

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

Something smelled terrible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This was unacceptable!

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

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

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

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

Even the river reflected this perversity. When Ellis had tied the small skiff to the dock, he had been forced to reach up so far he almost tumbled out of the boat. The man seemed to know no more about boats than Josiah did—less, even, since Josiah had at least learned where *not* to stand in a small river craft. And yet Ellis had professed to a lifelong expertise with boats. Either the man was a liar simply trying to avoid his work in the fields or an exceedingly slow learner.

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

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

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

continental tobacco market and bring stability and prosperity back to this tobacco-dependent society.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ah, she was so considerate!

"Perhaps December, then?"

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

"I see. We shall have to wait until...April?"

"Or May. Much as I am grieved to say it."

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

If only she would refrain from giggling with her sisters.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Freshly painted and recently enlarged, the manor house at Hill Crest plantation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you come down alone today?"

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

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

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

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

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

He sighed with this admission but felt he had regained some ground by

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

"It is hot, indeed, sir." He rang the sharp little bell again. "Confound these people. Their service grows more lax by the day. Always dreaming of their own plantations, I dare say. I've a year left in Grimble and his wife, and I'm coming to think I may get little of it." Carter waited as the door opened and the eager servant hobbled over. "I'm considering moving some of my best slaves into the house and returning the servants into the fields. I would advise you to do the same. The indenture is worth nothing near the end of its term here in the house, where the work is easy. But if they could be set to clearing a field—ah, Grimble, there you are."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grimble entered and attempted to serve two mugs of cider with inconspicuous efficiency, but the noise he made in the process made him even more obtrusive

than usual. Carter gave him a sour look as he departed, then smiled and continued his inquiries with deliberate casualness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shall we join the ladies?"

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

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

Chapter Two

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

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

But what was he going to do with them?

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

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

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

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

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

Edward stopped pacing and straightened, enjoying the stretch in his shoulders and the back of his neck. The sea air felt clean and fresh, so unlike the close, heavy atmosphere in the river at the head of the bay. He was always surprised to discover

how keenly he enjoyed returning to sea. Gradually, though, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that two seamen were following his movements quite closely. How long had they watched him pace? He wheeled around, took two quick strides, and glared into their faces.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stand at attention for Captain Talbot."

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

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

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

There was a dull pain in her stomach, and her head swam a little when she

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

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

"Damn your impudence, boy!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Caroline shivered, despite the heat. Her prepared speech, and the ability to call

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

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

"Welcome aboard the *Osprey*, men."

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

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

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

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

Chapter Three

Josiah noticed a dull thumping sound as they approached the door to the family parlor, and the source of the noise became apparent as he followed John Carter into the room. One of the sisters, Edwina perhaps, was kicking her heel dully against the scratched front leg of the bench on which she sat, absently twisting a loose strand of dark hair around her finger. A neglected sampler threatened to tumble from her lap to the floor with every kick.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was his turn to say something.

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

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

"Eleanor—Lady Davenport is quite well, thank you. She expects her husband to be assigned to a post on the Continent now that the war has ended. As I told Mr. Carter."

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

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

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

Georgiana, that was it!

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

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

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

Mrs. Carter turned a stern eye on her indecorous daughters; and Georgiana, apparently tickled beyond the power of speech, mutely pointed at something near Josiah's head. He looked up and turned around, seeing nothing but the rough plaster ceiling and walls. Had she been pointing to his head? He touched the back

and felt a leaf crunch under his fingertips. How long had he worn that in his hair? Good God—it must have wagged like the tail of a dog every time he'd turned his head!

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

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

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

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

"Well, I must tell you that our order was most dissatisfactory."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Last year the girls saw the captain of a ship at the Landing walking around with a monkey on his shoulder. Since then, they have assumed monkeys are to be

found on most ships, at least those of any importance." Carter smiled genuinely for the first time that day.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All this time, Josiah sat uncertain. Was he included in this outing? He enjoyed visits to the Landing when a ship was docked. The increased activity made the settlement

seem so much more civilized, and the ships themselves bore a rough yet graceful beauty. He wouldn't mind setting out to sea himself, he thought, were it not for the responsibilities of running his plantation. The seasickness that had kept him confined to his berth for the better part of his voyage from London last year flickered only faintly in his memory.

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

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

"Sir." The boy paused for breath.

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

"I was with Miss Caroline last night."

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

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

Edwina stirred excitedly on the bench.

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

"And something happened... I don't know what. I woke up and everyone was gone. And..."

"What, boy?"

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

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

"They say it were pirates. They say Caroline was taken by pirates!"

Chapter Four

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

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

After a few minutes of rest on the deck beneath the hammock that had been assigned to her, Caroline noticed that her stomach hurt. She wanted to eat, but the food they had given her earlier was tough, inedible and smelled as bad as everything else on the ship. She had eagerly drunk the ration of water that was offered. It seemed fresh, though the shared cup was filthy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ship rolled heavily, and something brushed against Caroline's back. Rats! Ugh! Then she felt a stream of water trickle along the deck as the pitch changed, and she hastily scrambled up and tried once again to slide into her hammock. Fortunately, the berth above hers was empty at the moment so she had room to maneuver. With relief, she found that this time she was able to stay in the middle of the hammock and could thereby avoid rolling out the other side onto the wet deck. She would be fine as long as she didn't move.

