the unremarkable servant once again.

Her frown was directed at the fire, and Josiah followed her gaze to see the pot of chocolate brimming with large bubbles that exploded over the side and sizzled into the ashes with the aroma of burnt milk.

“I expect it’s done now, is it?” He sometimes wondered if he spoke simply because he expected to hear someone say something, however unnecessary it might be.

“Yes, sir.” Priscilla had already taken up a cloth to remove the pot from its hanger.

As Josiah moved closer to the fire to assist, the smell of coffee assailed his nose. “If you can bring the coffee over, I will take the chocolate to Lady Davenport.” He picked up the cup she had just filled. “If I’m not mistaken, she generally prefers chocolate to cider.” He looked over at the boiling pot of coffee. “It looks strong enough to walk itself to the house. Extra milk in mine, if you please, Priscilla.”

He grinned and started to leave in haste, to put some distance between himself and the servant. But why? Just so it would appear to his sister and brother-in-law he was not on too intimate a footing with his servants? Besides, Priscilla would have both hands full with the coffee. Josiah waited until she had the cups ready then held the door for her and escorted her to the house, hoping his sister would notice when he opened the door and allowed the servant to enter first.

Chapter Forty

"Caroline, you are not going to do this." Georgiana blocked the doorway of her older sister's room. "The dance is *in two* days."

"This is a good day for it; we've plenty of ashes and fat collected, and we are very nearly out of soap. We may not have such a nice day again until after we run out. Besides," Caroline said, grinning as she pulled a frayed cap over her hair, "I am dreadfully bored. My gown is as finished as it will ever be, and I cannot stand to look at it anymore."

"But, what if you burn your skin? You could singe your hair! And you'll never get the smell out in time." Georgiana appeared near to tears. "You will arrive at the dance smelling like bacon grease, and the scent will carry over to us, as well."

"Do not look so alarmed, Georgiana. I shall have all day tomorrow to get the scent from my hair and skin, and I certainly won't be wearing this old gown." She laughed as she looked down at the collage of frayed edges, stains and holes that made up her dress. "This is hardly good enough for the garden anymore. Even the plants will have nothing to do with me, I daresay."

Georgiana crossed her arms resolutely. "I do not understand why you are doing this, Caroline. We are poor no longer, yet you make us work like slaves in the kitchen—"

"Overseeing and assisting activities in the kitchen one day per week hardly qualifies as slave labor, Georgiana."

"Well, I still do not see that it is necessary. Why can we not simply buy another housekeeper?"

Caroline started to inch around her sister, who still blocked the doorway. "We have discussed this on numerous occasions, Georgiana, and I do not have time for a full recitation now. We each take a turn in the kitchen to learn the necessary management skills so that when we have our own kitchens to manage—"

"I shall buy a housekeeper at once and never set foot in a kitchen the rest of my days."

"All well and good if you have the means." Caroline smiled as she realized she was almost out the door and would have to defend her choice of activity no further.

"I shall, you may depend on it. That is, my husband shall." Georgiana stopped thoughtfully. The subject of the mysterious future husband provided food for endless speculation, and she paused just long enough for Caroline to slip free.

"Tell Mother I will be back for supper," she called as she headed for the stairs.

"Wait, Caroline. Must you go to the tenants' house for this?"

“Why? Would you prefer that Mrs. Johnson come here?”

The sound of Georgiana’s exaggerated sigh followed her as she escaped down the stairs.

“I think crushed lavender will work best, but I’ve also brought dried rose petals and mint leaves. What do you suggest?”

“Perhaps we’d better start getting the water over the ashes first, Miss Carter.” Molly Johnson eyed the large barrel in the yard with concern. “We can only do a little at once, and it takes some time to get it all done.”

“Oh. Of course.” Caroline set down her baskets of sweet-smelling produce and looked at the barrel full of ashes. A smaller kettle of water bubbled over an open fire nearby. One of them would have to remove that kettle from its perch and somehow pour the water into the large tub without getting burned.

“Did you bring Leda?”

“No.” Caroline had been so consumed with her experiments crushing herbs and flowers to judge the power of their scent that she essentially forgot what Mrs. Johnson had told her about the effort and dangers involved in making soap. “I shall go collect her at once.”

“Do not trouble yourself; I’ll send the boys.”

“It would be no trouble.”

“Please, Miss Carter, the boys would appreciate the opportunity of the errand.”

This Caroline did not doubt. “Very well. I am sorry for the delay.”

“There will be no delay. William! James! We can start by ourselves.”

“Oh.” Caroline watched in silence as the tenant instructed her boys to bring Leda back straightaway. She looked at the barrel again. “When will we need to add the scent?”

Mrs. Johnson smiled. “Not for some time, yet. We’ve to make the lye, first. When that’s done, we boil it with the grease, and just at the end we’ll add your flowers. And if it sets up, we’ll have soap for the year.”

“And if it does not?”

“If we’ve bad luck with the soap, then we shall do much less cleaning during the year.”

Caroline shook her head. “No, if my experiment ruins the soap, I shall buy you some.” She suddenly wondered why she had not simply planned to purchase scented soap rather than attempt to make it. The idea of making and scenting her own soap had been conceived during their days of genteel poverty. It had sounded like an interesting experiment. Now, it looked like a lot of work with the prospect of having little to show for it.

Still, she was curious. How could they take water and ashes, two substances so very harmless on their own and by leaching the water through the ashes create such a powerful and dangerous substance as lye? And when that strong substance was boiled with old grease, the end result would be a soft soap they could use for cleaning.

“Don’t you find this a marvelous process, Mrs. Johnson?”

“Marvelous?” The tenant looked at her skirts as she spoke, trying to keep them away from the fire as she collected the boiling water. “I don’t suppose I’ve ever thought of it as marvelous.”

“Think of it, though. We take these simple wastes, put them together and create an entirely new and useful product. It is almost like magic.”

Mrs. Johnson grunted as she tipped the heavy kettle into the leaching barrel. “If it were magic, I’d have little elves to help me pour the water.”

“Oh, let me help you, Mrs. Johnson.” But by the time Caroline reached her, she had finished.

“I’d say it’s been at least an hour since the last water was added. Let us draw off the lye and see how strong it is. William! Bring me an egg, will you?”

Caroline finished brushing her lap free of crumbs from their hurried dinner of bread and cheese and looked at her with some surprise. “Are you still hungry, Mrs. Johnson?”

“It’s more of the ‘magic’ you spoke of earlier.” Molly Johnson smiled. She drew some lye from the bottom of the barrel and poured it into the kettle then placed the egg on top. “If it floats,” she explained, “then the lye is strong enough. And it appears that it is.”

“So now we...”

“We add some grease.” Mrs. Johnson gestured toward the smelly barrel of grease. “I find that a ladle works pretty well. Leda, would you help me pour some more lye into the kettle? I think we should make our batches as big as the kettle will hold.”

Caroline grimaced as she plunged her arm into the barrel and emerged with a full ladle. “How much will we need?”

“We’ll try that bowl full, for starters.”

Caroline held her breath to lessen the impact of the smell as she dipped her ladle in each time, and took an extra big breath before carrying the full bowl over to the kettle. Then her curiosity took over, and the odor seemed less important.

“Will it turn into soap immediately?” she asked as they added the grease to the kettle.

“Once it comes to a boil, it will turn fairly quickly, yes. We’ll add your lavender then.”

Caroline fairly bounced with excitement as she dashed over to collect her basket. But the watched pot was a large one, and it seemed as if it would take hours to boil, despite the large amount of wood Leda

had added to the blaze.

The sound of a bird twittering caused her to turn and examine the leafless trees around the clearing. A warm sun and the absence of wind made the afternoon truly beautiful, like a day plucked from the midst of spring—except that nothing was growing yet, and Caroline knew that it would get cold again, for some time, before the real spring days began. She closed her eyes and turned her face up to the sun to enjoy the warmth.

