

The Abernathy Trilogy

Abernathy, Abandon, America

By Kristen

Abernathy

Prologue, Part 1

June, 1770

William

A sea of people parts before our carriage, mindful of being trampled. I admit that I enjoy the annual auction for this very reason. Every street and square of Hereford is teeming with merchants and their buyers, both local and from afar, and they all must scurry out of my way. It's a simple pleasure for a man too old for greater excitement.

I drive the carriage resolutely, cutting a swath through the throng that jostles us from every side. Hereford is transformed by this annual event, from a quiet country hamlet to a bustling, boisterous (and malodorous) mess. It's simply a sight to behold, and though our official purpose for this visit is merely to purchase grains, one must allow that this is a veritably exciting event in our sleepy shire! I anticipate it every year. I know that Brian does as well, though admitting to as much would not suit his mien.

He and Arthur have been relatively quiet in the back, though I imagine it's a struggle for both. The two of them are so alike in disposition, I once jested that they must share the same mind. Brian merely laughed and replied that such a claim was surely an insult to Arthur.

Brian

It seems to take all morning for William to find a suitable place to leave the carriage, but when we finally do, Arthur and I burst forth from it as though the devil were inside. He is as eager as I am to stretch after our three-hour journey from the farm. And thus, he immediately begins to dart around the horses' legs, nipping at their forelocks and infuriating them to no end. I suppose that his past vocation in shepherding made for habits hard to forget. Soon after,

he takes off after a pair of hens, who had the ill luck to stroll too near. As the sound of his barking recedes into the distance, William and I set forth into the crowd to see what awaits us.

The market is teeming: a shouting, swirling, sweating mass of vendors and their prey. Here, the "best apples to be found in all of Herefordshire;" there, a string of rabbits "so newly killed, the fur is still warm!" Or so swear the merchants, preachers to a dubious crowd.

We make our way past poulterers and silversmiths, butchers and fish-mongers, casually perusing, though I have no intention to buy anything but oats this day. The weather is pleasant, and I am feeling strangely cheerful. Before long, we are passing the livestock pens, of such shoddy construct that hen and duck escapees are mingling with the crowd. A child chases after a wayward piglet and several onlookers erupt in laughter, cheering on the swine in his flight for freedom.

The mood is light and clear, yet amidst all this banality, I feel a peculiar charge in the atmosphere. It crackles around my senses like the air before a lightning storm, as though something momentous is about to occur.

William

"Sir," I shout above the din. "Have we not already passed the miller's stand?"

"We'll circle back afterwards" Brian returns. "I'd like to look around a bit more."

He continues forward, and I follow, aware that we are heading into the area where the human slaves are traded and sold. Brian has never once mentioned an interest in slaves, nor is it economical for a small landowner such as he to have one. Yet every year, he looks at them, and I fear the reason why.

I know what he sees in them--the potential of a very strong worker, one that could do twice the work of an aging servant such as myself. I know that Brian would never let me go, though I assume that it is more out of respect for his father than out of any real usefulness on my part. His father, the late Mr. Kinney, was a close friend to me, and as good an employer as ever existed on this earth. I've lived with the Kinneys since Brian was born, and have come to know them as my own family. After Mr. Kinney's death, I believe Brian never even considered replacing me, nor Josephine, our housekeeper. Still, every brawny, youthful farmhand I encounter makes me ever more aware of my age and inadequacy.

Brian

We come upon the slave enclosures and, like every year previous, I feign disinterest in front of William. Had he any inkling of the real reason I came to this part of the fair...! I shudder at the thought of being found out, even as I, myself, cannot admit my own reasons. How can I explain the thrill I get when I see the great Africans, giants among men, proud and noble, even as prisoners? They stand bare-armed and bare-chested, beautiful dark skin glistening in the sun, and I am awed.

But there is more than admiration or mere curiosity in me. There is something I cannot explain or comprehend. A physical excitement in the very center of me; a tingling at the sight of these beautiful men. Though I cannot even understand this feeling, I somehow know that it can never be spoken aloud.

By fortune, as a boy, I once discovered that I was not alone in this persuasion. My parents had sent me to London to be educated, and there I met another boy with whom I became instant friends. We spent all of our free time together, and the first night that he kissed me, I welcomed the experience. In the months that followed, we explored each other as archaeologists would a beckoning new landscape. I learned the many ways that a man could make pleasure with another man, and felt neither sinful nor ashamed while doing it. Yet, we maintained an unspoken understanding that these twilight meetings were to be a secret between us.

At the end of the term, we parted ways, and swore to write to each other. We managed to do so for a while (of course, making no mention of the trysts we'd shared). After a time our communication dropped off, and the next I heard from him was several years later, via his wedding announcement. I attended the ceremony, wished him happiness, and he shook my hand as any old acquaintance might. That was the last I saw of him.

At the time, I had assumed that he and I were the same. That our secret encounters had been only the meaningless acts of mischievous boys, and that I, too, would someday discover a beautiful woman, fall in love, and get married. Yet, some ten years later, this fate has not befallen me, and I must admit that the idea of marriage has not become any more welcome to me. Despite the protestations of my friends (and dear old William), I feel certain I will spend my remaining days alone.

A loud commotion jars me from my thoughts. From the agitation of the crowd, I estimate that a fight is ensuing. Naturally, the throng pushes in upon itself, everyone shuffling to see what has happened. I hear laughter suddenly from several in the crowd, and my curiosity overtakes me.

I press on into the crowd in the direction of the row, vaguely aware that I have long since lost William. Ever closer, I begin to distinguish some of the commentary from the front:

"A bull-dog, that one!"

"Have you ever seen a lamb with such teeth?"

"And such a wicked tongue; I dare say you've been put out, George!"

I come close enough to the scene to see, over the tops of a few heads, a large and very surly man (George, I would assume), huffing and puffing in an outrage, his face as red as a beet. Behind him is another, thinner man, begging George's forgiveness.

"What has transpired?" I ask of the boy in front of me.

"One of Nicholson's slaves has insulted George Parry!" he answers gleefully. "The slave is good as dead now--there's no way that Lord Parry would tolerate such an abuse without retribution! I suspect we'll see that chap hung before noontide!"

A few shoulders part ways, and I am able to fully witness the characters in question. One of Nicholson's henchmen reaches down to grab a figure off of the ground, and I am shocked to see him come up, not with an African slave, but a light-skinned, tow-headed youth. The huge iron collar around his neck leaves no question, however, as to his status. His face is entirely covered in blood, matted thick with gravel from where he was no doubt knocked to the ground. His eyes are clenched tightly to halt the blood from running into them. The guard holds him up by a fist clamped in his reddened and sticky hair.

Nicholson and Parry are negotiating amongst themselves, and a cruel smile developing on the latter's face seems to indicate that he is satisfied with their arrangement. Moments later, a crate is brought forth, and the slave is forced to his knees, his back to the cheering crowd. He is bent double over the crate, and tied down.

Seemingly out of nowhere, Nicholson produces a whip, which he passes to the gloating and boorish George Parry. My heart drops in my chest, and suddenly the air seems too dense to breathe. I feel a voice clamoring in my head, 'Stop! Stop this!' yet my tongue is paralyzed. Parry proceeds to tear the shirt off of the slave, and the shocked crowd gasps in unison. The boy's back is an intricate web of wounds and whipmarks--new and old--so many, I dare say, that there is not a finger's length of unscarred flesh to be found on him. Parry flounders,

visibly disappointed that he will not be able to leave his own significant brand for all the humiliation he has suffered today.

Fortunately, the delay has broken my paralysis, and I shout "Stop!" just as Nicholson pulls down the slave's breeches, no doubt to find for Parry some untouched patch of flesh to disfigure. Having commanded their attention, I reach into my pockets for my coin purse.

I address the weasel Nicholson first. "How much can I offer you for this slave?"

Nicholson regards me incredulously. My face must convey my earnestness, however, since he quickly becomes eager to have the troublesome boy off of his hands. "Ten pounds if you'll take him today," he says hastily. But Parry will have none of it.

"Kind sir," he condescends, "It is of no interest to me what transactions you enact after I am done here. But the fact remains that this slave has disrespected me in the grossest manner, and I will not rest until he has paid dearly for his transgression."

"How much, then, to cool your temper?" I ask, turning over more coins in my hand. "Twelve shillings to forget what has happened here? Fifteen?"

"Sir, you are mad," Parry retorts. "If you imagine that..."

"A full sovereign, then, and you can walk away a richer man." I produce the coin, mindful to have it catch the sunlight and glisten appealingly in Parry's face. I can almost see him licking his lips with delight.

Prologue, Part 2

William

I'd all but given up hope of finding Brian again, when I catch sight of his auburn hair over the top of the crowd. I am once again grateful for his exceptional height.

"Sir! Brian!" I shout, feeling every bit a helpless child. He notices me and, waving me to follow him, continues back in the direction of the carriage.

I watch him turn off the main avenue into a near-deserted alley, and I ensue. I cannot express my astonishment when, upon rounding the corner, I find him trailing along a blonde-haired slave by chain and collar!

Brian spins around to face me. "William, I beg you! Fetch a dampened cloth and some bandages, and swiftly!"

It is now that I notice the slave's face, a frightful mess of blood and Lord-knows-what-else. I turn and hurry back into the street as Brian shouts after me, "And find that damnable dog as well! We're leaving!"

I silence the part of me that begs to remind him that we never did purchase any grain, and take off into the crowd, hollering for Arthur as I go.

Brian

Now safely removed from the chaos of the market, I turn my full attention to the slave--my slave--for the first time. He stands with his back to the alley wall, head bowed and eyes still shut. The wound to his forehead--long, but not dangerously deep--seems to have slowed its spill. I raise his chin, realizing that he could not even wipe the blood from his own eyes, as his wrists are bound to his waist by rope.

I produce my handkerchief and set to work, gently swabbing under his brows, and at the blood collected around his eyes. Shortly, the lids flutter and open, and I am met with the most unnervingly beautiful blue eyes I have ever encountered. I'm rendered utterly speechless for several moments--though I know not what I would say, were I even able to talk. The slave, for his part, stares up at me passively, and I can read no emotion on his face.

William's return breaks me from my stupor, and I exhale the breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

William

"Dear God, what a fright!" I mutter, handing the dampened cloth to Brian. "What on earth has transpired to fix him in such a state?"

"I'd prefer to explain another time, William. Presently I have no thought but to leave this place."

"Certainly, sir," I reply, and begin to ready the carriage.

As I re-harness the horses, I attempt to wrap my thoughts around the situation. I remain perplexed. We have no real need for an extra worker, and certainly, if this slave was to be my replacement, Brian should have chosen much more carefully! The boy has the advantage of youth--I estimate him to be scarcely twenty years old--but he is lean, and only of average height. I suspect he'd barely outweigh old Josephine!

After more deliberation, Brian's motive now seems obvious enough to me. Ever since he was a boy, Brian's heart has always exceeded his chest. Few people saw it, but I did. He was always such a stoic, introverted youth. But he has a great and boundless humanity--manifest in subtle things. In his fairness and honesty. In his devotion to his father. And now in this--that which I can only assume to be an impulsive (but foolhardy!) act of charity. Once again, it seems as though Brian has acted from his heart, before consulting with his head.

I return to the door side of the carriage, where Brian has cut the rope from the slave's wrists and is loading his new acquisition into the cabin. I catch sight of the slave's back for the first time and gasp aloud. As soon as the boy is inside, I pull Brian aside.

"Brian..." I start, and then falter, searching desperately for the right words. I want to ask, 'Are you completely mad? What have you gotten yourself into?' though I cannot bring myself to do it.

"Sir," I try again. "I don't pretend to know why you bought this slave...nor would I ask how much you've spent to acquire him..."

"A good thing, dear William, since my answer would be that it is not your business to know." He smiles good-naturedly then, and I know I have not offended him.

"No sir. But if you'll forgive me, I must admit that I'm baffled by this choice! The boy looks healthy enough, but certainly not sufficiently strong for heavy labor. He's pale as a sheet--clearly he has seen no farm work in his life."

"William..."

"And you must have noticed the scars on his back!"

Brian blinks at this, but only briefly. "I hardly think that the scars are an issue--he seems able-bodied enough despite them."

"Sir, it's not the physical effects I'm concerned about. What does it mean for a slave to have been so abused by his master? He must have been very disobedient--perhaps even a thief!"

"William, I never knew you to be such a worrier! What do you expect to happen? We shall wake up tomorrow and find all of the silver missing?"

"Or worse! You know nothing about this boy, am I correct? What if he murders you while you sleep?"

Now Brian is laughing at me outright. I don't think my concern that unreasonable! He slaps me on the shoulder and disappears into the coach. And that is the end of our conversation.

Brian

I step inside and notice immediately that Arthur has forsaken his long-loved position next to me in favor of curling up next to my new...guest. I settle myself on the bench opposite them and wait for the first jerk of the carriage to signal our departure.

After we have covered some ground, and the noise of Hereford is long behind us, I look upon the man in front of me. I am anxious to talk to him, but somehow am more nervous than I can remember feeling in a long time. What is it about this young man that so compelled me to obtain him? The more I ponder it, the more nervous I become, and the more I begin to wonder what it is I really am doing.

I know that if I sit in silence any longer, I will truly admit to myself that I have made a grievous mistake. So to hush that more rational fraction of my brain, I force the first words I can think of out of my mouth.

"What is your name?"

Blue eyes dart up at me and return to the floor of the coach just as quickly. I must do with looking at top of his bowed head, his hair still matted with blood.

"Justin."

Another full minute passes in silence.

"I see that Arthur's allegiances are cheaply forged," I say, smiling and nodding toward the dog. Justin merely glances at me--again, too briefly.

My attempt at humor having fallen flat, I decide to talk business, hoping that my complete ignorance about dealing with slaves does not reveal itself.

"What sort of work can you do?"

His eyes remain glued to the floor. "I am skilled in many things, master."

Master.

The word from his lips thrills--and terrifies--me. I feel suddenly guilty of doing something deeply immoral. And yet--I must have rescued him from a much crueler life, if Nicholson was any indication. Life on my quiet estate can't be any worse, can it? Now that I consider it, I will have to consciously look for work for him to do. Still...there is a dreadful nagging in my gut, which tells me that I'm involved in something horribly wrong. I attempt to stifle it and continue.

"You do not seem fit for much heavy farm work."

"I am stronger than I appear, master."

"Have you worked with horses?"

"Yes sir."

"Can you read?"

"Yes sir."

"Write?"

"Yes sir."

"Can you cook?"

"Not well, sir."

I smile at his little joke, but he doesn't see it.

More time passes, each of us to our own thoughts. I think about William's warnings and shake my head. There is something with this boy--not a boy, I guess, but a young man. I cannot determine what causes his silence, but I am convinced that it is not from any malice of thought. Hardship, maybe. Fear, perhaps, though it is well hidden behind an impassive exterior. I am compelled to speak again.

"I promise, you will not be mistreated in my home," I affirm carefully. He neither responds nor regards me, and I am resigned to spend the remainder of our journey pondering how I might lodge a fourth person in my modest house.

Chapter 1

Justin

I must admit that my new master is an attractive man. He is handsome--and young. I imagine he's not thirty years. His clothes are not lavish, but they are clean and well kept-- so much so that I am surprised not to see a ring on his finger. Brian Kinney is a welcome change from that gruesome Nicholson, with his greasy face and black eyes.

I do my best to avoid eye contact with this man sitting across from me. The way that he looks at me...it makes me nervous. There's something unusual about this entire set of circumstances. I cannot put my finger on it, but I have been suspicious of this man from the moment he negotiated my purchase. I may be a slave, but I am not so far removed as to not know that he grossly overpaid for me.

Throughout my two years with Nicholson, he was sure to constantly remind me of my value--or lack thereof. I've always known that as far as the slave market goes, I'm not worth much. I can work hard, but have never been strong enough for field labor, which Nicholson discovered immediately. As a result I was placed in the kitchens, though the awkwardness of my youth was not forgiven, either by him or by any of his housekeepers. My lacerated back is a record of every plate I dropped or bowl I accidentally spilled.

By chance, I once found out from the steward that Nicholson hadn't paid anything for me at all. That he had gone to the Hereford auction to buy a horse, and the seller had thrown me in as part of the deal. There was to be a slave auction that day as well, but the auctioneer probably assumed that he could get nothing for me anyway. And thus, I came to find myself in Nicholson's possession, and he somehow managed to resent me from the start, despite not having paid a shilling for me.

And today, this tall man who stares at me with pensive, hazel eyes, willingly paid ten pounds to have me. Even paid off that jackass George Parry to spare me the whip. But why? Perhaps, if he truly wanted me for his slave, he would not want me injured or disabled before he could even put me to work. It seems a logical assumption, and yet...I fear that there is something else he wants with me, and that frightens me more than anything.

I want not to think ill of my new master. Desperately, I want to trust the kindness I see in his face. To believe his promise that I won't be mistreated. But I cannot. Something in the way he looks at me causes a sickening reaction in my gut. Dark memories long suppressed begin to dance around the edges of my consciousness. Memories of Abernathy.

I feel a chill run down my spine and resolve to concentrate on the floor of the carriage, forcing those thoughts from my head.

After what seems an eternity, the carriage comes to a stop. The huge sheepdog that had been curled up next to me throughout the trip bounds out of the coach. My master follows him, holding the door open for me.

Stepping out of the carriage, I look up to see a small stone house, scarcely larger than even the guest cottage on Nicholson's estate. The building exterior is old and weathered, but appears to have been maintained well. To the right is a large garden and a stable, and to the left, a generous pen with a few sheep and chickens. Surrounding the property are acres of hills as far as the eye can see, hills that seem to roll and swell under long grasses bent by the wind. Far to the west, I can see the faint black shadows of a mountain range.

A solitary bird calls from overhead, and I am quickly overwhelmed by the remoteness of this place. I don't know whether to be glad for it, or terrified.

Suddenly, a shrill voice bursts forth from one of the open windows of the house.

"Ech! What in Kingdom have you brought home?" I look up to see the speaker, a meanly wizened old woman, shaking her head and retreating from the window. In almost no time at all, she has reappeared at the door, just as we are about to enter.

"Mister Brian, what is this? Tell me you do not intend to bring a heathen into this house!"

"Rest your worries, Josephine. He is not a heathen," my master states, ushering her frail form back into the house. I laugh inwardly at his feigned certainty. He knows no more about me than I know of him.

She is not dissuaded, however, as she continues her screeching rant. "He is a Kelt by the looks of him! A barbarian from up north! You know they eat their young?" My master merely laughs aloud. Even the man who drove the carriage--William--is laughing at her. She's not oblivious to this, and retreats to the kitchen in a pout, grumbling and crossing herself repeatedly.

I glance around me; we are in a sort of sitting-room, with a large stone hearth and low ceiling. The room is somewhat dark, but not uncomfortably so. The furnishings are simple, though more stylish than I would have expected for being so far removed from town. My master catches me appraising the room and looks at me, almost expectantly. I lower my head.

Brian

"Sir..." William begins. I dread what is to follow. "Have you determined where shall be his quarters?"

Of course I had not, though I am loathe to tell William as much. I had charged myself with the task of solving that very dilemma while on the ride home, but instead found myself staring stupidly at the boy for the duration, unable to form a cogent thought.

"I have it all planned out, dear William," I lie. "Now, if you would be so kind as to stable the horses. Before supper I would like you to take Justin out to where he might bathe himself."

"Aye sir."

Upon his exit, I motion for Justin to follow me towards the back of the house. We walk carefully past the kitchen, where the still-appalled Josephine can be heard from within, muttering prayers

and admonishments. I am determined, however, that she treat Justin with respect, and will likely have to talk to her privately later tonight.

