

The background is a circular painting depicting a woman in a white dress standing in a stormy, mountainous landscape. She is holding a dark, knotted rope that loops down to the bottom of the frame. The scene is filled with falling leaves and a sense of movement. The entire scene is framed by a circular border decorated with autumn leaves. In the bottom left corner, there is a pocket watch with an ornate, engraved face.

ANNA
BELFRAGE

TIMES *of*
TURMOIL

ANNA
BELFRAGE

TIMES *of*
TURMOIL

Time *Light*
DRESS

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ISBN-13: 978-9198829853 (eb)

Published by Timelight Press

<https://www.annabelfrage.com/timelight-press/>

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She should probably have kept her mouth shut. But Erin Melville wasn't the type of woman who turned the other way when a big, hulking brute of a man chose to punish a scrawny boy in the middle of the street. Especially not when the asshole was using a whip on the child. So she waded in.

“Stop!”

“This is no matter for you to meddle in,” the man snarled, bringing the crop down in yet another vicious strike across the boy's narrow shoulders.

Erin shoved him. “He's bleeding!”

“As he should! A worthless, useless servant is what he is!”

Servant? The boy was at most twelve—or so she guessed, given his size. Too thin, the linen of his worn shirt clinging to a knobbly spine and bony shoulder blades.

The man raised the crop. Erin placed herself between him and the boy.

“Move!” He was sweating, the broken veins on his nose and chin looking almost purple against the red of his skin.

“No.”

“Fine,” he sneered. “I dare say you've tasted a crop once or twice, hey? Once a slave—” He broke off on a yelp.

“Best not finish that,” Duncan said, blue eyes flashing. Erin smiled at her husband, received a frown in return. She sighed inwardly. *Inconspicuous*, she reminded herself, *you*

should always strive to be inconspicuous. Well, so Duncan thought at any rate, hemming and hawing when he verbalised that she did not need to bring attention to the fact that she was a woman of colour. Not something to be flouted in a day and age where anyone with less than lily-white skin was suspected of being a slave, at least here in the American colonies.

In Erin's opinion, just being a woman was something of a trial in the year 1718. There were definitely days when she longed for her other life in the twenty-first century. Until she remembered that had she not fallen through time in 2016, she'd likely have been burned to a crisp in the fire engulfing her home. Discreetly, she took a couple of deep breaths, attempting to calm her thundering pulse: a time traveller, an impossibility, that's who she was, and should anyone find out ... well, being a woman of colour would be a walk in the park in comparison! She swallowed, took yet another breath and redirected her attention to her husband and the man with the crop.

"There's no hiding it, is there?" the unknown brute sneered. "Look at her: where did you find her? In one of the French colonies? After all, everyone knows those Frenchies are happy to fornicate with their slaves."

"As are the English colonists," Duncan retorted. "But my wife is not—has never been—a slave."

"No? Her skin says otherwise." The brute laughed. "Should I find her alone, I'd claim her as mine and—" Whatever he had intended to say became a loud gurgle.

"Careful," Duncan said, releasing the man to double over and gasp for breath. "Anyone touches my wife best be prepared to meet me at dawn—to die."

Erin tuned out the continued argument and sank down on her haunches beside the boy instead. A hand to his back reassured her he was breathing, but he was shivering violently. From the way his fists were knotted, his eyes squished shut, she guessed he was very much conscious, probably just waiting for the next blow. And the next. She frowned, encircling one bony wrist. He jerked. Sunken cheeks, deep

purple shadows under his eyes, old bruises mottling what she could see of his skin—this boy was living through hell.

“He needs help,” she said, standing up. “The boy,” she continued. “We must help him.”

“We?” The big man shoved forward. “You won’t be touching my property.”

“Your property?”

“He’s indentured,” Duncan explained.

“And that allows him to mistreat him? Murder him?”

“Nay, that it does not,” a deep voice said from behind them.

Erin recognised the Welsh lilt to the voice and offered the speaker a deep curtsy. “Mr Lloyd,” she said, noting out of the corner of her eye that the big bastard scowled at the substantially smaller David Lloyd.

“I’ll not have you meddle in this,” the man growled.

“No?” Lloyd prodded the prone boy with the tip of his shoe. An elegant shoe, as black as the stockings that disappeared into black breeches that matched the black coat, the skirts falling almost to Lloyd’s knees. “I fear I must, Hyland Nelson.” He pulled himself up to his full height, which effectively had him reaching this unknown Hyland’s shoulder. “I’ve told thee before, have I not? Thou cannot mistreat an indenture like that.”

“He’s mine to do as I please with,” Hyland objected.

“Ah, but that is where thou art wrong, dear Hyland. Even an indenture has some protection under the law, and thou knowest me: I am a great believer in the law.” Lloyd rose on his toes. “And the law says that if thou were to, let us say, maim this poor lad, permanently cripple him or, God spare us, kill him, then thou would pay the ultimate price.”

“You’d hang, Nelson,” Duncan clarified.

“He needs discipline!” Nelson roared. “He’s an ungrateful little bastard who shirks work.”

“Maybe if you fed him, he’d have the strength to work,” Erin said, receiving a warning blue look from Duncan. *What?* She crossed her arms over her chest. “That boy is starving.”

Duncan studied the child, a deep wrinkle forming between his brows.

“What is it to you?” Nelson demanded. “I’ll make sure he gets enough to survive, but more than that makes him hard to handle.”

“Ah. So thou art starving him into obedience.” Lloyd gave Nelson a disgusted look. “Most ungodly, Hyland Nelson. No, we cannot have that.”

“We can take care of him,” Erin said, leaning down to brush at the boy’s hair. He shrank from her touch, and her heart twisted.

“You?” Nelson spat. “He’s my indenture. He goes home with me.”

The boy’s tremors increased. Duncan looked first at the boy, then at Mr Lloyd. “We’ll take him home. He needs good care and food, and we can supply both.”

“I say no!” Nelson moved with the speed of a striking cobra, shoving Erin so hard she landed on her butt. His big hand closed on the boy’s arm, and he hoisted him upright. The boy yelped. Nelson whacked him across the face.

“Enough!” Lloyd roared. “So help me God, unhand the lad now, or I’ll have thee thrown in gaol for undue violence.”

Nelson sneered, but when Duncan drew his sword, he paled.

“You heard the chief justice,” Duncan said, making Mr Lloyd swell. Clearly, he was very enamoured of his new title, even if he’d never use it. Quakers did not believe in titles.

“This is wrong,” Nelson said, releasing the boy. “A man is entitled to do as it pleases him with his property.”

“Hmph! Compassion and charity, that’s what defines a good Christian man,” Lloyd said. Nelson opened his mouth, but Lloyd waved him silent. “The lad goes with Melville.” He

turned to Duncan. “Would thou consider taking on his contract?”

“What? No, he is not for sale!” Nelson protested.

“Of course he isn’t; he isn’t a slave,” Lloyd retorted. “But his contract can be transferred.”

“Father?” A thinner copy of Nelson sidled up to stand beside him. In difference to his father, he had most of his hair and no paunch, but he was as wide over the shoulders, had the same small mouth and light eyes under heavy brows. Neanderthal throwbacks, the both of them, Erin reflected, mentally apologising to the poor Neanderthals for the comparison.

“Ah, Caleb,” Lloyd said.

“Mr Lloyd,” Caleb muttered, looking anything but pleased. He frowned at the boy. “What has he done this time?” he sighed.

“Dropped the eggs,” Nelson said. “On purpose, of course.”

“Oh, of course.” Caleb sniffed. “Nothing but trouble, that one.”

“Well, how fortunate he will no longer be thy burden,” Lloyd said.

“Eh?” Caleb said.

“They mean to steal our property, son.” Nelson pointed at Erin. “It’s that uppity former slave’s—aah!” He staggered back, covering his face. He scowled at Duncan. “My nose,” he said. “You broke my nose!”

“And you insulted my wife. Again,” Duncan said.

“You’ll pay for this!” Nelson said.

“Aye,” Caleb filled in. “We’ll not have it, that someone harms us over a coloured—”

“Careful,” Lloyd said. “Erin Melville is a much-appreciated member of Chester’s society and a generous donor to our various charities. I’ll not have her maligned by men who’d have done better to stay down south in New Castle.”

Caleb bristled. “We’re free to go wherever it pleases us!”

“As long as thou respect the laws,” Lloyd said. “Up here, we do not hold with inhumane treatment of our fellow man.”

“Fellow man? Him?” Caleb pointed at the boy and laughed. “The son of a whore—”

With a keening sound, the boy leapt at him, teeth bared. Duncan grabbed him round the waist and pulled him back, which had the poor boy hissing in pain.

“See? A wild, dangerous creature,” Caleb said, pressing a handkerchief to the scratch marks on his cheek.

“I wonder why,” Erin said. “You treat someone like a beast, don’t be surprised if they become one.”

“Aye.” Lloyd nodded. “As we sow, we reap,” he added primly. “But as of now, this young lad is no longer thy concern. I will—”

Both the Nelsons broke out in loud protests. Lloyd stood on his toes, filled his lungs and roared. “Quiet!”

By now, they’d drawn quite a crowd, and to judge from the looks the Nelsons were getting, they weren’t much liked by the people of Chester, most of whom, like David Lloyd, were law-abiding Quakers.

“Duncan Melville will buy the contract,” Lloyd said in his normal voice. “Today.”

Much later, Hans guided the cart down the lane of the Papegoja estate. Tall and fair and disinclined to say much beyond yes or no, Hans Muller was a German who’d come to America after war had robbed him of his entire family.

Duncan had bought his indenture contract, and over the last few years he’d become an adopted member of the Melville family and was extremely protective of Erin and Esther, Duncan’s much younger stepsister. He was also the shocked but proud godfather of the Melville twins, two lively girls who’d recently mastered the art of walking, thereby upgrading from cute and adorable to cute and mercurial.

Duncan had ridden beside them in silence all the way from Chester. After her attempts at conversation had been stonewalled, Erin ignored him and instead concentrated her attentions on the boy—Tim, he'd mumbled—who was back to shivering uncontrollably, his shirt streaked with drying blood.

Hans carried the boy inside.

Erin made as if to follow but was stopped by Duncan's hand on her arm. "Those Nelsons make nasty enemies," he said. "They'll not take this lying down."

"But you paid them," she said.

"A transaction they'll claim was done under duress." He shrugged, handing the reins of his horse to one of the stable boys. "I hope he was worth it." With that he strode off.

She stuck her tongue out at his retreating back. What was eating him?

Inside, Mrs Andersson and Esther were already busy with Tim, Hans standing silently to the side to help lift and turn as needed.

"Poor child!" Mrs Andersson said in an undertone. "Look at him! A walking scarecrow!"

It had taken Erin some time to warm to Mrs Andersson, very much due to her shrill voice. Klara Andersson was well into her fifties but had an unlined pink complexion, big brown eyes, and a plump mouth that was presently pursed as she studied Tim, laid out on the huge kitchen table.

To her credit, Mrs Andersson had never once commented on Erin's evident mixed heritage. She'd swallowed Duncan's story—complete with a now deceased sea captain, a.k.a. Erin's father; a dark, exotic beauty said sea captain had come upon during his extensive travels and fallen in love with; and a rich but orphaned heiress, i.e. Erin herself—and had never questioned it.

But then, Mrs Andersson tended to think the sun shone out of Duncan's arse, especially after he'd told her his great-grandfather was Swedish. Mrs Andersson could go on for hours about her own Swedish ancestry—her mother had

arrived in the colony of New Sweden as a babe, and while Mrs Andersson had never set foot in distant Sweden, she claimed she was as Swedish as they came, which was sort of amusing as her father had been from Sussex.

“Bless his good heart,” she now said, hurrying over to the hearth and the pot that always held hot water.

“Eh?”

“Master Duncan,” Mrs Andersson said. “So in keeping with his generous character to open his home to an unfortunate orphan.”

“Hmm,” was all Erin said, noting how the oh-so-kind Master Melville paused at the door to the kitchen for an instant before disappearing in the direction of his study.

Esther winked at Erin. She found Mrs Andersson’s adoration of Duncan hilarious. Erin rolled her eyes in response but couldn’t stop herself from smiling at her very young sister-in-law. Everyone smiled at Esther—she had that effect on people. She was one of those sunny personalities who effortlessly memorised names and faces, who was as welcome in their tenant farmers’ homes as in the grander houses of their neighbours.

The young men in Chester County gravitated towards her like flies to a honeypot. No wonder because, at sixteen, Esther Connor was a delectable collection of curves and youthful energy, the blue eyes she shared with Duncan fringed by thick lashes as fair as her hair. She was also an extremely capable young woman, as at home milking a cow as preserving fruit or mending clothes or working in the kitchen garden.

Most of all, she was a beloved baby sister to both Duncan and Erin, which resulted in Duncan being overprotective. Plus, should anything happen to Esther, Duncan’s not-so-loving mother would skin him alive.

Conversation ground to a halt as the three women focused on Tim. The long benches on either side of the table were shoved aside. Esther lit every tallow candle she could find, creating a dim and smoky haze of light around the poor boy’s

bleeding body. An hour or so later, a clean and shorn Tim was carried up the stairs by Hans. He looked groggy, a consequence of the laudanum Mrs Andersson had added to the warm milk she'd had him drink before starting on his lacerated back.

Esther swept together Tim's hair and ragged clothes and threw them into the hearth. For an instant, the unpleasant smell of singed hair filled the kitchen.

"Gone," Esther pronounced. She peered at the floor. "Not a single louse in sight."

"Best make sure," Mrs Andersson said, calling for Julie, one of the maids, to scrub the floor. "Properly, mind," she added, wagging a finger.

Erin chose to escape the busy kitchen, going in search of her girls.

She found them clambering all over their father. Duncan had Ellen on his lap while Sandy—short for Alexandra—was trying to climb up his arm. And yet, despite being more or less attacked by their offspring, he looked ridiculously happy.

She could still remember the first time he had seen them. He'd burst through the door to their bedroom, his hair mussed, his eyes huge.

"Twins," she'd told him proudly, feeling as if she'd spent the last few hours in a cement mixer.

"What?"

Alice Williams, the local midwife, had smiled. "Two girls."

"Girls?" His voice shook. "We have two daughters?"

The midwife had handed him one of the infants, and Erin had watched her big, strong husband trace the baby's features with a trembling finger. Then he'd lifted his face to look at Erin.

"Thank you," he'd said, leaning forward to press butterfly kisses to her nose, her eyes, her mouth. "Thank you," he'd repeated, kissing the daughter he was holding before gesturing

for the midwife to hand him the other baby. “My babies,” he’d crooned, “my little treasures, my princesses.”

She smiled at the memory, was about to say something to Duncan when he noticed her. He frowned.

“Finished doing your good deed for the day?” he asked.

“He’s in bed,” she replied, sitting down in the chair facing his desk. Duncan’s study was a study in polished wood. Here, she’d chosen to keep the original wainscoting in dark oak, the plastered wall a nice contrasting cream. Dark beams in the ceiling, a dark wooden floor laid in a pleasing herringbone pattern and adorned with a small round rug Mrs Andersson—of course, who else—had woven for the master. The desk had come with the house, whimsically adorned with an elegantly carved parrot and the initials *JP* at the top of each leg. Other than the two candles on the desk, the small space was lit by the reddish glow from the hearth, the mantelpiece adorned with a further two silver candlesticks.

Duncan just nodded, going back to his antics with their daughters.

“You’re mad at me,” she stated.

“Mad? Aye, that fits. What were you thinking of, to—”

“Stop a man beating a child to death? I don’t know, maybe I felt it was my obligation to do something?” She crossed her arms. “Or are you saying it would have been better if I’d just ignored it?”

“Yes!”

“Yes?”

“Damnation, woman. Of course I don’t condone a man beating a young lad to pulp, but why did it have to be you meddling?”

“Because no one else did, you moron. Not even you!”

By now, both girls had gone very still, two pairs of identical blue eyes darting from Erin to Duncan.

“I would have,” he said in a lower voice. “Surely, you don’t believe me to be such an insensitive bastard?” His mouth twisted into a bitter smile. He rarely referred to himself as a bastard—probably because he was one, and a very, very unwanted child at that.

“So why are you so angry?”

“Why? Because now that damned Nelson has you in his sights.”

“What? Why would he—”

“You humiliated him, Erin.”

“No more than you did—or Lloyd.” She clasped her hands together. Hyland Nelson on a mission to make her pay was a very disturbing thought.

“But it is at you he’ll direct his anger, at the uppity coloured woman who spoke to him as if she were his equal.” He held up a hand. “Yes, yes, of course you’re his equal, but that’s not how he sees it.”

“No one here does,” she said bitterly. She turned away, staring unseeing through the window. Outside, the January day was shading into night, and there’d be no electric light to illuminate the shadows. She sighed.

Warm arms drew her close, her nose pressed against the linen shirt that smelled so reassuringly of him. “I do,” he said softly. “I do, my Erin.”

It took several weeks for Tim's bruises to fade. The bleeding lines on his back scabbed and healed, and by the time they were halfway through February, a fuzz of fair hair had sprouted to adorn his head. In clean and whole clothes, he looked almost like a normal lad, but in difference to other bairns, Tim did not talk. In fact, he made very little noise, moving like a veritable ghost through the house. Most of his time he spent with the horses, happy to spend hours seeing to the beasts. Other than that, he avoided them all—well, except for their wee lasses, who expected nothing of him but that he be there, offering a hand to hold, a lap to clamber into. Even with them, he did not speak.

“He understands everything,” Erin said, handing Duncan a bowl of oatmeal.

“Aye.” Duncan frowned. Was Tim mayhap impaired in some way?

Erin served herself. “Maybe he just doesn't have anything to say.” She slid in to sit on the bench closest to his chair.

“Hmm.” He helped himself to salt and butter.

“Well, some people are like that: they only speak when so required.”

He smiled at her. “Not like you, then.”

“Or you.” She stooped and pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. “You're the lawyer, remember? And when you're in court, all you do is talk, talk, talk.”

“Mostly, I write,” he said. He studied his fingers, presently permanently stained with ink. These days, he was swamped in work, courtesy of David Lloyd. The powerful and astute former attorney general, now chief justice, who had—or so Duncan had inferred from Lloyd’s casual comments—more or less single-handedly drafted the present Frame of Government for the colony of Pennsylvania, was a busy man, always involved in furthering Pennsylvania’s independence from its owner, William Penn.

Rumour had it that Penn was mightily displeased with the restrictions of his powers, but Penn was in England and not really in a position to do much to regain personal control. Better that way, as Duncan was of the opinion Lloyd and his supporters would fight tooth and nail to defend their liberties. Fight verbally, that is. After all, Quakers did not hold with violence.

Duncan had met Lloyd a couple of years ago, and the older man had taken an immediate liking to Duncan, suggesting repeatedly that Duncan stand for election to the General Assembly and join him in furthering Pennsylvania’s development. Just as repeatedly, Duncan had politely said no, insisting he did not have the time to invest in such a demanding undertaking.

“You keep me too busy,” he’d said to Lloyd when last the issue had come up. “And truth be told, I much prefer helping you draft laws and such. I have no interest in a public life.”

He glanced at his wife, talking intently with Mrs Andersson while feeding Ellen from her own bowl of oatmeal. Public life would require public appearances, and his Erin would likely not fare well under the myopic public eye of the Philadelphia worthies. She was safer here, albeit quite isolated. Other than Esther, Mrs Anderson and their female tenants, Erin had few interactions with women, leading a life that must feel suffocating to someone used to having the entire world at her fingertips.

He smiled slightly, recalling his own fascination with the internet and laptops. Well, not at first: initially, he had been terrified at finding himself in this utterly strange and foreign

time, a time of inventions such as cars and—what was it called? Ah, yes, television—and electricity and hot showers. Once over his initial shock at having been transported through time by a violent thunderstorm, he had been amazed by the sheer comfort of that future life. Had he been allowed to choose, he'd have preferred to remain in Erin's time, but fate had other plans, and so here they were, his Erin forced to adapt to an existence in which she was but an extension of him. There were days when she missed being "an independent woman," as she phrased it, which was why he'd been more than happy to allow her to indulge herself in rebuilding their home. Erin was a skilled carpenter, had learned the craft from her grandfather in a time when women could become anything they wanted. Not that Erin had ever seen carpentry as a future profession, more as a "hobby," and a right fanciful concept that was.

A quick kiss and passing pat to his wife's rear and Duncan retired to his study. A little island of solitude—as long as he kept the door closed, thereby stopping Sandy and Ellen from entering—in a busy household. He enjoyed the quiet, the rustling of thick paper, the smell of ink and hot wax.

When he'd acquired the Papegoja estate—in itself unusual here in Pennsylvania, where William Penn owned the vast majority of the land himself, renting it out to the eager colonists—he'd had notions of dividing his time between his work for the Graham Trading Company and managing his extensive new land holdings, but truth be told, he much preferred the work Lloyd sent his way to farming.

While he could handle both scythe and axe, drive a pair of oxen and spend hours in a sawpit if so required, his heart wasn't in such. Aye, he often took part, lending his strength to the heavier tasks, but he was happy to delegate the day-to-day to the taciturn Sivert Andersson, husband to the rosy Mrs Andersson. Sivert, to Mrs Andersson's obvious pride, was as Swedish as they came, having arrived in Pennsylvania a mere forty years ago when his father was sent out to serve as the minister of the Swedish Lutheran Church.

Andersson had capable help in Hans, who'd silently assumed the role of second-in-command. What on earth they'd do without Hans, Duncan had no idea. Over the last few years, the huge German had become a permanent fixture in their lives.

And now they had Tim. He pursed his mouth as he considered his recent run-in with the Nelsons, father and son, when he'd been to Chester yesterday. Right uncomfortable that, both Nelson's spouting invectives and threats. He wasn't worried on his own account—they'd be fools to pick a fight with him—but Erin was another matter entirely. Not that she ever went anywhere on her own, but to judge from Hyland Nelson's parting remark, they knew where the Melvilles lived, and who knew what foolishness they might attempt? He made a mental note to talk with Hans about this potential threat and retrieved Tim's contract from his satchel, now duly signed by both himself and Lloyd, acting as a witness.

Such a sad little thing, this scrap of paper which sold a lad estimated to be around three into servitude for twenty years so that the captain who'd carried him across the seas could recoup both on his passage and that of his dead mother. Nine years ago, that was, making Tim twelve or thereabouts. He disliked the notion of selling children into indentureship—they were too young to be subjected to such—but things were as they were. Well, at least Tim was in a better place now than he'd been a fortnight ago.

He tucked away Tim's contract and drew some of the documents Lloyd had given him closer. "It won't come to anything," Lloyd had said as he'd handed them over. "But I thought it best you see them."

Not come to anything? Duncan sat stunned once he'd finished reading. *No white man to enter into common-law marriage with a coloured woman on the risk of being forced into indentureship. No white man to wed a coloured woman on the risk of being enslaved together with his wife and any offspring. No person of colour to ...* Angrily, he shoved the papers aside. He had moved to Pennsylvania specifically

because laws such as these had made it impossible to remain in Maryland.

“Laws cannot be applied retroactively,” Lloyd has said yesterday, speaking of an entirely different matter, but should this inflamed drivel become law, Duncan had no choice but to take his family and leave. But go where? He considered the map that decorated one of his walls, the various trading routes of the Graham Trading Company marked in red.

He’d have to think long and hard about this and come up with some sort of plan. And until he did, he’d not tell Erin—no need to frighten her unnecessarily. But there was someone who could help: Uncle David. Yes, David Graham would have some notions as to what to do, or rather where best to go. Buoyed by that insight, he sharpened his quill and began a long letter to his uncle, starting with a brief summary of his recent successes on behalf of the trading company he owned a sizeable percentage of.

“Philadelphia? In this weather?” Erin threw a look out the window. It was raining, one of those incessant downpours that could continue an entire day.

“You know Lloyd. Once he needs something, he expects it immediately.” Duncan finished packing his satchel. “I don’t like it,” he added, “leaving you alone.”

“You’ve left me alone before,” she reminded him. But she didn’t like it either, not after he’d reluctantly told her about his heated discussion with Hyland and Caleb Nelson.

“You’re not to leave home,” he said. “And I want Hans to accompany you at all times.”

“Wow, my very own bodyguard,” she muttered. She cleared her throat. “They’d be fools to come here.”

“Unfortunately, Hyland Nelson does not strike me as the most balanced of men.” Duncan frowned. “There’s something between him and Tim.”

Erin plunked down on the bed. “He likes hurting him.” This observation was based on the patchwork of faded scars and bruises that covered Tim’s body. Any attempts to get him to talk to them continued to be met by silence.

“I fear it may be more than that.” Duncan straightened up and called for Jasper. His manservant popped his head in, assured Duncan he had everything under control and held out Duncan’s heavy cloak.

“Not that it will help,” Jasper sniffed. “We’ll be like drenched cats before we reach Philadelphia.” He gave Erin a mournful look and patted at his elegantly coiffed hair. “Why I even bothered with this, I do not know.”

“How more than that?” Erin asked as she trailed Duncan down the stairs.

“I don’t know. Maybe Tim knows something about Hyland Nelson he does not want to come out. Or maybe he just enjoys inflicting pain.”

Erin came to an abrupt halt. “Maybe that’s why Tim refuses to talk. Maybe Nelson has threatened him so often about spilling the secret that he prefers to be silent.”

“Maybe.” Duncan shrugged. “I am not interested in Nelson’s secrets.”

“Generally, those who have secrets are convinced everyone is interested in them. Besides, what if Tim saw him kill someone or—”

“Shush. We do not know, Erin.” He stepped outside. “I must be off. Jasper will never forgive me if I keep him astride his horse longer than necessary, not in this weather.” He made as if to leave.

“You forgot something.” She wound her arms round his neck. “Stay safe, Duncan Melville.”

“Always, honey, always.” He kissed her. She clung to him; he deepened the kiss, one strong arm holding her so close she could feel the muscles of his thighs and his growing erection. With a little groan, he released her. “It will be hell to ride like this.”

“Well, at least you can think hot thoughts to keep you warm.”

Erin waved them off and returned inside, shivering.

“Damned weather,” she said, joining Esther where she was sitting sewing beside the fire. She looked about with some pride, taking in the high skirting boards and the cornices. It had taken her weeks to create this little parlour, a space small enough that the single fireplace kept it nice and warm no matter the weather outside.

“It will soon be over.” Esther bit off the thread. “Spring is just around the corner.” She folded the garment and picked up the next.

“Somehow, it always feels much better once we’re in March,” Erin said, receiving an incredulous look in return. “Yes, yes, I know: March is a month of work, of ploughing and sowing and all that, but at least we can be outside.” Erin took pride in helping out as well as she could during those busy weeks and had, to her delight, discovered she was good at handling the oxen. She also made herself useful in the kitchen garden, having constructed two stout spades to help with the digging.

“Do you think Tim is mute?” Esther asked out of the blue.

Erin pursed her lips. “He did say his name,” she said, “so no. I think he is choosing to be silent. Maybe he’s learned the hard way to always hold his tongue.”

Esther grimaced. “That poor lad! Permanently scarred by all those savage beatings.”

“Yeah, someone should do that to Hyland Nelson,” Erin said. “See how he’d like it, being whipped until he bled.”

From the kitchen came a loud squeal.

“Oh dear,” Erin said, leaping to her feet. “That’s Sandy.”

“How on earth can you hear the difference?” Esther asked.

Erin smiled. “I guess a mother always does.”

She found Sandy and Ellen in a heap on the stone-flagged floor, both of them making grabs for the cat. Mrs Andersson gave her a harried look. “How am I to cook and bake when I have them underfoot?” She was standing in front of the huge hearth—big enough for there to be a chair beside the glowing fire. From the pot hanging over the fire came the scents of thyme and chicken, and on the table a covered dish promised pie for dessert.

“Where’s Julie? I asked her to look after them,” Erin said, scooping up Ellen to give her a loud kiss. The child squirmed, locks spilling from under her cap. They were remarkably like their father with those big blue eyes, thick dark hair and fair skin, several shades lighter than Erin’s own honey-brown skin. A good thing, given the times, but it filled her with a complex brew of fear and resentment: what if their next child—because by now she’d accepted there would probably be more kids—took after her? How would such a child be treated?

“Julie? I haven’t seen her since breakfast.” Mrs Andersson clucked. “That wench! I’d wager you she’s in the barn with yon Will.”

Probably. Will was the eldest son of Giles, one of their tenants, a good catch for someone like Julie, recently arrived from the old country on her own. Just like Tim, Julie was an indentured servant. In difference to Tim, she’d been sixteen when she’d set her mark on the contract, not a child recently out of clouts.

Mrs Andersson scowled. “She should be here, scrubbing the floor.” Mrs Andersson was house-proud to the extreme when it came to the kitchen, and it fell to Julie to do the hard work required to keep it all so clean you could probably eat straight off the floor. “And someone needs to fix that shutter,” she added.

Two large windows—one to the west, the other to the south—gave the kitchen a lot of light. One of Erin’s better improvements, if she said so herself, smiling with pride. Twelve small panes of glass in each window offered a view of the front yard and kitchen garden respectively.

“I’ll do it,” she said, which, if anything, only made Mrs Andersson’s scowl deeper. “Not right,” she muttered. “A woman with a hammer, pah!”

The rain did not let up until next evening. After two entire days cooped up, Erin just had to go outside, so after having settled her babies for the night, she wrapped herself in a shawl and stepped outside. Everything dripped. The air smelled of water and wet earth, and the various buildings were visible only as darker shadows against the cloudy sky. Something flitted by. For an instant, the weak light from the kitchen window illuminated Tim’s head before he was swallowed up by the dark.

She guessed he was making for the stables. This silent addition to their household had an affinity with animals, and particularly horses. She took a couple of deep breaths, filling her lungs with cool, crisp air, and strolled off in the general direction of the outhouses. Somehow, she ended up in front of the shed that housed her working space, regretting that she hadn’t brought a lantern. A couple of hours with her new plane, smoothing the planks intended to become the new flooring in one of the upstairs rooms, would have done her good.

She shoved the door open, inhaling the scent of wood and was considering whether to return for light when a high-pitched sound had her freezing to the spot. Yet another sound—a muffled scream.

Instinctively, she grabbed hold of one of her tools. Armed with a mallet, she took a few cautious steps out into the yard. One of the horses neighed. A heavy hoof struck the plank walls, and Erin squinted in the direction of the stables. Footfalls, the sound of a scuffle. A grunt, a hissed curse, and the dull sound of a fist hitting flesh.

She’d reached the stables. Her hand slipped on the smooth wood of the mallet handle, her pulse loud in her head. Erin pressed herself against the coarse wall planks and tried to calm her breathing. From inside came yet another dull thwack, and

another, followed by the unmistakable sound of someone in pain. Low voices, a chuckle, and this time the sound of the blow was followed by a yelp, quickly muffled. It didn't take a genius to work out who was in their stable, and she winced at the sounds of Tim being subjected to what must be a vicious beating. She tightened her hold on the mallet. *Enough*, she told herself, *don't stand here, Erin, do something! Now.*

From the direction of the main house came the wavering light of a lantern.

"Who goes there?" Hans called out.

"Over here!" Erin yelled. "There's someone in the stables!" Safe in the knowledge that Hans was coming, she plunged inside. A huge, beefy hand grabbed hold of her.

"Your man comes here and I'll kill the lad," Hyland Nelson growled. In response, Erin swung the mallet. It struck Nelson and he yelped, releasing her. "Bitch!" he snarled, and like a cobra he struck, his punch sending her to the ground. He gripped her hair and lifted her to her knees. "That's better," he chuckled. "On the ground, ready to serve your master."

"In your dreams!" This time, she put every ounce of strength into the blow. The mallet struck him across the knee with such force she could hear something break. To judge from how he hollered, it hurt. She tore free, wincing at the resulting pain, and got to her feet.

"Get out!" she told him.

"Not without him," someone said from behind her, and she could make out yet another shadow, this one hauling a slumped shape she assumed to be Tim.

"Over my dead body," she said, sidling away from a badly limping Hyland.

Caleb laughed, releasing Tim to fall to the ground. "Oh, that can be arranged," he said, and the weak light glinted on the muzzle of a pistol. He cocked the hammer, the distinctive sound loud.

Shit! Erin took a couple of steps backwards.

Caleb grinned. “Don’t bother. At this distance, I won’t miss.”

From behind her, Hyland laughed.

“You kill me, you hang,” Erin said.

“Really?” Caleb drawled. “And where is your witness? Besides, who cares if a coloured hussy dies?” He aimed.

Erin tensed, her hold on the mallet tightening.

From the crumpled heap on the floor came a hoarse howl. Tim leapt upward, striking Caleb’s arm.

The gun went off.

Erin threw herself to the floor.

Tim collapsed.

“Ah!” Hyland Nelson exclaimed, staggering backwards.

“Father?” Caleb said, just as Hans stormed in, lantern aloft.

“Father!” Caleb shrieked.

Hyland Nelson was leaning against one of the large hewn, timber uprights, hands pressed to his middle. “Help me,” he croaked.

Erin backed away.

“Help him!” Caleb yelled, pointing at Erin with his pistol. “Help him, or I’ll—”

“You shot him. You help him,” Erin said.

“He’s bleeding,” Caleb said, his entire arm shaking. “Dear God, look at all that blood!” A dark stain was spreading fast over Hyland Nelson’s front.

“Gut wound,” Hans put in. “Painful, *ja?*”

Tim got to his feet. He swayed, making a grab for one of the stall doors to steady himself.

Caleb was on his knees by his father. Hans had drawn his own pistol but was making no move to approach the intruders. Erin sidled closer to him.

“Will he die?” she whispered.

Hans nodded.

“Good,” Erin said.

“Good?” Caleb flew to his feet and pointed his gun at her. “You killed him! You and your meddling!”

“Me? You’re the one who blew a hole through his stomach.”

“Because of you! If he dies, I swear—”

“He will die,” Hans interrupted. “Either here or at the end of a noose for threatening my mistress, as will you. Brigands, thieves, the both of you.”

“We came to reclaim what is ours!” Caleb shrieked. “Ours! She stole him—”

“*Ja?* And you have a contract proving you own him?” Hans asked.

Erin’s eyes widened. She’d never heard the big German so voluble—or so fluent—in English.

From Hyland Nelson came a loud groan. Caleb crouched beside him, adding his free hand to his father’s. The wavering light of the lantern illuminated the spreading blood on the floor.

Tim tugged at Erin’s sleeve. “Die?” he croaked. She frowned at the dark bruises ringing his neck, at the tears and stains on his shirt.

“It seems so,” she said, tentatively touching her throbbing face.

Tim’s face broke out into a smile, revealing bloodied teeth. He shuffled forward and spat Hyland Nelson full in the face. Then he limped off.

Caleb was back on his feet, his gaze darting from his father to the open door. Ultimately, the desire to escape won out, and he leapt towards the entrance. “I will make you pay!” he spat over his shoulder before ducking into the night.

From the dying man came a wheezing chuckle. "My boy," he panted. "You heard him. He'll make you pay."

"How?" Erin said coldly. "He'll hang for this."

Hyland Nelson grinned. "His word against yours. Against the word of a former slave and an indentured foreigner." He laughed, coughed and emitted one long groan. His head fell forward.

"He's right," Hans said quietly.

"Find Giles," Erin told him. He lived closer than Sivard. "Now!"

Duncan came home to upheaval. Tim was sporting bruises and welts, there was a dead man wrapped in sacking in one of his sheds, and his wife ... He suppressed the rage that lived inside of him, a snarling thing that growled and snapped whenever he caught sight of Erin's swollen and bruised face. She looked as if she'd not slept a wink since the incident, and Mrs Andersson hovered round her like a worried mother hen. Only Hans seemed his normal, unruffled self, explaining tersely what had happened.

"Caleb will say you shot his father," Duncan said with a sigh.

Hans actually smiled. "*Ja*. But with this, I shoot no one." He handed over his pistol, and Duncan almost laughed. The flint was missing.

"Giles and Sivert will testify. *Keine* flint, *ja*? Never."

"Then why carry it?" Duncan asked.

"People see what they want to see. A man pointing a pistol is an armed man." Hans shrugged. "I have enough of killing."

When Duncan spoke to Giles, the large farmer laughed. "'Tis true. That Hans, he's been carrying around a useless pistol for years. Says it's saved him from many tricky situations." He chuckled. "A man like Hans waves that at you, I reckon you take it for granted it is loaded." He grew serious. "Awful business, this. And poor Mistress Melville, so distraught after that ruffian tried to shoot her! This matter with Nelson's threats ... It won't come to anything, will it?"

“They were trespassing, so even if Hans had shot him, he’d be justified doing so to defend his mistress. But Hans does not deserve to be labelled a killer, and once you’ve testified, the matter will be neatly sorted.” Or so he hoped. An indentured shooting a free man, no matter how justified, was legal quagmire.

Giles nodded and excused himself, saying there was a calving in process.

Duncan sank back in his chair and closed his eyes. He took a couple of deep breaths in an attempt to control the anger that yet again rose like a tidal wave inside of him. Better rage than fear, he reflected. Aye: better this red-hot rage than the frozen, numb sensation that had plagued him all night as he’d lain in bed with Erin safely cradled in his arms. She could have been dead! He could have returned home to a pale corpse, a lifeless body with dulled eyes and cold skin.

She was alive, he reminded himself, shaking his body as if he were a drenched dog to rid himself of all these dark thoughts. She was alive.

It was common knowledge that the Quakers—or Friends, as they called themselves—had arrived in Pennsylvania with an ingrained mistrust for the British legal system. Too many years of persecution, too many accusations of being in breach of the Conventicle Act, had left them with a desire to build their own legislation. Accordingly—or so Lloyd said, being a pragmatic soul no matter his faith—the original penal code had been somewhat lax. Some years later, the colony had swung the other way, implementing punishments that were particularly brutal—at least for some crimes, like sodomy.

“Now I believe we have found an adequate balance,” Lloyd had confided with some smugness. After all, he’d been a major contributor to the recent reforms. But some things hadn’t changed: the Friends preferred to settle their disputes in venues that were more reminiscent of their meetinghouses than a courtroom, which was why today’s proceedings were held in a simply furnished room adjoining Lloyd’s office.

Uncluttered and full of light, the bare room was evidently to Erin's liking, as were the chairs, unadorned but well-made. Duncan was not in the mood to inspect furnishings or interiors. Truth be told, he didn't believe Erin was either: she was merely distracting herself from the coming proceedings.

Lloyd entered, followed by a group of silent men, the jurors. Some were landowners; some ran businesses in Chester itself. All of them looked serious, inclining their heads politely at Erin—albeit some chose not to look directly at her—and greeting Duncan with more familiarity.

Last came Caleb Nelson, strutting into the room accompanied by his lawyer, John Edwards. Lloyd and Duncan shared a look: Edwards was a recent transplant from England and was prone to wordy comparisons between the glories of England and the woeful state of affairs in this sad corner of the world, Pennsylvania.

Today, Edwards oozed confidence. Where Caleb had opted for a brightly embroidered waistcoat under an ill-fitting coat and boots rather than shoes, John Edwards sported expensive black. Black coat adorned with silver buttons, a black waistcoat, neat black breeches, black stockings and polished silver-buckled shoes. Cuffs frothed with pristine lace, a blindingly white collar contrasting starkly with the darkness of his coat. He bowed to the assembled jurors, totally ignoring Duncan and Erin. Duncan bristled. Erin's hand clasped his forearm, urging him to sit back.

"Well, this won't take long, will it?" Edwards said, and Caleb grinned.

"No? How so?" Lloyd asked.

"Nonsense!" Edwards said. "Unsubstantiated accusations! Everyone knows it was that man who shot our dear Hyland Nelson." He pointed at Hans, for the day in his best coat.

"Ah. And thou wert there, wert thou?" Lloyd asked.

"Me?" Edwards snorted. "Of course not, but Caleb—Mr Nelson—says that—"

"Ah. So Caleb Nelson admits to being there."

Edwards gave Lloyd an irritated look. “What of it?”

“Trespassing, John Edwards. A most serious offense. Who knows what dastardly deeds he and his father were planning?” Lloyd nodded repeatedly.

“Dastardly deeds?” Edwards squeaked. “It was Hyland Nelson who was murdered!”

“Hmm,” Lloyd said. “Murder requires premeditation. Surely, thou knowest that, educated man that thou art.”

Edwards puffed up. “Of course.”

“So if Hyland Nelson died in stables he had no reason to be in, one could argue it was as a consequence of his actions: breaking and entering.”

“How dare you! My father and I—”

“Were trespassing,” Lloyd cut him off. “Or art thou saying Duncan Melville invited you?”

“Melville wasn’t home,” Caleb Nelson said.

“No. Which likely means thou were not invited. So in fact, thou wert trespassing, likely to do Duncan Melville damage. As I hear it, thou wert planning theft, Nelson.”

Caleb Nelson spluttered, but Edwards frowned, gesturing that he hold his tongue.

“We can but speculate for their presence at the Melville home,” he began, at which Duncan shot to his feet.

“Speculate? They were there to steal back my latest indenture.”

“Our indenture! You tricked us out of him!” Caleb roared.

“Duncan Melville bought him off thee,” Lloyd said, waving for Duncan to sit down. “At a fair price. And we all know why he did, do we not?” He fixed Edwards with a narrow, wintry gaze. “I assume thou dost know why we interceded on behalf of the lad, John Edwards?”

“I do,” the lawyer muttered.

“So,” Lloyd continued, “I think we can ascertain that Nelson, father and son, were at Papegoja Plantation to steal.” He turned to glare at Celeb. “Am I not correct?”

“He belongs with us,” Caleb said, and beside him Edwards shook his head.

“Not anymore.” Lloyd turned to Edwards. “Tell me, John Edwards, if this were England, how would a thief be punished?”

Edwards paled. “Err ...”

“He would hang, would he not?” Lloyd said.

“Well, it depends,” Edwards began. “For stealing a horse, likely, but—”

“Hang?” Caleb interrupted. “Me? It was him, the German, who shot my father, he should hang!”

“Tut-tut: For defending his master’s property against thieves? I think not. Besides, both Hans Muller and Erin Melville give a different account of events,” Lloyd said. He turned to the jurors. “Erin Melville will not testify, of course, but we have here her written statement.”

Duncan suppressed a yelp when Erin pinched him. Bright green eyes met his.

“I want to testify,” she said in an undertone.

“But you will not.” He’d have preferred it if she hadn’t been here at all, but Erin had been adamant: she had a right to be present. And he couldn’t quite tell her that he didn’t want her exposed, that he didn’t like men looking at her with a speculating gleam in their eyes, wondering if there was some truth in the lies spread by Nelson about Erin once having been a slave.

“All lies, lies, I say!” Caleb Nelson said once Lloyd had finished reading Erin’s account out loud. He swivelled to glare at Erin. “She knows it was the German who shot my father; she’s just lying to protect her man.” He sniffed. “What else can one expect of a coloured h—”

“Careful,” Lloyd said. “Tread with care, Nelson.”

“Her word should not count,” Caleb blustered. “Not against me, a white man.”

“How fortunate, then, that our first witness is white,” Lloyd said, and at his nod one of the guards opened a side door. Giles stepped in, hat in hand.

It was something of a victory to see Caleb’s smug expression convert into shock. His mouth fell open, and he blinked stupidly at Hans for several minutes as Giles spoke before collecting himself and yelling it was obvious the German had removed the flint after the incident in the barn.

“He’s never had any flint in it,” Giles told the assembled men. “He doesn’t want to kill anyone again.”

Hans shuffled his feet under the interested inspection of David Lloyd and his companions.

“A most godly approach,” Lloyd said, nodding his approval. He turned to Caleb. “Not one thou agreest with, Caleb Nelson.” Lloyd shook his head. “A son to kill his father—most sad.”

“It’s her fault!” Caleb stood, pointing at Erin, who shrank back against Duncan. He put a reassuring arm around her. Yet another reason why he’d not wanted her to come.

“How can it be Erin Melville’s fault?” one of the other men present asked. Like Lloyd, Hiram Jones was a Quaker, a quiet man who was happiest attending to business in his bakery.

“She moved! It was her I wanted to kill, not Father.”

“Ah. So thou admits intent to murder,” one of the other jurors said. Joshua Simmonds was the proprietor of Chester’s only pharmacy, a man who did a lot of business with Duncan.

“Murder?” Caleb scoffed. “How can it be murder if a white man kills a former slave?”

Duncan bristled, halfway out of his chair, but was halted by Erin’s hand on his sleeve.

Lloyd sighed. Deeply. “I have told thee once, twice, thrice: Erin Melville is as free as any of us.”

Caleb sneered. “Women that colour aren’t born free.”

“Maybe not where you come from,” Duncan retorted. “New Castle is likely a backwater filled with bigoted slave owners who happily fornicate with their unwilling slaves and name their coloured offspring slaves, but I can assure you the world is full of people of all shades who are most definitely born free.” He dipped his head to Erin. “Like my lovely wife.”

Caleb looked about to choke but held his tongue.

“Duncan Melville is right.” Lloyd cleared his throat. “In summary, what we have is the sad story of two men entering Duncan Melville’s home to abduct Duncan Melville’s indentured servant and—”

“That lad is ours! Ours! We were forced to sell his contract to Melville!”

“Aye, after near on abusing the poor lad to death,” Duncan said, wondering yet again why the Nelsons were so desperate to regain control over Tim. Well, that was a matter to ponder at length on another occasion.

“He deserved it. Wilful and rebellious, that Tim needs regular beatings. Hard beatings.”

“I myself find kindness works much better,” Lloyd put in.

“Well, you would,” Caleb sneered. “Cowardly, the lot of you Quakers, incapable of handling matters like men do.”

“Oh, like when thou snuck onto Duncan Melville’s property, grabbed the poor lad no longer thy indenture, were interrupted by Erin Melville, threatened to kill her—nay, tried to kill her—and instead shot thine own father? A most capable way of handling matters, is it not, Caleb Nelson?”

“I—” Nelson began.

“Quiet!” Lloyd snapped. “It is me talking, not thee. And to add to all this, thou then perjured thyself in front of all of us by stating that it was Hans Muller who shot thy father, not thee. No, no, Caleb Nelson, if that is how men like thee handle matters, then thank the good Lord there are very few men like

thee around. The question that now remains is what to do with thee. After all, thou didst murder someone.”

“I didn’t mean to kill him. He’s my father!”

“No, you meant to kill my wife,” Duncan said. He turned to Lloyd. “He should hang for this.”

Lloyd gave him an irritated look. “That is not for thee to decide. We will consider the matter and revert with a verdict.”

“What?” To her irritation, Erin’s voice squeaked. “That’s all he gets? Fines?”

“Well, we couldn’t find him guilty of murder,” David Lloyd said. He dragged his hand down his face, tired eyes looking at her. “He did not intend to kill Hyland Nelson.”

“It’s not right,” Duncan said. “He may have not intended to kill his father, but he definitely wanted to kill Erin.”

“But he didn’t.” Lloyd sighed. “Had he done so, he’d have hanged.”

“So I should be sorry he missed?” Erin asked. She steadied herself over to a chair, sank down before her knees gave out.

“Honey?” Her husband crouched in front of her, his big hands enveloping hers.

“I’m okay,” she said. No, she wasn’t. She hadn’t realised until now that Caleb wasn’t going to be locked up somewhere. She’d thought that even if he didn’t hang, he’d be out of their life, but this ... She cleared her throat. “Why not send him to prison?”

“Prison?” Lloyd made big eyes. “Why would we do that? Gaol is for debtors and perpetrators of vice.”

“But he tried to kill me!”

“Yes, and for that he will pay a minor fortune. He’ll have to sell everything he owns here to raise the amount required.” Lloyd looked quite pleased. “I dare say he’ll hasten back to New Castle and stay there.”

“And I can only imagine how much that will endear me to him,” Erin muttered.

Duncan frowned at Lloyd. “And what if he doesn’t leave? What is to say he won’t try again?”

“He’d be a fool to do so,” Lloyd said.

Duncan just looked at him.

“I know,” Lloyd muttered. “Caleb Nelson does not come across as the sharpest tool.” He sighed. “Opinions were divided. And as it is beyond dispute that he did not intend to shoot his father, we felt a hefty fine was adequate.”

“And am I to take comfort in that if he actually succeeds in killing my wife?”

Lloyd slumped. “He has been warned to stay away from thee and thine.”

“Whoopee,” Erin said, getting to her feet. “Take me home,” she said to Duncan. “Just take me home.”

Her angry and protective man nodded, slamming the door behind them with unnecessary force.

Five days later, they were woken in the middle of the night by loud yells.

“Duncan!” Esther appeared at their door. “Fire!”

Duncan rushed for the door with Erin at his heels. Down the stairs, out through the wide-open door and they were in the yard, presently full of people running back and forth. Some were leading horses out of the stable; others had formed a line from the well, passing buckets back and forth.

Tim appeared out of nowhere and tugged at Duncan’s sleeve. He pointed.

“What?” Duncan asked.

Tim pointed again, and now Erin could make out a dark shape, darting through the trees of the orchard.

“There!” she yelled. “Over there!” She was already running. “Catch him!”

Several men fell in behind her.

“We catch you and you’re dead!” she hollered as the dark shape set off at a mad run, making for the river, visible like a band of silver in the night. Duncan had hold of her and wrenched her to a stop.

“Go back inside,” he told her.

“What? No!”

“I said, go back. You cannot run about like this—half-naked.”

Belatedly, she realised she was only in her shift, her hair a mass of loose curls round her head.

“And our girls, they may be scared,” he added. Manipulative man! He knew full well what her reaction to that statement would be. In fact, he was so certain he was already leaping away, his shirt flapping round his bare legs.

“Bastard had a skiff waiting,” Duncan said much later, sitting on one of the kitchen chairs while she was seeing to his feet. “But we all know who it was, don’t we?” He shoved the mug of beer Esther had offered him away. “Damn him!”

“At least there was no serious damage,” Erin said. Together with Sivert, she’d already concluded the repairs required would take at most a couple of days.

“But there could have been.”

She nodded. Pure chance that Sivert and Giles had been attending to a colicky horse, thereby discovering the fire before it took proper hold.

Next morning, Duncan rode to Chester, accompanied by an uncharacteristically silent and grim Jasper.

“How unfortunate we did not get hold of him,” Jasper said as they clattered into Chester.

“Aye. But not due to lack of effort, at least not from you.” His manservant had run like the wind in his attempts to catch the fleeing arsonist.

Jasper stretched. “Next time . . .” he began.

“There won’t be a next time. This time, Caleb Nelson hangs.” He said that mostly to reassure himself. The lawyer in him knew it was highly unlikely anyone would hang for the arson, but he would try.

He pushed his way into Lloyd’s office, giving the man a terse summary of events. “That damned Caleb Nelson,” he finished. “I told you he’d try again. And had that fire taken hold . . .”

“Thee cannot be sure it was Caleb Nelson,” Lloyd said.

“Of course I am! Who else?” Duncan said. “I know it was him!”

Lloyd raised his bushy brows. “That is not enough.” He cleared his throat. “Although I assume it is some evidence of his guilt that Nelson has chosen to leave. He was on the first sloop out this morning.” He frowned. “I truly do not understand: why this fixation on an indentured lad? Why the determination to steal him back, thereby setting all these events in motion?”

That, Duncan felt, was a very good question.

When he returned home, he had Tim accompany him into his office. The lad stood as close as possible to the door, his gaze darting from Duncan to the window, to the door, to the window.

“What is it you know—or have—that makes you so valuable to Caleb Nelson?” Duncan asked.

In response, all he got was a shrug.

He repeated the question several times. Tim repeated his shrugs, eyes wide. Frustrated, Duncan dismissed the lad, watching him run off toward the stables. The lad was lying: he knew exactly what it was Caleb Nelson wanted. And whatever

it was, it was likely valuable enough for that accursed Nelson to risk capture—again.

“Damn,” Duncan muttered.

Had someone told the young Lettie Graham that one day she'd stand cowering before a man, she'd have laughed. Not her, not when Lettie was the strongest and fastest of all the Graham cousins, the best marksman—whether with musket or bow and arrow—the best rider, the best swimmer. No, that Lettie would never have allowed a man to terrorise her. That Lettie had dreamed of becoming an Amazon, one of those ancient female warriors her grandmother told stories about, brave women who defended the weak and fearlessly rode into battle.

But that was then, before Emrick, before days of being belittled and hurt, of being disciplined by her husband for any infraction.

A wife must be dutiful.

She must be obedient.

She must hold her tongue.

Emrick whipped that message into her back and thighs, leaving purple marks that never quite faded away. No Amazon, just a frightened woman who begged the man she'd promised to love, honour and obey not to hurt her anymore. But he did, and she tried to stop herself from crying out because it made Emrick angry if she didn't take her punishment in silence.

He slapped her. "You are a useless wife, incapable of keeping a clean house, of cooking a good meal."

Not true. She kept their home spotless, and from the Dutch oven came the smell of the baking meat pie, but it didn't matter that she scurried like a frightened mouse from the moment she woke to the moment she fell into exhausted sleep. Emrick always found fault with something.

He hit her again.

"Please," she begged, and shame clogged her throat. She shouldn't beg, she should fight back. Her younger self would have done so, but these last few years with Emrick had eroded her courage, left her an insipid and weak woman who likely deserved his ire. After all, she disappointed him. She should do better: clean more, cook tastier meals, sew him nicer clothes.

"Please?" He laughed nastily. "You are a barren shrew, Lettie Graham, and I'll regret wedding you till the day I die." He smiled, but his eyes were like jagged shards of glass. Once, she'd thought his green eyes beautiful. Now, they made her shiver with anticipated pain. "Or you die," he added and swung again.

His fist caught her full in the belly. He hit; she cried out. He hit and hit and hit, and only when she was lying on the floor did he stop. "Clean up the mess," he ordered before making for the door. "If that floor isn't as good as new when I get back, I'll teach you another lesson."

It took her a long time to get off the floor. Tentatively, she stretched her limbs, wincing at the sudden spurts of pain. She rose to her feet and gasped when her entire midriff protested. Nothing to worry about, no bones broken, only bruises, she told herself before finding a bucket and a clean rag with which to scrub off the blood that dotted the floor.

Emrick did not return home that night. He rarely did when he'd punished her as thoroughly as he'd done today. No, instead he'd be at one of the nearby inns, laughing with his friends before accompanying a whore upstairs. She wondered bitterly if he ever hit them as he hit her. Likely not: the madam would demand payment for any damage done to one of her girls.

The morning after was always the worst. Every movement hurt, from crouching over the chamber pot to staggering out to the kitchen, there to start a bright new day. A tear landed on the worn wood of the table. Another, and she hid her face in her arms and wept.

That was how her neighbour found her. Not that it was the first time Mrs Vincent had seen her like this, but it shamed Lettie nonetheless. The older woman studied her bruised face with evident concern.

“Not good,” she said bluntly. “Unless you leave him, he will kill you. Men like that, they do not stop.” She crossed herself, blushed vividly when she realised Lettie was watching her. Papists were barely tolerated in most of the colonies. Not that Lettie cared, what with one of her aunts having voluntarily embraced the beliefs of the Holy Church, this despite having been raised a good Presbyterian.

Lettie sighed. They’d had this conversation before. “And where would I go?” She rubbed a finger over a stain on the wood. “I am his wife. As such, he can always demand I return to him.”

“Only if he finds you,” Mrs Vincent said.

Unfortunately, Emrick knew there was only one place for her to run to: home. And while both her father and her uncles would do their best to protect her, they would risk serious fines should they attempt to keep her away from her husband. And Emrick had friends in high places, starting with that despicable Nicholas Farrell, as much of a bully and abuser as Emrick himself. Besides, to return home like a whipped cur—it had her innards twisting with shame.

Emrick returned late in the evening the day after that awful, awful beating. His gaze lingered on her bruised face for a long time before he looked away.

He never apologised, but for some weeks he was solicitous when he was home, which was rarely. Lettie hoped. And then, one night he came home in a foul mood about something that

had happened down in the harbour and took it out on her. Soon enough, it was back to shoves and slaps, and the day he punched her so hard her head cracked against the wall, Lettie realised Mrs Vincent was right: he would never change.

One day, he came home stinking of rum, and when she said as much, he hit her. To her own surprise, she swung and struck him hard over the mouth. For an instant, everything stilled, and then he roared, throwing himself at her.

This time, she fought back. It was as if a heavy wet blanket lifted from her. She screamed and spat, she kicked and punched. But Emrick was bigger and stronger, and a vicious punch to her face had her reeling back. He had her by the throat, thick fingers tightening around her windpipe. She slapped, she scratched, but he did not let go, his breathing loud and uneven. No air. She clawed at his hands. No air! She groped, found the handle of the hot skillet and hit him with all the strength left to her.

He staggered back. He blinked before slowly toppling over, landing on his back.

Lettie braced herself against her knees, working air into her lungs. She did not dare to look at him. Had she killed him? Her throat throbbed, there was blood in her mouth, and one eye was swelling shut.

On the floor, Emrick did not move.

She took a step towards him.

He inhaled.

She leapt back.

Not dead, then, just unconscious. And the moment he regained his wits, he would ... Dear God! He would ... Out! She had to get out of here!

A cloak, his heavy purse, a knife and she fled, running as well as she could towards the harbour. People looked at her, and she realised she was attracting too much attention. Lettie took a deep breath, took another. She settled her cloak round her shoulders and pulled up the hood, slowing her pace to a brisk walk.

She reached the harbour just as the April day was shifting into dusk. The tide was turning, and when she recognised one of the sloops, she slipped and slid down the last incline, yelling and waving to catch their attention.

“Are you headed to Annapolis?” she asked once she was within hailing distance. It hurt to talk, her voice a cracked thing. Please God, let Captain Herbert be headed back home!

“Aye.” Samuel Herbert’s gaze stuck on her throat, on her mauled face.

She blinked back tears, humiliation crawling up her spine. “I need passage.”

The captain’s bushy eyebrows rose as he studied her. “Aye, I reckon you do.” He gestured at the gangway but blocked her when she reached the railings. “You didn’t kill him, I hope.”

Mutely, she shook her head.

“Good. Ellis is not worth hanging for.” He cleared his throat. “You will have to share a cabin with my other female passenger,” the captain said, nodding in the direction of something in pink.

“If she does not mind, neither do I,” Lettie replied.

Herbert nodded and wandered over to talk to the lady in pink silk. Lady? Lettie was not entirely sure that was the correct label to pin on this rather exotic and ... umm ... somewhat exposed woman. Her bosoms rose white from a neckline so tight and low cut it was a miracle her nipples remained hidden from sight, and her hair was uncovered, falling in arranged curls down her back.

“Miss Peters is happy to share,” Herbert reported. “So, Mrs Ellis—”

“Graham,” Lettie interrupted. “I am Lettie Graham.” Her chest swelled. Yes, she was Lettie Graham, not Mrs Ellis. And Lettie Graham was an Amazon, a survivor. For the first time in what felt like years, Lettie Graham smiled.

Erin had her arms deep in one of the hives, a cloud of irritated bees around her, when the distinctive high voice of her housekeeper called her name. Erin winced. Even when draped in layers of sheer veils with an old hat pulled down low over her head, Mrs Andersson's agitated voice tore at her poor ears.

"Mistress Erin!" Klara Andersson came trotting towards her, her face bright red, her hand pressed to her heaving chest.

"Wait!" Erin ordered. The bees around her buzzed, swarming round her head. She pulled out the last of the honeycombs and placed them in the large bucket beside her. She always felt like a thief doing this, but once they'd calmed down, the bees would turn their industrious nature into building new combs on the clean wooden bars she'd inserted into the basket hives to replace the ones she'd lifted out.

She grabbed hold of the buckets and made her way towards where Mrs Andersson was waiting for her.

"Best hurry," she said.

"Why?" Erin pulled off the heavy leather gloves she'd been wearing, took off her hat and shook out her hair before bundling up the veils. She undid the worn coat she used as yet another protective layer and added it to the pile.

"Mr Lloyd," Klara Andersson said.

"He's here?" Erin gestured for Tim to pick up the full buckets. The boy just nodded, a lock of fair hair tumbling over his forehead. "Thank you," she said, placing her hand gently

on his shoulder. He stiffened. He always did when anyone touched him, even if it was getting better.

“Quite the harvest,” Mrs Andersson commented.

“Yes.” Had someone told Erin three years ago that one day she’d be puffed up with pride on account of her beekeeping efforts, she’d have laughed out loud. Not her, no, not Erin Barnes, newly minted journalist with her eyes set on one day winning a Pulitzer. Instead, life had thrown her the mother of all curveballs, which was how she’d ended up here, in Colonial Pennsylvania several decades before the American Revolution. Joseph Pulitzer wouldn’t be born for another hundred years and some.

She tugged at her sleeve. There were days when she wanted nothing more but to wake up back in her own time and find that these last three years were nothing but a complex dream. She’d thought a lot about her lost life over the last few months, the incidents with the Nelsons leaving her with nightmares and a permanent sense of insecurity. Not that she’d be much safer in the twenty-first century: there was a reason she’d ended up here, and that reason was Jacqueline Wilkes and her determined efforts to kill Erin Barnes. She shivered.

“And hopefully we’ll get as much come autumn,” Mrs Andersson said. “Such industrious creatures, our little bees.”

“Yeah,” Erin said, rubbing at a bee sting. The honey and the beeswax candles brought in a nice little extra income. Not that they truly needed it, but she enjoyed contributing so directly to the household. Her other private income—the proceeds of the two ships Duncan had bought on her behalf—never felt as hers: the investment had been financed by the generous gift Duncan’s uncle, David Graham, had given them after they’d saved him from dying in the Scottish Highlands. Duncan had insisted she should consider that money her dowry—his way of trying to redirect society’s focus from the colour of her skin to her purported wealth. Didn’t always work, the Nelsons being case in point.

“Mistress?”

Erin straightened up, jolted out of her thoughts by Mrs Andersson's voice. "Yes?"

"I was just saying that Mr Lloyd seemed somewhat agitated."

"Well, if he's hoping for Duncan to help him . . ." Erin began.

"He wanted to see you."

He did? Erin gnawed her lip. That sounded ominous. Usually, the very busy Lloyd would ride out to their home from Chester, greet her politely and drag Duncan off into his study, there to spend hours discussing legalities.

"Let's hope his business won't take too long," Erin said. "Daniel is coming over later."

Mrs Andersson's face clouded. "Hmph!"

"He's bringing me some new tools," Erin went on, suppressing a little grin at Mrs Andersson's responding grimace.

"It's not seemly," the housekeeper said, stooping to collect Erin's makeshift beekeeper outfit. "For a woman to dabble in carpentry ..."

"I enjoy it," Erin replied.

"Carpentry is men's work!" Mrs Andersson said.

"Is it? And where exactly does it say that?"

"Hmph! The Lord himself was a carpenter, and he was a man, not a woman!"

"He was? I thought he was a preacher," Erin said, mainly to get a rise out of her. Mrs Andersson was a devout member of the Lutheran Church and would make her way to Chester at least every other Sunday to listen to the weekly sermon and join her voice to the mandatory singing of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

"He started out as a carpenter. His earthly father taught him the trade," Mrs Andersson said. She narrowed her eyes.

“But I have never heard of a female being apprenticed to a carpenter. Never!”

“I wasn’t apprenticed. My grandfather taught me,” Erin said. Dangerous ground, this, because it was so easy to forget she couldn’t share just who her grandfather had been. A black US Army veteran who’d married a British half-Afghani and proceeded to build a good life with her, including a handsome son who’d fathered Erin and died four years later. She shivered: a bad, bad death at the hands of Jacqueline Wilkes.

“... sewing,” Mrs Andersson said.

“Eh?” Erin asked.

“I said, it would be better if you set a good example to your two little girls by practising your sewing instead of covering yourself in sawdust and wood-shavings.”

“I don’t like to sew,” Erin said.

Mrs Andersson snorted. “That’s not true. You don’t know *how* to sew, which in itself is a right mystery: what woman grows up without knowing how to make a shirt?”

“One that spent her time with her carpenter grandfather?” she retorted.

They walked through the old orchard, the long grass swishing round their skirts. According to the man who’d sold them the old Papegoja place, the trees had been planted by Swedish settlers back in the 1650s, and some years of Sivert Andersson’s careful pruning had brought them back to full glory, the branches heavy with miniature green apples.

The original plantation had been huge, a gigantic parcel of land acquired by the first Swedish settlers by purchase from the Lenape. It had been worked by indentures and, at some point, by slaves, but since several decades back, there were no slaves on Papegoja or on any of the neighbouring estates. Instead, the land was worked by a combination of indentured servants and tenants, most of which had first arrived as indentures, then been offered to stay on as tenants.

Now, some of those tenants could proudly call themselves freeholders, owning some of their land directly. Since Duncan had taken over the Papegoja estate, the acreage had shrunk, mainly because he'd chosen to expend his efforts on creating smaller parcels of land that their tenants could afford to buy outright. Giles, who had the largest of the tenant farms, now owned almost half of the land he farmed and was determined to one day own all of it outright, as were several of the others.

Duncan's efforts came with benefits: in difference to other estates, their people tended to stay on instead of leaving for greener pastures. Originally, most of the indentures had been Swedish or Dutch, then had come a wave of Germans, but most of them had left once their period of indenture was up, wanting to settle close to their fellow countrymen. Now, only two of the tenants were of German descent. Some were Welsh, but the majority were English, quite a few of them Quakers.

And then, of course, there was Sivert and Klara Andersson, the latter not missing one single opportunity to regale whoever was within earshot about how it had been her Swedish ancestors who first settled the land. Not that they were tenants: Sivert was employed by Duncan to oversee the farming of the remaining estate.

Erin halted when the main house came into view beyond the hedge of raspberry canes. Pride had her chest swelling as she took in the glassed porch—their own little orangery, as Duncan teasingly called it. All of it was her work, hours and hours of ignoring Mrs Andersson's disapproving looks as she sanded and joined, as she carefully fitted glass panes and fixed them into place.

The light-drenched space was a welcome addition to the old house, and as long as the weather wasn't too cold, it was her preferred room, comfortably furnished with armchairs and pillows and a wrought-iron brazier.

Her contemplation was interrupted by a loud call for "Mama," echoed seconds after by a second, equally demanding, voice. Two mops of dark curls, two sets of sturdy little legs, and Erin let out a loud *oumph* as the twins barrelled into her.

“Mama! You gone!” Sandy said, frowning her brow. “Sandy look an’ look an’ look for you!”

“I was with the bees,” Erin told her, smiling at Ellen, who, as usual, let Sandy do the talking. And ever since she’d begun mastering that particular skill, Sandy talked incessantly, half of it incomprehensible gibberish. Erin crouched to plant a kiss on Ellen’s brow. Sandy loudly demanded a kiss too, and soon enough she was on the ground, her arms full of squirming girls.

Mrs Andersson did not look impressed. “They’re almost two,” she said—as she did frequently, “too old to behave like untamed animals. They need a firmer hand, if you ask me.”

“But I’m not asking you,” Erin said, regaining her feet. “And no, I do not believe in punishing them for their exuberance.” Besides, they were only eighteen months, nowhere near to two!

Mrs Anderson sniffed. “He who spares the rod spoils the child.”

“Grandma Alex disagreed,” a young voice said. Esther held out her hands to the girls. “She said anyone who hit a child deserved to be caned themselves.”

“Hmph!” Mrs Andersson stalked off. “Mr Lloyd is waiting,” she threw over her shoulder.

“What is he doing here?” Esther asked, falling into step with her, the girls holding on to her.

They turned the corner to find David Lloyd pacing the front yard. Neatly cobbled and shaded by a huge oak, it was bordered on one side by the house, on the opposite side by the stables. From where Lloyd was standing, he was gazing out in the direction of the large kitchen garden and the orchards beyond; behind him was the lane that led up to what went for the main road to Philadelphia.

The main farm yard lay beyond the stables, flanked by the barn, various work sheds, and some of the tenant cottages. A busy, bustling place, it acted like a magnet on Erin’s two little

girls, and when a loud squeal pierced the air, they set off at a run, dragging Esther with them.

“A pig?” Lloyd suggested, sweeping his hat off to give her a slight bow. She reciprocated. She liked Lloyd. Besides, she owed him. Her gaze found Tim, standing silent in the shadows offered by the stable. Had it not been for Lloyd, that poor boy would still have been indentured to the awful Hyland Nelson.

“Too early to be slaughtering them,” she replied, patting herself on her back for sounding so knowledgeable when she knew more or less nothing about the subject. “Can I offer you something to drink?” She gestured towards the house.

“No, Erin Melville, not today.” He squinted up at the sun before replacing his hat. As neat as ever was Mr Lloyd, for the day in coat, waistcoat and breeches in a light grey. “I aim to be in Philadelphia before evening.”

“Ah.”

“It’s about Caleb Nelson,” he said. “He’s back, unfortunately, and he is still harping on about his father’s death, saying it was thy fault.”

“It wasn’t me who fired the pistol,” she said.

“Yes, we know that.” He frowned. “I don’t like that he is back.” He glanced at Tim. “And Simmonds heard him saying that this time he wouldn’t be leaving without the indenture you stole from him.”

“Except I didn’t.”

“No.” Lloyd pursed his lips, converting an otherwise wide mouth into a narrow spout. “The Nelson family is not well-liked—never have been. There’s a reason why Hyland has spent most of the last decade down south on his other lands. But that does not mean Caleb Nelson is entirely without potential allies, especially if he is willing to pay for help.” He frowned. “I felt it best to warn thee. And I’d not recommend thou visit Chester unaccompanied.”

Erin almost smiled. “I never do.” Duncan was adamant: Erin never left their home without an escort—usually Hans,

who'd now appeared from the stable and stood like a silent giant beside the equally silent Tim.

“No, I suppose thou dost not. A lady of quality like thee wouldn't.” He slapped his hat against his thigh a couple of times before replacing it on his head and making for his horse. His male servant was already astride, giving Erin a little bow.

“Tell Duncan,” Lloyd said. “And beware of more fires.”

“So you admit it, then, you believe it was him setting our stable on fire back in February.”

Lloyd sighed. “I do. But believing is not enough, not in the beady eye of the law. And that is as it should be, is it not?”

Well, she couldn't exactly disagree with him on that.

She waved Lloyd off and turned towards the house with a sigh. There was a sour taste in her mouth, a pressing sensation on her chest that she recognised for what it was: fear. Erin wiped her hands on her skirts. Nelson was back, a potential threat to them all. She beckoned Hans closer and updated him. The large man stilled.

“Best I arm myself with a real pistol,” he said.

“I'm sure it won't come to that,” Erin said, mostly to reassure herself. “He'd be an idiot with a death wish to come back here.”

“Eh?” Hans blinked.

“Never mind.” She studied the busy yard. “We need dogs,” she said. “Big dogs.”

“*Ja*. I will talk to Andersson,” Hans said. He crouched to scratch one of the farm dogs. “But even a small dog can do damage. Mayhap we leave them outside at night?”

“You leave Mab outside and she'll spend the entire night scratching at the door to get in,” she said, and they shared a quick smile. Everyone knew Mab spent her nights in Hans' bed.

Not even Daniel Brown's arrival an hour or so later managed to dispel her dark mood.

"An adze, irons for your fore plane and smoothing plane and two new paring chisels," Daniel said, holding up the burlap sack he was carrying.

"Thank you."

He touched a finger to his hat. "I'll have the beds ready for you next week."

Where Erin loved building spaces, Daniel was a furniture maker, his beautifully crafted pieces decorating almost every one of their rooms. He'd been anything but helpful initially, scowling at her when she'd entered his shop in Chester, not to buy a finished piece, but to ask him where he got his tools. But once he'd seen the results of her hard work, the craftsman in him had won out—probably helped along by the fact that Duncan had ordered numerous items from him.

"Any news from Charles Town?" Daniel asked.

"Duncan isn't back yet," she replied, "so I haven't heard the latest." She muffled a snort. The latest? They were in June, and that pirate Blackbeard had blockaded Charles Town three weeks ago! What had happened since was anyone's guess, but seeing as the South Carolina governor didn't exactly have a navy at his disposal, she supposed the pirate had got away with his spoils, leaving Governor Eden to seethe.

"Maybe he has surrendered to the governor and accepted that royal pardon," she said.