You'll burn as red as an Indian, the voice inside her head reminded her. And this time, she was not on a ship full of rough men but was home, preparing to go to a dance full of gentlemen. And one of them might—

“Good day, Miss Carter.”

Her startled hands flew up, scattering the contents of her basket through the air like a spray of floral artillery. “Mr. Throckmorton?” His horse reared slightly at the sudden onslaught. “Oh, I am sorry.”

“No, please.” He dismounted with surprising speed. “It is I who am sorry for surprising you.”

Caroline looked down at the scattered flowers and at her dirty gown. Then she looked up, wondering how it was Mr. Throckmorton always seemed to make an appearance when she was at her very worst. “I am surprised to see you here, I must admit, sir.”

“I came to ask Mr. Johnson if he might be able to assist us in building a new barn. I did not realize the Johnsons were entertaining guests.”

Caroline laughed. “We are making soap, Mr. Throckmorton. But I suppose I am here for entertainment, in a way. I wanted to see if I could make our soap smell like something other than salt pork.”

“Cake soap from England does not smell like salt pork.”

“No, but it is terribly expensive. I thought if I could figure a way to make our homemade soap more...”

“Refined?”

“Yes, I suppose that's it.”

“And have you?”

“I do not yet know. We have to wait for it to boil, then add the scent, then wait for it to cool.”

“I see. It sounds very interesting.”

“Oh, it is. Except for the waiting.”

“Would you care to go for a short stroll to pass the time?”

“Oh, well, yes, but,” Caroline said, looking over to the kettle, “I do not wish to miss the time to add my scents.” Then she looked down at the nearly empty basket. “If I have any left, that is.”

“Do forgive me, I apologize again for startling you so. Please, allow me.” Mr. Throckmorton bent on

one knee and began retrieving the scattered sprigs of dried flowers and herbs.

Caroline suddenly remembered having seen him on bended knee once before. He had proposed then, looking so formal and serious and somehow almost ridiculous. Now, he was engaged in a rather silly task, yet somehow looked almost dignified. It made no sense.

“I’m afraid most of these will not be of much use to you now, Miss Carter.”

“Fear not, Mr. Throckmorton. The most potent of them I have crushed and put into linen bags, and they’ve remained intact.” She held up the bag of lavender for his inspection.

He smiled but the look in his eyes was sad. “I am glad, for your sake, Miss Carter. And I would not wish to keep you from finishing your task. If you will be so kind as to forgive my interruption, I will inquire after Mr. Johnson now.”

He bowed and moved quickly away to where Mrs. Johnson stood with the boys near the house.

Caroline glanced over at the kettle. Surely, there would have been time for a walk before it became necessary to add the lavender, but it was too late now. She sighed. After a moment, Mr. Throckmorton returned, but he mounted his horse and said no more than “Good day, Miss Carter” before disappearing into the woods.

Chapter Forty-One

“My dear Anne, it is good to see you again, and under so much happier circumstances.” Abigail Bennett waded against the stiff brocade of her gown over to where her sister had just descended from her horse. “I am so pleased to welcome you all to Longacre.”

The sisters embraced one another rigidly.

“Thank you, sister, we are pleased to arrive at last,” Mrs. Carter said wearily. “I do not believe I was designed for travel. I feel all bruised after such a journey on this brute.” She nodded at the horse, placidly chewing on some dried grass at the edge of the lane.

“Well, we shall soon have you resting in comfort, and you may take your ease until the festivities begin tomorrow.” Mrs. Bennett embraced each of her nieces in turn as they dismounted in the yard. “It has been so very long since I have had the pleasure of your company here.”

“Since last winter, I believe, sister,” Mrs. Carter noted pointedly.

“Has it been so long? How time does get away. We had a dance in honor of Mr. Throckmorton, did we not? And now we gather to honor his esteemed sister. My, my.”

“Greetings, my girls!” Colonel Bennett doddered out of the house and waited while Caroline and her sisters came up to give him a warm hug. “At last year’s dance, you were all fighting my Maggie over that Mr. Throckmorton, now, weren’t you? Ha!”

“Certainly not, Colonel Bennett!” his wife reproved him.

“Now, I wonder who you will all set your cap for this year, hmm? It cannot be this Sir James, as he is not eligible on account of—”

“Colonel Bennett. Let us be perfectly clear. Our daughter Margaret was not of an age last year to be thinking of a husband—”

“Oh, but her mother did plenty of thinking—”

“That is beside the point. Margaret would not ‘fight’ over a gentleman’s attentions, and it is not seemly for you to jest of such things. Even in front of family.” Mrs. Bennett took her sister-in-law’s arm and headed toward the door. “I should lock him in his room tomorrow. What if he starts off like this in front of our guests?”

Mrs. Carter laughed as they walked into the house.

Colonel Bennett reached out a hand in greeting as John Carter approached. “I see they’ve not run you into the ground yet, John.”

“Not yet!” John Carter smiled as he shook his brother-in-law’s hand. He dropped his voice before continuing. “Though I daresay they’ve tried mightily these last months.”

Colonel Bennett waved him toward the door. “Come in, come in. A good brandy may go a long way to ease those pains. You know what your problem is, John? Not enough childhood illness. You’ve too many of them still left in the house.”

Carter laughed as he was expected to do, but it was a forced gesture.

“I am sorry, John,” Colonel Bennett said, realizing his mistake immediately. “I spoke in haste, do forgive me. To lose a sickly baby is not the same as a grown son—”

“I understand, Richard. You’ve no need to apologize.” Carter smiled sadly as he accompanied his host

into the house.

Johanna and Edwina eagerly fell in step behind them. Georgiana gave a brief instruction to the girls' maid before following. Caroline explained to the rest of the servants where to distribute the luggage and then entrusted it to the care of her aunt's manservant before she entered the house alone.

"Now, my dears, I have some exciting news for you," Mrs. Bennett gushed as the girls and their cousin Margaret refreshed themselves in the parlor with warm drinks and small fried apricot pies. "This year, we have M. Feuillet's fabulous discourse on the art of the dance."

Edwina rolled her eyes, and Caroline nudged her hard in the stays.

"That is wonderful news, Aunt," Caroline professed as she reached for another of the exquisite little pies.

"So, we must get up, up, up now and practice."

"What?"

"Our dance will begin the proper way, with a minuet, and I do not believe any of you girls are familiar with the choreography."

"Cherryography?"

"The steps of the dance, Johanna," Caroline explained. "The choreography. No, Aunt, I'm afraid we have never had the opportunity to dance the minuet. Perhaps we should keep ourselves as an audience for this dance." She took another bite, marveling at how the pies remained so warm. The plate had been hot, of course; she had noticed it when her hand grazed the side. What a clever idea, and yet so simple.

"Put down the pie, Caroline," Margaret laughed. "You're to be my partner."

Caroline groaned. She enjoyed dancing but only when she did not have to worry about remembering intricate steps.

Her aunt held up a slim, leather-bound volume as if exhibiting a prized painting. "We have no dancing master here, of course, but we have the book of a dancing master, and I'm sure if I read from this book, we shall learn it properly in no time."

A book. Well, Caroline had experienced the limits of book learning when it came to mastering physical skills. But she could say nothing, only smile and try to follow her aunt's instructions as she called out the intricate steps in a poor French accent.

"During the dance, Margaret, you must carefully note how your partner holds himself."

"Yes, Mother."

At the sound of giggling, Caroline looked up from the book that had failed to capture her interest. Her aunt sat with her own daughter and her youngest nieces clustered around her as she dispensed instructions for the next day's festivities.

“You will not take that tone of voice with me, young lady. This is your first dance, and you’ve no idea how much you are expected to learn about your partners in a very short period of time.”