I gesture towards the door in the rear corner of the room. "Down that hall are William's and Josephine's quarters. They were both hired by my parents and have lived here since before I was born," I explain, partly to excuse Josephine's behavior. "William is a good man, and Josephine is a good...cook."

Justin smiles slightly at that. I am smiling too. We walk to the other side of the hearth, where I open the door to my tiny library. Justin follows and immediately his eyes fly upwards and around, lost in the vertical swell of bookshelves that covers the narrow walls from floor to ceiling. The area is barely large enough to call a room, and besides the books, it can only hold two chairs. There is not even space enough for a desk.

"This room was used for storage when my father owned the house," I explain, apologizing for its inadequacy. "And perhaps as an armory before that. Since I gained ownership, I have tried to fill it with every volume I come across. I know it's a meager selection, but I think it important for every home to have a library. As you are literate, I want you to feel welcome to any book you find here."

Now he's really looking at me strangely. "Thank you, master" he utters quickly, and with wide eyes, as though afraid I might retract the offer.

We head upstairs, by way of the rear staircase in the house, and come upon the narrow hallway that is now occupied only by myself. The first door, I do not open. "Behind this door is the master chamber," I begin, but trail off. How do I explain that, even though I have been master of this house for years, I cannot bring myself to move into my parents' rooms? It has ever since remained as a guestroom, though we rarely have guests to make use of it.

"The furthest door is my chamber," I continue, when suddenly I feel that it is perhaps inappropriate for me to be showing him my rooms, so I take him back downstairs.

William has returned from the stables. I instruct him to take Justin down to the river, that he might bathe, and rid himself of this morning's events.

The four of us sit at supper, and I again must force myself not to stare at Justin. I had only suspected before that he was beautiful...but now, cleaned of all the blood and dirt, he is nothing short of stunning. His flaxen hair and fair skin are almost luminous in the firelight. He seems to glow before me, a preternatural angel with sapphire-blue eyes. I feel myself at once drawn to, and alarmed by, this sullen young man. A man whose spirit seems as heavy as the oppressive iron collar still fixed around his neck.

Throughout the meal, Josephine speaks to none of us, and Justin only speaks when spoken to. William and I maintain a trite conversation about the new season's crops, while I also ponder the question of where my new guest will sleep. I haven't even begun to address the question of what work I will find for him to do.

Over and over, I am reminded of how utterly ignorant I am in matters of slaveholding. I know I have heard of slaves abiding in separate houses on the property, which of course we do not have available. I've also heard of having slaves sleep in the barn, which is an unbearable thought to me. I certainly cannot ask William or Josephine to sacrifice their space for Justin, nor could I bring myself to give him my parents' old rooms. I can only imagine William's outrage, were I to give a slave the master bedroom!

Eventually, an idea comes to me. But it will take some time to work out.

Justin

Tonight I am to sleep here, in the sitting-room. Brian assures me that it is a temporary arrangement, and has found it necessary to apologize profusely for the "inconvenience." Inconvenience! Hardly! He has me set up here, at the corner of the hearth where it is dry and very warm. He gave me a fur rug to sleep on, and a blanket to keep off the chill, though I certainly don't need it on this temperate night.

These are much finer accommodations than I had with Nicholson. There, I had slept on a straw pallet, in a drafty annex to the cattle barn. I shared the space with four other slaves, all of us the most unwanted. They were decent enough fellows, but very quickly I felt the lack of privacy like a vice around my throat. There was barely enough room in the hayloft to sleep without touching each other. And by day, I was never alone, even for a moment. For

two years, my pathetic dreams were not of riches, or even of freedom, but just a quiet, private space where I could be utterly alone, accompanied only by my own thoughts. Alas, it was never to be.

I think the worst of it, though, was that I never felt clean. I'm grateful to William for telling me to take plenty of time at the river today--whatever I needed to get clean. And I DID need it. I felt as though I was washing away my whole life up until this point. I felt good there, in the water. Actually good. I dreamed the hunk of soap in my hands might actually wash clean my mind, my past, along with my skin.

Now, as I settle in on the hearth, I want to tell my new master that he need not apologize; that I have been accustomed to much, much worse. But I cannot. Partly because it is dangerous for a slave to insult a former owner. And partly because...I just cannot.

I wake to Josephine's gruff voice.

"I haven't a care in t' world for you, but Master Brian says I'm to mind you, and I'll do it. Now go fetch some eggs from the coop," she says, shaking my shoulder, in case her hawkish voice alone was not enough to rouse me.

I rise in the pre-dawn darkness to begin my first day at the Kinney estate.

Chapter 2

Justin

It has been three days now that I have been here, and have found myself quickly at ease with my new surroundings. Mornings, I rise with Josephine to assist with breakfast. Though she clearly dislikes me, she has taken it upon herself to "educate" me in the ways of a Good Christian. Which means, typically, that she recites passages to me from the vast tomes of her mind--obscure biblical verses and tirades about sloth and vice.

I suspect that my master suffers from fitful sleep, as he often is sullen and withdrawn at breakfast, and says little to any of us. After the meal, I go with William to let the sheep out to pasture, and do whatever other tasks he can find for me. Most of my work--if it can even be called that--is in assisting William with his own chores, that he might have less difficulty with them.

I thought at first that William resented my presence, but it seems that he has come to be grateful for my aid, and my company. He even talks to me, as we work side by side shearing sheep or mending tools. And though the subjects of our conversations are trivial, I never feel a hint of condescension or superiority in his attitude towards me. I begin to think him a good man.

My master is often gone during the day. I know better than to inquire after him, but from comments dropped by William and Josephine, I conclude that he must have some business in the nearby village of Warbidge. At dinner he is often cheerful, even asking me about my work, and my opinions about the farm. William speaks highly of me to him, for which I am grateful.

Tonight, as I am setting up my berth in the corner, Brian asks me to follow him upstairs. Not knowing what is his plan, I quickly find myself with a nervous rumbling in my stomach. Mentally I catalog the events of the day, and wonder if there has been some way in which I vexed him.

Once upstairs, he pauses in front of the first door, which William has informed me belonged to Brian's deceased parents. The door opens to a sort of parlor, to the right of which are the locked doors of the master's and lady's rooms. To the left, though, is another door, which he opens, gesturing for me to enter. The quaking in my stomach intensifies.

I step through the door, and find myself in a small, but cozy room. Not understanding his intentions, I turn to him and await his direction.

"This is to be your room, Justin," he says. "It's not much, I know, but I hope you will be comfortable here."

It takes a few full seconds before the gravity of his words sinks in. MY room. I look at it again with new, more interested eyes.

The room is small, but certainly enough for me, and contains a window that looks out across the north moors. There is a wooden-framed bed--a REAL bed, with a heather mattress and soft furs. Alongside it is an actual wooden desk, upon which lay sheets of writing paper and a real ink pen. I walk over to it and slowly run my hands across the paper, unable to form words.

Brian

Justin walks slowly around the room, examining every detail with wide eyes.

"This was once a nursery. It has been an empty room for decades, but now that you are here..." I trail off. "I found these furniture pieces in town; I hope they suit you."

I watch him at the desk, running his hands over every surface-- the paper, the chair, the metal handles of the drawers. His mouth opens slightly and closes again before he finally speaks.

"Master, I..." his words are barely a whisper. "Thank you."

The expression in his eyes tells me more than words ever could.

"Tomorrow after breakfast, Justin, I want you to come with me to the village. We have an important matter to attend to."

I bid him goodnight, and descend the stairs to inform Josephine of where she must go to wake Justin from now on.

Chapter 3

Brian

After breakfast, I take Justin out to the stables to fetch the horses. I discover quickly that William has the bay out with him in the fields, so Justin and I must share the roan mare. Fortunately, she is stout enough to carry two men. I mount the horse without a saddle and shift forward to its withers. The animal is quite large, and Justin looks confused as to how to mount it without stirrups. I reach down for his hand, gripping the horse between my thighs so as not to send us both to the ground. After some difficulty, he is up and behind me, settled on the mare's croup.

"Move forward a little," I instruct, "and hold tight to me." He shifts forward against me with his chest and hips, and wraps his arms around my stomach. I set off at a canter in the direction of the village, all the while pretending not to notice the warm pressure of his inner thighs squeezing my hips.

After a short ride, we come upon Warbidge, less a village than it is a scant number of houses and buildings clustered around a dirt square. We stop in front of a corner shop and dismount. As I tie up the horse, I notice Justin looking at me curiously, and I realize I haven't given him any clue as to the purpose for our visit.

I reach out to gently touch the heavy iron slave collar around his neck, idly looping a finger through the chain ring. "You can't enjoy wearing this," I say. "I thought you might like to have it removed."

I usher him inside and call out for Stryver, the blacksmith. He appears presently, a tall, brutish man with leathery skin and few remaining teeth.

"Well, Kinney," he addresses me, though his gaze is fixed on Justin. "What have you brought me?"

"I want this collar to be removed," I say. "I haven't a key for it."

Stryver looks pensively at me for a few moments, then turns to Justin. "Sit," he orders, pointing at a chair across the shop.

Justin does so, and Stryver turns to me. "Well, Kinney, you certainly have managed to find the most pathetic slave in all of Britain."

I smile coldly. "Thank you, sir, but I am paying you for your services, not your opinions."

"Fair enough," he recants. "But do understand that I have your best interests in mind when I recommend against this."

"Against it? Whatever for?"

"Look at him! He's none of the brawny, dark-skinned types that most men hold for slaves. If you remove that collar, he'll run off and could easily be mistaken for a commoner in any town! No one will know him for a slave to catch him, and you'll never get him back."

I admit I hadn't thought of that. Actually, I hadn't thought at all of Justin running away. But why wouldn't he? What reason at all would he have to stay with me, aside from fear of getting caught? And even that was negligible, once he was able to get far enough away from the farm.

Stryver must notice my hesitation, because he is nodding as though his words have fully convinced me. "You see, it is not wise. You can never trust a slave."

I look over at Justin then, who sits patiently, eyes fixed on the hands folded in his lap. No doubt he has heard every word, as Stryver made no effort to lower his voice. I watch him, willing him to raise his head and look at me, to give me some sign that I can trust him. That Stryver is wrong, and that if I treat Justin well enough, he will not want to leave. But he does not move.

I shake my head, and clasp Stryver on the shoulder, in thanks for his advice. "Take it off, friend."

He shrugs, and goes to fetch his tools.

I wander idly around the shop as Stryver sets to work. According to him, it is merely a matter of finding the appropriate tool, as the lock is old and simply fashioned. After a few minutes, I hear a snap, and Stryver lifts the collar from Justin's neck.

"Aha!" he cries, laughing. "Look, Kinney, you were right! There was no need to worry at all!"

I walk around to see what he is pointing at, and feel my heart sink a few inches into my gut. There, on the back of Justin's neck, formerly hidden by the wide collar, is some sort of writing. The ink has been turned blue by time, but the letters are still legible. It is a single word.

"Abernathy. Do you know what it means?" Stryver inquires.

I shake my head in response.

"A former owner, perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, in any case, your problems are solved, friend. There is no mistaking him for a free man now!"

Stryver begins to put away his tools, and I watch as Justin raises his hands to his neck, no doubt feeling the strangeness of skin newly exposed after so long. Something compels me to pick up the collar from where it lies, discarded, on the table.

It is indeed as heavy as it had looked.

Justin

As we leave the blacksmith's shop, my master looks particularly pensive. He lays his hands upon the horse's back, as though preparing to mount it, but does not move. Just stands there for a few moments and then seems to change his mind.

"I may as well take care of a few things while we are here," he says. "If you don't mind." I shake my head, and he begins walking across the dusty square.

Behind a row of shops and taverns, we come upon a narrow, three-story building, which appears to be an inn. He takes me inside, and through the main sitting area, to a tight staircase in the back of the building. We ascend to the top floor, where we find ourselves in a small, stuffy room with only one window that looks out onto the roof of the adjacent building. Inside it are a desk and several shelves, piled with papers and boxes.

"Welcome to my office," he says, smiling weakly. There is not even room to walk around without falling over a pile of papers, so I stand still as he continues. "I am the tax administrator for this part of the shire. It's not a difficult job, but the former administrator was corrupt, and managed his accounts very poorly. Trying to undo the damage has consumed half of my career to this point.

"Perhaps, while you are here, you could help me with some things?" he continues. He always asks, rather than orders me to do things!

He disappears back out the door and returns moments later with another chair, which he sets down at the desk, near his own. He places a stack of paper receipts in front of me, and asks me to order them by date. I set to it as he begins to write, and we sit working, side by side,

into the afternoon.

The room begins to glow an amber yellow as the lowering sunlight drifts through the windows. Brian has gone to fetch some drinks for us, as the day has grown quite hot. He returns with some water, and as he walks behind me, I sense his pause. His silence hangs heavy in the air, and I can almost feel the heat from his gaze upon the back of my neck. I know what he is staring at.

"Abernathy," he begins quietly. "Is it a surname?"

Already I can feel my heart begin to race while my breath quickens. He must notice my hesitation, because he speaks again. "You are under no obligation to tell me if it pains you."

Feeling foolish, I compose myself. "He was my master before Nicholson," I answer.

Brian sits down next to me, busying himself with his papers. After a moment he speaks again, though feigning preoccupation with his notes. "A good man?"

My heart stops. Nervously, I search for the right answer. In any other case, my response would have been a resounding 'yes', as that is a slave's duty. To praise one's former masters without hesitation. It is simply too risky to do otherwise. And yet...somehow I suspect that Brian wants the actual truth from me. My real opinion, not a careful lie. But it is too dangerous.

In the end I say nothing. Which says everything. And somehow, I believe he understands.

Chapter 4

August, 1770

Brian

For the past few weeks, I've been taking Justin with me to the village every day. I find myself able to get much more accomplished with his help, and am growing to truly enjoy his company. I've discovered that behind that quiet, nervous face lies an intelligent, interesting and clever young man.

He has begun to speak more freely in my presence. He never talks of his past, nor do I ask of it. But from hints in his speech and diction, I determine that he was born in the north, and must not have been a slave his entire life. He possesses an unusually vast knowledge, especially of art. And when I press, I find that he has an informed opinion about everything, from literature to religion to King George's governance of the Colonies.

I constantly marvel at how quickly he is becoming a fixture in my life. Already I cannot envision my home without him. He has become a sort of protege to William, not to mention being Arthur's new favorite companion. He even presents a new set of ears for Josephine's evangelizing. And I am finding that the more comfortable he becomes in my house, the better I sleep at night.

Justin

After two days of unmerciful rain, the grounds are a sodden mess. At breakfast, William reports that the north fence of the sheep pasture has been entirely blown down. Thankfully, none of the sheep were out, but the fence needs to be repaired as soon as possible. So Brian, William and I set out to undo the damage.

It is a very hot morning, humid from the recent rain. The air is buzzing with insects as we march through the soggy heath. We discover that several of the fence posts had loosened with the sodden ground, and had fallen over. Brian sets to work repositioning the heavy posts, while William and I pack mud around the bases.

It is difficult labor, made more so by the sun which now beats relentlessly upon our shoulders. I watch Brian as he works, shirt long since discarded. His skin is a honey-golden color, and is covered in a thin sheen of sweat that glistens in the sun. I cannot help but stare at his beautifully defined chest and muscular arms. He has the body of a statue, but with none of the cold rigidity. Instead he looks heated, powerful, and infused with life.

I think of how my discernment of him has changed in these two short months. At first, I eyed him warily, certain that I should be suspicious of any seemingly benevolent act on his part. But now, my perception is of a thoughtful, generous person, who has surprised me again and again with his kindness. He seems a genuinely good, honest man, and I am grateful to have him as my employer. I count my blessings for this turn of good fortune, and have determined to be extra diligent in my work, that he might see fit to keep me.

We move on to the last pole, and Brian has me stand behind him, holding the end of a cross-board as we feed it through the post. I try to focus on the task at hand, willing myself not to be distracted by the rippling of the muscles in his back. A single rivulet of sweat runs from his hairline down between his shoulder blades, and I feel my temperature rise well past the degree that can be attributed to my exertion.

The image of him stays in my head long after we have finished our work.

Later that night, after Josephine and William have retired to their rooms, Brian calls me to follow him outside.

"Are you tired, Justin? Ready to turn in?"

"No, sir," I reply. "I am not usually able to sleep until much later at night."

"And I as well," he says, smiling, and jabs a finger in the direction of the house. "I have lived with those two old-timers for so long, I've had no one to spend the evenings with. This is my favorite part of the day."

He leads me down the walk and towards the hills. The air is growing cooler with the sun down, and the breeze carries the sweet smell of heather across the heath. The sky looks as though it has been bruised by the storm--it swells purple and dark blue, with pink swaths hanging low over the mountains to the west. It is a beautiful evening.

After a short hike, we come to a steep hillside, and Brian sits, facing the reddish remains of the sunset. I sit down too, and when he reclines, I lie back as well, lacing my fingers behind my head. Side by side we lie, watching the stars gradually appear in the firmament. Tiny white moths dance around us in the grass, their only accompaniment the gurgle of the nearby river.

"I wonder whether Miss Booth survived these past two days without you," I say with a mischievous smile.

"Ugh," Brian groans, throwing his arm across his eyes. "Next you'll be asking what date we've chosen for the wedding. I'll start to call you William."

I chuckle at his agitation. I could not help but make fun of him. Our Miss Booth is the daughter of the innkeeper who rents an office to Brian. She returned to Warbidge recently, after completing her studies in France, and seems

completely smitten with Brian. He has made it very clear to me that he does not return her fancy, nor can he stand her constant meddling while we are working. He seems to have very little tolerance for her.

"Why William? Does he believe her to be a good match for you?"

"William believes any available, breathing woman to be a good match for me. He wants children to be running around the house."

"So what holds you back?" I ask, wondering how far I am allowed to go with this conversation.

Brian sighs. "Lack of interest."

"In Miss Booth?"

"Forget Miss Booth!" Brian laughs, throwing a clump of dirt at me. After a few quiet moments, he finally answers my query. "In women."

"I imagine that makes it difficult to find a wife."

"I don't want a wife," Brian answers. "Or children. I don't care if I never marry."

"What does William say to that?"

"William believes that I need only find the right woman, and I will fall desperately in love."

"You don't believe it?"

"I don't know that I believe in love at all. Do you?"

"Yes." And I do. I think I do.

"Then it's settled. Since women hold no interest for me, I can pass any I meet off onto you."

I chuckle. "A noble offer, to be sure, had I any interest in women myself."

He looks at me intently. "None at all? How is it that you believe in love, then?"

I pause, unable to answer. Love, for me, was always some distant, ethereal notion, mixed up with other things for which I'd always longed: safety, happiness, freedom. I never had a vision for it, just a vague, hopeful dream.

"I don't know," I say, truthfully. What I don't say is that this is a moot conversation, since I, as a slave, am not even a legitimate member of society. Where would I find love?

But Brian seems very interested in this discussion. "When you close your eyes, and imagine yourself in love, who do you see?"

I close my eyes, hands folded over my stomach. I wait for some miraculous vision, but none appears. It seems I cannot even imagine into the future, only the present. I try a little longer, but somehow my thoughts begin to drift unchecked, and all I can see in my head is a vision of a broad, muscular back, sweat-slicked and gleaming in the midday sun. And it is not a far leap from there to imagine that same back, and how it would look bathed in the blue moonlight that fills my

bedroom on any given night.