Daniel spat to the side. "Pardon? The man should hang!"

Erin nodded, distracted by the sight of an approaching horse. Seconds later, she was hurrying towards it.

"You're back!"

"I take it you missed me." Duncan was in only his shirtsleeves and waistcoat, his dark hair tied back with a blue ribbon the exact colour of his eyes. She would know: she'd bought it.

“Always.” And especially after David Lloyd’s news. She held up her arms, and he must have seen something in her eyes because he leaned down to lift her up. She ended up sitting before him, one strong arm banded round her waist as he walked the horse down the lane.

“What is it?” he asked, and it all spilled out of her. His arm tightened round her.

“I don’t like it,” she finished, “that he’s back. I hoped he’d never come back.”

“Me too. Likely a foolish hope, seeing as he has business interests here. But God help him if he tries anything,” he added with a growl, and somehow her fear subsided—at least a bit—because she knew firsthand just how protective Duncan could be. He pressed a quick kiss to her temple.

By the time he drew the horse to a halt, Jasper had caught up with them, neat as a pin in his dark blue coat and matching breeches, his face shaded by his hat. He looked harried—Jasper often did—but he managed a smile in Erin’s direction as he pulled his sturdy bay to a halt.

Sandy and Ellen came rushing towards them, Sandy shouting, “Da, Da!” while Ellen contented herself with a wide smile. Duncan helped Erin down before vaulting off to kneel, arms wide-open. Sandy and Ellen threw themselves at him. There were days when Duncan called them hellions or brats, but even when he was scolding them—well, mostly Sandy—there was no doubting the sheer joy just the sight of them brought him or the love he felt for them.

“And in his best summer waistcoat,” Jasper grumbled when the trio went sprawling in the grass. “I’ll have my work cut out for me getting that clean.” It was a very nice waistcoat in pale blue silk with elegant embroideries in various shades of blue and white on the large pockets. Jasper groaned when four little hands began exploring said pockets. “I keep on telling him, mistress, not to stuff all sorts of trinkets into them, but does he listen? Oh no. And who will end up mending it if it tears?”

“You,” she told him with a grin.

“Fortunately,” he replied with a little smile. Jasper excelled at sewing, having been apprenticed to a tailor when much younger. Something had gone wrong, and so here he was, a manservant in the colonies rather than a craftsman in Bristol.

“Anything for me in those pockets?” she asked Duncan once he’d finished greeting his children.

“Not this time.” He tugged at a lock of hair. “I must not spoil you, dearest wife.”

“Hmph!” She elbowed him. He gave her a smacking kiss.

“Master Melville!” Mrs Andersson beamed at him. “A good trip, I trust?”

“Aye, it went well. It usually does.” He smiled at Erin. “I was thinking maybe you could accompany me next time.”

While Duncan, accompanied by Jasper, would ride in to Chester most weekdays, there to oversee the bustling activity at the offices of the Graham Trading Company, he only travelled up to Philadelphia once a month, usually at the request of David Lloyd.

“When is next time?” she asked.

Duncan scowled. “Next week. Lloyd needs my help in drafting some legal documents, and you know what he’s like: he’ll not take no for an answer when it is sufficiently important to him.”

“Any news about Blackbeard?” she asked, mainly because she knew the congregating household was dying to know what was happening with the infamous pirate.

“He got what he wanted and lifted the blockade,” Duncan said. “That’s the last I’ve heard.” He shook his head. “Those poor people: several days as his prisoners and then to be stripped of everything they had of value and most of their clothes, left almost half-naked by the pirates.”

“So now they’re after him, right?” Erin said.

“After him? I think not. Charles Town does not even have a guard boat, and no captain would risk his ship and crew to

sail against him, not when he's got a full-rigged frigate with forty cannon under his command."

Several of the assembled people nodded.

"Only a fool would go up against a man like Blackbeard," Daniel said. "They say he has no soul, has no problems killing whoever opposes him."

Jasper sniffed, casting a long look in Esther's direction as he straightened up to his full height. "He'd have a hard time killing me. Mark my words, had I been aboard that ship, I'd have run him through with my sword and—"

"Seeing as he threatened to behead all his prisoners unless his demands were met, I dare say we must assume he's utterly ruthless and fully capable of holding his own in a fight," Duncan interrupted. "But no more talk of such things. The man is well to the south of here, and unless he accepts that pardon, he'll soon have his hands full evading the king's justice. They've sent out several men-at-war to help rid this part of the world of the pirate scourge."

Much later, Duncan took Erin by the hand and led her upstairs. Their bedroom occupied one of the eaves, a large airy room with a beautiful poster bed—made by Daniel—a chest of drawers, a precious French mirror hanging over it and a chair. Along one wall was a neat line of pegs to hang their clothes, there was a chest that held their warmer garments, and a tall table that held a pitcher and a basin. Linen towels lay folded beside the basin, a porcelain dish holding the small bar of scented soap, a luxury imported from Spain.

"I saw Nicholas Farrell today," Duncan told her as he sat to pull off his boots. "Fortunately, he did not see me."

"You think he's planning to move here?" She hoped not. Having Caleb Nelson around was quite enough, thank you very much. Nicholas Farrell was of the same ilk, a man who had her breaking out in hives, treating his wife like a punching bag and Erin as dirt. Just like Caleb, Nicholas was of the

opinion that because Erin was coloured, she'd likely been born a slave, and men like him did not deign to socialise with such.

“Leave Annapolis? I think not. There, he can capitalise on his surname. Here, he has to prove his worth, and we both know he doesn't have much. Bloody abuser of the weak, is what he is—yet another thing that would not endear him to the people of Philadelphia. Still, I prefer steering clear of him, especially when he's travelling with his comrades.”

By now, Duncan was down to his shirt. “Aren't you going to undress?” he asked, clearly done with the subject of Farrell. He came over, placing his hands on her shoulders. “Or maybe you want me to do it?”

Warm hands slid down her arms and up again. Somewhere along the way, he divested her of her bodice, managed to undo the lacings on her skirt sufficiently for it to sigh its way down her legs.

“God, you're beautiful,” he said, winding a curl of her undone hair round his finger. “Beautiful and mine.”

He backed her towards the bed but came to an abrupt stop. “What's that?”

“What?”

“That.” He pointed at a neat little parcel placed on his pillow.

“No idea.” She frowned, disengaging herself from his arms. He reached for it, tugged off the string that held the fabric rolled together and shook it out to reveal a ... nightcap? Erin was torn between wanting to laugh out loud at the notion of Duncan wearing this embroidered headpiece to bed and anger at the giver for presenting her husband with something so intimate. “I'm going to kill her!”

Duncan sighed. “She cares for me. Likely, she feels she must compensate for my wife's lacking skills in the sewing department.”

Erin gave him a black look and crossed her arms over her chest. “I'm tempted to fire her.” Not that she would. People as

competent as Mrs Andersson did not grow on trees. “As it is, I’m going to have words with her.”

“Best I do that,” Duncan said. “I’ll ensure she understands just how inappropriate this is,” he added hastily, “and I’ll insist I cannot keep it.”

“I’m the mistress of the house. She answers to me.”

“And I’m the master.” He drew her close and kissed her nose. “Matters such as this are best handled by me.”

“Huh.” She pouted. “It’s getting a bit old, her constant adoration of you, Master Melville.”

He settled in bed and patted the mattress for her to join him. “We both know it’s only because of my Swedish blood. She’d likely change her opinion should she ever find out about my Spanish witch great-grandmother.”

Mercedes Lind: a name they’d just recently learnt from a reluctant Ian Graham. Duncan had confronted his uncle when they’d visited Graham’s Garden, the Graham homestead in Maryland, back in 1715. He’d demanded the truth about crossroads and time travel but had been met by a stubborn silence, Ian saying he had no idea what Duncan might be referring to and that even if he had known, it wouldn’t be his story to tell.

And then, back in April of this year, Ian had passed by Chester on his way to Boston and an extended visit to his younger brother, Samuel. He’d obviously been thinking long and hard about things—for almost three years—but one evening he’d told Duncan the truth. Well, they only had Ian’s word for it because his story was totally unbelievable. Unless you’d had the misfortune of being dragged through time, like Erin and Duncan.

Apparently, Ian’s beloved stepmother and Duncan’s grandmother, Alex Graham, had been a time traveller, yanked back through time at a crossroads. And Alex’s mother had been born in fifteenth-century Spain and painted her way from one time to the other before she married Alex’s Swedish father, in the process leaving a trail of small magic pictures,

paintings that had the capacity to trap the viewer in the whirlpools of time and send them flying into another era.

She snuggled up closer to him. “Do you think she made that locket?” Just thinking of that particular piece of jewellery had her stomach clenching. It had been instrumental in dragging them both from 2016, and she’d almost had a heart attack when she’d discovered it hanging round the neck of a certain Armand Joseph Chardon they’d met in Edinburgh some years ago. Evil to the bone, that man was, using that locket to rid the world of those he considered undesirable. Hopefully, it had been permanently destroyed in a fire back in Scotland, but Erin had the niggling suspicion that wasn’t the case: after all, if it had been destroyed already in 1715, how come her father had dug it out of the ground in Maryland in 1994?

“Ian said she painted. That locket was made by a remarkably skilled goldsmith.”

“Not the interior,” she pointed out.

He sighed. “Nay, that’s true. But if Ian’s story is true, Mercedes painted because she was desperate to find her way back home. Whoever made that locket was more interested in using it for other nefarious purposes.”

“Hmm.” She hid her face against his shoulder. “But he’s dead, right?”

“Chardon?” His voice grew hoarse. “I hope so—he should be. But even if he isn’t, he’s half a world away, honey.”

For now, Erin thought and crossed her fingers. A futile and childish gesture, but still.

At the crack of dawn, Duncan woke, sitting straight up in bed.

“What?” Erin mumbled sleepily beside him.

“Not sure. I thought I heard something.” He groped for his pistol. Ever since that attempted arson some months back, he always kept his weapon primed and loaded on the bedside table during the night. Especially now that Caleb Nelson was back. He gritted his teeth: he’d had no proof it was him last time, but he *knew*. They both did.

“Is it him?” Erin was now wide awake, clutching the sheet to her chest.

“Nelson? He’s not that much of a fool.”

The sound came again. Someone was walking in their yard, a twig breaking under soft footsteps, fabric swishing against shrubs.

“If that is Esther sneaking about, I’ll be tempted to warm her bottom,” Duncan grumbled and got out of bed. In only his shirt, he crossed over to the window and flung it wide open.

“Who goes there?” he demanded. “Show yourself before I shoot!”

In response, a woman stepped out from under the closest trees, the light of the returning day striking her face. “I was just biding my time,” she said in a low voice. “Didn’t want to wake you this early.” She craned her head back. “Good morrow to you, cousin.”

He didn't recognise her at first. It could be the fading bruises or the slump of her shoulders that made it difficult to do so. This was a dowdy woman dressed in worn clothes who threw repeated looks over her shoulder, seemingly as skittish as a horse. But when she finally met his eyes, her lips quirking into a hesitant smile, he leaned out of the window.

"Lettie?"

"Aye." She ducked her head.

"What in God's name are you doing here? And at this ungodly hour, all alone?" he barked, and she flinched. She flinched! He gaped and felt Erin at his back, her hand on his shoulder.

"Hi," she said, looking down at Lettie. "How about we let her in first before we start the inquisition?"

The moment he opened the door, Lettie stepped inside, throwing several looks over her shoulder. "There's no one there," he said, peering over her shoulder in the direction of the lane and the apple orchard that extended along one side of it.

"One never knows." She shuddered. "The first person I saw once I'd disembarked in Philadelphia was that obnoxious Farrell." Her eyes met his. No need for more words than that. After all, she knew full well what Nicholas Farrell had done to ten-year-old Duncan. He fisted his hand at the unbid memories, recalling weeks of pain, months—nay, years—of fear, of always looking over his shoulder.

"Did he see you?" Duncan asked, studying her in the weak light that spilled through the narrow windows set on each side of the large double door. She shook her head, setting down the sad little bundle she was holding. "But I thought it best not to tarry in Philadelphia, so I set out directly."

"Alone?" he asked.

"Aye. But I went canny."

Lettie was tall for a woman, but the way she held herself, shrinking into herself, took several inches of her height. She wrung her hands repeatedly, revealing nails bitten to the quick

and red and irritated cuticles as well as what looked like half-healed burns.

“Fat,” she muttered. “From the skillet.” She tugged at her sleeves, hiding most of her hands as she followed him to the kitchen.

It did not take long before Lettie was seated in the kitchen, sipping at the herbal tea Erin had made. His wife bustled about in only her nightgown and a shawl, her hair standing like a cloud around her.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Lettie staring at Erin, a deep furrow between her dark brows. “That’s your wife?” she finally said in an undertone, sounding incredulous.

“Yes.” Duncan swelled with pride. “That’s my Erin.” He smiled when his wife took a firm grip of her hair, twisted it into some semblance of neatness and hastily pinned it into place before turning to offer their impromptu guest bread and cheese.

“But she’s ...” Whatever else Lettie had intended to say she swallowed back, thanking Erin for the food. She wolfed it down. Duncan shared a quick look with Erin before going back to stare with some awe as his cousin cleared the generous portion of bread and cheese in concentrated silence before sitting back with a little sigh.

Lettie caught him looking and flushed. “I was hungry,” she muttered. “I had coin enough to buy passage here, not much else.” She fretted with the ends of her shawl. “I did not dare stay with family in Annapolis—he’d go there first—so I stayed at a boardinghouse. But then I realised that it would not take him long to find me there, so ...”

To Duncan’s consternation, Lettie bowed her head, a fat teardrop plopping down on the table.

“Hey,” Erin said, moving closer. “It’s okay, you’re safe now.”

“Okay?” Lettie dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. “I cannot quite remember when I last heard someone say that.”

She gave Duncan a teary smile, not quite looking in Erin's direction. "Grandma Alex used to say that all the time."

"Aye. That and *bloody hell*." Duncan smiled. "And that last expression was very often related to your mischief."

To his relief, that made Lettie laugh.

A cup or two of Erin's herbal tea apparently had a soothing effect, at least to judge from how Lettie finally reclined in the chair.

"It's your husband, isn't it?" Erin said. "The one who'd come looking in Annapolis first," she clarified.

"It is." Lettie gave herself a little hug. "And I couldn't go home to Graham's Garden either." She looked at Duncan. "But I am hoping he still thinks I am somewhere closer to Charles Town."

"Charles Town?" Duncan frowned. "I thought you lived in Jamestown."

"I did. With my previous husband," Lettie said with a little laugh that sounded brittle. "And when Aaron died in 1715, well, there was Emrick." She shivered. "How could I be so foolish?" she muttered.

"Foolish?"

"Aye. I should have known better than to be swept away by him—him and his lying, treacherous eyes." She suddenly looked directly at Erin. "Eyes the colour of emeralds, the colour of a viper's eyes."

Erin blinked, thick lashes shielding her eyes—green eyes flecked with gold.

Duncan cleared his throat and held out his hand to Erin, drawing her close enough that he could slip his arm round her waist. Lettie's gaze followed his movement, her normally so generous mouth flattening into a tight line.

"Why would he think you're still in—ah," Erin said, "because of Blackbeard."

Lettie nodded. “For once, God was on my side,” she said. “The *Siren* departed on the eve of the day Blackbeard began his blockade of Charles Town. I am hoping Emrick thinks I am still hiding somewhere nearby.”

“The blockade has been lifted,” Duncan said.

Lettie just nodded, swallowing repeatedly.

“He’ll not find you here,” Duncan said, even if he couldn’t really promise that. Once Lettie’s husband concluded she’d gone to Annapolis, it would not take him long to find out she had relatives living in Pennsylvania. “He might not even bother to come after you.”

In response, Lettie gave him a long look. “He will,” she whispered. “And God help me when he does.”

“Just because he finds you doesn’t mean you have to go back with him,” Erin objected, and Duncan frowned in warning.

“What?” Erin said. “He’s abusing her!”

“He is her husband,” Duncan replied, and at that Lettie broke down and wept.

“So because he’s her husband, she can’t refuse to return to him? Wow.” Erin shook her head, took yet another turn round their bedroom.

“Even worse, should he find out she is staying with me, he would be within his rights to demand I return her to him.”

Erin stopped midstride. “No!”

“Oh yes.” Duncan sank down on the bed and scrubbed at his face. “She looks awful,” he muttered.

Gone was the confident, bright-eyed imp who’d featured so prominently in his memories of Graham’s Garden.

Gone was the young woman he’d seen occasionally when she’d visited Annapolis, glowing from within in the company of her first husband, Aaron Pierson.

Instead, here was a wraith, those blue eyes shadowed by pain and fear, her entire demeanour that of someone tensing for yet another slap or kick. And all because of that damned Emrick! Not that he'd ever met Aaron's cousin, but to hear it, they were as different as night and day, one sunny and kind, the other dark and mean.

"She looks in need of some TLC," Erin said, joining him on the rumpled bedding. He smiled at her expression. Aye, Lettie could do with both tenderness and care. Erin rested her head against his shoulder, her hair tickling his nose. "You think he'll come here?"

"Emrick?" He slid an arm round her shoulders. "Perhaps."

"And then what?"

"I don't know. But let us not borrow tomorrow's problems."

"We can't just return her to her abuser," Erin said.

Duncan chose not to reply. Emrick had the law on his side, and should he come knocking, there was nothing Duncan could do, bar hide Lettie and hope she wasn't found. He chewed his lip. He'd talk to Lloyd about it, he decided. Yes, a casual conversation about vulnerable women and men's hard fists and what one could do about it.

An hour or so later, they were all in the kitchen when Lettie appeared, hesitating on the threshold.

"Lettie!" Esther threw herself forward, enfolding Lettie in a hug.

"What are you doing here?" Lettie asked once they'd concluded greeting each other. She wiped at a tear and gave Esther a wobbly smile. "Last I saw you, you were still at Graham's Garden."

"Not anymore." Esther did a little turn. "Now I am seeing the world."

"Well, what little she can see of it from our home," Duncan said in a dry voice.

“I go to Chester often,” Esther protested. “And we’ve been to Philadelphia several times. That’s much more world than I’d see at Graham’s Garden.”

Seeing as the Graham family estate was in the middle of the woods, at least three days’ riding from Annapolis, there was no arguing with that statement. Erin smiled fondly at the girl, drawing her in for a quick hug. “Let us know when you want to see more,” she said.

Esther made huge eyes. “How much more?”

Duncan frowned at Erin. “Yes, how much more?”

“I was thinking Arabella,” Erin said.

“Arabella?” Esther beamed. “She’s in Edinburgh!”

“Where you will not be going—not without the express permission of your father and a chaperone,” Duncan told her.

Erin opened her mouth, but a warning look from Duncan had her swallowing down words along the line that a woman had as much right to decide over her life as a man did. That statement was valid in her time. It had no validity whatsoever in this time, as evidenced by the fact that a brute of a husband could beat his wife almost to death and still demand she return home with him. She gave Lettie a compassionate look, was met with a chilly gaze.

“That was foolish of you,” Duncan reprimanded once Esther had left the kitchen with the twins, both of whom had gawked at Lettie, Ellen offering her a shy smile while Sandy scowled and clambered up into Erin’s lap.

“What was?” Erin pushed her bowl away.

Lettie sniffed. “Filling Esther’s head with such nonsense!” She kept her voice down, glancing at Mrs Andersson who’s just entered the kitchen with a basket full of newly picked beets.

“What nonsense?” Erin looked from her husband to his cousin. “I wasn’t exactly proposing she’d set off on her own. I was just encouraging her to dream a bit bigger.”

“Dreams have a tendency to vanish at daybreak,” Lettie said bitterly.

“Not all of them,” Erin said.

Duncan took her hand. “Esther will likely never set foot on a ship—not unless she marries a travelling man. Her parents would never allow her to undertake such an adventure while unwed.”

“You don’t know that,” Erin said.

“Well, I do not intend to ask,” he replied, his full mouth flattening into a thin line. “You know Sarah is in two minds about her being here with us as it is.”

“No wonder,” Lettie muttered.

Duncan gave her a sharp look. “How so? Because I am the son she has always detested?”

Lettie flushed. “She did wrong by you—you know we all think so. But a woman so abused ...” She stared down at her hand, clenching it a couple of times. “One can never forget,” she whispered. “Never.”

Duncan left shortly after, saying he had documents to revise before his meeting with Lloyd. A silence settled in the kitchen, Erin helping Mrs Andersson clear the table while Lettie just sat, staring straight ahead. At long last, she turned to look at Erin.

“Of course you believe in dreams,” she said, her tone cutting.

“Eh?” Erin poured hot water from the huge kettle over the dishes.

“Well, look at you,” Lettie continued. “A woman like you, to be wed to an upstanding man like Duncan Melville.”

Erin crossed her arms over her chest. “What exactly do you mean by that?” she demanded.

It was like pricking a balloon. Lettie shrank into herself. “Nothing.” She shoved away from the table and fled the room.

“She doesn’t like me,” Erin said later to Duncan. An entire morning tiptoeing round their houseguest, attempting to show caring interest while being consistently cold-shouldered was getting to her. Besides, it wasn’t that she was brusque, it was that she looked at Erin with such obvious resentment.

“She doesn’t know you,” Duncan said. He leaned forward enough to tickle her nose with his quill. “And you do not know her either. Poor Lettie, obliged to flee from a man who has left her decorated in scars and bruises. I dare say such experiences make you less prone to trust strangers.”

“Hmm,” Erin said. It wasn’t only resentment in Lettie’s gaze, it was jealousy, the blue eyes she shared with both Duncan and Esther taking in every detail of their home before flitting to Erin, that long mouth of hers tightening.

“Lettie is nothing if not warmhearted,” Duncan said. “Give her some time to recover and you’ll realise that too.”

Erin seriously doubted that. Being stared at like she was an alien in her own house discomfited her. But Duncan sounded convinced, so she painted a smile on her face and nodded.

“I still do not understand.” Antoine shoved the escaped tendrils of hair back and studied his brother from under his brows.

“It is simple,” Felix said. “Duncan Melville did our father wrong. We seek vengeance.” Anyone who did Armand Joseph Chardon wrong was, per definition, the devil incarnate, at least in Monsieur Chardon’s opinion. Antoine privately held that quite often it was dear Papa who wore the horns and the forked tail. But then, Antoine had been burdened with a conscience and a well-defined sense of right and wrong, while Felix, just like Papa, would argue that whatever served his interests was right, however wrong someone else might find it.

Antoine sighed to himself. They were very different, he and his brother. Where Felix—just like Papa—was lithe, elegant and dark of hair, Antoine was on the stout side with light brown locks that defied any attempts to keep them under control, hence these enervating strands that had escaped his ribbon. And where Felix dressed in style, Antoine preferred his clothes to be comfortable and his boots well-worn. Truly, they had nothing in common except for the colour of their eyes, both of them having inherited a distinct golden-brown shade from Maman.

“Looks like a merchant, that one,” Papa had commented more than once. Somewhat odd, given that dear Papa was as much a member of the merchant class as Antoine was. For all his airs, for all the silk and lace, Armand Joseph Chardon had

been born the son of a notary, a man whose wealth was the result of his business endeavours.

Both Papa and Felix tended to study Antoine with exasperated amusement, sometimes wondering out loud if maybe their youngest family member was a foundling, so different was he from them. Thank the good Lord for that, as Maman used to say. Antoine rubbed at his chest. Grief still lay like a weight round his heart. Not a day went by when he didn't miss her, a sentiment not shared by brother or father, albeit Papa had ensured an adequately grand funeral for the woman he'd wed three decades ago, sired two sons on and otherwise mostly ignored.

"We've only heard Papa's side of things," Antoine ventured.

Felix shot him an angry look. "That is the only side we need to hear, *non?*"

Antoine bit back a reply along the lines that whatever Papa had been up to in Scotland, it had likely not been honourable, so perhaps his misadventure was a consequence of those actions. Still: to be left alive in a burning ruin ... Antoine crossed himself, causing Felix to give him an amused smile.

"What was Papa doing in Scotland?" he asked. From his mother and some of the servants, he'd pieced together some of it: a venture to arm the brave Jacobites as they fought to reclaim the throne for the rightful king—although Maman had rather sourly expressed that if the intention was to help the Jacobites, Chardon should not have sold weapons to Hanoverians. Except that, according to Busnel, who'd been Papa's *homme d'affaires* since well before Antoine had been born, the weapons sold to the Hanoverians had been defect. Well, some of them.

Felix rolled his eyes. "You already know! He was fighting for the cause!"

"Ah, yes." The cause ... *Pouf!* Papa's main motivation was avarice, which was why this determination to make Duncan Melville pay was out of character. Antoine shifted on his seat: he suspected Papa and Felix were underestimating Mr

Melville, so connected to the powerful Graham Trading Company. Just like they tended to underestimate Antoine. Behind his mild exterior ticked an intellect as sharp—if not sharper—than dear Papa’s. Maman always said he had it from her, or rather from her sainted father.

They stood in silence, studying the imposing doors of the Graham Trading Company. Situated on Threadneedle Street, it was a mere stone’s throw away from the Royal Exchange—and a bustling, fascinating place that was, full of self-important merchants, elegant shops and eateries. And where so many men congregated, there, as a matter of course, were women who practised their own business with as much aplomb as their male clients handled their own matters.

Antoine cleared his throat, impatient with all this loitering when there was an entire city to explore. What exactly Felix was hoping for, Antoine did not know, but his suggestion that they go inside the Graham offices had been violently rebuffed, Felix snarling that to do so would put his neck at risk.

Hmm. Interesting. What Felix had been up to in the wilds of Scotland was as much of a mystery as dear Papa’s ventures, but where Papa had come home a ruined husk, Felix had emerged with cuts and scars, but no permanent damage.

“I can go,” Antoine offered. “They will not recognise me.” He narrowed his eyes at how his brother blanched. So he was right: there was someone working in the elegant offices who could recognise dear Felix.

“And what exactly will you say?” Felix asked.

“Oh, I don’t know: that I met Monsieur Melville several years back in Paris.” He tilted his head. “You said how he’d been there.”

Felix nodded. “He knew Jacqueline from there.” He snickered. “In its full carnal meaning.”

“*Eh, bon.*” Antoine straightened up and sauntered across the street.

One of the men standing sentinel on each side of the entrance bowed when he approached and hastened to open the

heavy door. Antoine entered a large room with dark-panelled walls. A sequence of windows set high in the wall offered some light to what would otherwise have been a shadowed space, but he noted that most of the clerks busy at their desks had additional lighting in the form of candles or lanterns.

The clerk closest stood and approached him, adjusting his shirtsleeves as he went. A dark, undecorated waistcoat matched his equally dark breeches, stockings and polished, if worn, shoes.

“May I help you?” the man asked politely.

“I am looking for Duncan Melville,” Antoine replied, noting with some amusement how the man reacted to his accent.

“Mr Melville?” the clerk shook his head. “He’s not here.” He frowned. “At least I haven’t heard that he’s visiting.”

“Visiting?” Antoine asked. Papa and Felix were certain Melville lived here.

The clerk took a step back. “What business do you have with Mr Melville?”

Antoine gave him a smile. “None. I was but hoping for some hours of his company.”

The clerk’s brows rose. “And what made you think he’d be here?”

Antoine tilted his head. “Is he not? When we met in Paris, he gave the impression he was destined for London.”

“Must have been a long time since you met him,” another clerk said. Old and thin to the point of looking cadaverous, he studied Antoine intently.

“*Oui.*” Antoine shrugged. “But as I was in London, I hoped to renew our acquaintance.”

“*Malheureusement, Monsieur Melville n’est pas ici,*” the older clerk said. “Last I heard, he was in Maryland. Very far away from here.”

The younger clerk was about to say something, but a sharp look from his older companion had him snapping his mouth shut.

“How unfortunate,” Antoine said with a sigh, attempting to place Maryland. “Is there perhaps an address where I can reach him?”

“My apologies, Monsieur ...” the older clerk said, clearly waiting for a name.

“Antoine. Antoine Char ... umm ...” He coughed and sketched a bow. “Antoine Charles Arpin.”

“Well, Monsieur Arpin, if you leave a letter here, we will be sure to forward it to him.” He gave Antoine an entirely false smile. “It would be our pleasure to help you renew your acquaintance with Mr Melville. When was it you said you met?”

“1714,” Antoine said.

“Ah.” The clerk bowed and gestured towards his desk. “Forgive me, but work calls.”

“Of course.” Antoine inclined his head. “Good day to you.”

Emerging into the sunlight had him blinking a couple of times before he nimbly leapt the gutter and hurried over to where Felix was waiting. “He’s not here. He’s somewhere called Maryland.”

“*Merde!*” Felix exclaimed.

“You know where it is?” Antoine asked.

“I do.” Felix sighed. “This venture may well turn out to be more time-consuming than expected.”

Antoine did not really mind. As far as he was concerned, the further away from Papa, the better.

David Graham stood at the window of his private office and watched the young Frenchman and his mysterious companion hurry off. Right strange for a man to be sporting hat and cloak

despite the sunny weather, and something about the stout young Frenchman's eyes nudged at a memory.

He'd heard him enter and had stood unobtrusively to the side and listened as he spoke with the clerks, enquiring about Duncan. He snorted softly. Duncan had no more been in Paris in 1714 than he'd been on the moon, so whatever the young Frenchie was after, David would wager it was not in Duncan's best interests.

"Snooping," old Alfred said. He sniffed. "As if we'd hand out information to a stranger!" He glowered at young Michael, who blushed and ducked his head.

"But he did get information," David said.

"I said Maryland, Master David," Alfred replied. "He's not there anymore, is he?"

Nay, that he was not. But should anyone come asking for Duncan Melville, there were many in Annapolis who'd point them towards Pennsylvania. David looked at the door, overcome with an urge to go hunting. But in a city the size of London, finding two men—albeit foreigners and French to boot—would not be easy.

He turned to Alfred. "Get down to the docks. Make sure every single captain destined for the colonies knows to look out for a Frenchman and his companion looking for passage to Maryland. And if they want future business with us, they'd best refuse them. Tell them I'll pay well for information about them."

"Yes, sir." Alfred strutted towards the door, as eager as an ageing hound to be off.

"Take Michael with you. Otherwise, you'll be at it all day."

The young clerk brightened.

Moments later, they were gone and David retired to his office, there to write a letter. For some reason, it felt important to warn Duncan, and David had long since learned to trust what his mother used to call her "gut feeling." It made him smile, recalling a day many years ago when Mama had

attempted to explain to Da just what it was she meant with this odd expression.

Mama—he'd not seen her in close to three decades, not since she'd bid him that teary farewell in Glasgow. He'd been sixteen, too young to comprehend that mayhap this was the last time he'd see her, thinking perhaps that one day he'd return home. Home. He sighed. After all these years, Graham's Garden in Maryland was still home, and as to Mama, all he had to do was close his eyes to see her as she used to be, so full of life and joy. Except, of course, that she was dead since some years back, as was Da, and now he would never have the opportunity to see them again. Procrastination, he sighed, the enemy of all good intentions.

It was late when Alfred came back.

"Well?" David asked.

Alfred grinned. "I dare say they'll have problems finding a berth." He frowned. "The companion is somewhat choleric. He pulled his sword on old Dodson."

"Dodson can handle such."

"He can. With that giant of a bosun ..."

"Aye. Heavy Harry is a mite threatening when riled." David paused. "The companion, did you catch a name?"

Alfred tapped his nose. "I did, Mr Graham. That Arpin addressed him as Felix."

"Felix?" yet another mental niggle, and David frowned as he tried to hook whatever memory it was that evaded capture. "Well, that doesn't help us much. No last name?"

Alfred shook his head.

David puffed out his cheeks. "Anything else?"

"The companion seemed to be in charge—and rich. He had a most eye-catching brooch, all a-glitter with precious stones."

"Ah."

Alfred frowned. "I fear we're dealing with Jacobites, Mr Graham. That brooch, it resembled a Scottish thistle."

David sat down with a thud. “A thistle?” He pulled the half-finished letter towards him. “Dear God, Felix Chardon!”

Soon enough, the letter was done and sealed and on its way to the docks and the captain of the *Diana*. He would make sure it reached Duncan as swiftly as possible.

A week or so after Lettie's arrival, Erin retired to the glassed porch come evening, leaving Lettie and Duncan to reminisce alone. She sank into one of the armchairs and closed her eyes. Here, in this quiet space that she'd built herself, she could for some instants pretend she was back in her own time, far from the increasingly catty Lettie, far from a time in which she didn't belong, not really.

She'd opened the double door to the summer evening, a soft breeze bringing with it the scents of grass and roses. The day had been hot, so the wind came as a relief, as did the shaded space. Erin kicked off her shoes and tucked her feet under her. This was how her grandmother would sit, cradling a cup of tea as she told Erin about her travels all across the world. She missed Helen. Heck, today she missed much more than her grandmother, starting with a life in which she earned her own money and was legally considered as capable as any man.

As capable? More capable! Definitely more observant, because how Duncan could avoid noticing Lettie's constant put-downs was beyond her. The few times she'd said something about it, he'd assumed the expression of a depressed basset hound, saying that surely Erin understood just how frail Lettie was at present.

Of course she did! But that didn't mean she should—or could—ignore the way Lettie would look her up and down before shaking her head. Or how her brow furrowed when Klara Andersson addressed Erin as *mistress* before saying

something along the lines that in the Melville household the natural order of things was truly upside down. Fortunately, Mrs Andersson hadn't heard. Unfortunately, neither had Duncan. No, because when Duncan was present, Lettie was the grateful cousin, preferring to speak to him of their common memories, thereby excluding Erin.

Erin drew her shawl tighter round her shoulders. Outside, the orchards were sinking into purple shadows. Dusk was settling rapidly, and soon the fireflies would come out to dance, a spectacle that could last for hours.

"I thought I'd find you here," Esther said, stepping in from the garden. She settled herself on a stool and smiled up at Erin. "Your favourite place, isn't it?"

"One of them." Erin ran a hand along the expertly joined window frames. "I guess there's an element of pride involved."

"It's beautiful." Esther said. "Grandda would have been impressed."

Quite the accolade, that. In Duncan's office stood an armchair Matthew Graham had made, and the decorative carving was exquisite, far beyond Erin's more practical skills.

They sat in silence for a while, watching as first one, then two, then hundreds of little glowing bugs came out to play.

"I don't like how she treats you," Esther blurted. "Lettie," she clarified.

"We must make allowances, I suppose," Erin said, scraping at a blob of wax on her skirts.

"Not for all of it. Not for saying you should avoid light colours as they make your skin look darker, for asking Mrs Andersson if she doesn't mind addressing a coloured woman as Mistress, for—"

"What?" Erin was on her feet. "She said that to Mrs Andersson?"

"Aye." Esther grinned. "Mrs Andersson retorted that never had she had a kinder or more generous mistress, which made

Lettie look as if she'd sucked on a lemon." She sighed. "It's not right. Aye, she is hurting and bitter, but she should not take that out on you."

Amen to that. "Maybe you should talk to—" She broke off with an exclamation. "Who is that? Look!"

A dark shape stepped out of the apple orchard, followed by another.

"Nelson!" Esther and Erin said simultaneously, just as another shape, a screaming, shrieking shape in skirts, came barging towards the intruders. Lettie's cap fell off, dark hair streaming behind her as she charged, musket in hand.

"Can she shoot one of those?" Erin asked, leaping outside with Esther at her heels.

"Almost as good a shot as my mother," Esther said.

Lettie was eating ground, all the while yelling invectives. When she stopped, aimed and fired, the intruders turned tail, just as Duncan came bursting out of the house, pistol in one hand, sword in the other. Behind him came Jasper, unusually disarrayed and carrying a musket. Jasper stopped, took aim. A second shot, and one of the fleeing men clapped a hand to his arm.

Out of nowhere came Hans, and there was Giles and Will, Sivert and Tim.

"No, Tim, don't!" Erin yelled, but the boy ignored her, running flat out. He passed Duncan, Lettie, and then in one mighty leap he threw himself forward, arms locking themselves round the legs of one of the men. Down they went, and Lettie was howling, the musket held like a club as she ordered the man to show his face, show it now or she'd clobber him to death.

Seconds later, Duncan had the situation under control. The felled man had his arms wrenched behind him and secured with Hans' belt and was marched towards the house, a strutting Lettie walking side by side with Duncan.

"I thought it was Emrick," she said, directing herself to Duncan. She dashed a hand across her eyes and gave him a

wobbly smile. “But it wasn’t.”

“Nay.” Duncan scowled at their prisoner. “What was your business here?”

The man widened his eyes and attempted a smile. “Me? We were just passing and hoped for lodgings.”

“And that is why you came from the river rather than the road, *ja*?” Hans said with a snort. He looked at Duncan. “Should I beat the truth out of him?” He cracked his knuckles, and the man swallowed.

“Why not?” Duncan said, shoving the man towards Hans.

“Works for Nelson,” Tim said, and they all turned to stare at him.

“You can speak!” Esther beamed at him.

Tim gave a curt nod.

“So you know this man?” Duncan asked.

Yet another nod.

“And he works for Caleb Nelson.”

Tim nodded twice, glaring at the man.

“Well, well,” Duncan said, taking a turn or two round the man. He leaned close to him, displaying his teeth. “We don’t like Caleb Nelson here.”

“Who’s Caleb Nelson?” Lettie asked Esther in an undertone.

“He’s the man who tried to kill me back in February,” Erin answered in Esther’s stead.

“Ah.” Lettie had by now regained her composure and busied herself with her hair. “As long as it isn’t Emrick.”

“Isn’t Emrick? Well excuse me for not being quite so relaxed about this incident,” Erin said, her voice rising. “But hey, when Emrick does show up, I’ll just shrug and say ‘well, at least it isn’t Caleb,’ see how you like that.”

Even in the dark, she could see Lettie pale. She could also see Duncan scowl—at her. She crossed her arms and nodded at

the ruffian. “Ask him: was Caleb with him?” She took a step towards their captive. “Or should we have Hans work him over?”

“*Ja*, I’d like that,” Hans said. Erin winked at him. Hans was a gentle soul, one of those people who rescued spiders and flies rather than kill them. But he was big and could look very intimidating when he chose to, which he did right now.

“He was,” the man squeaked when Hans took a step towards him. “He was! But he meant you no harm, mistress,” he added, addressing Erin. “He just wants the lad.”

“Whose contract belongs to me,” Duncan interrupted.

“He needs him!” the man bleated.

“Why?” Duncan asked.

The man shook his head. “I don’t know.” A sly expression slid over his face. “I’d wager Tim does, though.”

Much later, Duncan was back in his office, a glass of whisky in his hand. On the other side of the desk sat Erin, resting her chin in her hands.

“We really need those dogs,” she said. “Big dogs.”

“Aye.” He’d already asked Sivert to hurry up and find them some. He took a sip, relishing the burn of the liquor. “That Tim, what is it that makes him so valuable to the Nelsons?”

“No idea.” Erin yawned.

“He needs to tell us,” Duncan said.

She shook her head. “Whatever it is he knows, it’s what has kept him alive for years.”

“Truly?”

“Well, I don’t know, but I’d say yes. And they’ve tried everything to get him to spill, but they can’t kill him, and he knows that. So good luck with getting him to tell you—that boy has learned the hard way to keep his mouth shut.”

She was probably right. All his attempts at getting Tim to talk had been met by the lad's customary silence.

"Coming?" Erin asked as she rose.

"Mmm? Aye." He drained his glass and followed her out into the dark passage and up the steep stairs, lit only by the candle Erin was carrying.

"Why can't you make an effort to get along with her?" he asked as he began undressing.

"Get along with who?" she said, her tone cold.

"With Lettie."

"You're asking the wrong woman," she said. "It's not me who isn't making an effort, it's her."

He began to say something; she held up her hand. "No, Duncan. You're so quick to leap to her defence, never to mine. One could almost think you care more for her than me."

"It's not about caring more. She needs me—us. And we need to be there for her."

"Go ahead," she said. "Be there for her all you want, but don't expect me to do the same, not when she constantly insults me."

He sighed. "You misconstrue, Erin. Lettie would never—"

"But she does, okay? Every day."

"Erin," he began, trying not to sound too irritated. Before he got another word out, she was gone.

Duncan sank down on the bed and studied his stockinged feet. Women were a right strange breed at times. For some reason, Erin had taken a dislike of Lettie, which may be why she interpreted everything Lettie said as criticism.

"Maybe she's jealous," Lettie had said earlier that evening. "Maybe she resents the fact that you and I have such a strong bond."

Mayhap that was it. Aye, that had to be it; of course it was. He gnawed his lip. Erin wasn't given to fancies, and the last

few years had made her sadly resilient when it came to commentaries about her skin colour. So the fact that she felt Lettie was disparaging her ... Nay, that could not be: Lettie would not do such. Not his brave and generous cousin, not wild Lettie, who dreamed of being an Amazon to defend those who could not defend himself. The memory of a very young Lettie made him smile.

Duncan yawned and stretched out on the bed, thinking that maybe he should go and find his wife. Aye, find her and bed her, making her all that more biddable. He grinned. Should Erin ever hear him say that out loud, there'd be no bedding for the foreseeable future. He pummelled his pillow and rolled over to stare out the window. The look in Erin's eyes just now—it made something twist inside of him. What was it she said? That he was so quick to defend Lettie, but never her. Was that true? He shook himself. Nay, of course not: he loved his Erin. But at present, the truly vulnerable woman in his household was Lettie.

The days after the intruder incident passed without any further antagonization from Lettie. Instead, she basked in the role of heroine, smiling whenever someone commented on her daredevil behaviour.

“Sort of stupid,” Erin muttered to herself at one point. “They could have had a musket of their own.” She felt immediately ashamed, but she couldn't help it: she didn't like Lettie and wasn't about to pretend she did, not when the damned woman resumed her constant needling—and meddling.

“Don't ever do that again,” Erin said through gritted teeth after Lettie had the temerity to question her instructions to Mrs Andersson.

“Do what? Point out the correct way to do things?” Lettie gave her a smile as sweet as bile.

“This is my home, not yours. We do things the way I want them done here.” She straightened up. “I'm the mistress, not you.”

“Not much of a mistress,” Lettie said with a smirk. “You can’t even pluck a hen.”

“No?” Erin shrugged. “Good enough to act the generous hostess to a penniless guest.”

Lettie blushed vividly, clenching the fabric of the green cotton skirts Erin had loaned her. In fact, everything Lettie was wearing came from Erin’s wardrobe, even if the difference in height led to Lettie showing much more ankle than was considered fully respectable.

“Some gratitude would be nice,” she added. “Instead, all you do is snipe, snipe, snipe.”

She escaped outside, gripped a couple of the heavy flagons of beer meant for the men working in the meadows and made her way towards Duncan.

Her irritation ran off her the closer she got to her man, and she stopped in the shade of one of the oaks just to watch him. Midday and the sun was blistering, his damp shirt as transparent as onion skin where it clung to his sweaty torso. The rhythmic scything had the muscles of his arm and back clenching and unclenching, the worn fabric of his old breeches hugging his ass and muscled thighs. He straightened up, took off the straw hat he was wearing and wiped at his face. He smiled when he saw her, leaning on his scythe to watch her as she traversed the recently cut field, the stubble scratching at the uncovered skin round her ankles.

“Beer?” she offered with a curtsy.

“An angel,” he replied. “A messenger from God, saving a thirsting man.” He drew her closer and planted a soft kiss on her forehead. “And here come the impish cherubs,” he added with a groan when Sandy and Ellen came bounding towards them, trailed by Esther carrying a heavy basket. Erin suppressed a grimace when Lettie joined them with another basket, settling herself just beside Duncan. Lettie smiled at Sandy and patted her lap, offering a seat, but Sandy shook her head and skipped over to sit with Erin instead. That made Lettie frown. Erin decided to ignore her and concentrated instead on the food.

“You think Jasper will return today?” she asked.

Duncan and Jasper had hauled their prisoner down to Chester, where the man had been fined and put in stocks for trespassing. Unfortunately, there'd been no sign of Caleb Nelson, which was why Duncan had sent Jasper off to Philadelphia to see if anyone had seen him there. “He'll be more useful sleuthing there than helping out here,” he'd told Erin as they'd watched Jasper set off, proud as a peacock at being charged with such an important mission. Very true that, as Jasper had something of an aversion to farm work.

“I'm not sure.” Duncan frowned. “And he may return with no news. Yon Caleb may have ridden south instead of north.” That was all they had: a sighting of Caleb astride a horse just outside the offices of the Graham Trading Company. She shivered. Duncan slipped an arm round her shoulders and squeezed, murmuring reassurances. Out of the corner of her eye, Erin saw Lettie glaring at them.

An hour or so later, the men got back to their feet. “I can help,” Lettie offered, grabbing a scythe.

“You don't need to,” Duncan said.

“I'd like to.” She glanced at Erin. “Maybe we should all help?”

Bitch. She knew Erin didn't know how to scythe, and damned if she intended to walk behind dear Lettie and rake.

“I have a floor to sand,” she therefore said before kissing Duncan on the cheek and herding her daughters back towards the house.

“She doesn't like me,” Lettie said in a mournful voice. She sighed deeply. “It is evident I am here on sufferance only.”

“How so?” Duncan adjusted his hat and gripped his scythe.

“Well, just today she told me I should be grateful. I am, of course I am,” Lettie added, “but family is family, isn't it? I suppose that Erin just doesn't feel I qualify as such.”

“But you are,” Duncan said. He stopped his work for an instant and took hold of her arm. “You are family, and you are most welcome in my home.”

She blinked, blue eyes filling with tears. “Thank you,” she said. “I needed to hear that after this morning.”

“What did she say?”

“That I’m a penniless guest and should remember that,” Lettie said, and Duncan’s hold on the scythe tightened. How uncharitable—and how unlike Erin.

“She resents me. I try to offer advice, and she lashes out. Is it my fault I am so much more at home on a farm than she is?”

Nay, of course not. But Erin had never asked for this life and was doing her best to adapt.

“She’s even turned your daughters against me,” Lettie went on. “They’d not dare to sit close to me what with her evident displeasure.”

That he found hard to believe. Sandy had always kept her distance from Lettie, and Ellen did as Sandy did. He smiled at the thought of his two bonny lasses.

“They look so like you,” Lettie continued. “All that dark hair and those blue eyes.” She smiled. “And right fortunate, that they’re so fair of skin. No sign of their coloured heritage.”

He grunted, uncomfortable discussing this. He knew Erin worried that should they have another child, it might be born darker. Not that he would mind because, in his opinion, Erin was beautiful, but it was indubitably so that life was easier for those who were fair skinned.

He concentrated on his work, escaping into the steady swishing of his honed blade while considering just how to get Tim to tell him what it was he knew that Nelson so desperately wanted. So far, all the lad did was blink up at him out of wide blue eyes and shake his head, attempting to look like a fool. He tightened his hold on the scythe. He had one final card to play: he could threaten the lad with passing his contract on to someone else, but his guts twisted at the thought of putting such pressure on a lad who’d had such a terrible life. He

straightened up for an instant and caught sight of Tim among the rakers. A good worker, he was. Duncan sighed and went back to his own work. There had to be some way to make the lad talk.

Duncan's entire body felt the strain of several days' hard work when Erin suggested they sneak off to the river for an evening swim. After eating dinner outside, the household and the tenants seated round several tables laden with pies and bread and cheese and meat so tender it fell off the bone after hours in the barbecue pits Mrs Andersson so excelled at, it was only him and Erin under one of the trees, the linen cloths on the denuded tables flapping lazily in the evening breeze.

When she took his hand, he followed, listening to the swishing sounds her skirts made as they cut across one of the fields they were to scythe on the morrow. He groaned inwardly: if he was feeling tired today, come tomorrow he'd be aching all over.

The river itself was bordered by lush water meadows. At high tide, this would mostly resemble a marsh, thick planks reinforcing the path that would be impassable otherwise. But now water only lingered in the pools which housed frogs and toads, offering tasty fare to the colony of herons that nested in the ancient oaks that bordered the waterlogged ground.

The jetty they used stood surrounded by thick stands of reeds, the planking faded to a soft grey. Erin had built a bench on the jetty and a set of stairs that led down into the water, and once they got close, she rushed ahead, fingers already busy with lacings and buttons. Duncan slowed his step, smiling at how eagerly she undressed, safe in the knowledge that no one could see them here, the impenetrable stands of dog roses the previous owner must have planted offering privacy.

She dove in, treading water until he joined her, after which they both swam out towards the distant shore. The river was wide—much too wide to swim across—and once they were sufficiently far from the shore, they swam parallel to it instead.

They floated for a while before swimming back to the jetty. She stood stark naked on the worn wood and combed her fingers through her wet hair before smoothing it back. A futile endeavour because that wild hair of hers would sprout into long, honey-coloured curls that defied all attempts to keep them contained. Lovely hair, a shade or so darker than her skin, a deep golden hue that contrasted so pleasingly against his.

His wife was lovely, exotic and sinuous. And while any man would drool at the sight of her like this, it was undoubtedly so that the first thing they would register was the colour of her skin. So would their wives, making snide assumptions about her background. The good people of Pennsylvania might not, in general, approve of slavery, but that did not mean they'd ever treat a coloured woman as their equal.

“What are you thinking?” she asked, smiling down at him. He heaved himself out of the water and sat on the edge.

“Nothing much.”

“It looked as more than nothing.” She sat down beside him, dangling her legs over the water.

“Work,” he replied. “An irritating contract I must sort.” A lie, but he saw no reason to reveal his thoughts. It wasn't as if she was unaware of how unwelcome she was in many Pennsylvania homes. Not all, thank God.

Day had turned to dusk, but it was still warm—warm enough that when he drew her close to kiss her, she felt cold against his skin. Not for long, though, and when he lay her down on a bed of discarded clothes, her green eyes shimmered with desire, her skin warm to the touch. He took his time, kissing his way along her collarbones, down to her round breasts, so prettily adorned by dark nipples the size of raspberries.

She gripped his hair when he sucked first one, then the other nipple into his mouth, laving the tip with his tongue. And when he slid further down, her legs widened, that tuft of curling hair at the apex of her thighs like a beacon to a homing pigeon.

She uttered a sound midway between a giggle and a gasp when he kissed her, his tongue teasing her hardening nub. As always, her reactions to being kissed and fondled here were extremely satisfying, hips lifting several inches off the jetty. She sighed his name. She called his name, fingers pulling at his hair in an effort to dislodge him—until she changed her mind and instead used those same hands to guide him back, all of her quivering with need.

She climaxed, bowing off the planks. The moment she relaxed back down, his cock ploughed into her, making her hiss a low “Yesssss!” He found purchase with his toes and increased his speed, each thrust so deep his balls pressed against her wet folds.

The tension within built and built, and Duncan slowed his pace, wanting to prolong the sensation for as long as possible. From Erin came a frustrated little growl. He lowered himself to kiss her, softly at first, but when she yanked hard on his hair, her heels drumming against his arse, he responded by kissing her hard, one hand cradling her head to keep her still as he kissed and kissed, his tongue thrusting into her mouth as his hips picked up pace.

His balls tightened. Heat coiled in his loins and belly, and he was so, so close, so ...

“Aaah!” He pulled out, soaring for some moments before collapsing back to earth, shifting so that he didn’t crush her. He found her hand and braided their fingers together. “I love you,” he said, placing a tender kiss on her cheek.

She turned his way, regarding him from under her lashes. This close, he could see the smattering of freckles on her nose and cheeks. Her mouth curved into a sweet smile, and she raised their joined hands to gently kiss his knuckles.

He wiped her belly clean of his seed, making her laugh, and suggested they bathe instead. So they did, a quick dip, no more, before walking hand in hand back towards the house. They stopped for a while to study their home, the old weathered wood sinking gracefully into the violet shadows of the summer night while the precious glass in Erin's beloved porch glittered in the remaining light. Through the open kitchen door came the sound of voices. He recognised Mrs Andersson's voice, Lettie's throaty laugh and smiled. Beside him, Erin grimaced, tugging at him to lead him away from the kitchen.

"She's not feeling welcome," he told her, and she came to an abrupt stop, shaking free of his hold.

"She has only herself to blame," she said.

"Erin," he remonstrated, "she's our guest—my cousin! Surely, we can show her some compassion, some—"

"I have shown her compassion! And yes, I get it that she's had a hard time, and of course she is welcome to stay. But I will not tolerate her undermining my authority. I've worked way too hard to establish myself as the mistress of this household to allow her to derail things."

"She's not trying to usurp your position. She is trying to help," he protested.

"Oh really? And you were there, were you, when she pushed me aside and started ordering the women in the dairy around? Or when she told Mrs Andersson that no one in their right mind served roast at midday in June, this despite just having heard me tell Mrs Andersson that we'd be eating the leftovers from yesterday?"

He smiled. "Surely, you're not going to hold Lettie's meal preferences against her?"

"That's not the point!" She glared at him. "She is rude to me. All the time. She makes snide comments, pointedly excludes me from her conversations with Esther. Not that you see any of that, oh no, because when you're there, she's all simpers and batting eyelashes."

“Lettie doesn’t simper,” he objected, and Erin gave him a look that made him wince inside.

“No? Well, excuse me for misinterpreting her fawning behaviour whenever you’re around.” She took a step towards him. “She’s not nice to me, Duncan. So either you stand by me or you can fuck off—with your precious but oh-so-rude cousin.”

With that, she was off, yanking open the front door and letting it slam behind her.

He stood for a while, considering just what to do. Erin was clearly hurt by things Lettie had said, but she was likely overreacting, somewhat sensitive to having her decisions challenged. He sighed. He knew she did not find it easy, this role of mistress that had so abruptly been thrust upon her. She’d struggled during their first few months here, regarded with a mixture of animosity and curiosity by their tenants, and had they not hired Mrs Andersson, she’d likely have been struggling still. Klara Andersson had proved a godsend, discreetly helping Erin find her footing in this new life.

And as to Lettie ... The poor woman was entitled to some modicum of bitterness, but he’d not accept her taking it out on his wife. He drew himself up to his full height and made for the kitchen door. Best nip this in the bud, and the best way to do so was by talking to Lettie.

His cousin looked confused—and hurt.

“As I said before, I’m just offering advice.” She turned to Mrs Andersson. “You’d agree, wouldn’t you?”

Mrs Andersson flushed. “None of my business,” she muttered. She eyed Duncan. “I heed Mistress Melville, sir.”

Lettie looked displeased. “She knows close to nothing about—”

“This is our home—her home,” Duncan interrupted. “And it is Erin who has created it.” With a curt nod, he left, bidding them both a good night.

Duncan rolled out of bed the next morning, muttering something about it being too goddamned early to start your day when the cock crowed. Erin blinked at him a couple of times. She'd fallen asleep before he came up last night, and it felt as if their argument remained unresolved.

"Sleep," he suggested, patting her bum, and then he was off.

When Erin next woke, it was to two warm little girls snuggling into bed with her. "Hey there," she said, cuddling them close. "Did you sleep well?"

Ellen gave her a wide smile. Sandy chose to reply with a long garble of words, among which Erin could make out Tim, bed and Mama. Then she slid out of bed and skipped towards the door, repeating, "Food, food, food."

"You're always hungry," Erin told her fondly. She pulled on her clothes, settled Ellen on her hip and followed Sandy down the stairs.

Soon enough, the girls had been fed and sent off to play under the supervision of Julie. Mrs Andersson smiled at Erin and placed a bowl of porridge before her before bustling off to inspect whatever it was that was simmering on the hearth.

"Ah, the tattle-tale awakes," Lettie said from behind her.

"Takes one to know one," Erin replied, wiping her mouth. "After all, you're the one who went to Duncan with big sad puppy eyes and insinuated you were being made unwelcome."

"Puppy eyes?" Lettie asked.

In response, Erin assumed an expression like a begging cocker spaniel.

Lettie frowned. "I never look like that. Besides, what I said was true. I feel unwelcomed."

"Then by all means leave. As soon as possible, if you ask me."

Lettie gave her a black look. "I have nowhere else to go."

“Not my problem, is it?” Erin swept by her, grabbed her hat and made for the door. She looked back at Lettie, whose back was bowed, her face hidden in her hands. “Look, I know you’ve had a hard time, okay? But that doesn’t give you the right to take it out on me.”

Lettie just shook her head. Erin approached her and tentatively placed a hand on her shoulder. Lettie shrank under her touch. Almost like Tim, Erin reflected, as prone to shy away from any physical contact as the latest addition to their household was. For similar reasons, she reminded herself, deciding then and there to make more of an effort with Lettie.

She bumped into Jasper in the yard. Duncan’s manservant looked his normal impeccable self, his cravat tied just so, his shoes polished. But he looked tired, mouth set in a grim line. “Did you find him?” she asked.

“No,” Jasper replied. “As I just told the master, that damned Caleb Nelson did not tarry in Philadelphia. He took the first sloop going south.” He stared off in the direction of the river. “I wish I’d shot him.”

Didn’t they all? Erin gave him a comforting pat on his arm and went to find Duncan.

“You spoke to her,” she said.

“I did.” He wiped his face. “She was upset.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much.” She took his hand and gave it a squeeze. “Thank you.”

“I still believe you are making too much of it. Lettie is trying to help, not meddle.” He sounded stern. She decided to ignore his tone and left him to his scything while she made for her work shed.

Lettie was usually first out of bed in the morning. Years of living in constant fear of not having the porridge ready when Emrick came marching down the narrow stairs would do that. Emrick . . . She took a couple of deep breaths. He'd not found her yet. Mayhap he'd never find her, but even as she thought that, she knew she was wrong. Emrick could be as tenacious as a ratter, and when it came to his property—and as his wife, she was just that, at least to Emrick—he'd not give up easily.

She tugged on her stockings and tightened the garters. It wasn't fair! Look at how Emrick treated her, while here it was a coloured woman—reasonably someone accustomed to being treated as property—who was the mistress, and a respected one at that. How anyone could respect Erin was beyond comprehension because the woman knew scarce to nothing about running a household the size of Papegoja Plantation. She'd never seen Erin inspecting the pigs or attending the morning milking. She snorted—likely she didn't even know how to milk! Or make cheese, at least to judge from their altercation in the dairy.

Aye, Erin had helped with the preserves, though God knew it was Mrs Andersson who led the work, not the lady of the house. And aye, Lettie had to reluctantly admit the woman knew her way round woodworking tools, having been quite impressed by what she'd seen of Erin's ongoing work upstairs. Not that such skills counted: well over three weeks here and she had yet to see Erin Melville sew beyond the rather sad reparation of Sandy's smock. Had she ever sewn Duncan a

shirt, as any good wife should? A man of Duncan's standing required good, well-made clothes, and with an incapable wife, he must resort to purchasing his linen.

Down in the kitchen, it did not take her long to stir the banked fire into life, swinging the cauldron into place above. An old-fashioned kitchen, this was, but among the pots and griddles were two Dutch ovens newer than hers and heavy enough to crush a foot should you drop one. The oats for breakfast had been left to soak overnight—not by Erin, but by the versatile Mrs Andersson—and when Duncan entered the kitchen, Lettie had the porridge ready, greeting her cousin with a warm smile.

Behind Duncan came Erin. She grimaced at the porridge. “Way too hot for that,” she said, ducking into the pantry. She emerged with a loaf of bread and a couple of boiled eggs. “Still soft,” she said to Duncan, holding up the bread.

“Why wouldn't it be? Baking day was only three days ago,” Lettie said.

“Three-day-old bread is not exactly fresh,” Erin replied, cutting thick slices of the dark bread. Lettie rolled her eyes. Spoiled, that's what she was! At Papegoja Plantation, the baking oven was fired once a week, which was more often than in other places.

Out of the corner of her eye, she studied Erin and Duncan, resenting every shared smile, every touch. It wasn't right—or fair—that Erin should have it all when Lettie had nothing. Nothing! She pressed her hand to her stomach. Not once had she quickened with life since she'd lost Aaron's babe some months before he died. It would have been so different had the babe survived, she reflected. Or mayhap not. She shivered at the image of an irate Emrick threatening her child.

“You okay?”

Erin's voice broke through her reverie. She even managed to sound concerned, though Lettie was quite convinced no one would be happier than Erin should Lettie leave. *Your own fault*, a small voice deep inside whispered. Her fault? How could it be her fault that a coloured hussy had somehow lured

poor Duncan into marriage? *He doesn't look lured into anything*, that small voice whispered, and Lettie banged down her porridge bowl with considerable force, causing Duncan to look at her.

“Emrick,” she said. “I was thinking of ...”

Duncan's brow wrinkled with concern.

“He comes, we sort it,” Erin said, and Lettie hated her for sounding so assured. Hated her while sagging with relief, which only made her hate the damned woman more. Lettie Graham didn't need—shouldn't need—anyone else to fight her battles. The voice inside her cackled, reminding her that so far she'd made a dismal mess of her life, so every helping hand was welcome, wasn't it? *Not hers*, Lettie thought, eyeing Erin with resentment when she danced over to plant a kiss on Duncan's cheek.

Duncan excused himself just as Hans entered, bowing politely at first Erin, then Lettie before taking a seat at the table. He wolfed down porridge, eggs and bread.

“You must have a hollow leg,” Lettie said with a little laugh.

“Eh?” The big German looked at her out of eyes several shades lighter than hers. A generous mouth, the lower lip surprisingly plump; a nose that had been broken at some point but set adequately; thick, straight fair lashes; brows so fair as to look almost white against the sun-tanned skin of his face—Hans was a handsome man.

“She means you eat a lot,” Erin said, patting Hans' hand. In return, she got a beaming smile, causing Lettie to prickle with irritation. What was it that had all these people fawning over this incompetent woman? Erin Melville was no more equipped to be mistress of Papegoja Plantation than Lettie was to fly!

She shoved to her feet. “Best hurry,” she said to Hans. “There's plenty of work waiting for us.”

Erin frowned. “He has time to eat his breakfast.”

Lettie snorted. "Harvest waits for no man." She looked at Hans. "Come on then, man!"

"In this house, I give the orders, not you," Erin said firmly. "And I say Hans has the time to finish his breakfast."

"Just because you have embraced the life of a lady of leisure it doesn't mean the rest of the household can," Lettie snapped.

"A lady of leisure?" Erin's eyes narrowed. "I work as hard as anyone around here."

"You do?" Lettie smirked. "Well, if so, it must be doing utterly unimportant things because as far as I can see you contribute nothing of value. Well, beyond what you offer Duncan in bed, of course." Something akin to shame twisted in Lettie's belly at the expression on Erin's face.

Erin cleared her throat. "I feel sorry for you. It must be awful to be so bitter, so twisted that all you can do is spout poison." She stood. "If you keep this up, why on earth would I do anything to stop your dear husband from dragging you back home once he finds you?"

Lettie wilted.

Erin sailed off, calling for her girls.

"You deserved that," Hans said, wiping his mouth carefully.

"I deserved that?" Lettie's voice rose. "Well, she does not deserve anything of what she has! Nothing! She's just a coloured slut, a—" She squeaked when Hans stood, towering over her.

He scowled. "Not one more foul word about our mistress," he growled. "And she is right: you are so twisted you have soured. Beware it does not become permanent." He stomped off.

Lettie took a couple of deep breaths.

"Lettie?" Duncan yelled from outside. "Are you coming?"

She painted a smile on her face. "Of course!"

The days after that awful scene in the kitchen, Erin kept herself busy. She was honest enough to admit to herself that it was easier to avoid Lettie than to somehow attempt to bridge the chasm between them. Besides, it took two to tango, and Lettie sure as hell showed no inclination to make any sort of amends. And any thoughts Erin had had about apologising for her comments about Emrick died a sudden death when Lettie continued to offer sly comments about everything, though always with a wide, innocent smile.

What was worse were the things she said to Mrs Andersson and Esther when she thought—or pretended she thought—Erin was out of earshot.

“Utterly incapable,” she said one morning. “Really, Mrs Andersson, does your mistress have any understanding for how much effort it takes to run a place like this?” She laughed. “I do not see her helping, likely because she wouldn’t have any notion about how to do such simple things as gut a pig or smoke fish.”

Erin didn’t stop to hear Mrs Andersson’s reply. *Ignore it*, she told herself, *just ignore it*.

But it was hard at times. “It is so fortunate Esther is here,” Lettie commented one morning.

“Yes, she is a rare treasure,” Erin replied, smiling at her blushing sister-in-law.

“Yes, and how fortunate there is a white relative to raise these little girls.” Lettie made cooing sounds at Sandy and

Ellen, who just stared up at her.

“What exactly does that mean?” Erin demanded.

“Well, you’re not white, are you? Fortunately, these two little lasses can pass for white, but only if we make sure they don’t adopt any coloured customs.”

“Oh, like sharing a house with an ungrateful bitch like you?” Erin snapped back, which had Lettie storming from the kitchen while Erin sank down at the table, hiding her head in her arms.

Esther came over and gave her a hug. “You have to tell Duncan.”

“You think I haven’t?” Erin studied her hands. “I’ve tried to, but she excels at being sweetly condescending, and retelling it doesn’t get her tone across.” Duncan assumed the expression of a depressed pug whenever she tried to talk about Lettie’s put-downs. “It’s humiliating,” she said quietly. “He looks at me as if I were a spoiled child, sounding like a damned minister when he repeats that it is our duty as family to welcome poor, hurting Lettie into our home.”

“But this was different,” Esther said.

“Yeah.”

“So will you? She cannot say things like that!”

Erin shrugged. What was the point? It hurt to have him so obstinately siding with Lettie. Just as it hurt to have him so rarely come and look for her, especially as these days he spent all his time with Lettie, who was helping with the last of the hay. More than once, Erin caught sight of Lettie and Duncan working side by side or laughing together in the shade.

Esther gave her a stern look.

“Okay, okay. I will.” A lie. She was done telling him what he should be noticing on his own!

No sooner was the hay in than the first wheat fields were ready for harvest.

“You’re going to help with that as well?” Erin asked.

“My lands,” Duncan replied. “And as Lettie says ...”

Erin tuned out. “But what about the Graham Trading Company?” Usually, he spent a lot of his time overseeing the business.

He gave her an annoyed look. Oops. She’d interrupted him midway through a monologue about Lettie. “Jasper is managing that quite well,” he said. “And it’s only for a couple of weeks.”

She sank down on the bed and fretted with the coverlet. “How much longer?” she blurted.

“I told you: a couple of weeks.”

“Not the harvest. Her.” She shook her head. “It’s like living with a toxic cloud.”

Duncan gave her an exasperated look. “What? This again? I thought things were improving.”

“Whatever gave you that idea? Oh right! Whenever you’re present, she acts as if butter wouldn’t melt. But when you’re not—”

“You take all her comments as criticisms!”

“Because they are—when they’re not downright insulting.”

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Maybe you should consider that you may be too sensitive to comments about—” He cut off abruptly.

“Comments about what, Duncan?”

“Your capacity to run your household efficiently.”

Liar! She stood. “I run it efficiently. You had no complaints before Miss Prissy showed up.”

“Don’t call her that.”

“Why not? You’re okay with her calling me coloured all the time.”

“She doesn’t!”

“No? How would you know?” She made for the door. “Too bad you can’t marry your cousin, right?”

She heard him inhale noisily.

“And too bad you’re already married.” She slammed the door and darted down the stairs.

By the time Duncan found his wife, she was already astride a horse and laughing at something Jasper was saying.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To Chester.” She wouldn’t even look at him. “I aim to inform myself about my ships.”

“You can ask me to show you the books.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t do that.” She gave him a smile so insincere it made his guts clench. “After all, you’re so busy with the harvest. And your beloved cousin.”

He moved closer. “I only have one beloved, and that’s you.”

Finally, she looked him in the eyes, but there was nothing but disappointment in her green gaze. “I find that very hard to believe,” she said, collecting her reins.

“How can you say thus?”

“Do some maths, Duncan. Calculate the ratio between time spent with her, time spent with me and I guess you’ll have your answer.” This last she threw over her shoulder, already urging her horse into a trot.

Her comment stung. It also made him think, and he spent most of the morning grappling with mathematics, scarcely listening to Lettie’s conversation. As she’d done these last few weeks, she prattled on about childhood memories, some shared with him, most of them not. To hear it, Graham’s Garden had been something akin to paradise, a slice of Eden ruled by Matthew Graham and his wife, Alex. The thought of wives made him sigh.

“What is it?” Lettie finally asked.

“Nothing,” It would be the ultimate betrayal to discuss Erin with Lettie.

Lettie, however, had the instincts of a bloodhound. “I saw Erin ride off earlier.”

“Aye.”

“Is she off visiting?” Lettie took a couple of steps, her scythe slicing effortlessly through the wheat stalks. “Although I suppose she doesn’t do much visiting.”

“Eh?” Less than a sixth of his waking time he’d spent with Erin these last few weeks, compared to close to three quarters with Lettie. “She’s off to Chester,” he said. Belatedly, he registered what she’d said. “Why wouldn’t she be off visiting?”

“Umm ...” A concerned wrinkle between her brows, Lettie turned her blue eyes his way. “Well, being so different and all.”

“Erin isn’t different,” he protested.

Lettie rolled her eyes. “Aye, she is. How did you meet?” she asked, and she sounded so genuinely interested that Duncan trotted out their customary story.

“How intriguing. She was raised aboard a ship?”

“No. Mostly, she grew up with her grandfather, in England.”

“Ah. So it is her mother who was coloured.”

He nodded stiffly. The other way around, really.

“And was her mother a slave?”

He frowned at her. “No. She was the only daughter of a rich Moorish merchant. Beautiful and well-educated, she captured Erin’s father’s heart.”

It was well after noon when she returned home. He straightened up and raised his hand in greeting. She returned the gesture, but she did not stop, nor did she come to seek him out, as she would normally do.

Beside him, Lettie chuckled. “Do I sense trouble in paradise?”

For the first time since she arrived, he felt a spurt of irritation with his cousin. “Nothing we cannot sort,” he told her and went on with his scything.

It had been a good visit to Chester. While Jasper busied himself at the offices, Erin had reviewed the accounts related to her ships with one of the clerks, pleasantly surprised by how much the recent trading ventures had earned her. But the moment they turned down the long lane leading to the main house, she’d seen Duncan with his constant female shadow. Yes, he’d lifted his hand in a wave, but as reconciling gestures went, that didn’t cut it, so after a quick meal, she’d retreated upstairs to her ongoing project.

With the smell of new wood in her nose and a tool in her hand, Erin could pretend that any moment there’d be a burst of noise and laughter from a TV show, the overhead sound of an airplane or the distant chug-chug-chug of a tractor. Here, as she concentrated on joining the final parts of the wainscoting, time was suspended. Helen could be downstairs cooking, and soon the tantalising scents of saffron rice and lamb tagine would come wafting up the narrow stairs. While the door was closed, she existed in a bubble, some much-needed escapism from an existence that was excruciatingly draining—at least at present.

Several hours later, Erin sat back on her heels and studied the fruits of her labour. New floor, new walls and what had previously been a boxy little room was now a light and inviting space, very much due to the enlarged window.

“What will you use it for?” Esther asked from the door. She ran a hand over the new door frame.

“I don’t know. A guest room for now?”

“You want Lettie sleeping up here?” Esther asked, laughing out loud when Erin made a gagging sound. She

joined Erin by the window. “Has she said any more hurtful things?”

“No. But that might be because we’ve not exactly spent any time together.”

“Hmm.” Esther came closer, licked one of her fingers and rubbed at something on Erin’s cheek. “Swim?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They were halfway through the apple orchards when Lettie caught up with them. Erin made a face—not the company she wanted.

“After a whole day on the fields, I need a bath,” Lettie said. “Hard work, that.”

Erin chose not to comment, walking a few steps in front while Lettie chatted with Esther. She was first in the water and was last out of it. She stretched out on the warm wood of the jetty and closed her eyes. Sheesh, she was homesick today! She yearned for a terrycloth towel, an ice-cold Coke and the soft sound of one of her Spotify lists in the background. Except that there was no bikini, no music, no comfortable lounge. With a little sigh, she sat up and pulled on her linen chemise.

“I still cannot get my head around it,” Lettie said, squeezing the water out of her dark hair.

“Around what?” Erin asked, hunting about for her comb.

“Around the fact that Duncan married you.” Lettie shook her head. “Him, a successful lawyer with a coloured woman.”