“What are we to learn, Aunt?” Johanna’s voice fairly radiated excitement, even though she would not be allowed to dance with any gentlemen.

“Well, my dear, first you must notice your partner’s breathing, how many breaths he takes, and so forth. You may thereby judge how fit he is.”

“Oh. I see. But how long do you count the breaths? And how many should a fit partner take? And how do—”

“Enough, Johanna.”

“It’s a secret for when you are older,” Edwina cut in. “You will be privileged to learn the secret of the breaths.”

Caroline couldn’t help but smile, even though she wished her sisters would cease the questioning and head off to their beds. She wanted to speak to her aunt alone.

“Now, you must also notice his teeth and his breath—”

“Aunt Bennett!” Georgiana could scarcely contain her excitement. “Will we come so close to our partners, then?”

The girls erupted in peals of laughter.

“Believe me, bad breath is noticeable at an arm’s length. Now, I think you girls are too tired to take notice of anything practical this night. Upstairs with you.” Their aunt stood and waved the girls out of the room, then walked over to Caroline and leaned over her imperiously. “I believe you should be upstairs in your bed at this hour as well, niece.”

“I will be soon, I hope.” Caroline stood and smoothed her gown. “But may I first have a few words with you before you retire?”

“Certainly.” The older woman motioned toward the sofa where she had held court a few minutes earlier. “Does something trouble you?”

“Yes, Aunt.” Caroline perched on the edge of the sofa. “I am concerned about my reception tomorrow. We, my sisters and I, have not been out since...for some time, and I worry for their sake, as well as my own.”

“Your sisters need have no worries, I believe. Your family’s estate is secure, or secure enough to see you here with the proper equipage. The earlier money troubles will be forgotten soon, if they have not been already.” Her aunt patted her hand.

Caroline was thankful no one of tomorrow’s company, not even her aunt, had seen them when they were struggling pitifully without their servants. Such sights would not have been forgotten soon, but perhaps the mere stories and rumors of financial troubles would be. Her stories, however, were a different matter. “And the additional worries, for myself, the rumors about my...absence from Hill Crest? I do not know what is known abroad, and what might have been said.”

Her aunt sighed. "The stories were not flattering, Caroline, I must confess. The most scandalous tales circulated about what you had done, and what had become of you."

Caroline looked away as tears smarted in the corners of her eyes.

"But," her aunt continued slowly, "the stories seemed to dwindle away soon after your return."

Caroline looked up hopefully.

"You may credit me for this, in part. A former servant of mine, a Samuel Carpenter, was one of the men taken from Elkridge Landing and returned on that ship with you. He told me afterward your family was responsible for saving all of the men taken. He also told me that you modeled proper decorum and virtue at all times, and that all the stories about you being dressed as a boy were absolutely false."

Caroline tried to conceal the look of surprise that must have appeared all over her face.

"Your return in an appropriate, if ragged, gown bolstered this statement," her aunt continued. "And, now that it is obvious you did not return in an expectant state, those rumors should be put to rest as well. In any event, I took great care to share his news with my acquaintance and to instruct the servants to do likewise. Though, of course, stories that tend to rehabilitate a reputation will not spread so fast as those that tear it apart."

"No, of course not."

"But I believe you need have no fear, Caroline. I have saved your reputation, though I beg you not to require such efforts again."

"Sir James Davenport, Lady Davenport and Mr. Josiah Throckmorton."

Josiah found it a bit disconcerting to be thus announced to the company while still in the process of removing cloaks and hats dripping from the cold drizzle outside. Longacre, like the other houses he had seen in Maryland, had no entrance hall; new arrivals for this evening's dance found themselves in the center of activity in the largest and, presumably, grandest room in the house.

He glanced at his sister and had to stifle a smile as she lost her balance while her maid struggled to remove the muddy clogs from her mistress's dancing slippers. Her public smile waned momentarily but soon recovered its customary brilliance. Although he took rather longer to recover from the shock of being as if on stage the moment they set foot through the door, Sir James regained his composure with only a slightly deeper than usual crease in his forehead to betray his discomfiture.

Before they could move far into the room, Josiah was surrounded by a crowd seeking introductions to the elegant couple. The host and hostess would have to be introduced first, so he was relieved to see Colonel and Mrs. Bennett making their way through the throng.

"Sir James, Lady Davenport, may I present Colonel Bennett and Mrs. Bennett?"

His brother-in-law bowed. "We are greatly pleased to make your acquaintance, Colonel Bennett, Mrs. Bennett."

"It is most kind of you to entertain us in your home."

"Thank you, Lady Davenport." Mrs. Bennett appeared to blush slightly. "It is you who are kind to honor us with your presence."

"What an elegant assembly you have gathered. I declare we rarely see the like, even in London. Would you not say so, Sir James?"

"What did she say about London?" Colonel Bennett asked, speaking for the first time.

Mrs. Bennett leaned in to her husband and raised her voice. "She was telling us of assemblies in London."

"Why were you speaking of London?"

Mrs. Bennett ignored her husband and proceeded to introduce her daughter. Then she leaned over to speak into her husband's ear. "Do send your brother over, sir, so I may introduce him to our distinguished guests."

"What?"

Mrs. Bennett gestured toward the other side of the room. "Your brother. Please send him over so that—"

"I still can't hear you," Colonel Bennett muttered crossly. "You, there, with the fiddle," he bellowed across the room, "hush up for a moment so we can talk." His wife smacked him in the ribs. "Well, we

don't need that music yet, anyway. You won't let anyone dance until you've had your minuet."

With a look that would melt iron at a hundred paces, Mrs. Bennett stormed over to the other side of the room, speaking first to her brother-in-law and then to the disgruntled musician.

Josiah took up the thread of introductions again and gradually felt as if he had become a puppet master, speaking the same lines repeatedly for different audiences who ignored him and saw only the brightly decorated characters he introduced.

Every once in a while, he would glance around while his sister and brother-in-law exchanged pleasantries with the latest introducees. On one occasion, he spotted Caroline and her sisters with other young ladies in a corner opposite the musicians. She did not see him, but Edwina did. He smiled at her in greeting but had to turn back to his sister before he could see if she had returned the smile.

Josiah sighed when he heard the violin begin the unmistakable strains of the minuet. He had heard his host mention the dance earlier but had not fully understood he was going to have to try to remember the steps. He looked about the company; surely, there were many here who would not know the dance at all, and would not know if he missed a few steps.

Eleanor would know, of course. This was her moment to shine. Or another of them, actually. He felt he was beginning to understand why she put up with all the discomforts of travel and primitive accommodations, since she was treated with reverence bordering on worship wherever she went.

Perhaps she and her husband would dance the entire dance by themselves. But, no, he could see that Mrs. Bennett was lining up ladies on one side of the room and gentlemen on the other. Couples might dance one at a time, but many, if not all of them, would eventually have their turn.

A servant appeared at Josiah's elbow and moved him to the head of the dance, next to his brother-in-law. He looked across and saw his partner was a young widow to whom he had been introduced last year. She was a little too plump and her face almost clownishly painted with rouge, but a not altogether unpleasing lady, he recalled. She had obviously practiced the dance, and he found he could remember enough of it, after watching his sister's performance, to get through his own with only small difficulty.

Then it was time to watch everyone else, a time that could be most enjoyable for those who had completed the dance and who relished the opportunity to watch for others' mistakes. Josiah, instead, looked around for the punch bowl. The introductions had left his mouth dry, but he knew he would have to wait until the dance ended. How many couples were left?

He saw that Caroline was to dance next, and she watched the current pair of dancers with fierce concentration. Her partner, one of the Carroll boys, looked across at her with a blank expression, as if at an empty wall. Josiah assumed at first he was merely bored waiting his turn; but he retained the same demeanor throughout the dance, and it appeared he never once met Caroline's eyes. Or perhaps it was just the angle from which Josiah watched; surely, no one could be so rude in such assembled company.