I open my eyes suddenly, and Brian is watching me closely, his sober hazel eyes searching mine for an answer. "I don't know," I say again, weakly. He rolls onto his back silently and we recommence watching the stars.

Chapter 5

Brian

All through breakfast, I can think of nothing else but our conversation on the hill last night. I replay and dissect his words in my head, over and over, desperately seeking a confirmation of my hopes. My wild dream that maybe, maybe I have found another man with the same desires as myself. And the idea that this man could be Justin---the beautiful and captivating blonde boy with whom I am rapidly becoming infatuated--it seems almost too good to be true.

I cannot explain my feelings for him. There is an attraction, the strength of which I have never before felt in my life. Yet until last night, I had no real reason to believe that my feelings would ever be reciprocated. But now, whether he realizes it or not, he has given me that dangerous spark of hope. And my mind can focus on nothing else.

Tonight I have the honor of hosting the Viscount Delaney and his wife for dinner. Had I any appreciation for their company, I might welcome the excuse to get Justin out of my thoughts, even for a few hours. But as it stands, I find both of them so numbingly dull, I can only cringe at the prospect of entertaining them for an entire evening.

Around five o'clock they arrive, and I am obligated to express overwhelming delight that they have brought along a Miss Mina Fiske, sister of the viscountess. I can see it in their faces as they introduce us--I am supposed to be impressed with Miss Fiske's beauty and delicate charm. When in reality, I am struggling to bolster myself for a night of pretended interest and fake pleasantries.

By the time the soup is served, it is even clearer that Miss Fiske has been brought along for a specific purpose. Lady Delaney makes every attempt imaginable to bring her sister into the conversation, and is quick to point out every virtue of my estate, from the "charming" furniture to the "impressive" grounds. Miss Fiske agrees to each comment with overbearing enthusiasm, and flashes me a wide smile laced with perfect teeth. It takes every ounce of restraint in my body not to strangle her.

I'm sure they can't imagine why I'm not proposing right here at the table. Miss Fiske is very attractive, or "fetching" as one might say. Of course it would be unthinkable of me to ignore her completely, but I am afraid to give her any encouragement whatsoever. How can I explain that, despite all her best attempts, I cannot see past the innocuous blonde slave that has become a permanent fixture in my mind? The slave who, by the dictates of convention, had to be banished to his room for the evening, so that those of us in "polite society" might dine properly.

The evening ends, finally, and I am met with the entreaties of all three demanding a reciprocal visit. And my response, of course, is that I would love to, that I should be delighted to see them again, that I count the days until then, and so forth. After they exit, I struggle to suppress the urge not to slam the door on my own fingers.

Josephine having already retired for the evening, I set to work clearing the table. Mentally, I am exhausted, though it is not nearly late enough for me to be truly tired. I retrieve my glass of wine from the table and refill it, hoping that it will quicken my fatigue, so I might go to sleep and put this night behind me.

After cleaning up, I find myself looking around the room, vaguely unsure of what to do next. It is too late for a walk, but I am too restless to read. The wine has warmed me, but not to the point of the haziness for which I'd hoped. After a few moments' consideration, I realize, resigned, that I miss Justin. I have become too used to his presence, his conversation. And now it is as though I cannot put this day to rest without at least bidding him goodnight. So I set forth on my fateful trip upstairs.

Chapter 6

Brian

I pause before the door to his room, and notice the dim candlelight flickering under the door. He is still awake. I knock gently, and within moments he appears, Voltaire's *Candide ou l'optimisme* in his hand. He is dressed lightly in short breeches and a loose white shirt--an old one of mine I had given him and which is far too large for him to wear during the day. Several buttons are missing, and the collar hangs open widely, exposing the pale smoothness of his neck and chest.

He smiles softly and asks, "How went the dinner?"

Unable to give an adequate response, I merely close my eyes, in a show of pain, and rest my forehead against the doorjamb. He laughs softly and walks back into the room, silently giving me permission to enter. He sits down on the bed and I join him.

"You read French?" I ask, watching him place his book on the desk, a torn bit of paper serving to mark his place.

"Doesn't everyone?" he asks with genuine innocence.

I smile widely at his sweetness. He smiles too, but misinterprets my humor. "Do you mock me, master?"

"No," I say, immediately serious. "Never." I realize more with each passing day how much I loathe that form of address from him.

A sober moment passes between us, and I can think of nothing to say. For all my eagerness to come up and talk to him, I now realize that I only wanted to be where he was. To listen to whatever thoughts or dreams or theories he would share with me this night.

Whether he recognizes this in me or not, he begins to talk enthusiastically about the chapter he has just read, and all the while I am rapt, more to his face than to his words. When he is excited about any subject, his dancing blue eyes gleam, and he flashes the most beautiful broad smiles. Presently, his discussion of Voltaire becomes more serious...about Cunàgonde and the transience of youth and beauty...and his voice becomes wistful.

Gradually, I lie back, content in timing my breaths to the rise and fall of the pitch in his voice. He is still seated next to me, legs folded under him. I notice that when he gestures, his naked left knee lightly touches my side, and that discovery causes me to miss the next few sentences of his dialog.

"...that there is no true goodness or beauty in the world," he continues.

The statement strikes me. I sit up finally and face him. "I believe you are wrong."

"It is Voltaire's assertion." Justin says, simply.

I pause a few moments to gain the courage for my next words.

"Only because has never met you," I say quietly. Even I am shocked by my boldness.

His eyes rise to meet mine, blue orbs swimming in an unreadable emotion. Partly of its own volition, and partly of an intense, long-burning desire, my right hand reaches up, daring me to touch his face. My thumb hovers near his cheek, threateningly close without touching. He blinks but does not move or make a sound.

My heartbeat is deafening, and I am certain he must hear it as well. My gaze slowly passes down over his red, barely parted lips, and lower, to the open collar of his shirt, which shifts slightly from his breaths. Before I can form a conscious thought, my wayward hand has drifted down past his jaw line. It rests now, just a feather touch, on the thin fabric edge of his collar.

I can see his shoulder blade just underneath, disappearing and reappearing under the flickering shadows cast by the candle. I can feel the warmth radiating from his skin, beckoning to my fingertips. Suddenly, it becomes my sole earthly desire to touch that skin—to run the tips of my fingers along the hollow of his neck, to feel the smooth musculature of his shoulder. And this desire supercedes all reason that warns me against it.

Just as my fingertips connect with his heated skin, he pulls back slightly--drawing himself just a few millimeters away from the contact. And miles away from me. I drop my hand as quickly as possible, daring a glance at him. His face is turned away from me, eyes focusing on nothing in particular. Though he appears unaffected, the panicked heaving of his chest tells otherwise.

I stand, my body feeling frighteningly hollow, while my heart still pounds away, fruitlessly. Only after I have left the room and closed the door behind me does the fog clouding my brain finally dissipate, and I am left with a singular, horrific feeling of dread. Dear God, what have I done?

Justin

I sat stunned for several minutes, and not until I felt tears dropping on my thigh did I realize that I was crying. And then I couldn't stop. So I crawled up under the covers and tucked myself into a little ball, willing sleep to take me, but it never did.

So now I lie here in the darkness, unable to sleep but exhausted from crying. And even though it feels like I haven't another drop to shed, I remain constantly on the verge of weeping again. I am consumed with too many feelings at once: guilt, despair and loss all wrapped into one miserable mess.

I have made two grievous mistakes, and I am appalled at my own stupidity. The first was in allowing myself to believe that my life would be different here. That I had truly found a lucky break. And that Brian was different than I had feared. That he respected me for my work and my loyalty, and maybe even enjoyed my company. It was terribly foolish of me to assume such, and I have no one else to blame for my disillusionment.

I taught myself long ago to expect the least from life, so that I may never be disappointed by it. Or devastated by it. Somehow I forgot that lesson when I came to live here, and that is my fault alone. I should have known better.

My second, and graver error, was in refusing him. Even if it was only a nervous gut reaction—I know he read it as a refusal. I don't know why I did it. I still cannot believe, after everything I learned at Abernathy, that I would make such a stupid mistake. I flinched. Not even out of confusion, since I am certainly no stranger to that kind of demand.

I believe I flinched out of surprise, or sadness that I had so misjudged my role here. And now I can only imagine how furious he is with me. How ungrateful he must think me.

The worst of it is that I know it would not even be so bad. I think I have spent enough time here to know that Brian is a kind man, and would be gentle with me. Gentler, at least, than Abernathy ever was. Part of me is desperate to go to him right now and beg his forgiveness. But another part of me feels I have escaped a fire. And maybe Brian let me escape it.

Brian

I lie here in silence, praying for the night to last an eternity. That I might never have to get up and face the day. Face him.

I'm appalled at myself. To say that I acted rashly is a gross understatement. I certainly should never have gone in there tonight. Should never have even dreamed...

I misjudged his feelings for me, obviously. And in my desperate hope for requital, I saw interest where there clearly was none.

And now...at best now, he must see me as sick. Were he not a slave, he would probably report me to the police, and then it would be all over. I know what they do to men like me. But he is a slave--with few rights and even less credibility. Somehow that makes it all the worse. I can't help but feel that I've taken advantage of my position. And after working so hard to gain his trust.

I rub my hands over my face angrily. This self-pitying introspection will not help me in the morning. I have to make a choice. On one hand, I could distance myself from him entirely. Perhaps we have been spending too much time together anyway...But on the other hand, it may be less uncomfortable for him--and less humiliating for me--to simply pretend that all this never occurred. To go on as though tonight's events had been the result of my drunken foolishness and nothing more.

Yes, that seems the better choice. Perhaps, in time, he will forget this ever happened.

Chapter 7

Justin

Groggily, I draw myself out of bed, to the tune of Josephine's impatient pounding. Little sleep has left me weary, but I am resolved with a new fervor this morning. I am determined to make things right with Brian today, and prove to him that I am indeed grateful for having such a good master.

I go down to the kitchen to help prepare breakfast, and make a point of asking Josephine if I can prepare the main course. She acquiesces, suspicious of my intentions, but I don't care to explain myself to her. I want to make Brian's favorite--eggs with little bits of ham cooked right in. I've discovered that he rarely eats much of anything for breakfast, except when it's this dish.

Brian and William arrive, finally, and we sit down to breakfast. I notice that Brian is wearing his waistcoat and a dress shirt, which means he is planning to go to the village. I wonder whether he will be taking me today--and I suppose the answer will reveal how much he truly is angry with me. I steal a few quick glances at him over the table, but he seems deliberately to avoid my eyes. He is even more laconic than usual.

"These eggs are very good," he says after a time, not looking up from his plate.

"Ech, he made them, not I!" Josephine cackles. "'Tis sure blasphemy to have such vanities as these outside of a Holy Day!" I notice that she has been picking out the ham cubes and segregating them to the edge of her plate.

Brian looks at her, then at me, and rolls his eyes. Not for all the strength in the world can I help but smile back whenever he does that.

"Justin, will you be ready to leave for town after this?"

"Yes, master" I say, hopefully not too eagerly. Perhaps he is not as cross with me as I thought. Still, I am firm in my resolution to make things right with him, and it will take more than a "blasphemous" breakfast to accomplish it.

Brian

The day passes slowly in the absence of conversation between us. I have given Justin a large stack of receipts to organize, in the hopes that it will keep him occupied without needing any help from me. I've been careful to keep a broad distance between us all day, and was especially grateful this morning to find that both horses were available for the ride into town.

Now and again, I find him glancing at me warily, almost in anticipation of something. This awkwardness between us is killing me, especially when I think that on our last day at the office, we had been laughing and joking together as old friends. I want that back. I know it will take time, though, and something else. An apology.

I was wrong in my attempt to go on as though nothing has happened. Perhaps Justin can, but I cannot. Not until I have apologized to him, a desperate attempt to alleviate some of this guilt I feel inside me. Tonight, before we retire, I will go to him and say that I'm sorry. I'll tell him I'm sorry for putting him in such a position, and sorry for making him feel uncomfortable in his own room. And pledge that it will never, ever happen again.

Night falls and my elder servants retreat to their rooms. Justin is sitting by the hearth, mending one of William's shirts. Now would be the perfect time to apologize to him, I realize. Yet I sit silently, mulling over in my head all of my rehearsed words.

Suddenly, though, he sets down his work and approaches me. "Master, may I retire for the evening?"

"Of course," I say, the words out before I could delay them. He disappears up the stairs, my window of opportunity missed. For several minutes I sit, stalling. It is the awkwardness of the impending conversation that causes me to hesitate, which I conclude is childish and cowardly of me. Newly resolved, I return my book to the library, take up a candle, and climb the back stairs to seek my absolution.

Only darkness emanates from under his door, which surprises me. It is typically his habit to read for a few hours before finally going to bed. He cannot be asleep already? I knock gently, but receive no response. I debate whether to abandon the idea altogether, but my resolve has made me brave, so I open the door a crack.

"Justin?" I whisper, casting a bit of candlelight into the room. He is nowhere to be found, his bed still made from this morning. Puzzled, I step back into the parlor. I know I saw him ascend the back stairs only moments ago. So unless he very quietly went back down via the kitchen staircase, there is only one other place he could be.

I walk back out into the hallway and towards the thin sliver of moonlight that glows from under my bedroom door.

Chapter 8

Brian

I am just about to knock on my own bedroom door when I realize the foolishness of it. I take a breath and let myself in, absorbing the image that unfolds before me.

Justin is indeed there, though nothing could have prepared me for the shock of finding him entirely naked, and sitting patiently on the bed. He stands up to face me, and no sense of shame or decency inside me could force me to turn my eyes away.

In the flickering light of the candle, his ivory skin warms to the color of amber. I take in his smooth, alabaster chest and the lean musculature of his arms. My willful gaze descends to his thatch of golden curls, trailing a path from his navel to his soft, pinkish cock. My legs weaken—no doubt in obeisance of my desire to fall on my knees right there before him.

As it is, I cannot move at all, nor speak or even breathe. My eyes trail back up to his face, and there find no smoldering passion, nor even a demure smile. His resolute demeanor argues with fear-filled eyes. What is going on here?

"Justin...what is this?" I stammer.

"What you wanted," he says softly, sounding almost defeated. "Last night. Before I...made you stop..."

"I don't understand."

"You must think me so ungrateful. I am not; I swear it! Last night, I was merely...startled." His voice takes on a pleading tone, and I cannot help but draw closer to him. We stand, inches apart beside the bed, and he tentatively touches my arm. "You are so good to me, master. I will show you how grateful I am." He smiles up at me, unconvincingly.

I stand, utterly speechless, trying to turn his words into meaningful thoughts in my head. Finally noticing that I have been dripping wax onto my fingers, I walk over to set the taper on the nightstand. I turn around again to find that, mistaking my action for confirmation, he has proceeded to climb upon the bed, crawling on hands and knees toward the pillows. He then lowers his upper body to rest on his elbows, head to the pillow and ass in the air.

Dear God! I think, as the scene unfolds before my eyes. The reality of this affair finally confronts me. Does he imagine that I would just climb up behind him and...mount him...as some animal? I suddenly think, in horror, of all the wanton dreams I've recently had of him, naked in my bed...but not like this--this twisted distortion of all my fantasies!

And as if this scene could be no more horrifying, his position leaves me in perfect view of the lattice of scars upon his back, and the branding of another man's name into his neck. On my bed is an abused, broken boy who gives himself to me as though I were demanding sex as some sort of tithe!

"Justin, please...just come down from there."

He lifts his head from the pillow to look at me, voice rising in confused desperation. "Have I angered you?" He slowly makes his way back towards the edge.

"No," I say, taking him by the shoulders and pulling him off the bed.

"I thought this was what...I thought that you...desired me?"

"I...yes! No!" My eyes follow his gaze to where it rests, at the front of my breeches, where the bulge of my erection is blatantly obvious. Of course, this will not help my argument! "I...please, just...put your clothes back on."

He goes about redressing, his face a red mask of embarrassment. I can only imagine my own. I retrieve my candle, and extend my arm towards the door. "Come."

I walk back down the hallway, Justin trailing behind me. Once at his room, I usher him inside, and pull back the sheets on his bed.

"Here. Get in." He climbs inside, never taking his gaze from me. "Please just go to sleep," I say. I know those are not the right words, but my mind is a muddle. I head back towards the door, and stop, turning around to face him again. I cannot leave things as they are.

"Justin, what happened last night was my mistake, and it is I that must apologize to you."

He sits up in disagreement. "It is your right, master!"

"No," I affirm. "I will never force myself upon you. And I am ashamed that I led you to believe that it was what I wanted."

"You don't want me, then?"

I sigh, and sit myself lightly on the edge of the bed. My admission comes as a whisper. "I do, Justin. I have ever since..." I trail off. Since the moment I first saw you.

"Then why do you refuse?"

I look into his eyes, to the confusion there. How can I explain?

"I want the part of you that you cannot give me," I say finally, reaching over to point at his heart. My fingertip lingers for a moment at his shirtfront, before falling, defeated. For once, he is speechless, and I exit the room, closing the door softly behind me.

Chapter 9

September, 1770

Brian

When I was a child, I found an abandoned young lapwing in the barn. I placed it in a husk basket and carried it with me everywhere. I named him George, after our sovereign, and he instantly became my best friend.

When my father finally asked me what was in the crate I carried, I showed him the lapwing. He laughed, and said that it was an unusual thing for a bird and a boy to be friends. Of course, I retorted that it was an easy thing, as George and I were as devoted as brothers.

"How devoted can George be when he is confined to a crate?" he asked. "Let him out, and you will know the true caliber of his friendship."

Already haughty in my nine years, I set about opening the crate, determined to squelch my father's doubts. George would stay right by my side, I was sure of it! We were best friends, after all!

I removed the top and peered inside. "Hullo, George! How 'bout it then?" My father sat in his chair by the fire, amused. The bird turned himself around in the straw I had laid, and looked me square in the eyes. He then lit into the air, and flew out the window. He disappeared finally, a black speck on the horizon across the moor.

For two days I was inconsolable, despite my father's assurances that I had done a good thing. In my mind I replayed that last moment, when George looked right at me and chose, without deliberation, to leave.

I remember that event, now, as I think about Justin, and what transpired in my bedroom. He offered me everything left in him, out of duty and out of obligation. But not out of love. And it was both arrogant and foolish of me to even dream of his feelings when our relationship began on such an imbalance.

But it is in my power to turn the tables, and I must do it. Even though there is a chance--a likely chance, actually--that he will fly out of the crate and out of my life, I owe him that decency. So I will do whatever it takes to give him his freedom.

Justin

Last night I dreamed that I was in a peddler's shop. And though I knew not how I'd gotten there, I found myself with a book in my hands, breathtakingly beautiful and unlike any I had ever seen. I felt as though I had been seeking this very book for my entire life. Yet when I opened the cover, I found the whole tome to be written in a dialect I

couldn't understand. It was not a foreign language, but one that many people seem to know. It was merely that no one had ever taught it to me.

I turned the pages over and over; the story presenting itself in an ancient, beautiful text that both thrilled and frightened me. I desperately wished to learn how to read it, and I became convinced that this book held the knowledge of everything I had ever wanted in life.

But night had fallen, and the shop was about to close. I became frantic, because I knew I had no money to purchase it, and would have to leave the book behind. Suddenly from behind the counter, the peddler called to me, asking if I wanted the book. When I told him I had nothing to give for it, he asked me again, did I want it?

"You need only make the choice to have it or not," he said.

I woke then, bewildered by my dream. I have no experience with making choices.

Brian

A week has passed since that fateful evening, and I am relieved that my relationship with Justin has remained comfortable. Though awkwardness remains, I believe we have both made the effort to put what has happened behind us. I still catch him now and again, eyeing me curiously, almost as though evaluating me.