“Lettie, for shame!” Esther exclaimed.

“Yeah, Lettie, for shame,” Erin echoed.

“He could have had anyone!”

“But he chose me,” Erin said.

“Why?” Lettie demanded.

“You’ll have to ask him.” Erin turned her back on the offensive woman. “But I’m guessing it’s because he worships

the ground I walk on.”

Esther giggled. Lettie, however, snorted, sounding like an enervated cow. Good likeness, actually: Lettie was proving to be quite the bitchy cow—however impossible that sounded.

“Worship? Pah! Men don’t marry for love.”

“Some do,” Erin replied.

“I suspect you seduced him, batting your eyelashes at him while spreading your legs,” Lettie said.

“Are you always this coarse?” Erin asked without looking at her. She tightened her hold on her comb to the point it hurt. Esther set a soft hand on hers, a gentle caress that had her relaxing.

“I know all about seduction,” Lettie continued.

“Ah, you seduced your husband, you mean?” Erin retorted.

“He seduced me!” Lettie screeched. “Him and his green, green eyes, and suddenly I was trapped, just like Duncan is with you.”

Erin stood up. “Well, at least I don’t beat the shit out of him, right?” She swept her shawl round her shoulders. “I have had it up to here with your rudeness. I suggest you think long and hard about how to apologise, because otherwise I’ll throw you out.”

Lettie smirked. “Duncan would never let you.”

“No?” Erin smiled right back. “Don’t bet on it.”

Women were demanding and complicated creatures. It had taken him much too long to calm the weeping Lettie, promising her that of course he’d not let Erin throw her out, and now he had this angry, hurt wife staring at him out of tear-filled eyes as he reproached her.

“You cannot say thus,” he finished. “To threaten her like that—”

“And did she tell you why?” Erin asked, her voice cracking. “Did she tell you how she insulted me, insinuating I’d seduced you into marriage, tricked you, because how else would a successful white man like you ever shackle himself to someone like me? Did she tell you that? Well, did she?” She paced back and forth, keeping her voice to a hiss. Remarkable just how vicious she could sound without raising her voice—vicious and hurt.

“She—”

“It’s not me who drops sly comments about the colour of her skin,” Erin added. “It’s not me who expresses just how terrible it must be for you, to be wed to someone so far beneath you. It’s—”

“Surely, she didn’t—”

“But she did!” Her voice rose. “Terrible, Duncan! Poor, poor you, married to a coloured, manipulative bitch! As if I even had a choice!”

He winced at that. “Honey, you—”

“What? Am I overreacting? Lacking in compassion towards your sweet, frail cousin? She isn’t frail, damn it! She’s mean! To me, the woman you supposedly love.”

“There’s no supposedly about it,” he protested.

“Just as there’s no supposedly about how she’s been treating me, but you’ve chosen to believe her, only her. How do you think that feels?” She stalked towards him. “I swear, if I could have my old life back, I’d be out of your hair like that!” She snapped her fingers. “And from how you’ve been acting lately, you wouldn’t mind.”

Like being savaged by a mountain lion, that was—as was seeing the look on her face.

“Mind?” he blustered. “Of course I’d mind! I don’t love Lettie, I love you!”

“Huh. And that’s why you’ve taken my concerns so seriously, right?”

Last Duncan squirmed like this, he'd been ten years old and trying to avoid telling his grandfather the truth.

“I—”

“Save it. And hey, ask Esther about Lettie.” She wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and pulled the door open.

“Where are you going?”

“As if you care.” With that parting comment, she was gone, and Duncan had no notion what to do. Was she expecting him to go after her, or did she want some space? All that anger, all that hurt—mayhap it would be better to give her some time to *cool off*, as she would put it. Aye, an hour or so and then he'd go find her. He scrubbed at his face and threw the bed a longing look. A wee rest, he decided, just stretch out for some moments and then go after his Erin.

He woke to the sounds of the day beginning and sat up abruptly in bed. Erin's side was untouched, and he'd fallen asleep fully dressed. He did a quick wash, scrubbed a finger over his teeth and took the stairs two treads at the time.

“Where's Erin?” he asked the kitchen at large when he entered.

Mrs Andersson gave him a long look before turning her back on him. “Out and about, I think.”

It did not take Duncan long to realise that he'd compounded his mistakes by not going after his wife the previous evening. When he finally found her, bent over her workbench, she ignored him, turning her back on him until he finally gave up and left, hurrying to join the other men on the fields.

At the midday meal, she continued to cold-shoulder him, staring through him as if he didn't exist. Lettie, meanwhile, fawned. Had someone ever suggested that his strong, self-assured cousin would lower herself to fawning over a man, he'd have laughed, but there it was: she came rushing with

food, with beer, and all he did was watch Erin sitting so silent and distant on the other side of the table.

She did not eat. Neither did he, Mrs Andersson's stew swelling into tasteless mush in his mouth.

She did not speak. And when Lettie launched herself into yet another anecdote from her childhood, she stood abruptly and left. He caught the satisfied smirk on Lettie's face, and his heart plummeted, even more so when Esther hurried after Erin. Had he read all of this wrong?

He spent the afternoon in grim silence. On purpose, he'd worked as far away as possible from Lettie, needing time to think—alone.

"I need to talk to you," he told Esther when he came in from the fields.

Some minutes later, he sat back, staring at Esther.

"Why hasn't she told me?"

Esther's brows rose. "She's tried to." She bit her lip. "And she told you again yesterday evening." She blushed. "Sometimes sound carries from your room."

"But—"

"Has she ever lied to you?" Esther interrupted.

"No."

"And yet you've chosen to wave it all off as minor matters, petty jealousy."

"Aye," he muttered. He'd turned a deaf ear to Erin, so certain adult Lettie was just the same as the Lettie of his youth.

He cornered Lettie in the small herbal garden, an overgrown space that had seen little love and care over the last ten years or so. Lettie, however, was making progress, taming the stands of mints and yarrow into orderly squares.

"Duncan!" she brightened, her smile faltering as he strode towards her.

“When did you become so judgmental?” he demanded. “When did you become an ungrateful shrew who repeatedly insults my wife?”

“Oh, come, Duncan.” She stood and shook her skirts clear of leaves and soil. “No need to pretend with me, cousin. We both know you’ve fettered yourself to her because you felt honour-bound to do so.”

“Do we?”

“Of course.” She smiled. “You are a good man—and she took advantage.”

She jumped when he kicked at the closest bucket, sending it crashing against the lopsided bench. “Never speak of my wife like that again. Never! And just so we are clear, nothing in this world is more precious to me than Erin is.”

She backed away. “But you could have done so much better than a coloured—”

“Enough! One more word, and I will throw you out myself.”

“But ... but ...” Lettie blinked and blinked. “We’re family.”

“Aye. But Erin comes first. Always. If you want to stay, you’ll have to apologise to her.” Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of something moving towards the river. “Erin!” He broke into a run. “Erin, please! Wait!”

To his relief, she stopped, shading her face against the western sun with her hand.

“May I accompany you?” he asked, apprehension bubbling through his belly when she took her time replying. At long last, she nodded, and they set off together. But when he tried to take her hand, she snatched it back.

At the jetty, she undressed quickly and dove into the water, reappearing twenty yards or so further out. He kicked off the worn boots, dropped shirt and breeches in a messy pile and jumped after her.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She quirked a brow but said nothing, swimming steadily at his side.

“I should have listened, put a stop to it,” he went on, and she just swam on.

“I failed you,” he added softly, and this time she stopped, treading water as she looked at him. “I just couldn’t reconcile what you were saying with the memories I had of her, so instead of truly listening, I dismissed it. You. I dismissed you.” He looked away from her penetrating gaze. “I took it for granted that you knew how loved you are and chose to defend the one I felt needed it the most, and in doing so ... God, Erin! Forgive me!”

In response, she disappeared under the surface, popping up some distance away. “You have to show someone you love them,” she said. “It’s not words that count, but actions.” She swam closer. “And these last few weeks your actions haven’t exactly made me feel loved.”

“I didn’t think you needed to be reassured of that,” he replied, and the look she gave him made him blush. “I was a fool,” he said roughly.

“You can say that again.” She flipped over on her back, floating with the current. He followed suit, close enough that now and then his fingers would graze hers.

“I was ten the first time I came to Graham’s Garden,” he said, staring up at the sky. “You know all that, how I wasn’t welcomed there because of my mother and her hatred of me.”

“Hatred of your fathers, not you,” she said.

Fathers. Aye. Because no one truly knew which accursed Burley brother had left Sarah with child.

“Seemed like hatred of me.” To this day, his birth mother always studied him with a dark reserve, as if he was to blame for what had happened to her. He cleared his throat. “But Lettie, well, she just grabbed my hand, and then it was her and me.” He smiled at the memory of wild Lettie teaching him to use a bow and arrow, to climb trees. Twilights spent playing hide-and-seek, moments sharing the strawberries she’d nicked

from Grandma's basket. "She made me feel welcome. She made me feel as if I belonged with the Grahams."

He turned back on his front and swam in place. "She's changed."

"Yeah, life does that to you." She made for the jetty, strong strokes cleaving the water.

"I've told her she has to apologise. If she doesn't, I'll send her on her way."

From Erin came a loud snort. "And where exactly would she go? You can't throw her out, and you know that. And I don't want an apology from her. Frankly, I don't give a shit about her." She pulled herself out of the water. "But you, on the other hand, you flayed me." She drew on her shift, the linen clinging to her damp skin.

He heaved himself up. "I know. And I am so, so sorry."

She finished tying her skirts into place and gave him a curt nod, moving out of reach when he made as if to enfold her in his arms.

"Will you forgive me?" he asked, feeling something of a fool standing stark naked while his wife was already half-dressed.

"I guess, seeing as I'm stuck with you." Green eyes bore into him. "But it's going to take time for me to trust you again." With that parting shot, she left.

Duncan exhaled. He supposed he deserved that, but by God did it hurt!

Six weeks at sea were finally over, *grâce à Dieu*. Antoine stood by the railings and watched the city of Annapolis emerge from the hazy morning fog. Felix came striding over, fretting with his cravat.

“What a provincial backwater,” he sneered.

To Antoine, Annapolis looked quite welcoming, but that may have been due to a burning desire to feel solid land under his feet. To his chagrin, he’d discovered he was no sailor, spending the first week or so spewing up his innards and the rest of the time staring due west, praying that the journey be as quick and smooth as possible. Felix, of course, was entirely unaffected by the pitching ship. He had, however, spent a lot of time heaping invectives over the damned captains in London, all of whom had denied them passage, expressing one weak excuse after the other.

“It’s because we’re French,” he’d told Antoine, who privately suspected it may rather be the case that someone at the Graham Trading Company had been disturbed by his questions about Melville and acted accordingly. No captain in his right mind would risk recurring business with one of the more successful trading companies.

So instead of travelling from London, they’d travelled to Southampton and from there across the Atlantic, posing as French wine merchants.

“What will you do once we find him?” Antoine asked, bracing his forearms against the railing. To his right, mudflats

dotted with birds bordered the narrowing waterway they were on, and straight ahead rose the spire of a church, overtopping the other buildings.

“What will *we* do,” Felix corrected with a wolfish smile. His hand strayed to his chest, gripping the object Antoine had only seen twice: once when Papa had handed the heavy locket to Felix with whispered instructions, both of them oblivious to Antoine standing at the door, the second time some weeks ago at sea, when Felix had pulled off his shirt to wash, no doubt thinking Antoine was fast asleep in his berth. An old locket, and for some reason it had all of Antoine breaking out in goose bumps, a queasy sensation in his gut. That locket was dangerous, but what it could do exactly Antoine did not know, nor did he want to.

“Surely, you want to avenge our name as much as I do,” Felix continued.

No, he did not. But all he did was nod.

“So?” Antoine asked. “What exactly is the plan?”

“To burn him and that wife of his to death. Like they intended to do to dear Papa.”

Antoine bit his tongue. When Papa had returned home, still badly damaged, he’d overheard him telling Busnel that his injuries were due to a miscalculation. “I thought myself stronger,” he’d said. And when he’d shared this with Maman, she had sighed deeply, expressing that she feared Monsieur Chardon had brought his own misfortunes down on himself.

“Your father is an ambitious man,” she’d added with an icy smile. “Men who stand in his way have a tendency to ... well, how should I put it? Disappear? But maybe this time, the adversary proved too strong.”

Since then, Antoine had compiled a list of Papa’s adversaries—it had taken quite a few bottles of wine and a very long evening with Busnel—discovering to his horror that Maman was right: men who stood in Papa’s way had a tendency to drop off the face of the earth.

No sooner were they off the ship than Felix had found them lodgings, halfway up Main Street. Even Antoine had to smile because, in a settlement as small as this, Main Street was something of a misnomer. In fact, he counted at most ten streets, of which only six were properly paved.

Their inn was a relatively new house—or so the proud proprietress said—the furnishings simple. No elegant wallpaper, no intricately carved furniture, no elegantly draped curtains—just a rope-framed bed, a high-backed chair and a small chest of drawers, on top of which was a basin and a pitcher, the latter delivered full of steaming water. Antoine washed, changed his linen and set out to explore.

It did not take long for Antoine to regret wearing both waistcoat and coat. Annapolis in July proved hot and humid, the low buildings casting but scant shade along the streets. It was market day, and he spent an hour or two browsing what was on sale. Most of it was food, but there was also some excellent leatherwork and a couple of stands offering all sorts of household wares. He bought himself a couple of hot pasties and strolled up towards the church. Not that he had any intention of setting foot inside an Anglican church, but St Anne's was situated on high ground, offering a good view of the bustling little town and the waters that surrounded it.

On the further side of the harbour, he could make out the holding pens for the slaves. They'd passed a slaver as they made their way up the Severn, and even at a distance of a couple hundred yards, the stench of the unwashed, captive unfortunates had made him gag. He'd not seen many slaves—or blacks—in France, but he knew that the colonies, be they French or English, depended on them. After all, large plantations required many hands to work them, and it was in the natural order of things that the white own, the black be owned. Or mayhap it wasn't, because, as he recalled, there were pirates trading in the abduction of whites who were then sold into slavery in Africa.

“Did you find anything interesting?” Felix asked when Antoine encountered him on Main Street.

“Not really. As you said, it is a small place.”

“I meant about Melville,” Felix said.

“Ah. *Non*, I did not. You?”

Felix made a disgusted face. “Apparently, he has left the colony.”

There was a moment of utter relief. “So we should abandon our venture?”

“Abandon it? Of course not! We just need to find out where he went!”

“But he could be anywhere,” Antoine protested. “He could even be back in Europe, in Paris even.”

“*Peut-être*. Papa said his wife is a *metisse*.” Felix snickered. “That cannot be easy here.” He gestured at the people who were out and about. “Lily-white, the lot of them.”

Felix had been recommended a tavern down by the docks, a place suitable for gentlemen who were looking for good food, excellent beer—“Can beer ever be excellent?” Felix scoffed—and some hours of companionship.

“The madam is as old as Methuselah,” Felix added, “but her girls are clean and healthy.” He elbowed Antoine. “After all those weeks aboard a ship, I fear my member needs to relearn the fine art of copulation.”

Antoine laughed. “It will, I suspect, prove an enthusiastic student.” As would his.

Mrs Malone had established her tavern several decades ago. The madam herself had to be well over four score, and was something of an apparition in purple and black. But while she might be old, she ruled her territory with an iron hand and excellent service, which was how Felix and Antoine were soon enjoying the best food they’d had in weeks, the pork knuckles cooked to the point of the meat falling off the bone. Served with a version of *choucroute* and bread so fresh it was still warm, it had Felix uttering a sequence of happy sounds, even if he grimaced at the beer.

Scantly dressed girls wove their way through the room, smiling and simpering at whoever caught their gaze. Quite pretty, some of them, their hair gleaming in the light of the lanterns, their lips moist and inviting. Antoine adjusted himself, shared a look with Felix.

“Go on,” Felix said. “You can go first.”

It did not take long. The whore was skilled, Antoine was eager—and happy to discover his cock had not forgotten how to copulate. Afterwards, a couple of coins changed hands and he tucked himself in and returned to his brother, who had been joined by a large and florid man.

“Farrell,” the man said, nodding at Antoine. “Nicholas Farrell.”

“Monsieur Farrell is a long-standing acquaintance of Melville,” Felix clarified. “As fond of the man as we are.”

“I don’t know the man,” Antoine said, which earned him a black look from Felix.

“Not, I dare say, a major loss,” Farrell said. He produced a decorated snuff box, dug into it and sniffed loudly a couple of times. “Ahh.” He sat back, displaying a magnificently embroidered waistcoat that strained over a sizeable paunch.

From the silver buckles of his shoes, through the quality of his clothes all the way to the bejewelled snuff box, Farrell exuded wealth. But the red-rimmed eyes, the shadow of grey bristle on his cheeks and the lanky strands of hair spoke of a man who made little effort with his appearance, assuming, no doubt, that the dazzling colours of his waistcoat would distract from his somewhat unappetising exterior.

Farrell was in no hurry to share what he knew about Melville, oblivious to Felix’s growing irritation. Instead, he went on and on about his desire to punish Duncan Melville for whatever transgressions it was Melville had committed against Farrell.

“And as to his wife ...” Farrell spat to the side. “An uppity coloured wench who had the temerity to meddle in my marriage! But one day, I aim to make her—and him—pay. And I know just how: two birds with one stone.” He cackled. “I cannot wait to see the look on Melville’s face when he realises his beloved wife is lost to him.”

Antoine grimaced.

They’d just ordered more beer when they were joined by a fourth man, some years younger than Farrell. In difference to him, the newcomer was handsome and clean, emitting none of the slight sour stench that emanated from Farrell. His brown coat and waistcoat were well-made, the shirt had elegant lace cuffs, the cravat a froth of white.

“You have an excellent tailor,” Felix commented, nodding a greeting at the man, who introduced himself as Emrick Ellis. “Is he perhaps French?”

In response, he got a scowl. “My wife sews all my clothes.”

“Ah. A skilled seamstress. Quite the treasure,” Felix said, not even bothering to keep the condescension out of his voice. In Paris, the well-to-do hired professional tailors, although Antoine rather liked the thought of wearing garments made specifically for him by a woman who cherished him. To judge from the quality of Ellis’ clothes, he was very cherished by his wife—except apparently he wasn’t, Antoine listening with growing surprise to Ellis’ terse retelling of a vicious, violent wife who’d chosen to abscond.

“Maybe it is better, *non?*” he ventured. “What man would want such a wife sharing his bed?”

Ellis sneered. “By the time I am done with her, she’ll not as much as squeak without my permission.”

Which, in Antoine’s private opinion, would likely only increase the wife’s desire to rid herself of him.

“You’ve not managed to tame her yet, though,” Farrell said with a laugh. “Not like my Barbara, who knows her place.”

His expression darkened. “Now that I’ve beaten all that nonsense that coloured slut filled her head with out of her.”

“Lettie knows her place,” Ellis protested.

“Nay, that she does not. Wild and headstrong, that one. Verily like her accursed cousin Duncan Melville.”

“Your wife is a relation of Monsieur Melville?” Antoine asked.

“Breed like rabbits, the Grahams,” Farrell muttered. “There’s dozens upon dozens of them.” Given that he’d spent an hour informing them about his own most extensive family, the Grahams were not the only ones who did so. Antoine glanced at Felix, wondering what it would have been like to have more living siblings. Instead, the graveyard back home sported three little headstones commemorating two girls and a boy who’d never seen their first birthday.

“Graham?” Felix’s tone sharpened. “So how is she related to Melville?”

“Ah.” Farrell chuckled. “Now that is a long and sordid tale, that is.” He beckoned for one of the serving girls to bring him more beer. “His mother was a Graham and a slut,” he began. “Eagerly, she welcomed all sorts to her bed, and one day, there was baby Duncan.”

Ellis frowned. “The woman was raped,” he muttered.

Farrell ignored him. “Even worse, she’s a papist.”

Felix just looked at him.

Farrell blinked and sat back, an unbecoming flush staining his cheeks. “She converted,” he said. “A good Presbyterian girl, and she converted.”

“Ah. Before she became a slut?”

“After.” Farrell scowled. “What does it matter anyway? Duncan Melville was born a bastard, his mother never wanted him, and the only reason he can live like a landed gentleman is because of the land he stole from me. Me! My entire patrimony he took.”

“Your grandfather deeded it to him,” another voice cut in. The man who stood looming over Farrell had presence, sporting coat, waistcoat and breeches as elegant as Felix’s. Taller than most, he exuded strength, the fine blue fabric of his coat straining over broad shoulders. “Jeremy Jones,” he introduced himself. He narrowed his eyes. “I count myself a very good friend of Duncan Melville. Very good.”

Antoine swallowed, discreetly wiping his hand against his breeches.

“And as to Farrell here ...” Jones broke off to clap Farrell so hard over the back the man almost fell into the table. “Well, *messieurs*, he lies.” Just like that, he shifted into perfect French. “Farrell was fifteen when he attacked Duncan, all of ten. So badly did he beat him that old Farrell felt obliged to offer substantial compensation or else see this worthless specimen of a human hang.” Yet again, he clapped Farrell over the back. “How unfortunate he didn’t,” he added, now in English. “The world would have been a better place without Nicholas Farrell.”

“How dare you!” Farrell exclaimed.

“Oh, I dare, Farrell. And James and I will always side with Duncan against you, just as we did back in 1716 when you were so determined to haul him before the court.”

“He deserved it! He broke the law wedding that coloured slut!”

“How touching, Nicholas Farrell, defender of the law,” Jones said. “Well, when it suits you.” Jones looked directly at Felix. “Just so you know: any enemy of Duncan Melville is my enemy as well.” With a curt nod, he strode off.

Farrell recovered. “Upstart. Who does he think he is, hey? And let’s not forget his father hanged for his crimes.”

Discreetly, Antoine ran a finger under his collar. That Jones exuded power, and he had no doubt whoever harmed Melville would gain a determined enemy for life. He glanced at Felix, noting he too looked somewhat affected.

Felix cleared his throat. “Do you know where I can find Melville?”

“He’s in Pennsylvania,” Farrell said. “At least that’s what I’ve heard.”

“But you don’t know,” Felix said.

“Not for certain, no.”

“I know where he is.” The speaker stood from a nearby table, swaying his way towards them. Antoine grimaced. The man was drunk, stank of spilled beer and vomit and looked as if he’d spent the last few nights sleeping in a gutter. He drew himself up straight. “Caleb Nelson, at your service.” He bowed, which had him overbalancing, and only Ellis’ quick reaction stopped this Nelson person from landing face-first on the floor.

“And how would you know?” Felix asked.

“How? Oh, I’ll tell you how! Melville and that coloured bitch of his stole my boy!”

“*Mon Dieu!* They stole your son?”

“My son?” Nelson blinked at Antoine. “My son? I don’t have one. No, they stole Tim.” He nodded repeatedly, as if everyone present should know who this Tim was. Nelson looked at Felix. “I have to get him back. Without Tim, I am lost.”

“*Ils sont vraiment étranges, ces gens,*” Felix murmured to Antoine. “I cannot help but wonder why he wants that boy back—is he perchance in love with him?”

Seeing as Nelson was just describing how he planned to beat the truth out of the unknown Tim, that did not sound likely.

“Where can I find him?” Felix said, interrupting Nelson.

“Eh?” Nelson licked his lips, swaying on his feet.

“Melville.”

A cunning gleam appeared in Nelson’s eyes. “I’ll tell you if you promise I get the lad back.”

“What do I want with him?” Felix shrugged. “So where?”

“Just outside Chester,” Nelson said, going on to explain Chester was a thriving little place situated on the Delaware River.

Ellis pulled at his sleeve. “Do you know if my wife is there?”

Nelson blinked. “Who?”

“My wife,” Ellis repeated.

“How would I know?” Nelson said. “But there are quite a few women staying at the main house.” He shuddered. “And one of them shot at me.”

“That could be Lettie!” Ellis leaped to his feet. “Come on, Farrell, we need to find a berth to take us there.”

“No,” Felix said.

“No?” Ellis sneered. “Who are you to tell us no?”

“Felix Chardon.” Felix stood as well. “And I will not have you interfering with my plans.”

“Your plans?” To his credit, Emrick Ellis did not cower under Felix’s gaze. Instead, he stood taller. “We are talking about my wife. I am in a haste to retrieve her. For weeks, I’ve been looking for her.” He slammed one fist against the palm of his other hand. “And once I find Lettie ...”

Antoine had always felt Maman had been most unfortunate in her husband, but in comparison with this poor Lettie, it seemed she’d lived in a veritable paradise.

“You don’t even know if she is there,” Felix said. “I promise I’ll find out and let you know.” He winked at Ellis. “And surely, a couple of more weeks of anticipation will only make delivering that punishment all the sweeter, will it not?”

“Hmph!”

“Have you been up to the Graham place?” Farrell put in, setting a hand on his friend’s arm.

Ellis grimaced. “It’s three days of hard riding.”

Felix pursed his mouth. “Surely, that’s where she would go? To that large family of hers.” He studied Ellis. “Is it the riding or the fear of confronting her male relatives?”

Antoine muffled a snicker. How better to distract a man than insinuate he was a coward?

“Fear?” Ellis puffed up like a peacock. “Me? If she’s there, then they’d best hand her over or I’ll bring the militia down on them.”

“That’s my man,” Farrell said. “Tell you what, I’ll ride with you, an impartial witness, like.”

They left Farrell and Ellis discussing their excursion into the wilds of Maryland. Nelson had promised to act as their guide in Chester before promptly falling asleep in his chair, and Felix was in a good mood, humming under his breath as they walked. Antoine, on the other hand, could scarcely walk, his guts a roiling mess. He wanted no part in this venture, feared that Felix and Papa had a terrible fate planned for poor Melville—a fate he most likely did not deserve.

They were almost at their inn when Antoine turned on Felix. “He who lies with dogs, Felix. Those men, those ...” He shook his head. “Surely, you will not help them? One wants to beat a young boy senseless, the other cannot wait to use his belt on his wife, and the third apparently does so regularly!”

“Some women need it,” Felix said with a shrug.

“That I do not believe,” Antoine said firmly. “No one deserves to be terrorised by their husband.”

“A disobedient, wilful woman is a dangerous thing,” Felix said.

“A wise man tames without breaking,” Antoine retorted.

Felix laughed. “Best of luck with that, *mon frère*. I myself neither tame nor break. I merely visit, enjoy and leave.”

“But one day, you’ll marry.” As the eldest, it fell to Felix to continue the proud—well, according to Papa—Chardon line.

“And when I do, she will be neither disobedient or wilful. She will not dare to.” With a crooked smile, Felix shoved the heavy door of the inn open. “Coming?”

There had been no getting out of it, which was why Lettie stood in front of Erin—with the entire household present—and apologised for her behaviour. She made an effort to sound sincere, and truth be, she even felt somewhat ashamed, mostly because of how Duncan had reacted.

Inexplicably, the man was in love with this coloured woman, seeing something in her that Lettie did not. All Lettie saw was a calculating, grasping female who had used wiles and seduction to trap a man who deserved so much more in a wife.

“... and I am truly sorry I hurt you,” Lettie finished. She lifted her head to meet Erin’s gaze only to find Mrs Melville wasn’t looking at her. She was staring to the side, looking as if she hadn’t heard one word of what Lettie had said.

“Thank you, Lettie,” Duncan said, and that caused Erin to glance his way before stooping to pick up one daughter, offer her hand to the other and leave.

Lettie turned a mournful expression on Duncan. “I tried,” she said.

From Esther came a bark of laughter. “Not hard enough.” She gave Lettie a serious look. “For weeks, you’ve disparaged her, insulted her. Do you truly think you standing here and telling her you’re sorry will make all that go away?” With a shake of her head, she grabbed a basket and made for the door.

“Where are you going?” Duncan asked.

“Berry picking,” Esther replied.

“I can come,” Lettie offered.

“I think not. It is me and Erin and the wildings.” She grinned, evidently pleased with herself for having come up with this appropriate nickname for the twin lasses.

The other members of the household dispersed, and soon enough it was only Duncan and Lettie in the kitchen. “Well, cousin, shall we join the others on the fields?” she asked.

“Nay. I have other matters to sort.” He glanced out the open door to where his wife was laughing with Esther, and he looked so sad it made Lettie’s heart ache. Erin didn’t deserve a man like Duncan! She, on the other hand, did. Instead, she had Emrick, who always found fault, who never praised, who may be bonny to look at but was dark and twisted on the inside. It wasn’t fair!

Over the coming week, it became evident to everyone that the breach between the master and the mistress was in no way healed. It was also evident who the household and tenants blamed for this, because suddenly Lettie was treated with utmost politeness but no cordiality.

When the women collected to do laundry—and it was heaps and heaps of it, most of it having soaked for days in a long line of barrels—the tenant wives and daughters made a point of remaining close to Erin, who stirred and scrubbed with the best of them, laughing and conversing as she did. An entirely different Erin from the woman she was in the house, because there she retreated into being cold and stiff, sharing the minimum number of words required with Duncan and none at all with Lettie, whom she ignored.

It irked Lettie to have her attempted conversations be met with a mild “Hmm?” before Erin drifted off to do other things, talk to other people.

But more than being irked, with each passing day Lettie was engulfed with shame, because the one who was truly hurting was Duncan. She could see it in his eyes, in how he

braced himself before entering a room where Erin was, that he found the distance between them unbearable.

Where before, not a day passed without some sort of overt display of affection between husband and wife—be it a light pat to the shoulder, a hasty kiss or something as simple as a shared look over the table—now there was nothing, Erin evading every attempt Duncan made at touching her. Maybe that was why he took to spending most of the days—bright, sunlit days—in his office.

And then one morning, he appeared in the kitchen and announced he was off to Philadelphia.

Maybe he had hoped for some sort of reaction from Erin, but all he got was a nod.

“I’ll be back in a week.”

“A week?” Erin looked at her husband before smiling at Jasper, who was carrying the loaded saddlebags.

“Aye.” Duncan managed a weak smile. “Will you miss me?”

She shrugged. “Not really.” Without a hug or a farewell kiss, she walked by him. “Ride carefully,” she said, not even noticing how he deflated. Lettie reached for him, but he neatly sidestepped, and some moments later he was gone, Jasper at his side.

Lettie spent the coming days feeling sorry. For herself, but mostly for Duncan. How he must regret welcoming her into his home! She watched Erin from a distance and tried to hate her as much as she’d done previously, but shame and hate did not marry well, and instead all she felt was guilt. On Thursday, a week after Duncan had left, she slipped away to sit on the makeshift bench under one of the apple trees, and there, in the dappled shade, she considered her choices and behaviour.

She should not have married Emrick. She laughed out loud at that conclusion, a hard, tearing sound. But she’d been so lonely when Aaron died, and he’d been ailing for several

weeks, weeks in which Emrick had been a constant source of strength. She gnawed her lip. Aaron had warned her, his fever-bright eyes darting from Lettie to Emrick.

“He’s only nice when it serves him,” he’d said, breaking off to cough. “Promise me—” But she hadn’t wanted to promise him anything as that would be tantamount to admitting he would soon be dead, so she’d kissed his forehead and told him to stop talking and concentrate on his recovery.

And then he was dead. Her kind, sweet Aaron, taken too soon from this world, taken from her. Why? She’d ranted at God so many times, but there was never any answer, any explanation. Mayhap God felt she deserved a man like Emrick, but what had she done to be so punished?

Her father had told her to come home, but Lettie had refused, not wanting to be the poor, childless widow in a home so full of wild bairns of all ages. Besides, she was a free woman now, a widow who could make her own choices in life.

Her own choices had led her to where she was now. She had chosen to wed Emrick, so taken by his charm, his comely face. She had chosen to stay the first time he hit her—well, that was not entirely true, because where could she have gone? Home, of course.

Lettie pulled her legs up and hugged her knees close. Home to Graham’s Garden, thereby admitting what a fool she’d been. That was the main reason she’d not made directly for Graham’s Garden this time. Aye, she did not want to put Uncle Ian and Da in an awkward position, but that was but a weak excuse; the men in her family would not have hesitated to handle Emrick Ellis. No, what Lettie Graham did not want was to return to a place where she’d been the evident leader a bruised and battered victim.

“Not so eager to help now that Duncan isn’t around?”

Erin’s voice had her startling.

“I helped with the milking this morning,” Lettie said defensively, refraining from adding that Erin was likely incapable of helping with that task.

“Well done, you,” Erin replied.

“What do you want?” Lettie was on her feet, smoothing at her borrowed skirts.

“It’s my orchard, remember?” Erin retorted.

“You’re being cruel,” Lettie blurted. Erin came to a standstill.

“Excuse me?” she said in a frigid tone.

“To Duncan,” Lettie added. “You’re punishing him.”

“I am? Not that it is any of your business—”

“But it is! You’re punishing him because you’re angry with me.”

Erin rolled her eyes. “If I am punishing him, as you so quaintly put it, it’s because of what he’s done.”

“He did it for me. He spoke up for me.”

Erin chose not to reply, her skirts swishing as she moved off.

“It’s not fair,” Lettie yelled after her. “And it’s not right! You’re treating him like his mother did! You’re acting as if he doesn’t even exist, and it is killing him. Killing him, Erin!” She picked up her skirts and ran, surprised by the tears wetting her cheeks.

She ran and ran, and suddenly she was by the river. She sank down on the jetty and wept. It was as if she couldn’t stop, loud sobs tearing at her throat. At long last, she quieted, and only then did she notice she wasn’t alone.

“Better?” Hans handed her a handkerchief.

“How can it be better?” She wiped her face and blew her nose. “I live under a shadow of fear; I’ve done so for years. Because the moment Emrick finds me ...” She gulped. “And here, nobody likes me. Not even Duncan, not anymore.”

Hans snorted. “That is your own fault,” he said before lowering himself to sit beside her. “But that Emrick ... *Nein*,

das ist nicht gut.” He surprised her by setting a large hand over hers. “Tell me. Maybe it will help.”

And so Lettie did. She talked and talked, and with every word it was as if the rage, the bitterness within, lightened until finally she was too tired to say anything more. Instead, she lay back on the warm planks, staring up at the distant sky. Beside her, Hans did the same. They were silent together. They breathed together. When the breeze turned chilly, he got to his feet and helped her up. Wordlessly, they walked back to the house.

“Thank you,” Lettie said at the door.

Hans just nodded.

How dare she! Erin stalked through the orchard. Damned woman! She had hold of her skirts as she balanced across the narrow plank that bridged one of the deep ditches draining into the river. She took the long turn round the main yard and sat down on the crumbling ledge of the old well. By rote, she picked up a couple of pebbles and dropped them into the dark. No responding *plop*, just a soft thud as it landed on the years and years of leaves and other rubbish that had been dumped in it once it had run dry.

Erin lifted her face to the afternoon sun and sighed.

Lettie was right. She’d been punishing Duncan—and she’d liked it, to see how hurt he was.

Except when she hadn’t, like when she’d sailed past him when he left without bidding him a proper goodbye.

Well, the least she could do was to welcome him home. He was due today, so she jumped off her perch, detoured to check that Julie was still keeping an eye on the twins, and strolled towards the main gate. The surrounding fields were reduced to stubble, and according to Sivert the harvest had been adequate—enough to fend off starvation at least. A half-empty kind of guy was Sivert.

When the impressive Armebot Printz, wife to Johan Papegoja, had supervised the building of the original plantation—a summer retreat for the family whose main residence was further south, all of this according to Mrs Andersson, who went all weepy when talking about this formidable Swedish lady—she had insisted on a magnificent arched gate, despite there being no wall. The arch still stood, as ludicrous now as it must have been back then. But the man presently riding through it looked anything but ludicrous, the warmth of the day having him riding in only shirt and breeches.

Tanned hands and forearms disappeared into the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt, the open collar offering a glimpse of his strong chest. He sat his horse with ease, the afternoon sun casting their joined shadows before them, and for an instant it was as if horse and man grew out of the ground, rooted permanently to this time, this place.

It took some time for Duncan to notice her, his focus on whatever it was he was reading. He said something to Jasper, stuffed the document inside his shirt and urged his horse forward. Which was when he saw her, forcing Atlas to an abrupt halt.

“Hi.” She shielded her eyes as she looked up at him. He didn’t look pleased.

“Erin, we must—” he began.

“I’m sorry,” she interrupted. “Yes, I was angry with you, but—”

“Honey, we have to—”

“Talk, I know.” She held up her arms, and he helped her up, settling her before him. He made as if to say something, but she twisted and put her hand over his mouth. “Let me finish, okay?” She took a deep breath. “I am still angry at you, but mostly I am angry at myself because all I’ve done these last few weeks is drive us apart when what I really want is for us to be like we used to be—should be.” She leaned against him, keeping her gaze straight ahead. “You know,” she went on, “you and me against the world.”

His arm tightened round her. “Always, honey. Always.” He pressed his lips to her cheek. “We have to talk.” He fished out whatever it was he’d been reading and handed it to her. “One of the lads at the Chester office came riding with this, saying it was urgent. We met him at the turnoff.” She smoothed it and peered down at it. Even after three years in this time, it cost her to read handwriting, but after some initial squinting the words sort of emerged. Shit! The paper crumpled under her hand.

“Seriously?” she whispered.

“A thistle brooch sounds familiar,” Duncan said. “And the name Felix most certainly does.”

“They’re coming here.” She looked at the surrounding buildings. “Our girls, Duncan! They’re—”

“Shush,” he said firmly. “Nothing is going to happen to them. Or us.” He helped her down and dismounted in one agile leap. “Thanks to David, we will be ready for them.”

“And if he has that locket? What then, Duncan?” The ground tilted under her feet. “What if we’re dragged through time again?” She’d die. Just the thought of being squeezed through that twisting time funnel had her wanting to throw up. All those swirling colours, all that noise, the screams of people somehow trapped within.

Somehow, he had hold of her, lifting her into his arms. “It will not happen.”

“Is something wrong?”

Erin closed her eyes. She wasn’t up to handling Lettie right now.

“No,” she said just as Duncan said, “Aye.”

Lettie looked from one to the other.

Duncan sighed. “We need all the help we can get, honey.”

“So these men have come all the way from France to do you harm?” If anything, Lettie looked animated.

“Aye.” Duncan sighed. “Some years ago, Erin and I set off to Scotland, there to save Uncle David from falling into bad company.”

“Jacobites,” Lettie said, nodding. “What?” she added at Duncan’s surprised look. “We’ve all heard how he fought for King James at Killiecrankie, and him only sixteen.” She sat forward, an eager expression on her face. “Was he? A Jacobite?”

“Nay. But we encountered those who were.”

“Chardon, a Jacobite?” Erin snorted. “That man served only one person: himself.”

“True. But his son Felix fought with a band of rogue Frenchmen supporting the Pretender.” Duncan swallowed. “They captured David. They would have killed him had we not rescued him, killing quite a few of the rogues. But most of them we took prisoner, and one of them was Felix Chardon.” Duncan rubbed at his neck, attempting to dispel the ghostly sensation of strong hands effectively choking the life out of him. “He tried to kill me but failed, accusing me of his father’s death.”

Lettie made big eyes at this. “Had you? Killed him?”

“We’re not murderers,” Duncan said, frowning at his cousin. “But he—”

“Died. Well, we thought so.” Erin shuddered. “He should have died, but I’m guessing he didn’t.”

Lettie gave Duncan a confused look. “But if he’s alive, then why is the son here?”

“I don’t think anyone emerges from a burning building unscathed,” Duncan said.

“And he was already wounded. Self-defence,” Erin said. “He tried ...” She swallowed, sneaking her hand into Duncan’s. “He tried to kill me—us.”

They shared a look, Duncan giving her hand a squeeze. When Chardon had produced that accursed locket, the maws

of time had yawned wide-open, and only through his own quick thinking were they able to remain in 1715.

Hans straightened up from where he'd been leaning against one of the walls. "And now you think this Frenchman is coming here?"

"Uncle David thinks so." And Papegoja Plantation was not the most defensible of places, what with the river on one side, open fields on two and the road bordering the fourth. "But they're not here yet," he added, mostly to reassure himself.

"If we're lucky, they'll run into pirates. After all, Blackbeard is back in business, isn't he?" Erin said.

"More fool him. They catch him, they hang him." William Keith, the Deputy Governor of Pennsylvania, had issued a warrant, and everyone knew Governor Spotswood of Virginia would like nothing as much as to execute Edward Teach—Blackbeard—preferably in Virginia.

"But if we're lucky, he may rid us of Chardon first."

"One can always hope," he said, tugging at one of her curls. "But—"

"Yeah, I know." She sighed. "Prepare for the worst."

"Well, we have those dogs at least," Hans said.

"Aye." Four huge brindled creatures that were let loose during the night and spent the days sleeping placidly in their kennels, with Tim ensuring they were properly cared for.

"And we have guns." Lettie stood. "Can you shoot?" she asked Erin.

"Passably," Erin replied, making Duncan smile. His wife was quite adept at handling pistols, her aim remarkably good over short distances.

"Passably will not do." Lettie was already lifting down one of Duncan's rifled muskets. "And the most important thing to learn is to reload with speed."

"*Ja*," Hans said. "Makes the difference between alive and dead."

Lettie gestured towards the door. “Well, come on, then,” she said to Erin. “No time like the present!”

His wife looked reluctant, tightening her grip on his hand. “It can wait,” he therefore said to Lettie, who looked crestfallen. He swept his thumb over Erin’s hand. “I find myself in need of a good bath.”

Hans grinned.

Lettie looked as if she was going to choke on something small and hairy. And Erin, well, Erin blushed.

“You don’t have to announce to the whole world that we’re going to, you know,” she whispered as she followed him upstairs, her hand still firmly held in his.

“I just said I needed a bath,” he replied, swinging open the door to their bedroom. Inside, Julie was pouring steaming water from a pitcher into the small portable bath, linen towels neatly folded on a stool beside it. Julie curtsied and left.

“It’s too small for both of us,” Erin protested when Duncan started to strip off her clothes as well. “Duncan!” she gasped when he lifted her and more or less threw her on the bed. She was breathless from laughing by the time she was naked, and Duncan managed to prove the bath did fit them both—as long as they moved with extreme caution.

He soaped her hands, her arms, worked his way up to her shoulders. A slippery finger followed the outline of her collarbone, dipped to circle her breast before gently brushing her nipple. He dipped lower, his entire hand smoothing its way down one hip, up the other.

“Duncan,” she groaned as he slowly skimmed his hand down her belly. “Duncan,” she moaned as he cupped her sex, a firm hold that had her lifting her hips against it. He slipped a finger inside her. Two fingers. Her head fell back; her eyes closed. With her legs dangling over the edge of the bath, she was a captive to his caresses, and he took his time, teasing her almost to completion before reverting to washing that beautiful golden skin. She shifted, pressing her arse against his groin, and his cock was rigid with desire.

“Now, Duncan,” she said. “Now!” But the bath was too small, and between breathless giggles and hot kisses, they somehow managed to uncoil themselves and fall damp and warm into their bed.

“Duncan,” she whispered as he entered her. “My Duncan.”
Aye. Hers, only hers since the moment they’d met.

The next morning, Lettie took a deep breath and looked Erin firmly in the eyes. “I know you have no reason to believe me when I say this, but I am truly sorry.”

Erin concentrated on the musket lying over her legs.

“I resented you,” Lettie said. “For being happy when I was not, for being loved when I am not.” Hesitantly, she clasped Erin’s hand, feeling the other woman tense at her touch. She released her as if scalded. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I don’t want you to fear me.”

Erin’s brows rose. “Fear you?” She shook her head. “I’ve never been afraid of you. I’ve just been so mad at you I felt it best not to be anywhere close. You know, in case I was tempted to brain you with one of my mallets.”

Lettie stared at her. “Brain me?” she croaked.

“Oh yes. I’m good with a mallet,” Erin said. Her face fell. “I used a mallet to defend myself when those damned Nelsons tried to steal Tim away the first time.”

“And you still think this Caleb Nelson will be back, don’t you?”

“I think whatever the secret Tim is holding on to, it’s worth way too much for Caleb to give up.”

Lettie clapped her hands together. “Well, next time he comes, you’ll not be using a mallet, you’ll be using a musket.”

Erin pursed her mouth. “I’m not so sure about that. I’m much better with a mallet.”

Lettie grinned. “Not if I have anything to do with it, Mrs Melville.”

Their eyes met.

“Okay,” Erin said.

“Okay,” Lettie echoed, and for the first time since she’d arrived at Papegoja Plantation, she gave Erin a genuine smile.

His wife really did have a very fine arse, Duncan Melville thought. Especially when she was on her knees, wagging it back and forth to whatever tune she was humming almost soundlessly.

“Finished gawking?” she asked without turning round, and he laughed softly.

“Never.” He moved towards her—or more specifically to the two little girls sleeping on a pile of blankets beside her. “They’re at their most biddable like this,” he said, smiling down at the jumble of limbs, of dark lashes fanning across rosy cheeks. His daughters were perfect, all the way from their wild dark curls to their rosy toes and their wide blue eyes. They already had him so firmly wound round their little fingers that Erin complained about feeling displaced in his affections. As if. He looked at his wife, and his chest expanded. His heart had room enough for the three of them—and for any future babe they might have.

“Done?” he asked, looking at the room. Erin might not be capable of sewing him a shirt, but give her chisels and hammers, adzes and nails, and she performed miracles. The formerly dilapidated house had been carefully restored one room at the time, and this, her final project, was yet another bedroom, a room filled with light from two casement windows. She’d repaired the wainscoting and painted it a mild yellow, and the old floors had been sanded and oiled. In one corner stood a simple bedframe in oak, as yet devoid of

mattress or bedding, in another a ladder-back chair their Welsh tenant had made.

“Done,” she replied, studying the fruits of her labour with evident satisfaction. She stood. “You’re back early.”

“Aye. I have good news and bad news.” These last few weeks, their world had centred round the threat posed by Chardon, even if both of them had done their best to distract each other.

“Oh shit—Chardon is here,” she said.

He gave her a crooked smile. “Aye. I saw him, Felix Chardon, down at the docks in Chester.” On the one hand, it was a relief he was finally here, a tangible enemy rather than an approaching nemesis. On the other ... He suppressed a shiver, recalling that day when he’d thought he’d die in the Scottish heather at the hands of Felix Chardon. “How unfortunate the miscreant did not expire in Scotland.”

“Amen to that.” She leaned back to look at him. “So what do we do?”

“We wait. What else can we do?” He frowned. “He was with Nelson.”

“Oh yippee, things just get better and better!”

He cupped her cheek. “We’ll let Lettie handle Caleb. That sad excuse of a man will die of a seizure with her at his heels.”

That actually made her smile. She snuggled up to him. “So what was the good news?”

“We have reinforcements.” He grinned. “Ian Graham just rode in, and he has his youngest son, Timothy, with him.”

“Timothy?”

“You’ll like him,” Duncan said. “But keep in mind he’s hard of hearing.”

“He’s deaf?”

“It’s not that bad,” Duncan said, “but the measles left him with defect ears.”

“Hearing, not ears,” Erin corrected. She glanced over at their sleeping girls. “Measles can do that?”

“Aye. But mostly, it doesn’t.” He himself had had measles when a young child and emerged unscathed. “We have guests to greet,” he added, shaking her out of her worried contemplation of their little lasses. He held out his hand.

Erin liked Ian, even more so after his extended visit back in April, long days spent in conversation about everything from time travelling—a subject Ian had been loath to dwell on—to family, horses and colonial politics. The man was some years over sixty, and despite an old back injury, he appeared younger than his years, his tall frame exuding strength. Thick grey hair was pulled back from his face and secured by a simple black ribbon, and when he smiled, his beautiful hazel eyes crinkled at the corners.

Timothy Graham, however, was a new acquaintance. She hesitated at the door, somewhat overwhelmed by the sight of four Grahams—even if Esther was strictly a Connor—sitting so close together, with Lettie looking happier than ever between her uncle and her male cousin, while Esther was on Ian’s other side.

At the sight of her, the man she assumed to be Timothy rose to his feet. As tall as both Ian and Duncan, he had the most impressive mass of reddish-brown curls, presently escaping from the ribbon he’d used to tie them back.

“Mistress Melville.” He bowed politely.

“Erin. Just Erin.”

He smiled, revealing somewhat uneven teeth. “A pleasure to meet you, Just Erin.” He laughed when she pulled a face. “It seems to me we already know each other, what with my father’s stories.” Erin gave Ian a guarded look. Some stories were best not shared with anyone. His left brow quirked up, his mouth curling into a little smile.

Erin’s shoulders relaxed. “I’m sure they’re somewhat exaggerated,” she said.

“As any good story should be,” Timothy replied. His smile disappeared. “And now we hear your story has taken a turn for the darker.”

“You can say that again.” With a sigh, Erin sat down beside Duncan.

“Well, we’re here now,” Ian said. “I dare say neither Chardon or Nelson are expecting that.”

“But what if they hire men?” Esther asked.

“In Chester?” Duncan shook his head. “They would find that very hard. Unless they brought men with them, they’re on their own.”

Chester might be small, but the docks were bustling with business, and most of that business seemed to be under the auspices of the Graham Trading Company. Some distance from the river, a church tower peeked over the neighbouring roofs, but like in Annapolis, most of the buildings were low—two storeys at most—and painted predominantly in white, even if Antoine could see at least one house in a warm ochre colour and another that was a lovely pink.

“We cannot loiter here,” Nelson grumbled. He’d not been a particularly pleasant man when drunk, and sobriety had, if anything, made him even more dislikeable, him spouting constant vitriol about everything from Melville to the Quakers. “Every one of those men depend on Melville for their living.” He spat to the side.

“So how do we find men here?” Antoine asked.

Nelson tapped his nose. “I already have men here. Three of them. That should be enough—Melville has only himself, his manservant and that hulk of a German.”

“And his tenants,” Felix commented drily.

Nelson waved a hand through the air. “They’re too far away from the main house. And it’s not as if we’ll announce our presence, is it?” He snickered. “By the time they notice us, it will be too late.”

“And you’re certain they have no dogs?” Since childhood, Antoine had a fear of dogs. Beside him, Felix chuckled, making Antoine’s cheeks heat. It was Felix’s fault to begin with, him locking Antoine into the kennels with Papa’s huge hounds.

Nelson shrugged. “None last time I was there. And I’d wager they think they’ve scared me off permanently.”

Nelson’s three men looked exactly like what they were: rogues for hire. Dishevelled and unkempt, they bristled with blades and guns, eyeing both Felix and Antoine with unveiled contempt. “A rapier?” one of them snickered. “And what use is that, hey?”

Seconds later, he was swallowing loudly, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down as Felix’s razor-sharp blade pressed into his skin.

“Only a fool underestimates me,” Felix said quietly, increasing the pressure so a fine line of blood appeared before taking a step back. Meticulously, he cleaned his blade before returning it to its sheath.

Nelson scowled. “No need to injure them! We need them.”

Felix shrugged. “We are paying for their services. Best they learn to show respect.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “So what is your proposed plan of action?”

One of the rogues gave him a long look. “Begging your pardon, but we don’t work with people we don’t know.”

“Wise move.” Felix inclined his head. “I am Felix Arpin.” He fixed Caleb Nelson with a steely gaze. Repeatedly, he’d told the man that he preferred no one knew their real names while expressing to Antoine just how foolish they’d been in giving Nelson their real names in that tavern in Maryland.

To judge from the reaction of the three rogues, Nelson had not shared their true names with them. A relief, Antoine supposed before giving them a curt nod. “Antoine Arpin. And you are?”

“Gus and Dave Walker,” the shortest of the men said. “I’m Gus. And that’s Jim.” He jerked his thumb at the man who was

rubbing at his bloodied neck. Gus cleared his throat. "Payment in advance."

Nelson snorted. "You think us fools? You get half in advance, the rest after Melville is dead and I have that rascal Tim back."

"And the spoils?" Jim asked.

"Spoils?" Antoine asked.

Jim leered. "There's a pretty girl living with the Melvilles, and they've got two young 'uns. They'd sell for a fortune, what with them looking almost white."

Antoine's mouth filled with bile. "No," he said firmly. "Our business is with Duncan Melville. That's all."

"And his wife," Felix corrected.

Antoine wheeled on him. "We will not harm a woman!" he said in French. "Never."

"And you aim to stop me, little brother?"

Antoine stepped right up to him. "If I have to, I will."

For the first time in his life, Antoine saw something akin to respect in Felix's eyes. Their gazes met and held. Antoine fisted his hands to stop himself from wiping sweaty palms down his breeches and stiffened his spine. He would not back down. Not on this.

At long last, Felix chuckled. "Perhaps there is a real Chardon in you, little brother," he said softly before reverting to English. "You heard my brother: no spoils."

"That's not right," Dave whined. He was the tallest of the three and had somewhere along the line lost a finger. "We need them spoils."

"No spoils." Felix clapped his hat on his head. "We're not brigands or pirates. This, *messieurs*, is a matter of honour."

It was evening when they assembled on a small jetty just north of Chester. They were all dressed in dark clothes, and even

Felix had abandoned his customary finery for a simple linen coat in brown he'd purchased in one of Chester's few shops.

The skiff Nelson had procured was small. It also listed heavily to starboard, which made it difficult to row. But with Dave and Gus manning the oars, they made adequate progress, Jim counting off the jetties they passed.

"Twenty-five," he said after a couple of hours. "It's the next one." Night had descended quickly, and the shoreline was but a dark smudge against a sky retaining some light to the west. The waters of the river looked dark and unwelcoming, and the closer they got to the shore, the more nervous Antoine became.

"Through that?" he whispered to Felix as the prow of the skiff began nosing through stands of reeds. Insects hummed and sang around them, and Antoine was overcome with images of snakes—vicious, venomous snakes. Except that at present, the truly vicious elements here were them, the men sitting in the little vessel now being forced through the snapping, protesting reeds. He swallowed, attempting to lubricate a throat gone dry. He leaned towards his brother.

"You promised," he said in French. "We do not touch the women."

Felix sighed. "Too tenderhearted. What do you care about the fates of some unknown women?"

"It is a matter of honour," Antoine said, throwing back Felix's own words. "And men of honour do not lower themselves to harming the weak."

Felix laughed. "You have a lot to learn about women, little brother. Very, very rarely are they weak." He leaned closer. "Which is why they must be taught that their husband is the stronger."

And then the skiff ran aground and they clambered out, one by one, to stand on a bank of wet gravel.

The plan was simple. The three brigands were to circle their way up to the main yard while Felix, Nelson and Antoine would approach the main house directly from the river. A two-

pronged attack, Nelson called it, and Felix had nodded and said it would likely work—as long as the three hired men managed their circuitous route without drawing any attention.

They waited until it was fully dark. Jim produced a lantern, struck steel to flint to light it and then they were off, Gus giving them a final wave before the three men disappeared into the shadows.

“Come on,” Nelson said. “Time to move.”

“*Oui.*” Felix moved closer to him. “But unfortunately, you will not be moving with us.”

“Felix!” Antoine gasped, staring down at the convulsing, gurgling man. “What have you done?”

“Done?” Felix shrugged. “I am merely correcting a previous mistake.” He prodded at Nelson, who had now gone still. “He knew our real names,” Felix explained, crouching to wipe off his dagger on the dead man.

“You murdered him!” Antoine backed away from him.

“And who will know that?” Felix demanded. “By the time he is discovered, we will be long gone.” He lit a lantern and leapt up the steep bank. “Come on. No time to waste.” He turned to grin at Antoine. “The sooner we do this, the sooner you can go back to your boring little life.” He raised the lantern, looming over Antoine like a veritable gargoyle.

Reluctantly, Antoine followed his brother, careful to maintain a distance. He considered refusing, but one look at Felix’s determined face, at the dagger he was holding so firmly in his hand had him concluding that would be a foolish thing to do.

No, no, he told himself, *Felix would never kill me, I’m his brother!* Except he wasn’t entirely sure he believed that. As long as Felix fulfilled Papa’s mission, it would not matter if he returned without Antoine. As long as the beloved eldest son returned, Armand Joseph Chardon would be content.

Lost in these dark musings, Antoine did not look where he was going. With an “Ouff!” he crashed into Felix, who’d

frozen halfway through what Antoine presumed to be the orchard Nelson had told them about.

“What?” Antoine asked in a whisper.

“Listen,” Felix said.

“Dear God,” Antoine croaked. “Dogs! Big dogs!”

Shots rang out. A loud keening, another shot.

“*Merde*,” Felix said. “It seems we’ve lost the element of surprise.”

“Who goes there?” someone roared.

The dogs. The baying was louder now, and Antoine fled. The river, he had to get to the river! Beside him, Felix was also running, and from behind came the sound of those damned dogs, but also of people, armed people—because Felix yelled, almost tumbling to the ground. Antoine heaved him up. “Where?” he gasped.

“Arm.” Felix cursed, clutching his wounded arm. He’d dropped the lantern, but even in the weak light, Antoine could see the blood staining his brother’s fingers.

The dogs had gone silent. Not, in Antoine’s experience, a good thing. Hunting creatures always went silent as they closed in on their prey. He increased his pace, dragging Felix along as well as he could. Another shot, and this time it was Antoine who yelled, a searing pain in his shoulder.

Snapping branches, the sound of heavy breathing and there was one huge dog—a hellhound, no less. Antoine whimpered.

“Two!” he said. “Felix, there are two!” He pointed his pistol, his entire arm shaking, and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. After all, he’d chosen not to load it.

“Shoot it, Felix, shoot!” He turned to his brother, only to find he wasn’t there, he was loping away from them.

“Felix!” Antoine screamed. “Don’t leave me, don’t—” He screamed when one of the dogs brought him down, jaws clamped round his thigh. “Felix!” he wailed, but his brother just kept on running.

“Stop!” he shrieked. “Stop, stop, stop!” He punched at the hairy beast standing over him, he kicked and screamed, and those huge teeth came closer and closer to his face. He did not want to die like this, savaged to death by a dog.

“Here!” someone commanded, and miraculously the dogs backed off. Antoine took a deep breath. He tried to sit up, his brain scrambling for something to say to the two men staring at him. One was old—much older than Papa—the other had to be Duncan Melville, dark hair pulled back from a face dominated by dark brows and a chiselled nose.

“Is he dead?” a young voice asked, and peeking from behind Melville was a young girl, the light of the lantern the older man was carrying illuminating fair hair falling unbound round her face. Like a halo of sorts, Antoine thought fuzzily, staring at this angel cradling a musket. His leg was throbbing madly, and there was a warm, sticky sensation down his left arm.

“Not yet,” Melville said, busy reloading his musket.

Antoine squished his eyes together, attempting to mumble a prayer. This was where his short life would end, this was ... He swayed and fell back to the ground.

“He’s hurt!” another female voice said.

“Aye. Unfortunately, he isn’t dead.”

“Duncan!” the new speaker exclaimed. And somewhere there, Antoine realised he wouldn’t be shot dead—at least not yet. He shuddered and collapsed, his last coherent thought being of Felix.

“Curse you,” he mumbled. “Curse ...” His head fell to the side. *Dieu*, but his leg hurt!

“Dog bites are dangerous things.” Hetty Wilson pursed her lips and studied the badly torn and bruised thigh. Its owner lay in a deep faint. Erin suspected he’d gone into some sort of shock, and even if she should hate the bastard—he’d come here with the intent of hurting them, killing them, even—the young man breathing so shallowly inspired more compassion than rage.

He could be at most some years over twenty, long dark lashes shading cheeks that were a tad too round. There was a softness to him, as if the boy he’d once been had not quite been erased by the man he was destined to become. This impression was reinforced by his pallor, by how his light brown hair clung to his sweaty forehead.

“To clean it, we’ll have to cut,” Hetty went on.

“Aye,” Lettie said. “I told you, did I not?” she added, directing herself to Erin.

“How do we do that?” Erin ignored her and studied the mangled leg.

Half an hour later, all she wanted to do was throw up. And the poor man had howled in pain, sat up straight and screamed for Maman before Lettie had somehow managed to manhandle him flat, lying across him to keep him still.

Hetty studied her handiwork with evident pride. Where before it had all been jagged edges and deep puncture wounds, now it was all a neatly sewn package—with substantial chunks of flesh missing. Erin glanced at the bowl and swallowed repeatedly.

“It had to be done,” Hetty said, gesturing for Lettie to apply the mash of yarrow and beebalm. “If not, he’d have died of rot.”

“Now he gets to live with a big hole in his thigh.”

“At least he lives,” Hetty said.

“For now,” came Duncan’s voice. He came over and frowned down at their patient. “I still don’t understand why we would expend such efforts on a man who is destined to hang.”

“You do not know his story,” Esther protested. “You have no notion why he was here—maybe he was forced to come here.” She gently washed the pale face with a damp towel.

“She’s right,” Erin said. “He deserves to be heard, Duncan.”

“Pah!” He scowled at her and stalked out of the room. Erin hurried after him, leaving their unwanted guest in the capable hands of the other women. Esther would likely remain glued to his bedside—she’d been reluctant to leave him since he was first brought in.

“No sign of him in Chester?” she asked.

“None.” He paced up and down his office. “Damn it! The man’s wounded, but somehow he’s gone up in thin air!”

The queasiness returned. “You don’t think ...” No, she couldn’t quite finish that sentence. And no one in their right mind would voluntarily subject themselves to falling through time. But if you were desperate enough ... She licked her lips. “Do you think he has the locket?”

Duncan shrugged. “I do not know, but I hold it likely. That locket is a powerful weapon.”

“Yeah,” she said weakly.

He pulled her close, planting a kiss on her head. “Even if he has it, I doubt he’s used it to disappear.” He grimaced. “Nay, I find it more likely he somehow slipped aboard a ship.”

She nodded, resting her ear against the reassuring sound of his heartbeat. “And the others?”

“Dead,” he said flatly.

One had been shot dead during the attack. The others had been hauled off to Chester, there to be dealt with by the long hand of the law. It seemed David Lloyd had acted with haste this time.

The door flung open. “I am sorry to say our fugitive did not die of his wound,” Timothy spat out, followed by a much calmer Ian.

“How do you know?” Duncan asked.

“We found the inn at which they’d taken up lodgings,” Ian explained. “Someone had been there, raking together belongings in haste.”

“How do you know it was Felix?” Erin asked.

“Because of the blood,” Timothy said. “He’d washed and bandaged his wound, leaving a bloodied shirt and coat behind.” He took a turn round the room. “Damnation!”

“Well, he’s gone for now,” Erin tried. As was Caleb Nelson, who’d been found by the skiff, his throat sliced open. She gave Duncan a tired look. Unfortunately, unlike Nelson, Felix would likely return.

“Have we any notion who our guest is?” Timothy asked, perching on Duncan’s desk.

“Well, he is French, that we know.” Duncan produced a bottle of whisky and poured them all a measure.

Erin sipped, relishing the resulting burn.

“I’d wager he’s the man mentioned by David,” Duncan continued. “Antoine Arpin.”

“Hmm,” Erin said, recalling just how he’d shrieked for Felix. “He’s probably family.”

Duncan scowled. “Which is why it would be better if he died!”

“No,” Erin said firmly. “Everyone deserves a second chance, an opportunity to explain themselves.”

Ian gave her an astounded look. “Even a man intent on slaying your husband?”

“Intent?” Erin shook her head. “Seriously? None of his pistols were loaded.” She held up a hand when Duncan seemed on the verge of interrupting. “We need to know just what Felix is after. The only one who can tell us that is him.”

He woke to pain and fear—and a bladder about to burst. Antoine groaned and tried to sit, gasping when his movement jarred his leg.

“Don’t move!” A young woman came hurrying over, and he sank back down, blinking at the apparition. It was her, the girl he’d seen as the dog mauled his leg. Except that now her hair was collected in a thick braid. Pity, he had liked how it shimmered in shades of gold and silver as it hung loose round her shoulders. He swallowed.

“I must,” he managed to say. “I ...” Dear God, how was he to explain to this angel that he needed to piss?

She blushed, a delicious pink blush tingeing her fair skin. “Wait here!” she blurted and darted off.

Wait? He laughed bitterly. What else could he do? He lifted the sheet with his good arm and stared down at the bandage decorating his thigh. He shuddered and sank back down. Here he was, alone and injured, abandoned by his brother. He swallowed a couple of times to rid his throat of a clogging sensation. How could Felix do so? Whatever else he may have thought of his brother, he’d never have pegged him as craven enough to flee, leaving his brother to face their purported enemies alone.

The door creaked open, interrupting his ruminations. He almost squeaked, pressing himself further down into the mattress as a huge giant of a man approached. He held his breath as the bedding was pulled off him, closed his eyes when the huge man leaned closer, his breath warm on Antoine’s face. “You need to piss?” the man said, and Antoine opened

his eyes, his gaze dropping to the object the man had placed between his legs.

No sooner had the man left with the chamber pot than the angel came back. She smiled shyly and busied herself adjusting Antoine's sheets before asking if he wanted something to drink.

He was surprisingly thirsty, gulping down the entire content in the mug. She frowned, setting a cool hand to his brow. Her frown deepened.

"What?" he croaked.

"You have a fever," she said.

Antoine almost laughed. At least he still had a leg!

She handed him yet another mug. This time, the liquid tasted bitter, but at her insistence he swallowed it all down. She placed a cool rag on his forehead and settled herself on a stool. "I am Esther. What is your name?" she asked.

"Antoine," he mumbled. "Antoine Chardon, *à votre service, mademoiselle.*" He shouldn't have told her his name, he reflected vaguely. No, he should not tell her his name because Felix would slit his throat if he did.

Next he woke, the man he thought was Duncan Melville was seated beside him. Intense blue eyes bored into him, and Antoine propped himself up on his elbows.

"What were you going to do us?" the man demanded.

"You," Antoine corrected. "Do to you." He licked his lips. "Assuming you are Monsieur Melville."

"I am. And you, as I understand it, are that viper Chardon's son."

Antoine considered protesting and saying he was Antoine Arpin. But then he recalled the fair-haired angel asking for his name and slumped against the headboard.

"*Oui. Malheureusement*, it is not something I can refute." Antoine turned his head away. "I never asked to be his son,"

he muttered.

“But you’re enough of his son to travel across the seas with evil intentions,” Melville said, scorn dripping from every word.

“You tried to burn my father alive!” Antoine exclaimed.

“Is that what he says?” Melville laughed. “And did he perhaps tell you how the whole situation came about? Did he tell you he abducted my wife, planned to kill us both but miscalculated? No,” Melville said, resting back against the wall, “I can see he did not.”

Antoine managed to sit up, uncomfortable with lying flat on his back with this angry man in the room. “I did not know that,” he said. “And I made Felix promise he would not hurt your wife or children.” He dropped his gaze to his hands. “Not that I know if he’d hold to such a vow. Not now.”

“If he’s anything like your father, likely not.” Melville gave him a piercing look. “Have you never wondered at how frequently those who displease your father just vanish?”

Antoine swallowed and swallowed. “Not until recently,” he whispered. “I was not involved in his business.”

“How old are you?” Melville asked.

“Twenty-one.” Antoine shrugged. “I was the disappointing younger son, left at home with Maman while Felix went everywhere with our father.”

Melville studied him in silence. “Tell me,” he began just as the door swung open. He paused, waiting for the woman who entered to join them. “My wife,” he said curtly.

“*Enchanté,*” Antoine murmured.

“I’m not entirely sure that is mutual,” the woman replied.

Antoine just nodded, peeking at her from under his lowered lashes. Yes, she was a *metisse*, but more than that, she was an astoundingly beautiful woman, the kind of woman the richer men in Paris would have fought over, hoping to parade round town with this delectable creature on their arm. Not that he thought she would ever have agreed to such a liaison.

Madame Melville did not strike him as the kind of woman who went from one lover to the other, hoping to feather her nest sufficiently along the way to survive once her looks had faded.

“You knew Jacqueline,” he blurted, and both Melville and Madame Melville gave him surprised looks.

“What of it?” Melville said, and from how he was looking at his wife, he had no desire to discuss his *amours* with Jacqueline. Antoine slid Melville a hasty glance: from what Felix had told him, Melville had met Jacqueline years ago while in Paris and indulged in a passionate affair, but that was before he’d wed the beautiful Madame Melville, all dark golden skin and matching hair.

“She never came back,” Antoine said. “She left with Papa for Scotland and never returned.” Busnel had told him that, shaking his head as he wondered what had befallen Monsieur Chardon’s lovely *maitresse*.

“No,” Melville said. “She didn’t. Your father cut her throat and left her to bleed out all over the bed he had just loved her in.”

Antoine groaned. “Is that what he does? He kills those who displease him?”

“I imagine he does—at times. But ...” Melville shared a look with his wife.

“Have you ever seen him wearing a locket?” Madame Melville interrupted.

Antoine’s entire skin prickled. “*Oui.*” He cleared his throat. “Why do you ask?”

“Is your brother wearing it now?” Melville asked, and when he nodded, Madame Melville staggered, groaning out a broken “No.” Her husband steadied her, and to Antoine’s shock, he settled on the single chair with her on his lap, strong arms holding her close. Never had he seen such an open display of affection between man and woman before. Clearly, the locket scared them. Antoine managed a discreet sign of the cross. It scared him as well.

“It’s not here right now,” Melville murmured, rocking his wife gently. “And I swear if Felix Chardon shows his face, I’ll shoot him before he can make use of it.”

“You know of this locket?” Antoine asked.

Madame Melville flashed him a green look. “You, apparently, don’t.”

“*Non.*” He grimaced. “Some secrets were best kept between Papa and his heir.”

“It is an evil thing,” Duncan said. “As is the man wielding it.”

“Felix isn’t evil,” Antoine protested. Felix was a son driven to please his father in all things. “And I have never seen him do anything with the locket beyond touching it.” He frowned. What could one possibly do with a locket? “Besides,” he added, “he rid you of one enemy, did he not?”

“You mean Nelson?” Melville shrugged. “He was no real threat to me and mine.”

“No?” Antoine managed a hoarse laugh. “I’d say he was more than determined to make you—and especially your wife—pay for perceived wrongs.” Madame Melville ducked her head, thick lashes hiding those intense green eyes from view. “He won’t now,” he added hastily, concerned he might have caused her additional discomfort.

“Too right.” She raised her head, meeting his gaze with one that blazed with determination. “And neither will your brother.”

“Mark my words, my brother will be back,” Antoine said with a deep sigh. “Fear of failure is a potent thing.”

“We should turn him over to the authorities,” Duncan said. “He’d hang.” But he didn’t sound entirely convinced.

“He’s too young to die,” Erin said. “Besides, he seems incapable of really hurting someone.” He hadn’t even been carrying powder for his pistols.

Duncan snorted. “Believe you me, if cornered, Antoine Chardon would be fully capable of maiming—even killing.” He sighed. “But I agree with you: it seems to me he had been dragged along on this venture whether he wanted to or not.”

“Yeah.” Erin chewed her lip. “The question, of course, is why.”

Ian looked up from his pipe. “Why? I dare say Felix—or his father—thought he could be useful, if nothing else as a convenient scapegoat.” He used a taper to light the pipe and sat back, sucking hard.

“That fits.” Duncan frowned. “Well, Antoine is not who we need to worry about. It is that damned Felix.”

“Aye.” Ian puffed on his pipe. “He is likely travelling under another name than his own.”

“They’ve been doing that all the time,” Erin said. They had found Antoine’s documents tucked inside his shirt, presenting him as a French wine merchant.

Ian nodded. “A new alibi, then. One that not even his brother knows.”

“We’ll have to forewarn the authorities,” Duncan said, pacing the room.

“Stop.” Timothy handed Duncan a glass. “Sit down, man. I cannot abide your pacing, and it makes it nigh on impossible to hear what you’re saying.”

“Apologies,” Duncan muttered. “I said, we should forewarn the authorities.”

“Aye. Tell them we fear the French have sent out spies,” Timothy suggested. “After all, no matter what he calls himself, that Chardon bastard cannot disguise his accent, no matter how excellent his command of English.”

“Antoine is almost fluent,” Erin said.

“Aye. A well-educated young man, our unwelcome guest,” Duncan said with a grimace.

“Mmm,” Erin said, thinking that mostly Antoine reminded her of Tim, somehow as vulnerable and alone—no matter how well-educated.