After the lengthy minuet finally drew to a close, Josiah bowed politely along with the rest of the company and then bolted to the refreshment table. Only after he had started into his second cup of punch did he look about to see what would happen next.

The musicians changed their tune and started up some sort of country dance. He moved slowly away from the table, peripherally aware of the gentlemen who filed past to seek partners and older ladies who drifted into clusters at the corners of the room. The younger ladies were spread about the room in groups of two or three as they waited to be asked to dance. And he would ask one of them. But... not just yet. He could wait for the next dance.

As couples gradually filled the floor, however, it was embarrassing to realize he was one of only a very few gentlemen who had not taken a partner. A young lady near him blinked rapidly, as if holding back tears—she, too, was one of the few of her sex not dancing.

He should have asked her to dance.

But he did not want to appear foolish, since he did not feel comfortable with the music. Perhaps the next tune would be better. Surely, she would have a partner for the next dance, and if not, he would ask her then. He sipped his punch slowly. After all, he was not yet finished with his drink.

Caroline looked at him from across the room and smiled shyly. He nodded his head and smiled in return. He should ask her to dance at some point during the evening, but not so soon as to give the impression they remained a close couple.

With a start, he realized this would probably be his best chance to examine and meet new prospects for a wife. Just as at last year's event. As if the entire year had never happened.

He took another sip and looked around with a fresh perspective. The young lady nearest him appeared too young—at least, too young for a man in his early thirties. He required someone of about twenty years of age. Too young and she would be of no use managing the household; too old and she could be flawed in some way, else someone would have married her sooner.

How old was Caroline, exactly?

It did not matter. He knew she was flawed. Moreover, she did not care for him.

The dance ended abruptly, and a prelude to a different tune began with ominous, creaking notes. This song would be even more difficult to dance to, but he had to do his duty. He looked to his right and saw the sad girl had already secured a partner for this next dance. Was there another likely prospect nearby? The young widow he had danced with first? No, it was too soon to dance with her again.

Dancers took up their positions on the floor; it was time to select a partner. With relief, Josiah spotted Miss Bennett nearby and headed toward her with all due haste. After all, though she was too young to be a marriage prospect, decorum dictated he dance with her at least once this evening.

The poor girl colored very easily and seemed so ill-at-ease dancing he suddenly felt like the dancing master instructing a shy pupil. And she seemed so genuinely grateful for his attentions. Perhaps...

No. Too young by far. Ten years from now she still would be young enough to run off to a tavern with the stable boy. No, he needed a steady, mature lady.

Not like Caroline, who he noticed standing next to the window by herself.

By the third of the country dances, it was obvious Caroline was being shunned. No gentlemen asked her to dance; no one save her family would even come near her.

Well, she deserved such approbation, did she not? Running off as she had so indecorously. Bringing her family to the brink of ruin. That was not the behavior of a lady. Even Eleanor had noticed, and she did not know of the horrid events.

Images flashed in his mind, even as he escorted his next partner to the dance floor. He saw Caroline playing the flute with her sister, Caroline up to her elbows in lard at the tenant's house, Caroline struggling with a ham outside the kitchen, Caroline serving drinks to her father. None of this was the behavior of a well-bred lady.

But was it the behavior of a woman atoning for her past indiscretions?

A lady's behavior—writing letters, playing cards, and so forth—would not have helped her family in straitened circumstances.

The music stopped, and Josiah realized with horror he had not once looked into his partner's eyes. He smiled awkwardly and made a polite comment about securing a future dance as he escorted the unfortunate lady back to her relations.

Perhaps he should ask Caroline to dance, since she already seemed to occupy so much of his thoughts.

No, this was still his best opportunity to evaluate marriage prospects. Besides, if the company shunned Caroline, they might shun him as well if he elected to acknowledge an acquaintance.

His sister suddenly appeared at his elbow. "Enjoying yourself, dear brother?"

"Indeed, I am."

"I am, as well." Eleanor flipped open her fan and covered her face before continuing. "What a clownish assembly! I shall have great fun recounting all the details when I am home."

Josiah said nothing; he refused to add wood to the scathing blaze of his sister's critique.

"Have you found a wife yet, Josiah? If there is none here who suits you, I am sure our host would be happy to let you search the barn. Indeed," she continued, waving her fan languidly, "I am sure its inhabitants must be better dancers and certainly cannot suffer by comparison in appearance."

"If you will excuse me, I must secure a partner before the next dance begins."

"Oh, yes, you would not want to suffer the ignominy of standing by your sister throughout a dance." She inclined her head toward Caroline, who talked with Johanna at the window.

"Why don't you go find fault with the refreshments now, Eleanor?" *Preferably from a face-first perspective at the bottom of the punch bowl*, Josiah finished to himself as he moved away. He could safely dance with the heavily rouged widow now; enough time had passed that he would not look overly interested in seeking her out again.

During the next dance, he could not allow his mind to wander far because a running string of inane questions from his partner required his constant attention. It was with no small measure of relief that he escorted her back to her neighbors when the dance ended.

From preparations in the adjacent room, he could see that a supper was nearly ready, so there would probably only be one or two more dances before they adjourned to eat. Caroline and two of her sisters had already moved closer to the room where the meal would be set out. Apparently, she had given up hope of dancing.

He could ask her.

She had behaved shamefully, yes. She had embarrassed him and put him and her family through a great deal of danger and expense.

But should she be punished for it indefinitely? Had she not already suffered enough?

He took two steps toward her then stopped. She had not yet seen him. This was foolish. What would the others in the company think of him, nearly a cuckolded husband returning to his unfaithful bride. And what if, unthinkable as it seemed, she turned him down, as she had when he had suggested a stroll two days earlier?

Suddenly, he did not care. *Be not afraid*. He nearly marched to the words as he came toward her.

“May I have this next dance, Miss Carter?”

Tears punctuated the corners of her eyes as she smiled at him. “I would be most honored, Mr. Throckmorton.”

Josiah held out his arm and enjoyed the warm clasp of hers as they strolled to a position on the floor.

“Thank you,” Caroline said, nearly choking on the words as she said them, and he had to lean forward to hear. “I was...”

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Carter.” And he meant it. Caroline was the first person he had felt truly comfortable with all evening. He still had difficulty matching steps to the music, but she seemed to share the same difficulty; and at one time they both paused with uncertainty, unsure of when to begin the next step. He grinned at her and she giggled, and then the next couple danced right into them.

“I beg your pardon,” Josiah apologized as he pulled Caroline away from the path of oncoming dancers.

When had he started thinking of her as Caroline, rather than Miss Carter?

“Is something the matter?”

She must have seen his discomfiture at the sudden realization of their familiarity. At some point he had let go of her arm. “Oh, we have only destroyed the dance, that is all.”

“Have we?”

“Yes. There’s an odd number of couples now, I’m afraid.”

“Oh.”

“Shall we set that to rights?” He offered his arm again.

“But of course.” She glanced at the musicians as she spoke.

“Does the tune sound strange to you, Miss Carter?”

“It is the most poorly executed reel I have ever heard.”

“I rather thought it might be a new musical fashion of some sort.”

“Goodness, I hope not!” Caroline smiled as they attempted to join the dance once more.

He saw his sister eyeing him darkly when the dance ended, and a servant appeared to tell him his presence was wanted to help lead the company in to supper. Seating arrangements placed him between Mrs. Bennett and her daughter, and he stifled a sigh. Perhaps he would learn no more of possible marriage partners, but his companions would be good-natured, at least. His sister sat across from him and he intended to pay her as little attention as possible.

“I do not believe I have ever had the opportunity,” his hostess said soon after the first dishes had been served, “of thanking you, Mr. Throckmorton.”

“Thanking me, Mrs. Bennett?”