I am convinced, however, that he has no idea what I have in store for him. I have appealed to a legal clerk from Hereford to help me draw up the paperwork for Justin's release from servitude. The clerk, a Mr. Hurst, is due to call tomorrow, so I will have to invent some task for Justin to keep him out of the house throughout the afternoon. I want to surprise him tomorrow evening with the papers that will grant him his freedom.

The idea both excites and dismays me. I am eager for Justin's release, as I cannot bear to have him "under" me any longer. It should never have been in the first place. He is too bright, too beautiful, and too valuable to spend his life in menial labor. I don't know how it is that he came to be a slave. And though I am desperately curious, I don't feel I have the right to ask after his history.

Still, I am filled with sadness when I consider my plan for tomorrow. It will surely change everything. Justin will be free from bondage and, in effect, free from me. And though I intend to offer him stay at my home, I don't expect he should take it. Why would he? A world free and open to him, finally, and he must go forth in search of his own happiness. It is what I wish for him--the better part of me, anyway.

The more selfish part of me wants to beg him to stay. To tell him my true feelings: that his very presence is a reason for me to wake in the morning, and gives me security when I turn in at night. That, for the first time in my life, I feel a purpose. A devotion to something greater than my tangible self. That I desperately desire him to be a part of my life, on any level he should choose.

In my jaded heart I have tried, but ultimately, I cannot deny it. I am truly, hopelessly, in love with him. And it is that which I can never tell him. So with his departure goes not only my friend, my companion, but also my first and only hope of real love.

The day dawns that is to be the last of Justin's slavery. We four sit at breakfast, and of course, no one but me knows the significance of this day.

"Justin," I ask, benignly. "I have an errand that needs to be done today. Would you help me?"

"Of course, master."

I detail the assignment for him, which will involve a ride to Warbidge, to fetch some inks from the general store, along with some minor tasks to be accomplished at the office. It should take a few hours--just enough time to occupy him while the clerk is here with me. He agrees graciously, of course, and seems excited by the prospect of taking on such responsibility.

Later that afternoon, Justin goes out to ready the horse for his trip. I begin to count out some money to send with him for the purchase of the inks, when William approaches me. "Brian," he begins, warily. "You are sending him alone to the village?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"Out of concern, merely, sir. I worry that you misplace your trust."

"How is that, William? You believe Justin cannot be trusted?"

"He is a good boy, but still a slave, sir. I think it a major risk to send him off, alone, with your horse and a purse full of money. What incentive has he to return at all? Mightn't he run off?"

Admittedly, I hadn't considered the idea. Of course Justin has no way of knowing that I intend to free him this very night. Would he steal my horse and money and disappear? I don't like to think of it.

"I have no such fear, William. I believe he can be trusted."

William huffs disapprovingly. I choose to ignore his admonishments as Justin enters, claiming the horse is ready for his departure. I give him a small purse full of money, which he takes with a nod and exits again. I watch out the window as Justin rides out from the barn. He sees me watching him and looks directly at me, his smile like the very sunshine, and rides off in the direction of the village.

Later that night, I sit by the fire, absent-mindedly watching Josephine as she clears away the last of the dinner dishes. I am grateful that William is out in the field, rounding up the sheep, for I cannot bear to be in the company of his patronizing sighs any longer. I suppose I should appreciate that he has at least enough tact not to blatantly remind me that he had been right all along.

Gradually they retire to their beds and I remain, the book on my lap untouched for hours. I reach into my robe, clutching at Justin's release papers, which I signed this afternoon. The ink on them must be fully dry by now. I walk over to the door and peer out into the chilly darkness. And as the crickets begin their nightly symphony, I wonder how much longer I will wait before admitting that he is not coming back.

Chapter 10

William

Well, he's gone, and I must admit, I am surprised. For all my admonishments to Brian, I never honestly thought the lad would run off. Or if he did, I figured him to have more Christian decency than to steal his master's horse in the process. If he's a smart boy, and I know him to be, he'll be several shires from here by now, where he will no doubt sell that beautiful roan for quite a take. It's truly sorrowful. He seemed such a good-hearted lad.

All morning, Brian has been melancholic to the point of being unapproachable. He wouldn't take his meal with us, coming down only for a drink, before returning to his bed. There's nothing can be said to pull him from this mood.

So Josephine and I sit, a lonely breakfast for two that we have not experienced in years--in fact, not since shortly after the death of Brian's father. And as I eat in quiet reflection, she continues with her exhortation on Justin's sinfulness. The devil, she verily explains, had taken up residence in his soul, and Josephine, being ever wary with one eye pointed towards evil, had suspected it all along.

Brian

Though I detest the thought of getting out of bed today, I do have a life to lead. Most specifically, a job to get to. So I draw myself from bed and dress slowly, not at all eager to make the trip to Warbidge this afternoon. Knowing that I must go and sit in that very office where Justin kept me company on so many days. I will have to stare at that second, vacant chair by my desk, and eventually return it to the innkeeper, hoping that he will not see fit to ask after that "young tow-head" that used to accompany me.

I finish dressing finally, and head downstairs, but not without stopping before his door. His door, which I suppose will be an empty room once again. Something compels me to go inside, and I do, sitting on the bed for several moments, battered by my thoughts. Had he been planning this for very long, or was it I that drove him away?

Weakly, I stand and walk over to his little desk. I remember his delight upon receiving it. It seemed so genuine, so truly grateful. Did I imagine it, all of it? Am I really such a fool?

I open the top drawer of his desk, in which sits the pile of writing paper I had given him, along with the pens and inkwell. I look through the papers, amazed to find each sheet covered with drawings--some mere sketches, and others elaborate compositions. A few are landscapes, inspired by the view from his window. Others are of small objects around the room, and one is of Arthur. The rest--the majority--are of me. In various positions and perspectives, though from when and where I cannot guess. He has captured me perfectly, and with stunning talent and attention to detail. Each drawing is as though he had studied me for hours. I gently return them to the drawer and close it.

I set off for the village at a gallop, eager to get this day behind me. When I arrive at the inn, I immediately walk into Miss Booth. This is the last thing I need.

"Why, Mr. Kinney! I missed you yesterday!" she says, with batted eyelashes.

"Good morning, Miss Booth," I say tersely, noticing that she is blocking my path.

"Beautiful day, is it not, Brian?"

"It is indeed," I reply, looking everywhere but at her.

"In fact, I was quite trying to run into you!"

I'll bet. "Isn't that kind of you." The back staircase is in my line of sight, if only I could just get around her!

"Yes, Brian, to be sure. I wanted to tell you about your slave."

Every muscle in me freezes. "What do you mean?"

"Indeed, it seems there has been a terrible mix-up! Do sit for a drink, and I'll explain what transpired."

"No, I...thank you, I cannot," I stammer as she heads for the bar. "Please, do tell me what's happened."

"Well!" she starts, pulling out two glasses and a bottle of gin. "I was privy to it all! Well, almost all...Let's see...it was about one o'clock yesterday. Perhaps closer to two o'clock...You see, I've been a dreadful mess since I've lost my gold pocket watch!"

I shove my fists into my pockets, that she might not notice how violently I clench and unclench them. Eventually, she continues: "I was on my way over to Sterling's general store, when I heard all manner of shouting and commotion coming from the front of the shop! Of course, never one to shy from activity, I picked up my skirts and ran right up. And there I saw your very slave--that young, blonde boy--being lifted onto a cart and carried off."

She must have seen my eyes widen, and she begins to laugh. "But wait, that is not the best of it! I ran into the store to consult with Anna Sterling, who you know is just the dearest friend to me. And I said right away, 'Anna, why have they carted off Brian Kinney's slave?'

"And she said to me, 'Brian Kinney's? I didn't know he belonged to Brian Kinney!' And we two shared quite a good laugh."

"Wait," I interject, finally. "Why was he carted off at all?"

"Well, that's exactly what I asked her, exactly! I asked her, had she caught him stealing? And she said, no, not specifically. But she had noticed him ride up on an expensive horse, and she knew him immediately for a slave. Because he has those queer markings on his neck, as you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, she figured him right off for a runaway slave, and a horse thief to boot. So she called up her brothers and had him arrested--and they even found a purse full of money on him!"

"But wait, if they arrested him yesterday, where is he?"

"Well, you know in these matters they just return the slave to his owner, so that the owner can punish him as he chooses."

"But no one returned him to me! I haven't seen him at all!"

"I know, that is the funniest part! Anna didn't know that he belonged to you (or she would naturally have sent him right back to you). But of course SHE determined that he must belong to the man whose name was on his neck. Abercrombie, or..."

"Abernathy," I assist, glumly.

"Yes, that was it! And it turns out that this Abernathy is a very wealthy man, living somewhere east of Hereford. Anna's brother knew of him. So your slave was delivered there! Isn't it hilarious?"

I bury my face in my hands, unable to even give a response to that.

"Oh, dearest Brian," she consoles. "Do not fear! Did I mention that they found a purse on him? So all your money--and your nice horse--were retrieved. And though it was all sent off to this Abernathy, I'm positive the man will turn everything back over to you immediately. He will understand this silly mix-up, surely!"

I try for a grateful grin, but it probably comes out more a grimace. She pats my hand, and pushes a glass of gin towards me.

I push it away again, and stand. "So how can I find this Abernathy?"

Chapter 11

Brian

The wind whips around me as I tear eastward across the moor. I vaguely consider that I should have gone home first, so that William and Josephine might not wonder what keeps me so late tonight. But I cannot wait another minute, nor do I want to explain to them why I am going after Justin.

How I will find him, I have yet to figure out. After an infuriating chat with Anna Sterling, I have been advised that the Abernathy estate is somewhere near Hereford, but she was unsure as to where, exactly. Not willing to wait around for her brother to sober up and help me, I lit out in the direction of Hereford, trusting that there, I will find at least one person that can direct me to Abernathy.

The ride to Hereford is a distant one, quite long enough for me to become fully wracked with guilt. It is my fault and mine alone, that Justin is in this mess. I had suspected him of running off, even of stealing my horse! When in fact, he had done exactly as I'd asked, and dutifully gone to Warbidge to run my errands. And like a fool, I bid him go, alone, not ever considering that the awful tattoo on his neck could get him into so much trouble! The blacksmith Stryver's chilling words echo in my head, too late, of course. There is no mistaking him for a free man now!

Onward I ride, inspired by my remorse and also by a rekindled hope--that maybe Justin hadn't wanted to leave me after all. I have no thought now but to find him, wherever he may be, and bring him home.

I have spent the better part of the afternoon interviewing the good townsfolk of Hereford. And though everyone has heard of Abernathy, no one seems able to direct me to it. Their faces crinkle up in deeply perplexed thought, "mmm..." and "hmm..." sounds coming from their crooked mouths. But none with a helpful answer.

I wander into the market, hoping that in a crowd I might increase my chances, and I begin to ask everyone I encounter. An elderly man selling twine finally smiles when I ask.

"Sure, son, I know where it is, this place you seek," he rasps. "Merely do an old man a service and buy some of my twine, and I shall help you all that you require!"

I suppose I truly am desperate, because before I realize it, I am digging around in my pocket for a coin to buy some twine I do not need. Suddenly, from nowhere, a hand grabs my own, halting me in my action.

I spin 'round to see who has interrupted my brainless purchase. Before me stands a stout woman with wild red hair and a mischievous face.

"His twine is weak," she says, narrowing her eyes at the old man. "And even less trustworthy is his advice."

The old man grunts and spits, turning away from both of us. This brazen woman turns to me, and beams. "So it is Abernathy you seek?"

"Yes, madam. Do you know the way there?" I ask for the twentieth time today.

"Young sir, it happens that I am on my way there this very instant. I have a coach at the ready not far from here. You may join me if you'd like."

I nod emphatically, indicating my gratitude, and we begin to walk away from the market. "Mrs. Abernathy, I presume?"

"No, no, dear boy!" she chuckles. "I am their governess. You may call me Deborah."

"Kinney. Brian Kinney," I return, stooping to kiss her hand.

"What business have you at Abernathy, Mr. Kinney?"

As we walk down the main street of Hereford, I recount to her the story that brought me here. The tale of my unfortunate slave, who had gone to run an errand for me, and had been arrested for thievery in the process. She listens with passing interest, until I reach the part about the tattoo.

"Justin?" she exclaims, her eyes wide.

"Yes, Justin! You know him?"

She turns on her heel and stalks off, leaving me confused and standing alone in the street.

"Wait!" I call after her, jogging to meet her pace. "Hold on! How did you know it was him I was describing? Aren't all of Abernathy's slaves marked in that manner?"

"No," she says sadly, turning to face me once she reaches the carriage. "Just that particular one."

I am still puzzled by her change in behavior, but some part of me suspects that she does it out of protectiveness towards Justin.

"Well, would you take me there?" I try. She regards me dubiously. "I promise, I mean him no harm. I only want to take him home."

"To what? As what?" she asks bitterly.

"As...my friend," I reply, still confused. She shakes her head at me and prepares to mount the carriage. Suddenly I remember the papers stowed in my coat pocket. I don't know why I have been carrying them with me, but I'm grateful now that I have!

I present the papers to her; she takes them from me with hesitance and examines them closely. Even produces a pair of glasses to read more carefully.

"Is it true, then, that you are freeing him?"

"Yes. I had these very papers drawn up yesterday, before this debacle. I wanted to give them to him last night, but he never came home."

She sighs, out of what appears to be relief. "Alright then sir, come with me. I will take you to Abernathy, and explain to you what I know along the way."

We climb into the carriage, and I wait patiently for my new friend to settle in. She seems nervous, or agitated, and cannot sit still.

"Is anything the matter, Madam?" I ask, eager for her to tell me more about Justin.

"I'm very concerned for him. Justin. I was not at the house yesterday to see his arrival, and so I imagine it was the steward that received him. The steward is new—he does not know Justin, or his history there."

"You suspect he is being treated badly?"

"No, but I suspect that he is fearing for his life!"

"Why? I don't understand any of this! What happened there?"

She sighs and folds her hands in her lap. After a moment's composition, she begins. "I will start from the beginning. My beginning."

Deborah's Story

I began my service with the Abernathy family some five years ago. At that time, the children were younger, which required me to live at the house full-time.

One day, not too long after I started my tenure there, I just so happened to be looking out the window when my master returned from one of his business trips. He had a small, blonde boy with him, who must have been about 12 years old. I watched him usher the boy into the house, and expected that I would be introduced to the child, but I never was. In fact, no one else had seen the boy come in, nor knew anything about a visitor. I watched again at the window when the master left the next morning, but this time he was alone.

I asked around of the servants, but again, no one in the house knew anything about a blonde boy. And the Lady Abernathy was gone for the summer, visiting her aunt in London. Being cursed with an unquenchable curiosity, I set about trying to find him in the house--no small task! Finally, I reached the north wing of the second floor--the master's rooms (which, I should point out, are on the opposite end of the house from milady's rooms).

Suddenly, from behind one of the doors, I heard the most pitiable sound of crying. I knew it immediately to be the boy. And though I guessed the door must be locked, I tried the handle. The crying stopped immediately, and I heard nothing but silence from then on.

I realized that none but me knew anything about the lad. For a while, I remained confused as to who he was—or as to why there was a young boy locked in a room upstairs at all! I suppose I must have been naïve. But not so for very long.

A few days later, I overheard several of the laundry women gossiping. Complaining about blood stains on the master's sheets. They began to make bets on which one of the servant wenches would find herself with child first. But I knew it was none of them. I knew exactly whose blood it was.

Out of pity, or of a mothering instinct, I cannot be sure, I went back up to that room the next time the master was out of the house. And I dared call out to the boy inside. To my surprise, he responded, and I could hear him come to kneel at the crack under the door. I knelt down too, and in that manner we began a communication that became regular over the next few months.

I used to bring him books, sliding them under the door, which he accepted gratefully. I brought him little sweets too, and what food I could fit under the crack, but it was always the books he most prized. I don't know how he was being fed at all, but the master must have had some accommodation for that.

One day, miraculously, we found the lock was left open. Even to think of that day breaks my heart. It was a foolish, foolish thing we did...

I opened the door, seeing him closely for the first time. Such a beautiful boy! His eyes were so stunning, yet so tragically sad. Acting quickly, I smuggled him down to the stables, bidding him hide until nightfall. He crouched into a cove, and I could not help but notice the pain he showed when he sat down on the ground. I pressed his hand, wishing him the Lord's guidance and speed. I knew I might never see him again--at least I hoped it would be so.

I went back into the house, continuing with my day as though nothing had happened, taking every spare moment to pray. The master came home not long thereafter. When he discovered Justin missing, he was in a furious rage! All of the servants felt it, though none but me knew the reason why. He was always a violent man, cruel and demeaning. But even the veteran servants said they had never seen him so tempered. He broke windows, furniture, and faces that night. I scurried the children off to a closet that they might not cross his path.

Finally, he left, and I heard him rounding up several of the male servants out in the yard. For hours they were gone, and I did not get a chance to see their return, as I was putting the children to bed. I prayed and prayed that Justin had escaped unharmed.

The next day, the master left late, and it was not until afternoon that I could sneak upstairs. I tapped quietly on the door, our secret pattern of knocks, hoping that no answer would come. But Justin answered. I heard him cry out in pain as he knelt down before the crack. Now it was I that was bawling for him. We sat and cried together, on either side of an oak door, for an hour. Finally, I asked him what book he'd like me to bring today. He asked for bandages instead.

Things went on in this manner for over a year. In that time, my lady returned from London, and I was very curious to find out whether she knew about Justin at all. I believe, after a while, she did know, but wasn't angered by it. In fact, I think she was grateful for his presence. For it meant that she was less frequently the target of her husband's cruel urges. Indeed, there were few of us in that house, from steward to stable boy, who wanted to cross paths with that violent man.

Finally, in the spring of 68, our master was called off to the Colonies. We none of us knew when, or if, he would be back, but the whole household was rejoicing to hear the news. Immediately after his departure for America, I ran upstairs to tell Justin, finding that, in a final act of depravity, the master had left the door locked. I think he still

thought that no one in the house ever knew about the boy, and would rather him perish alone in that room than set him free. I ran to tell my lady about it, and she silently gave over the key to the room.

For some weeks, perhaps even a month, Abernathy was a happy place to be. Though we had no reason to hope it, somehow everyone felt in his heart that the master would never be coming back. I took Justin under my wing, having him help me in tutoring the children, as he could read and write exceptionally well. But one day, as he and I were practicing French with the children, our Lady Abernathy entered the kitchen and pointed to Justin. "Come with me," she said sternly, and he obeyed. That was the last I ever saw of him.

One of the porters told me later that he'd seen the boy being bound at the wrists and placed onto a cart that was headed for town. At first I was angered that my lady would do such a thing. But then I realized that Justin really did serve no purpose, as far as she was concerned. Not any longer. If anything, his presence only served as a shameful reminder of her husband's terrible perversions.

On my next visit to Hereford, and for months after that, I consulted the town auction register. But never could I find any mention of a young Anglo boy being bought or sold. I wished I could have found him, even if only to tell him the news he'd no doubt be relieved to hear. That we'd just gotten a communication from Boston telling us that Abernathy was dead.

Chapter 13

Brian

I stare out the carriage window, dimly aware that night has fallen and the stars are coming out. I steal a glance at Deborah, who seems lost in her own thoughts. I am grateful for her silence, for were she to ask a response from me, I could not give one. My tongue seems paralyzed by the taste of my own shame.