Someone had set him on fire. All of him burned, and there was a firebrand lodged in his leg, a constant pain that had him twisting and begging for mercy. Occasionally, the fogs of heated nightmares lifted, and he was aware of a bed underneath him rather than a pyre, of a cool hand on his brow. But then the fires returned, and Antoine shook and shivered in between feeling his skin shrivel in the heat.

A moment of lucidity and the fair-haired angel offered him a smile before placing a cool cloth on his forehead.

“Je ne veux pas mourir,” he mumbled. He did not want die like this, struck down by a fever among strangers! *Dear Mother, see to me,* he prayed, *je vous salue, Marie pleine de grâce.* He couldn't quite remember what came next. It made him want to laugh. Maman would be so disappointed in him!

Beside him, his personal angel was praying, and to his surprise, she was holding a rosary—an old, very worn rosary. He licked his lips, wanting to ask where she had found it and why she was using it.

She raised her face and looked straight at him, blue eyes shiny with tears. “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee,” she said, and he was astounded at hearing her recite the Ave Maria in English. He reclined against the pillow, feeling how his sweat-dampened shirt clung to his skin. The fever returned, and he was dragged back under, his last conscious thought being that Esther had a voice as beautiful as her countenance.

Whoever had painted the room yellow had made an inspired choice. With the early morning sun spilling in through the small window, it was as if the room were bathed in golden light. Antoine blinked and did a careful stretch, relieved to discover his limbs responded as they should. He threw a quick glance at the woman sleeping in the chair beside him. Not, unfortunately, his angel. This woman had to be at least a decade or so older than him. The sunlight revealed the odd dash of grey in the mass of dark hair, and life had etched its marks on her face, two deep furrows bracketing what was otherwise a pretty mouth. It gave her the expression of a disgruntled frog—or of a woman who found little joy in her life.

He lifted the coverlet and studied his leg. The bandage looked clean, and someone had changed his shirt as well, making him blush as he wondered if maybe it was Esther who had helped with that particular task. Esther—he frowned at the vague recollection of her holding a rosary. Surely, that had to be a figment of his feverish dreams, even if he knew there were good Catholics living among the Anglican English.

“Awake, are you?”

He jolted at the voice, dropping the coverlet.

The woman had straightened out of her sleeping pose, hands busy ordering her hair. She had the same amazingly vivid blue eyes as did Esther and Mr Melville, fringed by lashes as dark as her hair.

“Hungry?” she asked.

“*Oui*. I mean yes,” Antoine replied, and his stomach growled in agreement. He looked at the window. “How many days have I been here?”

“Eight,” the woman said. “Your fever returned with a vengeance some days ago, so we had to open and clean the bite again.”

“Ah.” He could not remember any of it. “Was it bad?”

“Infected.” She studied him intently. “What sort of fool takes part in a raiding party with unloaded pistols?”

He shrugged. “One that does not want to kill.”

“And what would you have done if we’d shot your brother because you couldn’t defend him?”

Antoine squirmed. “Wept for him, I suppose.”

She snorted. “As if that would have helped him.”

“Well, it is a theoretical question, *non*? He is not here, but I am—because he fled and left me behind.”

“Maybe he thought you’d be able to fight your way free.”

It was his turn to snort. “If there is one thing Felix knows, it is how inept I am at fighting.”

She gave him a long look before nodding repeatedly. “Uncle Ian is likely right,” she said. “You’re the scapegoat.”

He turned his face away and blinked furiously. He had come to that conclusion himself several nights ago. “He doesn’t care much for me.”

“Who? Your brother?”

“My father.” He laughed softly. “I am too soft, he says. Too like Maman.”

She gave him a serious look. “This world does not treat the soft ones kindly,” she said, before exiting the room. “I’ll send Esther up with some food,” she called over her shoulder.

Esther entered carrying a laden tray. Not that he truly noted the food, his gaze stuck on her face. Beautiful skin, at present a delicious pink, as if the weight of his gaze caused her to blush. Mayhap it did, and for some reason that notion pleased him. He continued his perusal: elegant brows over a straight nose, those blue, blue eyes half-hidden behind fair lashes and a mouth that was made for kissing, soft and inviting. He cleared his throat.

“You have been tending to me,” he said.

“I have.” She set down the tray and placed a cool hand on his forehead. “No fever.”

“No.” He frowned. “I thought ...”

“Yes?”

“Umm... well, it may have been the fever, but I have this recollection of seeing you with a rosary.”

His angel smiled, fished into a slit in the side of her skirts and produced the collection of beads.

“You’re Catholic?”

“I am. To Grandda’s great chagrin.”

“He is displeased?”

“Not anymore. He’s dead. But aye, he was most unhappy when my mother converted.”

“Oh.”

“It happened after Duncan was born,” she continued. “She never quite recovered from the events that led to his conception.” She sighed. “I dare say she has yet to forgive him for that, despite none of it being his fault.”

Antoine felt a twinge of pity for Melville. He too knew what it was like to lack the affection of a parent. Esther poured him some tea and settled herself on the chair recently vacated by the other woman. “It was Father Carlos who helped my mother through the darkest times,” Esther said. “And when she met my father ...” Her mouth curved into a smile. “Well, he was a papist, and she happily converted to wed him.”

“There was a priest at hand?” He smiled. “I thought your family lived in the wilderness; that is what that Farrell said.”

Her face closed over. “You’ve met Nicholas Farrell?”

“Unfortunately.” He shook his head. “I did not find him particularly likeable.”

“He isn’t. The veritable black sheep of his family, he is. A bully who happily uses his fists to cow those weaker.”

“Like his wife.”

She nodded, glancing at him while gnawing at her lip.

“He had company,” he added. “A Mr Ellis.”

“What?” She flew to her feet. “Are they here too?”

“No.” He grinned. “Last I heard, they were off to the Graham homestead, there to retrieve Mr Ellis’ absconded wife.” He sipped at his tea, wishing it was coffee instead. But such luxuries were likely not to be expected in the backwaters that were the English colonies. “Lettie, isn’t it? Not that she told me her name,” he added, and from how she startled, he concluded it was Mrs Ellis who had been in the room when he woke.

“He can’t find her,” she said. “He’s a brute, a beast!”

“Well, at present, he is not here,” Antoine said. “And should he make an appearance, I am sure Mr Melville can handle it.”

She puffed up. “My brother can handle anything.”

Oui. Even, it would seem, Monsieur Armand Joseph Chardon. He shivered at the thought of how incensed his father would be should they return to France without exacting revenge.

“What is it?” That cool hand again, now cupping his cheek. He met her gaze, drowning in that sea of blue. He shoved away thoughts of his persistent father, of his determined brother, and leaned into her touch.

“Nothing,” he said. “A moment of weakness, no more.”

“You are spending too much time in that small room,” Erin chided, taking hold of Esther. “It’s days since you’ve been outside.”

Esther ducked her head. “I do not mind. Antoine has need of me.”

“Antoine won’t be staying,” Erin warned.

“No? And where would he go?” Esther’s eyes flashed. “I dare say he will not be welcomed with a fatted calf—unless he

returns with proof of your demise.”

“Esther!” Erin took a step back.

Her young sister-in-law rolled her eyes. “Of course I do not want you dead! But neither does he. That poor man is in an impossible position because, to hear it, his father is determined to have his revenge.”

“Very much in keeping with his general character,” Erin muttered. She cleared her throat. “Just be careful, okay?”

“Careful?” Esther ducked her head, but Erin still caught the way her mouth softened into a smile. “Of what, precisely?”

“Love, honey.” Erin patted her arm. “It’s not always a walk in the park, you know.”

“I like him,” Esther said. “What is wrong with that?” With a quick smile, she darted off, taking the treads two at a time.

Like? Erin shook her head. For the first time ever, Esther was in love. How unfortunate the object of those warm feelings was a man who potentially was their enemy.

She said as much to Ian a while later, sitting beside him on one of the benches in the orchard. The trees were heavy with ripening fruit; the long grass was already acquiring that dry yellowish tone that indicated summer was coming to an end. Not yet, though, because the day was agreeably warm, the sky as cloud-free as it had been for days.

“Headstrong,” Ian said, sucking on his pipe. “Like her mother and grandmother. Mark my words, if Esther has her heart set on that Frenchie, then nothing will dissuade her. Nothing.”

“Sarah will kill us if she marries a foreigner,” Erin said.

“Well, at least he’s a papist,” Ian replied with a shrug. “And besides, Sarah risked Da’s anger when she rode off with Michael.” He shook his head, staring straight in front of him. “Devastated, he was. Not only had his lass wed without his permission ...” He stopped to wink at Erin. “Aye, I know: in your time, women do not need permission to follow their hearts, but here they do.” He laughed. “Not that my daughters

asked me before they lost their hearts to the men they then wed.” He sucked some more at his pipe, blowing a couple of smoke rings. “Da never forgave himself for what happened to Sarah,” he said in a low voice. “And to then have her embrace the papist church and wed a man who was not only a papist but also kin to the men who’d hounded us for years—it was akin to having a dagger sunk into his liver. Excruciatingly painful, albeit not lethal.”

“What? You survive a dagger to your liver?”

“Sometimes,” he said drily. “Was that all you took away from what I said?”

“No.” She leaned back against the bench. “Antoine doesn’t worry me, but Felix ...” And next time, he’d come prepared, with more men.

“He’ll have a hard time hiring men to help him,” Ian said. “Every soul in Chester—and Philadelphia, once Jasper has made his rounds—knows there is an evil French spy afoot.” He patted her knee, his big gnarled hand a comforting weight. “It’s the locket that seems to concern you the most.”

“Yeah.” She fretted at the tear in her apron. “If he opens it ...” She shook her head.

“How does he avoid being sucked in himself?”

Erin had to give him an admiring look. Here they were, discussing impossibilities like magic lockets that could throw you back and forth through time, and he sounded as calm as if he were discussing the weather. But to judge from how hard he was gripping his pipe, it was costing him to sound so casual.

“I don’t know. Maybe it has to do with how he holds it?” She’d spent a lot of time considering that because it was evident Chardon Sr had used the locket repeatedly on others.

“If I were him, I’d be fearful of using it,” Ian said.

“But that won’t stop him, I think. As long as he has the locket, he can always return to where he was.”

“How close do you have to be to be ... err ... affected?” Ian asked.

“No idea. Not too far away, I think.” She frowned. “Maybe holding up a mirror would help?” Hope spiralled, only to be crushed: It couldn’t be *that* simple!

They were joined by Duncan striding through the long grass. In breeches and boots, with his shirt open, he looked a gentleman intent on ravishing—well, if it hadn’t been for the presence of his uncle.

He’d not quite reached them when Mrs Andersson appeared in the kitchen door. “Master Melville!” she hollered. “Visitors.”

“Bollocks,” he muttered, making Erin laugh.

“What are you laughing at?” He held out his hand. “If I have visitors, so do you.”

By the time they emerged into their front yard, Duncan had donned a waistcoat and brushed back his hair, and Erin was in a long-sleeved bodice in striped cotton.

In the yard stood a woman, accompanied by three men standing a step or two behind her.

“Finally!” the woman said, her mouth curling into a little sneer. “Is it your custom to keep visitors waiting?”

“We were not expecting you,” Duncan said, crossing his arms over his chest.

The woman looked him over before directing her attention to Erin. Her brows rose high. “So it is true.”

“What is true?” Duncan growled.

“That your wife is ... exotic.”

Erin threw back her head and laughed. “Exotic? Wow, makes me sound as if I’m from Africa or something.”

“Well, part of you most certainly is,” the woman retorted, taking a hasty step back when Duncan advanced on her. She held up a hand. “I apologise, I meant no affront.”

Except of course she did, those sharp eyes looking at Erin as if she were something the dog dragged in.

“Who are you, and why are you here?” Erin asked.

The woman sniffed, muttering something about a lack of common courtesy, but yet another warning sound from

Duncan had her managing a slight inclination of her head. “Mrs Diana Colton, at your service.” She arched her brows. “But I would prefer to discuss my business in private.”

Erin shared a quick look with Duncan. She didn’t like this woman, and there was something about her closely set eyes and heavy brows that niggled at her brain.

“Of course,” Duncan said.

Mrs Colton gave him a brief smile before saying something in an undertone to the man standing closest to her.

Duncan directed Mrs Colton to his office but did not invite her to sit, retreating to stand on his side of the desk with Erin. “Well?” he demanded.

Mrs Colton sighed profoundly. “I am the sister of Caleb Nelson, and I am here to understand how he died—and by whose hand.” She looked directly at Duncan. “I have reason to believe there was little love lost between you and my brother, sir. I am therefore inclined to believe you may have had something to do with his death.”

“Are you accusing me of murder?” Duncan said mildly.

Mrs Colton stiffened. “I have the right to know!”

“Know what? That your brother was a would-be thief and a bully? That he was an arsonist? That—” Erin fell silent when Duncan squeezed her hand.

“Calumny!” Mrs Colton exclaimed.

“Oh, I fear not,” Duncan said calmly. “And let us not forget he shot your father dead.”

“A mistake!” Mrs Colton said. “He never intended to kill him, he—”

“Was aiming at my niece,” Ian said coldly from behind Mrs Colton. The lady whirled. Ian inclined his head, hazel eyes narrowed into shards of golden green. “But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

“What? Of course not! And neither, sir, do you—unless you were there.”

“Are you saying my wife is a liar?” Duncan asked.

Mrs Colton flushed. “I do not know your wife. But my brother—”

“Was the scum of the earth,” Ian filled in. “The world without him is likely a better place.”

“How dare you!” Mrs Colton exclaimed. “He was my brother—my brother!—and here you stand, side by side with the man who may well have killed him and tell me he deserved to die?”

“He did.” Erin shook free of Duncan’s hold and advanced on Mrs Colton. “And one more insinuation that my husband was somehow involved in his death and I’ll wash your mouth out with soap.”

“You ... you ...” Mrs Colton’s face turned an alarming deep red. “This is all your fault! He told me, he did, how it was you who started it all by interfering when our dear departed father was merely disciplining that lout Tim.”

“Thereby stopping him from killing him.”

“Oh, my father would never kill Tim,” Mrs Colton said.

“No, we gathered,” Duncan said. “Which in itself is right interesting, isn’t it?”

“Aye,” Ian said. “As is the question of why you are here. After all, you already know how your brother died and why: his companions found him to be neither an asset or trustworthy, and so ...” He mimed dragging a finger over his throat.

“Sir! Have some mercy, he was my brother!” Mrs Colton said, pressing a hand to her chest.

“Hmm. You do not strike me as overcome with grief,” Ian said, gesturing at her yellow outfit. Mrs Colton went beet-red. “In fact, I’d wager the only reason you’re here is because—”

He was interrupted by a howl, followed by a woman screaming.

“That’s Esther!” Erin said.

Duncan shoved Mrs Colton aside and rushed for the door, Erin at his heels.

Antoine had at last succeeded in convincing Esther he would survive some time outdoors. Together, they had navigated the narrow backstairs, making for the kitchen door, and once outside, she had dragged him towards the little herbal garden, stating it was a nice and secluded place, what with the large box hedges that bordered it. He was limping badly by the time they sank down on the single bench.

“You need a crutch,” Esther said.

“I do not!” He flexed his leg a couple of times. “It is just sore.”

“If not a crutch, then a cane.” She was already on her feet. “Stay here.”

Not a hardship, not in such a pleasantly scented environment. Someone was investing a lot of labour on maintaining the neatly laid out garden—so formal it reminded him of his grandfather’s pride and joy, the garden he’d inherited from *his* grandfather. Antoine knew nothing of herbs beyond recognising rosemary and lavender. Here he sat surrounded by stands of what he thought might be some sort of mint, while in the background a rambling rose arched gracefully, its white blooms shedding petals on both greenery and gravel.

Esther was back mere minutes later, accompanied by a young boy with hair as fair as hers. At first, he supposed this was a brother, but when she introduced him as Tim, he realised this was the boy Caleb Nelson had been so desperate to get his hands on. From under his lashes, he studied the youngster. There was nothing remarkable about him as far as Antoine could see, and it also seemed as if the poor boy was mute, responding only with nods and gestures when Esther spoke to him.

“Who is he?” he asked once Tim scurried off to fetch something that could serve as a cane, this despite Antoine

protesting loudly that he didn't need one.

“Tim?” Esther shuddered. “He came to us back in January, all covered in welts and bruises. They'd misused him for years, the Nelsons, and for some reason they were determined to get him back. Not that I understand why.”

“Hmm,” Antoine said. “Mayhap they enjoyed having someone to hurt?”

Her eyes widened, her mouth falling open.

“There are all kinds of men in the world,” he said gently. “Some find the greatest pleasure in the cries of pains of another.”

“But why?” Esther asked, and he couldn't resist leaning forward to tweak at a lock of her fair hair.

“I do not know or understand.” And he was not like that. He released her hair and sat back, wondering what it would be like to initiate his angel in the pleasures of the flesh. Shame rose hot and thorny in his gut: she was an innocent, sixteen or so. Not that he was ancient, but still ... And yet, the vivid image of her in his bed, that hair spread like a sheet of gold over the pillows, had his cock twitching with anticipation.

He cleared his throat and broke eye-contact with her. “I am not entirely convinced that is why Caleb Nelson wanted him back, though.”

“Eh?” She licked her lips, a dazed expression on her face.

“Tim.” He frowned. “He was too desperate.”

Esther nodded. “He has a secret,” she said. “But he refuses to tell.”

“Ah.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Tim, who returned brandishing a stout stick. He proudly indicated that he'd sharpened one end, making jabbing movements.

“Thank you,” Antoine said with a smile. “A cane and a weapon in one.”

Tim beamed and nodded.

“Shall we walk?” Antoine suggested, offering Esther a little bow. She giggled and curtsied before skipping off at a pace that was far too fast for him. “Oh, I’m sorry,” she began but then came to an abrupt stop.

“What?” Antoine joined her.

“Visitors,” Esther said, and from Tim came a loud hiss. He took a step back, colour draining so fast from his face Antoine feared he’d faint. He glanced at the woman standing in the front yard. She was wearing a most unbecoming shade of yellow, a shade vaguely reminiscent of bile.

“You know her,” he said to Tim, who swallowed repeatedly.

“Is she a relative of the Nelsons?” Esther asked, and Tim nodded, long arms winding round himself in a protective hug.

“Come,” Antoine said, tugging gently at Esther’s sleeve. “Let us go elsewhere until they leave.”

She looked at him, at Tim, and nodded. “The stables,” she suggested, and Tim brightened.

It was dark inside the stables—and empty, except for the two fine horses standing in separate boxes at one end. “They’re out on the pastures,” Esther said. “All but Tim’s two patients.”

“What is wrong with them?” Antoine asked, studying the huge stallion who glared back at him. Close to seventeen hands, the bay had been curried until all of him shone, the dark mane and tail glossy. But when Antoine looked closer, there was a nasty gash on his croup.

“One of the mares took umbrage,” Esther said.

“Ah. One should always be wary when approaching a female with the intention to court them,” Antoine said.

Esther laughed. “Court? Atlas does not court, he merely imposes himself on the object of his lust.”

“Well, he is a horse, after all. Tsk, tsk,” he said, reaching out to stroke the stallion. “Best mend your ways.”

The door to the stables banged open.

Antoine whirled, wincing at the protesting flare of pain in his leg.

Three men—the ones they'd seen in the yard—entered.

“Well, well, well,” one of them said. “She was right, wasn't she? Find the horses and you'll find the lad, she said.” He took a step towards them.

“What do you want?” Esther demanded, planting her hands on her hips.

“We're not here for you,” one of the other men said. He looked her over. “But we could be, if you want.” He licked his lips, sweeping his dark hair off his brow.

Antoine limped forward, placing himself beside Esther. “How dare you speak to her thus?”

The man snickered. “And who is going to stop me? You?”

“Leave it be,” the first man said. He gestured at Tim, who had pressed himself into a corner. “We're here for him.”

“Then you'll leave empty-handed,” Esther said. “My brother will not have it, that his indenture is carried off.”

The man with the dark hair laughed. “By the time he finds out, we'll be long gone.” He shared a quick look with his companions, and Antoine tensed, his gaze flitting from the cudgel one man was holding to the pistol so casually held by the first man.

“Now!”

At the order, the three men exploded into action. One of them dove for Tim, the bastard with the long hair threw himself at Esther, and the third—fool of a man—attacked Antoine.

A cane was not a rapier, but Antoine had spent many, many hours honing his sword skills, and some of them came in handy. One swift jab had the lout coming to a surprised halt. One determined sweep and the cane struck him full over the ear, sending him staggering backwards.

“Let her go!” Antoine hissed, limping towards the man struggling to hold Esther. “Let her go before I kill you!”

“One more step and I shoot you!” the oaf said, levelling the pistol at him. “Get him!” he yelled, talking to the man behind Antoine. He could hear the cudgel swishing through the air and ducked, sidestepped and turned, putting all his strength behind the swipe. There was a sharp crack when his cane connected with the man’s forearm, and the cudgel went flying.

“Watch out!” Esther yelled. “Antoine, behind you!”

He turned, took a step back and stumbled, landing on his rump. His first aggressor roared and threw himself forward. Antoine lifted his cane, tip upwards. Too late, the man tried to swerve, but he was already midair. There was an odd, squelching sound when the tip penetrated his side. And then the man howled, shrieking in pain as his weight lodged the cane deeper inside him.

“You foreign bastard! You’ve killed our Jerome!” The man holding Esther dropped her and advanced on Antoine, pinned beneath the sobbing, bleeding man. He aimed the pistol at Antoine.

“No!” Esther was on his back, shrieking like a demon from hell. Tim wound himself round his legs and the man fell, screaming invectives as he tried to kick free.

“What in the world is going on here?” Duncan Melville marched into the stables, accompanied by that German giant, Hans.

“They wanted Tim,” Esther said. She moved closer, kneeling down beside Antoine. “He saved us both, Duncan.”

Which, to judge from the scowl on Melville’s face, did not exactly endear Antoine to him.

Much later, they assembled in Duncan’s study. Mrs Colton and her men had been dispatched to Chester, Giles and Hans offering themselves as guards. Antoine’s leg had been

rebandaged, Esther sported a huge bruise on her face, and Tim had yet to stop shivering.

“Damnation!” Duncan dragged a hand over his face, studying his sister, his unwelcome French houseguest and the lad who, indirectly, was the cause of all this. He had already expressed his gratitude to Antoine, albeit in so stilted a fashion Erin had rolled her eyes at him while Esther had scowled, loudly haranguing him for being an ingrate.

“He risked his life for me!” she said, and that had Duncan itching with the desire to throw that damned Antoine out on his ear. Not that he could, not when he owed the man for stopping Mrs Colton’s men from succeeding in their endeavour.

“You throw him out and she will likely go with him,” Erin had told him a few moments earlier as he’d expressed his frustration. “She’s in love with him.”

“What? No! That cannot be!” He’d glared at her. “If anything, that makes it even more important to have him leave.”

“Idiot.” She’d kissed his cheek. “At present, he is a hero. But she is young, Duncan, and at her age love is a fickle thing. In love with one boy one month, with another the next.”

“Oh aye? Was it like that for you?”

“Absolutely. Well, until I met you—but I wasn’t exactly sweet sixteen then, was I?”

He’d laughed, feeling somewhat reassured.

Duncan sat down behind his desk and fixed his gaze on Tim. “This cannot continue to happen, lad. I thought with Caleb dead we’d be spared further attempts by the Nelsons to abduct you, instead ...” He sighed, not liking how the lad shrank together. “You have to tell us why,” he added in a softer voice.

Tim shifted on his seat and gnawed on his lip. The silence lengthened, and Duncan was on the verge of snapping at the fool of a lad that either he told or he had no choice but send him away when Tim finally spoke. “Telling you will not do

much good,” he said. “But I can show you where I hid the treasure.”

Duncan blinked. “You *can* speak!” he said.

“I’m not a dumb beast,” Tim replied, adding a hasty, “master.”

“This treasure you speak of, did you steal it from Hyland Nelson?” Duncan asked.

Tom nodded. “He hurt me. Always. One day, he beat me so hard I couldn’t move for days. One of the maids told me he’d beaten several servants to death, and so I ...”

A few minutes later, they were all staring at Tim.

Once recovered from that first severe beating, he’d managed to steal into Hyland’s office and make off with the strongbox containing not only most of Nelson’s money but also the family jewels. Nelson had quickly realised who the thief was but had just as quickly realised killing Tim would mean he’d never find the box. Not that it had stopped him from beating Tim black and blue whenever he could, but he always stopped before causing permanent damage.

“I told him I’d tell him once I was a free man,” Tim said.

And once Nelson had recovered his precious box, he’d not have hesitated to have Tim’s throat slit, but Duncan chose not to say that out loud. By chance, he met Antoine Chardon’s eyes, and to judge from the grim expression on his face, the Frenchman had reached the same conclusion.

“How many Nelson siblings are there?” Erin asked.

Tim held up five fingers. “The youngest wed a man in Virginia. She—Mrs Colton—is the eldest.”

That left two. Dear Lord in heaven! If they were as determined as Caleb and their older sister, they’d not have a moment of peace. “We need to sort this,” Duncan mumbled.

“Allow me to do it,” Antoine suggested.

“You?”

“*Oui.*” He squirmed. “You will likely prefer to stay at home with your family, at least until ...” He cleared his throat. “Well, until ...”

“Your brother has been dealt with,” Ian filled in.

Antoine’s shoulders sagged. “*Oui,*” he said softly. “Until he has been dealt with.”

“I don’t know,” Duncan prevaricated, but he already knew he would agree to the Frenchman’s suggestion. If nothing else because it would take him away from here, at least for a couple of days, even a week. “We will talk more about this on the morrow,” he said, standing up.

The study emptied except for Erin and Antoine Chardon. The man looked pale, bruised hollows under his eyes.

“Yes?” Duncan said.

“I just wondered, the man who ... err ... impaled himself. Did he die?”

“He was still alive when they left.” Duncan reached over to squeeze Antoine’s shoulder. “And if he dies, it is through his actions, not yours.” He didn’t add that he thought it unlikely the man would live to see the morrow.

“Not much of a comfort.” The younger man wiped his hands over his pristine waistcoat—one of Duncan’s older garments—and grimaced. “So much blood,” he whispered. “So much pain!”

“He brought it on himself,” Erin said.

“*Non.* His mistress did. And you saw, did you not, how she near on spat at him and his companions when she was hoisted up to sit beside them in the cart.”

Aye, Mrs Colton had been bright red with anger—likely just as much at being obliged to sit in the bed of a cart as at their failure. The woman had a mouth on her, shrieking over and over again that she, a lady of quality, should not be treated like that. Until Hans had said something that had her gaping before sitting down with a thud.

“You defended my sister.” Duncan pinched his nose, attempting to relieve the thudding headache. “Had she and Tim been in there alone ...” He shuddered.

“I am glad to be of service,” Antoine said quietly, inclined his head in Erin’s direction and limped off.

“Wow.” Erin sloshed some of Duncan’s precious brandy into one of the two pewter mugs and handed it to him. He sipped and sat down with a groan, drawing her down to perch on his lap.

“Sarah would have killed me had something happened to Esther.”

“But nothing did, thanks to our intrepid French musketeer.”

He laughed at that, familiar with the story of d’Artagnan and his companions, both through his grandmother and his wife.

“I was right,” she said, curling up on his lap. “Tim’s silence was his way of staying alive.”

Duncan snorted. “Fool! The moment he handed over the box to Nelson, they’d have killed him.”

“What a horrible man Hyland Nelson must have been. To beat a child almost to death!”

“Aye. And Tim wasn’t the first one to suffer, was he?” He finished his brandy, and they sat in silence, her head on his shoulder.

“So will you accept Antoine’s offer to sort this?”

“It has merit, starting with the fact that none of the other Nelsons know who he is. Me, on the other hand, they’ve likely heard of.”

“Yeah. Until their ears are close to falling off.” She nibbled gently on his earlobe. “He and Jasper would make a good team.”

He considered that for a while. Jasper would be delighted at being charged with such a mission.

“I will speak to them both tomorrow,” he decided, standing up with her in his arms. “But now a bath, I think. Just you and me.”

It was hard to watch Uncle Ian and Timothy prepare to leave. Lettie had felt safer with them here, as if the mere presence of her male kin would suffice to keep Emrick away. She shuffled on her feet, drowning in a wave of fear. What would happen when—because it was a when—Emrick came riding down the lane to Papegoja Plantation and demanded his wife be returned to him? *Oh God, oh God, oh God!* She fisted her hands in her apron. He would kill her this time. Not here, of course, but once he had her back home in Carolina ... She gulped.

Antoine had told them he'd met Farrell and Emrick in Annapolis—well, he'd told Esther, who'd shared this with the rest of them. “But last he heard, they were off to Graham’s Garden to search for you there,” Esther had said.

Uncle Ian had chuckled. “And a merry dance Mark will lead them on.”

“But they don’t know I left him,” Lettie had protested.

“They do.” Esther had squirmed. “I sent word to my mother the moment you showed up here.” She’d taken Lettie’s hand. “I’ll wager they’ll take turns pretending to be you, flitting off into the woods when that toad Farrell and that vile Emrick demand to see you.”

“He’ll fetch the militia,” Lettie had groaned. “He’ll demand they turn me over.”

“Without being able to prove you are actually there?” Ian had shaken his head. “It will be nigh on impossible to convince the militia to ride for three days on hearsay alone.”

Well, that was a relief of sorts, and for some weeks the constant gnawing in Lettie's belly had quieted, very much due to Uncle Ian's continued presence. But today, he was leaving, and she felt ridiculously abandoned.

She cleared her throat and straightened up, shoving all those dark feelings as far from her as she could. She was Lettie Graham, she reminded herself. Aye, an Amazon, a woman capable of defending herself against anything. Except she wasn't. She shivered, and suddenly there was a reassuring touch on her back. A discreet graze, no more, but she did not need to turn to know who it was that was standing so close to her. Since the time she'd told Hans the full sorry tale, he had become something of a protective shadow.

Timothy was hugged and kissed, she whispering her goodbye in his good ear. And then there was Uncle Ian, and it was like being embraced by Da because they were so alike, her father and uncle, both of them as distinctively tall and broad-shouldered as all Graham men, both of them with hazel eyes under strong brows.

"Best consider your next step," he said when he released her. "It will not work forever, and at some point Emrick Ellis will realise you're not hiding in the woods around Graham's Garden."

Lettie swallowed noisily. Beside her, Hans took a step towards her, his body close enough to warm the shivers off her back. She turned to look at him—look *up* at him because Hans was the first man she'd met who towered so over her. He met her gaze and nodded once.

Uncle Ian looked from one to the other, and then he smiled. "Good," he said. "I see there already is a next step." He held out his hand to Hans, who stared at it for some moments before enclosing it in his own huge paw. "Take care of her," Ian said. "She has always been of the opinion she doesn't need anyone, but I think she has come to realise she is wrong. We all need someone, don't we?"

"*Ja*," Hans said. "We do."

Lettie wasn't quite sure what passed between the two men, but when Ian swung astride his mount, Hans moved that much closer to her. "He comes, he finds you are not alone," he murmured. "Never again are you alone, Lettie Graham."

And she believed him.

Duncan had chosen to accompany his uncle and cousin to Chester. Not only did he have business to handle at the offices of the trading company, but he also wanted to inform himself as to Mrs Colton and her men. He'd asked Erin if she wanted to come along, but she'd waved him off, saying she had important matters to handle at home—more specifically the apple picking.

"I'm thinking cider," Erin told Mrs Andersson as she stood halfway up a ladder to pick the fruit and hand them down to the housekeeper. She was actually thinking one step further because, reasonably, if one had cider, one could make some sort of stronger liquor, and she really wanted to try out the alembic she'd purchased in Chester. Not that Friend Simmonds had been all that thrilled at selling her one, grumbling that distillation was a fine art that only trained apothecaries such as himself should dabble in, but money was always money.

"And pies," she added as she clambered down to move the ladder.

From Mrs Andersson came a snort. "Of course pies! Many pies. And some we preserve."

Erin made a face. She was no fan of apple jam or spiced apples, but Mrs Andersson had a tendency to serve the latter with more or less every meal during winter.

Apple picking was a predominantly female occupation. The wives and daughters of the tenants were out *en masse*, filling basket after basket with ripe fruit. Some of the older girls were carting full baskets over to the shed that held the press, where Lettie and Esther were working as a team, inspecting and washing the fruit before chopping it up and

placing it in the ram press. It took quite some strength to work the press, which was probably why Hans had offered to do it. Or not.

Erin smiled to herself, thinking it was sort of cute to see the big German court Lettie. Okay, court was probably not the right word. Stalk? After all, wherever Lettie was, there was Hans. No, that wasn't right. Hans wasn't stalking her not-so-dear cousin-in-law. He was protecting her, a constant, silent bodyguard. She stifled a giggle and hummed a couple of lines from "I Will Always Love You."

"What was that?" Mrs Andersson said, squinting up at her.

"Nothing."

"You were singing." Mrs Andersson wagged a finger at her. "Likely not something godly." Seeing as Mrs Andersson considered any song that wasn't a psalm ungodly, that left a lot of room.

Sandy and Ellen came rushing over. "Mama!" Ellen exclaimed, pointing at Erin.

"That's me, honey." When Ellen looked about to clamber up the ladder, Erin jumped off. "What's the matter?"

"Look, look!" Ellen tugged at Erin, and with a huge grin, Sandy opened her clasped hands to reveal a frog. A very dead and desiccated frog.

"Eat," Sandy said.

"We don't eat frogs," Erin said.

"Townie does," Ellen said.

"Who?"

"A-townie," Ellen repeated. She pointed at Mrs Andersson. "He's frog-eater."

Mrs Andersson had gone an interesting shade of red.

"I am sure he isn't," Erin said firmly. "And this frog is too dead to eat. He needs to be buried."

From Mrs Andersson came a loud snort. "Bury a frog?"

“Better than serving him up for dinner,” Erin snapped back. “And I suggest you never refer to our guest that way again.”

“Guest? The man is a rogue! He came here to do you harm, mistress, and instead of having the Frenchie hang, you cosset him.”

“He was tricked into this venture,” Erin said firmly. “And thank God he was here some days ago, right? Right?” she added with emphasis.

“Hmph! He only did as he did because he is intent on bedding the poor girl.” Mrs Andersson scowled. “We all know what them papists are like: untrustworthy, lusty creatures that take without asking!”

Erin was very tempted to tell her Esther was one of those untrustworthy papists, but she bit her tongue. Religion was an infected subject in this time and age.

“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?” she quoted, doing a mental high-five with herself for remembering some of the bible quotes her mother used to spew. Very much at odds with her anything-but-religious character, but she supposed being raised a Baptist did that to you.

Mrs Andersson gaped.

“Yeah,” Erin said. “It is uncharitable to judge others, isn’t it?” She turned back to her girls and extended her hands. “Come on, you, we have a frog to bury.”

As a special treat—and also because both her girls looked anything but clean after enthusiastically having buried Fred the frog under a minor hill of dirt—Erin took them down to the river, accompanied by two of their dogs.

She skirted the place where they’d found Caleb floating in the water and led them to the small cleared space just beside the quay. Here, the water was relatively shallow, and soon

enough both girls were as naked as the day they were born, while she waded around with her skirts and petticoats tucked into the waistline.

A shadow fell over them and she startled, relaxing when she remembered the dogs.

“You’re back,” she said, smiling up at her husband, who was already fending off his happy, very wet daughters.

“I am.” He pulled off coat, boots, stockings and breeches and waded in. “Ahh!” he said. “Just what I needed.”

“Did everything go all right?”

“Aye.” He chased after Ellen, lifted her high and let her drop with a splash into the water, never releasing her. “Me too, me too, Daddy!” Sandy demanded, and the coming minutes left Duncan drenched, his shirt plastered to his skin.

They sat on the ground and dried, the girls protesting loudly when Erin pulled their smocks on. She rather liked the simple garments they wore, sometimes wishing it would have been okay for an adult woman to wear something so comfortable and shapeless. Instead, she had to struggle with petticoats and corset—even if she did not tighten hers as much as fashion dictated—as well as way too many layers, especially on a day as hot as today.

“He died,” Duncan said out of the blue. “The man Antoine stabbed with his cane.”

“He didn’t stab him. The man fell on top of it.”

Duncan nodded. “But that’s not what Mrs Colton is saying.” He grimaced, and she could only imagine what vitriol that foul bitch was spewing. “She says it is a disgrace that the colony allows a French spy to roam free, but that she isn’t surprised, what with the good citizens of Chester tolerating a —” He bit off the rest.

“A coloured woman in their midst,” she said with a sigh.

He nodded, wrapping his arms around her. “I don’t like it,” he muttered. “More and more, the good people of

Pennsylvania are adopting an intolerant approach to everyone who isn't white."

"Adopting?" She twisted in his arms to look at him. "They've held those opinions all the time. It's just that now it is becoming PC to voice them."

"PC?"

"Politically correct."

His jaw clenched. "Aye." With a loud sigh, he dug his chin into her head. "I fear we will not be able to stay, honey."

"Seeing as most of the colonies had laws forbidding interracial marriages, I guess you're right." She raised her hand to stroke his cheek. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? For what?"

"For being the reason why you have to worry so much."

He kissed her hair. "You're the reason life is worth living," he said huskily. "And the rest, we will sort, honey. You and I, always."

"You and I," she repeated. "And them," she added drily a second later. "Sandy and Ellen, no!" Too late. They turned to grin at her, both of them covered in mud.

They cleaned their girls up and returned to the house, Sandy and Ellen capering before them like gambolling lambs. Clearly, wearing wet clothes was a good thing.

"Do they believe Mrs Colton?" she asked. "About Antoine."

"No." He glanced her way. "The Nelson family has little credibility among the people of Chester, and besides, one of her men spilled the whole story, eager to save himself from dangling by the neck."

Erin rubbed at her throat. "And will they?"

"Hang?" He shook his head. "Nay, I think not. But for now, they remain behind lock and key—as does the fair Mrs Colton."

“What? They threw her in jail?”

“Not as such.” He grinned. “She is forcibly boarding with David Lloyd. And he has promised to keep her there until Jasper and Antoine return from their little venture south.”

“Ah.” She swung their joined hands. “So you’ve decided to trust the foul frog-eater.”

He burst out laughing. “I fear expressing yourself like that about our dashing French guest to Esther may cause you serious injury.”

“Well, she’s not here now, is she?”

Lettie emerged hot and sweaty from the pressing shed and undid a couple of buttons on her bodice. These last few hours, she’d eyed Hans in only his shirt with envy, but it wouldn’t do for her to discard her bodice—hard work had the tendency to leave linen garments clinging to your skin. Not that she’d minded studying Hans’ broad back as his muscles tensed and relaxed under his worn shirt, but she was, after all, a married woman.

Hans said something about cooling off in the river and strode off, his fair, unbound hair wafting in the breeze. Surprisingly long hair for a man, she reflected, falling to well past his shoulders. Esther had excused herself earlier, saying she needed to ensure Antoine was recuperating as he should, and Lettie had shared an amused look with Hans. Antoine was no less hale today than he’d been yesterday, and since the incident in the stables, if anything his recuperation had proceeded in leaps and bounds. It made Lettie smile, recalling how Grandma Alex always used to say male pride was a prickly and vulnerable thing, no matter the age of the male in question.

Lettie retreated to the herbal garden. After weeks of determined effort, it now looked tamed, the various herbs growing docilely in their allotted squares. Well, all but the mints, but everyone knew mints had to be constantly kept under control. She nipped off some pennyroyal, tore up a

couple of runners creeping across the neat pathway and settled on the little stone bench that offered her a view of the land as it sloped all the way down to the Delaware.

Sandy and Ellen came into view, running back and forth. Every morning, Julie dressed the little scamps in smocks and caps. Every afternoon, the caps were gone and the smocks looked as if they'd rolled themselves in the dirt. Dark curls bounced as the girls darted this way and that, stopping here to examine something, there to study something else.

Behind them came their parents, hand in hand. Lettie waited for the familiar wave of jealousy to surge. Nothing. Instead, she warmed inside at the way her cousin spoke to his wife, head bent to murmur something in her ear. They were holding hands, and Erin threw her head back and laughed before rising on her toes to kiss him. Hard. His free arm came round her waist and he lifted her, twirling them slowly as their lips remained welded together. Still no surge of jealousy, just a quiet joy that Duncan had found someone to love him as he deserved. And yes, Erin might be not be the wife she wished for him—these days because she worried life would not be easy for her cousin and his coloured wife—but she was beautiful and vibrant. Just, in Lettie's amended opinion, what Duncan needed.

It had been something of a surprise when Mrs Ellis had suggested she accompany them on their mission. Melville was clearly not pleased, but Mrs Ellis—Lettie, as she insisted he call her—was adamant. “Should Emrick show up while we are away, you can honestly say I am not here,” she’d argued.

The large German had looked just as displeased as Melville, and there had been a lot of words between the two men as Hans tried to convince Melville he too should come along. But Melville refused, stating he needed Hans at Papegoja Plantation should Felix reappear.

On the day of their departure, Antoine had been up at dawn, packing a small bag. Madame Melville had sent someone to retrieve most of his belongings from the boardinghouse in Chester, so at least he was now wearing his own clothes rather than the borrowed garments he’d had from Melville.

A soft knock on his door had revealed a red-eyed Esther. “Promise me you will be careful,” she’d whispered, pressing something into his hand before darting back to her room. That little object was now carried closest to his skin, the little heart in braided fair hair rubbing against his chest with his every movement.

Now he stood beside Jasper, studying the sloop that was to carry them to New Castle. Not a long journey, according to Jasper, who had then launched into a brief history of their destination.

Founded by the Dutch, taken over by the English, until recently part of Pennsylvania proper but since close to two decades it was the administrative centre of the colony of Delaware—“Not that it is a *real* colony,” Jasper had sniffed. “It answers to Penn just as Pennsylvania does, but they have their own assembly and pass their own local laws.”

Truthfully, Antoine was not that interested. New Castle would be yet another New World backwater, likely quite similar to Chester or Annapolis. A twinge of homesickness had him gazing due east. He missed his home—well, except for the miasmic presence of *cher* Papa.

Distractedly, he pressed a hand to his chest and Esther’s little gift. Would she like Paris? He inhaled loudly. *Fool*, he berated himself, *fool, fool, fool! She is an innocent, too young to think of like that!* But he couldn’t help himself, smiling slightly as he imagined just how she would gape at the wonders of *la belle* France.

Once on the sloop, Mrs Ellis found a place by the railing. She was wearing a large hat that left most of her face in shadow and had decided that she was to pose as Jasper’s older widowed sister.

“My sister?” Jasper hissed to Antoine. “She looks nothing like me!”

Which was true because Jasper’s colouring was much fairer and he had none of Mrs Ellis’ stature, being somewhat on the short side. Melville’s man was slim and willowy, but having watched him handle a rapier, Antoine knew the man could likely be quite deadly if so required.

Jasper had chosen to dress for what he called “the mission” in black.

“Easier to blend in,” he’d said, which had Antoine raising a brow. In his experience, blending in required dressing like the people you were attempting to look like, and so far he’d not seen anyone dressed like Jasper. Truth be, he himself did a better job of blending, what with his fawn-coloured coat and matching breeches, a discreet waistcoat and worn, well-polished boots. His cocked hat shaded some of his face, and

he'd braided his hair before tying it off with a ribbon in a futile attempt to keep it under control. It took but an hour on the water for the stiff breeze to undo his efforts, flyaway strands tickling his face.

They arrived in New Castle at dusk. Beside him, Tim stiffened, and Antoine placed a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder.

"They will not recognise you," he told him. No, they wouldn't, because Tim was dressed as the son of a gentleman, in neat breeches, shirt, stocking and shoes he complained pinched. "Besides, they do not even know you are coming," he added. He gave Tim a little shove. "Go on, go over to your Maman and offer her your arm." He chuckled at the expression on Tim's face, but obediently the lad moved over to Mrs Ellis.

"Now what?" Mrs Ellis—Lettie—said that evening. They had found lodgings in an inn standing just opposite to the courthouse and had partaken of a good supper.

"Now we retrieve the treasure," Antoine said.

"Now?" Tim squeaked. "It is dark."

"Best cover available," Jasper said. "No one is out, and we can go about our business discreetly."

"Are you worried you won't find your way?" Antoine asked Tim.

The boy shook his head. "It is far."

"Well, we can all do with some walking," Lettie said. "What?" she added. "You thought I'd stay here?" She snorted. "I am the best shot among us."

"Let us hope we do not find ourselves in a situation where we need to shoot," Antoine said drily.

"Is it your intention that we find the treasure and leave?" Jasper asked.

"*Non*. That will not stop the Nelson family from hounding your master. We must negotiate with them."

“Give it back to them?” Jasper asked. “Surely not! If they are anything like their father and the eldest brother, they do not deserve anything!”

“I fear they would disagree,” Lettie said. “Antoine is right: we need to end this matter once and for all. For Duncan’s sake, but also for Tim’s.”

“Mine?” Tim shrugged. “What can they do to me now?”

“Kill you,” Lettie said.

Antoine frowned at her. No need to scare the boy.

“We all know that should they get hold of him, they’d not hesitate, not even if they reclaim the treasure.” She looked at Tim. “They likely hold you responsible for the deaths of Hyland and Caleb Nelson.”

Tim shrank together. “But that wasn’t my fault!”

“Mrs E—Lettie is right. People want someone to blame for their losses and misfortunes.” Like Papa blamed Duncan Melville for his injuries when in truth they had been self-inflicted.

The boy slumped in his chair. “I did what I had to do,” he whispered. “I didn’t want to die.”

Antoine refrained from saying that in doing as he did, the boy had sealed his fate. Hyland would never have let him go unless the treasure was returned to him, and once Tim had led him to it, he’d have had no compunction in killing him.

Lettie embraced the boy, rocking him gently. “We will sort this,” she promised.

It was hard going in the dark. They had slipped out through the window of the room Lettie and Tim were sharing and had taken their time making their way through the sleeping town. No walls to scale, though, and it seemed most of New Castle’s inhabitants preferred retiring early—except for the main room at their inn and one or two more taverns, they saw little sign of life.

“It is rowdier down by the harbour,” Tim said.

That was always the case. Where there were sailors, there were taverns and other ... erm ... entertainments. Not that he was even tempted by the thought of a willing whore. Not now that he had met his angel.

Tim had them leaving the road that traversed the landscape like a narrow line of light grey. They crossed through some water meadows and were soon making their way along the banks of a river. The ground was uneven and strewn with rocks, making progress difficult, especially with a bad leg and in the dark. They entered the woods, and Lettie and Jasper unblinded the lanterns they carried. The weak beams of light made the surrounding darkness even darker, but at least they could see where they put their feet. No one talked. Lettie moved as if totally unencumbered by fallen trees, thick shrubs and mossy patches of ground. Tim padded along, following a faint trail that wove its way closer and closer to the sound of rushing water.

“We’re on Nelson land now,” he said when they passed a pyramid of stones. He halted and cocked his head.

“What is it?” Jasper asked.

“Nothing.” Tim smiled, the light of the lantern he was holding illuminating his face. “I worried they might be riding sentry. They do that at times.”

“God’s fish!” Jasper said. “You should have told us that!”

“No matter,” Lettie said, keeping her voice low. “But best we make haste should these sentries suddenly appear.”

“Sentries?” Antoine asked her in an undertone. “Surely, attempting to protect a property this size is futile?”

“They’re not stopping someone from getting in,” she told him. “They’re likely patrolling the most likely routes a runaway slave would choose.”

“Oh.” He leaned closer. “They have slaves?”

“Almost all landowners down here do. And in Maryland.” She straightened up. “Not us, though. Grandda refused to

enslave another human being.” She stepped over a fallen log. “Do you have slaves?”

“The Chardon family? No.” But then, neither did they have acres after acres of arable land to work.

They fell silent, concentrating on following Tim’s lantern. A bit further, and they emerged before a narrow stream. To judge from the noise and the frothing waters, it was deep. The stones closest were slippery, and on the further side there was a miniature waterfall, created by several large boulders.

“There,” Tim said, pointing at the boulders. “I hid it there.”

To everyone’s surprise, Lettie bunched up her skirts and jumped, landing with surprising grace on the other side. Moments later, she was thigh deep in the water. Tim pointed and gesticulated and it did not take long for her to heft a heavy, iron-bound box from behind the curtain of water. She almost dropped it, groaning loudly under its weight as she waded across. Antoine and Jasper scrambled down to lift the box from her.

“*Merde!*” Antoine cursed. “How on earth did you carry this?”

“I didn’t carry it full,” Tim explained. “I went back and forth several times.”

“The wood is rotted in places,” Lettie said once she was back on dry land. She braced herself on her knees and took a couple of deep breaths before grinning at them. “I cannot remember when last I had so much fun. Maybe it was when I tried to shoot an apple off Cousin Timothy’s head.”

“With a musket?” Jasper asked.

“Nay, with an arrow. Do you think we can carry it back?” she asked Antoine, squeezing water out of her skirts.

“No.” To prove his point, he shoved a hand through one of the sides.

“Is it all still there?” Tim asked anxiously.

They broke the box open, Jasper throwing the odd bits and pieces into the stream, and there were several water-damaged

leather pouches, several gold coins, and a necklace that glittered in the light of the lanterns.

“Diamonds,” Antoine said, touching one of the stones. “This alone is worth a fortune.”

They returned the way they’d come, pockets and pouches stuffed with gold, jewels and coin. Antoine tucked the necklace and several bracelets down his shirt; Lettie did the same with some other trinkets.

They were almost at the road, when they were hailed. “Who goes there?” someone yelled.

“Damnation,” Jasper muttered. “I take it this is one of Nelson’s sentries?”

Tim had frozen.

“Close the lanterns!” Lettie hissed, and when Tim remained immobile, she knocked the lantern out of his hand. Jasper kicked it, sending it flying in the direction they’d come.

“Oi!” the voice said. “Show yourself, or I will shoot!”

Tim curled together on the ground.

Jasper whirled. “Here,” he hissed, lobbing his stuffed pouches in their direction. “I will distract them.”

“You do not know the terrain,” Lettie protested.

The sound of horses came closer, the underbrush snapping.

“Tim, we need your help!” Jasper hauled the boy up to stand. “You and I, we run. We run as if the demons of hell were after us. Because if those men catch us ...”

Tim took off, Jasper a dark shadow at his heels.

“There!” one of the approaching men said. “Over there!”

“Stay down,” Antoine whispered to Lettie. A soft huff met his remark.

From some distance away came Jasper’s voice raised in a loud jeer.

“Fool! Thank the Lord the terrain is hard on a horse,” Lettie muttered. “Come on! We must go.”

They hurried through the water meadows, bent almost double as they moved from one stand of shrubs to the other. Once out on the road, they kept well to the verge, constantly throwing looks over their shoulders. By the time they passed the courthouse, Antoine's leg was cramping badly, but he gritted his teeth and loped on.

They were at the inn when from one of the alleys came Tim.

"Jasper," he gasped. "Over there!" He pointed the way he'd come.

"Is he hurt?"

"Shot." Tim threw Antoine a wild look. "The horses! I can hear the horses!"

"Take the boy," Antoine said to Lettie. "Here." He handed over the valuables he'd been carrying and hurried off as well as he could.

"Jasper!" he hissed, just as a mounted man trotted past the entrance to the alley. Antoine pressed himself against a wall and held his breath. A soft groan from behind a barrel had him falling to his knees. "Jasper?" He crawled closer.

"Here," Jasper replied with a muffled groan.

"They must be here!" a loud voice said. The sound of hooves came closer, and Antoine pulled his pistol.

"Or they're down on the wharves. More places to hide there," another voice said. A horse snorted. "Think it was that accursed whelp we saw?"

The sound of someone hawking and spitting had Antoine grimacing.

"Could be. And if it was him, then we both know what he was up to. So we'd best find him and his companion before they scarper off with what rightfully belongs to us."

"Well, if it is the whelp, then he won't be hiding here, will he? He's more at home in the wilderness."

The horses moved off. Antoine let out a breath he'd not even been aware of holding.

Jasper groaned.

“Quiet,” Antoine admonished. Not until he'd counted to a hundred twice did he move, slowly helping Jasper to his feet. “What happened?”

“They shot at us,” Jasper said through his teeth. “The damned ball grazed my leg.”

More than a graze, Antoine concluded a while later, watching in grim silence while Lettie cleaned and stitched the deep gash along Jasper's thigh.

“We have to get you out of here,” he said, holding up his hand when Jasper began protesting. “No, Jasper. You leave on the first sloop tomorrow—with Tim.”

“No wonder Nelson was so desperate to get this back,” Antoine commented a while later. On the table in front of them were stacked at least eighty gold coins, a mixture of English guineas and Spanish escudos. There were twice as many silver coins, a handful of precious stones, an impressive pearl brooch, the diamond necklace, and an assortment of bracelets, earbobs and rings.

“How he could amass so much?” Jasper asked, wincing as Lettie tightened his bandage.

“Piracy?” Lettie suggested.

Not entirely unlikely.

“Now what?” Jasper asked, looking at Antoine.

“Now we contact the Nelsons,” he said. “But not before we have hidden all this and sent Tim off with his share.”

“My share?” Tim tentatively touched one of the coins.

“Compensation. Aye, I like that,” Lettie said, counting out ten gold coins and handing them to Tim. “It's the least you deserve for all the suffering they put you through.”

Tim stared at her from huge eyes. “Truly?” His finger shook as he touched the coins.

“Truly,” Lettie said with a smile.

The two remaining Nelson brothers strode into the inn’s main room late the next afternoon, announcing they were there to meet with someone about their lost treasure. With them came several men, bristling with arms, but at the landlord’s curt order they retreated outside.

“I’ll not have your gang of ruffians in here, y’hear?” he told the Nelsons.

“Protection,” one of the Nelsons said, a man who looked remarkably like Mrs Colton, albeit at least a decade younger.

“Protection? Pah! If anyone needs protection, it is the rest of us—from you!”

The other Nelson scowled and took a step forward but was halted by his brother.

“Unsavoury lot,” Lettie commented from where she was sitting. “Well, not to wonder, given their father.”

“Our father? I’ll have you know the Nelsons have been here for generations! Our great-grandfather arrived here well over sixty years ago, and here we have stayed and thrived—until that thieving lout stole what was ours. Ours!”

Lettie yawned. “Am I supposed to commiserate?”

“He’s a thief!” the other brother exclaimed.

“He’s a child who was brutalised—every day—by your vile, abusive father,” Lettie replied calmly. She tilted her head to the side. “Maybe you liked having Tim around so he could beat him instead of you.”

To judge from how the younger brothers flushed, she’d hit the nail firmly on the head.

“Enough,” Antoine said, and his accent alone sufficed to have the Nelsons fall silent, staring at him.

“Who are you?” the one Antoine assumed was the oldest said.

“Ah, are we introducing ourselves?” he replied mildly and stood, waiting.

“Berthold Nelson,” one of them finally said.

“Laurence Nelson,” the other said.

“And I am Antoine Chardon, here as Mr Duncan Melville’s representative. This,” he gestured at Lettie, “is Mr Melville’s *cousine* Madame Graham.”

“And where’s the whelp?” Berthold Nelson snarled.

“Not here.” And thank the merciful Virgin for that.

“Not here?” Laurence’s voice rose into a painfully high register. “Then why are we here, hey? Without him, how are you to locate what he hid?”

Antoine merely smiled.

Berthold looked from him to Lettie. “You’ve already found it.”

“*Oui.*”

“Give it to us. Now,” Laurence growled, his hand disappearing under his coat.

“You pull that pistol and that will be the last thing you do!” the landlord yelled.

“Are they always like this?” Lettie asked.

“The whole family,” the landlord said with a sigh. “Mind you, it was that Hyland’s fault. Mean and vicious and quick with his fists and feet—even with his own children.”

“Shut up, Nils,” Berthold muttered.

“No one tells me to shut up in my own inn,” Nils said, bristling like a cockerel. *Parbleu*, but this was a strange place! And entirely lawless, to judge from how the other patrons blithely ignored the heated discussion.

“Gentlemen,” Antoine said in an admonishing tone. “We have business to conduct, *non?*”

“Business? No, we do not. Just hand over what is ours, or we’ll shoot you.”

Lettie rolled her eyes. “And if you shoot us, how will you find it?”

That clearly stumped Laurence. Berthold, however, sighed and sat down at the table. “What do you want?”

“Assurances,” Antoine said, placing a document before him.

It took the brothers some time to read through.

Once they had done so, they sat back. “We have no grievances with Mr Melville,” Berthold said.

“Or his wife,” Laurence added. He leered. “In fact, we might even treat her right nice if she proves accommodating. Caleb said she is quite the—”

“Laurence!” Berthold snapped at the same time as his brother yelped, staring down at the dagger stuck between two of his fingers.

“Talk about my cousin’s wife like that again and I’ll sink my blade through your hand,” Lettie snarled, tugging the blade free. Antoine gave her an admiring look, wondering just how this strong and confident woman could have ended up the victim of that worm Emrick Ellis.

“He did not mean it.” For good measure, Berthold slapped his brother over the head. “He’s a fool, this one, given to ribald jesting.”

“What he said was not much of a jest,” Antoine said.

“No, of course not.” Berthold picked up the document. “Where do we sign?”

“Here.” Antoine tapped at the deed. “And mark this: I will personally deliver this to the Chief Justice of Pennsylvania, who is already mightily incensed by the behaviour of the Nelson family. This last escapade with your sister ...” He shook his head.

“Our sister?” Berthold looked at Laurence. “That bitch! I told you she was planning something.”

“Ah, so she was acting on her own behalf.” Lettie gave them a sweet smile. “What a close and loving family you seem to be.”

Antoine muffled a chuckle.

The Nelson brothers signed.

Antoine and Lettie rose. “Tomorrow, at the quays,” Antoine said. “That’s where we will hand it over.” It was already there, hidden beneath the plank floor of one of the storage sheds.

“You know,” he said to Lettie once they were alone, “if I were Emrick Ellis, I would never attempt to force you to return to him.” He shook his head. “Like courting death with a honed blade in his hand.”

Lettie twisted her hands together. “Except he has never seen me like this,” she said quietly. “I ... Well, when every word, every gesture can earn you a beating ...” She looked away. “That’s what I hate him the most for. He stole my courage; he stole my sense of self.”

Antoine patted her hand. “But it seems to me you’ve found both those things again.”

“I’m not going back to him,” she said hoarsely. “Not as long as there is breath in my body.”

Likely not. One very big German would crush the life out of Emrick Ellis before he let him harm Lettie again.

It was not long after dawn when the Nelsons appeared with all their men and stomped down the wharf to where Antoine was waiting. “Well?” Berthold demanded.

“Over there,” Antoine said, pointing at the shed. “Under the floor.”

“Go and check,” Berthold said, pulling a pistol. He aimed it at Antoine. “And if it isn’t there, I’ll blow a hole through the Frenchie.”

“Which will force me to blow a hole through your head,” Lettie called out from where she was already aboard, her musket cradled in her arms.

“Then let us all hope it is there,” Berthold said, his arm not as much as wavering at her threat.

Laurence let out a loud yell. “It is here, Berthold, it is here!”

“Good.” Berthold sneered at Antoine. “I want the whelp. He should pay for what he did to us.”

“You come near the whelp, as you call him, and I will personally castrate you,” Antoine said calmly. “And that, *monsieur*, is not a threat. It is a promise.” He took a couple of steps forward and brushed the pistol aside, staring into Nelson’s eyes. “Best go before your brother helps himself to more than his fair share of the coins.”

Berthold scowled and stalked off.

“No brotherly love lost there,” Lettie commented as they watched the two Nelson brothers squabble.

“*Non.*”

“Is it like that with your brother?” she asked.

“*Non.*” He sighed. “Felix mostly ignores me—always has.”

“Do you miss him?”

“*Non.*” Truth be told, he hoped he would never lay eyes on him again.

They arrived in Chester in the late afternoon. No sooner were they off the sloop than Lettie tensed, tugging constantly at her hat while scanning their surroundings.

“Stay here,” Antoine suggested, guiding her into the interior of the Graham Company offices. “I will fetch our mounts.”

The trading company was a sprawling site, complete with several warehouses, accommodation for the employees and stables. Antoine whistled as he strolled along the narrow alley that led to the back entrance, sliding a hand along the wooden planks that formed a six foot wall around the entire complex. Halfway down the alley, someone grabbed him from behind. He struggled, inhaled to scream, but any sounds were choked by the hand clapped over his mouth.

“Not a sound,” Felix hissed, and Antoine’s knees almost gave out. Felix released him and Antoine scowled, rubbing at his sore throat.

“Pleased to see me, little brother?” Felix was far from his normal dapper self, his cheeks covered in bristle, his clothes the worse for wear. To judge from how he favoured his arm, he had not had his wound properly tended to.

“Where have you been?” Antoine demanded.

“I had to leave,” Felix said.

“You just left me! I could have died, but you just ran, as fearful as a rabbit chased by wolves.”

Felix scowled. “And how would it have been better if I had stayed?”

“Well, we both know that had you stayed, you’d have been dead.” Antoine glared at his brother. “I suppose you considered me expendable.”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Felix said in a soothing voice. “And look, here you are, a welcome guest among our enemies.” He elbowed Antoine a tad too hard. “Our very own Trojan horse, eh?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to yell at his brother and tell him he would never betray the Melvilles, but Antoine was no fool, fully aware of the assessing look in Felix’s eyes and the way his hand so casually rested on his rapier. Besides, maybe he could make amends by luring Felix into a trap. His guts twisted—this was his brother, and here he was, considering betraying him! Until he recalled just how quickly Felix had

fled, leaving Antoine to face their purported enemies alone. He gave Felix a black look.

“Papa will not be pleased when he hears how you fled, leaving me badly wounded.”

Felix’s brows rose. “And why would he ever find out?” He moved closer.

Antoine stepped away from him, causing Felix to come to an abrupt stop. “You think I would harm you?” He sounded hurt.

“You already did,” Antoine snapped.

“I didn’t mean to,” Felix said. “Truly, little brother, I did not like leaving you squealing like a dying pig.”

“I wasn’t squealing,” Antoine protested—even if he probably was.

Felix sighed. “Well, none of that matters now, does it? What matters is that we are here, together. Now all we have to do is plan just how we finish off the bastard once and for all.”

Antoine did not reply.

Felix was suddenly far too close. “Or are you having second thoughts?” he asked, and there was a dagger in his hand.

“Fool!” Antoine shoved him away. “I am angry with you! How would you have felt if it had been me running off?” He managed a laugh. “But of course, you’d likely expect me to run, right? After all, none of us ever thought *you* would be the coward.”

Felix flushed. “I am no coward! I did as I had to.”

“So you say. And then you have the temerity to threaten me with a blade?” Antoine spat to the side.

Felix backed off, returning the dagger to its sheath. “My apologies,” he said. “But I sensed a hesitation from you.”

Antoine swallowed back the urge to laugh. Hesitation? Felix had no notion! But he managed to present his brother with an insulted expression.

“I’m not the one who fled,” he said. “So, dear brother, let me know what you want me to do.” He raised his hand to his chest and placed it firmly over Esther’s little heart. “Let us finish this.”

Felix nodded.

Except, of course, that Antoine had no intention of finishing anything with his brother. He had an angel to protect.

Erin was returning from her little workshop when Antoine and Lettie came galloping down the lane. At first, she worried they were being pursued, but as far as she could see, it was only them. There had to be a reason behind their haste, though, and as she made for the yard, fear began bubbling in her stomach.

As far as she was concerned, there were only two potential reasons behind their haste: either they'd seen Emrick Ellis or Felix Chardon. *Please let it be Ellis*, she thought. *Ellis we can handle*. Not that she had any idea how to handle a man who had the law on his side when he demanded his abused wife be returned to him.

Duncan reached the riders before her. And when he turned to face her, she knew. She came to an abrupt halt, hands pressed to her belly as she willed herself to breathe. Warm hands had hold of her, drawing her close enough that she could rest her head against his chest.

"I sort of hoped he'd died," she whispered.

"So did I," Duncan said.

She leaned back to look at him. "What do we do?"

"We start by making it damned hard for him to stay anywhere close." He nodded at Antoine. "He thinks his brother is staying in one of the boardinghouses close to the harbour, as yet unaware that there is a hue and cry in the entire county for a would-be French spy."

“But he’s dangerous!” Erin pressed closer. “People who go looking for him, they can disappear!”

“Assuming he is as skilled at using that evil piece of magic as his father was.” Duncan dragged a finger down her nose. “I suspect he isn’t, which will make him hesitant to use it.”

“Except on us,” she moaned.

“Aye.” He frowned. “Do you think it would help to close your eyes? Not see those whirlpools of time form before you?”

She actually laughed. Hysterically. For like a minute before she managed to compose herself and lift her face from his chest. “Sorry. It’s all just so impossible,” she said. “An ancient magic locket that can tear holes through time.” She shivered and took a deep breath. “Maybe it would help, but closing your eyes with Felix Chardon close by isn’t exactly an option, is it?”

He tightened his hold on her. “No, it isn’t.”

“He did not look well,” Antoine said a bit later. “And I have never seen him look so unkempt.”

Lettie chuckled.

“What?” Antoine said.

“Nothing—I am merely impressed by your command of the English language.”

“He had a tutor,” Esther said, smiling at Antoine. “For years and years, he had an English tutor.”

“Education is important,” Antoine said with a shrug.

Erin couldn’t care less about Antoine’s schooling. Okay, so he spoke several languages, had studied mathematics and astronomy as well as Latin—all this related rather breathlessly by Esther, who gazed at Antoine with stars in her eyes.

“What do you think he will do?” she interrupted.

“He said he was going to try and hire some new men,” Antoine said. “I told him it would be futile, but according to Felix, there are always those more motivated by money than loyalty.” He shifted on his seat. “And then he’ll come here.”

“Where we will be waiting for him,” Lettie said, miming firing a musket.

Antoine paled.

“I don’t want him to die,” he groaned.

“And we don’t want to live in fear,” Erin retorted.

He bit his lip and nodded.

Two days later, Duncan and Hans returned home from Chester, drenched to the skin by the sudden rainstorm.

“Unless he’s hiding in someone’s privy pit, he’s not in Chester,” Duncan said, handing over his wet garments to Jasper.

“Maybe he doesn’t trust Antoine,” Erin said, giving him a towel.

“Or maybe he heard every man and his dog have been alerted to the possible presence of a French spy,” Jasper said.

“So where would he go?” Erin asked.

“Well, anyone can disappear in Philadelphia,” Duncan said.

“True,” Jasper said, producing a clean and dry shirt for Duncan. He gave Duncan an eager look. “Maybe you need someone there, Master Melville. Someone to skulk about and sniff him out.”

“You’re injured,” Erin said. She shared a quick smile with Duncan: Jasper strutted about with quite an affected limp, telling everyone who asked—or didn’t—of his recent close brush with death. A fate he’d avoided due to his heightened senses and quick thinking, according to Jasper. According to Tim, who was somewhat more voluble these days, their pursuers had fired at random and from a great distance, Jasper being hit because he was running down the middle of the road.

“It is not that bad, mistress,” Jasper said. “And I am good at blending into the shadows.”

“Boy, does he want to be a hero,” Erin said once they were alone.

“Aye, he has not quite recovered from Esther’s lukewarm interest in his injury,” Duncan said drily.

“Esther’s interest in Jasper has always been lukewarm.” She sat down on the bed. “Will you send Jasper to Philadelphia?”

“Maybe.” He sat down beside her. “But if I were Chardon, I’d be hiding somewhere closer.”

Waiting for your nemesis to materialise was exhausting. Every day, Erin woke to a griping belly, to tension in her neck and shoulders. Every day, she tried to distract herself by busying herself in various household tasks, be it helping Mrs Andersson harvest the ripe vegetables in the kitchen garden or participating in the monthly laundry.

She spent hours in her workshop, planing and sanding plank after plank until they were as smooth as a baby’s bum. Problem was, she wasn’t planning on replacing a floor. And all the time, one part of her was always on alert, always keeping an eye out for a man she’d not even met.

She spent hours cleaning the large glassed porch, thereby acting as an unofficial lookout, her gaze drifting repeatedly to the distant river and the orchards that lay between.

Even as she was harvesting the last of the honey for the season, her mind was elsewhere, which resulted in several bee stings and a twisted ankle when she had to retreat hastily from the irritated creatures.

“Like a fucking bogeyman,” she said, crawling closer to Duncan. They were in bed, the house around them was still and dark, but she had problems sleeping, as did Duncan. Not only them: she knew for a fact Antoine was tossing as restlessly in his own little room—unless he assumed the role of sentry and settled himself at his window to stare out at the night.

“Aye.” He dragged his fingers through her hair repeatedly and she sank closer to him, momentarily safe in his arms. “No one has seen him,” he said. “Perhaps he has left and gone elsewhere.”

She took little comfort in that. Even if Felix Chardon had slipped aboard a boat destined far away from here, she could bet her last penny on the fact that he intended to return.

It was almost a relief the day Mrs Colton came marching down their lane, head held high.

“I am here for my horses!” she snapped. “The ones you stole from me when you had me carted off like a common criminal.”

“Maybe because that’s what you are,” Erin said. Duncan wasn’t home today, having been obliged to ride to Philadelphia on behalf of Lloyd. It made her even more anxious. What if Chardon was in Philadelphia, saw an unsuspecting Duncan and ...

No, no, no, the thought did not bear thinking. Or if he was somewhere close, spying on them, now ready to spring forth and ...

Idiot, she chided herself. *It’s Duncan he wants*. Not exactly a reassuring thought. In fact, it had her gulping down air—which was what she’d been doing when Hans came to find her and inform her of their visitor.

“Me? I’ll have you know I count my antecedents back to the first Swedish man to set foot in this land!” There was nothing particularly Swedish about Mrs Colton. Dark haired and dark eyed, she could have been from anywhere, not like Klara Andersson and her Sivert, who were both very fair of skin and hair, the latter having pale blue eyes to match.

Mrs Colton was still in that same unbecoming shade of yellowish-green that she’d worn last time, this time paired with a well-worn cloak in mauve. Not exactly a combination that was easy on the eyes, especially not given the woman wearing it. Okay, that was uncharitable; she couldn’t exactly

help the fact that she so resembled her father and brother, with heavy brows and small eyes set close together. She also had a receding chin, which did not exactly improve her appearance.

“Yes, yes, we know, the Nelsons are the salt of the earth, which is why they resort to violence, blackmail and threats to get what they want.” Erin cocked her head. “Seeing as they’re true chips off the old block, I guess your brothers won’t be sharing with you, will they?”

“Sharing what?” Mrs Colton demanded.

“Why, the treasure. We returned it to them close to a fortnight ago.”

“No! No, no, no! Those two fools will spend it all—all of it!” Mrs Colton glared at Erin. “I deserve my share!” More like she needed it; her clothes were carefully mended, the lace at neck and collar yellowed.

“None of my business. But seeing as you tried to abduct our Tim, I am sure you understand if I do not commiserate.”

“Our Tim?” Mrs Colton sneered. “The boy is an uneducated good-for-nothing.” She looked Erin up and down. “Likely, that is why he fits in so well with you.”

“Be very, very careful,” Erin said, advancing on her. “I have no patience with uncouth and coarse women accusing me of being uneducated, especially not today.” She almost told the bitch that she’d even attended university, but as that was an impossibility in the here and now, she bit back that remark.

Mrs Colton took a step back. “My horses.”

“They’re ours now,” Erin said. “Surely, you know that? In lieu of the fines you could not pay, Mr Lloyd told us to keep the horses.”

She might not like her, but the expression on Mrs Colton’s face made Erin feel sorry for her.

“I need those horses,” Mrs Colton said, eyes wide. “I ...” She cleared her throat. “I shall endeavour to pay the fines some other way, but without my horses, I am stranded here.”

Erin waited. And waited. Mrs Colton fidgeted.

“Please,” she finally said, sounding as if she’d been forced horse dung.

“Where’s your husband?” Erin asked. “And what does he think of all this?”

A dark flush crawled up Mrs Colton’s face. “He’s in Willington.” She looked away. “It’s all his fault! If he hadn’t gambled—” She bit off what she was going to say, fretting at the little pouch that hung round her waist.