“For your service in enabling the return of the men taken from Elkrige Landing. Samuel Carpenter was a servant of mine, and though he has moved on to his own place, we all think of him quite fondly. He informed me that you arranged for all the men to be taken aboard your ship for passage home. He said something about a ransom?”

“Well,” Josiah said, feeling himself color slightly, “the ransom was paid entirely by Mr. Carter. It is he who deserves your thanks.”

“And he has had it, I assure you. But Samuel said something that led me to believe you arranged his return, and he said that, until the last moment, he and the others had no indication whatever they would be released.”

“Yes, well...” Josiah looked at his wineglass and tried to think of some appropriate phrase to end this line of conversation. “We may thank God for the safe return of all.” *Except Charles.*

His hostess took a bite and chewed, but Josiah thought it rude to eat when thinking of Charles’s memory. He put down his fork and turned to make polite conversation with Miss Bennett.

Chapter Forty-Three

"But I don't understand. Why did she use a fan on a cold day in winter?"

Georgiana smiled as she pulled the last pin from her hair. "Because, Johanna, that is how a lady speaks in a crowded assembly. She uses her fan to convey a message."

"Like a code," Edwina interposed thoughtfully. "But there were few who could interpret this evening, I imagine." She took a bite of an apple she had smuggled up from the kitchen.

"Did you know what Lady Davenport was saying with her fan, Caroline?" Johanna asked.

"No. I confess I did not even notice the fan. I was actually looking at the mark on her face."

"The mark on her face?" Margaret asked.

"The mole. At least, I had thought it was a mole. But it was in a different place than it was when she dined with us at Hill Crest."

"Indeed, it was. How exceedingly odd," Edwina mused as she took another bite.

"I had not thought of it, but I believe you are right, Caroline." Georgiana picked up her hairbrush and began painstakingly brushing out her long, copper-colored curls. "Do you suppose those marks are another fashion? I will have to ask Nell—she can find out these things from Lady Davenport's maid. That's how I learned about the fan."

"Did you understand what she was saying with her fan?" Johanna asked.

"Not exactly." Georgiana paused for a moment. "But often, the way she fanned slowly and seemed to flutter her eyelashes, it seemed like she was almost flirting. And one time I saw her close the fan and strike it against her hand—"

"Against her hand?" Johanna looked at her own hand, trying to mimic the gesture.

"Like this." Georgiana demonstrated with her hairbrush.

"Ouch. I see."

Georgiana resumed brushing methodically. "So, I assume that meant she was angry about something."

"Well," Johanna said, wincing, "it was a good thing for whoever she was angry at that she struck it

against her own hand.”

“I saw that!” Edwina put down her apple. “I saw who she was angry at. She was furious at her brother, Mr. Throckmorton. I wonder why.”

“Mr. Throckmorton was very kind to me at supper,” Margaret said shyly. “Though I do believe his sister looked at us with a rather fierce expression. I had supposed she disapproved of me.”

“I am sure she was not thinking of you in that way at all,” Caroline interjected. “I am certain she was merely angry at her brother.”

“Why would she not think of me that way? I am of age, and have fortune enough, at least as much as—” Margaret stopped, her cheeks growing more flushed with each second. “I am sorry, Caroline. But I must think of a husband, now, too.”

“Yes, of course.” Caroline tried to make her smile reassuring but felt that it was not. “Lady Davenport may well have put the two of you together. Though I daresay she would have little enough to be angry about at the prospect.”

She felt a huge lump in her throat that made it nearly impossible to swallow. It was true. Her cousin would make an excellent match. The only daughter of a wealthier family, her settlement would be much larger than Caroline’s would have been, and Mr. Throckmorton could not find a more respectable, steady young lady anywhere in the colonies. It would be a good match.

And she reminded herself that he was not a good match for her. Though, frankly, it was getting harder to remember exactly why she had determined he would not have made a good husband. She now had to set her sights on a dashing, handsome man of action like—

“I found him to be a rather elegant dancer,” Margaret continued, growing bolder. “Did you not, Caroline?”

“Why, yes, I suppose so.” Then Caroline began to color, remembering not only Mr. Throckmorton’s skill at dance; but also that, had it not been for his approach, the company would have continued to snub her all evening. After that dance it was as if a spell had been broken; her neighbors spoke to her at supper, and afterwards other gentlemen had asked her dance. “Mr. Archer was perhaps the most elegant of the company, though.”

“I agree, but he looked about as if for an audience, so that he scarce spoke a word to me throughout our dance. I would not care to dance with him again.”

Caroline mumbled some sort of agreement. Mr. Archer had cut a fine figure as he moved across the floor. She had enjoyed the thought he had asked her to dance, but she had felt so large and clumsy next to him she had not actually enjoyed their time together at all.

Her cousin sat back and hugged her knees to her chest. “I would dance with Mr. Throckmorton again. He put me at ease.”

“Ooh, he is so serious. I cannot look at him but I start to laugh.” Georgiana giggled. “I am grateful he did not ask me to dance.”

“I do not think him overly serious, do you, Caroline?” Margaret defended.

Georgiana and Edwina looked at their older sister expectantly. “No, I...” Was he overly serious? That had once been her observation. “No, I do not think so,” she said at last.

“In any case,” Margaret began to lecture, suddenly sounding very much like her mother, “a serious man will make the most considerate husband. Mother thanked Mr. Throckmorton for saving Samuel and all the men taken by that pirate. He remained modest, of course, but she said he had arranged for their return when the pirate only intended to return Caroline. So, dear cousin, he has saved you two times now. Are you not grateful for his serious nature?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Enough of this talk of serious gentlemen.” Georgiana thumped her hairbrush down on a small table “I want to know which young man you thought most handsome and which had the best manners. Caroline, will you take the first turn?”

“I am afraid I have a dreadful headache and will have to lie down.” She smiled deliberately. “Too much punch, I imagine. You will carry on without me, of course, and Georgiana, do take my turn.”

“Very well. Goodnight, Caroline.”

“Oh, my,” Eleanor sighed as she descended the stairs. When she reached the bottom she paused, then moved over to lean against a chair near the window.

Josiah looked up from his book. “Too much wine last evening, Eleanor?”

“Certainly not,” she huffed as she opened the window and rang the bell for Priscilla. “I was merely thinking of home, and the sad situation.”

Josiah shivered at the blast of cold air that came through the window. “Why can you not send your own maid to the kitchen?”

Eleanor looked surprised. “And why would I? Kate’s job is to see to my wardrobe and appearance.”

“You are dressed. Your hair is...arranged, she should now have time to see to your breakfast.”

“Kate is re-trimming a gown for me this morning. And then it will be time for her to begin packing. Surely, one of your servants is not too busy to bring me a piece of toast?”

Josiah turned his attention back to his book.

“As I said, I was thinking of the sad situation back at home.”

He smiled wryly. “And that sad situation would be...a maid who breaks too many of your dishes, perhaps? A gardener who cannot make the roses bloom in February?”

“It is most unseemly of you to jest, Josiah. I speak of our poor Uncle Robert.”

“Uncle Robert? Has he taken a turn for the worse?”

“There can certainly be no worse for him, poor man. He was at death’s very door when we left England. Were it not for James’s business in Maryland, we certainly would not have left him alone.”

“You left him alone? What has become of Beech, and his other servants?”

“Oh, the servants remain, of course, but they are nothing as compared to family. They do not signify, really; they are mere employees, household effects like the plate and glassware. One may become attached to them, of course, but—”

A knock sounded at the back door.

“Do come in, Priscilla.”

The girl entered and curtsied reverently.

“Oh, you are such a dear, prompt little thing. Please bring me two slices of bread, toasted not too darkly and spread with butter, and have you any marmalade?”

Priscilla looked aghast. “Marmalade?”