In my head I replay every moment I shared with Justin. The mistrust, the misunderstandings...everything with new light shed upon it. Deborah's story horrified me—the notion that someone could so abuse Justin raises the very bile in my throat. But am I much better than Abernathy? Why did I bring Justin home in the first place? I've denied answering the question for so long, but the truth is as obvious as it is terrible. He was beautiful and I wanted him.

After a short time, I begin to see a giant shape loom against the night sky. The closer we get to it, the more of its enormity I see. It is the Abernathy mansion, a sprawling, ominous behemoth that seems to command the very

ground it sits upon. We pull up to the gate and are let inside, passing myriad statues and fountains that decorate the grounds.

We disembark, and Deborah bids me wait in the hall while she consults the steward. I cast my eyes about the grand marble staircase and Turkish rugs. Behind me and over the door is a giant painting, larger even than I am. In it sits a nobleman, covered in furs. One bejeweled hand rests on his knee, the other, atop of the head of a wolfhound. I would have to step backwards and crane my neck to see further up the painting, but I cannot. Not even morbid curiosity will compel me to look upon the face that so violated Justin. The story alone will haunt me.

Finally, Deborah returns, a short, peevish man at her side.

"Sir," he addresses me, dripping with condescension. "I have been informed of the mix-up regarding your slave. Do be assured that he has been cared for most appropriately while he has been with us."

"Thank you. Now, if you'll just show me to him..."

"Ah, unfortunately, sir, you'll have to wait. Lady Abernathy is presently entertaining some guests for dinner and will be indisposed for a few more hours."

"How does the Lady enter into it?" Deborah asks. "We know it's his slave, can't you just go fetch him right now?"

"Not without the Lady's approval!" he says, indignantly.

"Fine," she huffs, turning to wink at me. "We'll wait here in the parlor. Where do you have him kept anyhow?"

"Locked upstairs, in one of the master's old rooms," he answers, with a wave of his hand.

Deborah is struck aghast, as am I, but she composes herself quickly. "Thank you, Phillip." He departs.

"Deborah, please!" I whisper, my hands shaking in agitation. "We must get him out of there!"

"I know, do not fret!" she cries, already making her way out of the room. "I have a plan. You wait here, I will return presently." She departs, and I am left alone in the parlor, pacing and wiping my brow.

She returns momentarily, handing me a key and a candle. "Come, I will show you how to get upstairs. I had a duplicate made of that key as soon as the master was gone, and have hidden it in the kitchen since."

I follow her through several rooms, to the kitchen, and a narrow passageway beyond it.

"Behind this door you will find an old staircase," she instructs. "No one uses it, so look sharp for rats. It will lead you up to the north wing. All the rooms there are empty, but servants are about, so mind you go quietly. I will wait in the parlor should Phillip return. Go, now!"

She runs off, and I head upstairs, my heart pounding with nervous energy. Finally I find myself in the hall she spoke of, pitch dark save for my candle. I try the key on the first door I see, and the lock opens with a satisfying pop. I enter the room, and close the door behind me.

The shadows cast by my candle dance eerily around the still-furnished room. I shine light into the corner nearest me, startled to find the huddled body of Justin there on the floor. His arms are wrapped about his knees and covering his face.

"Justin?" I venture at a whisper, approaching his shaking form. "Justin, it's me, Brian."

He looks up tentatively, and his eyes widen. "Master?" he issues, his voice disbelieving. "Is it you?"

"Yes," I smile, crouching down before him. He throws himself at me, suddenly, arms fastening around my waist. For a moment I steady myself, so as not to drop the candle, before wrapping my arms around him in return. I am overwhelmed by the relief I feel, just to hold him, and have him safe!

I bury my face in his soft hair, and find that he is still shaking. I pull back some to discover that he is crying, and struggling to talk.

"Master, I am so sorry..." he chokes between sobs. "I did as you asked. You must believe me! I swear, I did not try to run off! Please believe me..."

"Justin, I believe you. I know what happened. I know...everything. It is my fault that this happened to you."

"No," he shakes his head against my chest.

"Yes, Justin." I pull him slightly away so that I can see his face. I wipe a tear from his cheek and smile. "Let me take the blame for once. It was a foolish thing I did."

"It was a kind thing you did. I knew then that you trusted me. And I was so terrified when I could not get back to you! I knew what you'd think of me..."

Now I am the one shaking my head. "If I doubted you, Justin, I was wrong to do it. I do trust you." He looks at me with tear-filled eyes, and I can see the fear still there. Fear of this place.

"Justin. I must go back downstairs and wait for the Lady to give me permission to take you home. But I will be back as soon as..."

"No, master, please!" He grabs my arm desperately. "Please don't leave me alone in here."

I regard him for a moment, his eyes begging mine to understand what he isn't saying. I know it all too well.

"Justin. I've spoken with Deborah." His eyes widen at her name.

I continue, "She's told me some of what's happened here. I know what you fear..."

His eyes take on a haunted, distant look. "He told me he'd find me, wherever I was. He told me if I ever got away, he'd find me and take me back." His eyes turn on me, now frantically. "And here I am, right back in his house! Please, you cannot leave me here!"

"Justin," I take his hand, desperate to allay his fear. "Deborah also told me something else. Shortly after you were taken from here, they received word from America. He's dead, Justin. He's not coming back."

He stares at me without seeing, his eyes dark. Finally, he closes them and a single tear slips down his cheek. I pull him towards me, gently, tucking his head under my chin.

"I won't leave you alone," I assure him. "I'll stay right here with you."

Chapter 14

December, 1770

Justin

Winter approaches, bringing snowy gusts from the mountains to the west. Last week, Brian and I took the carriage to Warbidge so that we may bring much of his work back to the house for the winter. He keeps us on a regular schedule though, saying that cold weather is no excuse for idleness. We work at the desk in his bedroom, as it is situated directly over the kitchen and stays quite warm on cold days.

It seems odd to think how afraid I was when we first got back from Abernathy. I was sure I'd receive nothing but scorn from William and Josephine. But Brian explained to them what happened, and they seemed to understand. William did, at least. Josephine still dislikes me, but she is not outwardly unkind, especially when Brian is around.

Still, I suppose it was easier to explain my "disappearance" to them, than it was to explain that he gave me my freedom. That, I know William does not understand. For a while he seemed unsure about how to talk to me. I was unsure myself! But thankfully, after some initial awkwardness, things seem to be back to normal. I still rise to assist Josephine with breakfast and help William with the animals. I still work with Brian at his paperwork, though he is teaching me more complicated things--accounting and figures. The only difference, really, is that I can leave anytime, if I choose it. And I am to call Brian "Brian" now, instead of "Master." He was adamant about that.

I still remember our conversation. It was in Hereford, the night he rescued me from Abernathy. He'd taken a room at an inn there in town, that we might rest the night and return home in the morning. Once we got to our room, I began to lie down on the floor, when he stopped me, saying I should take the bed. He would sleep on the floor.

I think I laughed at him outright. "I cannot take the bed while my master sleeps on the floor!" said I. "It's not right!"

He looked at me soberly, and shook his head. "Not your master, Justin. Not anymore." He pulled out some papers then and gave them to me. I think I read them through several times before grasping their full meaning.

I looked up at him, finally. "Do you no longer want me around?"

"Justin!" he laughed, shaking his head at me. "I'm freeing you, don't you understand? I do want you around, for as long as you'll stay. My home is yours. But not as a slave. Not any longer. If you wish it, you can stay as long as you desire. And if not, you can leave tomorrow, a free man."

He sat down on the bed, and beckoned me to sit next to him. I still stared at the papers in my hand, unable to speak.

"If you want to leave," he continued, "I will give you some money that you may start out with. I owe you, for all the work you've already done for me."

"No, you don't," I said, quietly.

"Yes, Justin. It's important. I don't want you to stay with me only because you cannot afford to leave. If you were to stay, I'd want it to be because..."

He looked down, then, unable to finish. But I knew what he meant. I knew it exactly. He quickly composed himself before I could speak.

"Tomorrow, then. When we return to the house, I will give you your payment, and anything else you need." He stood and walked to the window, his back to me. "You can go anywhere, Justin. Make any life you choose for yourself."

I watched him there for a while, before I went over to him. I touched his arm, that he might look at me. "And if I cannot decide tomorrow?" I wondered if he understood the implications of my words. That there was more for me to decide than just my place of residence.

"My offer stands," he said. "You may stay with me, as you have been, until you choose to do otherwise." He smiled slightly. "My only request is that you call me henceforth by my name. As we are equals from this moment on."

"Alright, Brian," I said, trying out the new word. "Thank you."

He nodded, and squeezed my shoulder slightly before walking back towards the bed. He then drew a tanner from his pocket. "I'll flip this in the air, and how it lands will determine who takes the bed, agreed?"

"Agreed."

If I remember, he missed the catch and the coin rolled under a crack in the floorboards. Or perhaps under the bed—I'm not sure which it was. Either way, we decided it would be all right to share the bed, in the spirit of equality.

I recall it being very pleasant to fall asleep that night, the gentle wheeze of his breathing beside me.

Brian

Life continues as it has been, and I know a contentedness I have not experienced in a long time. Justin and I have, I dare say, become good friends. I have become so used to his company that I fear the day he shall choose to leave. I know it will happen, eventually. Now, as winter is upon us, it makes perhaps more sense for him to stay, but I suppose the spring will stir his desire to leave. It pains me to think of it, but I am resigned. He is too young, too spirited, for me to hope he would want to stay here. It surprises me that he has even stayed this long.

Our days are filled with the common tasks of life. He asked me to teach him mathematics, and I am happy to do so. He still draws, for I see him at sketch now and again. He writes to Deborah often, and I said we might have her visit when the weather improves. He showed me once a portrait he'd drawn of her as an angel. He said that for all the time he'd spent in that room—hearing her voice but never seeing her—he assumed her to be an angel sent by God to keep him sane.

I don't ask Justin about his past, but every now and then he talks about it. He hints at a mother who died when he was very young—a beautiful blonde woman with a soft voice. After her death, he grew up on a trading ship; I assume his father was a merchant of some sort.

"He would never allow me to leave the boat," Justin said once, wistfully. "I never even knew what countries we visited. But every time we were docked, I would sit on the bow and draw whatever I could see of the port. I wish I

still had those drawings. Now that I am older and more learned, I might be able to guess from them where we had been."

Though he only mentioned it vaguely, I gather that one time, while docked at an English port, his father did bring him ashore. He mentioned being introduced to a wealthy lord, who took his hand after exchanging some money with his father. His father then left without looking back at him.

"But I don't remember when this was done," Justin said quietly, as he rubbed the mark on the back of his neck.

In every moment such as that, I stifle the desire to draw him close to me. To hold him. But I am not sure if he would want it. I'm not sure if he ever will. But I had set my heart on friendship, and I must be grateful to have even that.

Chapter 15

January, 1771

Justin

Brian has fallen ill. The doctor was here yesterday, and proclaimed it the lung sickness. Though he calls it that, I know what he means. It's consumption. I remember the symptoms in my mother—the fever, the sound of blood in her cough. I remember she didn't survive it.

The doctor has bled him, and we have been instructed to stay out of his room for three weeks, no matter what. Josephine is permitted to bring him food and tea twice a day, but none other. I volunteered to take her place, but the doctor forbade it. He said that since William and I work with the animals directly, we are more likely to carry disease than she.

I realize now that I am utterly terrified. Terrified that Brian will die, alone in his room, and I shall never see him again. And all this time I have wasted! Waited, and for what? I am happy here, yes. I enjoy my work; I am comfortable in this house. And I have that new idea of freedom still in my head—the notion that I can go anywhere, anytime I choose to. And yet none of it matters! Because every element of happiness I have is tied up in him.

I think of the dreams I've had recently. I want to visit France, Italy, Spain. See the great masterpieces of Venice, and an opera in London. I want to ride a camel and climb a glacier and learn Greek. But every time I think of those things, I think of him. I want him to show me those places, and teach me those lessons. And maybe I'll never do any of those things. Maybe I'll spend the rest of my life tending a farm on the wild moors of England. And it still seems a perfect life if he's in it.

Brian's fever has broken, and the doctor says I might see him today. He asks after our relationship, and I can describe myself only as his assistant. I wait until nightfall, after the doctor has left and the others have gone to bed. This was always our time.

Creeping quietly into his room, I find him asleep. He lies on his back, his face pale. Sweat beads his brow and his breath rattles ominously in his chest. His eyebrows are furrowed, as though his dreams are unhappy, and I cannot help but feel alarmed by his appearance. He is so unlike himself—the proud, strong, beautiful man with whom I've fallen in love.

I sit on the edge of the bed and watch him, willing him in my mind to wake up. Wake up and be well again, Brian. Everything's changed.

Suddenly, his eyes open, and he gazes up at me.

"Brian!" I whisper, not realizing that I had been crying until his hand reaches up to brush a tear off my cheek. He smiles weakly, not risking speech.

I feel a flutter in my chest, like I have suddenly started breathing after weeks of holding back. Immense relief floods through me, somehow convincing me that everything will be all right. I clasp his hand in mine, and kiss it. Shaking with emotion, I move his hand so that it points to my heart, and look at him with teary eyes.

He closes his eyes and exhales a breath, a tired smile on his lips.

February, 1771

Justin

Though snow still blankets the grounds, I can feel the air turning. Spring is on the horizon, and with each improving day does Brian's health improve comparably. Doctor Marston remarks often at his uncommonly quick recovery. Uncommon that he recovers at all, is what he doesn't say.

Afternoons I spend with Brian in his room. I show him the work I've accomplished in the morning, and he checks over my figures. He says that he needn't review them at all much longer, as my math has become flawless, but I ask him to do it anyway. He's grown restless confined to his bed, and I try to give him any tasks to occupy himself.

Today I asked, could I draw him? "After all," I say with a grin, "You are already sitting still."

"Charming," he says dryly. "But I should prefer not to be immortalized ghostly and gaunt with sickness."

"You are neither ghostly nor gaunt. Perhaps a tad gaunt."

"Thanks ever so," he grumbles.

I chuckle at his surliness. "I never knew you to be so vain."

"I'm not vain at all, merely uncomfortable like this. I prefer you to see me healthy."

"And I prefer to see you healthy. But in sickness you are no less beautiful to me."

He does not answer. Simply looks at me with those thoughtful hazel eyes. I take his hand in mine, and we sit in comfortable silence for a while. This has become regular for us, holding hands. Sometimes at night, when we are talking into the late hours and I grow tired, I will lay my head upon his chest and listen to his rumblings. He never comments about this, but always I can feel the feather touch of his fingertips in my hair.

Chapter 16

April, 1771

Brian

"I have you to thank for my recovery, Justin"

We sit together, perched upon the hill near the river. This very morning I was deemed fully recovered by the doctor, and am celebrating my new health with a serving of fresh air. This is the first I have been out of doors in months.

"Nay, it was your own will, I think. You are more stubborn than any illness," he jibes.

I exhale loudly, feigning annoyance, but he does not buy my offended airs. I never can get away with anything where he's concerned!

"In either case, you've been invaluable to me," I say, with sincerity.

"It pained me to see you ill."

"I know."

"There was another reason, yet, that I wanted you well again," he says shyly, his hand coming to rest lightly upon my knee. The world halts upon its axis.

"You should not say such things to me, Justin."

"Why not?"

"Because you make it very difficult to fight the urge to kiss you."

"And suppose I didn't want you to fight it?"

I look at him, nervously. This moment is dangerous, and I feel something like my resolve slipping away from me.

Justin seems to read my thoughts. "You are afraid to touch me," he states. It is not a question.

I nod. I am terrified.

He leans in, impossibly close, and whispers, "I am not afraid of you." A soft touch of his lips to mine, warm and promising. The smell of honey and youth dances around me, mingling with the springtime air.

Justin

Tonight, all through supper, I steal glances at Brian. He does his best to ignore me, but every now and again, I catch his gaze. Though nothing betrays his casual expression, I can see it there, in his eyes. A promise. That what began with a kiss on the hill today would be resumed, tonight.

My head is swimming with emotion. Excitement argues with nervousness, both mired in a dull, throbbing, anxious impatience. The very thought of it: his bed! I am so unversed in the ways of coupling that I know not what to expect. I know only that it will be nothing like it was with Abernathy. Because this time I want it too.

And though my head knows not what is in store, my body seems quite sure of itself. I endure supper sitting next to William on the bench, my hips shifted forward as far as possible under the table so as to conceal the obvious straining of my cock in my breeches. Brian can sense my discomfort, and I see the tiniest glint of amusement behind his eyes. He seems bent on my torture!

Finally, after what seems hours of agony, William and Josephine retire. I look to Brian immediately after they have closed the door behind them. He stares back at me from his chair for several moments, before rising and moving about the room, capping all the candles save one. The last he takes up, and begins towards the stairs. I remain in my chair, waiting for...something. Permission? Invitation?

At the bottom step he pauses, and looks back at me, a question in his eyes. Will you come?

There is only one answer. I rise and follow him up the stairs.

Chapter 17

Justin

I walk behind him down the narrow corridor to his bedroom. He goes inside, holding the door open for me. As I pass over the threshold, I feel the weighty significance of this act. I pause a moment before closing the door behind me.

For a nervous minute we merely stare at each other. Somehow I know that he needs me to move first in this. So I approach him slowly, placing my hands upon his solid chest and feeling the contours of his muscles underneath the shirt.

I lean up to kiss him, and his lips press upon mine with all the sweetness we'd shared before. But when our lips part, he does not draw away. Instead, I feel the hot tip of his tongue caress my lower lip and a searing lightening bolt shoots immediately to my groin. My tongue snakes out to meet his, and he opens his mouth to admit it. Our lips come together again, but this time open, host to the erotic play of our tongues between them.

He moves then, his lips tracing a fervid, wet path along my cheekbone and down my neck. I can feel my knees weakening under his ministrations, and he gently presses me back against the door to steady me. I feel his pliant lips next at my earlobe, sucking carefully while his fingertips dance down the front of my shirt, freeing buttons as they go.

Once liberated of my chemise, he kneels before me, gripping my sides with his large, strong hands. He kisses up and down my chest, and teases around my nipples before finally taking one into his mouth. Distantly, I hear myself moan aloud as he sucks upon it, the sensation causing my entire body to tingle. I can feel the bud hardening under his lips, echoing another hardening I feel down below. Suddenly he nips me bluntly with his teeth, causing me to gasp with unexpected pleasure.

He stands, taking my hands in his and leading me towards the bed. My pulse is racing as he looks at me, eyes dark with lust. He guides me to sit at the edge of the bed and kneels between my legs, kissing me again in that beautiful, wet way. As he leans into me, his stomach presses into my groin, clearly discovering the stiffness I bear.

I blush with embarrassment, feeling suddenly self-conscious. My only experience with this has been in my own private ministrations, often as I lie in bed, quick to attain a release. My cock has never been awake before in another person's presence, let alone a beautiful man such as this!

But he seems only to be pleased by the discovery. He sets to work undoing the ties of my breeches. I hold my breath as he tugs them down and over my begging cock, which now stands straight as a pole against my stomach. I watch his face for some sign that this is all right. That it is all right. The confirmation I seek comes in the form of his slow smile.

"Justin," he whispers, "you are more beautiful even than I'd dreamed." He begins a trail of soft, wet kisses along the insides of my thighs, closer, ever closer, to my rigid cock. I watch with wide eyes, disbelieving. Surely he won't actually kiss me there? And the closer he gets, the more desperately I hope he will.

The earth stops suddenly as I feel the first contact. His tongue, flattened and moist, strokes my shaft from bottom to top, before sucking the head into his mouth. I hiss and fall backwards on the bed, my spine liquefied by the molten heat engulfing me. Collecting the last reserves of my strength, I force myself up on my elbows, needing to watch him. His reddened lips that form a tight ring--that rise and fall upon my swollen organ, pressing me ever further towards the inevitable.