Erin gave her a long look. “I’ll have your horses brought out,” she said. “And we forgive the fines.”

Mrs Colton gave her a stiff nod. “Thank you.”

“Just make sure you pay it forward,” Erin said.

“Eh?”

“You know, do a good deed for someone else who might need it.” She left before the woman could return to her normal vitriolic state, calling for Tim to fetch her mounts.

“That was most generous of you,” Antoine said over a light supper.

“She was skint,” Erin said with a shrug. She shoved the plate away, most of the food uneaten.

“Skint?” Antoine looked confused.

“No money. And her clothes ...”

“Ah, *oui*, a most unbecoming shade. Leeches the colour out of anyone.”

“And so out of fashion,” Esther said. “No one wears that cut to their bodice anymore.”

“More importantly, they were very worn.” Once she’d noticed, she’d seen just how old the polished boots were, how often the ugly yellow fabric had been taken in and remodelled.

“And why should that concern you?” Lettie bit into a baked apple.

“It didn’t.” Beyond the basic compassion she’d feel for anyone. “But we don’t need the horses, she does.” She rose. “I’m taking a walk.”

“I’ll accompany you,” Lettie said. “I can carry the musket.”

“You always carry the musket.” She hated having to walk about armed just because some borderline insane Frenchman wanted to do away with them on the say-so of his evil and twisted father! She scowled at Antoine, who shrank back.

“What did I do?” he asked.

Erin composed herself. “Nothing.”

“Well, beyond being French and a Chardon,” Lettie said.

“I cannot help either of those things,” Antoine said stiffly.

“I know.” Erin managed a smile. “I do, Antoine, honestly. But this waiting, it is driving me mad.”

“Walk,” Lettie ordered. “Now.”

Once outside, Lettie led the way to the orchard and handed Erin the musket. “Go on, impress me.”

“You’re the markswoman, not me,” Erin said.

“Marksman,” Lettie corrected.

“I disagree. You’re not a man.” Erin grinned. “Makes me think of Eowyn.” To her immense surprise, she’d discovered Lettie was a major fan of Middle Earth, this due to her time-travelling grandmother—not that Lettie knew Alex Graham had been born in the late twentieth century—telling them the stories about the ring and its fellowship.

Sometimes, it made Erin worry that when Tolkien came along, someone would accuse him of plagiarism. Mostly, she just enjoyed having someone around who understood the references to that magical realm. Like now, when Lettie adopted a fierce stance and yelled, “I am no man!”

“That’s right,” Erin said with a laugh. “Die, evil Nazgûl, die!”

After a couple of shots at the simple targets Hans had crafted, they made their way towards the beckoning water, still glittering with light despite the approaching night.

“I miss the sea,” Erin said.

“Water is water,” Lettie said.

“No, it’s not. My grandmother loved the sea. She said that if you sat in front of it and listened properly, you could hear the stories of all those that had gone before.”

“And drowned?” Lettie asked.

“She didn’t say, but I don’t think that was what she meant.” She bunched her skirts under her and sat. “The sea is always whispering stories, isn’t it?”

“Not to me. But then, I am not given to fancies.” Lettie was still on her feet.

A bird called. Another answered, and then there was the loud whirring of wings as several birds took flight, lifting out of a nearby stand of reeds. Lettie lifted the musket and took a step forward. “Stay down,” she said in a low tone.

Something moved among the rushes. Something large.

Erin threw herself flat to the ground.

“Oi!” Lettie yelled, and with a startled squeal a pig came crashing towards them. It veered once it was on land and fled due south.

Erin couldn’t stop laughing. Lettie sat beside her, still cradling the musket.

“Something scared those birds,” Lettie muttered. “And that wouldn’t be a feral pig.”

Erin lay on her back and stared up at the darkening sky, while beside her Lettie sat silent. She was just about to suggest they return to the house when Lettie grabbed her arm—hard. Erin looked to where Lettie was pointing. A boat nosed its way through the reeds, poled, not rowed.

The September night was rolling in fast from the east, drenching their surroundings in shadow, but there was enough

light to make out the shape of a man at the stern. Slowly, it approached the shore. No lantern to spread some light, no noise beyond the sucking sound of the pole in the mud.

“Come closer and I shoot!” Lettie called out, and the man on the boat froze. “State your name or I shoot!” she added.

The man dropped into a crouch just as Lettie fired.

A yelp, and the man began poling away from them. Lettie was busy reloading: ball, ram, powder—she did it so fast that the boat was still clearly visible when she fired off the next shot, this time striking the side of the boat.

“*Merde!*” the man called out, and Erin growled. Yes, she growled, wishing she could throw herself forward and rip his throat out.

“I’m warning you, Felix Chardon! Stay away from me and mine!”

In reply, she got a laugh.

It was a definite improvement, or so Duncan thought. Aye, an angry Erin was easier to handle than a fearful one, and at some point during his days away in Philadelphia, Erin's fear had distilled into a simmering, potent rage.

"How dare he blight our lives like this?" she snarled, wielding her hammer with deadly precision. "How dare he?" *Bang, bang, bang* went the hammer, and just like that, the old ladder was mended and as good as new.

"Do you think he's staying on the boat?" he asked, mostly to distract her.

It was Lettie's opinion he was likely drifting about during the day and sneaking onto land at night. She also thought he was still bothered by the injury he'd acquired in his first attack on Papegoja Plantation. "He was favouring his left arm when he poled," she'd explained.

Antoine had corroborated this by telling them that Felix had been sporting a bandage of sorts round his right arm. He'd looked utterly miserable when he'd added that he feared his brother might be ailing.

"Torn asunder," Duncan commented to Erin, nodding in the direction of Antoine. Their French guest was sitting on the low wall that surrounded the old well, scuffing at the ground. Slumped shoulders, hat pulled down so as to obscure his face entirely—Duncan would wager he was finding it hard to be amongst them when they so openly desired his brother's demise

“No, he isn’t. He knows he’s doing the right thing, but that doesn’t mean he’s looking forward to betraying his brother—or seeing him dead.” She sighed. “I’m not entirely happy with that either.” She looked at the hammer in her hand. “To defend yourself and cause someone’s death is one thing. To plan it ... Shit, Duncan, what does that make us?”

“It is his choice,” Duncan said firmly. “If he comes here with the intent of doing us harm, then we are in fact defending ourselves, no matter if we’ve done that by setting a trap.” Said trap was as yet unset because there were too many unknowns: Would Chardon sneak onto their land alone? Would he come accompanied? At night? During daytime, when least expected? All these variables made his head ache.

“Yeah, but still.”

“I know, honey. I know.” He cupped her cheek and raised her face, planting a soft kiss on her forehead. Somehow, they had to take the initiative, lure Felix Chardon out of the shadows. He considered this in silence, holding his wife close. He glanced at Antoine and pursed his mouth; the young Frenchman could very well be the deciding factor, but he was uncomfortable with tricking him.

“Why are you staring at Antoine like that?” Erin asked.

“He is the key, I believe. At some point, Felix will reach out to him.”

“Or not. All this hue and cry, it may have convinced him Antoine betrayed him.”

“Hmm.” He looked again at Antoine. “So perhaps our Antoine should be prodded into going in search of his brother.”

Erin leaned out of his hold. “That could be dangerous for him.”

“Antoine is a bright young man. More importantly, how do we prod him? Should we ask Esther to—”

“No! Esther would never participate in a scheme that might hurt Antoine. And I’m not entirely sure I would either. I like him.”

“So do I,” Duncan said. But his family’s safety came first, and if securing that meant manipulating their guest, so be it.

After days of agreeable temperatures came a morning shrouded in fog, the damp seeping through your clothes to chill your skin. At least if you were obliged to be outside. Antoine shivered where he stood, staring out of the rustic conservatory Madame Melville had apparently built with her own two hands. A remarkable woman was Erin Melville, even if of late she was mostly plagued by angered fear—of his brother.

“It must be cold and wet in a little boat on a day like this,” Esther said from beside him. “Especially for an ailing man.”

“Felix would no more sleep in a leaky boat than I would,” Antoine said. “So if he is close enough to come poling, then he is staying on land somewhere close.”

“That is not what Lettie thinks,” Esther said. “Even Duncan seems to be of the opinion he is out on the water. How else to explain no one can find him? Every building along the river shore has been searched, and there has been no sight of him or the boat.”

He scowled at the distant shore. “If I were him, I’d have found lodgings on that side. After all, no one is looking for him in New Jersey.”

Esther moved closer, her breath warm on his face when she turned towards him. “I dare say Mr Lloyd has sent to them as well,” Esther said. “The Friends have close connections, no matter that they’re divided by the mighty river.”

How unfortunate for Felix. But Antoine remained convinced that his brother had found shelter on the other shore. One part of him hoped he had: he did not relish the notion of a potentially ailing Felix exposed to the elements in a little boat. The other wished his brother to hell—or at least as far away as possible from here.

“*Je ne veux pas etre Cain,*” he muttered to himself. But the likeness was awry: Abel was the good brother, murdered

by his evil sibling, Cain, while in this case Antoine felt himself obliged to side against his brother to defend the good and decent people he'd been living with for close to two months. He glanced at Esther and she met his gaze, her eyes so blue he could drown in them.

"It will sort itself," she said, and to his surprise, she rose on her toes and pressed her lips to his. She leaned back, the tip of her tongue emerging for an instant. Slowly, he curled his hand round her neck and drew her close enough to reciprocate the kiss. A soft, innocent thing, closed lips meeting closed lips.

Esther pressed her fingers to her lips and blushed, a faint pink spreading up her neck and cheeks. She would look lovely naked in his bed, her skin that lovely flushed colour, her lips swollen from his kisses, her ... He cleared his throat, smiled at her and took her hand, liking how she immediately braided her fingers with his.

"So what will you do?" she asked.

"I have to find him." And somehow dissuade him from making yet another attempt on Melville's life, preferably leave this place as soon as possible—before Melville assembled the large group of armed men he'd been talking about last night. Antoine ran a finger under his collar.

"Best way to hunt a fox is with dogs and mounted men," Melville had said, and all night Antoine had seen Felix running madly through the unfamiliar terrain, with baying hounds snapping at his heels.

"I will help you," Esther said.

"You cannot. It would displease your brother."

"Pah!" Esther stood up straight. "I do not answer to him!" She lowered her voice. "Besides, I wasn't going to tell him."

Antoine considered her in silence. "I do not like it. You should not have to keep secrets from your family, and if I do find Felix, I cannot tell Mr Melville where he is." He shook his head. "I cannot, Esther! No matter that he is vile and dangerous, I cannot point those who desire him dead in his direction."

“I understand.” She squeezed his hand. “I do. And I will not tell—not unless he attempts to do Duncan and Erin harm again.”

“Fair enough.” After all, Antoine had already concluded that should things come to a head, he would do what was necessary to stop Felix from wreaking vengeance on the Melvilles.

Papegoja Plantation had its own little well-maintained skiff, moored at a separate jetty from the one the household used to bathe during the summer. This jetty was broader and sturdier, wide enough for a loaded barrow to be rolled along it.

Esther leaped nimbly aboard and settled herself on the centre thwart. By the time Antoine was aboard, she already had the oars in the crutches.

“I should row,” he said.

“I like to row,” she replied. “You keep an eye on our destination.”

“It is not right for a man to be rowed by a woman,” Antoine protested, and Esther laughed.

“Why on earth not? I’d rather row you than carry you.”

“Eh?” Why would she carry him? He listened with interest as she explained that in some godforsaken places along the wild British coast, fishermen wives carried their men out through the shallows to their boats, this to avoid them getting wet.

“But ... *les femmes*, they get wet!” Antoine protested.

“Yes, but they can warm themselves at a fire afterwards. Their men are stuck at sea for several days, so they need their clothes to be as dry as possible.” She smiled at him. “Women are as prone to protect their men as men are of defending their women.”

“Hmm,” he replied. In his experience, quite a few men were disinclined to do much to protect or keep their women happy. He could not recall a single instance when his father

had said or done anything to make Maman's life easier or happier.

The Delaware ran strong, and Esther had to put quite some effort into the rowing before they finally approached the opposite shore. They moored the boat and pushed through thick stands of reeds and shrubs to emerge on a narrow track.

At first glance, there were no signs of habitation, but Esther pointed to the far right where the gable of a house stuck up from the surrounding vegetation. The track, however, meandered to the left.

Antoine led the way, and after several minutes of walking, they came upon a skiff moored in a stand of reeds. Impossible to see from the river, and to judge from how overgrown the track was, people rarely used it. Other than the oars, there was also a long pole.

Several yards further along, the track took a sharp turn to the right, and there, almost hidden by a stand of trees, was a small shed.

"Stay here," Antoine ordered Esther in an undertone, pointing to a relatively hidden spot behind a big thorny bush.

She nodded, gripping his hand hard. "Be careful," she whispered.

On purpose, he ensured to make noise as he approached. Once he got to the door, he crouched. "Felix!" he hissed. "Are you here?"

No answer, but there was a soft scuff on the other side, a faint squeaking.

"Felix! *C'est moi*, Antoine!" He pitched his voice a bit louder.

"What do you want?" came Felix's voice from behind him, and Antoine spun, only to come face to face with the muzzle of a pistol. "Back door," Felix said, smiling crookedly when Antoine gasped. "Surely, you know that only a fool hides somewhere with only one entrance?"

"You need to oil the hinges," Antoine said.

“I will not be here long enough for it to matter.” Felix shrugged. “So why are you here?”

“I was concerned for you.” Compared to last time he saw him, Felix was looking more like himself, his clothes neat and clean, that dark shadow of unkempt bristles gone. He’d even tied back his hair, and a faint whiff of lavender indicated it was not that long ago since he’d used expensive soap.

“That I do not believe,” Felix said. “No, dear brother, I fear you’ve betrayed me to Melville.”

“Me?” Antoine scowled. “I have done nothing of the sort!”

“And yet no sooner do you set foot in Chester than everyone—everyone!—is out searching for me.”

“They’ve been doing that since our first attempt on the Melvilles,” Antoine said.

“So you say. But I am disinclined to trust you, brother of mine.” Felix was still pointing his gun at him, but his arm wavered, sweat dotting his forehead. That injury of his was not entirely healed, then.

“Had I intended you harm, I’d have come armed and accompanied by Melville’s men,” Antoine protested. “Instead, I come with this.” He dug into one pocket to produce a little bundle of clean linen bandages, in the other to fish out a small flask of what Esther assured him was a most potent apple brandy. “For your arm,” he clarified at Felix’s confused expression.

“There is nothing wrong with my arm!”

“Yes, there is. You can’t even hold the pistol straight. We have to do something about it.”

“We?”

“Well, you cannot do it yourself, can you?”

“I had a woman up in Camden help me.” Felix lowered the pistol and gestured at his clothes. “Not only did she heal and clean me, she also fed me and clothed me—well, after first undressing me entirely.” He chuckled. “Took her by surprise, I

did, when in the midst of our lovemaking I tied her to the bed.”

Antoine made a face.

“She got what she wanted,” Felix said. “A passionate bout in bed with a man much younger and far more comely than she ever was.”

“And what if she tells someone? They’ll know to look for you here!” Camden was well over an hour away, but still.

“Oh, she won’t. Our fair widow would rather choke on her own tongue than admit she took me in and seduced me. She would never be able to live down the shame among her Quaker friends.” He cackled with laughter.

“And did her healing work?” Antoine asked.

“Not entirely.” Felix shrugged off his coat before hastily gripping the pistol again. “If you try anything ...” he warned.

“I won’t.” Antoine rolled up Felix’s sleeve. The shirt was a couple of sizes too big for Felix’s elegant frame, but the linen was of excellent quality, as was the needlework. He studied the half-healed gash, set his thumbs on either side and squeezed lightly. Felix hissed out a curse.

“Abscess,” Antoine said.

“How would you know?”

“Maybe because I’ve suffered several around that damned dog bite?” Antoine retorted. “It has to be cut open and drained,” he said. “Best we do it inside.”

The interior was dark but surprisingly dry. A small table, a stool and a hearth in which glowed a small fire. On one side was a hammock, stuffed with several pillows and blankets. “Her husband used to be a mariner,” Felix said with a shrug. “And she had no need of all that, did she?”

It did not take long. His brother sat as still as a rock, not as much as a whimper escaping his tightly pressed lips as Antoine cut, cleaned and stitched.

“*Sacrebleu!* That burns!” he said when Antoine poured the apple brandy over the closed gash before bandaging it.

“But it helps.”

“Hmph! We will see.” Felix adjusted his clothes. “And will you help me?”

“I am your brother,” Antoine sidestepped. “But surely you realise only a fool would attempt a surprise attack on a man forewarned?” He moved closer. “Why don’t we just go home?” Not that he had any intention of doing so—at least not with Felix.

Felix laughed bitterly. “And what welcome will we receive? Papa does not hold with failure. It is easy for you—you have somewhere else to go, and likely Grandpere Arpin will slaughter the fatted calf to welcome you home, but me, I have to live with the wreck that is our father.” He shuddered. “He will make me pay, Antoine. Just like he made Grégoire Dubois pay.”

“Grégoire? But he was his friend! Our friend!”

“Grégoire put horns on him. Big, big horns,” Felix said. “For years, he had a liaison with our dear Maman, and—”

“*Non! Non, non, non!* Maman would never—”

“But she did. And one day Papa found out, and Grégoire, well ...” He sat down on the stool, linked his hands together and stared at them. “He made me watch,” he said softly. “I was all of thirteen, and Papa made me watch as he more or less flayed Grégoire to death. His honour demanded retribution, and Grégoire paid with blood and pain—until he died.”

Antoine couldn’t quite speak, swallowing repeatedly to rid his mouth of the bitter taste of bile.

Felix looked at him. “Surely, you knew he was a man of determined action.”

“That is not action, Felix. That is murder.”

Felix shrugged. “Is it? I learned my lesson that day. A Chardon never, never forgives a slur on his honour.”

“Did Maman know?”

“About Grégoire?” Felix nodded. “Oh yes. He made sure she did. And after that, she never spoke to him again—not directly. But she never betrayed him again either, which was what was truly important.”

“Maybe he deserved to be betrayed!”

“By his own wife?” Felix snarled. “No man deserves that!” He was on his feet, crowding Antoine back against the wall. “Just as no one deserves to be betrayed by his own brother!”

“Or abandoned by him!” Antoine shoved so hard Felix overbalanced, stumbled over the stool and fell. Felix groaned. Antoine extended a hand and hauled him up.

“Well, well, there’s hope for you yet,” Felix said with a smile.

“There’s hope for both of us if we just abort this ridiculous quest for revenge and return home,” he said tiredly. “He would never know, Felix.”

“He would. I cannot lie to him.”

“Then we don’t return home until he dies.”

“Knowing him, that will take years.” Felix looked at Antoine. “We do not want Papa as our enemy. People who oppose him—or disappoint him—usually end up dead.” He straightened up. “Besides, this is my debt of honour too. I am a Chardon, and I—we, brother—will make Melville pay!”

“Felix,” Antoine groaned.

“So what will it be, brother? Can I count on you?”

“I am your brother,” Antoine replied in a dull voice. And he would likely burn in hell for choosing the life and well-being of others before that of Felix. But he just couldn’t. He studied his hands, clenching them to stop them from trembling. Poor, poor Maman! And Grégoire! He’d been a small child when Grégoire disappeared out of his life, a big, solid man with a ready smile. To think of him tortured to death by his vile father—it turned his stomach.

“Good.” Felix clapped him on his shoulder. “We need a plan.”

“One that preferably does not lead to us being hanged,” Antoine muttered. He turned to look his brother straight in the eyes. “And we do not harm any of the women. Not even Madame Melville.”

“Oh, we will hurt her,” Felix said. “She’ll be grieving for her husband the rest of her life.” The bastard looked pleased saying that.

On the way back, Antoine rowed, attempting to sort through the emotions thronging him. It was as if Esther understood his need for silence. In fact, she’d said nothing since he came bursting out of that foul shed, desperate to put space between himself and his brother.

“He blows hot and cold,” he said abruptly. “One moment I am swept with compassion for him, the next I want to throttle him.” He leaned into the oars. “Truth is, I am not entirely sure I know him. It is as if the obsession to not disappoint our father has twisted him.” Yet another long pull on the oars. Felix would not desist trying because returning home without fulfilling Papa’s request was not an option. And if he did not desist, then Antoine would have to do what he could to stop him. *Take this cup from me*, he prayed softly. *Dear Father, spare me this choice.*

They bumped into the jetty. He lifted the oars, handed Esther onto the jetty and helped moor the craft. He wasn’t aware he was weeping until Esther gently wiped his cheeks.

Over the coming days, Antoine disappeared regularly, usually with Esther in tow. Erin didn't like it. It was evident Antoine was struggling, and Esther was too young to be dragged into some sort of complicated—and dangerous—situation featuring the damned Chardons.

Besides, there was Esther's reputation to consider. That thought brought Erin up short. Look at her, the modern twenty-first century woman adapting so completely to her new life that she worried about a teenager spending time alone with a young man!

She tried to talk to Esther but was met with evasive replies and vague smiles. Esther became adept at slipping away from all of them, spending whatever time she did not invest in Antoine on the twins and Tim.

"At least we know where he is," Duncan said late one afternoon, standing with her by the shore. Their skiff was halfway across the river, Antoine straining at the oars. "A relief, in truth, because this means we know from what direction he'll come."

"So why don't we go after him? Send men to find him?"

"Do you think they would?" he asked. "If he was truly cornered, do you not think he'd resort to using the locket?"

"Would it matter?" As long as he was out of their hair, right?

“He’s a determined bastard. I reckon he’d return at some point. Likely when we least expect it.” He sighed. “We have to lure him out into the open. We cannot continue living like this.” For an instant, his shoulders dropped, and she set a hand to his back, feeling how all his muscles tensed. He was hiding it well, her man, attempting to be so calm and strong, so reassuring when the fears rode her.

Fears of having Felix kill Duncan.

Or of having him flip open that damned locket and drag them back to die in a burning hell.

Or ...

She took a slow, deep breath. He was always there for her—but he needed her too.

“Come,” she said, taking his hand.

She led him up the back stairs and into their room.

“What ...” he began, but she silenced him with a kiss, and she could feel him smiling under her lips.

She undressed him. A slow, teasing process in which she took every opportunity to touch, to kiss. Once he was naked, she gestured at the bed. “Lie down.”

He did as ordered, flat on his back, his cock rising into the air.

“Wrong way,” she said, wagging a finger at him.

“Wrong way? But how ...”

“We will start with a massage,” she said firmly, holding up a bottle of her precious almond oil.

“Ah.”

He flipped over, and she ran her hands up his legs, his firm butt, over his back. He sighed under her touch, and she did it over and over, smiling at how he sank deeper and deeper into the bedding with each pass. She undid skirts, bodice and corset and clambered onto the bed. He twisted his head to look at her, a dark lock falling over his forehead.

A generous amount of oil, and she straddled him before sinking her hands into his tense shoulders and neck.

Duncan made a protesting sound.

“Relax,” she told him, and there was a muffled laugh in response.

“With my wife’s naked privates rubbing against my arse?”

“Clearly, I’m going too easy on you,” she said, increasing the pressure along the ridges of his shoulder blades. She found a trigger point and dug in, and he reared off the bed.

“That hurts!”

“It’s supposed to hurt—well, a bit.” She leaned forward to kiss his nape. “This helps release tension, and as tense as you are, you’re going to feel it. But hey, no pain, no gain.”

He muttered something, protesting repeatedly the coming minutes, but he grew successively quieter, and she stroked and massaged, leaving him bright red in places from her ministrations.

“Who taught you to do this?” he mumbled.

“My grandmother.” She laughed softly. “She obviously didn’t straddle me half-naked, but when I first came to live with them, I had problems sleeping. This helped.” She settled herself on his bum, and slid her hands up and down his flanks. “It hurts to be discarded like garbage,” she said, keeping her tone light.

Even after all these years, she couldn’t think of her mother without experiencing a shadow of that long-gone pain. Not that she ever missed her mother—which in itself was indicative of how nonexistent their relationship had been—but she’d never forgiven her for choosing her new husband over her daughter’s welfare. It was him coming on to her, making horribly inappropriate comments and advances, and yet her mother—never Mom, never!—had sided with him and thrown Erin out.

“I ended up in a better place,” she said with a smile. “Helen loved me unconditionally, so I went my way, and my

mother and her now all-white family went their way.”

How he could move so quickly and with such strength, she didn't know, but suddenly he was on his back, his hands gripping her shoulders.

“She did you wrong,” he said.

“I know. Just like your mother did you wrong.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. “But being in the right doesn't mean it doesn't hurt.”

“Nay.” His hands slid down to her waist. He rose to sit, lifting her in place on his legs. “Let's get this off you, honey.” Her chemise came off, and he made a soft appreciative sound before kissing first one, then the other breast. “Like molten syrup,” he said. He nibbled her skin, closed his mouth round one nipple and sucked. “And just as sweet,” he added, his voice darkening. He looked at her, and those blue, blue eyes ate her up. “I need you,” he said hoarsely.

In response, she rose on her knees and guided him inside.

They exhaled together as she sank down, impaling herself on his length. She stayed seated like that, drowning in his gaze, in the way his hands skated along her skin, leaving heat in their wake. She shifted slightly, and he groaned. She tightened her pelvic muscles, and he moaned her name.

His hands closed round her hips, and slowly he guided her up, just as slowly dragged her back down. Too slow! She tried to move faster, but his grip was hard and demanding, his mouth quirking into a little smile as he shook his head.

Up. Down. Slow, gliding movements that had her close to combustion but didn't quite drive her across the edge. He tilted her hips slightly, using his cock to apply pressure to her clit, and Erin swallowed back a gasp. Again. Again and again, and she sank her nails into his shoulder, a silent demand that he do something about the fire inside her.

He kissed her. A soft, gentle thing that quickly morphed into heated devouring. Lips glued to lips, and she couldn't breathe, but who cared, because seriously, who needed air? He

pulled free, panting. She licked her lips. “More,” she whispered.

He rolled them over and pounded into her, she holding on for dear life as his loud breath tickled her ear, her neck. No words, not now, just a silent coming together, a reaffirmation that it was them against the world. Always.

She climaxed and felt him begin to draw back to spill outside of her. No. Not this time. She tightened her hold on him, wrapping her legs round his waist. He froze. “Are you sure?” he asked. She nodded, and for some odd reason there were tears in her eyes. She loved him. She wanted him. Entirely.

She held on when he shifted them so that she was lying on top of him, her head on his shoulder. His big hand moved up and down her back and she pressed herself as close to him as she could. She dozed, waking some time later to the sound of loud, high voices coming up the stairs.

“Good timing,” she said with a smile.

“Aye. It would have been most unfortunate had they come an hour ago.” He pulled on his shirt and hopped into his breeches. As he crouched to retrieve his waistcoat, she set a hand on his arm. “Do what you have to do to lure him here,” she said. “I don’t like it if that means using Antoine, but we’ll have to make it up to him afterwards.”

He met her eyes. “I don’t like it either, but I don’t see an alternative.”

She nodded just as Sandy banged on their door. “Mama! Mama!” she called.

“How do they know we’re here?” she whispered.

With a grin, he pointed at the window, standing half-open.

“Oh my God!”

“They’re too young to understand,” he soothed her.

“Yeah, they are. The rest of the household, however ...”

He shrugged. "I do not care. If I feel the inclination to bed my lovely wife in the middle of the afternoon, well then, I'll just do it." He gave her a quick kiss. "Best get dressed," he said with a wink before opening the door to sweep his delighted daughters into his arms.

Erin came down to dinner feeling embarrassed, but it soon became evident the assembled household had other concerns.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

Lettie raised her face, revealing an unhealthy greyish pallor. "I had a letter from Da today." She held up a thick piece of paper. "They haven't seen Emrick in a week." She swallowed. "He could be here! He could—"

"But he isn't," Duncan said. "We would know if he landed in Chester."

"Emrick is no fool. He will likely travel to Philadelphia." Lettie traced a loop on the table.

Mrs Andersson set down a huge bowl of sauerkraut on the table and hurried over to fetch the pork sausages that would go with it. Jugs of cider or beer, a slab of dark bread and a sizeable chunk of cheese, a little stone jar of Mrs Andersson's potent mustard—Erin's belly growled in appreciation.

As always, Duncan sat at the head of the large table, with Erin beside him. At the other end, Sivert Andersson sat flanked by his wife and Julie, with everyone else squeezing in where they could. Antoine was sitting silent beside Esther, who kept leaning towards him to say things that would have him nod and even manage a quick smile before reverting to staring gloomily at nothing.

"We will sort Ellis when we have to," Duncan said, heaping his plate with food.

"*Ja,*" Hans said. "He will not harm you," he told Lettie, who, to Erin's amusement, blushed as prettily as a teenager.

"I suppose I could go to Graham's Garden," Lettie said, glancing at Hans.

“Mayhap. But you cannot spend your life hiding from him.” Duncan reached for the mustard. “Very good,” he complimented Mrs Andersson. “But then, all your meals are.”

Mrs Andersson preened. “This is nothing special, Master Duncan. Just simple Swedish fare.”

Hans blinked. “Swedish? *Nein*, this is German fare!”

“Hmph! I cooked it, did I not? And I am not German, I am Swedish down to the last bone in my foot!”

“Except for those bones that are English, *min skatt*,” Sivert said, and whatever the Swedish endearment meant, it has Mrs Andersson leaning against him, her hand on his forearm.

“Sauerkraut is German food,” Hans insisted. “It is even a German word!”

“We call it *surkål*,” Mrs Andersson retorted. “And I find it likely it is the Germans who stole the idea from us Swedes!”

“What?” Hans bristled. “The only thing the Swedes have brought to my homeland is war and famine!”

Mrs Andersson rose to her feet.

“Enough!” Duncan snapped. “Let us be grateful for the good food, not squabble about where it comes from.”

“Which is actually China,” Erin said, causing both Hans and Mrs Andersson to glare at her. “What? It’s true. Just like they invented gunpowder and fireworks and the printing press and even paper.”

“Gunpowder?” Jasper sniffed. “Surely, such a significant invention must be English.”

“Nope.” Erin filled her mouth with sausage and cabbage. She tilted her head to the side. “You know, I can’t quite think of anything the English have invented.”

“I still say sauerkraut is German,” Hans muttered. “And while we may not have invented gunpowder, everyone knows the art of gunsmithing is German.”

“*Oui*,” Antoine said from where he was sitting. “They make the best pistols in the world, the Germans.”

Hans puffed up.

“Especially the variant without a flint,” Erin said, smiling at Hans.

He sighed. “I did not say it was a good invention, and neither is gunpowder. But sauerkraut ...” He smacked his lips. “Now that is a good thing the Germans have given mankind.”

Mrs Andersson seemed on the verge of saying something, but a low “*Nej*” from Sivert had her desisting.

They had finished the meal when Duncan cleared his throat and directed himself to Antoine.

“I have reasons to suspect your brother is hiding on the opposite shore.”

Antoine sucked in a breath, made as if to say something, but Duncan held up his hand. “No, Antoine, don’t try to deny it. Do you think I haven’t noticed your sudden passion for rowing across the river?” He gave Antoine a serious look. “And I do not like how you’ve implicated Esther in all this. She—”

“Chose to involve herself!” Esther said, glaring at her brother.

“The man wants to harm us!” Duncan exclaimed.

Lettie leaned forward. “Aye, Esther, he is a vile creature who—”

“He’s his brother!” Esther yelled, pointing at Antoine. “His brother. And just so you know, I have agreed to help Antoine on one condition: should he not be able to deter his brother, then he will warn you, Duncan. Antoine knows I will not forgive him—or myself—if harm comes to my family because I offered to help.”

“I am trying to convince him to leave,” Antoine said, his voice breaking.

“Well, you have five days to do so,” Duncan stood. “Next Monday, I will initiate a search of West Jersey. Men will ride south from Camden to here.”

“Why wait?” Lettie asked.

“First, we celebrate Michaelmas,” Duncan said. “I dare say everyone is looking forward to attending the market in Chester.” He looked at Erin. “I’m not sure we’ll go, though. I’m not entirely sure our little lasses are old enough to behave.”

And just like that, he’d baited the trap. Erin swallowed while managing a chuckle, saying that not even with wild dogs snapping at her heels would she agree to taking her little hellions to Chester. “It will take at most five minutes before they slip off somewhere,” she sighed.

Lettie found Erin in her workshop, where she was back to planing planks manically.

“I’ll not be going to Chester,” she said. “And neither will Hans.” She took hold of Erin’s arm, bringing her motion to a stop. “Should he be fool enough to try anything, he will not find you alone.”

“What do you mean?” Erin tried.

Lettie shook her head. “No, no, Erin. I am no fool. What Duncan said in there it had but one purpose: to flush the evil beast from the shadows.” She settled herself on one of the workbenches. “Do you think it will work?”

“I don’t know.” Erin frowned down at the plane. The iron bit needed replacing. “One part of me hopes that it does; the other prays and prays that he comes to his senses and leaves.”

Lettie cocked her head. “You’re more afraid of him than you should be: he’s one man, Erin. One. What is it he can do that so frightens you?”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Erin plunked down to sit. If Lettie was willing to put herself in danger, then she deserved some sort of forewarning, but how on earth was she to explain this?

“His father has a locket,” she began. “And we know for a fact that Felix is carrying that same accursed locket.”

Lettie looked amused. “A locket?”

“You won’t believe this,” Erin muttered. “If the locket is opened, it ... Well ...” She clenched her hands together and took several quick breaths, willing back the surging panic. “It is full of evil magic,” she whispered. “It creates some sort of hole through time, and if you are too close, it will suck you through it.”

Lettie looked about to laugh.

“It’s true!” Erin said. “It happened to us—to me and Duncan—but fortunately Chardon was hurt and we managed to get back here, to our time.” Well, not her time, but no way was she going into that.

“Hmm,” was all Lettie said. She then surprised Erin by sliding off her perch and giving her a hard hug. “I am not sure I believe you, but I can see you are truly frightened, and that is enough for me. We will be there for you.”

“We?” Erin teased, wanting desperately to change the subject.

“Hans and I.” Lettie looked proud. “He is my man, he says.”

Erin chose not to prick that little bubble of joy; after all, as long as Emrick Ellis was around, *he* was Lettie’s man. Unless, of course, Hans and Lettie chose to leave for very distant parts.

“I had to tell her,” Erin said much later, joining Duncan in bed. She’d cleaned her teeth as thoroughly as ever and smelled nicely of almonds and lavender—this courtesy of her Scottish friend Arabella Stirling, who sent out regular beauty supplies to her.

“Nay, you did not!” He gave her a disgruntled look.

“And if she’d been standing too close when he flipped open that locket? What then, Duncan?”

“Hmph!” he grumbled. “What did she say?” he asked after some moments of silence.

“She had problems stopping herself from laughing.” Erin sighed and turned to face him. “Let’s just hope she is never in

a position to realise just how far all this is from a laughing matter.”

“Amen to that,” he said. “What will Antoine do, do you think?”

“Warn his brother,” she said. “And hopefully, he’ll spill the information that we will be home alone.”

“Except that we won’t be,” he said in a satisfied tone.

Erin turned on her back and stared up at the ceiling. “We have to make sure the girls aren’t here.” And then they had to hope their plan worked. Or that Felix decided to flee. *Please let him flee*, she thought. But she didn’t really believe he would.

“Five days, Felix! Five. And then ...” Antoine mimed a slashed throat before reverting to pacing the small enclosed space Felix presently called home.

“Yes, yes, you have said that already.” Felix yawned, but Antoine knew him well enough to know he wasn’t as unaffected as he pretended to be.

“So what will you do?”

“Me? Surely, you mean we, little brother.”

“*Mais oui!*” Antoine dragged his hands through his hair. “But you are as stubborn as a mule! You refuse to listen to common sense, Felix, but time is running out!”

For some odd reason, this made Felix smile. “Time?” He snickered. “Ah, yes, time.” He reached for an apple and bit into it. “So why five days?”

“There is some sort of market this Saturday.” Antoine made a dismissive sound. “Apparently, it is a most important event in this backwater.” He almost smiled at the memory of how words had bubbled out of Esther as she tried to describe just how exciting the Chester Michaelmas market was.

Concentrate, he chided himself. One long steady inhalation and he managed a loud snort. “Every single person on the Melville plantation is going. Well, not Melville himself, of course.” He threw Felix a quick look and rushed on. “He will be closeted in his study considering just how to corner you!” He wheeled and glared at Felix. “He has men at his

disposal. He has dogs; he has horses.” He slammed his hands down on the table. “I do not want to watch you die, Felix!”

“How touching,” Felix drawled. “And tell me, little brother, why would I die and you not?”

“It is you they’ll be hunting. Me, I am the inept, bawling fool who was abandoned by his brother.”

“How fortunate for you.” Felix looked Antoine up and down. “You seem to have landed on your feet.”

“The Melvilles have been good to me,” Antoine said stiffly.

“So good you forget your obligations to your family?”

“My obligations? And why do you think I am here? How many times have I snuck off to row across that damned river to ensure you are healing?” He had hold of his brother, giving him a soft shake. “Felix, this is no jest! You may be skilled with pistol and rapier, but Melville is talking about many, many men armed to their teeth.” He sank down on his knees before his brother. “Please,” he said hoarsely. “Do not throw away your life.”

Felix had frozen with the apple halfway to his mouth. “You *do* care,” he said, sounding surprised.

Antoine groaned. “How many times must I tell you? Of course I do!”

Felix sat back and studied him intently. He took a bite out of the apple and chewed. “You are probably right,” he said at long last. “It may be best to leave.” He scratched at his chest, and for an instant his fingers tightened round the circular shape of the locket. His mouth curved into a little smile, and Antoine’s guts twisted. He knew that smile: whenever Felix intended to lie, he smiled and widened his eyes. So when his brother turned eyes so similar to his own his way and gave him a wide-eyed look, Antoine wanted to scream out loud.

“You should perhaps try to find us passage, dear brother,” Felix said.

“*Oui.*” Antoine got to his feet. “It will have to be from Philadelphia.”

Felix returned to his apple, a gleam in his eyes.

“I told him,” Antoine said bitterly as Esther rowed them back. “I dangled it before him like one dangles a carrot before an obstinate mule.” He hid his face in his hands. “I even went to the trouble to ensure he thinks I said it only in passing.” He groaned. “Your brother won’t be alone at home, will he?”

Esther shook her head. “He is no fool.” She stopped rowing. “Neither is your brother. He seems to think you’re one, but he prides himself on his intelligence, does he not?”

Antoine nodded morosely.

“So, reasonably, he must wonder if you are unwittingly repeating something Duncan has said precisely to lure him into a trap.” She dipped the oars and pulled. “If he chooses to act on it, on his head be it. You have repeatedly tried to convince him to abandon this venture.”

He nodded again. She was right—but it did not feel right.

“But surely you need me here with you!” Jasper looked about to weep.

“I need someone I trust to protect my children,” Duncan said. He clapped Jasper on the shoulder. “You have to keep them safe for me. And if something happens to us ...” Erin saw his Adam’s apple bob up and down several times, “then it is you who must make sure they reach my kin safely. You, Jasper.”

A while later, Jasper left, riding beside the cart transporting Julie and their two very excited daughters. Erin stood side by side with Duncan, waving enthusiastically until they’d dropped out of sight. The moment they did, she leaned into him, feeling his arm settle round her shoulders.

They were now totally alone—or so it would seem to anyone spying on them. Lettie and Hans had slipped out well before dawn with every single musket they owned. Antoine had refused to leave and was hidden somewhere out by the work sheds. And Esther ... Erin gnawed her lip. Duncan had ordered his sister to leave, had been adamant, even. But from the flaming heat in Esther's eyes and the stubborn set to her jaw, Erin suspected she had not obeyed.

“She's here somewhere, isn't she?” Duncan said with a sigh, leading them in the direction of the farm yard.

“Mmm?”

“Esther.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

They'd decided to choose their own ground. The large farm yard was enclosed on three sides by the stables, the huge barn and various sheds, one of which included Erin's workshop. The fourth side gave onto the harvested fields, with the old well sitting at one end while drying firewood neatly stacked to rise well over five feet over the ground stood at the other.

She'd placed several long poles at regular intervals along the various walls. Long enough to maintain a safe distance from the locket, sharp enough at one end to do some damage. Huh, all they needed was some antiquated armour and a caparisoned horse and they could pretend to be medieval knights hefting lances at a tournament.

“He might not come,” she said, mainly in an attempt to convince herself.

“True.” He pulled her close enough to press his lips to her forehead. “But if he does, we are ready for him.”

Ready for him?

“Shoot on sight, honey.” He looked grim. “Felix Chardon will not leave here alive.”

Her knees buckled, and she had to wipe her damp palms against the rough fabric of her skirts.

One hour passed. Two. Fear transformed into anxious irritation.

“We will never know if he has truly left,” she told Duncan, lifting her gaze from yet another floor plank.

“I know.” He was stacking the finished planks against one of the walls, anything to keep them both busy.

“Should we have left the dogs to roam free?” she asked as yet another hour passed. The poor animals looked decidedly unhappy, cooped up as they were in here.

“Better to have them as backup.” He scratched the head of one of the huge hounds.

“If he even shows,” she muttered, just as a shot rang out.

“Duncan Melville,” someone roared, and Erin pressed a hand to her chest, trying to calm her racing heart.

“It’s him,” she groaned.

“Aye.” He cupped her face and looked deeply into her eyes. “It will be all right, honey.” One swift kiss and he made for the door, already pulling his pistol. “Remember the plan,” he said, stepping out into the sunshine.

“The plan,” she told herself. “We have a plan.” But when she looked out of the small window, she realised the plan had gone to hell because Felix Chardon wasn’t coming alone. “Oh God!” she exclaimed.

Antoine had woken before dawn, early enough to watch Lettie and the German scurry off to wherever they were now hiding. The household was mostly in bed when he’d slipped across the cobbled front yard, ducked round the corner of the stables and considered just where to hide. Where to lie and watch as his brother marched straight into a trap—a trap he had helped construct. *Holy Mother, please guide my brother, he prayed. Make him see reason and leave, Our Lady.*

He chose a spot in the shadowed interior of the barn, close enough to the wide-open doors that he could see most of the open area beyond, today unusually silent. On a normal

Saturday, there would be men and beasts and carts and women chattering on their way to the dairy shed, children leaping about in between doing their chores. Today, after the bustle of carts and horses as every single human living on the estate prepared to leave for Chester, nothing moved.

Antoine yawned and rested back against a wall, wondering if Esther was still scowling at being forced onto the last cart. How she'd argued with her brother, but Antoine was eternally grateful that Melville had refused to budge. Esther should not be anywhere close to what might happen here; she was too young, too innocent to be sullied by deviousness and violence.

Madame Melville and Melville himself appeared, standing for a while in the sun before ducking into Madame's carpentry shed. Amazing woman, that, as at home with hammer and saw as with a needle. He frowned, not quite being able to recall one single instant when he'd seen the lady of the household sew. He had, however, on repeated occasions seen her working on repairs requiring advanced carpentry skills. He chuckled softly, thinking that his Maman would have liked this unusual woman—Maman was of the firm opinion there was little a man could do that a woman couldn't do as well.

Hours passed. He shifted with the sun, following the shadows deeper into the barn. He's just settled himself atop a barrel when a shot had him leaping to his feet. And then came his brother's voice, screaming for Melville, and Antoine wanted to crawl away and hide, but he couldn't. He was obliged to at least watch when his brother was shot to death, so he peeked out, only to have every single drop of blood in him draining downwards.

"Look what I found," Felix said to Melville, shoving Esther in front of him.

"Let her go!" Melville yelled.

"Why on earth would I do that?" Felix asked. "If she is here, then so I imagine is my little brother, and I do so desire to be reunited with him."

"Esther," Antoine croaked. "Esther!" he roared, and he was out of the barn running towards his brother, who was

holding a spitting, struggling Esther as a shield in front of himself.

Antoine skidded to a halt. “Don’t you dare touch her!”

“Oh, I already have.” Felix tightened his hold on Esther’s hair to the point that her mouth fell open—but she did not utter a sound.

“Stop it! You’re hurting her,” Antoine yelled. He took several deep breaths, assessing the situation. Not only did Felix have Esther, he had five men with him.

“And you do not like that, do you?” Felix said, pressing the muzzle of his pistol into Esther’s temple. With a low laugh, he ran his mouth up and down her throat. “She tastes delicious,” he said. “I look forward to further exploring her delights—should she live.” He stared at Antoine. “It is up to you, brother. Come and stand with me, or she dies.”

“No,” Antoine said. “Not Esther, not—”

“Your little sweetheart?” Felix filled in. “You think I didn’t know you visited me accompanied?” Felix laughed. “I know everything, little brother. Everything!” He spat at Antoine and changed to French. “Papa always believed you would prove weak. What else to expect from a cuckoo?”

“A cuckoo?” Antoine took a few steps closer, tightening his grip on the blade he was holding.

“Surely, you’ve suspected as much? Especially since I told you our mother was a whore, a—”

“Maman was no whore!”

“Of course she was!” Felix hissed. “She spread her legs for fat Grégoire, and look what that led to.” He gestured at Antoine with the pistol, and Antoine sagged with relief now that the muzzle wasn’t digging into Esther’s skin.

“... like son,” Felix said.

“Eh?” Antoine said.

“I said, did you really think you were a Chardon? You? There is nothing of Papa in you, nothing! Instead, you

resemble that overweight miscreant our precious mother so evidently preferred. Like father, like son, hey? So maybe, just like poor Grégoire, you will weep and beg. And maybe, just like poor Grégoire, you will realise it will not help.”

“He’s not my father?” Antoine asked.

“Grégoire? I just said he is!”

Antoine shook his head. “Chardon.”

“No.” Felix gave him an amused look. “Look at you, fathered by an apothecary.”

Laughter bubbled out of Antoine. He fell to his knees and laughed and laughed.

“Shut up!” Felix yelled. “Shut up, damn you!”

Antoine just couldn’t stop.

“Pull yourself together,” Felix snapped. “This is unbecoming behaviour.”

“Unbecoming for whom?” Antoine got to his feet and approached, arms wide.

“Don’t come any closer!” Felix took a step backwards, hauling Esther with him.

“Thank you,” Antoine said. “Thank you for the best gift I have ever received.”

“You’re mad,” Felix growled. “And do not come closer, or I’ll shoot!”

“I am not mad. I am happy!” Antoine twirled and filled his lungs with air. “I am not a Chardon,” he yelled in English. “Thank the Lord, I am not his son!”

“Ingrate!” Felix pulled the trigger, and something hot and hard struck Antoine in the head. He tumbled forward, and the last thing he heard was Esther screaming his name.

Antoine’s body crumpled, and Esther howled. Shots rang out, and two of Felix’s men dropped to the ground. Erin released the dogs, and the five huge beasts leapt snarling towards the

intruders. One more shot, one more dead man, and the two remaining men took to their heels, chased by the baying dogs.

Erin stepped out just as her man began stalking towards Felix, who was backing away, still holding a crying Esther. Erin squinted. There was blood round Esther's mouth, and a dark stain was spreading on Felix's sleeve. Good for her! The man deserved to be bitten, although who knew, maybe doing so would give you rabies, and ... *Concentrate*, she admonished herself, but she really didn't want to because her Duncan was standing way too close to Felix.

"One step closer and I kill her," Felix warned, and then he shook his head. "Enough of this. It is time to finish what I have come here to do." He dug around behind his back and pulled out another pistol, grinning like a madman.

"I am always prepared," he bragged. "And now, unless you want me to blow your precious sister's brains out, kneel!"

Erin grabbed hold of Duncan. "Don't! Please don't!"

"What choice do I have?" he said in an undertone. "Look at her."

"Shoot him!" Erin screamed, "for God's sake, Lettie, kill him!"

Nothing. Of course not. Not even Lettie would dare take such a shot, not with Felix holding Esther in front of him.

Two of the dogs came loping back and began pacing towards Felix.

"Kneel, damn it! Kneel, or I kill her now!" His hold on Esther tightened to the point where she gargled.

Duncan fell to his knees.

Felix laughed out loud and aimed his pistol, his finger tightening.

Esther threw herself backwards just as the shot went off. With a grunt, Duncan collapsed.

"Noooo! Nooo!" Erin charged. Felix stumbled, released Esther and pulled a knife.

Erin grabbed one of her poles and made a jabbing motion. He backed away; she came after.

“Crazy woman. You think you can best me—me, Felix Chardon—with a piece of wood?” he jeered, taking yet another step back.

“Watch me,” she said. “I’ll run it through your belly and leave you to die—slowly.” She took a quick step to the side, effectively forcing him further back towards the crumbling ledge of the old well.

“You think you can win?” Felix snickered and groped under his shirt. With a triumphant grin, he pulled out the locket. “And if I open this, then what? Will you be sucked into it with me?” He leaned forward and hissed, “Let us find out!”

She tightened her hold on the pole and ran.

He swore loudly and fumbled with the engraved lid of the locket. It flipped open.

The pole caught him mid-chest and sent him stumbling backwards. His heel connected with the ledge. She yelled and charged again. This time, the force was enough to send him tumbling into the well, but it was too late. Strands of green and blue rose in whispering tendrils of magic towards the sky, releasing the scents of brine and burning wood. They formed a whirlpool of seething colour, a twisting, heaving thing that crackled with energy.

Light. So much light! And there was Helen’s smiling face, there her house. In the midst of that glittering, swirling funnel, she saw cars and houses, people who writhed and screamed as they swished by. Dangerous. It was hard to breathe, her mouth filled with the bitter taste of ash, and her pulse was painfully loud in her head. So, so dangerous!

She managed to back away a step or two. The whirlpool grew even bigger, strands of colour snagging at her wrists.

She was brutally pulled backwards, and it felt as if her hands were dipped in acid, her skin burning when those swirls of green and blue were torn off her.

“Down!”

She was squashed flat underneath Duncan, and she screamed in terror as everything around them began to spin. Duncan grunted out a curse and pressed himself even harder against her. They levitated. No, no, no! She dug her fingers into the ground, a futile attempt to anchor them to the here and now. Sandy! Ellen! She hooked her fingertips into the gravel and gritted her teeth. *Hold on*, she urged herself. *Hold on for them, for my babies.*

From the well came an extended shriek, abruptly cut off.

Everything quieted.

On top of her, Duncan slumped.

At first, Erin didn't dare to move, but as the minutes ticked by, she cautiously lifted her head, releasing her hold on the ground. No whirlpool of bright colours. Instead, she met the stunned expression of Lettie, crouching beside her. She crawled out from under her unconscious, injured man. His sleeve was drenched with blood. She had his blood on her clothes as well, but who cared? She knelt beside him, and his eyes fluttered open.

"I'll live," he said hoarsely.

She rested her forehead against his. "You saved me," she whispered.

"Nay, I saved us," he whispered back. "Because without you, there is no point to me." He made a clumsy attempt to grasp her bleeding, throbbing, hand. "And you helped, honey."

Hans shuffled closer to the well and craned his neck. He turned back to look at them with eyes the size of saucers. "He's gone."

"Good." Erin had by now located Duncan's injury. Duncan winced when she applied pressure to it and covered her hand with his.

"If he comes back ..." He nodded in the direction of the well.

Erin started trembling. If he came back? Oh God, he could! Any moment, he could pop back and ... She stared at

her husband, at the blood staining his clothes, her hands, and she almost vomited.

“Cover it,” Duncan said. “Make sure that if he does come back, he lands in a damned tomb.”

She nodded but didn't move.

“Now, Erin,” he ordered. “Now!” he repeated in a sharper tone, and it somehow unfroze her.

“I'll take care of him,” Esther said, sinking down beside Duncan.

“Antoine?” Duncan asked, and Esther gave him a brilliant smile.

“He lives,” she whispered.

Those unnecessary floor planks suddenly became useful. While Lettie and Esther busied themselves with Antoine and Duncan, Erin flew back and forth between her work shed and the old well. Hans joined her, a mute Hans who mumbled German prayers under his breath. He shoved her gently to the side after her first fumbling attempts to handle her hammer with her shredded fingers, and so it was she who ran after planks, him who built a sturdy lid over the old well. Once done, he disappeared and came back with a wheelbarrow and a spade.

“Needs to be covered by earth,” he muttered, and they spent the coming hours doing just that. By the time they were done, there was a low mound where before there had been an old dry well.

“We have to send for Lloyd,” Erin said, nudging one of the dead rogues.

“No, we don't.” Lettie appeared beside her. “How on earth are we to explain what happened here?”

“How are we to explain Duncan's been shot?”

“An accident,” Lettie said with a shrug. “Happens all the time with firearms.”

She gave Erin a little push towards the main house. “Wash,” she said. “Go and sit with your man. Hans and I will handle this.”

Erin leaned closer to her. “I think he’s in shock,” she whispered.

“Who isn’t?” Lettie said drily. She took a deep breath and then winked at Erin. “I can think of a cure for that.”

“Lettie!” She shook her head.

She washed. And washed. She ignored her torn fingertips and nails as she scrubbed and washed. And all the time she cried, a silent weeping that left her out of tears and exhausted. She found Esther sitting beside Antoine, who slept deeply, his head adorned by a bandage.

“A deep graze,” Esther said, leaning forward to kiss Antoine’s cheek. “Lettie says he was fortunate.”

Erin dragged herself into their bedroom, noting with some surprise it was nowhere close to evening yet, the September afternoon golden and bright. In the bed, Duncan was on his side, his gaze never leaving her.

She joined him.

“We did it,” she said.

“Aye, that we did.” He snuggled up to her. “And his damned father will never know what happened to his son or his precious locket.”

For an instant, she felt a twinge of pity. Not for Chardon Sr, evil bastard that he was, but for the son, who’d had no say in how he’d been raised and who’d now ended up God knew where. An instant, no more, until she jostled her husband by mistake, causing him to inhale noisily. Felix Chardon had come here intent on destruction. He deserved what he got.

Duncan woke to silence and a throbbing arm. Beside him, Erin slept on her belly, her hair a mass of curls covering most of her shoulders. He sank his nose into all that hair and inhaled, and something deep inside of him relaxed. She was still here—*he* was still here.

Carefully, he slid out of bed, biting back an exclamation when his bandaged shoulder protested. He used the chamber pot, grabbed hold of his breeches and slipped out. The door to Antoine's room stood ajar, and a quick look inside revealed the Frenchman was sunk in sleep—as was Esther, sitting on a stool beside him with her head pillowed on his bed. Duncan frowned. Esther could do better than Antoine. Knowing Esther, she'd not take kindly to anyone attempting to talk sense to her. In that, he suspected she was very much like her mother, who had not been much older than Esther when she'd eloped with a papist.

The kitchen was as silent as the rest of the house. The hearth was cold, but he found some bread and cheese, glugged down a mug of cider and went outside.

Rarely had Papegoja Plantation been as quiet and peaceful as it was today. From the smoke rising out of several chimneys, he concluded some of his tenants had returned at some point during the preceding night, but the majority had seemingly taken advantage of his offer to lodge at the trading company, thereby enjoying the festivities to their full.

He made his way to the farm yard and studied the low mound that now covered the old well. Other than that, there were no signs of what had transpired here yesterday: no dead men, no blood soaking into the dirt. One of the dogs trotted over and nudged at him with its cold nose. Distractedly, he stroked the large head while seeing before him that twisting spiral of colours that had risen out of the well. His Erin, standing too close, and somehow he'd found the strength to rise and grab hold of her because he knew that should she disappear from him, he'd never see her again.

He exhaled shakily, sitting down abruptly on an overturned trough. She could have been gone! Gone! Instead, here they still were, and had it not been for Lettie and Hans, that might not have been the case.

As if thinking of her conjured her, his cousin came into sight. As neat as always, she strode towards him carrying two heavy buckets. "You shouldn't be up," she admonished, setting down her burden. Frothing milk, he concluded after peering into one of the pails.

"It's my arm, not my leg that's injured." The shot had gone through the fleshy part of his shoulder, narrowly missing the shoulder blade—or so she'd told him as she'd doctored him yesterday. He owed his life to Esther, she'd also told him. Had she not shoved herself backwards, Felix would not have missed—not at that distance. On the other hand, the only reason he'd been shot was because she'd disobeyed. He shook free of these thoughts. He was too tired to feel anything beyond relief. "Besides, I couldn't sleep."

"Nor could I. The cows were lowing." She sat down beside him. "I don't like that two of those ruffians got away."

"Do you think they'll return?"

She snorted. "Here? Nay, but they might say something."

At present, Duncan couldn't rouse the energy to be concerned. Instead, he lifted his face to the sun, relishing the peace and quiet of the morning. The twisting knot of anxiety that had resided in his belly since he'd first heard of Chardon's planned retribution had dissolved overnight, leaving him to

consider other things—like when he should uproot his family and where they would go. Uncle David had extended an offer to join the company in London, remarking that while Erin’s colouring would likely cause a raised eyebrow or two, her evident wealth would cause much more interest.

“What exactly happened yesterday?” Lettie asked, breaking the agreeable silence.

“Felix Chardon came, we defended ourselves, he lost.”

“I meant the ... err ...” She lowered her voice. “Yon magic locket!” she hissed.

“Erin already told you what it could do.”

“And I did not believe her.” She fretted at something on her apron. “He was just gone! And had you not grabbed hold of Erin, she’d have been gone too.”

“Aye.” He did not need reminding of that.

“So where is he now?” she asked.

“I have no notion. In hell, if God is just.”

“Or if He even exists,” Lettie muttered, and that had Duncan opening his eyes.

“You cannot say such,” he admonished—even if he had his own doubts as to all things religious, this courtesy of his adopted father, who was of the opinion religion was merely another way for the entitled few to control the unentitled many. Heretic thoughts best kept to oneself, that.

“Grandma was not entirely convinced he existed.”

“Nay, that is not true.” He smiled fondly at the recollection of his grandmother, flushed and angry as she told Grandda just how dislikeable she found the latest minister, a man much given to preaching about the weaker vessel and woman’s subordinate role in life. “Grandma believed in God. She just didn’t believe in all the men who professed to speak on His behalf.”

They shared a chuckle.

“I wish I had such a locket,” she said after a while. “Imagine being able to rid this world of Emrick Ellis—and Nicholas Farrell.” She pulled a face.

“I dare say using it comes with a price,” Duncan replied. He nodded in the direction of the mound. “Ask Felix Chardon.”

Lettie left him sitting there, saying someone had to cook breakfast.

“Breakfast?” he squinted up at the sun. Half the day was gone.

“Dinner, then. I was thinking pancakes.”

They shared a smile. Grandma Alex had been a firm believer in pancakes as what she called “comfort food.” Today, they could all do with some of that.

The smell of food brought Antoine out of a dream about Maman. Esther was still fast asleep, her head pillowed on his chest. Distractedly, he stroked her hair, staring up at the ceiling as he tried to bring some order into his confused thoughts. She made a little sound and burrowed closer before startling awake and sitting up. She was rosy with sleep, the linen had left indentations on her skin, and all along her hairline fine strands of fair hair had escaped the confine of her braid. She licked her lips.

“You’re awake.” Her voice was hoarse.

“I am.”

She leaned over him, hands on his bandage. Firm, round breasts pressed against him for an instant. “You’re not bleeding anymore.” Carefully, she prodded the area above his ear. “Does it hurt?”

“Yes—but not much.” He met her eyes. “He shot at me!”

“I know.” She gnawed her lip. “I bit him,” she whispered. “Like a rabid dog, I sank my teeth into him, and he jerked.”

“Which may have saved my life.” He cupped her cheek. “Thank you.”

She leaned into his touch and closed her eyes. They sat like that for an instant—too briefly, in his opinion, because he would gladly have her resting her weight against him like that for an eternity.

“What did he say to you?” she asked.

Antoine looked away. “He said I am not a Chardon. He said my mother had an affair with a man called Grégoire Dubois, and he fathered me.” He laughed softly. “I liked Grégoire.”

“Does he know you’re his?” she asked, and he was impressed by how matter-of-fact she sounded. “What?” she asked.

“You sound so unaffected.”

“It is not me who has had my identity torn apart,” she replied with a little smile.

“My identity? I am still Antoine, still the man I was yesterday.”

“Yes, of course. But also, you are not. You no longer share any blood with that vile man who ordered you to exact revenge on my brother.”

He considered that. “True. But I had no intention of fulfilling his demands.” He sighed. “I really did hope he would come to his senses,” he said. “He may only be my half-brother, but Felix did not deserve to pay the price for Papa’s—Monsieur Chardon’s—desire for revenge.”

“He chose,” she said firmly. “Whatever befell him is on his head, not yours.”

He sat up. “What do you mean, whatever befell him?” He suddenly noticed one side of her face was puffy, a faint purplish tinge to her skin. “Did he do that?”

“Yes.”

“Bastard!” Then he laughed bitterly. “Except, of course, that he is no bastard, but I am.”

“In this household, no one cares.” She smiled at him. “And maybe your real father will be happy to meet you and acknowledge you.”

“He can’t. Papa—damnation!—I mean Chardon killed him years ago.”

She made a strangled sound, and he swallowed back the rest he’d intended to say, about how the man he’d always considered his father had tortured his real father to death.

“I think he knew, though,” he said with a little smile, recalling the casual kindnesses from Grégoire, how often he’d stop to speak to him or hand over a little trinket. In retrospect, the years when Armand Joseph Chardon had been abroad, enriching himself during the Spanish War of Succession, had been golden years, Maman happy and the household relaxed.

Antoine recalled long summer days spent outside with Maman sitting in the shade embroidering or reading while he and Felix scampered about. Well, Felix ran, Antoine mostly toddled—at least at first. And throughout all the time, Grégoire had been a fixture, visiting so often it was unusual if as much as a week went by without him passing by.

And then one day Chardon returned. He supposed it had not taken him long to conclude that only one of his sons was truly his. Where Felix in everything but his eyes took after his father, Antoine bore little resemblance to Chardon.

“Why didn’t he disown you? Send you and your mother away?” Esther asked when he shared all of this with her.

He gave her a mirthless smile. “How better to punish her than by keeping her close, likely holding my life over her head to ensure she obeyed?”

“What a vile creature he must be!”

“*Oui.*” But Felix ... Grief gripped him. Never again would he see his brother, laugh with him, want to kick him when he was patronising. “How did he die?”

“Mmm?”

“Felix.”

“Ah. Umm ...” She twisted the bedding. “I’m not sure he is dead,” she finally said.

Antoine shot up straight, wincing at the responding bolt of pain in his head. “Is he here?”

She shook her head.

“*Sacrebleu!* Did Melville cart him off to Chester?”

She shook her head again.

“Esther! Where is he? Tell me!”

“He’s gone,” she whispered. “He just ... vanished.”

Antoine collapsed. “How?”

“I don’t know.” She hid her face in her hands and rocked back and forth. “When you were shot, he threatened to kill me unless Duncan knelt, unarmed, before him.”

He did not want to hear this. He had hold of her wrists and gently pulled her hands from her face. “Is Melville all right?”

“He lives,” she assured him with a shaky little smile. She then went on to tell him about how Madame Melville had attacked Felix and how he’d produced a locket from under his shirt. “She pushed him into the well, and there was so much colour, so much whirling winds, and Erin was being sucked towards it, and ...” She began to weep.

He wrapped his arms around her, holding her until she’d regained her composure.

“When everything quieted, he was gone,” she finished. “Hans looked, but there was no sign of him in the well. Nothing.”

“He just disappeared?”

Esther nodded. “I think Erin and Duncan knew what that locket could do.” She crossed herself. “When he saw her being dragged towards those spinning colours, Duncan somehow he got to his feet, staggered towards her and pulled her backwards

before they both fell to the ground, him clinging to her like a giant bleeding barnacle.”

“Barnacles do not bleed,” he said distractedly, and that teased a smile from her.

Much later, Antoine made his way slowly to the farm yard. Every step left him dizzy and shivering, but he gritted his teeth and set one foot before the other, coming to an abrupt halt. Around him, the returning tenants and their families bustled; there was laughter and loud voices. He scarcely registered that, his gaze glued to the mound that now covered the old well.

“What if he comes back?” he demanded a while later, having cornered Melville in his study.

“Then he’d best return to whence he came from.” A dark bristle covered Melville’s cheeks, a grey tinge to his skin indicating just how exhausted he was, and to judge from how carefully he moved, the shot to his shoulder was bothering him.

“You’ve buried him alive!” Antoine pointed an accusing finger at Melville. “You’ve left him to rot in the dark, damn you!”

“He isn’t there,” Duncan retorted.

“But he might be. He might try to return, and—” He sagged against the wall, not quite able to breathe. Dancing spots rose before his eyes; the room tilted this way and that.

“Breathe.” Madame Melville grabbed hold of his hands. “Look at me and breathe.”

His gaze clung to hers as he tried to draw in air. “Just look at me,” she repeated. “Now, inhale, exhale. Inhale, exhale.”

He managed one shaky breath, another. She helped him sit down.

“Panic attack,” she said over her shoulder to her husband.

“Aye, I gathered as much.”

Panic attack? *Oui*, it suited to this congesting sensation round his lungs.

“Why?” he croaked.

“Why what?” Madame Melville looked at her husband.

“Why the mound over the well,” Melville explained.

“Ah.” She moved to the other side of the desk, presenting him with the impressive united front of the Melvilles. “We cannot risk him returning and taking us unaware,” she said. “Because just the thought of falling through that funnel again ...” Her hand trembled as she smoothed at her hair. In that instant, Antoine understood just what it was his purported father had done to them.

“He did that to you,” he croaked. “Chardon used that ... that ... evil heirloom to make you disappear from here and reappear elsewhere.”

“Yeah,” she said, leaning into her husband. “Well, he tried.”

“And now Felix ...” He gulped. “How will he survive?”

“Oh, I am sure he’ll manage perfectly no matter where he ends up,” Melville said drily. “He’s ruthless enough to always survive.”

Well, he could not argue with that.

“Esther says you’re Felix’s half-brother,” Madame Melville said. “Same mother, different fathers.”

“That is what he said, yes.” He shrugged. “But I will never know for sure, will I?” He managed a little laugh. “I dare say *mon cher Papa* would not appreciate me questioning my parentage.” He sank lower in his chair. “*Mon Dieu*. It will fall to me to tell him we failed and Felix is gone.”

“Or you do not tell him at all,” Madame Melville said. She held up her hand when Antoine was about to object. “It will keep,” she said. “And you’re welcome to stay here for as long as you want.”

“I am not sure we should allow him to stay,” Duncan grumbled later. “I do not like how Esther stares at him as if he is the brightest star in the firmament.”

“At least it’s mutual. He thinks the sun shines out of her ass.”

He chuckled at that, reclining against the pillows with a soft groan.

“Does it hurt?” She fussed around him, adjusting the pillow, the blankets.

“Aye.”

Erin shed her clothes, hanging up skirts and petticoats, bodice and corset. She set her foot on the bed to roll off each stocking in turn, and he leaned forward to graze his fingers over the smooth skin of her thighs, ignoring how much that hurt.

“Lie still,” she admonished.

“That is hard to do when you’re undressing before my eyes.”

“Uh-uh, no hanky-panky, mister. Not when you’ve been so recently injured. Lettie will kill me if you tear your stitches.” She slipped under the coverlets, and he used his good arm to pull her as close as possible to him.

“Poor Esther,” she said, studying her scabbed fingers. “She could scarcely look at you over supper. That girl is drowning in guilt.”

“As she should. Had she done as I told her to, Lettie would have shot Chardon upon sight. Neither Antoine nor I would have been injured.”

“No need to tell her that,” Erin said.

“She jeopardised the whole plan,” he said. “Truly, she deserves to be belted.”

“Not happening,” she said firmly.

“Of course not,” he replied with a little sigh. “My birth mother would haul me over hot coals if I attempted such.”

“Huh. She’s the least of your problems. You as much as tweak a hair on her head and Antoine will shoot you.”

He twisted so that he could see her properly. “He really does care for her, doesn’t he?”

“Yup.”

“Shit!”

Which made Erin burst out in laughter before kissing him on the mouth and telling him it would all work out. Somehow.

“No more Madame Melville,” Erin said to Antoine several days later. She sat down beside him, bunching her skirts round her legs. “I’m Erin, okay? And that’s Duncan,” she added, pointing at her husband, who was beleaguered by their two girls, both of them hopping about in excitement.

“I am not sure Monsieur Melville would agree,” Antoine said. “It is not as if we are kin or even friends. Besides, it is not right. You are my elders, and—”

“Your elders?” Erin spluttered.

He slid her a look. “You are most definitely older than I am, Madame, no matter how beautiful you might be.”

She laughed. “Talk about an underhanded compliment: I’m old but beautiful.”

He frowned. “I did not say you were old, just that ...”

“I got it. But I’m not even thirty yet, so no, I am not your elder. No way.”

Antoine dipped his head. “My apologies.” He hesitated. “Erin,” he added.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

He shrugged. “*Non.*”

Erin studied him. Since the events last Saturday, he’d taken up more or less permanent residence on the makeshift bench he’d constructed, his gaze locked on the mound that covered his brother’s ... grave? No, prison. She tightened her hold on

her legs, wondering if Felix Chardon was the ancestor up Jacqueline Wilkes' tree who had brought that damned locket to Maryland, where her father had been destined to find it. It all felt interlinked somehow: a locket brought her here, a locket sent Felix there, so maybe her being dragged back to this time was fate, a destiny brought upon her by Felix Chardon's desire for revenge.

She rubbed at her temple and forcibly turned her thoughts elsewhere—like to where Duncan had used his good arm to hoist a delighted, squealing Sandy up on the shaggy pony that was to be the twins' first mount. Ellen was trying to climb up Duncan in her eagerness to join her sister, and beside Erin, Antoine laughed.

“A handful, those two.”

Ellen was now seated behind her sister, two mops of dark, dark curls over two sets of blue eyes. Duncan clucked the pony into a walk, and Sandy whooped while Ellen tightened her hold on her sister. Antoine sighed. “When I was old enough to sit a horse the first time, it was Felix holding the reins.”

“He was what? Six or seven years older?”

“Seven.” He gave her a black look. “And he *is* seven years older, not was.” He gestured at the mound. “Assuming what you told me is true.”

“For God's sake, how many times must I say this? We did not bury him alive. What sort of monster would do that?”

“Someone like my dear father?” he replied.

“Yeah, well, we're not like him.”

“And neither was Felix.” He refused to look at her, staring at the mound instead. He no longer wore a bandage, and several strands of hair had, as usual, escaped its ribbon, feathering the outline of his jaw. A strong jaw, a strong nose, albeit nowhere as aquiline as Chardon's, and eyes an unusual shade of light brown, somewhere between amber and whisky—the man was handsome, his plump lower lip adding a

softness to him that she suspected was very much in keeping with his character.

These last few weeks of tension had left their mark, leaving him several pounds lighter—an improvement, in Erin’s opinion, as were the evident muscles on his arms and shoulders, this probably due to all the rowing he’d been doing.

“Do you miss him that much?” she said softly.

“Miss him?” He laughed softly. “I do not know. Truly, had he not come back after abandoning me, I do not think I would have minded never seeing him again, but now ...” He banged a hand against his chest. “I am suffocating with guilt,” he said hoarsely.

“He tried to kill you.”

“Because I betrayed him.” Antoine shrugged. “What else could he do?”

She moved closer and gripped his forearm. “Listen to me,” she said. “No, don’t look away. Listen to your oh-so-wise elder.”

As she’d hoped, that made him smile.

“He chose, Antoine. You tried to make him see reason and leave. Yes, you baited the trap, but he chose to walk into it—and not exactly unaccompanied. Besides, how much guilt would you have felt if he’d succeeded? What if it had been me, Duncan and even Esther who were gone?” She released him. “Felix Chardon could have left and returned home. But he didn’t.”

“You do not understand,” Antoine said. “To return home and admit to having failed . . .” He shivered. “And the thought of facing him again to tell him Felix is gone ...”

Yeah, a disappointed and enraged Armand Joseph Chardon was probably a scary creature. “As I’ve already said, send him a letter,” she suggested. “Or don’t tell him at all.”

“Does he not deserve to know?”

In response, Erin shook her head slowly.