“A sort of preserves, made of oranges,” Josiah said without looking up from his book. “And we haven’t any.” He paused and lifted his head momentarily. “But Priscilla makes a wonderful strawberry jam.”

“Dear me, aren’t you a talented girl. Well, then, I must try some of your jam on my toast. Is there any coffee left?” Eleanor looked at her brother’s empty mug on the table.

“A little, Lady Davenport.”

“Bring me some, then, with plenty of milk and sugar.” Eleanor gave a complacent smile of dismissal.

“Yes, milady.” Priscilla turned and skipped out the door.

“I was speaking of poor Uncle Robert.”

Josiah sighed and closed his book. “So you were. He has always been an outstanding model of respectability and an asset to the family. I am sorry to hear he has been suffering, and his death will be a great loss to the family.”

“A great loss, indeed. He has managed the Hampshire estate for over thirty years, and the earnings from that property often exceeded those of the estate in Sussex.”

“I was not aware of that. He must have been a most capable manager. An even more regrettable loss to the family, then.”

“Of course,” Eleanor said as she walked over to retrieve her fan from a shelf, “Uncle Robert had never planned to manage that estate. And Mother told me once he had not really wanted to take on the task. He had built up quite a thriving law practice and had become rather attached to city life.” She began to fan her face languidly. “But, for the good of the family, he gave up his practice and moved to Hampshire. And we must all be eternally grateful.”

“Yes, we must,” Josiah echoed absently. He picked up another book, Allestree’s *The Whole Duty of Man*, a handbook on moral guidance he had read in his youth and from which he remembered only one incongruous phrase about a man’s body rising in judgment against him for defrauding it of its due portion of refreshment. The book made for dry reading, best taken in small doses.

He imagined Charles Carter had probably read Allestree’s book numerous times and absorbed its lessons well. He had tended to his spiritual life and showed admirable consideration for others, and had been well-regarded by them in return. If he had lived to assume control of the Carter estate, he would have worked hard, like the ancestor in the hazy portrait, to provide for his family and future generations.

Perhaps his own duty lay along a similar path. It gave Josiah a strange sense of pride to look around Hanset and know that the fields and rude buildings were his own and would prosper or decline through his own efforts.

But, no, his duty lay elsewhere. Surely, it must be his obligation to tend the larger estate in England on behalf of his family.

A light knock sounded on the door, and he looked up to see Eleanor open it and put her finger to her lips to indicate Priscilla should make no sound as she entered. His sister obviously wanted to give him time to consider her words.

“I’m going out,” he said as he stood and reached for his coat. He could not think in the closeness of the small house—his small house—filled to the brim with his sister and her belongings.

“You will be back to dine with me, won’t you? Remember that Sir James does not return until tomorrow.”

“Yes, Eleanor,” he said over his shoulder. “I shan’t be out long.” He could feel her confident smile boring into his back as he closed the door.

The colorless winter sky mirrored the vague bleakness he felt in his soul. He should feel relieved, even joyful, at having finally reached his decision. He would, with one simple move, fulfill his duty and recapture the comforts he had so sorely missed. Moreover, it was the only practical course of action. Here, debts and fluctuating markets threatened to ruin his plantation.

Josiah turned off the kitchen path and strolled among the dead stalks of the kitchen gardens. A poor choice for contemplative walking, as his route revealed not merely a dormant garden but a disorganized, weedy chaos of lifeless foliage.

Back in England, managing a well-established and diversified estate, his position would be secure. Moreover, his family name alone would be enough to obtain a most suitable wife of good breeding and respectable temperament. But his background and titled family connections would be enough to obtain a respectable wife here, too.

He kicked aside a plant that careened over from its raised bed. A resourceful, hard-working wife would be far more useful here than a well-bred hothouse flower like Miss Bennett. To make his struggling plantation a success, he would need a true partner, willing to invest time and energy into all facets of the venture. They could try different crops, perhaps train the servants and slaves to make more of the items that were too expensive or difficult to import, maybe expand in trade—

Who could be the wife who made up the other half of this “they?” He could scarcely recognize *himself*

as half of this theoretical industrious partnership. It was inconceivable, really. His place was with his family in England.

Miss Carter would make an admirable partner at Hanset. He had seen her work, and experiment.

Josiah kicked at another errant stalk in his path. Now, after demonstrating she would be unacceptable as a wife, Miss Carter had proven she would actually make a most appropriate one. And her company was rather enjoyable.

But, the question of respectability aside, she did not care for him. They were no longer engaged, and it was only by some misguided chance she had ever accepted him in the first place. The look in her eyes when he had tried to speak to her in Charles Town, that look of horror and despair, could never be forgotten. She would never marry him.

It was time to start packing.

Chapter Forty-Four

"Caroline, Father says he wishes to speak with you in the front room," Edwina announced as she took off her hat and hung it up.

"Oh, dear. Did you tell him about the kitchen order?"

"No. Why would I?"

"Do you think Georgiana may have? Or Johanna?"

“Perhaps, but I do not believe so. No one but yourself will care about what you’ve ordered for the kitchen.”

Caroline smoothed her gown as she walked toward the door. The other items she had ordered should really not raise his concern, so she had no reason to be nervous. And yet...

“Ah, Caroline, please, sit yourself down.” John Carter smiled as he waved his hand toward the leather chair opposite him.

“Thank you, Father.” She perched on the edge of the seat.

“I have wonderful news.”

He paused for so long Caroline began to wonder if he wanted her to guess what it was. Perhaps he had obtained a good price on some finery and wished to surprise her?

“Mr. Archer has asked permission to wait on you.”

“When? How?” She had seen no one arrive yesterday or this morning.

Her father waved aside her questions. “A servant brought a letter early this morning. Are you not pleased, my girl? He is a most elegant gentlemen, and the oldest son of a fine family. I believe you’ll not do better for a husband in these environs.”

“But Father, I still don’t see...our affairs, my dowry?”

“You may thank Mr. Cheesewringer for making you marriageable, my dear. With our estate less encumbered, I may offer land or goods for your dowry.” He grinned. “You are fortunate, dear girl, in being the eldest. I may not be able to be so generous when it comes time for Edwina and Johanna.”

“I would not want you to take—”

“Now, now, you must not fret over these arrangements. As oldest daughter, you are entitled to a greater share, and you will not contradict me when I say that you have done the greatest share of the work around here these last few months. We will be able to make suitable matches for your sisters when their times come. But first they must see their oldest sister well married. There. I thought that news would please you.”

“It does, indeed, sir. I am...exceptionally pleased. May I be excused, Father?”

“Certainly, my girl. Are you not well?”

“Just a touch under the weather, I suppose.”

“You had better take some rest, then.”

“I shall, Father. Thank you.”

Caroline felt as if she were moving in someone else’s body as she pulled the door closed behind her.

“Caroline! Whatever is the matter?”

“Come upstairs with me, Edwina. I don’t know what to think.”

When she reached the safe solitude of her tiny bedchamber, Caroline fell onto the bed, and her sister did likewise.

“Brr, it is cold in here, may we not move—” Edwina stopped as she noticed tears streaming down her sister’s face. “Do tell me what is wrong, Caroline.”

“I do not know that anything is wrong.” Two fresh tears welled over onto her cheeks.

“Then why do you cry?”

“I’m not crying.” Caroline dabbed at her eyes with a corner of a blanket. “Very well, I—I do not know what makes me cry. I should be happy. Father has just shared most wondrous news.”

Edwina leaned closer. “What is it?”

“Mr. Archer has asked to court me.”

“Mr. Archer?” Edwina pursed her lips in thought for a moment. “He is rather short, is he not? But you all judged him an excellent dancer, and I daresay his family has money enough, at least as much money as one of us is likely to marry into.”

“Edwina!” Caroline sat up and moved away from her sister uneasily.

“It is true. We are not likely to attract husbands from one of the truly wealthy families.”