And I feel it, the white-hot urgency that builds in my groin, flowing upwards through every artery. It reaches my head, clouding my vision and my thoughts, a torturous, squeezing, blissful pressure. Vaguely, I think to stop him—to warn him somehow of what's going to happen. But my voice now knows only the language of moaning, and I can do nothing but feebly pat his hair.

Rising, clenching, demanding, screaming, my back arches in a sudden stasis before the dam breaks and it flows out of me. I collapse back onto the bed, gasping for needed breath.

Slowly regaining coherence, I feel around my stomach for the effects of my release, but can find nothing but sweat. I struggle to pull myself up into a sitting position and look at him, still kneeling between my legs. His lips are bruised red from their exertions and he grins slyly at me as he wipes the corner of his mouth.

"You drank it?" I say in disbelief.

He nods and rises up to kiss me. His tongue finds its way into my mouth, and I taste it there--my seed in his mouth--and suddenly nothing seems more perfect.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"I think," I begin, pausing as he stands to remove his shirt. "I think I should like to compare my taste to yours."

He smiles hesitantly, in slow realization of my intentions.

"You are certain?"

"Very certain."

He's beaming in earnest now, and begins to untie his breeches. "Have you ever before?"

"No. But I want to--if you will guide me," I say, feeling suddenly bold.

He stands before me, and slowly slides his breeches down over his hips, watching me watching him. Abruptly it springs forth and I struggle to keep my jaw from dropping. Enormous and beautiful, it stands proudly from its bed of dark, curly hairs. Now I am nervous...I doubt I could even fit my hand entirely around it, much less my mouth! But I also know that in this moment there is nothing I want more in this world than to do just that.

He moves toward me, positioning himself between my knees so that, seated on the low bed, I am at eye-level with it. Tentatively, I reach out to touch the swollen head. It feels like hot velvet under my fingers. Slowly I begin to stroke the shaft, marveling at the incongruity of tightly corded veins pulsing under tender, smooth flesh. I glance up at him; his head is tilted back, eyes shut, and mouth open in a wordless sigh.

A bead of clear liquid appears at his tip, and from sheer impulse, I lean in to steal it with my tongue. The taste is a mixture of heady and salty, of pure manhood unbound. Brian looks down at me and reaches around my head to stroke the short hairs at the back of my neck.

"Do not try to take it all," he advises. "Just the tip is alright. And mind your teeth...please."

"I promise," I say, returning his smile.

I lean in then, and begin placing small kisses all over and around the tip. When I finally open my mouth to take him in, he moans loudly, a sound that goes straight to my groin. The head alone fills my mouth and I move my lips upon it as much as I can. I work it around my mouth, using my tongue both to stroke and suck, in a determined mimicry of his previous actions upon me. I use my hands where my mouth cannot reach, as all the while his moans grow louder and more desperate.

I suddenly realize with wonder the awesome elation in giving pleasure. Each stroke of my tongue, each time that pulsing shaft moves between my lips, I feel a direct hardening of my own cock. And the passionate cries he emits are pressing me ever further. It is I that gives him this pleasure, I that induces him to beg under his breath: harder, please...yes... Even in this subservient act, I feel powerful, mighty. What a beautiful thing--two men that society would wish to segregate have become equals in the act of love.

With a sudden loud gasp, his grip on my hair tightens, and I feel warm liquid fill my mouth. I struggle to swallow it slowly, savoring the taste. I finally release his cock from my mouth, and he collapses weakly to his knees. He leans into me and we embrace, two warm, slick bodies, briefly sated. I clutch him to me, feeling his heartbeat echoing against my chest, gradually returning to a normal tempo. My lover.

Chapter 18

Brian

We lie entwined, taking a few moments' rest. But I suspect we are not finished for tonight; the eager attentiveness of his cock suggests that much more is to come.

"I never knew," he says, "that two men could make such pleasure."

I smile knowingly. "Justin my dear, that was only the beginning of what two men can do."

His eyes widen. "I want you to show me everything!"

"Perhaps not everything," I say. There is one thing I cannot ask of him. Not tonight, and maybe not ever. That ultimate act of closeness, no matter how much I desire it, treads too closely to the pain of his past. But I certainly do not feel slighted—as I told him, there are many, many things we can do with our passions.

"Turn over, and I will show you something," I say. He flops over easily onto his stomach, and does not see me wince at the sight of his scar-riddled back. But he never complains of pain, and though the lattice of ugly marks will remain with him for his life, they have all healed to dull, pinkish welts.

It suddenly becomes my sole desire to cleanse him of those scars. To erase all of the hurt and the suffering he endured. So I begin to kiss him—every inch of every line that mars his back. He hums with contentment and pulls the pillow under his head to settle himself comfortably. I crawl up, straddling his body, to softly kiss the blue-black writing on the back of his neck. I want every part of him born anew tonight.

Slowly I work my lips down along his spine, tracing its ridges with the tip of my tongue. Lower and lower my mouth travels, until I can feel the small, flat plane of his coccyx. I pause, giving him a chance to stop me, but he remains silent, clutching the pillow in anticipation.

I reach down to gently part the globes of his ass, and am rewarded with the heavenly sight of his tiny hole, sweet and tight in its path of damp, pale hair. I breathe on it gently, delighting in its little quiver, and begin to lick around and around it. Low moaning sounds come from his mouth, pressing me further. Finally, I wet the tip of my tongue and tap lightly at his entrance. He jerks suddenly and gasps with pleasure as I feel my own cock jump in response.

Now teasing his hole in earnest, I dance the tip of my tongue along his tiny folds, feeling him relax more and more with each pass. Gradually I press my tongue inside him and he moans so loud I fear he'll wake the house. But I am not about to stop now! I delve further, twisting and rolling my tongue within his tight ring of muscle.

My own shaft now throbbing with rigidity, I pull back slightly to enjoy the sight before me. His beautiful, perfectly shaped ass is splayed, exposing his rosy, puckered hole, now slicked and shining with my saliva. I glance up suddenly and for the first time I notice the tears running down his face.

"Justin," I say, alarmed, "have I hurt you?"

"No! No," he protests, rubbing his face into the pillow to dry it. "It feels...it just feels so...incredible. Like nothing I've ever known."

I smile and climb up to nuzzle his dampened cheek. He twists his upper body on the bed to kiss me, tentatively reaching his tongue into my mouth to taste himself there. Justin immediately takes notice of my swollen, aching cock pressed against his hip. He reaches down and begins to rub the shaft with agonizingly slow strokes.

"Brian," he whispers into my ear, "I want you to put it inside me."

It is a moment before I'm sure I heard him correctly, and when I am sure, the shock takes another moment to register. I halt his hand in its actions and shake my head.

"I cannot, Justin."

"Why not? It is what we both want," he says, arguing his point with another grasp of my solid member.

"I don't want to hurt you," I reply simply, though this is getting less and less simple with every stroke of his hand.

"You could never hurt me."

I shake my head again, but he begins to trace the sensitive skin behind my earlobe with his tongue. "Please, Brian..." he purrs, his voice more seductive than I could ever have dreamed. "Make me yours."

I grab him, grinding my lips into his in a feverish kiss. My discipline is now gone for good, banished from this bed, and he knows it. He pulls away from me and begins to twist around onto his stomach once again. But I stop him, turning him onto his back and covering his body with mine.

"Not like that," I say, kissing him sharply on the mouth. "I want to see your face."

I kneel between his knees and lift his thighs up off the bed, placing his legs on my shoulders. Spitting once, twice, into my hand, I begin to spread the moisture onto my shaft, careful not to rub it in too much. I take my time as he watches me, the pure craving evident in his face. I settle down over him, supported by my arms, my cock head positioned just before his tight entrance.

Pausing once more to give him a chance to refuse, I gaze into his eyes. His pupils dilated with lust, he merely smiles slightly and reaches his hands around to grasp my buttocks, urging me in. A slight push against him and he gasps, gritting his teeth against the pain. The head of my cock is inside, squeezed almost unbearably by his tiny hole. The rest of my cock begs me to go deeper out of sheer envy.

But I wait, wait for him to relax his muscles, and he does, allowing me to slide into the utter paradise of his velvety channel. We both groan aloud at the completion of it, my organ buried inside him to the hilt, caressed and pressed by every breath he takes. I settle on top of him to kiss him deeply, our tongues seeking the same connection shared by our groins. Slowly I begin a rhythm, stroking his hard, weeping cock in time with my long thrusts.

I see heaven there, in his eyes. Blue as the sea, but steadier, like the throb of the rolling heath. Until everything blue is eclipsed and together we are consumed, from inside out, by the white, pulsing torrent of heat.

Much later, we lie together, Justin's body wrapped about mine. His head rests under my chin, and his light breathing tickles my chest as he sleeps. I remain awake, plagued by the fear which has accompanied me for some time. The fear that tomorrow will be the day he'll choose to leave. And if not tomorrow, it could be the next day, or the one after that, or a month from now. It is inevitable; that much has not changed. But after tonight, I don't know if I could bear to watch him go.

Is this what it means to be in love? To spend half of every day overjoyed and the other half worrying over when the dam will break? Or is this merely my own curse, for being in love with another man? An ordinary relationship has so much to support it: rings, family, God and all of society. All the trappings that sanctify and solidify a couple's union. But what can two men have? Words, only. Promises at most. And from Justin I don't even have those.

I sigh and pull up the blanket, clutching him ever closer to me.

Epilogue

Brian

I wake earlier than usual, and find myself alone. I sit up and glance around the room with a tightening in my chest. Justin's clothes, and indeed any evidence of him, are gone. I draw on my clothes and stumble downstairs, praying that I will find him in the kitchen. Josephine is there, and fixing breakfast.

"Where is Justin?" I ask with feigned disinterest.

"Tsk," she hisses. "Damned if I know with that one. Should be helpin' me in here and he's off God-Knows-Where."

The vice around my heart tightens another turn as I shuffle out of the kitchen and through the sitting-room. With a heavy sigh I walk outside to the barn to count the horses, desperately needing to find them, one-and-two. Upon entering the barn, thankfully, I find both horses safely in their stalls. Beyond them, I hear William talking, and before long, a telltale blond head appears in my sight. Justin and William are crouched in one of the rear stalls, their backs to me.

Justin senses me suddenly and turns, waving me over with a knowing smile. "Brian! Come look!"

I chide myself mentally for my unwarranted fears, and walk over to join the two. Before them on the ground are two sodden, matted newborn calves, struggling to stand on new legs. Their breath creates clouds in the chilly morning air. A few paces away sits their mother, watching us warily but showing little interest in her calves.

"Twins," confirms William.

"She must have given birth in the night," says Justin.

"Aye, I could hear her bellowing all night. I can't believe that neither of you heard the commotion," says William. Justin and I shake our heads with all due innocence. "'Tis unfortunate, anyhow," he continues.

"But I still don't understand why," Justin cries. "They seem in perfect health to me!"

"It's just a fact, lad. Twin calves are always born weak. You can see how their mother even shuns them. We're best off disposing of them now."

"But they're of good size, and look to be standing well," Justin pleads. "I know they'll grow up to be fine!"

William rolls his eyes and sighs, indicating that he has been arguing with Justin over this for quite some time. "'Tis your decision, sir," he tells me with a pat on the shoulder and retreats to the house.

Justin turns to me. "I'll feed them myself if she will not. I'll take care of them all summer. And you'll see--by winter they will be grown and strong. Will you let me?"

The point of his question is lost to me, as my mind lingers on two words. All summer. I struggle to process the rest of his request while my heart nearly leaps out of my chest!

"Yes...of course," I say finally.

He beams fully, even clapping his hands with excitement.

"All summer?" I have to ask. "Does that mean you'll stay...for a while?"

He draws closer and puts his arms around me, glancing briefly behind me to be sure we are alone. "For as long as you'll have me."

"You know I'll have you," I say with a mischievous smile, leaning in to steal a kiss. "I love you."

He smiles up at me with genuine happiness. "I know."

I chuckle, warmed by his confidence. "You are so certain?"

"Only now, because I recognize the same feeling in myself. It is love. I didn't believe it would find me, and you didn't believe in it at all. But we created it, here, between us."

He confirms his words with another kiss, this one deep and passionate, leaving my knees weak. He prances joyfully out of the barn in the direction of breakfast, and I can do nothing but follow his lead. This boy will be the death of me, I think, shaking my head. So here I go, happily into the fire.

Abandon

Prologue

February, 1772

Brian

"...then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?"

Josephine reads aloud as we three sit, blandly pretending to follow along in our own Bibles. The snow has compiled to waist-height, making travel, even to church, impossible. But Josephine will not forgive a lapse in piety, even for inclement weather. So nary a Sunday may we miss her afternoon-long devotionals.

Of course Justin doesn't own a Bible, so he must share mine, taking the opportunity to practically sit on top of me. On the opposite side of the table, William seems to be actually paying attention to the reading, and does not notice that Justin's hand has crept down, and is currently in my lap.

I steal a warning glance at him, but he ignores me. I am far too sensitive in that region, after our activities this morning were so bluntly interrupted. Justin and I had stolen out to the barn, having agreed that the bedroom was too great a risk while William and Josephine were awake and about the house. We had been in a most...compromising...position in one of the empty stalls when suddenly we heard the heavy door to the barn opening. It was William, who (by the sheer grace of God) went about feeding the horses at the south end of the barn without coming near enough to discover us. Still, that was too close an escape for my liking.

Suddenly, I feel Justin's hand squeeze my cock through the fabric and I gasp aloud. Josephine slams her Bible down onto the table, and glowers at me. She finally continues, the droning of her voice accompanied by Justin's furtive snickering.

The sermon lasts for several hours, until finally Josephine's pace begins to slacken. We watch attentively, desperate for a sign that she will finally stop and remove herself to the kitchen to begin supper. Eventually, after a few more verses, she closes her Bible and crosses herself. The rest of us glance around at each other, desperate not to move or make a sound that will cause her to begin again.

At last, Josephine gets up from the table and heads towards the kitchen. Suddenly I see Justin's mouth opening, most likely to say something that will get us all in trouble, and I jab him under the table. William stifles a chortle, and we all watch her retreating form until finally she is gone, and our laughter bursts out of us, along with several hours' worth of yawns and stretches.

"Your turn to put the Bibles away, imp," I say, swatting Justin on the head. He sticks his tongue out at us and collects the books in his arms. We watch as he struggles to carry the heavy books to the library.

"Do my eyes betray me," William asks, his eyes narrowing on Justin's retreating form, "or has he a piece of straw in his hair?"

Chapter 1

Brian

"We should be more careful," I admonish later, as we are wrapped about each other in the large master bed. I finally moved myself into this room over the summer, somehow no longer feeling uncomfortable about it. Now, Justin can come and go from his room to mine without venturing out into the main passageway.

Justin shifts his limbs against me, raising himself on one elbow. "Do you think that William suspects us?"

"No... Not yet. I think the notion is too uncommon for him to come to on his own."

Justin is silent for a long time, his fingers tracing light circles on my chest. When he finally speaks, his voice is distant and pale. "Is this wrong?"

"Is what wrong?"

"Us. Our love."

I sigh sadly, and reach up to caress his cheek, but he pulls away. Rolling onto his back, he stares gravely at the ceiling. "The world would have that we didn't exist."

"Why do you care what the world would have? We have each other. That's all there is for men like us."

"That and a life full of secrecy and shame," he says bitterly.

"Are you ashamed of us?" I ask.

"No," he declares, without hesitation. "But according to the law, and God, and everyone else, what we do is too despicable even to speak of. They think us an aberration."

"Justin, why fret over what we cannot change? As long as no one knows about us, there will be no one to judge us."

"So this is our life, then? How long will we hide?"

He searches my face for an answer, but I have none. None to placate him, nor any for myself. Gradually he pulls himself toward me again and emits a quivering sigh, tucking his head under my chin. I wrap my arms about him and gently run my fingers through his flaxen hair. It has grown a measure, now almost long enough to hide the word that marks his neck. After a time, I feel his muscles begin to relax and the tension wanes from his body.

"Nothing about this feels wrong," I say softly. "It can't be. In all my life, I never knew happiness until I met you."

He clutches my hand in his and we hold onto each other into sleep.

From deep within the brume of slumber, I feel the bed shift under me. Justin pulls gently out of my grasp and begins to get up, quietly so as not to wake me.

I reach out and grab his arm. "Stay. Please."

"Brian...you know I cannot," he whispers, pulling on his chemise. I can barely trace his form in the darkness. "Josephine will be looking for me to help with breakfast. I think you'd rather she not find me naked in your bed."

Sadly, I withdraw my hand, knowing fully that he is correct. He kisses me softly and slips out the door, leaving me alone to stare at the high vaulted ceilings of the master bedroom.

Chapter 2

April, 1772

Brian

Spring approaches quickly, the snow melting deep into the boggy heath. Better weather spells a resumption of outdoor chores, and for the past several weeks, Justin and I have been careful not to be overt in our attentions to each other. But today, when Josephine hands him a pail and washrag, sending him upstairs to clean the floors, I know I will not be able to resist for much longer.

After a reasonable time has lapsed, I rise from my position at the table, claiming that hours of poring over financial charts have given me a headache.

"I think I shall go upstairs and lie down for a bit," I announce, with all the innocence I can muster.

"The boy is up there cleanin'," Josephine mutters, not looking up from her knitting.

"'Tis no matter," I reply. "He shan't disturb me." And with all the ease of a man pure of heart, I put away my ledgers and climb the back stairs.

I come upon him in the newly appointed guestroom--my former bedroom. He is on his hands and knees, scrubbing the floor with his back turned to me. How could even the most pious of men resist this?

Justin notices me as I approach him, and sits back on his heels. He wipes at his brow with a wet sleeve and smiles up at me, a picture of unequalled beauty. I kneel behind him and place my hands on his shoulders, kneading the tight muscles there. He purrs happily, letting his head loll back against my chest as I work over his arms. Slowly, I reach for the hem of his shirt, my fingers dancing along his tight waist.

But he surprises me suddenly and twists out of my grasp, standing and pulling me up with him. Within seconds, he has my shirt cast aside, my breeches down around my ankles, and is pushing me back against the wall. Without preamble, he drops to his knees before me and swallows the head of my cock.

"Justin...ahh..." I whisper, even as my aching organ is being nursed by his ravenous mouth. "We must be quiet..."

But I know it is a warning more to myself than to him, for I tend to lose all control when I am under his sway. I have found Justin to be not only an innately talented lover, but also a very eager student. His curiosity--and his stamina--are almost unquenchable. And he devours my cock now with the unbridled appetite of a starving man.

Gradually, he changes his pace to a slow, tortuous building of pressure. I can feel my muscles pulling and the liquid heat of my pulse throbbing in my veins. He uses his mouth only--a talented play of lips and tongue and throat that has even me astounded. He is utterly masterful; the vision of his blonde head bobbing up and down upon me is almost too gorgeous a site to bear.

Even as I watch him, my eyesight is growing hazier, but I can tell that his right hand is working to free his own cock from his breeches. Looking down again, I can see his shoulder begin to bounce with a steady rhythm that matches that of his mouth. And the knowledge that he is pleasuring himself in time with me is so intensely arousing, I feel my end rapidly charging upon me. I want to wait--wait for him to catch up--but my control is slipping from my grasp.

Now I feel his other hand at my cock, and he slides one single finger into his mouth. He works it in alongside my shaft, until it is fully wetted with saliva. He pulls the finger out again, never missing a beat, his lips still working my swollen, burning cock. My release is in sight--so brutally close--every inch of my body on fire.