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

On his way through the fo'c'sle, John Hardey heard the crying. *It must be the boy,* he decided. *I'll let up a bit tomorrow, and the lads'll do likewise,* he promised

himself. Seamen expected a lad to grow up far too quickly. A boy needed a bit of comfort now and then until he was full grown, and he wouldn't get that at sea.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"In a while. I'll be back."

This wasn't going well at all. Josiah had the vague sense he should be outraged at this man and should demand to know immediately what had happened to Miss Carter. The innkeeper, quivering with fear and perhaps remorse, should beg his forgiveness and swear to help recover Miss Carter at all costs.

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

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

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

What did he need to learn from this questioning? The men who were in from the ship last night, the name of the ship and its homeport, whether the innkeeper had seen any questionable characters, what time he closed and if he had noticed anything unusual as the men were leaving. Had he noticed the boy servant and Miss

Carter? Why was the boy left behind? Josiah realized that, with the innkeeper's gruff attitude, he would have to keep his questioning brusque and quick to get the answers he needed.

Having taken mental inventory, he now felt better prepared.

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

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

His host said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Throckmorton, Josiah Throckmorton."

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

"Old Langley? Oh, yes, Langley's Choice. Yes, I purchased his plantation from England. And then, I, uh, moved here." This questioning was not progressing as Josiah had hoped. How did they get onto the subject of his plantation?

He'd try again. "So, Mr., uh, sir, did you notice anything unusual last night?"

"No."

"Nobody...acting strangely?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm told he returned to the inn."

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

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

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

"And did he see Caroline last night?"

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

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

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

"Did he see any boys?" Charles continued.

"I don't know."

"Well, did he notice anything unusual at closing time?"

"Nothing that seemed unusual. To him."

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

"I don't know." Josiah had forgotten to ask. "I did not see a clock in the establishment."

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

"Yes, of course."

"I'll ask him." Charles Carter turned to enter the inn, but Josiah held up his hand.

"He has gone. He had other business." He now felt very glum.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They all came here last night to see the Greek treasure that was to be shown for a shilling's worth of tobacco," another woman chimed in. She turned and picked up a boy who was rather too large to be picked up and kissed him.

"Something's happened, and we must know. Somebody told us there were pirates here last night."

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

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

His audience did not look convinced.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How many were here when you left?"

"Oh, lots of men, room full."

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

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

"I see. No one at all?"

"No one, Mr. Throckmorton."

"Thank you."

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

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

Chapter Five

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

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

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

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

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

She would have to escape.

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

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

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

Caroline twisted a piece of hair around her finger as she thought about a means of escape. She could sneak away when everyone was sleeping. She wasn't sure how long she and the other "slaves" had been asleep before their crude

introduction to the captain, but she thought it had been at least two and possibly three days. Yesterday made four. Even if they had a lot of water stored in casks, it wouldn't keep for much more than a week without starting to smell a little funny. Bread wouldn't keep much longer, either; so unless they had a bread oven on the ship, which she doubted very much, they would have to stop soon for bread and water. Then, when everyone was asleep, she would sneak upstairs and—

And what? How would she get off the ship?

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

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

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

Something grabbed her elbow.

"Dyer!"

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

"You're on watch now."

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

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

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

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

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

sailors watching her?

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

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

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

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

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

It was breathtaking.

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

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

"G'morning, Dyer."

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

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

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

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

"Aye, you're a new one, too," the other man, the "real" sailor, addressed her as she approached. She opened her mouth to reply then closed it and merely nodded her head.

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

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

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

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

Caroline broke her vow of silence. "I didn't think we were to be paid anything. I thought we were slaves."

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

"I'm Jim Dyer," she answered, trying to deepen her voice.

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

"Where's your place?" Caroline thought she overdid the gruff voice a little that time.

"Near Hunting Ridge."

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

"And you," Carpenter continued, "what have you left behind?"

"I, uh, work on the Carter plantation, Hill Crest. I'm new to it."

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

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

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

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

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

"How many of us did they take, d'ye know?" her companion asked, after a pause.

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

"D'ye know anyone else?"

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

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

Do seamen do this to each other frequently? Caroline wondered silently.

"They've kept us all apart since yesterday morning," she finally said, "so it's been hard to tell, hasn't it?" And just then she saw they were going to be separated again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Six

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

This was all happening too fast for Josiah.

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

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

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

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

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

Josiah imagined the best way to put a request to the Lords of the Admiralty

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

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

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

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

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

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

He stopped walking.

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

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

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

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

“Counsel, yes. Let’s go speak with your father and seek out those with authority to speak to the Admiralty.”

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

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

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

"I am at peace now, Mr. Throckmorton." Charles's sudden reappearance startled Josiah once again. "I'm sure we are in the right."

"Mr. Carter?"

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

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

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

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

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

Josiah looked at him incredulously.

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

Josiah still stared.

"We are proceeding just as the Lord has planned."

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

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

"We must, certainly," Charles agreed.

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

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

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

Charles eventually stood, walked over to a large framed map that decorated the south wall of the room and began studying the features of the Chesapeake Bay and

the coast of the Americas.

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

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

"Thank you, sir," Charles answered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

sun seemed so...uncivilized, and frankly, uncomfortable.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter Seven

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

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

He simply needed more.

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

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

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

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

So, which colony should he approach? Virginia was closest, of course, but the colony was so tied to England he doubted her governor would dare to break wind