“Perhaps not, but what does that matter?”

“I was just fitting Mr. Archer into the grand scheme of things, that is all.”

“And does he fit?”

“As well as any of us do, I suppose.”

Caroline sighed and stood, adjusting her twisted petticoat. She looked at her sister once more. “Are you not pleased for me?”

“If you want me to be, I will. But you don’t seem to be any better matched with him than you were with Mr. Throckmorton when you became engaged to him last year.”

“There is no comparing. So much has happened since last year.”

“Very well. I shall be happy for you if you wish. But you might start by being happy on your own behalf. You are still crying.”

Caroline could not deny it—she was, indeed, still leaking tears. “I must be crying for joy, then, and perhaps,” she added, forcing a giggle, “a little bit of relief. I feared the other night I might never even be asked to dance again, and now, already...and Father says he can provide handsome dowries for all of us. So, someday you, too, will—”

“Let us not rush that day, Caroline.” Edwina stood and moved toward the door. “I wish to wait for a few new gentlemen to move in our neighborhood. The prospects here are too slim at present.”

“What?”

“Well, you have taken the two best of the lot.”

“Yes, and that will be enough. I shall leave the remainder for my sisters.”

“How very generous of you.”

Caroline dabbed her apron at the corners of her eyes. Her face felt flushed and hot, despite the chill in the room. “I believe I will take a short walk outside.”

“Well, it will freeze up those tears, at any rate. And, no, I do not care to join you. I’ve already been out, remember?”

Caroline smiled as she followed her sister through the door. Downstairs, she nodded to her father as she opened the front door. The cold air made her suck in her breath, but there was little wind so she could weather the chill for a few minutes, at least.

Her father’s face appeared in her mind as she walked. *I have wonderful news.* Certainly, her reaction had not been what he hoped. He had attributed it to illness, but she had felt no illness before.

It was news full of wonder. How could this be? *You may thank Mr. Cheesewringer,* he had said. She could not thank someone she had never seen.

Yet, that name was so familiar. She had met someone with that name, and not too long ago.

But it was a woman.

Her image came to mind, an uneven face on a lumpy body, with an eager smile. A grasping woman but not unkind. Surely, this woman or her family could not have been their mysterious benefactor? The Mr. Cheesewringer who had paid their debts must be wealthy. And generous—a trait she had not noticed in the landlady in Charles Town.

Why would someone have paid their debts? It was odd her father never seemed to question this generosity. Would this gentleman later require something of them? Was he simply embarrassed at the thought of relatives in poverty? None of it made any sense. Why would some unknown relative care if they were forced to work or perhaps lost their plantation? It would be nothing to someone on the other side of the ocean.

Had the real benefactor chosen to remain anonymous and used a pseudonym to remain so? But again, who among their acquaintance would have the means or the motivation to do such a thing? Perhaps, in recognition of their years of patronage, Mr. Goodwin might have...

No, an attorney could not shoulder the debt of every loyal client; and from what Charles had told her of Mr. Goodwin’s business, he did not have the means to casually assume such a debt.

Charles. It shamed her to realize she had not thought about him, or had at least not missed him so

horribly, in these last weeks. She needed him now, though; she needed to talk with him. She was accustomed to conferring with Edwina or even Georgiana or her mother about many things; but for the truly serious questions, Charles was the only member of the family who spoke with any sense.

Why did the thought of marrying Mr. Archer upset her so dreadfully? Surely, this was the perfect match she had waited for, a handsome gentleman of good family. And when his father died and he took over the family's estate, she would be mistress of her own plantation. Until then, she could enjoy visits, fine clothes, perhaps learn to play the clavichord. A life of grace and ease—away from her bickering sisters.

Yet the prospect held little appeal.

So what, then, did she want? Did she want to sneak on board a ship when the next convoy left with the tobacco crop? Would she search a seaport until she found a handsome captain? She could go look for Captain Talbot—but only to wring his neck. He had sold her off like chattel and deserved to have his ship sink under his feet or, better yet, be forced back to ElkrIDGE Landing to face the wrath of the families whose lives he had disrupted so painfully.

Caroline swiped at a few crumpled brown leaves hanging from a slender tree branch. Most of the leaves crunched into pieces and fell, but one clung tenaciously to the branch.

This was when she needed Charles. He would diffuse her anger; he would help her focus on her dilemma.

Would she accept Mr. Archer's proposal, if he made one? Her father had given him permission to wait on her, and their courtship could take some time. He might soon tire of her or find her unacceptable. Did she hope he would?

And why did he find her suddenly so acceptable? Mr. Archer had not been willing to dance with her until Mr. Throckmorton had taken her out—her dance with him had somehow seemed to clear away the taint that had hung over her almost palpably from the moment the first guests had arrived.

Mr. Throckmorton truly deserved thanks for coming to her aid that evening. She could write him a letter, or perhaps make a visit to Hanset with one of her sisters. Enough acquaintance existed between their families that surely it would not be improper for them to visit.

Perhaps tomorrow.

"Mr. Throckmorton, sir. Please rise."

Josiah opened his eyes but could not tell who spoke to him in the early darkness. "Yes, what is it?"

"Sir James said to tell you the storm seems to be ending. The wind is down much, and you may be able to depart today." A candle moved closer to the bed and illuminated the face of his brother-in-law's servant.

Today? It was not even day yet. Josiah started to wave the man off and pull the covers back over his head.

"Shall I tell him you will be down presently?" he persisted.

“Yes. Leave the candle.” Josiah half-hoped the man would stumble on the uneven stairs then regretted the thought. It was not the poor servant’s idea to wake him this early. He amended his thought to hope it would be his brother-in-law who tumbled down the stairs.

He dressed almost without thinking. Most of his clothes had been packed; only one suit and a few shirts and sets of stockings remained out.

He was really leaving. Today, in all probability.

Several days of windy, wet weather had kept them all indoors and made the departure seem unreal and theoretical. It was as if he merely waited for his sister to leave him in peace. Except that he was going with her.

An unexpected wave of sadness rushed over him as he touched the doorframe on his way to the stairs. He would miss this house. It was his house.

What a ridiculous thought. He hated this house. And the last few days had made it easy to determine he hated Maryland weather, too.

Not that London was much better.

Of course, he would not be in London for long. Eleanor had indicated he should proceed to Hampshire as soon as practicable. And the weather there was, probably, about the same. It was a rather damp, dreary place, or so he remembered. And lonely.

He did not have to go. He could stay here, in his own house. He could ask Miss Carter to marry him, and if she rejected his suit he could court another.

He did not have to go.

He did not want to go.

This was his own plantation, his own affair, and he could make something of it that would be all his, not the cast-off inheritance of his family.

But what if his crop failed? What if debts overran him? What if Caroline laughed at him?

He hurried down the stairs, relieved to find his sister and brother-in-law and their servants all tended to business elsewhere so that, for the moment, he had the room to himself. His room.

As he had command of his house, he could also command his fears. What was the phrase he had used? “Be not afraid. . .” He had repeated those words from Charles’s Bible, and they always seemed to settle his nerves. This time, however, the words seemed to have lost their magic.

He shivered. Despite the large blaze in the fireplace, a cold wind swept past in insolent gusts. He would never have enough money to make this house comfortable. Caroline would never agree to live here: or if she did agree, she would berate him mercilessly over its faults.

It would be foolish to stay.

Chapter Forty-Five

The realization struck like the clapper on the side of a bell. It was Mr. Throckmorton who had paid their debts. Caroline put on her cape and yanked her hat from its perch on the wall.

“Caroline! Are you not going to wait for me?” Edwina called after her as she headed to the stable.

“I believe I had better go alone, and I need to go now,” she answered back over her shoulder. She could not discuss this in front of anyone else in the family, but she had to know if her presumption was correct.