I feel his left hand again, cupping and caressing my sac, feeling behind it... when suddenly that finger slips inside me and I gasp--that blissful pinch of intrusion--my hole clenching, fluttering around him. In a flash of burning heat, a sea of hot sparks explodes behind my eyes. I hear myself moaning--shouting--his name as my release pours into his mouth.

Before I am even recovered, he stands and kisses me, tongue probing my mouth as his right hand still works his own anxious cock. I struggle to break the kiss, needing to watch him-- watch this private, gorgeously erotic act he is willing to share with me. Within seconds he grasps at my neck and moans, and I feel warm streams of his semen bathing my stomach.

When his emission finally abates, I pull him to me, pressing my forehead to his as we pant together, weak-kneed and weary.

"God..." I whisper, overwhelmed by the magnitude of sensation. I can still hear my heartbeat, pounding ceaselessly in my ears.

Justin pulls back suddenly. "Brian, that pounding..."

"I know," I reply sluggishly. "You can hear it too?"

He is scrambling to re-tie his breeches now, and finally I realize that the pounding is not coming from my own head, but from the hallway. Someone is knocking on the door to the master suite.

"Josephine is looking for you!" Justin cries, tossing my shirt at me. I battle with the sleeves, my pants still around my ankles, when the knocking stops and I hear Josephine's shuffle approaching the guestroom. For lack of quicker thought, I dive into the bed and cover myself, just as she opens the door.

"Mister Brian!" she shouts, surprised. "Why are you not in yer own room?"

I ransack my brain for a plausible excuse, but Justin pipes up. "I thought I'd disturb him less if he rested in here," he explains. "There's less furniture I must move around in this room." A genius, this boy!

"Aye," Josephine replies, apparently convinced. "Then get to it. You might have finished the job by now, were you worth what you ate."

"Josephine," I scold, "he's doing a fine job." I can't stand for her to berate him so, as though he were still a slave and not an equal member of this household. But she will never grant him any respect. "What is it you were looking for?"

"There's a postboy downstairs needs to see you."

"Right away," I respond curtly, hoping she'll see fit to leave. She does finally, but not without casting one final glower in Justin's direction. But he is already back to work.

Now able to get out of bed, I redress myself and walk over to Justin, who chuckles at the sight of my shirtfront--conspicuously stuck to my semen-covered chest.

"She treats you terribly," I lament. "I'm sorry for it."

"She is an old woman," he replies, simply. "It does not insult me."

"You're a saint." I crouch down to cup his cheeks in my hands, planting a firm kiss on his lips. He gazes up at me with those miraculous blue eyes. "The most beautiful saint to adorn the heavens."

"And the least deserving," he replies with a wink, giving a final poke to the front of my pants.

"Perhaps," I chuckle in agreement. "But in your wickedness I am so very, very blessed."

I kiss him once again, breathing my sated gratitude against his lips, and go downstairs to see what the post has brought me.

My dear cousin,

With immense shame, I realize that it has been almost three years since last we saw each other! An unforgivable offense on my part, as you are not only my cousin, but a cherished friend.

So, if it be not too great an imposition, I should like to pay you a visit. City life has become so tedious of late, and I am aching for some of that unspoiled country air that you seem to favor. Besides that, I have a matter of great import to discuss with you. But I shall leave you in the dark until you agree to see me!

I eagerly await your response.

Ever your loyal friend,

Timothy Kinney

Chapter 3

June, 1772

Justin

I grasp Brian's shoulders and hold my breath, a common reflex whenever he pulls out of me. He is always careful to withdraw slowly, gently, but it is still jarring. That sudden absence of his long, thick cock inside me. That feeling of emptiness, as though a part of my very self has been removed.

He rolls off of me and collapses in a gasping, sweaty heap. Though the night was chilly, the room is heated from our exertions, steam fogging the narrow paned windows. I turn to face him and cannot help but laugh.

"What are you smiling for?" he pants, beginning to smile himself.

"You are so beautiful," I explain.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Especially like this, when your face is flushed, and your hair a fright."

His hand flies up abruptly, self-consciously patting down his hair. Of course I am laughing even more, now. Without warning he tackles me, wrapping his legs around mine and smothering me with kisses. I pretend to struggle, but end up only giggling uncontrollably until tears are pouring from the corners of my eyes.

Having completely immobilized me, he waits patiently for me to quiet down, an amused expression on his face. "And do you know when you are most beautiful to me?" he asks.

"Tell me."

"Immediately after you have shot all over yourself."

I want to laugh again, but I realize quickly that his mood is quite serious. He begins to rub his body against mine, my already-stiff cock straining in the friction. "Yes..." he purrs seductively, "when you lie on your back, covered in your own seed...with my seed leaking out the back of you." He begins to kiss along my chest, around my nipples as he murmurs. "I become so thirsty for it...want to lick every drop off of your stomach...and out of your ass..."

"Yes..." I moan.

He pushes himself up off of me, and lifts my legs, spreading them apart. I hold onto my knees, exposing my well-plowed asshole to him. He dives down immediately, licking and sucking at my sensitive, soft flesh. The muscles of my ass are tired from their previous strain, and his tongue slips easily inside the loose ring. I can feel him deep inside me, lapping up his own juices, and the very thought of it drives me wild.

My own cock has begun to leak, a bead of clear liquid lingering at the tip. Somehow knowing exactly what I need, Brian reaches up and begins to stroke me. Slowly at first, then more rapidly, matching the strokes with sharp jabs of his tongue in and out of my ass. I feel myself beginning to shake uncontrollably, the pressure building, arching, until I explode in a tempestuous fury, whitish streams streaking my stomach.

I moan deliriously and settle back against the pillow as Brian's raises his head, licking his beautiful lips. He then climbs on top of me and completes his fantasy, laving my sticky abdomen with his hot tongue.

Several rounds later, we have both finally consigned defeat, and lie entwined in the moonlight. My muscles feel as porridge, but I am growing sleepy, and it is time to leave for my own room. As always, he plays at a struggle as I pull out of his grasp, but ultimately I draw myself away, weakly trudging around the room in search of my clothes.

"My cousin arrives tomorrow," he says lazily, watching me dress.

"Yes," I reply, hunting under the bed for my stockings. "I look forward to meeting him."

"You do?"

"Of course! I wish to meet everyone in your family."

"Justin..." he starts, hesitantly. "You know I cannot introduce you as...my lover."

"I know, Brian. I understand." And I truly do understand. But...I admit...it still hurts.

He sighs unhappily. "I wish it wasn't this way."

"Brian, it's alright." I walk back over to him and sit down on the bed, not yet feeling ready to leave.

"It's unfair," he laments. "To both of us. If you were a woman, I could give you a ring and the world would pat me on the back. William himself would probably jump with joy."

"Would you rather I was a woman then?" I ask, still amused at the thought of William jumping up and down.

Brian ponders the question a moment, looking me over from head to toe. "No," he decides finally, a slow smile appearing on his face. "If you were a woman, I would never lust after you as I do."

"Hmm..." I sigh, taking his hand and languidly rubbing it against my growing erection. "Then I suppose you should make the most of my manhood while you have it."

He laughs in agreement and pulls me over onto the bed, that we may begin again.

Chapter 4

Justin

The morning sings crisply in anticipation as we work to prepare the house for our guest. William is dressed in his finest livery, and Josephine polishes and re-polishes the silver. I sit with her in the bright, cozy kitchen, the smell of baking bread dancing in my nose. I am hard at work at de-feathering a pheasant that is bound for our supper, when I hear the unmistakable clatter of hooves and the creaking groan of carriage wheels.

I scramble from my bench to join William and Josephine in the sitting-room, the three of us forming a customary servant greeting line near the door. Brian goes out; I can hear talking and laughing out in the courtyard for several minutes. I am aching to peek outside, but I dare not move from my post.

Finally the door bursts open again and Brian walks through, with his arm around his cousin's shoulders. The man is about Brian's age, though not nearly as handsome. He is just shy of stocky, with closely-cropped hair that is making a gradual sojourn away from his forehead. And though he looks as though he has never seen a day's labor in his life, his face is cheerful and good-natured.

"Ahh," he cries, looking around the room. "It seems an age since I have been here."

"It has indeed been a long time," Brian replies.

"You've maintained it well, I see," the man says, more soberly. He turns to Brian and places one hand on his shoulder. "Your father would be proud."

"Thank you," Brian says genuinely, removing his cousin's coat. I hold out my hands to take it and Brian nods at me briefly, smiling his thanks. He turns back to his cousin and leads him to the chairs by the fire. "And your father? How fares he these days?"

The two men settle in, conversing about common acquaintances and events since their last parting. William goes out to bring in Mister Kinney's carriage, and Josephine and I head to the kitchen finish preparing the supper. I had assumed that Brian would want to eat alone with his cousin, but when I lay place settings for only two, he immediately inquires after the rest of them.

Our meal is dominated by the conversation between Brian and his cousin, who seem to have endless relatives about whom to discuss. Josephine, William and I eat in polite silence, and I am quite content simply to watch Brian talk. Now and then, he sneaks a glance at me and smiles. His face is bright with happiness, a contagious joy that none of us can escape.

Gradually, the three of us excuse ourselves to clear the table, but Brian and Mister Kinney remain. Their boisterous laughter echoes even into the kitchen, and makes me smile to myself as I clean the dishes. Eventually, Brian appears in the doorway to the kitchen, and calls me over to him.

"Justin, would you mind bringing us another bottle of wine? We've almost gone through the first."

"Certainly," I laugh, already noticing the alcohol's effect on him. On my way to the cellar, I witness Brian taking William aside and bidding him send Josephine to bed. I can assume from this that he and his cousin plan to stay up quite late, and do not want to offend any sensitive ears with their bawdy talk.

Hours pass, Josephine now soundly in her bed. William and I remain in the kitchen, diverting ourselves with a game of chess by the candlelight. He is yawning profusely; this is much later than his typical bedtime, but as servants, we may not retire until Brian's guest does. However, the boisterous laughter and shouting seem only to accelerate as the night progresses. I do not mind it; it warms me inside to hear Brian's laughter fill the house, and even William chuckles to hear it.

After a time, Brian stumbles into the kitchen, claiming they are ready for a third bottle.

"I shall get it," I say quickly, rising up to spare William the trouble. He is near about to fall asleep in his chair.

I retrieve a new bottle from the cellar and head into the sitting-room. Brian calls out to me loudly, his glass raised in the air. "Ahh, Justin!"

"Justin!" echoes his cousin, also saluting me with his empty glass. I struggle not to laugh outright; they are both clearly as drunk as cobblers. I offer to refill Mister Kinney's glass first and he holds it out to me, returning to his conversation with Brian.

"You know, cousin, I don't know whether to be insulted that you've invited no ladies to join us. Know you no comely country women to introduce to me?"

"Timothy," Brian mutters, "have you nothing but women on your mind at all times?"

"Is there any more entertaining occupation?"

"Hmph," Brian grunts dispassionately, before turning his attention on me. He suddenly grabs me, pulling me into his lap. "Who needs women when I have this?"

I struggle nervously, but Brian maintains a tight grasp on my waist. His cousin laughs throatily, clearly assuming this all to be a drunken joke. Thankfully, he is well beyond coherence, so I pray only that William cannot hear the goings-on from the kitchen.

I twist around to face Brian, hoping that he will see the concern on my face and come to his senses. But he is far from lucid. I silently mutter a quick prayer that he will not say anything to get us into serious trouble.

"Well, Timothy, am I not a lucky man?" Brian asks, running one hand along my jaw. He leans in to place a soft kiss on my neck as I continue to test the grip he has on my waist. His tongue darts out, leaving a hot, wet mark behind my ear, and I can feel my cheeks blush crimson.

"Perhaps if we dressed him up, we would not know the difference," his cousin adds. "He is rather pretty." Both men laugh even harder, and nervously I play along, desperate for some means of escape. Before Brian does or says something truly dangerous!

But Timothy seems rather amused with this little game, and suddenly pulls me out of Brian's grasp and onto his own lap. I glance nervously back at my lover, who now looks as though a storm cloud has just passed over his face.

Brian jumps up, his expression feral, and yanks me away from his cousin. "Justin," he commands furiously, "go to bed."

I all but run out of the room and up the stairs.

For a long time I lie awake in the dark, too worried to fall asleep. How many times have we come so close to being found out? And tonight! Saved only by the alcohol that addles his cousin's brain. Were he sober, I am sure he would not be so amused by Brian's antics! I pray that he not remember any of this in the lucidity that the morning shall bring!

I must talk to Brian, the moment I see him again! He was right; we do need to be more careful, and more cautious. Especially during his cousin's visit, we must stay as far apart from each other as possible.

I must have fallen asleep, for I wake groggily to find Brian lumbering over me in my small bed, and struggling his way under the covers. I think briefly to protest, but I am too tired, and he too wonderfully warm. His solid arms encircle me and I press my face against his heated chest. Within moments he is snoring, holding me in a tight grip even in sleep.

I resolve that caution can wait until tomorrow.

Chapter 5

Brian

The carriage rocks and sways, stumbling over loose stones on the road and sending bolts of pain to my skull. Though it is already late in the day, I am still not fully recovered from last night's drinking binge. My head throbs mercilessly, as though someone was tapping upon my forehead over and over. Timothy seems equally affected; I noticed his eyes squeeze in pain when the carriage first jerked violently to a start. He has been uncharacteristically silent for the duration of our trip.

However, since neither of us wants to admit to drinking too much, we set out this afternoon with our original plan: to take in The Beggar's Opera at the Hereford Playhouse. I had promised Timothy a bit of culture on his visit,

though he complained of having more than enough of that in London. In any case, it is a good reason to be away from the house for a day.

I woke this morning in Justin's room, unsure as to how I'd gotten there, or what had transpired in the night. The entire evening is a blur to me. I tried to corner Justin this morning after breakfast, hoping to find out from him why I had ended up in his bed. His answer was vague and brief, but from it, I gather that I had been treading in some dangerous waters. He told me that we should exercise much more caution while Timothy is here, and has avoided me since.

So onward we ride, Timothy and I, in the direction of town. An innocent evening of theater awaits us, a safe distance from my secret lover and the imprudent behavior he inspires in me.

The theater fills quickly, already choked with the best and brightest of local society...if it can be deemed as such. The red velvet walls are gilded in crackling gold paint, a gaudy show that surrounds the great swell of patrons milling about in advance of the first curtain.

Timothy and I are already seated in a box on the left, a good distance above the house below. We are perfectly suited both for observing the stage and for spying upon the audience, and Timothy takes this opportunity to point out the various women he deems suitable for me.

"Come now, cousin, what say you about that girl in the burgundy gown?"

"Too slight," I reply, disinterestedly.

"Too slight? Then there--to the right of the proscenium--the brunette in the green frock."

"Too tall."

"Brian!" he cries in exasperation. "I'll admit to some deliberation, but now I am quite certain. You are the most fickle bachelor in all of England!"

I sigh and lean back in my seat, stretching my legs. "I have no answer for you, Timothy. These women don't excite me."

"Well," he says with a sly grin, "you allow me the perfect opportunity to tell you my plan. The very thing I came to you to discuss!"

I raise an eyebrow and wait for his proclamation.

"I want you to come to London."

"I'd love to," I reply. "It's been forever since I've been to the city, and I should very much like to see your parents again."

"Outstanding! Then it's settled! And first thing upon my return home, I shall find you a flat in my neighborhood. The fun we'll have, cousin!"

"Wait, Timothy. A flat?"

"Yes, of course! Where do you think you shall live? Not with me, I hope! I haven't the space at all."

"Live?" I exclaim. "You didn't say that I should live there! I thought you invited me to visit."

"No! Well, yes, you may visit...but I want you to move to London, once and for all."

"Whatever for?"

"Brian. Friend. Must I remind you of our conversation of nigh a moment ago?"

"Yes, clearly you must!" I reply, not understanding him at all.

"There is no woman in all of Herefordshire that interests you! You said it yourself!"

"Ach, women again?"

"Brian, this is your future I'm considering! You've thirty years behind you. Do you intend to be a bachelor forever?"

"You're a bachelor, and you're barely younger than I am."

"Aye, but not for long! In fact, shortly upon my return to London, I shall propose to one of three beautiful ladies who have my eye."

"Three?"

"Yes, I haven't decided which."

I cannot help but laugh at the absurdity of this conversation. Here is my cousin, hoping that the prospect of innumerable women will lure me away to London! Still, for the humor I pretend, I can feel the throbbing of a headache coming on.

"Well, sir," I say, desiring a change in topic, "I would be delighted to meet your fiancée, whoever she may be."

"Then you'll move to London?"

"No, I shan't!" I say, laughing again. "But I will visit, sometime after the harvest."

"Brian," he turns to me, more seriously now. "It is with your best interests at heart that I recommend this. City life would do you well."

"And what of my farm?" I ask, beginning to be annoyed. It seems everyone has an opinion about what is best for me!

He stops himself, choosing his next words mindfully. "I know what the farm means to you, cousin...but your father would want you to be happy."

"I am happy."

"Well, won't you be even happier in London society, where you could find an attractive wife and start a family?" When I respond only by folding my arms sullenly across my chest, he continues, a foreboding tone in his voice. "People will begin to think you strange, living out on the moors all alone."

"I'm not alone!"

"Servants don't count, Brian," he says, dismissing my claim with a flick of his hand. "You know what I mean."

I stare at the stage crossly, willing this conversation to be over. An awkward silence ensues between us, and I can feel the heat rising in my face. Blessedly, the house lights are put out and the conductor taps our attention towards the rising curtain.

Chapter 6

Justin

I sit in my bedroom, my chair pulled up to the window. Though my paper and a pen are in front of me, I am not inspired to draw. Instead I find myself waiting...staring out my open window into the dense blackness of the night. It has been quite humid for so early in June, and the low-hanging clouds block any streams of moonlight from entering my room.

I light a third candle, then a fourth, till shadows dance around the room, chased by the yellowish glow. I sit on the bed and ponder resuming my book, but I have not the patience for it tonight. I am restless. I have been anticipating Brian's knock, knowing that he would come to me once he saw his cousin off, and Josephine and William went to bed. We haven't arranged it; we haven't even spoken much in the past couple of days. But I know he'll come.

Finally, I hear his soft sequence of taps upon my door. He enters without a word, and comes to sit upon the bed. Silently he leans over, laying his head in my lap. I run my fingers through his auburn hair, not wanting to break the peace of this moment. But I am unsure as to the reason for his melancholy.

"You must be tired," I estimate. Brian and Timothy had been quite late in returning from the play last night, and were up very early again this morning to go fishing.

"No, I am not," he replies quietly, voice muffled by the cloth of my trousers.

"Are you sad that your cousin left today?"

"No. I enjoy his company, but can only stand so much of it."

There is something unsettled in his voice; I cannot place it. But I know not to press. He will reveal it to me on his own time, if at all. I want to tell him how much I've missed him. Even though it has only been two days, I've felt a great ache in my heart, not to be able to talk to him or see him at length.

A long silence stretches between us, before Brian speaks again. "I hate this hiding too, Justin."

"I know," I sigh, resettling our bodies so that I might wrap my arms around him. "But...It was wrong of me to complain before about it. There is no other way."

He squeezes me a little tighter.

"I wouldn't trade this for any other life," I whisper against his mouth, nudging his lips into a kiss.

Brian

I sit patiently as Justin slowly unbuttons my chemise, lightly dragging the tips of his fingers along my chest. With each touch, I can feel layers of tension being stripped from me, as though under his hands I am being cleansed of my anxiety. Once at my waist, he removes my shirt entirely and steps back from the bed.