Madame Melville—Erin—was evidently concerned about him. It left Antoine with a sensation of warmth in his chest, as did Esther's constant fussing. But it did not stop him from drowning in icy guilt, which was why he spent most of his waking time here, holding a long and silent vigil over his brother's tomb. Except, of course, it wasn't a tomb. Hans had sworn to him the well had been empty, looking so ill at having to recount the events Antoine had no reason to doubt his word.

And still, he sat here, because what if Felix were to materialise in the well and find himself entombed?

Reluctantly, he rose at the sound of the dinner bell and sat in silence throughout the meal. When he returned to his perch, Esther accompanied him, and even if she didn't say anything, he found comfort in her presence.

The afternoon shadows lengthened.

Tim hurried by with a horse.

Hans stopped for some moments beside the bench, his large hand squeezing Antoine's shoulder.

Giles and his eldest son argued heatedly while leading a yoked pair of oxen towards the barn.

A dog barked, another fell in, and there was Tim, shooing the dogs out of their daytime kennels to begin their nightly watch. One of the large hounds trotted over to snuffle Esther's hand and was rewarded with a quick scratch behind the ears.

The day sank into dusk, and Antoine shivered in his shirtsleeves.

The yard was suddenly blissfully quiet. No sounds other than Esther's breathing, the slight rustling as she moved. Her hand slipped into his, and he braided his fingers with hers.

"What will you do now?" she asked, and he could hear the tremor in her voice.

Leave—that was what he should do. Yes, he should leave Papegoja Plantation and the young woman beside him because he was not quite sure he deserved to be happy, not after what

had befallen his brother. *And what would Felix have done if it had been me?* he asked himself. *If it had been him sitting here and me God knows where, would he have twisted with recriminations? Would he have suffocated with guilt if he'd succeeded in killing me?*

He knew the answer and, dear God, did it hurt! Felix would have spared him the occasional thought, but guilt? No, that was a foreign concept to a man raised by his father to always set himself and his interests before those of anyone else. It should help, knowing that. But it didn't.

Instead of burdening Esther with all that, he just said, "I do not know."

He did not like how she tensed or how she withdrew her hand from his.

"Esther," he tried, but she was on her feet.

"And what about me?" she asked, already several yards away from him.

"You?" He smiled. "You I will always love, no matter where life takes me."

To judge from her groan, that was not the answer she wanted. The supper bell rang, and she verily fled from him, not even asking if he was coming too.

Antoine sighed and settled into the quiet.

A faint thud had him lifting his head from his arms. Another, and he sat up straight. Several thuds, and they were coming from the mound.

"Felix?" he whispered, falling to his knees in the dirt. "Is that you, Felix?"

One more thud, something that could be a voice—or a figment of his imagination—and everything was silent again.

Antoine prayed. He clasped his hands together and prayed that someone watch over his brother and guide him into a safe harbour. He was not aware of weeping until he shakily regained his feet, noting distractedly that his face was wet and his nose clogged.

He returned indoors. At Esther's door, he halted and pressed his ear to the wood. It broke his heart to hear her weeping, and for an instant he considered knocking but thought better of it and retreated to his room.

At some point during this long evening, he had reached a conclusion: he had to return home. Not to tell Armand Joseph Chardon his eldest son was lost to him, but rather to exact retribution. Armand Joseph Chardon did not deserve a letter or commiseration. No, what he deserved was to die—for what he'd done to Grégoire, for how he had twisted Felix, wringing whatever was good and light out of him. And should Antoine survive that encounter, then maybe he would find the courage to return here for Esther. Or maybe not.

“How many times must I tell you? You shouldn't be riding with that shoulder.” Erin scowled up at Duncan, already astride. “What if you're thrown or something?”

“It is mostly healed.” He pulled his cloak around him to combat the chill of dawn. “Besides, I do not intend to fall off.”

“Generally, the people who do don't,” Erin snapped.

“It's only to Chester,” he said. “And Jasper here will ensure I maintain a sedate pace.”

“That I will, mistress,” Jasper said.

“And how is he to stop you if you don't?” Erin asked. “He cannot very well push you off.”

“I'll take him on a leading rein,” Jasper said. That would never happen. Duncan gave his manservant a warning look before promising he'd be back before dinner, blowing his wife a kiss with his good hand and setting Atlas to walk sedately up the long lane.

“We could have been halfway to Chester by now,” he grumbled to Jasper. “Silly woman.”

Not that he meant it. Her concern reflected just how much she cared, but he'd not been lying when he said his shoulder felt much better. Aye, the stitches strained, and there was a dull

ache that flared up at sudden movements, but he was hale enough to ride a horse.

October was around the corner, and there were not many captains who braved the Atlantic crossing during the winter months. Accordingly, it was his responsibility to make sure the last Graham ships to come in for the season left Chester with full holds. The company warehouses were therefore full of baled tobacco, of indigo and barrels of molasses from the West Indies.

Once at the office, Duncan shrugged out of his coat, wincing when he jostled his bandaged shoulder. The office clerks gaped, peppering both him and Jasper with questions. Duncan kept it adequately vague, saying something about a misfiring pistol. Not entirely unusual, which was why Lettie never touched a handgun, saying everyone knew one could always rely on a musket, but only rarely on a pistol.

He spent several hours reviewing the ledgers and inspecting the warehouses with Stevens, the head clerk, before wandering down to talk to the harbour master. Yet another Quaker, Mr Bolton was from somewhere in Northumberland but happily transplanted to the milder climes of Pennsylvania—something he would remark on every time they met.

“Back home, it is all rain and sleet now,” he said with a joyful grin. “Here, though ...” He extended his arms as if about to embrace the pale blue sky.

“We get rain here as well,” Duncan said.

“That we do, but thou hast likely never lived through a northern winter, hast thee?”

“No, I cannot say that I have.”

Mr Bolton pretended to shiver. “Months of never being warm, of always being damp—and the dark! No, I tell thee this is paradise in comparison.”

“Hmm.” Duncan studied the various ships lying at anchor, the neat wharves and the equally neat town rising beyond them. Not how he imagined paradise, but it was peaceful, a good place to call home. He set his teeth. Not for him—not for

much longer, what with that idiotic proposed legislation banning any sort of relationship between white and coloured people.

He was in an irritated mood when he saw David Lloyd making his way towards him. Not that Lloyd was in any way involved in drafting the new legislation, but surely he could strike it down somehow, stop it from being approved by the assembly.

“Penn is dead,” Lloyd said in lieu of greeting. He took off his hat, and Duncan followed suit, mostly as a sign of respect towards Lloyd, not a man he’d never met. A couple of breaths, some moments of stillness, and Lloyd clapped his hat back on. “Friend William had many faults, as do we all, but we owe him eternal gratitude for what he did for us here. An entire colony, welcoming our brethren to live and worship freely.”

“So what happens now?”

“Now? His children inherit the colony and the related income.” He cocked his head. “Thou must pay a considerable quitrent for the Papegoja place.”

“I don’t. I own it outright.”

“Ah.” Lloyd nodded. “One of the benefits of purchasing some of the older tracts of lands.” He smiled smugly. “Like I have done.”

They fell into step with each other, Duncan shortening his stride to accommodate the older and shorter man.

“There was more violence at thy home, it seems,” Lloyd commented. “Word is thou wert injured.”

Gossiping clerks! “This? A slight misadventure, no more.”

“That is not what the two ruffians we apprehended a few days ago said.” Lloyd shook his head. “Really, Duncan, thou liest to me?”

“My apologies.”

“This must stop,” Lloyd said. “We cannot have it, so much disruption, so much death and blood, at such close quarters.”

“You make it sound as if I am enjoying these frequent attacks on my home,” Duncan said. “It is not my fault villains like the Nelsons and those ruffians tread the earth.”

“Nay, of course not.” Lloyd came to a halt, leaning on his cane. “A touch of gout,” he said. “They said they were promised gold by the Frenchman but never got any.”

“Well, that is not my concern, is it?”

Lloyd narrowed his eyes. “Likely not. But I’d like to know where he is now.”

“The Frenchman?”

“Do not be obtuse!” Lloyd snapped. “It does not suit thee. Aye, the Frenchman, the would-be spy that could potentially be a threat to all of us but ended up being only a threat to thee and thine.”

Duncan bristled. “That man is a threat to every godly person in the world!”

Lloyd set a hand on his arm. “But mostly to thee, no?”

Duncan looked away. “Aye. To me and my wife.” He cleared his throat. “But he is gone now. I reckon he did not much like the welcome he received.”

“Is he dead?” Lloyd asked.

“Not as far as I know,” Duncan replied.

“And the others? The men the ruffians accuse you of callously shooting?”

“Me?” Duncan shook his head. “I swear on everything holy that I have not shot anyone recently.”

Lloyd frowned at the *everything holy* part, studying him in silence.

“Are you questioning my word?” Duncan said stiffly.

“No,” Lloyd replied at long last. “But we will not tolerate any more violence.”

It was on the tip of Duncan’s tongue to curse the older man to hell and back, but he swallowed back his anger. “As I said,

we have done nothing to welcome it,” he managed to say in a calm voice.

“No? And yet thee did just admit that Frenchman was here to cause thee and thy wife harm. Surely, no man crosses an entire sea without a reason?” Lloyd sighed. “Enough of this. Let us talk of law instead.”

Duncan glanced at the sun. “I must return home.”

“It is not yet noon,” Lloyd said. “And this will not take long.”

Lloyd offered Duncan a seat and handed him a sheaf of papers. It took but a glance for Duncan to realise what this was, and all of his previous irritation returned in force.

“They persist, I am afraid,” Lloyd said, settling himself in his chair.

Duncan read through the first few pages. “We both know why the good men of Pennsylvania are so eager to push through these laws.” He dropped the documents in a messy pile on Lloyd’s uncluttered desk and made a great show of wiping his hands.

“Of course. To ensure good order in our community.”

“Are you saying my wife is a threat to that good order?” Duncan kept his voice soft.

Lloyd sat back. “Thou knowest I have the greatest respect for Erin Melville, but ...”

“Yes?”

“It is not right. White men should wed white women—it is easier thus.” He busied himself tidying up the stack of papers Duncan had dropped on his desk.

“Aye, I imagine it is. Because accepting that a white man has a coloured wife is effectively stating that she is an equal to a white woman, both in intellect and morality.”

“Precisely,” Lloyd said, giving Duncan a relieved smile.

“My Erin is the equal of any white woman,” Duncan growled. “She is as intelligent—if not more—than most white

women I have ever met. She has higher morals than most of them, and—”

“Erin Melville’s qualities are not the issue,” Lloyd said. “No one questions them.”

“And yet this legislation will make it impossible for us to remain here, won’t it?”

Lloyd hemmed and hawed before sighing deeply. “It would likely not be wise to stay,” he said. “Not that the legislation, once in place, would be applied to marriages entered before it was passed, but it may make things difficult for thee—well, for her.”

“And you do not think it already is?” Duncan asked. “Here in Chester, she is mostly accepted, but in Philadelphia there are establishments that will refuse her entry based only on the colour of her skin.”

Lloyd nodded repeatedly. “Which is why it is best for the races to remain separate. Besides, we have the offspring to consider.”

Duncan scoffed. “This is not about a general concern about white men mating with coloured women—slave owners do it all the time. No, this is about buttressing the ridiculous notions of white man’s superiority to other races. Because if, God help us, the people of Pennsylvania were to accept that a coloured woman—or man—is in everything the equal of a white person, then how can we ever justify the evil practise of slavery?”

Lloyd set down the now neat pile of documents and looked up at him through his spectacles. “I do not hold with slavery; neither do most of the Friends.”

“No, but some do—and grow rich trading on the suffering and misery of others. And this ...” He swept a hand through the stack, scattering all the papers again. “This will help perpetuate that ungodly practise.”

“What would thee have me do? Demand we abolish slavery in the colony?”

“Yes!” Duncan slammed down his hands on Lloyd’s desk. “But you won’t do that, because it would cause too big a dent in the purses of too many of your precious Friends.”

Lloyd rose. “I will not tolerate the Friends being insulted, not even by thee, Duncan Melville.”

“I wasn’t insulting you. I was stating the truth.” He looked down at Lloyd. “I imagine you are quite pleased with this piece of legislation. If nothing else, it assures you we will have to leave, thereby ridding you of all that violence you blame us for.” From Lloyd came a sharp intake of breath, but Duncan did not wait to hear his reply.

He was almost at the main street when he caught sight of the man he detested most in the world—well, with the potential exception of Chardon Senior. He dodged behind a corner, watching Nicholas Farrell come strolling down the street with a limping man by his side. Handsome enough, Duncan guessed the stranger was Emrick Ellis, something that was confirmed when Farrell turned to address him.

“Here at last, Ellis,” Farrell said. He used his cane to nudge at Ellis’ left foot. “Had it not been for that damned viper, we would have been here sooner, but nothing like anticipation to whet the appetite, hey?”

“You’re not the one who got bitten,” Ellis grumbled.

“No, but I have been waiting for much, much longer. I am overdue my revenge on that Melville bastard.” He cackled. “And this time I will smite him where it hurts him the most!”

Duncan almost snorted. Farrell he could handle with one hand tied behind him—which was right fortunate at present—but Ellis, well that was another matter. He was not quite sure how to address the issue of Lettie’s abusive marriage. A full divorce was contrary to law, and a divorce of bed and board had to be approved by the assembly—which was most unlikely, seeing as Ellis was no adulterer, merely an abuser.

He hurried back to the stables. “Home,” he told Jasper. “We must make haste.”

An hour or so later, they were at the imposing gate, and he slowed Atlas into a walk, winking at Jasper, who just shook his head. Halfway down the lane, though, Duncan set his heels to Atlas. Something was wrong. There were far too many people milling about in front of the main house.

The sun had just cleared the eastern horizon when Antoine made his careful way down the back stairs, successfully evading the treads that creaked. He stood in the dark of the passage and couldn't stop himself from looking upwards, to where Esther was still asleep, still unaware that she would likely never see him again. It tore at him, and without conscious thought he pressed the little heart she'd given him harder against his skin.

It was the right thing to do, he reminded himself. She was too young to be torn away from her home and family, too young to be exposed to the dangers of the world—more particularly to the evil of Armand Joseph Chardon—with only him to protect her.

He swallowed heavily. In time, she'd forget him. He, however, would never forget her, his beautiful angel. A penance of sorts, he supposed, to wander the world with a broken heart. One deep breath and he eased the door open, stepping out into the chill of the morning.

Heavy dew glittered in the yellowing grass, dampening his stockings as he moved silently in the direction of the distant road. He buttoned his coat and adjusted the bundle he was carrying, ensuring yet again that his purse hung where it should and that his pistols were tucked into his waistband. Powder and balls he carried in a pouch suspended from his belt, but he felt naked without a blade. He would remedy that once he was in Philadelphia.

He had reached the road when he heard the sound of hooves behind him. He hastily ducked behind a stand of something exceedingly thorny, watching as Duncan Melville and Jasper turned left towards Chester. For an instant, Duncan looked over his shoulder, and the rising sun caught him full in the face. Those blue eyes, so like Esther's ... Antoine suppressed a groan.

He had been walking for close to an hour when from behind came the sound of a carriage—well, a cart because the vehicle in question had none of the elegance a carriage had, but it was pulled by a team of four horses progressing at impressive speed.

After some discussions, Antoine was offered a seat in the back, sharing the cramped space with length after length of heavy oak planks.

“For West’s shipyard,” the drover told him.

“Ah,” Antoine said as he hoisted himself aboard. There was no further conversation, Antoine concentrating on holding on for dear life as the drover urged his beasts into a fast trot.

He squinted at the sun. By now, Esther would be awake. Had she found the little keepsake he had slipped under her door? He touched his finger, uncomfortably bare now that the ring he’d worn every day since Maman’s demise no longer adorned it. It had been her ring, much too small for a man to wear on anything but his little finger. It would, however, easily fit Esther’s ring finger. Well, if she did not choose to throw it in the river, cursing him for leaving without as much as a word of farewell.

Now that it was too late, he regretted sneaking off as he had done. He should have spoken to her—to Erin, even Melville—but he’d known that it would have taken little to dissuade him from what he felt he had to do. He set his shoulders. He must sort this matter with Chardon—challenge the bitter old man about his paternity and what had happened to Grégoire.

The cart creaked. Every turn of the wheel carried him further from Esther, and *parbleu*, but it hurt! He looked back the way they'd come. Maybe he should ... *Non, non, non!* He was doing the right thing by her, by his little angel.

Antoine was so submerged in his own dark thoughts it took him some time to realise they had reached Philadelphia. Here, the drover slowed his team to a walk, often calling out greetings to other drovers. Antoine straightened up, gaping at the sheer bustle that surrounded them. Row upon row of brick two-storey abodes flanked straight streets and narrow alleys, and it seemed to him that everywhere was the sound of industry, be it the smiths at the forges while young lads worked the bellows to carts laden with barrels and canvas.

“Southwark,” the drover said. He threw Antoine a grin. “Right lively, it is.”

Antoine just nodded, amazed as they passed not one or even two, but at least ten different shipyards. They passed a church, which the drover informed him was Swedish, made their way slowly along the waterfront with Antoine gawking at all the ships. A steady stream of workers was busy loading those moored at the quays, heavy barrels rolled up gangways or lifted aloft by cranes.

To his right, the ground rose upwards, the houses here larger and grander than what he'd seen before.

“Society Hill.” The drover spat to the side, a projectile of brown saliva that had Antoine wrinkling his nose. To smoke tobacco he could understand, but to chew it? “Them's the finer folk,” the drover added.

Wide streets bordered generous lots, and there was so much air, so much light, it had Antoine thinking of Paris—not that there were any other similarities between this colonial town and the city he called his own. He loved Paris, indubitably the most beautiful city in the world. *Oui*, it would be good to set foot on his native land again, but should he not feel a spurt of excitement at the notion of returning home? Except, without her ... *Non, ne pense pas d'elle*, he admonished himself. He could not think of her, of someone so

pure, so innocent. Not when he was contemplating something as heinous as patricide. Patricide?

“Armand Joseph Chardon *n'est pas mon pere*,” he muttered.

“Eh?” the drover asked.

“Nothing.” He closed his eyes, his hand resting yet again atop the little heart she'd given him. A keepsake, a permanent reminder of the woman he would love until his dying breath.

At long last, the drover drew his team to halt before a large gate over which hung a sign proclaiming it to be “West Shipyard.” Antoine clambered out, thanking the drover, who raised his whip in salute before guiding his horses through the gate. From what Antoine could see, the area beyond the gate was effectively a small town, complete with long rows of housing, various work sheds and warehouses that rose several storeys upward.

He made his way towards the harbour, his bundle in a firm grip as he passed more humanity than he'd seen in months. To judge from their dress, many of the people he passed were Quakers, clad in simple, unadorned clothing. But here and there was a gaudy butterfly, a merchant's wife in silks and ribbons, an elegant youth in narrow breeches and matching coat over a waistcoat that, to judge from the quality of its embroidery, had to come from London or Paris.

He asked a well-dressed gentleman for directions to an inn and was directed to the Blue Anchor, set a stone's throw from the busy quays. To judge from the building's exterior, it had stood where it was for quite some time, an impression reinforced by its dark interior, the roofbeams permanently smudged with soot from lanterns and candles. From somewhere came the smell of food, and in response his stomach gurgled. The innkeeper grinned, revealing uneven teeth.

“The food's good,” he said. “As is the beer.”

Finding a berth would keep some hours. First, he would eat.

After having watched her man ride up the lane at an uncharacteristically sedate pace—and she'd bet her ass that the moment he was out of sight he'd urge Atlas into a trot—Erin returned inside.

“Stupid man,” she muttered. They'd argued heatedly last night, and she'd fallen asleep believing she'd convinced him he should wait at least a couple of days more before riding to Chester. But no, oh no—she'd woken to the sounds of rustling, sitting up in bed just as he snuck out of the door, his clothes in his hands.

Well, at least she'd caught up with him in time to give him yet another piece of her mind. And she'd just have to trust him to be careful.

She decided to take advantage of the quiet house and treat herself to a cup of precious tea. The kitchen was dark and empty—Mrs Andersson would be in at any moment—and Erin busied herself bringing life to the banked fire in the hearth before swinging the kettle of water over the flames.

The tea was kept in a locked chest in Duncan's study, so by the time she'd fetched it, the water was almost at boil. The door banged open, revealing a rosy Mrs Andersson.

“Up already?” she asked.

“As you can see.” She prepared two cups of tea, offering one to their housekeeper. “Duncan had an early start.”

Mrs Andersson chuckled. “I'll wager he was hoping to slip off without you noticing, mistress.” She sniffed appreciatively at her tea. “Men are strange like that: they like being fussed over but find it unmanly to admit it.”

Erin left Mrs Andersson to make breakfast and went upstairs to wake her daughters. One of the benefits of having kids that bounced about all day was that they slept soundly, waking up warm and pink and all mussed by sleep. Today was no exception, Ellen blinking sleepily at her but making no move to roll out of bed while Sandy turned her back and burrowed deeper in the blankets.

A while later, the twins were back to their normal, energetic selves. Sandy skipped about singing about mawy's lamb at the top of her lungs, while Ellen protested loudly when Erin braided her hair into two short pigtails.

"Shush," she admonished. "Not everyone is awake yet."

How Esther could be sleeping through all this—her room was next door—was something of a miracle. In fact, Erin was a bit surprised she wasn't up yet. Usually, the moment the twins were up, Ester would pop her head in and wish them a good morning.

"Let's go and wake Esther," she suggested, holding Ellen by the hand. Sandy was already at Esther's door, banging on it.

"Esther?" Erin opened the door. She frowned at the sight of the neatly made bed. Where was the girl? She threw a look down the passage to Antoine's room. Had the girl been stupid enough to allow Antoine to seduce her? Jesus, she hoped not, because Duncan would probably take a whip to the poor Frenchman if that was the case.

"Julie?" she called, and the maid trotted up the stairs.

"Sorry I'm late, mistress, but I—"

"Yes, yes," Erin said. "Have you seen Esther?"

"No, mistress." Julie glanced at Esther's door. "Is she not there?"

Obviously not, but Erin felt it unnecessary to say that out loud. "Take them downstairs," Erin said. She tweaked Sandy's cheek. "Mrs Andersson is making breakfast today." A treat, that. Sandy shone up and was halfway down the stairs before Ellen reluctantly let go of Erin's hand.

Erin smoothed down her skirts before taking the few steps that separated her from Antoine's room. She turned the handle and shoved the door ajar, peeking in through the narrow gap. No Esther, thank God. No Antoine either, the bedclothes neatly folded at the foot of the bed.

Erin spent the coming hour looking for Esther. The stables, the dairy—all the way down to the jetty, thinking the two

young lovebirds had snuck out for a romantic little interlude by the water. She squished back through the water meadows, hiking her skirts up high. Worry was gnawing at her. Where were they?

She entered the kitchen hoping to find Lettie there. Maybe she knew where Esther was.

“Lettie’s not here?” she asked Mrs Andersson.

“No, I haven’t seen her today, which is right strange as she is always the first to rise.”

Erin shook her head at the offered breakfast, already making for the stairs. “If Lettie is missing as well, I’m going to put it all down to aliens,” she muttered, taking the stairs two treads at a time.

Hans Muller was a remarkably shy man. So shy, in fact, that it had taken Lettie weeks to reach this point in their developing affections for each other. But now, here he was in her little room, and he was so big it was as if the room shrank into place around him. Big and presently very pink, all the way from the tip of his ears to his ... Lettie extended a finger to touch his straining member. He uttered a muffled groan.

“How long has it been?” she asked.

“Four years, two months and three days,” he replied, and she withdrew her hand, not quite sure what she felt at his exactness. Did his dead wife still take up most of the room in his heart and mind?

“And you?” he asked, hesitantly reaching out to wind a lock of her hair around his finger.

“Two years and nine months.”

“Ellis did not ... umm ...”

“Oh, he did. But he never loved me—he just took his own pleasure without caring about mine.”

He used her trapped lock to draw her closer, so close that her nose nudged his chest. She could feel him inhale, and then

her chin was tipped up, her gaze trapped in his.

“I will love you,” he vowed before gently setting his lips to hers.

“I know,” she whispered, rising on her toes to kiss him back.

It was slow and gentle, it was so, so tender, and when he finally fell away from her to lie by her side, they were both covered in a sheen of sweat. He didn't say anything, he just clasped her hand and kissed each knuckle in turn.

This moment was meant to be savoured, but unfortunately that was not to be.

“Lettie, are you in there?” Erin asked, knocking at the door.

She was tempted not to answer.

“Lettie!” Erin knocked harder.

“Aye, what is it?”

The door burst open. “Esther and Antoine are gone. Gone! And I have no idea where—oh!” Erin took a step backwards, staring at Hans' buttocks, presently turned her way as he pulled up his breeches. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ...”

“There is a reason why one should knock,” Lettie said drily, hunting about for her chemise.

“Or one locks the door,” Erin retorted before grinning hugely and making some sort of odd gesture, her thumb pointing upwards.

“I am sorry,” Hans said. “I had no intention to ...”

“But I had,” Lettie said. “I am not ashamed of us.” Saying it, she realised just how true that was. Hans was too important for her to be ashamed of anything that happened between them.

“Nor am I.” He leaned over her and kissed her gently. “But I did not like being caught with my breeches round my knees.”

“You weren’t even wearing them to begin with,” she replied, and he laughed softly.

“Hey! We don’t have time for kisses and stuff!” came from the other side of the door.

Lettie rolled her eyes and dressed quickly, Hans’ gaze never leaving her. She yanked the door open and glared at Erin. “Well? What is it?”

“Esther,” Erin said. Her expression morphed into a scowl. “And Antoine.”

“Do I need my musket?” Lettie asked.

“When we find them, maybe.” Erin gnawed at her lip. “I can’t find her, Lettie. Or him.”

“And what’s Duncan doing about it?”

“He’s in Chester.” Erin twisted her hands together. “Where can they be?”

They emerged outside, and Lettie blinked up at the sky, surprised to discover she’d whiled away a considerable part of the morning. Well, it had taken some efforts to convince her man—here she just had to look at Hans—to come to her room with her.

“You haven’t seen her today?” Erin asked.

Lettie gave her an incredulous look. “Nay.” After all, until recently she’d been in bed with her silent German.

“Shit!” Erin said. “Someone must have seen them.”

But no one had until Erin cornered Julie.

“No, mistress, I haven’t seen Esther,” Julie said.

“And Antoine?”

The maid wrinkled her forehead. “Antoine? Aye, him I have seen!”

“Today?” Lettie asked drily—Julie was sweet but somewhat witless.

“Just before dawn.” Julie went a bright red. “I was on my way to the privy.” She mimed a cramping stomach.

“And where was he?” Erin asked.

“On the lane.” Julie frowned. “He was carrying something.”

“And you are certain you did not see Esther with him?” Lettie asked.

“Only him.”

They dismissed Julie. Erin sat down with a thump. “He left. Just like that! No goodbyes, no nothing.”

“And that tells us everything about where Esther is,” Lettie said. “She’s gone after him.” Foolish, foolish lass! To set off alone to God knew where—anything could happen to her. “Like mother, like daughter,” she muttered.

“Why would he do that?” Erin asked.

“Why? You ask that after watching him spend the last days staring at yon mound? He’s twisting with guilt.”

“Yeah, but still ...” Erin rose and clapped her hands together. “We need to set out after them.”

“And go where?” Lettie shook her head. “It is best we wait for Duncan to return. He may have encountered them on the road to Chester.”

Tim came rushing towards them. “One of the horses is missing,” he said on a gasp.

Lettie sighed. “She woke up, realised he’d left and rode off after him.”

“It would almost be romantic if it wasn’t so stupid.” Erin did some pacing, frowning at her feet. “Sarah’s going to kill Duncan if something happens to Esther.”

Lettie felt it needless to reply. Sarah Connor would indeed flay Duncan if Esther did not return unharmed.

They were all outside when Duncan came riding down the lane. He saw them and urged his horse forward in a canter.

“What is it?” he asked when he was within hearing distance. “What has happened?”

“Esther,” Erin said.

For some odd reason, that had him relaxing. He glanced at Lettie, his jaw tightening before he hastily looked away.

“Is she ill?” he asked.

“No,” Erin said, “she is gone.”

He exhaled loudly. “With Antoine.”

“Nope. We think he left first. She’s riding after him.”

He cursed. “That little goose!” He turned Atlas in a tight circle. “I shall have to go after her.”

“I can ride with you,” Jasper offered.

“As can I,” Hans said.

Yet again, Duncan’s gaze flew to Lettie. “Nay,” he finally said. “You are needed here.”

Lettie’s knees dipped. She knew what he was going to say before he opened his mouth.

“Emrick Ellis is in Chester.”

A wall of warm man was behind her, and Lettie straightened up, determination flowing like fire through her veins.

“Better for him he stays there,” she said.

“He won’t.”

No, he wouldn’t. But Lettie Graham was not returning to him, ever. And if he tried to use force ... she would not hesitate to fight back.

With his belly full, Antoine returned to the quays. Surely, one of all these ships was destined for France.

An hour or so later, he'd concluded that none of them were. Several were going south, carrying barrels of pork and corn to feed the unfortunates who toiled in the sugar plantations of the West Indies. Others were going north, destined to Boston. Three were for England, but according to the captains there were no berths to be had. He suspected that was not the case because whenever he opened his mouth, he was eyed askance, one of the first mates he spoke to even going as far as to ask him what on earth a Frenchman was doing here, in land belonging to good King George. Antoine had been tempted to tell him that as far as he knew, every inch of Pennsylvania belonged to William Penn—but chose not to.

Daylight was waning when he balanced down yet another narrow gangway and landed on the quay with a sigh. A wasted day, and he wasn't quite sure how to best arrange his travels. A sloop to Boston, and from there find a ship across the Atlantic? If nothing else, maybe he could find a ship destined for Quebec.

“Let me be, you oaf!” the young voice rang out, and Antoine snapped to attention. It couldn't be! But yes, it was, and something black and toothy snarled in his belly when he saw Esther, surrounded by a group of young men who were slowly herding her backwards.

He did not stop to think. He found a spar of broken wood on the ground and broke into a run.

“Esther!” he yelled, and that had two of the louts turning towards him. Two downward swipes with the piece of wood and they scattered, one of them clutching at his arm. “Get away from my woman,” he snarled at the three remaining men, and the youngest of them held up his hands.

“Your woman? Then why is she here, prancing about all on her own?”

“That is something I intend to discuss at length with her,” Antoine retorted. “Now go!” He watched them out of sight before he turned to Esther. “What in God’s name are you doing here?” he snapped.

“Just because you are a coward, it does not follow that I am one,” she replied, lifting her chin.

“I am no coward,” he protested.

“No? Is that why you snuck off without as much as a farewell?” She dashed a hand over her eyes, and his heart shrivelled at the sight of her tears.

“Do not weep,” he said. “Please, Esther.”

“I am not weeping! I just have something in my eyes!” She glared at him through wet eyes. “How could you?” She held up her hand, and there sat his ring. “And what was this? A promise or something to remember you by?”

He moved close enough that his arm brushed against hers. “I couldn’t expect you to hold to a vow,” he said in a low voice.

“No, not to a man who cares so little for me he slips away like a ghost.”

“Cares so little? I care too much, Esther! I want you with me always, but—” He bit off the rest at the expression on her face.

“One cannot care too much,” she said with a smile.

“You are too young!” Truth be told, he was too young—but it did not feel like it.

“I am old enough to know what I feel,” she replied.

He lifted his hand to her face, using his knuckles to stroke her cheek. “I do not want you sullied,” he said. “I do not want you to stand before my father and hear the bitter bile that drips from him the moment he opens his mouth.”

“Then we need not visit him.” She’d moved closer and was now leaning against him. He could do no other than wrap his arms around her.

“But I must,” he said. He couldn’t quite meet her gaze. “I aim to extract vengeance.”

“As you should.”

He blinked.

“For your real father, mayhap even for your brother,” Esther continued. “If I were a man, I’d do the same.” She leaned back and narrowed her eyes. “But you will not be doing it alone.”

He groaned. “It is too dangerous. Besides, your brother will never forgive me.”

“It is my life,” she replied.

“But it is not you who orders it,” he said gently. “That responsibility falls to your father, your brother—”

“My husband,” she finished. She held up her hand again. “And I already have the ring.” She gave him a smile. “In a sense, wearing it makes me your wife, doesn’t it?”

He just looked at her. Under his scrutiny, her smile dimmed. Her confidence crumbled at the edges, and she tried to disengage herself.

“No,” he said softly, tightening his hold on her. He smiled. “I like the sound of the word *wife*. It suits you.”

A faint blush stained her cheeks. “And I like the word *husband*,” she replied shyly.

“Unfortunately, we will not find someone to wed us here,” he said, once again caressing her cheek. Such soft skin!

“Oh, I think we will.” She stood on her toes. “There are papists in Pennsylvania. Accordingly, there are priests.” She took him by the hand.

“You know one such priest?”

“I do. His name is Father Joseph.” There was laughter in her eyes as she tugged him along. “My mother was most adamant in ensuring there was someone I could turn to for spiritual comfort.”

Father Joseph was not pleased, even less so when Esther brazenly told him they had no choice but to wed, not now that ... She placed her hand on her flat belly.

If looks could kill, Antoine would have been an incinerated pile of ashes what with how the priest glared at him.

An hour or so later, they were back on the street, and as they walked back to the inn, it was as if Esther suddenly comprehended the enormity of what she'd just done. She fell silent, stealing looks at him from under her lashes while gnawing at her bottom lip.

“Nothing needs to happen,” he told her.

“Aye, it does. No marriage is valid without consummation.” It was too dark to see her properly, but he could imagine just how she flushed when saying that.

They supped on oyster soup. Over the table, he met her eyes, his hands occasionally grazing hers. Under the table, he extended his legs, brushing against hers. In the flickering light of candles, she was as if dipped in gold, and when she turned her face to talk to the serving wench, he could see her pulse beating visibly against the fine skin of her neck.

Up the stairs, and he stopped frequently to kiss her, his hands spanning her waist, sliding down her hips, up towards

her breasts. By the time they reached their room, her lips were wet and swollen, her eyes dark and gleaming.

He'd never bedded a virgin before. And while he could vividly recall the time he lost his virginity—in the hayloft with Marie, one of Maman's maids—he imagined it was not the same for a woman. There was bound to be some pain, and he did not want to inflict that on her. So he took his time, kissing and teasing as he divested her of one garment after the other until all she was wearing was her chemise. That too had to go. For an instant, she tried to hold on to the garment.

“Trust me,” he whispered, his mouth covering hers.

She was naked, and he guided her down onto the bed, grateful for the fact that he had paid extra for a separate room and clean linen. He undressed, and her eyes never left him, the tip of her tongue darting out between her lips when he shed his shirt.

More kisses. Not only to her lips, but to her shoulders, along her collarbone, down to those apple-sized breasts adorned with rosy little nipples. She tensed when he sucked on one of them, but when he laved it with his tongue, she arched against him, a sound somewhere between “Aye” and “Oh” escaping her.

He slid further down. Open-mouthed kisses to her most private parts and she writhed, her fingers sinking painfully into his hair. He rose above her, kissed her deeply and slowly sank into her, all of him quivering with the effort to hold himself still as she adapted to having his cock inside her.

He moved. She groaned.

He slid a hand between them to tease that little nubbin that drove most women wild.

Her legs widened, strong hands digging into his shoulder to pull him even closer.

Dear God, this is heaven, he thought as he surged into her. *Oui, il était au paradis, et elle était son ange.*

Afterwards, he padded out of bed to dip a washrag into the lukewarm water in the pitcher and tend to her, his movements

gentle as he cleaned her. She gave him a half-lidded look, her mouth curving into the softest of smiles.

“Can we do it again?” she murmured before yawning widely.

“As often as you want to,” he said. “But first, we sleep.”

Duncan was in a foul mood. An entire day of hard riding followed by an evening of searching everywhere for Esther had his shoulder aching, his belly grumbling loudly. With heavy steps, he made his way to the inn he always frequented when in Philadelphia and was met by the innkeeper’s wife.

“No sight of her?” she asked.

“None.” He sighed. “I had hoped ...”

Esther had stabled her horse here, so he’d rushed into the inn, assuming he’d find her there, but according to the innkeeper, Esther Connor had only paid for the horse.

“It is a new day on the morrow,” the goodwife said.

“But it is a huge city,” Duncan replied. Well over five thousand inhabitants at the last count, Philadelphia grew bigger on a daily basis, attracting people from all over the world. “How am I to find her here?”

“Have you tried the wharves?”

He gave her a black look. Did he look like a fool? “Aye.”

“Maybe you are looking for the wrong person,” she offered. “Your sister is by all accounts a comely young girl, but there are plenty such here. But the man, you said he was French?”

Of course! He was almost tempted to kiss the older woman. “You, Mistress Swenson, are a pearl among women and as wise as Solomon himself.”

“Let us not go overboard, Mr Melville,” she replied drily. “It was mere common sense.” Her tone softened. “She is fortunate, your sister, to have a brother that so cares for her.”

“Not enough to keep her safe at home,” he said, making for the door. “I must—”

“Not now,” she said when he made for the door. “Too late. Wait until the morrow. Besides, Master Melville, you need to eat—and rest.”

Duncan was up at daybreak. After washing down a piece of bread with a generous amount of beer, he made haste for the harbour.

“A Frenchman?” The captain of the *Seagull* sucked in his lower lip. “Yes, there was one here yesterday, asking for passage back to France.” He snorted. “As if we sail to France with our holds full of tobacco.”

Another captain had also seen Antoine and told Duncan he’d recommended the young man find passage to Boston instead. “He asked for a berth with me, to London, but I said no.” He produced a snuffbox and went through the elaborate procedure of sniffing loudly a couple of times. “Can’t have a Frenchie aboard my ship,” he said.

Duncan was striding towards yet another of the moored ships when he saw them.

Arm in arm, they came down the slight slope that led from the Blue Anchor, and he watched as Antoine drew them to a stop to help her adjust her hat—but not before he kissed her. Here, in broad daylight!

Duncan seethed. It did not take him long to catch up with them from behind and grab hold of Antoine.

“Eh?” Antoine said, twisting round.

“What have you done to my sister?” Duncan growled, shoving him backwards.

“Stop it!” Esther stepped between them.

“And you!” Duncan had hold of her arm. “How can you shame us thus?”

Suddenly, there was a blade at his throat. “Unhand my wife,” Antoine growled.

“Wife?” Duncan took a step back, staring at Esther. “Is this true?”

“It is.” She lifted her chin. “I am his wife in all ways.”

“I wish you happy,” he replied drily. “But no matter how wed, you will not flit off like a ghost and leave me to handle your distraught mother alone.” He frowned at Antoine. “And surely we deserved a proper farewell before you eloped with my sister.”

“I did not—” he began just as Esther shoved Duncan.

“He left. I followed.” She stiffened her spine. “And I would do it again. And again.”

“No time for that,” Duncan says. “I must make haste back home. Ellis is here.”

“Here?” Esther stood on her toes.

“In Chester.” He frowned, suddenly recalling Farrell’s promise to make him pay. He could always defend himself against that fat bastard—which Farrell knew. But Erin ... He swallowed hard. *Nothing will happen to her*, he told himself. *She is safe and protected at home*. He came to an abrupt halt. He’d not told them Farrell was here as well!

“What is it?” Esther asked, a deep line between her brows.

“Farrell is here as well,” Duncan said, “and I forgot to tell them that.”

“They have Hans,” Esther said. “And Jasper and all the tenants. And let us not forget Lettie.” She mimed aiming a musket.

He managed a smile. “Nay, let us not forget Lettie.” And yet worry gnawed at him, an urgent desire to ride home now, immediately.

The first day of October dawned to glorious skies. Erin stretched, rolled over to say good morning to Duncan only to remember he wasn't here.

She'd hoped he would return already yesterday, slipping out of the house after supper to walk all the way to that ridiculous gate just in case she'd be able to see them—or at least him—on the road.

“They'll not come back tonight,” Lettie had said from behind her, startling Erin out of her vigil.

She'd tightened her shawl round her shoulders. “I know. I guess I just hoped ...”

“Aye, so did I. But not only must he allow his horse some rest, he also has to find them.” Lettie had sounded remarkably calm, but a quick glance at how tightly her hands were twisting the fabric of her skirts, indicated she was anything but.

“We'll handle Ellis,” Erin had vowed.

“Yeah, we sure will,” she reiterated in the early morning, starting the day by splashing her face with cold water. A quick wash, an irritated struggle with the laces of her corset and soon she was fully dressed, setting one foot in turn on the bed to tie the garters in place.

Lettie looked pale as she sat by the kitchen table. Hans said nothing beyond a grunted “Good morrow” and disappeared outside once he'd finished his meal.

“He is a tad frazzled,” Lettie said, shoving her bowl of uneaten porridge away from her. She gave Erin a wobbly smile. “As am I, truth be told.”

“He’ll not harm you,” Mrs Andersson said, and from the way she was handling the heavy ladle, she was more than prepared to whack the unknown Ellis over the head should it be necessary.

“He has the law on his side,” Lettie said in a hoarse voice.

“And yet there are other cases of separation.” According to Duncan, only the assembly could grant a full divorce, and he could not find any instance of them having done so. However, a man and a woman who no longer wished to live together could get something called a divorce of board and bed, which effectively meant they were still married—none of them could marry again—but had two households. Not, said Duncan, something he thought Ellis would agree with. “The man likely wants an heir,” Duncan had said. “And without a wife in his bed, there is little likelihood of one.”

“He could marry another woman on the sly,” Erin had suggested. “It’s not as if anyone here will know what’s going on down in Carolina.” At which point, Duncan had sat back and calmly explained that a bigamist was first whipped, then sentenced to hard labour for life. Okay, so bigamy was out.

Erin tightened her hold on Lettie’s hand. “You could go for one of those board-and-bed solutions.”

Lettie shrugged. “I could. But this has become a matter of honour for Ellis.”

“So you sue him for abuse,” Erin said, reaching across the table to grab hold of Lettie’s fisted hand. “Duncan says—”

“Duncan knows as well as I do that it is nigh on impossible to prove. Aye, there are neighbours that would stand witness on my behalf, but they are all women, Erin. Women.” Lettie sighed.

“The people of Pennsylvania do not hold with abuse, though,” Erin tried. “I just think—”

“What? That my word will be enough? Emrick will line up dozens of male witnesses that present him as a good and fair husband. Had he maimed me, then aye, it might serve. But as it is ...” She shook her head before clearing her throat. “That does not mean I intend to return to him.”

“Good,” Erin said.

It was well after noon when three men came riding down the lane. That one of them was Emrick Ellis was evident from how Lettie stiffened, but the other two looked more like servants, riding a couple of paces behind Ellis on scruffy mounts.

Erin did a quick sweep of the people congregating outside the main house. Sivert Andersson was standing side by side with Hans, Giles and two of his sons were there, and then there was Lettie, standing in splendid isolation a pace or two ahead of the men.

She cast a quick look to the side, pleased to see Julie was following her instructions and taking the twins off to play somewhere else. No need to have them anywhere close should things get hairy. Sandy was jumping up and down, her high voice repeating “Horsey” over and over. Erin hid a little grin. Poor Julie would have no choice but to take the girls to the upper meadows to say hello to their pony. Behind Julie flitted Tim. He met her gaze; she raised her hand. The boy was still silent, still prone to spending his days alone, but with the twins it was as if the child who’d never been allowed a childhood came to life, making him an ideal companion for the two girls.

A loud cough yanked her attention from her girls to the man who’d now halted his horse in front of them. A handsome devil was Emrick Ellis, and he knew it, preening like a peacock before turning to his wife.

“At last!” he said. “I have been so worried, sweeting.” He vaulted off the horse, but what he’d intended as a grand gesture sort of flopped when his left foot folded under him, causing him to almost land face-first on the cobbles. There were scattered chuckles, and when Ellis rose, there was

something dark in his green eyes, something that had Lettie taking half a step back. Ellis smirked, and Lettie straightened up to her full length.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

The moment she saw the flaring anger in Emrick’s eyes, it was as if Lettie’s spine liquified. *Please don’t hurt me*, she thought. *Please!* And then there was the slightest of touches to her back and she remembered she wasn’t alone, not anymore. She stiffened her legs and looked straight at him.

“What do I want?” he said in that silky voice that had once entrapped her. “Why, I want my wife back home with me.” He narrowed his eyes, his gaze flitting to Hans, who was now standing inappropriately close to her—she had but to lean back and she’d be cradled against his solid body.

“That will not happen,” she said firmly, and she had to swallow repeatedly when his hands twitched, those big, big hands tightening into fists.

“My wife belongs with me,” Ellis said. “Even if she’s an adulterous slut.”

“Hey!” Erin pushed forward, planting herself between Lettie and Emrick. “How dare you insult Lettie like that?”

“And who might you be?” Emrick sneered, taking his time looking Erin up and down. He knew who she was, of course: Lettie could see that in the gleam in his eyes.

“I am Erin Melville.”

“Ah, yes, the coloured woman who so entranced a good, upright white man that he wed her instead of just ... enjoying her.”

“Well, it’s nice there are some good, upright white men around, don’t you think? It would be a sorry state of affairs if all of them were spineless abusers like you.”

An ugly red mottled Emrick’s cheeks. Lettie had hold of Erin’s skirts. “Do not provoke him,” she said in a hushed voice, throwing a worried look at first Emrick, then his two

companions. One of them she recognised; he'd been working for Emrick since before she'd met him the first time. The other was watching impassively, though his eyes kept darting to the assembled men behind her.

“No,” Emrick said. “Best not do that.”

“Why? Because you'd hit me?” Erin widened her stance. “Try, mister. Try, and my men will have you flat on the ground.”

Emrick shifted his stance. For an instant, he twisted to throw a look over his shoulder, squinting as if trying to catch sight of something in the distance. In the next, he gave Erin a bored look. “Is your master not at home?”

Erin bristled, and Emrick grinned. “My apologies,” he said in a voice dripping with insincerity. “I meant Master Melville, your husband.”

“As you can see, he isn't.” Erin stretched her lips into a frigid smile. “Had he been here, you'd have been long gone, hauled towards the gate by him. You see, my husband has little patience with men who treat me with discourtesy—and his protectiveness extends to his cousin.”

Emrick scowled. “I have never treated Lettie discourteously.”

“No, of course not. What can possibly be discourteous about beating a woman half to death?”

From behind Lettie came a growl, and Sivert Andersson took a step forward and spat with precision at Emrick's feet. “We do not hold with wife-beaters here.”

“How fortunate, then, that this is not our home,” Emrick replied sweetly before his arm snaked out, his hand clamping down on Lettie's wrist. Some months ago, his hold would have reduced her to a trembling, fearful mess. No longer. Instead, she pulled back with enough force that he stumbled forward, hastily releasing her to avoid getting her finger in his eye.

“You do not want me back,” Lettie said. “Because you see, I will fight back.”

“Until I teach you not to,” he said, scowling at her. “Now come, wife.”

“What is it you don’t get? She’s not coming with you, you moron!” Erin was shoulder to shoulder with Lettie. “So why don’t you get back up on your horse and—”

“Mistress,” someone howled. “Mistress!” And there came Julie, running as if pursued by mountain lions. In her arms was a bawling Ellen, but where was Sandy?

“He has her,” Julie half sobbed, half screamed. “He has our poor Sandy, and unless you go alone to him, he’ll kill her.”

“Erin, no—” Lettie began, but then Emrick was on her, and there were yells all around. An arm round her neck, slowly choking her, and she raised her hands and had hold of his ears, hauling downwards with all her strength. He yowled and released his hold. Yet another yowl and Emrick went flying, landing several yards away.

One of his men—Charlie? Or was it George?—had been pulled off his horse. The other was attempting to pull free and ride off, but Lettie wasn’t having any of it. She threw herself forward and grabbed hold of the reins, hanging like a deadweight. “Get off! Get off, damn you!” The man made as if to hit her with his pistol. With a loud shriek, Mrs Andersson swung her ladle, striking him so hard over his forearm he lost his hold. Together, Mrs Andersson and Lettie pulled him off, Mrs Andersson plunking down to sit heavily on him. “Sivert, over here!” she yelled.

Lettie braced herself against her knees, breathing in gulps. She raised her head, and the first thing she saw was Emrick, grinning widely.

“Where’s Erin?” she asked.

In reply, Hans pointed up the lane.

“No, no, no!” She turned to Giles and his sons. “Go after her! Now!”

Erin did not stop to think. One look at Julie's terrified face, at Ellie, and she took off, running towards the distant meadows.

With her skirts hiked high, she flew over the uneven ground, her breath coming in agonising short gulps. The damned corset!

No time to do anything about it, not when he—Emrick's accomplice?—had her Sandy.

Right at the far end of the meadows, so close to the gate she could make it out, was a small stand of trees. A loud holler came from that direction, and Erin veered towards it.

“Mama!” Sandy yelled. “Mam—” The sound cut off on a loud sob, and Erin was going to kill whoever it was that was hurting her baby. Yes, she was going to eviscerate him, bite his fucking throat off it that was what it took.

It took her an endless time to traverse the meadows, and every time Sandy bawled out loud, her heart twisted.

And then finally she was close enough to make out the horse standing in the shadows of the tree, the hooded man sitting astride it, and her struggling little daughter.

“Let her go!” It did not come out as forceful as she wanted because her lungs were screaming for oxygen.

“An exchange,” the man said. “You for her.”

No choice, no choice. She frowned, trying to place the voice.

“And then what? You exchange me for Lettie?”

The man snickered.

She took that as a yes, taking a cautious step towards him. “Don't cry, baby,” she said, and out of the corner of her eye she saw something moving in the nearby bushes. Was that Tim?

If anything, that made Sandy cry louder, and the hooded man cursed. “Silence, whelp!” he roared. “Silence, or I'll—”

“Don't hurt her!” Erin held up both her hands. “Please don't hurt her. She's just a baby.”

“Get over here,” the man ordered, and she sidled closer, trying to find some way out of this situation. If only she’d grabbed a pistol! Sweat prickled at her skin.

“Now!” he growled. “Or else ...”

He shook poor Sandy, and she ran over to the horse.

“Closer.”

She obeyed.

With a little laugh, he dropped Sandy. Erin made as if to bend to pick her up, but a hand had her by the hair, and she had to grit her teeth not to scream at the pain as he heaved her upwards and over the saddle. She fought. She arched her back and kicked, but that hand in her hair, it held her under some sort of control. The horse was urged into a canter. The saddle slammed into her ribs with each leap. And still she fought, still she struggled.

Because when he’d hauled her upwards, she’d recognised him.

“You’ll die for this,” she managed to say.

“Not soon enough for you,” he replied. “Besides, no one will be able to prove anything against me.”

“Duncan will find you. He will kill you!”

“He can try. But that won’t help you.”

She leaned over and grabbed hold of the reins, yanking on the reins with such force the poor horse almost turned on itself.

“Bitch!” A vicious knock to her head left her dazed, and she slumped as he urged the horse to run faster.

If damned Nicholas Farrell thought she was going to roll over and die, he had another trick coming. She pretended to be unconscious, and the moment his hold on her relaxed, she had hold of the saddle and shoved herself backwards. This time, he did not catch her in time. She was off the horse, and she staggered backwards, attempting to get her bearings.

He hauled the horse to a stop so brutally it reared and leapt off. She ran. Unfortunately, she ran the wrong way, ending up hedged in by a dilapidated shed on one side and a crumbling stone wall on the other.

Nicholas Farrell licked his lips. “Well, well. Seems it falls to me to teach the wench good manners.” He leered. “You’ll have to learn fast, wench. You have but one objective, namely to please men like me and smile while you are doing it.”

“In your dreams.”

He chuckled. “No. More, I dare say, like your nightmare.” He leaned towards her. “Because there’ll be no coming back from where you’re going, and that husband of yours will never find you. Never!” He cackled.

“I’m not there yet,” she said, infusing her voice with as much bravado as she could muster. “And what’s to say Duncan isn’t already in pursuit?”

“Tut, tut, Mrs Melville. He isn’t home, is he?” Farrell took a step towards her, another. Erin backed away, looking desperately for something she could use as a weapon. He lunged; she almost fell as she scabbled away but righted

herself at the last moment. Most of her hair had come undone from his rough handling before, and all of her scalp burned, but there, dangling just by her eye, was a hairpin, trapped in her curls.

When next he charged, she stabbed him in the face with the pin. Too bad she missed his eye, but she'd inflicted some damage. *Kick him*, she urged herself, and she did, slamming her foot into his crotch. He uttered a pained grunt and doubled over. She did it again, and he shrieked. Good. She hoped she'd burst his balls. She ran, making for the horse.

How that damned man managed to recover so fast was a mystery. She'd just got her foot in the stirrups when his hand closed over her ankle. One yank and she was off. He cursed and spat as he dragged her backwards over the gravel. She screamed for help, kicked and twisted.

“Shut up!” Something hard connected with her hip. “Kick me, will you? That will cost you!” She fought him. She swung her arms, dug sore and aching fingers into his face. A slap stunned her. He snickered and she shrieked, launching herself upwards. She had hold of something. An ear? She didn't care. She tightened her hold and pulled. He howled. A punch to her face, but she wouldn't let go. *No, do not let go!* She managed to get her knee up, right into his crotch. He gasped out a curse. Another blow and this time her head rang with it.

Her grip on his ear slipped. One final yank and something ripped. Blood running down her arm.

“Bitch!” His face. Too close. A big, meaty hand round her throat. She flailed at him.

Fight. Duncan, help me!

At some point, she gave up. At some point, she stopped screaming. At some point, she just curled into herself as he hit her and kicked her and punched her. At some point, the dark that edged her consciousness took over, and she welcomed it.

They were saddling the horses when Duncan came riding down the lane, accompanied by Esther and Antoine.

“Thank God!” Lettie exclaimed, but from where he was tied to the oak, Emrick just laughed. “Think he’ll be able to help her? Too late for that!”

It took Duncan mere moments to take it all in. “Erin?”

“Gone,” Emrick Ellis said loudly. “Gone forever.” He stopped laughing when Lettie trod on his leg.

Hans was already astride. “She’s been taken,” he said. “But he can’t have gone far.”

The look Duncan gave Emrick had their captive trying to crawl into the tree.

“Where is he taking her?” he growled.

“Why should I tell you?” Emrick asked. In a flash, Duncan had his dagger out, the blade digging into the tender skin under Emrick’s eye.

“Why? Because if you don’t, I’ll cut out your eye. And if you still don’t tell, I will do the same to the other.” His voice was utterly devoid of emotion, so cold even Lettie shivered.

Emrick licked his lips. “There’s a ship waiting in Chester.” He smiled, revealing blood-rimmed teeth. “And she’ll not be coming back.”

Duncan increased the pressure on his blade and Emrick screamed as Duncan slashed all the way to the orbital bone.

“Duncan!” Antoine’s voice was like a whiplash. “Not now! We must ride.”

Duncan stood, and for an instant he swayed. Lettie had hold of him. “You will find her,” she told him.

He set his shoulders. “Aye, of course I will.” He mounted his fresh mount. “You’d best pray I recover my wife,” he snarled at Ellis. “Because if I do not, the pain you’ll suffer before you beg for death will be unbearable.”

“I did her no harm,” Ellis protested.

“No? You aided and abetted in her abduction. For that, you will hang, if I feel inclined to be merciful.”

“Me?” Ellis bleated. “I did no such thing! I was here to reclaim my wife.”

“No one will believe that.” Duncan showed Emrick his teeth. “No one, Ellis. I will make sure of that.”

He rode up to Lettie. “Take care of my children.” She almost wept at his tone. Here was a man determined to do whatever it took to reclaim his wife, even if it meant abandoning his daughters—at least for a while.

“Of course.” She gripped his hand. “I will see them safe.” She looked over to where Esther was cradling Sandy, who’d somehow made it back all by herself, repeating two words over and over: *Mama* and *Tim*.

“I think Tim might be following her,” she said.

Duncan gave her a tired look. “And what on earth can a lad like him do to a man like Farrell?”

They rode off, a phalanx of grim, silent men headed by Duncan.

And then it was only Lettie and the other women—and their three captives.

“Throw them in the cellar,” Lettie said.

“No.” Esther took a step forward. “We put them in the kennels. With the dogs.”

Emrick paled. “You cannot do that.”

“Watch me,” Lettie said, thinking she liked this rather odd expression Erin liked to use. Erin. For the first time in many years, Lettie closed her eyes and prayed for the safety of someone other than herself.

Jasper had been sent ahead, which was why David Lloyd was already down by the wharves when Duncan and his men rode in. Not only Lloyd, but several of the senior Friends were lined up on the quay, as were all of the Graham Company employees.

“Have you seen Farrell?” Duncan asked.

“No,” Jasper replied. “But he is likely skulking somewhere.”

Mr Bolton came trotting over. “Someone’s stolen my skiff!” he said. “Look!”

And there he was, that big blowfly of a man, rowing determinedly towards the schooner moored furthest from the shore.

“After him!” Duncan ordered, and everyone scrambled for the boats.

“Wait! Wait!” From the other end of the harbour came Tim, sprinting towards them. “She’s ...” He inhaled. “She’s ... not.” He gave up, pointing instead at another ship. “There.”

“My wife is on that ship?” Duncan asked, narrowing his eyes. The *Green Lady* was an elegant brigantine destined for Jamaica, its hold filled with barrels of pork and corn, of finer items intended for the rich colonists—all of it on behalf of the Graham Company.

Tim nodded. He pointed at the skiff. “Ruse.”

“Then best we give them a ruse as well,” Lloyd said. “Come on,” he said. “Let us give him the chase he so desires.” He stood on his toes and nipped off Duncan’s hat, setting it atop one of the taller of the Friends, Apothecary Simmonds. “And behold, here is our decoy. Go!” he added. “Go, go!”

Bolton leapt into one of the skiffs bobbing by the quay. Four men scrambled after him, with Simmonds nimbly leaping aboard and taking a stance in the middle, pointing with agitation towards Farrell. The skiff took off. Bolton called out pace, and soon enough the boat was skimming over the surface.

Stevens pushed forward. “The supercargo of the *Green Lady* is still ashore,” he said.

“I imagine he would be. John Morris is an honourable man who would never look the other way as a woman was carried aboard.” Duncan swallowed repeatedly to rid himself of the lump in his throat. “We can use that.”

“That we can.” Stevens nodded. “We’ll inform him we need to add a further dozen barrels to the cargo.”

“Nay. We do not lie to him,” Duncan said. “But aye, he can be rowed across with further cargo.” He smiled grimly. “Living, breathing, armed cargo.” He shook his head. “I never took Captain Hayes for a villain.”

“We do not know that he is,” Lloyd reprimanded. “Mayhap Farrell is forcing him.”

On the water, Farrell had almost reached his destination, Bolton urging his men on at such volume his voice carried all the way to them.

“What ship is that?” Duncan asked, watching as the sails were unfurled. Whoever captained it had been informed beforehand about the need of a speedy departure.

“The *Beatrice*.” Stevens frowned. “We’ve never used her.”

“And we never will.” He turned to Tim. “How is she?”

The lad looked away, digging one bare toe into the ground. He just shook his head, silent tears streaking his face.

“But she’s alive,” Duncan said, hearing himself the pleading note in his voice.

Tim dashed an arm over his eyes. “Aye.”

Bolton was no more than a stone’s throw away when the sails of the *Beatrice* caught the wind, nudging the ship forward. From Bolton came an angry roar, Simmond shook his fist, and if Duncan squinted, he swore he could see Farrell in the aft. The *Beatrice* slid off, and after collecting the skiff Farrell had discarded, the men began rowing back towards the shore.

“And now to handle the *Green Lady*,” Lloyd said.

John Morris had the expression of a stunned fish: huge eyes and gaping mouth. “No!”

“Aye,” Duncan said.

“But why?” Morris asked.

“Greed?” Duncan suggested.

“Coercion?” Lloyd added, giving Duncan a frown.

“No.” To his annoyance, Duncan’s voice shook. “No honourable man would stoop so low as to aid and abet in an abduction due to coercion.”

Lloyd’s brows rose. “I disagree with thee, my friend. A potential sword hanging over thy head can make a villain out of most of us.” He waved a hand when Duncan opened his mouth to protest. “It does not matter. If thy wife is on that ship, the reasons behind the captain’s actions are neither here nor there.”

Morris was sweating like a pig as they approached the brigantine.

Hidden under tarps were eight armed men, and manning the oars were Duncan, Hans, Giles and Bolton.

“Are we there yet?” Antoine hissed.

“Almost,” Duncan said. He glanced at Tim sitting on the thwart beside him. “Can you do this, lad?”

Tim just nodded, his eyes huge as he studied the approaching ship.

“Ahoy, the ship!” Morris called out, and the rowers began swinging the skiff so that it lay side by side with the *Green Lady*.

Lines came down, and the skiff was moored. Tim swallowed, nodded at Duncan and took hold of the aft line. A rope ladder dropped down, and Morris went up first, followed closely by Antoine, Jasper and Duncan.

Duncan kept an eye on Tim’s progress. The lad was slowly making his way upwards. Morris was on the deck; Antoine and Jasper followed suit. Antoine held out a hand to Duncan and heaved him up, while behind came Hans and the other men.

“Ah, Morris. About time,” Captain Hayes said without taking his eyes off the seamen scrambling up the rigging. “We must be off.”

“We’re still waiting for another load,” Morris said.

“What? No, no, we cannot tarry, we—” He swung to face the supercargo and fell silent.

“Mr Melville,” he finally said. “To what do we owe the honour?”

“Oh, I am sure you know why,” Duncan said, helping David Lloyd up. The captain’s eyes widened at the sight of the chief justice. He tried to back away, his gaze darting from one armed man to the other. He filled his lungs as if to scream, the sound converting into a squeak when Antoine dug the point of his rapier into the underside of his chin. “Where is she?” Antoine hissed.

“Oy! You cannot come aboard and threaten our captain like that!” The bosun swaggered forward, scowling at Antoine.

“Hello, Benson,” Duncan said, and the bosun blinked, stared, and for an instant it seemed he was going to flee—but Hans blocked him.

“All thy men on deck, captain. Now,” Lloyd said.

“Why?” the captain asked, leaning as far away as he could from Antoine’s blade.

“Well, we wouldn’t have someone do something foolish, like dump illegal cargo into the water,” Lloyd said. He settled himself on a barrel.

“We have no illegal cargo,” the first mate said, frowning at Morris. “He’s accounted for everything.”

“Except for what was taken aboard an hour or so ago,” Duncan said.

The first mate frowned. “I wasn’t here then.”

“Neither was I.” A sailor dropped down from the shrouds.

“Or I.” This last speaker was not much older than Tim. And where was Tim? As if he’d conjured him, the lad’s head

popped up from one of the hatches. “She’s here!”

With a growl, the bosun tore free. “It’s your damned fault!” he yelled at the captain. “I told you this would not end well.”

“Hold your tongue!” the captain snapped.

Lloyd’s hand was on Duncan’s sleeve. “What art thou waiting for? Go!”

Duncan gave him an agonised look. “I am frightened,” he whispered. “What if she’s . . .”

Lloyd patted his arm. “Go to her. The lad said she still lived. That is all that matters.”

Duncan nodded and cleared his throat. “Come,” he said to Jasper. “In case we need to be two to carry her.”

He followed the sound of Tim’s voice down into the darker parts of the ship. There, in a small enclosed space was his Erin, thrown like garbage on a heap of sacking. It was likely a mercy that it was too dark to properly see her, but when he made as if to lift her, she whimpered, and he did not know what to do.

“Here.” Jasper had found poles, and together with Tim he fashioned a makeshift stretcher. It took an eternity to manoeuvre the clumsy contraption upwards, but there, at last, was a square of daylight, and hands reached down to help lift her into the light. The movement jarred her, and her left arm fell to the side, dangling as if she were dead.

“She’s alive,” Tim said. “I know she is, master.”

So did he, having stopped repeatedly to assure himself she was still breathing.

There was utter silence from the assembled men.

“*Mein Gott!*” Hans finally uttered.

David Lloyd took one look at Erin, staggered over to the railing and retched.

Duncan’s eyesight blurred. He did not want to look at the brutalised woman before him, yet he had no choice, trying to

see something of his Erin in the unconscious wreck before him. There were bruises everywhere, purple blotches that looked almost black in places. Her clothes had been mostly torn off, revealing far too much honey-coloured skin now marred with angry welts, with bruises and deep gashes. With a shaking finger, he traced the collar of black bruises encircling her throat.

“He dies for this,” he whispered. “I swear, Erin, he dies.”

She did not respond. Other than her shallow breathing, she resembled a corpse, a brutally desecrated woman who’d been thrown to the side and left to die.

From somewhere came a low moan, a whispered, “Dear Lord!”

The first mate came hurrying over with a blanket, settling it gently on her, and Duncan wanted to tuck it tight around her, but he did not dare do so in case that would hurt her.

Her fingers were covered in drying blood, two of her nails near on torn off. One eye was entirely swollen shut; there was dried blood under her nose and around her mouth. At some point, she’d bitten through her lower lip, miniature rivulets of blood having coagulated on her chin.

He didn’t know where to touch her. There was not an inch of whole, untouched skin. Carefully, he skimmed his hands over her ribs. Yet again, that heartbreaking whimper.

“He’s kicked her everywhere, the bastard.” He didn’t recognise his own voice, choked with tears.

Tim edged closer. “He did that when she kicked him in the balls,” he said. “He said he was going to ...” He made an unequivocal gesture with his hands. “But she would not have it.” Tentatively, the lad reached out a hand to brush a strand of hair off her face. “She kicked him twice, and then she ran. But he caught up with her, and I should have done something, but ...”

“What could you have done?” Duncan said. “He’d have snapped your neck.”

“She defended me once,” Tim said. “I should have done the same for her.”

“You did better,” Duncan said. “You made sure we found her.”

Lloyd knelt down beside them.

“See?” Duncan said bitterly. “This is what white man considers is his right to subject a coloured woman to.”

“In this instance, he will be punished,” Lloyd vowed, giving the captain a grim look.

“He’s not the main perpetrator! It’s that damned Farrell!”

“And if so, he will also be punished.”

The captain brayed with laughter. “Good luck in catching him,” he said. “He’s halfway to Annapolis by now, and your laws do not apply there.”

“Abduction is a crime in any colony.” Lloyd approached the captain. “And for abduction, one hangs.”

The captain swallowed. “I didn’t abduct anyone! I just agreed to transport the goods.” He reeled back when Antoine used his rapier to whip him straight across the face.

“Madame Melville is no goods,” the Frenchman spat. “And now you and that rat Farrell will pay the price for treating her as thus.”

“The Farrells have a lot of power in Annapolis,” the captain said, attempting to staunch the blood that now dripped down his face. “He’ll not get more than a slap over his fingers for something as inconsequential as mistaking a coloured wife for a slave.” He shied away when Duncan stalked towards him. “I am but stating things as they are.”

“Except that he knew who she was—which I can prove,” Duncan said. “Just like you knew, Haley. “

“No, no, no!” the captain bleated.

“Of course thou did,” Lloyd said. “Thou does regular business with the Graham Company.”

“None of this was my fault! I merely did a favour for a friend.”

“How commendable: thou participated in a criminal act, and now thou wilt pay the price.” Lloyd studied the surly bosun. “As wilt thou.”

“Me?” the bosun protested. “I was but doing as ordered!”

Lloyd shrugged. “A right weak defence, in my humble opinion.” He turned to Duncan. “Thy wife needs thee. Go and sit with her. I will manage things here together with our adept French friend and thy loyal servants.”

“Thou wert right: it was greed,” Lloyd said with a deep sigh, settling himself beside Duncan. On the pallet bed, Erin was sleeping—no longer unconscious, thank the Lord, although the sounds she’d made while Hetty Wilson and Simmonds had tended to her had left him bleeding inside. So much pain! But now she was sunk in peaceful slumber. Simmonds had given her a huge draught of laudanum before he left.

He catalogued her injuries: a badly swollen knee—sprained, Hettie thought—several cracked ribs, a hand so swollen Hetty suspected Farrell had trod on it, various lesions and cuts, bare patches on her head where the bastard had torn her hair out, dark bruises on her thighs, as if they’d been wrenched apart, deep gashes on her hips and buttocks, as if she’d been whipped with a belt buckle, one ... Nay, he could not go on. Instead, he picked up her hand and kissed the bruised knuckles.

“She fought back,” he said with some pride.

“Of course she did.” Lloyd patted him on the back. “Did thou hear anything I just said?”

He shook his head, still cradling her hand.

“He was promised he could keep whatever money he sold her for,” Lloyd said, his entire face scrunching together. “An unusual arrangement, Haley admitted: usually, he and Farrell split the proceeds between them. They have been doing this for years, apparently. The bosun said as much, claiming he was only the paid help, so he was not really to blame for all

this.” He snorted softly. “As if that will help him. Nay, those two will hang by the neck until they die.”

He went on to tell Duncan that the *Green Lady* was to sail on the morrow with the entire crew and Morris. “The first mate—Lewis—will act as captain, and Morris has promised they will go nowhere near Annapolis.”

Duncan didn’t quite follow. His head hurt, his heart ached, and somewhere along the way his intellect had decided it could not quite handle all this. Not after having sat Tim down and had the lad tell him everything he’d seen, from when Farrell caught up with Erin when she tried to escape to when she lay like a silent, broken doll.

Tim had not wanted to. He’d covered his face with his hands and begged Duncan not to make him tell him, but Duncan had to know. Every kick, every blow—as Tim detailed the savagery of Farrell’s attack, it was as if Duncan shared some of his wife’s pain. But when Tim described how Farrell had undone his breeches, Duncan did not want to hear. But he did, wincing when Tim talked of an enraged man who used his belt and feet instead of his swollen purple member.

“I think he tried,” Tim had said in a whisper.

Duncan had had to clear his throat several times. “And did he succeed?”

“No. He screeched and cursed.” Tim had actually smiled. “The mistress likely left him permanently damaged.”

“No warning to Farrell,” Lloyd explained, forcing Duncan’s attention back to him. “Stevens has written letters to the Graham Company in Annapolis.”

“Uncle Ian must be told,” Duncan mumbled. He rested his head against the mattress of the bed. “And ...” He yawned. “Jeremy!” he sat up. “I must get word to Jeremy and James, ask them to keep an eye on the rat until I can take care of him myself.”

“Nay, Duncan, that is not how thou wilt handle this. Nicholas Farrell is to be hauled before a jury of his equals and there condemned. Thou wilt not do anything rash.”

Duncan ducked his head.

“Duncan!” Lloyd moved closer, his nose almost at Duncan’s ear. “Thou must think of her. She needs thee.”

His shoulders slumped.

“I failed her,” he groaned. “He did this to her because of me.”

“But that is not thy fault.” Lloyd’s hand settled on his bowed head. “That is entirely his fault.”

“I wasn’t there to keep her safe,” Duncan groaned. He dragged his hands through his hair. “And I knew firsthand how vicious he could be.”

Haltingly, he told Lloyd of that long-gone day when Nicholas Farrell left a ten-year-old lad covered with bruises and a broken limb.

Lloyd made a disgusted sound before getting to his feet. “Some men do not deserve to live,” he said with a sigh. “Some do not have the inner light that is required to separate right from wrong. Such men are best kept far away from the weak and vulnerable.”

A sour taste filled Duncan’s mouth; the combination of rage, fear and a growing desire to inflict pain on someone tasted like spoiled milk. “Hayes was right about one thing: the Farrell family is powerful in Annapolis—so powerful Edward Farrell’s eldest was never subjected to more than a slap on the wrist.”

“Not this time,” Lloyd said.

Duncan looked away. Hayes was right about something else as well: Lloyd’s word carried little weight in Maryland.

“She cannot accompany you to Annapolis,” Lloyd said.

Nay, he already knew that. He’d been risking legal action during the short time they lived there, principally because Maryland had already passed laws akin to those now being discussed in Pennsylvania. But Erin’s obvious wealth and the background they’d created for her featuring a rich English father and his Moorish bride had created enough of a

protection—then. Especially with Jeremy and James Jones making no secret of the fact that they would take it very badly if anyone caused Duncan any harm. Now, though ... They needed a home, a place in which his Erin was seen for the beautiful, vibrant woman she was, not as a mere extension of the colour of her skin. Later. He would consider this later. He pressed her unresponsive hand to his cheek.