Why else had he stayed unexpectedly in Joppa taking on legal clients? Who else would ever think of a name like “Cheesewringer?” He had the connections to raise such a sum, if he did not have the money himself. And perhaps he had come to know Charles well enough to feel a relationship akin to family.

It did not quite make sense; it seemed such a bold, reckless move for such a calm, staid gentleman. And yet, once she thought of it, there seemed no other answer. She would ask him, this day. He was planning to return to England soon, and she must know before he left.

“Caroline, wait!” Edwina came out of the house as Caroline rode out of the yard. “Father will not like this. Mother will have a spell.”

Caroline ignored her.

It had to have been Mr. Throckmorton. She hoped he could take time from his travel preparations to speak with her alone.

For some reason, she thought of his offer of a stroll together when she had been so concerned with her soap and her scents. Why had she not said yes immediately?

Of course, back then she would not have thought to ask about the debt.

She felt addled, as if her thoughts were shaken afresh with each step of the horse. Too much had happened. First she had been shunned by society then suddenly embraced, and was now expecting a call from a suitor. An announcement from Hanset had informed them the estate and furnishings would be put up for sale and that Mr. Throckmorton would return to England with his sister.

She urged her horse to move faster across the soggy ground. Surely, he would not have left already? The weather had prevented her from visiting sooner.

She had just today decided to ask about the debt. So, why had she been so anxious to visit him these last several days? Why had she felt such sadness when she heard he was leaving?

The truth nearly knocked her off her horse. She wanted him to ask her to marry him again. And he could not do this if he left.

She could not ask him to stay, but she could see him, at least, and apologize for her boorish, childish behavior in Charles Town.

Her face suddenly felt flushed, despite the cold.

Something was wrong. The house looked wrong. Perhaps this was not the main house—Caroline had only been to the plantation once before. But it was the biggest in the cluster of buildings.

No smoke came from the chimney.

She dismounted and hastily wrapped the reins around a post without tying them.

No one answered her knock.

In desperation, she turned toward the other buildings. A well-worn path led to a building where smoke swirled up in friendly curls. She nearly ran down to it.

“Yes, miss?” The girl’s surprise was evident on her face as she opened the door.

“I wish to speak with Mr. Throckmorton,” Caroline said, trying to keep her voice from sounding breathless.

“I am sorry, miss, but he has left with the others. They’ve gone to the landing, and will be there by now, I ’spect.”

“Thank you.” Caroline turned away quickly so the serving girl would not see the tears that sprang to her eyes.

She was too late. He had gone.

But perhaps not. They had gone to the landing, the girl said, but very likely the ship had not yet left. They might not even leave until tomorrow.

She dashed back to her horse, glad there was no one there to see the awkward way she scrambled onto

the beast's back.

A gray sky seemed appropriate to the morning; Josiah found he was irritated when the sky lightened enough he could clearly pick out the colors that trimmed his sister's traveling suit. He wanted no color, only a muted, gray, dull world.

His sister may have sensed how he felt, or she may simply have been tired by the early hour of their rising. In any case, she did not attempt to engage him in conversation as they rode toward the landing.

The journey passed more quickly than he expected, and it was with no small reluctance he dismounted. The expense of transporting his horse to England would be too great; the animal would be sold with the rest of the property and servants he left behind.

He patted the horse's neck. "I'll miss you, old boy." Disciple, Charles had named him, but that name made Josiah uncomfortable. He had always simply referred to him as "the old boy." His new owner might very well give him a third name.

"I will miss you." He patted the horse one final time. They had shared the trip to Joppa, the adventure in frontier law. He had stories for the fireside now, but no one with whom to share them. Someone might, perhaps, join him of an evening in Hampshire, and of course, one day he would have a wife...

But the wife he wanted by the fire, the one who would enjoy his story, was not in England. She was here. And he was leaving her. And only because he feared the consequences if he stayed—chanting "Be not afraid" like a conjurer had not driven those fears away. Why should it? What meaning did those words have for him?

They had meant something to Charles when he'd read them. Some of that meaning must have conveyed to Josiah. But it had long since faded. He could no longer even finish the sentence.

Be not afraid for thou art... Be not afraid for I am... It was hopeless. Why did the words tell him not to be afraid? He was under protection. He was under protection from the Lord. Because the Bible was supposed to be the word of the Lord.

He did not need to be afraid because the Lord would protect him. That sounded like something Charles would say.

Josiah watched his belongings being transferred from his small skiff to the ship that would take them to England. Did he dare order the seamen to halt the transfer? Could he tell his sister he had decided to stay?

Or would he make Langley's choice, the return trip across the Atlantic to a land of civilization and predictability?

He continued to watch the loading.

Why did he not tell them to stop?

She could almost see the water now. One more bend, then it would be in view. The ship would still be at anchor—Caroline was sure of that now, she could feel it. The hour was too late for them to have caught the morning tide, so they would wait until evening, or perhaps even tomorrow. She would have ample time to find Mr. Throckmorton; and though she did not know what she could possibly say to make him stay, she might yet think of—

She felt a cold pain in the pit of her stomach as the landing came into sight. She was too late. The ship had already shrunk to small dimensions. Even if she were to ride directly to the waterfront and scream, her voice would not be heard by those on board.

She continued to ride toward the water anyway, but no longer with any objective in mind.

She was too late. He was gone. She dismounted awkwardly near the dock, not caring—even taking a perverse pleasure in the fact—that many people might observe her uncouth behavior. She added to the unladylike effect by kicking viciously at the stones underfoot.

“Do take care, Miss Carter. I believe it would be much more painful to be hit by a spray of stones than it was to be attacked with sprigs of dried flowers.”

Heat rose in her cheeks as she looked up. Once again, Mr. Throckmorton was on hand to see her at her worst. But, more importantly, he was still there. She looked at the distant ship in confusion. “You—you were on...”

“I was supposed to be on the ship, yes. But I found the company to be lacking. And the destination too distant. I will be journeying only a little way. You travel the same direction, I believe?”

“Direction? Oh, yes.” What did he mean?

“Might I be so bold as to ask if you will allow me to accompany you?”

“Yes—oh, yes, of course.” She looked at him slyly. “And how far do you wish to accompany me?”

He smiled then pursed his lips for a moment. “There was a certain large rock near Hill Crest where I once laid my hat, before I assumed a posture of chivalric pomposity—”

Caroline giggled.

“—and asked you a rather long and drawn-out question.”

Caroline giggled again, her face feeling quite flushed now.

“Might we return to the rock?”

“Yes, yes.” It was getting exceedingly difficult to look at him without laughing.

“This time I will not be getting down on bended knee, you understand.”

“No.” She tried to keep her face straight. “Of course not.”

“I will not muddy my clothes, and dampness might give me the ague. But I will still put my hat upon the rock, if you wish.”

“Oh stop, stop,” Caroline laughed. “We need not go back to the rock.”

“But I rather had my heart set on seeing it again.” His face assumed a crestfallen look.

“You need not ask me the question.”

He froze, as if she had twisted a dagger into his chest.

“You, the practiced attorney, should know this. You have already once asked the question. I have already once said yes. My answer still stands. Does your question?”

Confusion vied with relief on his face. “Of course, but your father—”

“Merely agreed to a postponement of our wedding. Surely, you will not try to break your contract at this late date?” She grinned.

“That would, indeed, be most inappropriate for an officer of the court.” He made a mock bow in concession. “I’m afraid you have me, then.”

“I am afraid I do.”

END

About The Author

After coming east from Chicago to attend college at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC, Kate Dolan grew attached to the region and never moved back. She holds an interdisciplinary degree in English, history and drama and a law degree from the University of Richmond School of Law, and has written professionally for over ten years in a variety of fields. She lives in a suburb of Baltimore, from which she is ideally positioned to drag her husband and two children to visit an endless array of historical sites.