“I love you, honey,” he whispered. It was likely his imagination that had him seeing a slight twitch to her lips in response.

Erin swam through the murky darkness of her mind. It was safe here, the constant pain reduced to a dull throbbing, no more. But occasionally, bright light would penetrate her hiding place, and damn it, but that *hurt!* There were moments when she hung suspended between the deep dreamless sleep she craved and wakefulness. She recognised the voice of the man beside her, his grip on her hand.

Through lowered lashes, she saw shadowy outlines lean over her, heard soothing voices tell her it would all be fine. Fine? What would be fine? She licked her lips, her tongue snagging on thread. She tried to turn her head and it was like having her brain bisected by a piece of glass.

One morning, she opened her eye—why could she only open one of them?—and saw Duncan fast asleep in a chair. He was too big for it, looking as if someone had forcibly squashed his large frame into it. She sighed, and he startled awake, blinking owlishly before leaning forward.

“Erin?”

She tried to speak, but her tongue was glued to her palate. She swallowed, and that hurt.

“That’s me,” she finally managed to say, and for some weird reason that made him cry.

She wanted to offer him a hug but was too lethargic to even try. So instead, she stared at the ceiling. An unfamiliar ceiling. Erin closed her eyes. Sandy screaming. Sandy!

She tried to sit. Duncan was beside her in an instant, his hands restraining her. No, no, no! She couldn't lie here.

"Sandy!" she said. Well, she tried to say, but it came out more like "Sannee."

"Sandy is unharmed," Duncan told her, but she wasn't quite sure she believed him. She knew him too well, and that quick side glance had her gut cramping. He met her gaze. "I swear. She is unharmed. He may have been rough with her, but she is a hardy lass, our Sandy."

She blinked back tears. That bastard had thrown their baby to the ground as if she were garbage.

"Farrell," she said.

"Aye."

Disjointed images flooded her brain. A horse. Her, on the ground. His face far too close. A huge fist. Explosions of pain up and down her body. Hard hands wrenching her legs apart. A ...

"Erin. Erin!"

She opened her eyes and screamed. Too close, too close!

"God!" Duncan threw himself backward.

Next time she woke, he wasn't there. Instead, there was Lettie, and her blue eyes gleamed with tears as she smiled down at her.

Erin attempted a smile. It hurt. Just like it hurt to breathe or move her legs or try to close her left hand. It took considerable effort to lift it, and she stared at the purple-and-yellow discoloration, at the two fingers in splints.

"Duncan?" she asked, lowering her hand.

A shadow passed over Lettie's face.

"Duncan?" she repeated, and she could hear how shrill her voice was.

"He thought you'd prefer it if he wasn't here." Lettie licked her lips. "Apparently, his mere presence frightened

you.”

“Farrell,” she croaked.

“Aye. You mistook him for Farrell.”

Never. She would never mistake her Duncan for that monster. “Duncan.”

“Shall I fetch him?”

She managed a nod.

He hesitated by the door. Dark shadows under his eyes, bristles covering his cheeks—he looked exhausted. Somehow, she extended her undamaged hand to him. He took a step or two closer.

“Duncan,” she groaned.

He knelt beside the bed, and with clumsy fingers she stroked his cheek, his hair. “Messy,” she chided, tugging at a dark lock. He moaned, pillowing his head on her chest. *Ouch!* But it wasn’t too bad. She settled her hand on his head and concentrated on shallow breaths.

“I want to go home,” she enunciated a while later.

“Hetty says it is too early to move you.” He raised his head to peer at her.

“Home. Please,” she added before closing her eyes. So, so tired.

How they got her home, she wasn’t sure, but the moment she opened her eyes, relief filled her, her splinted fingers stroking the sheets. She inhaled carefully, smiling at the scents of lavender and almond oil.

From beside her came a soft snore. Duncan was fast asleep, his dark hair framing a face that looked worn even at rest. But at some point, he’d shaved, and he smelled of soap and mint. He woke under her scrutiny.

“Hi,” she said.

In response, he pressed a kiss to her unharmed hand.

“What happened to me?” she asked. “I don’t remember much after ... after ...” She couldn’t trust her memory, those little jagged recollections that had her sucking in breath. She remembered kicking him in the balls. She also remembered him standing over her, breeches undone. She squished her eyes shut, listening as Duncan told her what he knew.

“... and then he wrapped you in his cloak, threw you over the horse and rode off with you,” he finished.

She peeked at him. “That’s it?”

“That’s it?” He laughed mirthlessly. “Honey, he almost killed you!”

“But he didn’t ...” She licked her lips. “He didn’t ...”

“Violate you?” Duncan sank down on the pillows. “Tim says no.”

“Tim?”

“Aye. He saw it all. And thank God he was there, because if he hadn’t followed you, we’d have boarded the wrong ship.” He touched her eye, still bruised. “He’s distraught, saying he failed you. I, on the other hand, believe he saved you.”

She gave him a weak smile. Tim saw. Oh God: it made her want to throw up. He saw it all and didn’t see Farrell violate her. But would a boy of twelve really know what rape looked like?

Two days later, Erin had had enough. Ignoring Duncan’s forbidding frown, she got out of bed and stood, high-fiving herself for being able to suppress a gasp. Shit, her leg! She lifted the chemise—which also hurt like hell to do—and stared down at the myriad fading bruises all along her hip and thigh.

“You should stay in bed,” he said. “You need your rest.”

She ignored this oblique reference to her recurring nightmares. Still too vivid, they left her drained and sweaty, fear a rancid taste in her mouth. But at least she had not mistaken Duncan for Farrell again, her heartbeat reverting to normal as he held her and shushed her.

“I need to start moving around.” She shuffled like an ancient dinosaur towards the wash basin. Julie had just been in with a pitcher of hot water, and she wanted to wash herself for a change. “And I need to see my girls.” She peered at her face: much better today, the swelling almost gone. Her lip still looked pretty gruesome, but at least she looked normal enough that she wouldn’t scare her daughters.

Esther had been in to see her repeatedly, glowing from within whenever she spoke of Antoine—which was more or less constantly. It could have been annoying to listen to this blushing girl gush about her new husband, but for Erin it had been a much-wanted distraction. Esther’s focus on herself rather than Erin served as an unspoken promise that Erin would heal, that somehow she’d emerge from this cocoon of pain and be herself again.

Lettie had said as much yesterday, grinning when Erin pouted at yet another bowl of soup. “Feisty,” she’d said with a laugh. “Always a good sign.” And then she’d very gently brushed Erin’s hair off her face. “Does it hurt all the time?”

“Yeah.”

She insisted on dressing herself, ignoring his disapproving look. By the time she was done, she was sweating and nauseous, but no way was she going to admit that. But she did allow Duncan to help her down the stairs, steadying her along the passageway to the kitchen.

Mrs Andersson actually squealed. And then she came barging towards Erin at such speed she would likely have bowled them both over had Duncan not intercepted her.

“Oooo!” the damned woman batted her eyelashes at Duncan. “My apologies, Master Melville.” She beamed at Erin. “I am so happy to see you up and about, mistress.”

“Thanks.” Gratefully, Erin sank down to sit on one of the kitchen benches. A bowl of oatmeal appeared before her, and for the first time in close to two weeks things felt almost normal—until Julie ushered the twins in. Ellen came to an abrupt halt, staring at Erin. Her mouth wobbled, and then she breathed, “Mama!” throwing herself at Erin. It hurt like hell,

but it didn't matter. Erin hugged the little body as close to her as possible, peppering her with kisses. And then she turned to Sandy, opening her arms. To her shock, Sandy hid her face against Duncan instead.

"Sandy?" she said, placing a hand on the tense little back. "It's me, Mama."

Her usually so bubbly daughter peeked at her.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" she asked, rubbing Sandy's back. To her consternation, Sandy plugged her thumb into her mouth. She hadn't done that for months.

"She's not spoken since that day," Duncan said in a low voice.

"And you tell me now?" she hissed, which caused Sandy to shy away and nestle even closer to Duncan.

"Would it have helped to know?" he replied in a low voice. "I did as I thought best, Erin. I ..." He broke off, shaking his head.

"Breakfast everyone," Mrs Andersson sang out, and suddenly the kitchen was full of people, loud voices expressing how nice it was to see Erin back on her feet. She settled Ellen beside her. From the other side of the table, Sandy stared at her, still sucking on her thumb. On impulse, Erin reached across the table. Sandy shied back, eyes as blue as her father's staring at her.

"She'll come round," Duncan said, adjusting Sandy in his lap.

Not over the next few days, she didn't. It broke Erin's heart to have her daughter avoid her, but it was her silence, the way she abdicated from her previous position of leader for the dynamic duo, following Ellen like a little shadow instead, that had her hiding herself away to cry.

She was doing just that, sitting alone under one of the apple trees, when Esther joined her. No words, just a hand slipped into hers, and they sat like that for a long, long time.

To distract herself from Sandy, she asked Lettie about Emrick.

“He doesn’t like dogs,” Lettie replied, a wicked smile on her face.

“Eh?” They were in the kitchen, Erin mostly watching while Lettie did the actual cooking.

Lettie laughed. “The look on his face when we hauled him into the kennels and left him there with the dogs ...”

“You didn’t!”

“Aye, we did. For a while.” Lettie gestured for Erin to hand her the neatly tied bunch of herbs, sniffing at it before dropping it into the pot. The scent of sage and thyme wafted through the air. “He blames me,” she added.

“For what? For succumbing to his baser instincts and beating you black and blue?” Erin sat down carefully on one of the kitchen chairs and fiddled with the splints on her hand.

“Nay. For not giving him a son.”

“It could be his fault.”

Lettie snorted. “It could never be Emrick Ellis’ fault.”

“No, of course not. God’s gift to womankind, that’s what he is.” She relaxed against the backrest and took a couple of deep breaths. No pain today when she did that, and most of the bruises had faded to faint yellowish smudges. Her lip no longer sported stitches, and today she’d walked all the way to the jetty and back without limping. “So what will happen next?” Erin asked. “With Emrick.”

“Well, at some point during the night he spent with the dogs, he concluded he no longer wanted me back. Besides, that Mr Lloyd made it very clear that Emrick was a mere inch or so away from a hangman’s noose, and the only way to avoid an early death was by collaborating—with Duncan and with me. So once dear Emrick has fulfilled his legal obligations by testifying against Farrell, he will return home to Carolina, while I stay here, a permanent separation of bed and board.”

“He is testifying against Farrell?” Just the name had her pulse racing, her hands trembling. In a second, Lettie was there, kneeling before her.

“He will never hurt you again,” she said.

“You don’t know that. What if ...” He’d evaded justice before, his father more than happy to grease whatever palms were required to save his son.

“Nay, Erin. He will not harm you ever again. If, by some mischance, he evades the noose, he will not evade the Grahams—or the Jones.”

“He will not evade me,” Duncan corrected from behind her. “But none of that will be necessary: this time, Nicholas Farrell has overreached.” He sauntered over to sniff appreciatively at the stew bubbling in the pot before sitting down by the table. “Captain Hayes has signed a most detailed confession, Lloyd himself has written an extensive description of the events, and both Tim and Ellis are to testify, as is Antoine.”

“Antoine? Why?”

Duncan looked away. “Because I cannot find it in me to stand before a jury and detail the extent of your injuries,” he said in a low voice. “Every time I think of it, I ...” He broke off.

Lettie set a mug of cider before him, handed another to Erin. “She—you—survived,” she said simply.

Duncan covered Erin’s hand with his but said nothing.

It was later that afternoon that Ellen came skipping towards Erin. “Mama, Mama, Mama,” she sang, grabbing hold of Erin’s good hand.

“What is it?” Erin said, laughing at how determinedly Ellen was tugging her along. Into the barn and Ellen danced ahead to the ladder leading to the hayloft.

“Uh-uh.” Erin wagged a finger at her. “You’re not allowed to ...”

Too late. Ellen was already scrambling upwards.

“Who taught you that?” Erin asked.

“Sandy,” Ellen replied.

“Of course she did,” Erin said under her breath, but somehow it made her happy to think of Sandy as she should be, an irresistible and sometimes very annoying bundle of energy.

In the hayloft was a cat. And Sandy, clutching a mewling kitten to her chest. When she saw Erin, she held out the kitten towards her before hastily pulling it back.

“Is it your kitten?” Erin asked, and Sandy gave her a huge smile and nodded. “Okay. But it has to stay with its mommy for now,” Erin said, leaning forward ever so slowly to release the unhappy kitten from Sandy’s grip. “Look, it’s crying,” she said, stroking the mewling kitten. “It needs its mommy.”

Sandy’s pudgy fingers loosened their hold, and the little tabby landed in the hay in front of her. Quickly, Erin returned it to its mama, and soon enough it was suckling with its siblings.

“What is its name?” she asked Sandy, holding her breath.

Sandy blinked up at her before breathing, “Kitty.” What Erin wanted to do was pull her close and hug her. What she did was wait. On one side, Ellen leaned against her, her gaze never leaving the kittens. On the other, Sandy shifted closer and closer until she was finally close enough for Erin to hook a finger with her. That was—had to be—enough for now.

Four weeks after Erin's ordeal, she insisted on accompanying Duncan to Chester.

"I'm not sure ..." he began, but she interrupted him, saying she had to "normalise things."

"I can't let him affect my life," she added, looking at Sandy. Her mouth wobbled. "Not more than he already has."

He gave her a tight nod. It was both Lettie's and Esther's opinion—echoed by Mrs Andersson—that Sandy would revert to being herself.

"With time, she'll be back to being that naughty sprite who steals my buns hot from the oven," Mrs Andersson said, and it was Duncan's impression that of late she was always baking, casually setting out the results on the kitchen table. Yesterday, Mrs Andersson had squealed with anger, chasing Sandy, who'd rushed from the kitchen clutching a sizeable chunk of honey cake. "See?" their housekeeper had said with a little smile. "Improving in leaps and bounds, that one."

Duncan wasn't unduly concerned about Sandy. Such young children were resilient, and their daughter had a formidable ally in her sister, the hitherto so quiet Ellen having become quite voluble and demanding when it came to what she perceived Sandy wanted.

"It won't stop with one kitten," Duncan had commented a few days ago, grinning at Erin's disgruntled expression. True enough: the next day, Ellen had told them all the kittens were to be theirs, huge blue eyes blinking up at them.

“Sandy wants,” she’d said.

That time, Duncan had put his foot down, setting a finger to Erin’s lips when she seemed on the verge of acquiescing. “One kitten,” he’d told Ellen firmly. “Only one.”

Ellen, the little imp, had tilted her head to the side. “One kitty for Sandy.”

“Aye,” he’d said with a smile.

“One for Ellen,” she’d added with what could only be described as a triumphant grin, and from Sandy had come what sounded suspiciously like a giggle.

Erin had muffled her laughter when Duncan had promised they could each have one—only one—kitten.

While not overly worried about his daughter, he lived in a state of heightened concern for his wife. Aye, her nightmares came less frequently, but far too often he’d find her staring out into space, and of late it was as if she was drowning in dark fears. On occasion, he’d seen her press her hands to her belly, and he’d carefully asked Lettie if she thought there might have been some permanent damage to Erin’s insides, mayhap causing her pains she was reluctant to tell them about.

Today, though, his wife looked remarkably herself again. In dark green skirts, that tight bodice in a pale yellow he so loved seeing her in, hair tamed into a heavy bun beneath her hat, she looked every inch the wife of a well-to-do landowner. From the mulish look on her face, she would not take no for an answer, but at least she agreed to sharing a mount with him, which was how Duncan found himself walking Atlas towards Chester with his arms full of warm wife. Jasper was riding some paces ahead of them whistling tunelessly, and beside them loped one of their hounds, a large brindled creature Tim had named Baccy.

In Chester, Erin informed Duncan she was fully capable of doing her errands on her own.

“I’m visiting with Hetty,” she told him.

“Are you ailing?” he asked, taking hold of her hand. “Is something not healing as it should? Are you—”

“Hush.” She rolled her eyes. “I like her—and she’s just had a baby.” But there it was, that little shadow that had him worrying there was something she wasn’t telling him.

With a man as capable as Stevens in charge, it took little time for Duncan to review the Graham business. With Jasper and Steven, he inspected the warehouses, pleased at seeing them so empty—as they should be this time of the year.

“Four fully loaded vessels last week,” Stevens said. “Sugar, tobacco, cocoa—”

“Cocoa?” The Spaniards preferred to handle the trade in this commodity themselves.

Stevens winked. “Well, you know that old fox Captain Jan and his son. They ... umm . . . well, at times, they just happen upon an abandoned shipment.”

Abandoned his arse. “He’s still sailing?” Duncan asked, smiling slightly at the memory of the rogue. Like Erin, Jan was of mixed race. In difference to Erin, it did not truly matter, as he lived aboard his precious ship.

“He’ll die aboard the *Diana*,” Stevens said. “I dare say his son has days when he wishes that to happen sooner rather than later.” He laughed. “He may be old, but he’s a right tyrant, that one.”

He left Jasper to pack his saddlebags with cocoa and sugar—and the tea that Stevens had set aside from the last shipment—while he went to talk to the chief justice.

“How is Erin?” Lloyd asked the moment he saw Duncan.

“Better,” he said, and the older man’s face broke into a wide smile.

They spent the better part of an hour reviewing the various witness statements.

“Will they hold?” Duncan asked, frowning at the neat handwriting covering page after page.

“It should hold.” Lloyd sat back. “But ...”

“But what?”

Lloyd sighed. “I find myself concerned. I fear a trial in Maryland will be ... inconclusive.”

“Inconclusive? Why so?” Duncan folded his hands together on his lap. Not this time. Nay. This time, Farrell would not get away with it. “With all these witnesses, how can it be anything but conclusive—he’s guilty as sin!”

“Ah, Duncan, I agree with thee. But his peers in Maryland, well, they may not. To men who hold slaves, abducting a coloured woman is no great matter—theft, at most, and for that Farrell will be fined.” He frowned at his constantly ink-blotted fingers. “So ... I have given the matter extensive thought.” Lloyd broke off, busying himself with ordering the few items on his desk. “We need to try him here.”

“Here?” Duncan laughed harshly. “Do you truly believe Farrell will agree to that?”

“Nay. But thou hast friends and family in Annapolis, and as thou tells it, Farrell is not the most liked of men. So I thought ...” He looked at Duncan expectantly.

“What?”

“Erm ... well, that thou could ...”

“Have him brought here!” Duncan leapt to his feet. “Here, where he committed his crime.” He arched his brows. “Because I presume we agree that here in Pennsylvania, the abduction of a woman, no matter the colour of her skin, is a serious offence.”

“As is near on beating her to death.” Lloyd’s hand shook as he raised his mug and took a couple of swallows of whatever fragrant concoction he was consuming to combat his gout. “It is a miracle she lives. Thou must thank the good Lord for holding his hand over her.”

“Except he didn’t,” Duncan said, retaking his seat.

Lloyd reached across the table. “Aye, he did.”

There was no point in arguing with Lloyd over this. “I will set out for Maryland on the morrow,” he said instead.

“Good, good.” Lloyd lifted a finger. “Without Erin.”

“Aye.” Not that he liked the thought of leaving her, but bringing Farrell to justice was simply too important. He stood.

“Before thou goest ...” Lloyd rooted about in one of his drawers. “Ah, yes, here it is.” He shoved the document across the table towards Duncan.

“An annulment?” Duncan scanned the text before looking up at Lloyd. “You are not authorised to—”

“And thou thinks I do not know that?” Lloyd huffed. “But as long as he stays in Carolina and she remains here, who is ever to know?” He squirmed. “Better for both,” he muttered. “A new start.”

“He signed it?”

“Ellis?” Lloyd nodded. “Said his life would be complete if she never darkened his door again.” He pursed his mouth, tapping at the deed. “It surprised me. Ellis strikes me as a man with a surfeit of pride, and such men do not accept defeat thus easily.”

“Perhaps the fear of ending up in a noose has helped settle his mind.”

Lloyd leaned back in his creaking chair. “Except that it is highly unlikely he would face such an outcome. He did not abduct Erin, nor, one could argue, did he assist Farrell in his endeavour. All he was here for was to reclaim his errant wife.” He gave Duncan a crooked smile. “Very few would condemn him for that.”

“His motivations do not matter.” Duncan nudged at the deed. “This matters. And he has signed it.”

“That he has.” Lloyd produced a copy of the document. “Lettie Graham needs to sign it as well.”

Duncan left with a spring to his step. Not only would Lettie now finally be free, but with Lloyd’s help Farrell would finally pay.

“But that’s kidnapping,” Erin objected—with very little heat—as they strolled along the wharves.

“Nay. It is chasing down a vile miscreant and bringing him back to hold him accountable for his crimes.”

“But won’t his father—”

“If Edward Farrell knows what is good for him—and his family—he will turn his back on this very rotten apple.” He gave her a wolfish smile. “I am counting on Jeremy and James to help me, as well as my kin.”

There was a loud clearing of a throat. “Your kin?” a female voice said, and Duncan swivelled.

“Oh shit,” Erin muttered, slipping her hand into his. She gave him a firm squeeze. He tightened his hold, never taking his gaze off the woman in front of him.

Eyes as blue as his bored into him. “Behold your kin,” Sarah Connor said. “And what I want to know is how in the name of the Virgin you allowed our daughter—my Esther—to wed?” She gulped down air.

“It wasn’t like that,” Erin began.

“I was not talking to you!” Sarah snapped. “I was talking to ... to ...”

“Your son?” Erin suggested, making Sarah’s husband wince. “What?” Erin asked, directing herself to Michael Connor. “That’s what he is, isn’t it?”

“She’s my daughter!” Sarah spat. “Mine! And now she’s wed to a stranger—a foreigner!”

“I guess it’s a case of the apple not falling far from the tree.” Erin took a step forward, for all the world as if she intended to bodily protect him. His wife. Pride and fierce joy bubbled through his veins.

“This is none of your concern,” Sarah said.

“No, but—”

“I did not let her do anything,” Duncan said, having finally reclaimed some control over his vocal cords. “She eloped.”

Michael’s brows pulled together. “And you did not stop her?”

“Generally, when people elope, they sneak off,” Erin said. “You know, like you two did.”

Duncan bit back a laugh at the affronted expression on Sarah’s face.

“That was different.”

“Really? How?” Erin asked.

“I was older!”

“Not that much older,” Michael said, slipping an arm round his wife’s waist.

“It was different!” Sarah repeated.

“Esther likely disagrees,” Duncan said.

“Who is this Antoine Chardon?” Michael asked. His mouth softened into a smile. “Well, beyond being the comeliest, bravest, wittiest and most wonderful man to ever walk this earth.”

Duncan shared a look with the man who could have been his stepfather—had his mother chosen to keep him instead of throwing him out like offal. “He is, I believe, a good man. And it was not him who enticed her to run away with him.”

“No, he was trying to do the honourable thing and leave,” Erin filled in.

“Ah. But Esther would not have it,” Michael said. He looked down at his wife. “She is remarkably like her mother,” he said, smiling at her.

“Hmph!” Sarah crossed her arms. “We entrusted her to you!”

Erin just didn’t have the energy for all this drama. Her head hurt, and with a sigh she took off her hat to massage her thudding temple. She turned her back on Sarah and leaned against Duncan. “Take me home,” she said. “I’m not feeling all that good.”

It wasn't a lie, but what ailed her wasn't only her physical health, it was the fact that she was pretty sure she was pregnant. Pregnant! She hid her face against Duncan. What if Tim was wrong? What if there was even the remotest of possibilities Farrell was the father? Bile filled her mouth, and she swallowed and swallowed.

A soft touch on her back startled her.

"My apologies," Sarah said, and Erin could feel Duncan tense. She lifted her head sufficiently to look at his birth mother. "I should have started by expressing my concern for you," the older woman said, frowning as she studied Erin's face. "Dear God, what must he have done to you that you still bear the marks of your ordeal."

Some very faint yellowing bruises, the scab on her lip, the long gash where his belt buckle had torn into her skin just beside her ear—Erin felt self-conscious, ducking her head.

"Not your shame," Sarah said firmly. "His. Animal!" she added viciously. Her gaze met Erin's, and in those eyes Erin saw shadows of her own terrifying experience. A gentle touch to her healing lip, to the long gash. "Make him pay, Duncan," Sarah Connor said before dropping her hand. "Men like that do not deserve to live."

On the way to Papegoja Plantation, Duncan gave Michael and Sarah a brief summary of his plan.

Michael nodded thoughtfully. "Aye, that may work." He flashed Duncan a smile. "I will come with you. Can't let Malcolm have all the fun."

"Malcolm?" Erin asked before remembering he was Ian's eldest son. "Why would he have the fun?"

"He's in Annapolis, there to keep an eye on that worm Farrell," Michael said. He grinned. "Him and Tom and Adam Leslie."

From how Duncan's hold on her relaxed, Erin gathered this pleased him. "Who is Tom?" she whispered.

"Lettie's oldest brother," he whispered back.

“God help Farrell if he’s anything like her,” Erin muttered, and for the first time in weeks, Duncan laughed. It felt good, and she smiled in response. But soon enough the worry was back: *drip, drip*, your period is late; *drip, drip*, you’re probably pregnant; *drip, drip*, it could be Farrell who—no, no, no! Instinctively, she pressed herself against Duncan.

“Honey?” he murmured, and she realised she’d sunk her hands into his forearms, fingers like talons.

“Nothing,” she managed. “Nothing at all.”

It was sort of amusing. To judge from how Lettie met Erin's eyes and grinned, she agreed, albeit she stood well back from the two women presently standing nose to nose in the front yard.

"Mama!" Esther had exclaimed at the sight of her mother, picking up her skirts to run towards her, more or less crashing into Sarah.

They'd stood like that for quite some time until Sarah set her hands to Esther's shoulders and disengaged herself. "Married?" she said, sounding as if she'd inadvertently swallowed down a mug of pond slime.

Esther straightened up. "I am." She'd crossed her arms. "Happily wed."

"To a foreigner," Sarah spat.

Esther batted her lashes. "A wonderful, wonderful man. *Et oui*," she added, "*il est français*." She rolled her eyes. "He's French, Mama. Not some exotic stranger."

"As I said, a foreigner." For an instant, Sarah's eyes cut to where Antoine was standing, arms as crossed as Esther's. No longer as boyish as when she'd first seen him, Erin reflected. Antoine Chardon had grown up in these last few months, taking those final steps into adulthood. Not necessarily easy steps, what with being betrayed by—and then betraying—his brother and finding out he wasn't who he thought he was. He'd also lost whatever softness he'd had when they first met,

the arms under his linen shirt bunching with muscle and sinews, his features more defined.

Sarah scowled and leaned towards Esther. “You wed without permission.”

Her daughter mirrored her pose: arms straight at her sides, hands clenched, a formidable frown on her face as she too leaned forward. “I did as I had to do,” she said.

“Had to do?” Michael cut in. “Had the bastard—”

“He did nothing wrong!” Esther yelled. “Nothing!” She glared first at her father, then her mother. “And it is not his fault he’s a bastard, is it? Just like it isn’t Duncan’s fault that you were raped by his father.”

Oops. It was sort of fortunate that other than Jasper and Hans, there was only family present. Duncan shifted on his feet, and Erin slipped her hand under his arm and squeezed.

“Esther!” Sarah hissed.

“What?” Esther raised her chin.

“We do not talk of such things openly,” Michael admonished.

“Nay, that we do not. Mama has spent most of Duncan’s life attempting to sweep his mere existence under the rug. Except she failed. So instead, she’s resented him—for something that was never his fault.” Esther sniffed. “It wasn’t Duncan who disobeyed his father, it wasn’t him who—”

“Quiet,” Michael said, his low voice like a whiplash. “Do not speak of things you know nothing off! Do not disrespect your mother thus.”

That had Antoine closing the distance between him and Esther, his hand resting casually on her lower back. “My wife is upset,” he said smoothly.

“As are we,” Michael retorted. “She is our daughter, and to have her wed without my consent—”

“*Oui*. But what is done is done.” Antoine bowed slightly. “I am fortunate in my wife. I love, honour and respect her and

will never do her harm. I am also wealthy enough to ensure she will lack nothing in comfort, and—”

“You’ll take her from us!” Sarah said, her eyes wet. “Back to France, with an entire ocean between us.” Her voice broke.

“Oh, Mama,” Esther said, enfolding Sarah in a hug. At first, Sarah was as stiff as a post, but then her arms came round Esther, and they stood tight, tight together, whispering to each other.

Michael sighed, coming over to stand beside Duncan. “It is hard on her,” he said. “Both Jane and Ellen live close by, and I dare say she hoped our Esther would also find love close to home. Instead ...”

“She spread her wings,” Erin said. “That’s what children do: they grow up and set out to explore the world.”

“But it is such a large world,” Michael said, his gaze never leaving his wife and daughter. “So, so very large. It is hard enough having Esther here, in Pennsylvania, but once she is across the sea, well, it is likely we will never see her again.”

A permanent parting. No wonder Sarah was so upset.

She said as much to Duncan as she accompanied him to the stables, Atlas ambling along beside them. “It’s so different in my time,” she said. “I could be in London and still talk to Helen on a daily basis.” She grinned. “Mostly, it was her being in London or Madrid or Rome or wherever she was visiting and phoning me.”

“There are letters,” Duncan said.

“Yeah, that come like every two months—at best.” She slid him a look. He was never comfortable in the presence of Sarah, reverting to a stiff politeness.

“But they’d have that at least: a mother corresponding with a beloved daughter.” He glanced at her. “I did not like how Esther shouted to the world that I was the product of rape.”

“Not the entire world,” Erin tried, but to judge from his expression, that didn’t help much. “It’s because she doesn’t care,” she therefore said. “To Esther, you are simply her

brother—a beloved brother she will most certainly correspond with.”

That had the set of his mouth softening. “You think she loves me?”

Erin snorted. “You’re fishing for compliments, Mr Melville. That girl thinks the sun shines out of your ass. Okay, not as brightly as it does out of Antoine’s well-rounded posterior, but close.”

He chuckled and brought her close enough to bury his nose in her hair. “Have you been looking at Antoine’s arse?”

“Me?” She slid her arms round him and gripped his butt cheeks—hard. “Why on earth would I do that?”

They stabled Atlas and followed the sounds of high voices to the small enclosed meadow that stood just beyond the old well. As always when she passed the mound that now covered it, Erin uttered a hasty prayer: *may he never return*, she thought.

“Wow, look at that,” she said a few moments later. In the meadow, Tim was leading the pony. Sitting astride was Ellen, while Sandy was skipping beside Tim—and she was talking, loud, mostly unintelligible, words spilling from her. But there was a lot of “me” and “horsey” and “now” in it.

“First Ellen, then you,” Tim said firmly, and Sandy stomped her foot. “None of that now,” Tim said. “Horses don’t like it when you throw tantrums.”

“I’m not sure what impresses me the most,” Duncan murmured, “that our Sandy is back to being her normal self or that Tim can be right voluble.”

Erin wiped at her eyes. “She’s going to be okay,” she said, and it was as if an icy weight slid off her shoulders. “She’s going to be fine.”

“Aye.” He draped an arm over her shoulders. “I’d wager that three days from now we will be wishing she’d talk a bit less. And not as loud.” He winced at Sandy’s high-pitched, “Me now!”

“Never,” she said, smiling at her daughters. *My little babies*, she thought, and the warm sensation in her belly cooled to icy fingers.

It was as if a dark cloud covered the sun. One moment, Erin was laughing at their daughters, sounding carefree and happy for the first time since Farrell’s attack, the next she stiffened.

“What is it?” he asked, turning her to face him. “No,” he added when her gaze slid to the side. “No lies, Erin.”

She wet her lips, and he watched her tongue trace the scab over the healed wound. It had a sudden rush of heat roaring through his loins, and he was overcome with pulsing desire for this woman with her green, green eyes and skin like molten honey. Not now. Nay, not when her eyes were shadowed, her entire demeanour hesitant.

“Honey?”

She inhaled. Did it again. “I’m late.”

Late? For what? He waited.

“My period,” she added in an undertone.

His initial reaction was joy. Loud, soaring joy that wanted to shout to the world that his Erin was with child. But then he looked at her, and something about all this was making her fearful rather than joyful.

“I’m three weeks late,” she continued, her eyes now shimmering with tears. “Three, Duncan. That means that ...” She choked. Another inhalation. “It could be his,” she groaned.

“Except he did not violate you,” he said.

“I don’t know that!” she hissed. “Neither do you.”

“Tim does. He saw, he ...” He swallowed.

“He’s a boy! Maybe he didn’t understand what he saw.”

“He saw you kick him in the balls. Twice,” Duncan said harshly. No, no, no, he could not countenance the notion of

Farrell having forced himself upon his Erin. “He saw,” he groaned. “He saw, Erin. And he swears he did not see him rape you.” He brushed at a strand of her hair, securing it behind her ear. “I think the reason why he beat you so brutally was because he couldn’t get it up.” He laughed harshly. “A bruised cock does not function as it should, thank the Lord.”

“But what if—”

He covered her mouth with his hand. “Nay. It did not happen.”

She shook free. “But what if it did, Duncan? What if ...” She pulled a face. “And we will never know, will we?”

“If you are with child, then it is mine,” he said firmly. “Mine, honey.”

She looked up at him from huge eyes. “I’m not sure I want it, not if it’s possible it’s his.”

“Would you rather give it away? Abandon it?” He turned his back on her, gripping the upper slats of the fencing. “That child is yours,” he added in a shaking voice. “Surely, no mother abandons her own child?”

Utter silence met this comment. He closed his eyes, his head falling forward. A babe born under a cloud of doubt—her doubt, mostly, because he’d had Tim retell him over and over again everything he’d seen, and he was almost certain there’d been no rape. Almost. Damned awful word in this context.

Hands slipped round him, her front pressing into his back.

“It isn’t the man who sires the babe who is its father,” he said after a long while. “It is the man who raises it, who cares for it.” He lifted his head, and there at the further end of the meadow were his two lasses and Tim, who was still patiently leading the pony, now with both Sandy and Ellen astride. “No one knows that better than me, honey.”

“I’m so scared,” she choked out.

He turned in her hold, cradling her close. “The child is mine, Erin.” Even if that toad Farrell had fathered it, he’d

never get to raise it, shape it into a future adult. Nay, that would fall to Duncan to do. Besides, he was certain—almost.

He slipped a finger under her chin and lifted her face, pressing a gentle kiss to each wet eye, her nose, her mouth.

“Our child,” he said against her cheek. “Ours,” he added, kissing her ear.

She gave him a shaky smile. “Ours,” she whispered.

There was some truth in a shared burden being lighter, but despite Duncan’s firm insistence he was the father, it gnawed at Erin. Which was why two days later, she went to find Tim.

The boy was in the hayloft, pitching down hay for the horses. He was also humming, and it took some time for Erin to recognise the tune, but once she did, she grinned. Mrs Andersson would be delighted to know Tim was working to the tune of her favourite psalm, a beautiful little thing that gave thanks to God for the returning warmth, for the summer and its many gifts—in Swedish.

“I’m guessing all those Sundays in church are starting to rub off,” she called up, and Tim went silent. He peered down at her through the hatch.

“Mrs Andersson threatens not to feed me if I do not accompany her,” he said, clambering down the rickety ladder. “Besides, I like it.” He gave her a shy look from under his heavy fringe of fair hair. “Mrs Andersson thinks my birth mother was likely Swedish—like her.” To judge from what little documentation there was, Tim’s mother had boarded in Bristol, so Erin held it unlikely she’d been anything but English.

“Ah,” was all she said, settling herself on a barrel.

Tim remained where he was. He’d shot up recently and was now all knees and long, uncoordinated limbs.

“I’ve never thanked you,” she blurted.

“For what?”

“For saving me.”

From Tim came a pained sound. “But I didn’t, mistress. I just ...” He looked away. “I was too weak, too small, and he was so, so angry, and ...”

“Hey.” She held up her hand. “It’s because of you I’m still here. I could have been ...” She bit her lip.

“Elsewhere,” he filled in softly, moving closer to her.

“Yeah.”

He was clearly uncomfortable talking her through what he’d seen, and there were a lot of pauses, of moments when he took a little turn.

“Are you sure he didn’t, well, you know ...” Jeez, the kid was twelve!

“He wanted to,” Tim said. A fleeting smile crossed his face. “I reckon it is hard to do when your cock looks like a blue sausage.” His smile widened. “A very small and fat sausage.” He moved closer. “Besides, he was bleeding like a pig.”

“He was?”

“Aye. You almost tore his ear off, mistress.”

She emerged from the stables to find Duncan waiting for her, his shoulders propped up against the wall.

“Did that help?” he asked, entwining his fingers with hers as they walked back to the house.

“It did.” She drew in a deep breath. There were other reasons why being pregnant worried her—reasons like crap healthcare if anything went wrong and the potential consequences of having a child with less than white skin—but at least she didn’t need to worry about giving birth to a child carrying Farrell genes.

“I am glad.” He squeezed her fingers gently. “Michael and Antoine will be accompanying me to Annapolis.”

The sudden change of subject had her blinking.

“I don’t like it,” she said. “What if—”

“He has to pay,” Duncan said. “And Lloyd is right: he will never pay in Annapolis.”

“But the Farrells may—”

“Ha! I dare say most of his extended family will be relieved to see him gone.”

“That’s not something they can ever admit,” she protested. “They’re going to have to act, do something.”

“A token gesture, no more.”

She pulled them to a halt. “A token gesture? What does that mean?”

He shrugged. “They may forbid me to ever set foot in Maryland again. Not something I will lose much sleep over.”

Seeing as they had no plans to ever go there again ...

“It could be dangerous.”

“It could. But with Jeremy and James backing us up, I dare say it will at most be something of a scuffle. I may well sprain my back lugging that heavy lout around.”

“Are you that sure you can count on the Jones twins?” She’d not met them in over two years, and although they’d both been polite to her, it had been evident—at least to her—that they felt Duncan had committed a serious mistake in wedding her.

“They’re the closest thing I have to brothers.” He looked down at her. “Besides, everyone knows what happened to their mother was Nicholas Farrell’s fault.”

“What did happen to her?” There was a lot of mystery surrounding Lucy Jones.

“I do not rightly know. My adoptive father never spoke of her; it was as if he’d erased the memories of his daughter out of his mind.” A wrinkle or two appeared on his brow. “She was very beautiful. And deaf. All I know is that something happened with Nicholas Farrell and then she disappeared.” He shook himself.

“Disappeared?”

He gave her a grim look. “Aye. Gone. And there was talk of magic, but Henry Jones is good at threatening people into silence.”

“Magic.” She wet her lips. She wanted to laugh at such a ridiculous notion, but all that came out was a croak. “Maybe she just took off.”

“Maybe.” He tightened his hold on her fingers. “But that was all very long ago, before I was born, even.”

“Well, then. Ancient history.”

“I’m not that old,” he growled, and this time she actually could laugh. But all that evening, her thoughts kept on returning to the unknown Lucy Jones and her disappearing act. Magic could come in many forms—such as a bejewelled locket.

They were up at dawn the day after, a silent cavalcade of people along the road to Chester. Duncan had not wanted them to come along, but Esther and Erin were having none of it, nor was Sarah. Which was why all three of them—and Lettie—stood on the quays and waved at the disappearing stern of the *Cassiopeia*. Fog lay like wisps of white smoke across the water, rose upwards to envelop most of the ship.

Erin shivered in her cloak.

“We should have gone with them,” she said, which earned her incredulous looks from her three female companions. “Well, we should. Moments like this is when we should stand together, you know, one for all ...”

“All for one,” all three filled in, and Erin just had to laugh. And she knew that any moment now, Esther would say ...

“It was all Buckingham’s fault, with his overt desire for Queen Anne.”

“Nay, it wasn’t,” Sarah replied. “It was Milady who’s the real villain.”

“Hmph!” Lettie said. “Buckingham was a fool; King Louis was a fool. Had the king been somewhat wiser, he’d have clipped Richelieu’s wings.”

“I had no notion you were so conversant about French history,” Lloyd said, emerging from the fog like a ghost. “I do agree with thee,” he added, inclining his head to Lettie.

“Richelieu had far too much power.” He looked out across the water. “On their way, then.”

“They are.” Erin clasped her hands together. “I do not like that he sails off into danger without me.”

“Ah, but that, Erin Melville, is the way of the world. Thy man sails off on a quest; thou must bide at home and wait.” He gave her a little pat. “At times, the waiting is harder than the quest.”

“I should have gone with him. I’m the victim in this case.”

Lloyd shook his head. “That would not have helped.” He peered at her. “Aye, thou art comely, and with those big green eyes ...” The older man went a bright red. “Well.” He cleared his throat. “But no one in Annapolis would have seen that. They would only have seen the colour of thy skin and damned thee—and Duncan—for it.”

“It’s not right,” she said.

“Nay, it is not. But the world is as it is. Unfair and violent but also quite, quite miraculous.” He pointed to where a sunbeam had found its way through the clouds, gilding the fog and water. “Miraculous,” he repeated softly before setting a finger to his hat and bidding them a good day.

“Mr Lloyd seems to have quite some fondness for you,” Esther teased.

“He has his sweet moments,” Erin said. “But I guess it’s mostly his wife who sees them.”

“A good man,” Lettie said, nodding repeatedly, her gaze on the limping Lloyd.

“You’re only saying that because of that annulment document,” Esther said.

“I am.” Lettie smiled widely. “I am now freed from the fetters of a loveless and abusive marriage.” She sobered. “Truth be told, there are days when I do not quite believe it. Emrick is obstinate and ...” She fell silent.

Esther huffed. “You frightened him. What man would want a wife who’d happily throw him to the dogs?”

A possessive bastard who'd happily punish her for it? A tremor whispered its way down Erin's back, her knees unsteady under the onslaught of the memories of what Farrell had done to her. She cleared her throat. "He's signed the annulment," she said, giving Lettie a reassuring smile. "Just remember it's not entirely valid."

Lettie rolled her eyes. "I know that."

"Not entirely valid?" Sarah looked from one to the other.

"I will explain later," Lettie told her aunt, already moving away from the water to where Hans and Jasper were waiting.

Erin, however, remained where she was, staring at the point where she'd last glimpsed the *Cassiopeia*.

"They will be all right," Esther said, leaning against her. "I hope she isn't planning on wedding Hans."

"She'd like to," Erin said.

"Bigamy is a serious crime," Esther said. "And that document will not hold."

"Huh. You sound like a lawyer," Erin said, slipping an arm round Esther's waist and giving her a squeeze. "Lettie knows that too," she added. "I think it's enough to be free of that rat Ellis."

"For now," Esther said. "But what if—"

"Problems for another day, okay?" Erin threw one last look at the fog-draped water. "Come on. Let's go home."

Duncan had sailed into Annapolis on various occasions. As a lad, he'd been sent to school in Massachusetts, returning home each summer brimming with excitement and joy at being back where he belonged, with the person he loved the most: his father, Simon Melville. Then he'd been sent off to the old country to complete his studies, and it had been many years before he yet again strode down the gangway to his hometown and into the arms of a father who had somehow shrunk significantly in the intervening years. Not so much in girth—Simon Melville had been a very round man—but in stature,

the hitherto so large man scarcely reaching to Duncan's shoulder.

There had been other travels, other long voyages, and every time he'd sighted the huddle of buildings that comprised Annapolis he'd been swept by a sensation of rightness. This was where he belonged; this was home.

Not so this time. As the sloop slid up along the bay, he felt none of those feelings. Aye, the mudflats were the same, the waders darting back and forth were the same, and he supposed that should he crane his neck back and study the skies assiduously, he might even catch a glimpse of an osprey, those huge birds of prey that had so fascinated him when he was young.

The sloop turned into the Severn, and there was the harbour, overlooked by the windmill. Further up the slope rose the steeple of the Anglican church, and right at the top of the slope was the old meetinghouse, once the centre of the town, now housing a shrinking congregation of Presbyterians. All of it was familiar. None of it felt like home. No, he reflected, because home was where his family was, and they could never live here.

Michael disembarked first, followed by Antoine. Duncan was halfway down the gangway when a whoop went up, and he knew without turning towards the sound it was Jeremy Jones. It might not feel like home to be greeted with hugs and claps to his back, but it felt good. The Jones twins beamed at him, James accompanied by his wife, Charlotte.

Moments later, Malcolm and Tom Graham greeted him just as warmly, reminding Duncan that he did have family here as well. It left him with a warm sensation in his belly and a smile so wide it near on hurt.

Some hours later, they were in the Jones' home, a whitewashed mansion that stood a couple of miles away from Annapolis. French mirrors in gilded frames and elegant rosewood tables adorned the walls at intervals, and the large dining table was ablaze with candles in polished silver candlesticks.

Silent slaves served them dish after dish, and Duncan could scarcely look at them, recalling with some anguish that not so long ago he'd not reflected much on their fate—or the injustice of it. Not so that he himself would ever have owned slaves, but neither had he ever voiced his objections to slavery. He did not do so this time either; he needed James and Jeremy, and while his friends were in many ways good men, their wealth depended on their various plantations, all of them worked by enslaved men.

Beside Duncan, Malcolm shifted on his seat. “Don’t like it,” he muttered. “I am fully capable of serving myself.” He leaned to the side as yet another silent slave topped up his glass. “Think they have house slaves in the privy as well?”

Duncan coughed and spluttered. “I hope not,” he finally wheezed.

“Do you think they hate us?” Tom asked from Duncan’s other side. Tom was rarely in Annapolis, far more at home in the northwestern wilds of the colony. Once, perhaps twice a year in town sufficed for Tom, who’d never travelled further than St Mary’s.

“They must, I reckon,” Malcolm said in as hushed a voice. “But this lot does not have it too bad. It is worse for the ones slaving in the fields.” His long mouth tightened into a thin line. “Always makes me think of Grandda and his years as an indenture.”

“What are you whispering about?” Jeremy asked.

“Do you think he suspects anything?” Duncan deflected, not all that interested in summarising the recent discussion. It was Jeremy’s grandfather who’d been the overseer on the plantation where Matthew Graham had toiled and suffered, and there was no reason to breathe life into that painful past.

“Farrell? No. Not until he sees you here.” James gave Duncan a wolfish grin. “I am so looking forward to his reaction.”

“His reaction?” Michael Connor frowned. “Won’t he flee?”

“To where?” Jeremy drawled. “No, what Nicholas Farrell will do is what he always does when he’s at risk: he will run back to his dear papa. Which is where we come in.” He elbowed his brother. “We will act the battering ram, enticing Edward to open his door by dangling the promise of an exciting new financial venture.” He glanced at Antoine. “And behold, our new French partner.”

From Antoine came a soft snort. Jeremy had initially been suspicious of Antoine, relating how he’d seen this self-same man in the company of Farrell some months ago.

“I did not like him then, I like him even less now,” Antoine had responded with a shrug.

“And where’s your companion? Your brother, wasn’t it?”

“Gone,” Antoine replied. “He did not think much of Farrell either,” he added, and for an instant his face fell.

“Very few do,” James quipped.

As planned, Duncan confronted Farrell the next day, all of him seething at the sight of the craven bastard. There he was, that huge bastard of a man who’d so hurt his wife, looking entirely unscathed bar the bandage that covered his ear. The odd, squealing sound Farrell made at the sight of Duncan did nothing to soothe Duncan’s rage. Neither did how the man stumbled in his haste to back away, his face pasty.

“Where is my wife?” Duncan growled, and for an instant there was a gleam in those pale blue eyes.

“Your wife? Why would I know anything about your wife?”

“Do not lie to me!” Duncan thundered. “I have witnesses aplenty that have you making off with her, so where is she?”

By now, Farrell had regained some of his composure, likely due to the fact that he believed Erin was still missing.

“Well, those witnesses are wrong! I would never touch your wife.”

Duncan crowded him back against a wall. “This time, you took things too far,” he said. “This time, Nicholas Farrell, you pay with your life.” He whipped out his rapier. “I challenge you, Farrell,” he yelled. “I challenge you to a duel on the morrow, and by God, by the time the sun has risen the birds will be feasting on your sorry carcass.” He shoved Farrell to the side, a pale and sweating Farrell. “And if you do not show, I will come after you,” he promised. “After all, we all know you have the balls the size of peas.”

“How dare you,” Farrell blustered, but his hands shook when he ordered his clothes, his hat.

“On the morrow,” Duncan said and strode off.

“... and just like we expected, he rushed off to his father’s house,” Michael said later. “And that, as far as we know, is where he still is, likely bleating to his father that he needs safe passage somewhere.” He cast a look at the *Cassiopeia*. “The captain says he’ll be ready to leave at short notice.”

“Good, good.” Jeremy rubbed his hands together. “We should not wait too long—we do not want this particular worm to squirm free of the hook, do we? Nay, an hour or so after noon, I think.”

“I’m coming with you,” Duncan said.

“Edward Farrell will never allow you to enter,” James said.

“He’ll not have much choice.” They had no need of a complicated scheme involving a new trading venture. All they needed was that Farrell open the door. Then they’d just force themselves inside, and Duncan would present the elder Farrell with Lloyd’s warrant.

The Farrell residence was set a stone’s throw away from the windmill, almost opposite the graveyard. What had once been an ostentatious house—the largest by far this close to the harbour—had over recent years lost some of its shine. Aye, there was glass in the small windows, the shutters were newly painted, and the front yard was as immaculate as ever, not as much as a dandelion leaf daring to sprout between the heavy stone flags. But the treads leading up to the main door were

worn, the roof sagged somewhat in the middle, and the ornamental carving round the main entrance had lost its contours, the previously so impressive boar's head that decorated the huge door worn down to resemble a brown blob.

"It's old," James said, craning his neck back to study the house. "That's why it no longer feels quite as imposing."

"Or mayhap it is us, no longer young lads gawking at an impossibly high house." The Farrell home rose three storeys high, on top of which was an attic, at least to judge from the small window in the gable facing the street. Something moved behind the glass. A shadow? A man? Duncan did not know.

Edward Farrell was not pleased. He objected loudly when James and Jeremy pushed their way past the old servant, holding the door open for Duncan and their other companions.

"I will not have it!" Edward Farrell said. "Get out of my house!"

"Oh, we will," Duncan said. "Once we've apprehended your son." He waved Lloyd's document before Farrell. "Abduction is a serious crime."

"He is not here," Edward Farrell blustered.

"In which case, you will not mind us looking, will you?" Jeremy said. He nodded to Antoine and Tom, and they hurried off towards the back of the house to block any attempts to escape that way.

"I'll have my men see you off!" Edward Farrell's voice was shrill when he called for his house slaves. Other than the elderly man who'd opened the door, no one responded. "Where are those good-for-nothings?" Edward demanded of the doorman.

"The mistress sent Luke and Jonah off on an errand, master," the old man replied, and James' mouth curled into a satisfied little smile. "Charlotte was right," he murmured to Duncan. "Old Farrell's second wife detests her stepson."

"She knew we were coming?"

“Or guessed.” Yet another sly smile. “Likely knew. Charlotte may have said something in passing.” He winked.

They found Nicholas Farrell in the attic, attempting to hide behind a couple of old chests.

“Ah, my most favourite man on earth,” Jeremy said, showing every one of his teeth in an icy smile.

“You have no right,” Edward Farrell blustered. “No right to invade my home!”

“No? You are hiding a criminal,” James said calmly. “Likely, we should haul you along as well.”

“Me?” Edward backed away. “I have done nothing! Nothing!”

“Beyond raising this utter disgrace of a man,” Duncan put in. “Beyond buying him out of scrape after scrape, allowing him to get away with everything.

“He’s my son!”

Duncan turned on him. “He’s a menace and a bully! And what he did to my wife—”

“I did nothing! It isn’t my fault if you’ve misplaced her.” Nicholas attempted to straighten out of James’ hold.

“Misplaced her?” Duncan crowded him. “You took her! You threatened my daughter to get to her, and then you ... you —”

“Beat her nigh on to death,” Michael filled in, and from Edward Farrell came a croaked, “No, no, no.”

“She deserved it! Had she but splayed her legs nicely, I’d —” Farrell yelped, holding a hand to his bleeding nose. “He hit me!” he exclaimed, pointing at Duncan. “He hit me!”

“If that had been my wife, I’d not have broken your nose. I’d have cut off your balls,” James growled, one arm round Duncan’s shoulders to hold him back.

“*Your* wife?” Nicholas laughed. “Who on earth would want to bed her, little mouse that she is?” Now it was Duncan holding James back while Jeremy hauled Nicholas upright and

marched him down the stairs, his hands bound behind him, a handkerchief stuffed in his mouth.

“Oh dear,” Jeremy said halfway down, shoving Nicholas so that he fell the rest of the way. He pulled their now badly bleeding prisoner upright and dragged him out in the light of day. Bloodied and dishevelled, Farrell was marched through the streets of Annapolis, people thronging to watch the spectacle.

“At last!” a woman yelled.

“Took you long enough,” another shouted, and Edward Farrell, who was scurrying behind them, scowled.

“That’s my son!” he said. “That’s a Farrell!”

“That’s a piece of shite,” a man said.

“Aye, good riddance to bad rubbish,” someone else said.

“Hang him!” a young woman shouted. “Hang him for what he did to Betty!”

“Betty?” Edward Farrell blinked. “Which Betty?”

“Do not pretend you do not know,” the woman retorted. She shook a fist at Edward. “That precious son of yours should have hanged years ago, but no, his dear papa always protected him—even when he killed someone.”

“Aye, like our Betty,” another woman said.

“Two of Mrs Malone’s doves,” James explained. “As was Betty. She was found dead some years ago, beaten to death.” He frowned. “I had no idea they suspected it was Nicholas who did it.”

“Mrs Malone is generally very protective of her brood,” Duncan said.

“Aye, but she is as protective of her purse, and the Farrells bring in much custom to her establishment.”

They passed Barbara Farrell, standing surrounded by other women. She took a step forward, and Jeremy obligingly pulled Nicholas to a halt. Barbara cleared her throat, hollowed her cheeks, and spat him full in the face.

“I shall dance at your funeral,” she said.

“Barbara,” Edward Farrell reproached. “Is that the way a wife addresses her husband?”

“He deserves nothing less.” Barbara inhaled deeply. “Once he is gone, I will finally be free.”

“He’s not dead yet,” Edward protested. “He deserves his day in court—he may, in fact, be innocent.”

“Innocent?” Barbara laughed. “Him? Oh no, Mr Farrell, he is as guilty as sin. And this time, I pray God will be just and make him pay.” She dipped her head to Duncan. “I will be happy to testify.”

“You cannot,” Edward Farrell said harshly. “You are his wife.”

“A most unfortunate condition that will hopefully soon come to an end.” She leaned towards Nicholas again. “I cannot wait to call myself Widow Farrell.”

From Nicholas Farrell came unintelligible sounds, but to judge by the look in his eyes, he was promising his wife eternal retribution. Except, of course, that the threats from a man likely soon to swing from a noose carried little weight.

“This way,” James said, taking a sharp turn to the right.

“What is this?” Edward protested. “Where are you going?” He increased his pace, grabbing hold of Jeremy’s sleeve. “Jones! This is the wrong way! The gaol lies yonder.”

“Not when you’re aimed for Pennsylvania,” James said.

“This is preposterous!” Edward yelled, and from Nicholas came a loud whine. He dug his heels in and threw his weight backwards, and Jeremy and Duncan staggered. At a piercing whistle from James, three burly men came trotting towards them. “Take him,” James said.

“No!” Edward Farrell had hold of Jeremy. “Unhand my son, Jones! This is unacceptable. You cannot do this!”

“But we are,” James said calmly. “His latest crimes were committed in Pennsylvania. It is only right he be tried there.”

“But they are all Quakers,” Edward protested. “Ridiculous in all their morality.”

“Is it ridiculous to uphold the law?” Duncan asked, leaning towards the older Farrell. “Is it ridiculous to demand restitution when a brute of a man near on beats your wife to death? Attempts to sell her into slavery?”

Edward Farrell paled. He released his hold on Jeremy and shuffled a few steps backwards.

From Nicholas came a panicked, “Mmmm!” He fought as a fiend when Jones’ three men began dragging him towards the waiting sloop.

Edward Farrell swallowed a couple of times. “I shall contract a lawyer for you, Nicholas,” he said in a shaky voice, taking a couple of steps backwards.

“You do that,” Jeremy said. “Although you will likely have to travel very far to find someone willing to represent him.”

To that, Edward Farrell said nothing, watching in silence as his desperate son was dragged towards the sloop. Mrs Farrell joined him, a woman so much younger she could have been his daughter.

“Come,” she said. “Let us go home, husband.”

“He’s my son,” he said.

“He’s a disgrace,” she replied, her voice soft. “You know that, Edward. You’ve always known that.”

“My son,” he repeated, his voice breaking.

“You have other sons. Better sons. Sons that deserve living without the shame of that brother.”

Edward Farrell shook his head and produced a huge handkerchief. “My little Nicholas,” he whispered, just as Jones’ three men succeeded in hauling Nicholas Farrell aboard.

“I will be glad when all this is over.” Lettie slid in to sit beside Hans on what she now fondly considered their bench in the little herbal garden. It was the last day of October, but despite the late hour it was still warm, hours of sun having dissipated the morning chill. Tightly furled rosebuds still decorated the old rosebush that stood just beside the bench, the worn wood agreeably soft against her shoulder blades.

“*Ja*. As will the master and mistress.”

She slid him a look. She did not like it when Hans referred to Erin as the mistress. Not that she could quite explain why because formally she *was* his mistress—at least for three more years.

“He’s probably left by now,” she said a bit later. She crumbled a stalk of rosemary between her fingers. “Emrick,” she added.

“Good,” was all he said, but his large hand closed over hers, stopping her fretting. “He’s gone,” he said. “You need not worry about him.”

But she did. Emrick Ellis was not the sort of man who graciously accepted defeat, and since seeing Duncan and his companions off two days ago, Lettie had grown increasingly more fraught. “I should have stayed in Chester,” she said. “I should have been there to watch him leave.”

Hans pursed his lips. “He did not, you think?”

“I don’t know,” she groaned. “I truly do not know, and what if he didn’t? What if ...” she licked her lips and stood, doing a quick perusal of their surroundings. To the west, the sun was setting, sinking closer and closer to the treetops. Afternoon sun gilded the stubble on the fields, danced across the damp cobbles of the front yard—they’d had a rain shower some hours ago.

“What could he possibly achieve here alone?” Hans asked, taking hold of her wrist. Gently, he tugged her down to sit.

She sighed, nestling against him. Such a big, strong man, making her feel both vulnerable and protected. “It’s just ...”

“*Nein*,” he said firmly.

They returned to the main house side by side. Hans rarely touched her unless they were alone—well, beyond a supporting hand to her arm should she need it. He walked with his hands clasped behind his back, but she could feel his protective warmth and couldn’t quite help herself, moving that much closer to him.

He gave her a little bow at the door, muttering something about seeing to the horses with Tim. She went in search of a mug in which to set the little posy she’d collected.

“You can do better than him,” Sarah commented from behind her.

“Than Emrick? Assuredly,” Lettie said, smiling down at the two little rosebuds.

“Than him. The German.”

“His name is Hans,” Lettie replied without turning around. “And I am not sure what you mean. How could I do better?”

Her aunt huffed. “I do have eyes in my head, Lettie.” She moved closer. “He’s an indenture! He has nothing to his name.”

Lettie bristled. “He has plenty. A good heart, a strong arm, a—”

“That’s not enough,” Sarah said brusquely. “A woman needs a man who can support her.”

“Like Emrick could?” Lettie turned.

“Not all men are like Emrick.”

“Thank the Lord for that. But as to Hans, we are but friends,” Lettie said. A large shadow froze in the kitchen doorway. Then it was gone, and Lettie ignored Sarah’s voice, running out into the dusk.

“Hans, wait! Wait.” But he didn’t wait. If anything, he increased his pace.

She tried to catch up, following him through the apple orchard, but somewhere between the orchards and the water meadows she lost him, and she stood for an instant, gasping for breath. What little daylight remained now lingered like a faint line along the western horizon. Straight ahead, the river glittered under the approaching night, and Lettie threw her head back and yelled.

“Hans! Please! Pl—” She ended with a yelp when out of the shadows stepped three men. And with them, they hauled Hans, one of them having shoved a musket against Hans’ broad back.

“Ah, dear wife. And so we meet again.” Emrick Ellis leered at her.

“What are you doing here?” She was amazed she managed to sound so calm.

“Me?” He took a step towards her. “Why, I am here to retrieve my disobedient wife.”

“We have already discussed this.” She took a couple of steps backwards. “I am not coming with you.”

“No?” He snapped his fingers, and the man holding the musket switched his grip and brought the butt down on Hans’ head. He toppled to the side.

“Hans!” She shoved past Emrick. “Hans.” She was on her knees beside him, reaching for him when Emrick sank his hand into her hair and tugged.

“Slut!” Emrick hissed. “To howl your lover’s name like a bitch in heat.”

One of his companions snickered.

“This is what is going to happen,” Emrick said. “You will come along obediently and Hans here will live. But if you fight ...”

Lettie swallowed. And swallowed. Emrick’s hold on her hair tightened. “What is it to be?” he demanded.

“Hans,” she whispered, and to her relief she saw his eyelids flutter. For an instant, he met her gaze before seemingly collapsing.

“Woof,” Hans said. “Woof, woof.”

The older of Emrick’s companions brayed with laughter. “Knocked his wits out of him, didn’t we?”

Or not. Hope fluttered like a trapped lark in her chest. The dogs. She glanced due west. Any moment now, Tim would release the dogs before hurrying over the yard to join the household for supper. All she needed was time. And distraction.

“They’ll come for me,” she told Emrick. “My kin.”

He sneered. “Am I supposed to quake at the thought?”

“A wise man would.”

He responded by punching her full in her belly. “By the time they come, it will be too late for you, *wife*.”

Time. Distraction.

She spat him in the face. “They will make you pay.”

“Aye?” His face was uncomfortably close. “And you will be dead,” he hissed, and she could see the truth of that in his eyes. She raked her nails over his cheek.

Time, she thought, when he slapped her so hard she would have fallen to the ground had it not been for his grip on her hair. *Distraction*. She tasted blood in her mouth and ran her tongue over her teeth. Still there. She actually managed to laugh, a loud high-pitched sound that had the other two men looking at her and shuffling closer. Good. Get them away from

Hans. Emrick pulled her to her feet. He raised his arm, and she covered her head with her arms. “Don’t hit me!” she whined.

He laughed.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hans stand. A flash of movement and the musket went flying.

“Oi!” the man said. “Ellis!” he added shrilly when Hans grabbed hold of him. His companion backed away hastily.

And here came the dogs, huge beasts that came crashing through the shrubs.

“Time,” Lettie said, and laughter bubbled out of her bleeding mouth.

Emrick’s two companions fled.

“Damnation!” Emrick shoved Lettie aside.

Oh no. Not this time. She lunged, all those years of fear and pain exploding from her.

It took Emrick by surprise.

He rallied and tried to push her off. She clung to him like a leech.

He staggered backwards.

His heel caught on something, and they tumbled to the ground.

There was a dull crack.

Emrick jerked. His arms flopped a couple of times, and he went still.

“Lettie?”

A big warm hand on her back and she released her hold. Hans helped her up.

She wiped at her mouth, staring down at Emrick. “Why is he so still?”

One of the dogs loped over.

“Emrick?” She shoved the dog aside and shook him. Nothing. She did it again.

“He’s dead,” Hans said softly.

Lettie sank to her knees. Beside her, Hans did the same.

She leaned against him. “I didn’t mean it,” she said.

“You didn’t kill him. He fell.”

“Not that.” She couldn’t quite look at the sprawled body. Instead, she snuck her hand into his. “Aye, you are my friend. But you are so much more than that.”

“I know.”

In the distance, the supper bell clanged.

“What do we do now?” Lettie asked.

“We eat.” He helped her up to stand before lifting Emrick’s body onto his shoulder. “And we think. Then we do.”

“Do what?”

“First, we eat.” He looked at her. “You must wash.”

She sat at the table, waving away questions about her swollen lip by saying she’d slipped. Her entire left cheek throbbed, and come the morrow there would likely be a bruise. Across the table, she met Hans’ gaze. *Eat. Act as if nothing is amiss.* Whatever it was she was eating, it tasted of pig’s swill. Emrick was dead! At this moment, he was lying in the woodshed, and here she was, supping with her kin.

She choked back a laugh and sank her nails into her palm. He was dead, and she’d killed him! Not on purpose, he’d died because he cracked his head open on a rock, but if she’d not lunged at him, then maybe ...

Something trod on her foot. A gentle but insistent pressure and she peeked at Hans from under her lashes. He concentrated on his food, somehow managing to consume as much as he always did. How could he be so unaffected? Her hand shook as she reached for a piece of bread. The pressure on her foot increased, and he shoved the pitcher of cider in her direction. She sloshed some into her mug. Too much, too fast, and there was a puddle of cider on the table.

“Are you all right?” Erin asked.

“Mmm?” She forced her mouth into a smile, ignoring just how much her lip protested. “Aye. Just a tad thirsty. Too thirsty, even.”

Not until everyone had gone to bed did she slip outside.

None of the day’s warmth lingered, and she shivered. There was no lantern to light her way, so it took some time to reach the shed.

“Hans?”

No reply.

She wasn’t about to enter the shed on her own.

She took a couple of slow turns.

Where was the man?

A faint sound had her near on leaping out of her skin. She huddled into herself.

There. A large shape near the old well, and there was a moment when she actually believed it was that evil Frenchman reappearing from wherever he’d gone. Reason reasserted itself, and her shoulders fell when she recognised Hans.

“Best place,” he said curtly, gesturing at the hole he’d dug through the mound. He’d cracked a couple of planks, creating a narrow hole.

“Dearest God.” She sank down. Emrick was vile and abusive, but did not everyone deserve to be laid to rest? This was no peaceful final sleep; this was like throwing him on an offal heap.

“Is he really dead?” She slid a look at the bundle wrapped in burlap.

“He is.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “There is no choice.”

“But it was an accident,” she began. “He fell!”

“And who will believe that, Erin? Those companions of his, will they slink away quietly do you think? Or will they

raise a hue and cry, clamouring that the German be brought to justice for murder?”

“You? But you didn’t do—”

“It doesn’t matter. It will be me they accuse.” He stood up. “Will you help me?”

She nodded mutely.

An hour or so later, it was done. She said a hasty prayer—more for herself and Hans than Emrick—and then she led them both inside. Her hands shook. So dirty! Hans heated water; she found soap and a bristle brush. Side by side, they began scrubbing themselves clean.

Halfway through, she started weeping.

He drew her close, murmuring words she didn’t understand.

“He does not deserve your tears,” he said softly.

“I wasn’t weeping for him.” She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. “He could have killed you!”

“*Ja*. But that did not happen.”

“Thank the good Lord!” She held out her hand. “Will you share my bed tonight?”

“*Ja*. But what if Mistress Connor finds out?”

“I do not care. Besides, she sleeps upstairs.”

He chuckled softly. “How fortunate. She strikes me as terrifying.”

A flurry of sounds had her freezing in place. They were back! Emrick’s companions were here, likely armed to the teeth. She seemed to have forgotten how to breathe, and in her head her pulse thundered, making it difficult to think. A weapon. Aye, she needed a weapon. Her hand closed on a kitchen knife.

Hans was already at the door, musket in hand. His large shoulders relaxed. “It’s the master,” he said. “They’re back.”

Lettie sagged. Air rushed into her lungs, but her heart still raced, her hands trembling. Somehow, she managed to release her hold on the knife and straighten up.

“Not a word,” she told Hans before crouching down to stoke life into the fire.

When Duncan entered, followed by Michael and Antoine, she had bread and ale on the table. They looked tired. Her cousin had a bruise under his eye and scratches on his hands and forearms. She raised a hand to her swollen cheek, glad of the shadows at this end of the kitchen.

“I take it he did not come quietly,” she said.

“That he did not.” Michael sat down with a thud. “But it is done.” He gave her a sharp look. “Why are you out of bed?” His gaze drifted over to Hans and back to Lettie.

“I worried,” she said, and she couldn’t quite stop herself from smoothing at nonexistent wrinkles on her skirts. Belatedly, she realised she had her sleeves rolled up, her hands still smarting from the bristle brush. Duncan looked at her hands, at Hans’, just as evidently newly scrubbed. But he did not ask.

“I am off to bed,” he said, trudging towards the stairs.

Michael and Antoine followed suit a while later. Lettie ordered the kitchen, blew out the candles and took Hans’ hand, leading him into her little room. What she’d once perceived as a slight—that she be given a room downstairs while the rest of the family slept upstairs—was now a blessing, an opportunity for privacy.

They slid into bed, and she pillowed her head on his chest.

“I didn’t mean for him to die,” she whispered, because every time she closed her eyes, she saw Emrick Ellis, his handsome face drained of animation, his green eyes dull.

“He would you gladly have killed.” His hold on her tightened, and she did not bother to correct him. It was an indication of how affected he was that he misspoke in English, and somehow knowing he was also struggling soothed her. She fell asleep to the sound of his voice, whispering in

German to her. Soft, soft words she did not understand but which nonetheless made her feel safe and cherished.

Something small and warm woke him.

“Papa!” Sandy squealed, and Ellen came clambering over Erin to join her sister in showing him just how much they’d missed him.

Erin rolled over on her side, her gaze capturing his. She did not say anything, she just tucked her hands under her head and smiled as their little lasses peppered him with kisses, their plump arms attempting to hug as much of him as they could.

When he’d arrived home last night, his only thought had been to find Erin. Even finding Lettie and Hans awake had done little to distract him from his single-minded objective, and so he’d taken the stairs two treads at the time and found his wife fast asleep with their daughters in her arms. It had made his heart swell, and he’d undressed in haste, leaving his clothes on the floor before sliding in to curve himself around them. His lasses, his wife—he would do anything to keep them safe.

Nicholas Farrell had regained some of his confidence when they’d cut his bonds. He’d spat and threatened, even managed to laugh loudly when Michael had explained just where they were going.

“My father will never allow it,” he’d sneered, but there’d been an instant when his eyes had shifted to the left, the tip of his tongue darting out to wet his lips. “And even if you haul me before a court in Pennsylvania, what makes you think they’d believe the word of coloured trash over mine?”

“What did you say?” Duncan had demanded, and Nicholas had sidled away.

“That’s what she is. Come to think of it, that’s what *they* are—your wife and your pretty daughters.”

The man had to be a fool to so insult his family. Or mayhap he truly believed that any white man would always agree with him.

Duncan cracked his knuckles and the resulting pain recalled him to the here and now, to the bed full of warm children and a lovely wife.

“Tell me,” Erin said once they were alone. She’d ordered up hot water and rags, and he was now sitting as naked as the day he was born while she washed him from head to toe. The rag slowed over his bruised face. Over the deep scratches on his forearms.

“Farrell fights like a woman,” Duncan said.

“You fought?”

He’d challenged him on that deck, jeered at Farrell to prove himself sufficiently a man to attack him and not a defenceless woman. And while Duncan was tall, Nicholas was taller and bulkier, which may be why those little eyes lit up with glee. By the time Duncan was done—nay, he’d been pulled away from him—Nicholas was a bruised, bleeding mess.

“He called you coloured trash,” was all he said. “What was I to do but fight him?”

Her mouth set. “Men like that you ignore. You don’t let them get at you, okay?”

“Get at me?” He swivelled on his stool. “He got at me the moment he laid a finger on you, the moment he insulted my daughters, the moment he frightened our Sandy into silence, the moment—”

“Shhh.” She set a finger to his lips, and then she was in his lap, and he rested his face against her breasts, soft and round through the thin linen of her shift. “What will his father do?”

“I truly don’t know.” He laughed. “Neither, I think, does Nicholas.” He’d blustered and protested as he was marched towards the gaol, threatening them all with the might of the Farrell family, but all the time, his gaze had darted this way and that, as if hoping to catch sight of someone who could help him.

“And when is his trial?” A tremor moved through her. He slipped his arms round her and held her close.

“Lloyd will not set a date until Farrell has a lawyer.” He scowled. The chief justice had been adamant.

“It’s the right thing to do, I guess,” she said.

Of course it was, but at present that did not help. Duncan wanted this to be over, once and for all.

They went down to breakfast.

“Oh my God, Lettie! That looks really, really bad,” Erin said, staring at Lettie’s bruised face. “You should have put something cold on it yesterday.”

“What happened?” Duncan asked.

“She slipped,” Sarah replied in a dry tone. “Must have fallen like a log.”

Lettie rolled her eyes. “I was clumsy.” She turned her back on them. “It is no great matter.”

Duncan pursed his mouth. A fall left scrapes as well as bruises. He narrowed his eyes at Hans, but the notion of him raising as much as a finger against Lettie was utterly ridiculous. But to judge from the tension rolling off the big German, the frequent looks Lettie threw out the window, something had happened—and it was not good.

Duncan suppressed a sigh. He did not need further turmoil in his life. At present, he was drained of energy, wanting nothing so much as to spend some days in complete solitude. A desert island, he mused, smiling slightly as he recalled a ... what was it they were called? ... ah, yes: a reality show, in which people voluntarily chose to spend weeks in tropical

isolation. He'd not mind that as long as Erin was there with him.

Mrs Andersson beamed at him as she set down a laden plate before him. "Your favourite sausages, Master Melville."

"No porridge for him?" Erin asked in a mild voice.

"Ah, well." Mrs Andersson's ears went a bright red. "The master needs his strength, a man like him—anyone can see he needs it!"

"I would not mind some sausages." Michael Connor stole a piece from Duncan's plate. "Mmm," he said, chewing industriously. "Delicious, Mrs Andersson."

They were just finishing off the last of the sausages when Tim rushed through the kitchen door.

"Visitors," he said, frowning. "Of a sort."

That, Duncan decided, did not sound good.

Together with Michael, he went out to greet these visitors. Behind him came the rest of his curious family. He swore he heard Lettie inhale, cast a look at her and was met by a weak smile, eyes wide and innocent. Hmm. He shifted his gaze to Hans, standing some distance away. His back was as stiff as a board, his jaw rigid.

"Gentlemen," Duncan said politely once the party of five had dismounted. He recognised three of the men and nodded a greeting at them. "Hansen," he said to the constable. "What brings you here?"

"These two gentlemen requested my services," Hansen said, pointing at the two strangers. "They hail from Charles Town."

"Ah." It took some effort not to look at Lettie.

"Far from home," Erin said, slipping her arm under his.

"Aye." One of the strangers drew himself up. "I am a friend of Emrick Ellis."

"Not something that gives you any brownie points here," Erin muttered. She raised her voice. "Should I commiserate?"

Only a truly desperate man would want someone like him as a friend.”

The man scowled but ignored her. “I was here yesterday,” he began.

“You were?” Sarah interrupted. “When?”

“I just said: yesterday.”

“How strange. No one came calling at the door,” Sarah said. “Surely, any polite person would introduce themselves?”

The man squirmed. “We came from the river.”

“Ah. Uninvited guests,” Sarah said. “Or, to be more precise, trespassers.”

“How we came to be here does not matter,” the other man said, puffing himself up like a toad.

“Begging your pardon, Mr Simpson, but it does,” the constable said, frowning. “If you were trespassing—”

“We were here on an errand. With our dear friend Emrick Ellis,” the first man said.

“Who was also trespassing,” Duncan said.

“We weren’t trespassing!” the first man yelled. “We were not here to see you, we were here to see her.” He pointed at Lettie.

“But this is my land,” Duncan said, crossing his arms over his chest. “So aye, you were trespassers. But mayhap whatever business you had with Lettie could not be conducted openly?”

The first man scowled. “He had the right of it, Ellis did. He was only here to retrieve his wife, and now he’s gone.”

Gone? All of Duncan itched with the desire to look at Lettie. “How unfortunate.” He looked the first man up and down. “I did not catch your name, Mr ... ?”

“Lewis,” the man replied.

“Thank you. So what, exactly, is it you are insinuating, Mr Lewis?”

“Insinuating? Me? Nothing! I am saying that huge lout of a man murdered Emrick at her say-so!”

“Serious accusations,” Duncan said. “And what evidence have you got?”

“We were there!” Lewis exclaimed.

“And you saw Hans kill him?”

“No, not as such,” Simpson said, earning himself an angry glare from Lewis. “What? We didn’t see it, did we? Those dratted dogs chased us off, but when Emrick did not join us, well, we assumed the worst.”

“Ah.” Duncan nodded. “Ellis is truly fortunate in his friends—such brave men, the both of you.”

“It was your dogs!”

Duncan had had enough. “Because you were trespassing! On my land! I have the right to protect me and mine.” Lewis scurried backwards, staring at Duncan, who wheeled to face Hansen. “Go on,” he told the constable. “Search my land. Mayhap you’ll find that coward Ellis hiding in a tree, or maybe he’s been savaged by the dogs. If so, that is a consequence of him trespassing—unfortunate, but there it is. But I can tell you right now that whatever has befallen Ellis, Hans Muller had nothing to do with it. Nothing.”

“How can you be so sure?” the constable asked.

“Because Hans Muller would never kill a man. Never. He’s seen too much death as it is in his life.”

His cousin, however ... A desperate Lettie could resort to violence. Come to think of it, had Hans seen her being mistreated, he might have done the same.

“So why is her face bruised?” Simpson piped up, pointing at Lettie. “I can tell you why, because Emrick slapped her, adulterous slut that she is.”

Two long strides and Duncan was looming over him. “You watched a man hurt a woman without interfering?”

“She’s his wife!” he protested.

“And you are a liar,” Erin said with a deep sigh. “Lettie fell,” she said to the constable. “I was there.”

“So was I,” Sarah said. “And Hans.”

“And where, exactly, were you?” the constable asked.

“In the pressing shed,” Erin replied, attempting to sound bored. “We needed Hans there to help us with the press.”

“Too late for cider-making,” the constable said.

“But not for repairing the press,” Erin replied sweetly.

Hansen studied her in silence. “We will conduct a search.”

“Please.” Duncan extended his arms. “But those two I want off my property. Now.” He glowered at Simpson and Lewis. “Men who come with unsubstantiated accusations against my household are not welcome here—even less when they’ve admitted to trespassing.”

Hansen was a meticulous man. Every shed, every nook was inspected, and at one point Duncan found the man looking at the mound covering the old well. At present, Erin and the twins were there, playing some sort of complicated game. That had Duncan frowning: Erin always avoided the old well. Hansen, however, just chuckled when Sandy hollered and jumped up and down on the packed earth, repeating, “King, king, me is king!”

It was close to suppertime before Hansen called off his search. “Nothing,” he said to Duncan.

“I told you so,” Duncan replied.

“Hmm,” the constable said. “I am prone to believing they did come here yesterday.”

“Aye, so am I. But they were trespassing, constable.”

“But I have found nothing to indicate Ellis is here, whether dead or alive.”

“They could have thrown him in the river,” Lewis said from where he was standing under the oak. To Duncan’s chagrin, Hansen had refused to escort them off the premises, but he had also refused to allow them to participate in the

search, insisting they stay by the oak. To ensure they did as ordered, Duncan had had Tim bring out the dogs, taking great pleasure in how both men did their damndest to stay as far away from the hounds.

“If they have, he’ll float up,” Hansen said. “They always do.”

No sooner were Hansen and the men gone than Duncan had hold of his wife. “Walk,” he said.

“Now?”

“Aye. I need ...” He inhaled, did it again. “I just ...”

“Come,” she said, taking his hand. “Not the homecoming you were hoping for, was it?”

“It is just too much,” he said. “Truly, since that day with Felix, it has been one thing after the other.” He sighed. “I am tired, honey. So, so tired.”

“We need a vacation,” she said, and he had to smile. It was a strange concept, to travel elsewhere to do little but rest, but at present the notion held substantial appeal.

“He’s in the well, isn’t he?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Erin leaned closer, her breath warm on his cheek as she hastily explained what had happened. “I called her out on it,” she said, “because I could see someone had disturbed the mound. That’s when she told me.”

“They threw him down there?”

“They panicked,” Erin said. “Besides, he was dead.”

He wasn’t going to think about this right now. But as they passed the mound, he muttered a hasty, “God keep you,” ignoring Erin’s surprised look.

“We can’t let him lie there,” he said a bit later.

“No?”

“Nay.” He frowned, recalling the constable’s intent study of the mound. “Hansen is no fool. It will strike him, at some

point, that an old well would make an excellent tomb.” He shivered.

“Jesus,” she groaned. “Yet another thing to add to our to-do list: extract corpse from hiding place and find a new one.” She grimaced, tightening her hold on his hand.

“Aye,” he muttered. “Pray God we can have some peace soon.” But first, they had the trial to get through. And a corpse to hide.

The solution was dead simple—at least on paper.

“We bury him in the well,” Erin said, even if just the notion of spending time in that restricted space had her shivering.

She’d actually argued for leaving the body somewhere to be found first, but Duncan had been adamant: no matter that Ellis had died by misadventure, those friends of his would badger and badger until someone was found guilty. “And Hans is the obvious suspect,” he’d said.

“Aye, that works. I’ll do it tonight,” Duncan said, having mulled her proposal through. He was presently lying flat on his back in their bed, staring up at the ceiling. He looked drawn, a tight set to his mouth that stood in stark contrast to his sprawled limbs. This was a man attempting to relax—and failing.

“Not on your own, you won’t.”

“I’ll ask Hans.”

She sat down beside him. “You can’t. The old well scares him silly.” No wonder, really. “How he managed to dig that hole yesterday ...”

“He would do anything for her.”

“It’s kind of sweet, isn’t it?” She lay down beside him.

He snorted. “Sweet? There is nothing sweet about this mess.”

She stroked his arm, his shoulders. He exhaled softly. Erin propped herself up on an elbow and combed her fingers through his thick, dark hair. Over and over, and the tension in his face dissipated, his mouth reverting to its normal, generous curve. His body relaxed, and he was back to looking like a man only some years over thirty, those concerned and constant wrinkles to his brows disappearing. His breathing deepened. She smoothed her fingers over his forehead. He turned towards her touch and slept.

She watched him sleep curled up beside him. Her strong man was bowing under the burden of keeping them all safe, whether it be from assholes like Nelson and Farrell or determined madmen like Felix Chardon.

“Rest,” she whispered, brushing that signature lock of dark hair off his brow. “I’ll watch over you.”

And she did just that until the candle guttered and gasped, leaving their room in darkness. She didn’t want to wake him—not when he slept so peacefully—but it was past midnight, and if they were going to do anything about Emrick, it had to be now.

He startled awake when she shook him. “What? What?” He was out of bed, grabbing for his pistol, and she just had to wrap her arms around him, holding him until his breathing slowed.

They made their way down the narrow backstairs. On tiptoe, they passed Lettie’s room and emerged in the kitchen. He struck flint to steel and lit a lantern, handing it to her as he went to open the door. It creaked. A lot. But nothing stirred in the house, and he held her hand as they slunk off in the direction of the old well.

The night was surprisingly chilly, despite being overcast. Here and there, patches of night sky were visible, the stars little pinpricks of distant light. She stopped for a moment.

“Pegasus,” she whispered, pointing at the three visible stars in the Pegasus square. Duncan grunted, clearly not impressed. “Do you think he ever existed?” she asked—

mainly because any conversation served to distract her from the waiting task.

He turned to her, his face a pale oval. “A winged horse? Of course not.”

“Well, in the overall context of things, that isn’t any more impossible than painted portals through time, is it?” She moved closer to him. They were almost at the old well.

“Next you’ll tell me you believe in unicorns as well,” he scoffed.

“What?” She pretended to be shocked. “They don’t exist? But what about all those unicorn horns the Graham Company sells?”

Duncan ducked into one of the work sheds. “We don’t,” he replied, emerging with spades and a crowbar. “Well, not anymore.”

“They went out of fashion, huh?”

“It was more a matter of dwindling supply,” he said. “And nay, they were not real unicorn horns—but you know that already.”

“Duh. Seeing as they don’t exist—or so you say.” She set down the lantern, adjusting it so that only a narrow beam of light spilled on the ground.

“Might as well dig where Hans dug,” Duncan said.

It did not take them long to uncover the hasty repair to the planking Hans had conducted. Erin stood back.

“What if ...” She licked her lips. “You know, what if ...”

“He’s not there,” Duncan said firmly, but in the light of the lantern she could see how he tightened his hold on the crowbar. “Besides, Felix Chardon would not have stayed in a buried well—especially not with a dead man as company.”

That made some sort of creepy sense. But she still stood back.

Duncan moved in with the crowbar. Some moments later, the wood snapped. Below was a narrow hole. Erin peered

down into all that dark. No sounds, no light. “Do you think there are rats?” she whispered.

“Aye.” He sounded curt.

“I don’t like rats.”

“You do not need to come,” he said with a sigh.

Of course she did. She had to shoulder part of his burden, but she didn’t tell him that. Instead, she resolutely approached the hole and began wiggling through it. Halfway, she stopped. “How do we get up again?”

“A ladder.”

She balanced on her arms as he hurried off.

“Got it,” he said, and she took a deep breath and allowed herself to fall the few feet to the bottom of the well. Years and years of leaves had created a carpet of sorts—nasty and damp, it had her sinking well to her ankles. The ladder came after, followed by Duncan.

“Where is he?” he asked, and his voice echoed. He held up the lantern, scanning the rotting mulch. “He’s not here!” Erin moved closer to Duncan. “How can he not be here?”

At most eight feet in diameter, the well offered no hiding places, no nooks in which a suddenly resurrected Emrick could hide. All there was were the walls and a lingering smell of brine, a faint taste of bitter almonds to the air.

“He’s been back,” she groaned. No need to say who.

“Aye. And recently.” He stooped, picking up something white. A handkerchief, elegantly embroidered with an *F*.

“But where is Emrick?”

“I don’t know. Maybe—” Whatever Duncan was about to say was cut off by the sudden appearance of a head in the hole above them.

It was strange how quickly one could become accustomed to sharing a bed with someone. Antoine turned carefully so as not

to wake Esther and tucked the blankets tight around her. Fair hair spilled every which way across their pillows, and he just had to dip his nose close enough to inhale the scents of chamomile and lavender.

It was strange how quickly one could become accustomed to thinking “we” instead of “I,” he reflected, pressing a gentle kiss to her rosy cheek. His little angel did not stir, but even in sleep she turned towards him, like a flower seeking the sun. He rewarded her with one more kiss and a soft, “Sleep,” before sliding out of bed to pad over to the chamber pot.

Too much beer, too many hours spent with Esther’s parents—mostly her father. He liked Michael Connor and sensed the older man approved of him. The mother, however ... He shook himself while thinking that Sarah Connor was a force of nature, at present most resentful of him and his presence in her precious daughter’s life. Not so much because of him, but rather because at some point he would carry her daughter over the ocean, far, far from the land of her birth.

There had been endless hissed conversations between mother and daughter, discussions that usually ended in tender embraces. But now and then, Esther stalked off, dark blue eyes bright with anger as she told her mother she was content—nay, deliriously happy—with the choices she’d made.

“You don’t know him!” Sarah Connor had protested only yesterday.

“And you knew Father that much better?” Esther had retorted.

“It was different. I—”

“It is not different!” Esther had clenched her fists. “I love him, Mama.”

“You are too young to know that,” Sarah had tried, at which point Antoine had chosen to enter the room, causing his mother-in-law to swallow back what else she’d been planning to say.

“If you truly love her, you’d let her go,” Sarah had told Antoine later in a caustic tone.

“I tried that.” He’d smiled. “She would not have it, and truth be told, I am eternally grateful she had the courage to believe in me—in us.”

Us. Yet another new word in his vocabulary, and one that had him smiling in the dark. He was halfway towards the bed when a faint glimmer of light had him coming to an abrupt halt. Could it be Ellis’ companions, back to do mischief?

He’d left the shutters open—of late, he detested shutting out the light—and from his vantage point Antoine could see the stables and the shadow of the barn, at least twice as high as the surrounding buildings. *Oui*, there was that light again, a faint beacon that abruptly disappeared.

“Antoine?” Esther murmured, and she was warm and rosy and half-asleep.

“Shh,” he said.

“Antoine,” she mumbled, but she was already drifting back into her dreams.

He considered waking Duncan but thought better of it. The man needed his sleep, had spent weeks agonising at his wife’s bedside. Besides, it would be embarrassing should all he’d seen been a figment of his imagination. So instead, he pulled on his breeches and boots, making his way downstairs as silently as possible. Once outside, he took a few moments to accustom himself to the dark. Mayhap he should have brought a lantern.

There was no moon to light his way, but by now Antoine was familiar with Papegoja Plantation. When he reached the main farm yard, he came to a halt. It was all quiet, beyond the odd shuffling of a hoof, the soft snort of a horse. The kennels were empty, and of the dogs there was no sign. A relief, because had there been intruders here, those huge beasts would have been here as well. Absentmindedly, he rubbed at his thigh and the scarred reminder of just how fierce the Melville dogs could be.

In one corner of the yard was the old well. Antoine swallowed, attempting to lubricate a suddenly very dry mouth.

He avoided it as much as possible, doing his damndest never to even look that way. In there, his brother lay entombed. Or not. He suppressed a burst of nervous laughter. There were days when he dearly wished his brother was dead, days when he prayed and prayed for Felix's soul, hoping it was at peace. The days when he considered the notion of Felix in another time—a vindictive, angry Felix, likely determined to have his revenge—were the days when he prayed for himself.

A muffled sound had him straightening up. Voices? He scanned the yard. No one there. He took a couple of hesitant steps across it, thinking that maybe Hans or Tim was in the stables. Yet another sound, and yes, that was a voice—a male voice. He cocked his head and listened. More sounds, and his heart began thumping. The sounds came from the old well.

His knees shook. Sweat dewed his back and elbow creases. Someone—something—was inside the well. His instinct was to flee, run like a hare and hide in his bed with Esther. But the thought of her brought him up short. He had to protect her, even if that meant covering the yards that separated him from that accursed well and handling whatever was inside it.

It was a slow, painful process. Could it be Felix? One part of him wanted nothing more than it be his brother; the other cursed himself for coming out here unarmed. He looked about, and in a wheelbarrow parked neatly by one of the sheds was a pitchfork. Better that than nothing.

One shuffling step. Another.

More voices, and now he could see a hole.

Not Felix. Not unless he'd somehow transported himself outside the well and then dug himself out, which was a ludicrous thought. Not Felix. Or maybe it was.

He leaned over the hole. "Felix, *c'est toi?*" he asked

Madame Melville—Erin—muffled a surprised yelp.

Antoine overbalanced. One moment, he was on firm ground, the next he was falling, landing between Duncan and Erin. He scrambled to his feet, threw himself backwards. What if he'd landed on his brother's remains, what if ... He wiped

frantically at his shirt with his free hand, the other still clutching the pitchfork.

“He’s not here,” Duncan said.

Antoine gulped down air. It smelled strange, like it could be before a thunderstorm.

Erin held up the lantern. “Are you okay?”

He couldn’t reply. Instead, he pointed with a shaking finger at the opposite wall. There someone had scraped out two words, white against the mildewed green of the old stones. *JE REVIENDRAI*, it said, and Antoine fell to his knees.

I will come back. “Something isn’t right,” Duncan muttered, staring at the message. *If you do, I’ll be waiting, you bastard.*

“Too right. Felix Chardon has just left his calling card.” Erin sounded remarkably calm, but a quick look revealed she was anything but, her fingers twisting round each other.

“Not that.” He tasted the air. “There’s some sort of imbalance.” He frowned at the stonework—or rather at the visible cracks. Was it a fancy, or were they growing? “Out!” he ordered. “We must out. Now!”

He threw Erin upwards, scrambled up the ladder and yelled at Antoine to hurry.

The Frenchman was halfway up when the earth beneath them rumbled.

“Here!” Duncan had hold of Antoine’s wrist, hauling with all his might. Everything under him dipped, and he fell to his knees.

“Duncan!” Erin had hold of his breeches, dragging him backwards.

The earth shook. Antoine screamed.

“Do. Not. Let. Go!” Duncan yelled, and he wasn’t sure if he was talking to Antoine or his wife because, at present, the ground beneath him was undulating, cresting like angry waves.

One more haul. Erin roared and pulled, ripping his breeches. They landed in a heap, just outside the old well. Erin's carefully worked planks snapped like kindling, the stonework cracked, and with a muffled roar the well collapsed inwards.

Somehow, Duncan got to his feet. Doors in the closest houses opened, spilling faint light on the yard.

"Master Melville?" Giles came trotting over in only his shirt, a lantern in one hand, what looked like a cudgel in the other.

"Aye." He coughed, wrapping an arm round Erin. She leaned against him, hands fisting his shirt as if she would never let him go.

"Lord above!" Giles stared at the shallow indent where once there'd been a well. "It just collapsed?"

"Aye."

Giles looked at him, obviously expecting some further explanation. His gaze flitted over to Antoine, sitting huddled on the ground with his arms wound tight round his legs. He rocked back and forth, his face hidden against his knees. "What did he do?" Giles asked.

"Nothing," Erin said. "Beyond sleepwalking."

"Sleepwalking?" Giles frowned at Antoine. "All the way here?"

"Better here than the river," Erin said, and as she'd clearly come up with a story—Duncan couldn't, not when his mind was still reeling—he stayed silent, listening as Erin explained that they'd heard him and gone after him.

"He does that often?" Giles asked, eyeing Antoine as if he were a rabid dog.

"No." She cleared her throat. "He was standing on top of the old well when suddenly everything started—" Her voice broke.

"Shaking," Duncan filled in.

By now, there were more people in the yard. From the main house came Hans and Tim; a scarcely dressed Michael came next, a firm grip on his daughter.

“Antoine!” Esther tore free from her father and flew across the ground to her distraught man, enfolding him in her arms. He moaned something and turned to her, his eyes squished shut as he pressed his face against her chest.

“We will have to fence it in,” Giles said. “Old wells that collapse are dangerous things.”

“They do that a lot?” Erin asked.

Giles shrugged. “Without water, there’s no pressure on the stonework. With time, the stones begin to lean inward instead.”

“Oh.” One syllable, and yet he could hear just how much she hoped this was the explanation behind what they’d just witnessed. But it wasn’t. He knew that; she knew that. What had destabilised the old well was a trapped whirlpool of glittering colours because the forces required to punch a hole through time were far too strong to be contained by ancient stonework only intended to hold water.

Dearest God in heaven, they could have been trapped down there, choked to death under tons and tons of earth. He must have tightened his hold, because she winced. He relaxed his hold, brushing a quick kiss over her head in apology.

“We must see to Antoine,” Duncan said to Giles, receiving a distracted nod in return.

“I’ll talk to Andersson,” Giles said, pointing at where Sivert Andersson was marching towards them, sporting a mass of unruly hair, an undone shirt and breeches he was presently tightening round his waist.

“He’s coming back,” Antoine said in a low voice. He looked from Duncan to Erin, to his Esther, presently sitting as close to him as possible.

“To be correct, he has come back,” Erin said. “And then he left.” She tried to smile, but her mouth wobbled.

“*Je reviendrais*,” Antoine muttered. “But how?” Now there was no well to return to.

“I don’t know.” Duncan extended his long legs. He was in clean and whole breeches, his face and hands scrubbed clean of earth and mud.

“Here.” Erin set down mugs of something that steamed, and Antoine drew in the comforting smell of warm milk and cinnamon, liberally laced with honey. She looked as clean as Duncan did, and Antoine’s own skin tingled after his recent efforts with a wash rag. It had not helped much, to set himself back in order, to comb his hair and don clean clothes. Not when he couldn’t stop thinking about Felix’s message—it had to be Felix—so clearly addressed to him as it was in French.

If it had only been him, that would have been bad enough. But now there was Esther, and how was he to keep her safe should a vindictive Felix appear in their lives?

“Just because he wants to come back doesn’t necessarily mean he can come back,” Erin said. “Not now that the well is gone. It was his anchor point in this time.”

Hope flared through him. “*Oui!* You are right.” And then he looked at her and realised she was just as desperate as he was to convince herself Felix would not return.

“A problem for another day,” Duncan said firmly. “I myself find it hard to believe anyone can control that damned locket. It takes you where it wants to take you. And truly, the experience of falling through time is so dreadful that even a desperate and angry man would hesitate to do it again.” He raised three fingers. “Three times he’s gone through. That is three times of terror, of being twisted in a vice as you fall and fall, while all around you wail the voices, the sounds of time distorted.”

Esther made big eyes at him. “You’ve done it.”

“What can I say? I had the distinct misfortune to meet Armand Joseph Chardon,” Duncan replied. He reached for his

wife, and something passed between them. There was more to this particular story than Duncan was willing to share, of that Antoine was certain. But he could not quite rouse himself to feel any curiosity, not when he was struggling with wave after wave of fear. Fear that Felix would return, fear that something would happen to Esther.

She might be very young, his wife, but she was not only the most beautiful angel in the world, she was also insightful. She leaned her head against his shoulder. "I am not worried," she said softly. "I know my husband will always keep me safe."

Her conviction smothered those waves of fear. And when she slipped her arms around him to add, "Just like I will always keep him safe," Antoine Chardon knew he had found in Esther what Duncan Melville had so evidently found in Erin: a woman strong enough and brave enough to stand by his side, no matter what life threw their way.

“Evil people come to evil ends,” Hans said—again—when Lettie—again—whispered that it was absolutely incredible that Emrick Ellis had gone up in smoke.

She ignored him. “He wasn’t in the well, Hans. So where was he?”

Duncan had not been forthcoming about the events at the old well. A brusque, “He wasn’t there,” was all she’d got out of him, and when she’d fretted and wondered out loud if someone had discovered the body, Duncan had assured her he found that highly unlikely.

He’d been right, though, her cousin, because on the morrow after the well collapsed, Hansen had returned, saying he had to conclude the inspection. The constable had stared at where the well used to stand. “It just imploded?”

“Aye.” Duncan had gestured at the pile of rubble, stones and broken planking. “You are welcome to dig through that. Or you take my word for the fact that we are not hiding the body of Emrick Ellis anywhere on my estate.” The certainty in his voice told Lettie that her cousin knew no one would ever find as much as a hair belonging to Emrick.

Days passed. Duncan rode down to Chester to inform himself about Farrell’s trial, returning looking like a thundercloud. “Still no lawyer to represent him!” he snapped. “And to judge from his smirk, that bastard thinks he’ll get away with it this time as well.”

“And Emrick?” Lettie had asked.

“Ellis? What does he have to do with it?”

“Are they still ...” She wet her lips. “Lewis and Simpson, are they still demanding justice for him?”

“They’ve left,” Duncan said, and Lettie’s entire body relaxed. He gave her a long look. “Without a body, he’s not dead,” he said in a low voice. “You’re still his wife, still wed to him.”

“But I have the annulment,” she began.

“Aye. But best not rely on it too much.” He gave her shoulder a quick pat. “At least not yet.”

“It’s as if he thinks I am in a rush to wed again,” she told Hans later, her head resting against his chest. She snorted. “I’m not even sure I want to wed again.”

“Mmm.”

She lifted herself up on an elbow. “You disagree?”

“I want nothing more than a woman to call my own, a home that is mine.” He tweaked her cheek. “You are that woman, Lettie Graham, whether you are wed to me or not.”

Her eyesight blurred. “Just as you are my man, Hans Muller.”

“Even if I have nothing to my name?”

She laughed. “Even then.”

“Are you staying much longer?” Lettie asked Sarah a morning later. She’d been hoping for a walk alone, but her aunt had hastily decided to join her and was now marching beside her with her features set in a grim mask.

“Nay. We return home the day after tomorrow.” Sarah cast Lettie a look. “With Esther.”

Lettie stopped. “What?”

“I want her back home with me!”

“She is a married woman, Sarah. Her place is with her husband.”

“A husband who sleepwalks!” She drew in a breath. “I do not like it. Just as I do not like that he is French and will steal her from us. And—”

“She loves him,” Lettie interrupted, even if she had to smile a bit at the notion that such a young woman truly knew what love was. She knew, but she was decades older than Esther. On the other hand ... She studied Sarah, who after thirty years remained as besotted with Michael as she’d been when she’d first brought him home.

“Pah! Love is for fools,” Sarah said.

“I think that’s why you do not like him,” Lettie said. “You do not like how she looks at him as if he is the answer to every dream she’s ever had.”

“He could hurt her. Crush her heart.”

“Have you not seen how he looks at her?” Lettie asked.

From Sarah came an unintelligible mutter.

“To Antoine, Esther is the sun,” Lettie said. “She enters a room, and he immediately turns towards her, and I do not think he is even aware of doing so.” Hans had commented on that some days ago, saying it was unfair that Antoine could so openly show his adoration of his woman while he could not. Lettie couldn’t quite contain the bubble of joy that rose through her. She grinned.

“What are you grinning about?” Sarah asked.

“Nothing.” She was adored; she was loved. She slipped her arm into Sarah’s. “Esther will not go with you. And you will never force her because you know just how it feels to have found the person you were destined for.”

“Hmph!”

They walked in silence for a while. “Was it like that for you with Aaron?” Sarah asked.

Lettie gazed up at the sky. “It was.” It struck her then that she was one of the truly fortunate. She’d been loved by Aaron. She was loved by Hans. And it if hadn’t been for Emrick, she’d never have met Hans. “Sometimes, I believe God has a plan for all of us,” she said. “And God’s plan for Esther includes Antoine.” Just like hers included Hans. And Emrick—although she wasn’t quite sure why God had found it necessary to put her through those years of hell.

“Perhaps.” Sarah sighed. “She’s my youngest, and I do not quite want to come to terms with the notion that she needs others more than me.”

“Mmm.” She slid Sarah a look. “A child always needs its mother.”

She had not meant it as a barb, but to judge from how Sarah stiffened, she’d taken it as one.

“He most definitely does not need me,” she snapped. “And I do not want him to because I have nothing to give to him. Nothing!”

“I was talking of Esther,” Lettie said. It was too late for any true reconciliation between Duncan and his birth mother. Truth be, she was impressed by how well he’d handled having Sarah staying at his house, although now that she thought about it, he’d effectively avoided being anywhere close to Sarah on his own. And whenever he had been in the same room with Sarah, Erin had been there to act the bulwark.

The rest of the walk was conducted in silence. They turned up the narrow path that led back through the orchards towards the house, and already from here Lettie could hear the twins, their loud, happy voices carrying towards them.

“Will you be returning home with us?” Sarah asked suddenly.

“Me?” She smiled at how Sandy was trying to catch one of the kittens. “I am home.”

“Here?” Sarah shook her head. “This isn’t your family.”

“Aye, it is.” Her gaze drifted over to the tall, fair man presently loading logs on a cart.

From Sarah came a loud snort. “That man most definitely is not! He’s—”

“Everything I want,” Lettie cut in. “Just like Michael was everything you wanted, this despite him being the nephew of the men who raped you and fathered the son you’ve never forgiven for even existing.”

A rather nice put-down, she thought as she walked off, leaving a stunned Sarah behind.

They all accompanied Sarah and Michael to Chester. Not that there was much point, as Sarah was oblivious to all but her daughter, talking intently with her all the way there. Erin felt a flare of anger on behalf of her husband. Several weeks staying with them, and not once had Sarah even attempted to talk to Duncan. Okay, he’d not tried either, but it was Sarah who’d thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

“I do not care,” Duncan said with a little smile, when she shared all this with him in an undertone. “Not anymore,” he added, his gaze darting over to where Sarah and Esther were riding so closely together they might just as well have shared a horse. “Besides, she did thank me for my hospitality.” He winked.

She muffled a snort of laughter. After all, expressing that the stay had not been unbearable and the board was good was not exactly sounding grateful.

“She’s your—”

“Nay, she is not,” he said. “She is the unfortunate victim of vile abuse who never, ever wanted the child she was obliged to carry under her angry, grieving heart for nine months.”

She gaped at him.

He shrugged. “In your time, women can be spared that experience.”

“Not everywhere,” she said, but he waved her silent.

“Here, she had no choice. Do I miss not having a mother? Aye, I do. Do I wish I’d grown up surrounded by all my

Graham relatives? At times. But then I think of my father, of how much Simon Melville loved and cared for me, and I think I was luckier than most. Aye, I had only one parent—and an adoptive one at that—but he would have gone to the ends of the earth and back again for me.” He gave her one of his blinding smiles, his dark blue eyes glittering in the weak November sun. “And then I found you.”

“Hmm. Found me? It was the other way around, wasn’t it?”

“True. You found me, sprawled and injured by the roadside and so confused, so fearful.”

“Yeah.” Falling through time did that to you.

He held in his horse; she followed suit. “I know there are days when you desperately wish yourself back in your time.” He leaned over and stroked her cheek. “There are days when I wish none of what propelled us out of your time to mine had ever happened. But what I never wish is that I had not met you. Not a day goes by when I do not thank fate for putting you in my way. Before I met you, life was bleached of colour. With you, every day stands new and vibrant, and I hope to experience a long, long sequence of such days with you.” He gave her a crooked smile. “Preferably with less excitement than of late.” He clucked his horse back into a walk. “Coming, honey?”

She caught up with him and extended her hand. He took it, gripping it hard.

“You and me,” she said.

“Always, honey, always.”

Erin kept her distance as Sarah and Michael took farewell of their daughter. She’d already exchanged a hug with Michael, a somewhat stilted handshake with Sarah, and as to Duncan, he’d spent several minutes in discussion with Michael, both of them brushing heavy locks of hair off their forehead at regular intervals. Duncan merely gave Sarah a nod before stepping aside to allow Esther one final long hug.

The sloop cast off, and Sarah and Michael stood at the railing, waving until the ship carried them out of sight.

“I might never see them again,” Esther said, wiping at her tears.

“Life is long, *mon ange*,” Antoine said. “Who knows, we may return as colonists.”

“About as likely as me sprouting wings,” Erin muttered to Duncan. “He’d hate being stuck in the wilds somewhere.”

“As would she.” He chuckled. “One of the reasons she finds Antoine so intriguing is that he offers her glimpses into another world.”

“Hmm. When are they planning to leave?”

“Antoine is obliged to stay over the trial, so likely not until spring. He is as yet undecided: Should he return home to confront his father, or should he go elsewhere?”

“Elsewhere?”

“There is always Quebec,” Duncan said. “But he yearns for home. It is just that he worries Felix will find him easier there.”

“Sheesh! *If* he returns. We don’t know that he ever will, and yet he’s going to hover over us like a threatening cloud all our lives. Too bad he isn’t dead!”

“Aye.” He settled his gaze on Esther. “That is most unfortunate.”

As if feeling the weight of their stares, Esther turned their way.

“Had she not been there ...” Duncan muttered.

“I know.”

“Ah, Duncan! Just the man I wanted to see.” Lloyd came trotting towards them. As always, in black, as always, with impeccable linen. “Edward Farrell arrived last night—with a lawyer. The trial starts in three days.”

“Three?” Suddenly, time felt too short. Only three days until she had to face him again, only three days until a full courtroom would hear the details of what he’d done to her, how he’d almost ...

“Erin? Honey?” A firm grip on her shoulders and there was Duncan, his eyes so very, very close. She could drown in them, disappear forever into their blue depths and ... “Breathe,” Duncan said firmly. “Breathe with me, honey.”

One. She didn’t want to see Farrell ever again. Two. But she had to. Three breaths. He deserved this. Four. It wasn’t her shame, it was his. Five. Only his. Six breaths. She straightened up.

“I’m okay.” She even managed a smile.

“There is no shame for thee in all this,” Lloyd said, patting her forearm. “He is the beast. Thou art the victim, and it is only right that thy suffering leads to his punishment.”

“And will he? Be punished?”

Lloyd gave her a grim look. “Oh yes. That I promise thee.”

They'd argued.

"I have to attend," she'd tried.

"Nay, that you do not." He'd glowered at her while adjusting his cravat. Duncan Melville was pulling out all the stops, resplendent in dark blue coat and breeches, a soberly embroidered waistcoat in various shades of blue and grey and his best shirt. "I can speak for you."

"In itself a bloody humiliation," she'd snapped back, which was when he'd reluctantly agreed to her coming along.

So here they were, facing the Chester courthouse. Erin adjusted her hat under Duncan's beady look and put on her gloves. A compromise, he'd called it, saying that if she was to attend, she would do so in such a way as to draw as little attention to her as possible.

"You're making me invisible," she told him. "Are you that ashamed of me?"

He flinched as if she'd slapped him, but at present she was too hurt to do more than register it. This was definitely one of those days when she desperately wished she was still in 2016, a person with equal rights no matter her gender or race. A relatively recent development, she grumbled to herself, it was only during the latter part of the twentieth century that things had begun changing for the good—at least for people of colour.

But today it was a cold November day in Chester, Pennsylvania, and the year 1718 was slowly drawing to its close. She could paraphrase Queen Elizabeth II—not that she even existed yet—and call this an “annus horribilis.” For both of them, she reminded herself, taking a step closer to Duncan. Not much of an apology for her previous comment, but he seemed to take it as one, tucking her hand under his arm.

They entered, followed by Jasper. Hans, Tim and Antoine were already seated, ready to present their testimony. A serious group of men nodded a greeting to Duncan, some of them also making the effort to dip their head in her direction. She responded with a little curtsy, which had David Lloyd smiling.

An older man in black was seated some rows down. A magnificent, if very outdated, wig adorned his head, but rather than enhance his appearance, the mane of glossy black hair underlined his age.

“Edward Farrell,” Duncan murmured.

Now that she was closer to him, she could see some resemblance to Nicholas Farrell, principally round the eyes and nose. And when he pressed his lips together, looking as if he’d bitten into something really, really sour, he was uncomfortably similar to his son. Her fingers tightened on Duncan’s sleeve. He covered her hand with his.

“Dress up a monkey, it is still a monkey,” Edward Farrell sneered, making no attempt to keep his voice down.

“Well, you would know,” someone drawled from behind them. “That’s what you’ve been doing with Nicholas all these years, isn’t it?” James Jones came strolling down the central aisle. “Erin.” He bowed over her free hand. “What a pleasure it is to meet you again—and how relieved we all are you’ve emerged from your terrible ordeals.”

Edward Farrell had gone the colour of a boiled ham.

“Come.” Duncan steered Erin towards the other side, James flanking her.

“Thank you,” Duncan said, sounding choked.

“Brothers, Duncan, brothers.” James winked. “Well, if we’re going to be correct, you’re my aging uncle.” He grew serious. “Farrell’s lawyer is a nasty piece of work.” He turned to Erin. “I gather you are not requested to give your testimony.”

“More like not allowed to,” she said, making Duncan sigh.

“Better that way,” James said. “Sydney Reynolds is a shark.”

Said shark entered a few moments later, side by side with Nicholas Farrell.

It was unfortunate, at least in Erin’s opinion, that Farrell too had opted for dark blue. But where Duncan carried his clothes with elegance and grace, these last few weeks incarcerated somewhere had left Farrell looking grey around the edges, his eyes red-shot as he lumbered into the large room.

He walked straight past them and slumped down in a chair, leaning back so that it balanced on only two legs. It creaked under his weight.

“This,” he said loudly, glaring at Lloyd, “is a farce.”

“Not to us,” Lloyd replied calmly.

“It is not me who should be sitting here accused! It is him!” Nicholas swivelled to point at Duncan. “He abducted me!”

“Hear, hear,” Edward Farrell said, but it was one lonely voice in the surprisingly full courtroom.

“You attempted to flee the long arm of justice,” Duncan said, brushing at his coat skirts. “What were we to do? Allow your crimes to be unpunished?”

“Crime?” Reynolds said, his voice uncomfortably high. “And pray, just what are his crimes?”

“We will come to that shortly,” Lloyd said. He stood, cleared his throat and read out the charges: abduction, grave assault and intent to sell a free person into slavery.

“Pfff!” Reynolds said, still in that falsetto. “And do you expect us to take the word of a coloured woman over that of a respectable white gentleman?”

“I do,” Lloyd said. “Erin Melville is far more respectable than Nicholas Farrell, no matter that she is a free person of colour. But,” he continued, raising his voice to drown out Reynolds’ bleated protests, “this court will not hear from Erin Melville. It will hear from numerous witnesses—and Mr Farrell’s accomplice, Captain Martin Hayes.”

Nicholas’ chair landed on all four legs with a loud thud. “Hayes? What has that traitorous bastard said?”

“In due course, gentlemen,” Lloyd said. “But first, allow me to describe the events to the judge and jury.” He bowed slightly in the direction of the silent men sitting somewhat to the side. Erin had spoken to one or two of them before, recognised a further three from her walks around Chester. To judge from the simplicity of their clothing, the majority were Quakers. The judge she’d never seen before, a man of Lloyd’s age with a long narrow face framed by a wig.

Lloyd was interrupted frequently by Reynolds, the squeaky-voiced elephant of a man not missing one occasion to add a slur about coloured wenches.

“Mr Reynolds,” the judge said, interrupting the lawyer halfway through an insulting monologue about the relative value of white men versus coloured women, “hold your tongue.”

Unfortunately, Reynolds was disinclined to do so. But where Reynolds grew increasingly more agitated, Lloyd remained calm and controlled.

“... and there you have it,” Lloyd finished.

“Fabricated nonsense!” Reynolds exclaimed.

“Enough!” the judge snapped. “Do not strain my patience further, Mr Reynold.”

“I call my first witness,” Lloyd said calmly, and Hans Muller rose.

“What?” Reynolds said. “Are we to hear from a purported murderer?”

“Careful, Mr Reynolds,” the judge said. “Calumny can cost you. In fact, it already has, repeatedly, if I recall correctly.”

Reynolds went a bright red. “I am merely referring to the fact that recently Mr Muller was accused of killing a certain Mr Ellis.”

“Ah, yes. No proof, just the malicious accusations of two gentlemen who trespassed onto Duncan Melville’s lands and found themselves chased off by dogs.”

“But Ellis is missing,” Reynolds said.

“True. But Hans Muller has an alibi. Mayhap thou art not familiar with the concept?” Lloyd asked.

Reynolds bristled. “He has the alibi offered by a woman—a coloured woman.”

“Tsk, tsk. In this colony, her word carries weight. Besides, it is not only her word. Plus, there is no body.” The judge frowned, directing himself to the jury. “Apologies for this. We are not here to discuss one Emrick Ellis—well, except for the fact that he too is a witness and has signed a detailed description of events.” He approached the jurors with a document.

“That doesn’t count! He’s not here,” Reynolds said.

“But Hans Muller is.”

Hans was finally allowed to speak, his dark voice describing Ellis’ visit and how midway through Julie had come running. Erin zoned out. She didn’t need to listen to Hans to remember every detail of that day. That panicked run up towards the gates, the chill that struck her when she saw Farrell holding her little Sandy, the ... A firm squeeze to her thigh recalled her to the here and now.

Reynolds tried. Like an enervating terrier, he tried to lure Hans into inconsistencies, but their German friend was a rock, calmly repeating his story over and over again.

Then came Tim.

Reynolds perked up, narrow lips widening into a grin.

She shouldn't have come. Erin suppressed the desire to cover her ears so as not to hear Tim's explicit account. His voice shook. At one point, Lloyd offered him a handkerchief to wipe his eyes, but he soldiered on, looking firmly at Farrell the entire time. From the other side of the aisle came an, "Oh God," and there was Edward Farrell, hiding his face in his hands. Other than that, the room was so silent one could have heard a pin drop.

At long last, Tim was done.

Reynolds stood, shaking out the tails of his coat. "Let's go over all that again, shall we?" he said before submitting Tim to a barrage of questions while successively getting closer and closer so that he loomed over the boy.

"Compared to Hyland Nelson with a whip, Reynolds is as intimidating as a white rabbit," Duncan murmured in Erin's ear.

In fact, the louder and more aggressive Reynolds became, the firmer and calmer Tim's replies were. Aye, it was Farrell who'd carried off Mistress Melville. Yes, he'd seen her push herself off the horse. And yes, just like he'd already told the gentlemen of the court, Farrell had kicked her repeatedly, had punched her and used his belt on her. Reynolds blustered. Tim spoke clearly, not once backing off from his original testimony.

"Enough," the judge finally said. "You've badgered the boy long enough, Reynolds."

Antoine was next. Erin concentrated on her gloves, not listening as he described her injuries once they'd found her aboard the *Green Lady*. "I am sad to say I am not surprised," Antoine finished. "When I first met Mr Farrell in Annapolis earlier this year, it was evident he had evil intents against the Melvilles."

Reynolds leapt to his feet, protesting.

The judge gave him a disapproving look and asked Lloyd to call his next witness.

Captain Hayes was a shadow of a man. His clothes hung off him, and what had until recently been a forceful person had shrunk into a man resigned to his fate. But he had no intention of hanging alone, and it was his very detailed testimony that drove the final nails into Farrell's coffin.

"I've even got a contract," he ended by saying, nodding at Lloyd. "The chief justice has it now."

Nicholas Farrell looked about to faint, his big hands clenching and unclenching.

"A contract?" Reynolds scoffed. "What sort of fools do you take us for? Nicholas Farrell would never sign a deed confirming his crimes."

"He would if he thought he'd get away with it," Hayes replied. "And it's not just one contract. I have quite a few, as Farrell here has done this before." He looked directly at Erin. "Not quite as brutally as he did it to Mistress Melville, but aye, there have been other women that have been carried off to slavery down in the West Indies."

It started as a whisper and grew into a growl of outrage, the spectators standing up and demanding names, details. Hayes pressed himself against the wall and stared, holding his hands up in supplication. "It was business, nothing more. And none of them were white. Some were likely slaves he stole."

"But some were not," Lloyd said, looking at Hayes as he would at a cockroach.

"No," Hayes admitted. "Some were most loud in their protests that they were free."

Lloyd held up a sheaf of papers. "Hayes kept the contracts. Likely, he hoped they would come in useful at some point, mayhap to extort Nicholas Farrell?"

"Did you know?" Erin whispered to Duncan.

"I knew there were several contract," he whispered back, "but that there were many?" He shook his head. "They used

them to transfer ownership, make it as if Hayes had actually purchased the women he then sold.”

Ownership? She gripped his forearm so hard he winced. So damned close! If Duncan hadn't found her, she'd have been reduced to chattel, to ... And only now, hearing the terms *contract* and *ownership*, did she realise just what a narrow escape she'd had. Bile filled her mouth, and tears leaked from her eyes. “Shh,” Duncan soothed in an undertone. “It didn't happen, honey.”

She leaned against him, finding comfort in his warmth and smell. He was right: it hadn't happened. Not to her, at least.

“We will of course attempt to locate the families of these other unfortunate others,” Lloyd said. “Likely, there will be demands of restitution.” This he said while staring straight at Edward Farrell, who stood, his chair scraping against the floor.

“I wash my hands of you,” he said loudly. “I should have done it much, much sooner.”

“Father!” Nicholas Farrell stood. “No, Father, no! They'll hang me if you leave!”

“Fool!” Edward Farrell said. “They'll hang you anyway. And you deserve it.”

“Father!” Nicholas wailed, but Edward Farrell was already leaving, a lonely old man who shrank with every step he took towards the door.

Five days later, Nicholas Farrell and Arnold Hayes were to hang.

This time, Duncan had refused to be budged, saying that under no circumstance was Erin to accompany him. Given how quickly she acquiesced—well, relatively speaking—he suspected she had no real desire to see Farrell die.

Hangings were rare events in Chester. After all, the Friends were of the firm opinion that fines were a much better deterrent unless the crimes were very serious. Floggings were also rare, but according to Stevens most of the town had

witnessed when Benson, the bosun, had been flogged some days ago before being sold into indentureship for five years. It was Duncan's opinion he too should have hanged, but the jurors had concluded his limited participation did not merit such punishment.

"My grandfather hanged for similar crimes," James mused as they stood waiting for the condemned men to be led forth.

"Ah," Duncan said, seeing no reason to tell James he already knew: anyone descended from Matthew Graham knew just how vile Dominic Jones had been.

"Except ..." James broke off to bite into a pasty. "His victims were white, mostly lads."

"Mmm." One Jacob Graham had narrowly escaped that particular fate.

"We forget that, you know," James continued.

"Forget what?"

"That in some places, it is white man who slaves, brown men who own them." James stuffed the rest of his pasty into his mouth and chewed industriously. "Not here, obviously."

"Nay, not here."

Arnold Hayes was led out first. No bluster, no begging. With surprising dignity, he marched up to the gallows, accompanied by a minister.

He remained still as the noose was placed around his neck, even managed to remain still as he was hoisted upwards. But then his composure broke, and it was a struggling, desperate man who twirled in the rope before his life expired.

James looked a tad pale.

Next came Farrell.

Duncan had it from the guards that Farrell was still expecting his father to pull weight. And it was a strutting man who emerged from the house where he'd spent his last night, fussing with his cravat, his cuffs. He came to a halt, rose on

his toes and scanned the crowd. The guards shoved him forward a couple of steps. Farrell repeated the process.

“He’ll be here,” he said loudly. “You just wait. Edward Farrell will never allow his son to hang.”

“Pfff,” James muttered. “I’d hazard Edward Farrell is presently drowning his sorrows very far from here.”

Nicholas Farrell was tugged forward. “Take your hands off me!” He shook free, straightened the embroidered skirts of his coat and took a further few steps forward. His gaze alighted on James, on Duncan.

“Come to gloat?” he demanded. “If so, you will be sorely disappointed. Father will not let Quaker rabble hang his eldest son.”

There was a rumble among the assembled people. Nicholas Farrell took a step back and licked his lips. Yet again, he rose on his toes.

“Father?” he yelled.

No response.

“Father?” His voice rose so high it cracked. “Father!” he bellowed.

“It is time,” the older guard said, taking hold of Nicholas Farrell’s arm.

“There’s been a mistake! You cannot do this, my father will not allow it!” Farrell fought like an enraged bull, throwing himself this way and that in a futile attempt to free himself.

“Damnation,” Duncan muttered, incapable of averting his gaze from the spectacle. To his surprise, he did not want to watch this, shuddering as that huge mountain of a man was hauled up to the gallows, still screaming for his father.

Once up on the platform, Farrell froze, staring at the lifeless bundle that until recently had been Hayes. The hanged man swung slightly in the breeze, his face a dark, blotchy red, his tongue protruding from his mouth. Even from where he was standing, Duncan could see Farrell’s eyes widen.

“No, no, no!” He heaved himself backwards. A big man was Farrell, and heavy with it. The hold of one of the guards slipped. Farrell tore free, swung at the other, but more men came running, and a howling, begging Farrell was dragged towards the noose.

“It is not quite as satisfying as I expected,” James commented as the struggling Farrell wept, crying for his father.

“Nay.” Watching a terrified man reduced to a bawling beast was disconcerting, no matter how big a bastard he was. “I thought he’d show more courage.”

“Him? He’s never shown courage, always picking on those weaker than him. Why change the habit of a lifetime upon death’s door?”

The noose was now in place.

Four sturdy men hauled, and Nicholas Farrell jerked and kicked. His eyes bulged. He squirmed like a hooked worm, his mouth wide-open in an attempt to suck in air.

He gargled, the sound loud in the silence that had fallen. He twisted and spun, his face darkening by the second.

His legs kicked.

He soiled himself—everyone did—and then he died.

“Not one single Farrell in attendance,” James said afterwards, leading the way to the closest inn. “One would have thought someone would have the decency to accompany him during his last hours alive.”

“Did someone accompany your grandfather?”

“Well, Grandma Kate was there—likely to gloat.” James smiled fondly, as did Duncan. Kate Jones had been an impressive woman who’d deserved more from life than an overbearing bully of a husband with a fondness for whores.

“His mistress was there as well.” James frowned down at his beer. “They say that he died well, his gaze locked on her and only on her.” He shrugged. “Maybe he loved her.”

“I did not think Jones men loved,” Duncan said, nudging him with an elbow. “You’re all rather fond of long evenings at Mrs Malone’s.”

James smiled. “Not all of us, Duncan. Not all.” He leaned closer. “She’s with child, my Charlotte.”

“Congratulations,” Duncan said. “I dare say your father will be pleased.”

“Yes.” James took a couple of deep swallows. “Jeremy, however ...” He shook his head. “He is most unhappy with Frances.” He cleared his throat. “Fortunate, then, that he can drown his sorrows with the fair wenches at Mrs Malone’s, hey?”

“If he spent more time with her—”

“She’s a shrew,” James said. “The only one who finds her tolerable is dear stepmama Iris—and we both know why that is.”

“Because she’s as much of a shrew,” Duncan said, nodding. He grinned. “Do you recall the time when we filled her bed with frogs?”

James burst out laughing. “I do. What I mostly recall is how Grandma Kate struggled not to laugh as she told us off.”

Much later, they retired upstairs to the room they were to share.

“Did you mean it?” Duncan asked, pummelling the pillow into shape.

“Mean what?” James said through a yawn.

“That we’re like brothers.”

James sat up and blinked at him. “You’re not going to go all maudlin on me and weep, are you?”

“No.”

“Good.” He lay back down. “Of course I meant it,” he said a couple of heartbeats later.

Duncan smiled into the dark. “Friends are the family we choose for ourselves,” he murmured.

“Eh?”

“Nothing.” He yawned. “Stop your prattling and sleep.”

It was as if a heavy cloud had lifted. Erin hummed under her breath as she inspected lengths of wood for her next project, doing the odd dance step or two as she moved about her work shed.

“Haven’t seen you do that in weeks,” Duncan said from the doorway. His gaze slid slowly from her face to her feet and back up again. “Nor have you been singing much.” He grinned. “Not necessarily a bad thing.”

“Duncan!”

“Honey, you have many, many skills, but singing is just not one of them.”

“Which is why I hum,” she said with a sniff.

“What’s all this for?” He joined her by the bench.

“Joists,” she said. “I was thinking a wooden deck that would run all along the house on the side facing the river.”

“Mmm.”

“You don’t like the idea?”

“I do not think we will be able to stay here long enough to enjoy it,” he said, hopping up to sit on her bench.

“So I shouldn’t do it?” She heaved herself up beside him, swinging her legs.

“That is up to you.”

“So where do we go?” she asked, hating the quaver in her voice.

In reply, he produced two thick folded paper squares from inside his coat. One of them he’d already read, the seal cracked. The other he handed to her.

“From Arabella!” she said. She lifted the letter and sniffed, smiling at the faint fragrance of roses and lavender. Arabella always added a drop or two of her perfume to her missives.

“And from David.” He unfolded his uncle’s letter. “He says we are more than welcome to stay with them in London —”

“Ugh. No offense, but staying under the same roof as Flora is no walk in the park.”

“She mellowed towards you in the end.”

“Yeah, because she believed I’d helped save David up there in the Highlands.”

“You did.”

“No, Duncan.” She leaned towards him, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You did. You almost died saving his sorry ass.”

“I dare say he’s quite fond of his arse,” Duncan said, settling her on his lap.

“Of course he is. The man’s dishy—and he knows it.”

“Dishy?” He nibbled his way up her throat.

“Yeah. Like he probably has no problem whatsoever finding willing female companions.”

He bit her earlobe, licking away the responding sting before kissing that sensitive spot just behind her ear. She squirmed. “But he only wants Flora,” he said.

“Lucky for him. She doesn’t strike me as the most forgiving of wives.”

“Would you? Forgive?” he asked. Somehow, she’d ended up straddling him, skirts bunched high.

“Haven’t we had this conversation before?”

A hot, hard kiss, and she opened for him. He pulled back, licking his lips. “I do not recall.”

“Hmm.” Her turn to kiss him. “I wouldn’t.”

“Of course not.” A hand in her hair kept her very still as he nibbled, licked and kissed his way from one ear to the other, detouring all the way along her neckline. “Neither would I.”

His other hand explored up her leg. A finger brushed back and forth over her gartered stocking before his warm palm skimmed its way upwards. A gentle tug on her curls and she gasped. He pounced, a deep, open-mouthed kiss that just went on and on until she was grinding herself against him.

He guided her hands to his fastenings. She fumbled. He groaned out loud when she accidentally pressed the heel of her hand against his erection. Some more determined efforts and he rose free—for an instant—before she took him deep inside.

They rocked. Gently at first. She couldn’t quite find her rhythm, perched on top of him. Neither could he, suddenly gripping her hard and turning them around so that she sat on the bench, thighs spread, him between them.

“Better,” he murmured against her lips. “Much, much better.”

Afterwards, he disappeared outside, returning with a damp handkerchief for her. He insisted on cleaning her, setting his big hand for an instant on her belly. As yet, she wasn’t showing—beyond the slight curve that only he or she ever saw. He stooped and kissed her skin just above her belly button.

“So London?” he asked as he straightened up.

“Or Edinburgh.” She broke the seal on Arabella’s letter. After a less than auspicious beginning, Erin and Arabella Stirling had become firm friends. The independent Scottish widow was now a regular correspondent, her letters full of anecdotes involving both her and her paramour—Arabella’s term, not Duncan’s—Nathaniel Williams. Someone less of a paramour than the staunch, somewhat dour constable was hard to imagine, but sometimes opposites did attract, and in

Nathaniel Arabella had just the man she needed to keep her grasping, greedy former brother-in-law at bay.

“Oh. My. God.” Erin sank down to sit, her eyes scanning the neat handwriting. She glanced up at Duncan. “That brother-in-law, Gustavus—what an asshole!” She handed him the letter.

“Well, well,” he said. “She should have been more circumspect.”

“It’s her house. And what right does he have to shout to the world that she’s having an affair?”

“The right of every greedy man who suffers under the controlling thumb of a far more intelligent woman,” he said, laughing at her glower. “I like Arabella. I do not much like Gustavus, and this ... Imagine the scandal,” he said drily. “The good people of Edinburgh were likely most upset when they found out an upstanding widow was cavorting with an equally upstanding constable.”

He met her eyes. She chortled. “In his case, it’s sort of a prerequisite that he is upstanding.”

“Aye. I dare say Gustavus regrets his actions,” he said, having finished the letter. “China is very far from home.”

“She’s not exiled him there permanently. It’s just a business trip.”

“Eight, mayhap even ten or twelve months away from home. And who knows just what evils may befall him along the way?”

“She wouldn’t!”

“No? I think Widow Stirling is a very, very dangerous woman to rile.”

She went back to her lengths of wood. He reclined on a stool, waiting patiently.

Dusk fell. Duncan rose and stretched languidly, resembling a giant cat.

Hand in hand, they made for the main house. “Whether London or Edinburgh, they’ll still stare at you,” he said.

“Yeah. But there, they gawk because they’ve never seen someone like me. Here, they gawk because they’re horrified someone like me is married to you, a white man. Here, I am a woman who doesn’t know her place, way, way down the pecking order due to the colour of my skin. There, they’ll think I look different but won’t necessarily conclude I am cheap trash.” She shrugged. “I sort of prefer that.”

“You’re not trash!” he said.

“I know that. So do you and the people who know me. But to the vast majority of white people in these colonies, I will never be anything more than an uppity coloured woman.” She grimaced. “And it’s not about to change, not for centuries.”

He didn’t reply—after all, what could he say? But his grip on her hand told her that wherever she went, there went he. That would have to be enough.

They were almost at the house when an excited Jasper came loping. “He’s dead! Dead!”

“Who?”

“That rascal Blackbeard.” He made a few sweeping movements with his arm. “I vow, I wish I’d been on the frigate that caught up with him.”

“You get seasick on the open ocean,” Duncan said drily.

“Hmph!” Jasper said before hurrying off to share his news with the other members of the household.

“Truly?” Lettie had her hands to her cheeks. “Really?”

“I need someone to manage Papegoja Plantation,” Duncan said. “You’d excel at it. Especially with Hans at your side.”

His cousin’s face went a bright red.

“And I am releasing him from his contract,” Duncan continued, “I thought—”

“Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you!” Lettie peppered him with kisses.

“Kissing cousins, hey?” Erin said as she entered the study, and Lettie took a startled leap backwards, almost crashing into one of the chairs. “I was kidding.” Erin rolled her eyes.

“I was merely expressing my gratitude,” Lettie said with a little huff.

“You think Hans will approve?” Erin grinned. “You know, of you being his boss?”

Lettie laughed. “It is my informed opinion that all successful marriages have a woman in charge.” She blushed. “Aye, I know we cannot wed—at least not yet—but we’ve made our vows to each other.”

Duncan wagged a finger. “Mrs Andersson will not like it if you bed without being wed.”

“Mrs Andersson will never find out,” Lettie replied. “Besides, we have Tim as our chaperone.”

“Tim?” Duncan asked.

“He’s staying with us,” Lettie said firmly. “He’s found a home here, and God alone knows that lad deserves some stability.”

“He’ll be happier here than in London,” Erin said.

“Aye. And as of tomorrow, I am releasing him as well from his contract.” Duncan shook his head. “Mere babes should not be indentured.”

“Well, that’s one issue sorted,” Erin said once Lettie had danced—aye, danced!—off to share her news with Hans.

“Hmm.” He frowned. “They must tread carefully, those two. It would not do if it became common knowledge that he shares her bed.”

“Oh my God!” Erin gasped, fluttering her eyelashes. “He does?”

He just shook his head at her antics.

“Fornication is frowned upon,” he said. “Always.”

“Not if it’s the man who does the fornication,” she retorted acidly. “Look at all those men lining up to visit the whores at, what’s her name, Mrs Murphy’s?”

“Mrs Malone,” he corrected. “And that’s different. Those women are not respectable—everyone knows that.”

“Reasonably, the men who pay for their services aren’t respectable either,” she said.

“Is that how it works in your time? The client is as vilified as the whore?”

“No.” She made a face. “Guys always get away with it.”

He had no inclination to continue this discussion; he would most definitely not want her to ask him detailed questions about his past and his ... relations with the pretty lasses who worked for Mrs Malone. So instead, he folded his arms on his desk. “Has Esther said anything yet?”

“Beyond crying her eyes out because she’s not with child?” She shook her head. “Jesus, Duncan, she’s too young to become a mother—or at least to want to become one.”

“She disagrees, I take it,” he said with a little smile.

“Her life is over. Over.”

“Ah. It is my opinion Antoine is secretly relieved.”

“Obviously. He has enough on his plate thinking about how to keep Esther safe from big bad brother Felix. Throwing a baby into the equation ...” She gnawed at her lip. “Do you think he’ll show again?”

“I think he very much wants to,” Duncan said. “But that locket is a fickle thing.” He shivered. “Very fickle.”

“I tried to tell Antoine that,” Erin said.

Aye, so had he, but their young French friend lived in a constant state of anxiety, albeit he was more than adept at presenting his wife with a serene face. “I gather he wants to go home, if nothing else to introduce Esther to his grandfather.”

He no longer had a place to call home—well, beyond the woman sitting in front of him. Come to think of it, neither did Erin, the places she'd rooted herself in lost to the vagaries of time. They had that in common: homeless, the both of them.

He cast a look out the window. The low December sun painted the red-washed stables in rosy hues, the huge denuded oak just outside his window throwing its shadow over the house. He would miss this, he reflected, and it must have shown on his face.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

He held out his hand to her. “It is not your fault, honey.” She settled in his lap, and they sat like that as the last of the daylight waned.

“We'll build a new life,” he promised her. “You, me, our children, we will find somewhere safe, somewhere to set down roots.”

“Silly man,” she murmured. “I'm okay being a nomad as long as it's with you.”

But he wasn't. Duncan Melville wanted a home, and he would do whatever it took to build one.

EPILOGUE

There were benefits to life in this time, principally that a man as ruthless as Felix Chardon found it easy to make a living, and a good one at that. France was a nation rebuilding itself on the pyres of what had first been destroyed. “*Vive la révolution!*” he had chanted with all the others who marched beside him, even if he had no interest whatsoever in the well-being of the masses.

But upheaval and turmoil led to opportunities, and the little Corsican was inflaming the hearts of his countrymen, so France was marching to war, and there was he, Felix Chardon, already a captain and likely to rise even higher through the ranks. Just how he’d acquired his present rank was neither here nor there. At times, a man had to cajole, at others, threaten.

No matter. The important thing was that he had achieved a position of trust with Bonaparte, planning to reap whatever benefits he could along the way.

Felix Chardon set a hand to the locket he still carried secreted under his shirt. In this time, Papa was long since dead, the old family home now in the hands of another family, descendants of one of their neighbours. He’d visited the old graveyard, had even placed a small token on his father’s stone, scrubbing at the moss to reveal just when he’d died. Not that long after he and Antoine had set out on their quest, and there’d been a moment when he’d reflected that maybe he should have heeded Antoine and simply stayed away until the old man expired.

Except he hadn't.

He studied his hands, clenching and unclenching them. Damn Antoine! He should be focussing on revenge—Papa would want that, no, expect it, even—but just the thought of plunging through time again had his entrails twisting with agony.

Five times, he had fallen. Five times twisted into that vice of colour and clamour, feeling as if his every bone would crack under the pressure. It had taken him weeks after his first ordeal to recover sufficiently to attempt a return, only to discover that bastard Melville—it had to be him—had effectively enclosed him in a tomb. Some more weeks of recuperation, and he'd tried again, hoping that the locket would perhaps set him down somewhere else. Sadly, it did not. Instead, he'd landed atop a very cold and very dead corpse.

There was no way out of that damned well, and he had no notion why he'd bothered to scrawl that message on the wall—it was highly unlikely anyone would ever see it. But it had felt good, giving him that spurt of ire he'd required to yet again open that accursed locket.

That last fall ... He tightened his hold on his glass. *Mon Dieu!* Those strands of magic had wrapped round him and the dead body, and there'd been a horrifying moment when he'd been pressed so tightly to the unknown dead man he'd almost suffocated. Then suddenly, the corpse had been gone while he kept on falling, the agony making him scream. He'd emerged with blisters on his hands, one of his shirtsleeves burned away and angry red burns on his neck and on his chest, the latter resembling a locket-sized brand. Worse than that had been the debilitating pain to his spine and legs, making it near on impossible to do anything but lie curled together in bed. It was fortunate he'd found the fair Annette to care for him, even more so when he'd discovered just how wealthy she was.

Felix smirked; women were simple creatures, easily misled with soft words and soulful glances. It helped, of course, to be as handsome as he was. He couldn't quite stop himself from casting a quick look at himself in one of the old mirrors that

graced the walls of the inn. *Ah, oui, très elegant.* The uniform suited him, exhibiting his long legs and broad shoulders.

One of the serving wenches gave him cow's eyes. Pretty, for sure, and most definitely willing to spread her soft thighs for a soldier—an officer, even—in the victorious army. But of late, he was disinclined to bed anyone but the fair Evangeline, Annette's much younger sister. Annette, most tragically, had plunged to her death from one of the attic windows in her house, somewhat aided in her fall by the fair Evangeline herself. Felix smiled: a woman like that, as unscrupulous as he was, as determined to get ahead—she was made for him, albeit she required some taming.

“*Chardon, venez-vous?*” someone called, and with a little sigh he downed the rest of his wine. Time to march to riches and glory. Especially riches. For now, revenge would have to wait. Truth be told, he could not think of one single reason to abandon this present, potentially so lucrative existence to teach Antoine a lesson.

He was, however, convinced that he figured extensively in his brother's nightmares. As he should do. He chuckled darkly. That in itself was some sort of revenge, he presumed. Yet again, he touched the locket, and it buzzed against his skin. He swallowed heavily, overcome with a desire to void his guts. There were days when he was overcome with a compulsion to rid himself of it, throw it into a dung heap and walk away. But he couldn't do it. After all, the locket was his birthright.

Outside, his men began to sing. He hummed along, adding his voice to theirs as he stepped outside: “*Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes ...*” A rather perfect hymn for a nation born out of blood and eager to trample the old-world order underfoot.

Felix Chardon smiled. His kind of nation.

Even Papa would approve because, as he'd taught Felix from a very, very young age, nothing gave a strong and determined man better opportunities to enrich himself at the expense of others than bloody conflict.

* * *

Duncan And Erin will be back. And as to Felix, well, who knows when he next shows up?

HISTORICAL NOTE

It is time to come clean: Erin and Duncan ended up in Pennsylvania because I was so thrilled to find a colony without anti-miscegenation laws, thinking this would be something for a safe harbour for my couple. Unfortunately, while Pennsylvania did not have such laws during the first two decades in the 18th century, by 1725-26, the colony had implemented them. There went any hope of allowing Erin and Duncan to remain in Pennsylvania ...

So, what were anti-miscegenation laws? Already in the 17th century, Maryland and Virginia implemented laws that forbade marriage and/or sexual relations between white people and black or coloured people. Well, bar the white slaveowner forcing himself on his slaves. The consequences were dire: take the example of Nell butler, a young Irish woman who fell in love with a black slave. They wed and she immediately became enslaved, and all their children were born as slaves. A white man who cohabited with a free woman of colour could find himself forced into indentureship together with her. If they wed, they both ended up enslaved. All of this is of course a consequence of racially-defined slavery: recognising people of colour as acceptable marriage partners to white people would potentially lead to uncomfortable questions about the morality of enslaving a person solely based on the colour of their skin. Laws such as these would survive well into the twentieth century.

In general, Pennsylvania was never as dependent on slave labour as some of the other colonies—with the exception of

the three Lower Counties, i.e. Delaware, where slavery was well-established before the arrival of Penn. The early Quakers were hesitant to slavery. It was recommended that slaves be offered religious instruction and be freed after fourteen years. However, the realities of colonial life meant labour was scarce, and soon enough many Quakers opted for slaves rather than indentured servants. Penn himself recommended buying slaves, as that way you'd have a servant "for life". And as Duncan says to David Lloyd, Quakers also participated and made money from the slave trade itself.

Chester is the oldest city in Pennsylvania. It was founded by Swedish colonists as Uppland back in 1644, and when William Penn landed there in 1682 on his first visit to his new colony he renamed it Chester. I felt a smaller, less busy place would make for a more comfortable environment for Erin and Duncan, while Chester was large enough to have relevant trade.

I have Duncan and Erin living on the Papegoja Plantation—which does not exist, even if JP, Johan Papegoja, most definitely did. In actual fact, Johan Papegoja and his formidable wife Armegot Printz had their main residence much further south. I am rather impressed by Armegot, something of a colonial termagant who ruled her husband as firmly as the people who served her. Born in Sweden to officer Johan Printz, she arrived to New Sweden in 1643 with her father, who'd been appointed governor of the new Swedish colony. She embraced life on this new continent with open arms, but would eventually be forced to leave and return to Sweden. You can read more about this fascinating lady on my blog, <http://www.annabelfrage.com/2014/05/31/an-amazon-in-the-colonies/>

David Lloyd was born in Wales and came to Pennsylvania in 1686 at Penn's request. A capable lawyer, he served as Attorney General and designed the colony's first judicial system. Lloyd firmly believed that it was the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, not the Proprietor—i.e. William Penn—that should have the final say in how Pennsylvania was ruled. Obviously, this caused some friction in his relationship with Penn, but despite this he was appointed Chief Justice in

1718. Lloyd converted to Quakerism in 1691 and moved to Chester in 1700.

Pennsylvania allowed Catholics to settle in the colony and we know that in 1719 a catholic priest, Joseph Greaton, moved to Philadelphia. I have moved his arrival up a couple of years so as to ensure there was a priest available for Esther.

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The Castilian Pomegranate

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The Locket Series

The Whirlpools of Time

Times of Turmoil

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Had Anna been allowed to choose, she'd have become a time-traveller. As this was impossible, she became a financial professional with three absorbing interests: history, romance and writing. Anna always writes about love and has authored the acclaimed time travelling series *The Graham Saga*, set in 17th century Scotland and Maryland, as well as the equally acclaimed medieval series *The King's Greatest Enemy* which is set in 14th century England. Anna is presently hard at work with her other medieval series, The Castilian Saga ,which is set against the conquest of Wales. The third instalment, *Her Castilian Heart*, was published in 2022, and the fourth and final one will be out in 2024. She has recently released *Times of Turmoil*, a sequel to her time travel romance, *The Whirlpools of Time*.

All of Anna's books have been awarded the IndieBRAG Medallion, she has several Historical Novel Society Editor's Choices, and one of her books won the HNS Indie Award in 2015. She is also the proud recipient of various Reader's Favorite medals as well as having won various Gold, Silver and Bronze Coffee Pot Book Club awards.

“A master storyteller” “This is what all historical fiction should be like. Superb.”

Find out more about Anna, her books and enjoy her eclectic historical blog on her website, www.annabelfrage.com

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