He stands before me, the longing evident in his eyes, and slowly pulls his tunic over his head. His golden hair is tousled and his face flushed...he looks every bit a paragon of wantonness. The skin of his chest glistens from the humidity, and I long to run my hands across it.

He reaches now to his waist, languidly pulling at the ties, and taking entirely too long for my tastes. Instead of undoing them, he twists and rolls them in his hands, knowing that I watch every movement with agonizing impatience. I appeal to his face for mercy, but he only looks at me with lust-filled eyes, the slightest tip of his tongue visible between his teeth. And I am already hard...so impossibly hard...I cannot help but stroke my own aching cock through my pants.

Finally, he draws down his breeches, and stands naked before me. His thick, readied cock springs forth, and I feel I might emit from the very sight of his beautiful body. He climbs on top of me then, straddling my lap with one knee on each side of my hips. I have full access to his body and my hands know no bounds. Feverishly I stroke every inch of him, kneading and caressing his heated, moist skin. I cup the full swells of his ass, so perfectly shaped, and lean in to take a nipple into my mouth.

Sucking and nibbling, I tease the tight bud of flesh until he is whimpering with need. Grabbing his cock between us, I begin to rub my thumb around its head, coaxing out drops of his milky liquid. He is moaning in earnest now, digging his nails into my shoulders and begging me in staggered breaths to do something--anything--to bring him to a release.

I buck my hips, tossing him over onto the bed, and dive between his legs. I set upon his cock, savoring--loving--the taste and feel of him in my mouth. The skin of his shaft is so velvety soft, and yet so solidly rigid. I roll the head around in my mouth, loving its weight upon my tongue and the sound of his guttural moans in my ears. God how I have missed this!

But I need more, more than this, more of him. I want to devour him, literally, that I may never be apart from him again. These last few days were torture! So near to him and yet unable even to touch him. He is my constant addiction, one to which I hopelessly succumbed long ago. Whenever we are apart, my body begs for him with anguished fervor.

I pull my mouth away, to his distressed groan. But when I begin finally to undo my own breeches, he calms, knowing that I am by no means finished. At last free of any barriers between us, I climb back onto the bed. But this time, I cover his body lengthwise, facing the opposite direction, so that we are head to toe. I shift myself backwards so that my mouth is just over his cock, and his, just under mine.

He makes no mistake as to my intent, and immediately pulls down my hips, drawing my throbbing shaft into his mouth. Ribbons of pure pleasure shoot through my groin, and I must fight the temptation not to thrust between his willing lips. But I want this to last...I want this for both of us. So I settle down on my elbows and begin to lick his shaft in long, wet strokes. Finally I suck him back into my mouth, and we both breathe muffled moans from our cock-filled mouths.

His knees fall even further apart, a silent cue begging me to explore further. I suck a few of my fingers into my mouth to wet them, and reach down and around his scrotum, caressing and gently squeezing the tightening sac. He moans around my cock, sending a bolt of fire through my veins. Everywhere I am aflame, scorching hot...desperate for every inch of my skin to be in contact with his.

My fingers travel down past his perineum, to the dampness and short hairs that surround his tight hole. I press the tips of two fingers against it, feeling the quivering pulse of contact. I can see his toes curl in anticipation, and he shifts his hips against my fingers, begging for entry. Finally I push two fingers inside him, the soft squeeze of his muscles at first resisting, then drawing me in up to my knuckles.

He begins to suck harder, faster on my swollen cock, and I follow suit. Each roll of my tongue is matched by his own, and it feels as though the very divisions between our persons are falling away. We are one person, one body, one great writhing, sweating, pulsing circle of pleasure. I feel two of his fingers at my hole, waiting, testing my reaction, and I want that...God I want that...

I struggle to say "yes" around his cock in my mouth, but it comes out more a desperate hiss. Still, the need is understood, and he slowly feeds one, then both fingers into my ass. I nearly choke at the enormity of feeling, my muscles clamping down on him inside me. He matches the pressure by pulling my cock even further into his mouth, until I feel the head being constricted by the walls of his throat.

My mind is swimming at the sensation, and desperately I want to plunge myself completely down his throat. To come deep inside of him, joined with him in every imaginable way. But I am afraid of hurting him...until a rough squeeze of his hand against my ass communicates his desires, and without thinking my hips begin to thrust in tiny, shallow jabs.

Sparks fly behind my eyes, and it is almost too much to bear...already the waves of heat are coursing over me, over us...I can feel his arousal as strongly as my own. His organ swells in my mouth, and mine in his...We are one--completely melded, a glorious harmony of heated, glowing flesh.

And in this moment, there is nothing but us. My life--everything but this--recedes into the distance. In him--in his mouth, his body, his love--nothing else exists. My concern over our illicit relationship, my frustrating cousin's unsolicited advice, my fears about our future...gone. In him I am absolved, pure. I am perfect.

We are perfect.

William

I am startled out of sleep by a shrill wail, and the slamming of the hall door. I rise, throwing on my robe, and run out into the hall--and directly into the path of a frantic Josephine. She screeches at the contact, and fights off my attempts to pacify her, pummeling me with her withered fists.

"Josephine! Good Lord, what is it? You're carrying on as though the devil were after you!"

"The devil is right!" she shouts, her eyes wild. She rips out of my grasp and runs to her room. I manage to throw my hand against the door just before she slams it.

"I have seen it!" she cries, frantically searching around the room for something. "The beast! With mine own eyes, I have seen it! Lucifer himself!"

"What are you on about, woman? What did you see?"

But she throws herself onto her knees, her face buried in rosary-wrapped hands. She begins to rock back and forth, muttering, chanting, sobbing. Clearly she is in a fright, but if she won't tell me what has happened, I have no patience for this!

"Josephine," I shout, shaking her out of her fit, "tell me what it is you saw. Is someone hurt? Is there an intruder in the house? What?"

"Yes!" she suddenly looks at me with wide eyes. "Yes, an intruder! That boy! I KNEW it! I KNEW from the first moment that he was trouble. That the devil was in him! And none of ye, none would heed my warnings! And now the Lord shall smite us all, for harboring a child of SATAN!"

"What, Justin?" I laugh.

"HE brought the devil into this house. I knew it from the start! But you would not listen. And now shall we all be punished!"

"You are mad, woman! Just TELL me what you think you saw!"

She struggles to calm herself, still heaving from her paroxysm. "I was startled out of sleep...I thought I heard a noise...the dog was after a mouse...or some other thing...in the kitchen...and I went up to find the boy for to have him kill it..." She takes a shuddering breath before continuing. "And I saw...from under his door... a glowing red light, like the fires of hell were inside! I looked through the keyhole, and saw it there, with my own eyes! The devil itself!"

"And what did this devil of yours look like?" I ask, still convinced that she is being irrational, though I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing up.

"Twas a great, horned beast! Red and covered with...with fire and water at the same time... And limbs! Many terrible limbs, in all directions, everywhere...moaning..." She collapses into hysterics now, sobbing and chanting once again.

"Ach," I spit, standing and walking toward the door. "You're naught but a foolish old woman."

She looks up at me suddenly, daggers in her glare. "Perish with them, then!" she screeches, her words like ice. "Let he who believeth not in the Lord's might be banished from His kingdom! May he succumb to the depths of..."

I slam the door, unwilling to hear the rest of her tirade, and head towards my own room. I don't know what compelled me to listen to her in the first place. I am too tired for this episode of hers, and decide that it can be left until the morning to work out.

Chapter 7

Justin

The first thing I perceive is the sunlight, nearly blinding me as I open my eyes. The second is Brian's arm draped heavily across my chest.

I shift gently away from him, in tiny increments, but instantly his grasp tightens, and I realize that he is awake.

"Where are you going?" he says groggily, his face buried in the pillow.

"The sun is already up. Why didn't Josephine wake me?"

He ponders for a second, and I seize the opportunity to wriggle away from him, pulling on my tunic. "Something's wrong, Brian."

He lumbers out of bed, groaning with the same soreness I feel. "She probably overslept, nothing more. Don't worry."

We sit side by side on the bed, pulling on our shoes. I am suddenly overwhelmed with how wonderful this feels. This is what Brian wanted--all those nights he tried to talk me into staying in his room. It wasn't the sleeping, it was the waking up. Together. As though we belong in each other's lives.

"I love you," I tell him plainly, as though no more certain fact exists.

He smiles warmly and reaches for my neck, pulling me into a tender kiss. His lips taste like honey and like me; it is wonderful. Together, we head downstairs to meet the day.

We go down the front stairs, into the kitchen, but there find no sign that Josephine is awake. Brian looks at me strangely for a moment, and I feel suddenly nauseous. I follow him into the sitting-room, and there find William, sitting alone at the large table, waiting. He holds a piece of paper in his hands, and silently slides it across the table to Brian as we approach.

I watch Brian blanch as he reads, before passing the letter to me and sitting down as though he has been struck in the face. With shaking hands, I examine the tight curls of Josephine's handwriting.

Mister Brian,

It is with great grief that I terminate my service to you. I have been loyal to the Kinney home for three decades, and wished nothing more than to see you honor your good father's name, God rest his soul. But it becomes clear to me that between these walls has the Lord been blasphemed; that Satan in all his despicable evil hath been given entry in this house; that old serpent, called the Devil, which deceiveth the whole world, hath been invited to your confidence.

I shall not bear witness to the atrocities of devil-worshippers. It pains me to think of your fall, but I will not live in a house so far lost from God's sight. "For woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea, for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, and speaking of only lies."

It is my dutiful hope that you shall repent and see the light of the Lord, casting out the beast from your sights.

I shall pray for your salvation, and for the mercy of our Lord upon your eternal souls.

Josephine Murray

I sit finally, next to Brian but not near him. He is hunched over the table, slowly rubbing his forehead with his hands.

"It's true then," he asks of William. "She is gone?"

"Aye, sir," says he. "I went to her room when I woke and found it emptied of all her possessions."

"How? Where could she go?" Brian mutters.

"I don't know, sir. She may have gone to Warbidge on foot, and from there...perhaps she could hire a coach to town."

"On foot! She's an old woman, and in the middle of the night?"

"It was late when I rose, sir; she may have left at daybreak. It is not too far to walk..." says William hesitantly, "and she was...determined."

"What?" Brian cries. "Did you know of her plan?"

"Not a thing, I assure you, Brian! Do you imagine I would let this happen if I did?"

"No, no," Brian sighs, shaking his head. "Forgive me, friend."

"I know only that she was upset last night--inconsolable."

"When?" asks Brian. "I saw her retire myself."

"Aye sir, but twas much later. After you yourself had gone to bed. I woke up to her shrieking in the hall outside my room. I went to question her, but...she was spooked, sir, as though she'd seen a ghost! And she kept carrying on...about seeing 'the devil himself'... she made no sense at all!"

Brian nods slowly, staring at the table. Several moments pass in a strained silence. I replay William's words in my head, as a tightening squeeze constricts my stomach. What might Josephine have seen? I glance up at William, startled to find that he is staring at me with an unreadable expression. I fear that he knows something...dear God, to think of it!

At last, Brian rises from the table. "I'll find her," he announces, with finality. "She can't have gone far. I'll ride to Warbidge and inquire after her there."

"Sir," asks William, "what about the fair?"

The fair! I'd forgotten about it. And from the look on Brian's face, he'd forgotten as well. The annual Hereford fair is today--the very same fair at which I met Brian, two years prior. It seems an eternity ago...

"Yes...the fair..." Brian replies, deep in thought. "Then here is our plan. I shall ride to Warbidge first to look for her. You take the trap to Hereford, and I shall meet you later at the fair. If I don't find her in Warbidge, she will perhaps have already taken a coach to Hereford, and we can look for her there."

William nods at the proposal, but looks dubious of its success. "We shall find her," affirms Brian, perhaps as much to convince himself as William. "I don't know what has frightened her, but I will talk to her, and bring her home."

"Yes, sir," William agrees, and goes out to ready the horses.

Brian seems lost in thought for a few moments before noticing me. "Justin," he begins softly, pacing the room. The uneasiness is evident in his now-unshielded voice. "You remember...that I cannot take you to the fair."

"I know, Brian. You needn't explain it to me." Neither of us wants to take the risk of me being somehow separated from Brian, and 'caught' again as a runaway slave. I understand it fully, though Brian has clearly felt guilty since we first discussed it, some weeks ago.

"Will you be bringing home any more blonde boys?" I ask, teasingly.

He turns and glowers at me, his face suddenly dark. "How could you ask me such a thing?"

"I...it was merely a joke, Brian."

"Now, after everything, you doubt how I feel about you?"

"No," I soothe, going to him and taking his hands in mine. "I know how you love me."

I lean up to kiss him and then smile, assuring him of my trust. "I love you, Brian," I attest, with my eyes as well as my words. I squeeze his hands once more. "Bring her back."

He nods, and leaves to meet William in the yard.

Chapter 8

Brian

In Warbidge I found only dead-ends. No elderly woman trudging into town from across the western moors. No talk of devil sightings or signs of the Apocalypse. Only the banal morning rituals of an awkward country village.

So now I descend upon the Hereford fair, and in an instant I am flooded with memory. Along with the brutish crowd and the dizzying bedlam, I am assaulted by shards of visions from this day, two years past.

Two years only...and how my life has changed. So sure was I then that I would live out my days as a hermit--the only life I could expect! And suddenly before me...as a vision in the noonday sun...appeared a pale young man, battered and bloodied with filth. The most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

As I wrestle my way mechanically through the throng, I find myself not searching for William, as I should. Nor even for Josephine. Instead, I wander lost in thought, nearly oblivious to the arms and shoulders that brush against me from every side. I am somehow above the commotion, beyond it... in the world of my own memory. And Justin is all I see, all I hear.

His words come back to me now...How long will we hide? Bitter words, angry at the world that shuns us. His are the artless cries of an innocent young man, not yet resigned to understand that our life together will never--can never--be normal. There is no hope of marriage or family for us, nor even hope of acceptance.

I know his suffering all too well, but I have had a much longer life than he has. Much more time to get accustomed to the secrecy. The detachment. And the fear of being found out. So I bear the guilt of his disillusionment. In allowing him to love me I have lifted him out of one type of bondage and into another. I wasn't lying when I told him that all we have is each other. That's all we'll ever have.

And so it was this morning, when he asked if I would be bringing home another slave from the fair. I know he meant it for a trifle, but I was incensed. Furious with myself. Because beneath the petty jest I knew there lay a ribbon of sincere doubt. If not of my love, than of my devotion. Does he not know that he is my future? How can I expect him to trust my earnestness, when in front of the world I must play at being a bachelor?

Abruptly I am ushered back to reality by means of an elbow to my ribs. I look down to find the culprit: a short peasant woman carrying a dirty, mewling baby in her chubby arms. She glowers up at me as though I were the cause of all her worldly sorrows. Ahh, would that I were home now, with Justin, instead of mired in this chaos!

Glancing over the woman's head, I suddenly see a jeweler's stand in the distance--somehow I hadn't noticed it before. I fight my way towards it, compelled by some force beyond my consciousness. I approach the crude booth, laid out with gems and jewels of every shape and value. Dull bronze pocket watches fraternize with glittering emeralds and ruby brooches. But amidst all the splendor, my eyes have only one focus. A single silver ring, unadorned and unflawed, rests at the center of the table.

I lift the tiny band, only vaguely aware of the jeweler's toothless grin across the table, and hold it out before me. It is unpolished and simple. Pure and unassuming. But as I examine the ring more closely, I notice that the inside is plated with brilliant gold that gleams as I tilt it into the sunlight. Yet when I slip it onto my smallest finger, the gold is entirely hidden. A secret.

The merchant is talking to me now, giving me his pitch. It's Italian silver, he boasts, but I am deaf to his exposition. In my mind, I see only Justin...the light in his face as I give this to him. I know he will love it--more surely than I have known anything else. And now it seems as though the purchase of this ring was the very reason I had for coming to this fair. Josephine, William...all else recedes into the background. I was drawn here today to find this ring for Justin. Because it is him. It is us.

I can see him in my mind's eye, lying as he often does in my bed... naked and supine against the pillows. His right hand is thrown leisurely above his head, toying with a strand of his golden hair. The other hand...he brings coyly to his lips...teasing me. His tongue darts out to caress just the tips of his fingers...so irresistibly wanton. At this point I typically would throw myself on top of him, but now...in this fantasy...there is a solid, simple band of silver adorning his left ring finger. And inside it is a secret--a promise that I make to him.

"I'll take this," I say, digging into my purse for the money.

"It's a good ring," agrees the merchant, a short, bald man with sun-darkened skin. "But I think it's a bit too small for your fingers, Mr. ..."

"Kinney," I finish, not interested in conversation. "Thank you, yes, but it is not for me."

I glance up at the man's face, and notice something different there. Recognition.

"Kinney, eh? There was a man here inquiring after you not long ago."

Ah, William. I'd nearly forgotten all about him! "Yes, I've been looking for him as well. Do you know where he went?"

"Aye," he grunts, and points across the square, to a small blue tent.

"Thank you," I reply, handing over the money. He offers to place the ring in a leather pouch for me, but I find I am unable to let go of it, even for that second. So I hang onto it in the pocket of my breeches, the cool metal snug around the tip of my index finger. I set across the square in search of my friend and servant.

Once under the shaded blue tent, I scour several faces for that of William, but cannot find him. Looking about me, I realize that this is the constable's tent. Before me are several officers, trying to talk sense into some drunk fairgoers. Thankfully, none of them are William, but I am beginning to grow concerned.

"What is your business, sir?" A short, heavy man approaches me. He is dressed in a legal uniform, but his eye carries a menacing glint.

"Excuse me, I am Brian Kinney. I was told there was a man here looking for me?"

"Brian Kinney!" the man exclaims, his thick, bushy moustache betraying a smirk.

"Yes..." I reply, at once confused and defensive. "Can I help you?"

"You already did, sir!" he says, laughing unpleasantly. "I thank you for saving me a trip across the moors!" He nods then to an enormous man standing at my right, and before I realize what is happening, my wrists are pulled behind me and bound together with rope.

"What the devil?" I shout, addressing the sinister face of the man in front of me.

"Imagine," he says, cackling, "the fish jumping straight into the basket!"

"I demand to know what is the meaning of this," I shout, struggling against the grip of the man holding me.

"Mr. Kinney, as constable of Hereford, I am taking you into custody pursuant to a criminal indictment filed against you."

"Indictment? This is absurd!" I cry, incredulously. "Will you at least do me the honor of naming my crime?"

He smiles at me through crooked teeth. "Sodomy."

Chapter 9

William

This is utterly intolerable! For three hours I have been battered about the calamitous streets of Hereford, and can find no sign of Brian anywhere. I wouldn't doubt he found Josephine in Warbidge and took her home, forgetting all about me! Intolerable! And in this blazing heat!

The sun will be going down in an hour, and when it does, so help me, I shall take my aged self back home, with or without that old crone!

Brian

For the hundredth time, I circumnavigate the small room, occupied only by myself, a desk, and two wooden chairs. I have been told that the sheriff would be in shortly to take my statement, but it has been hours, and with no sign of activity since I was first locked in.

A tiny barred window near the ceiling of the room indicates that dusk has fallen. And though part of me still clings to the hope that this is all a mistake...I now feel genuine pangs of fear beginning to stab at my gut. Somehow with the growing darkness comes a finality...a seriousness that could be denied during the daylight. This is real, and I am here. And someone knows about us.

I find myself being shaken out of slumber. I suppose I have been asleep, my head on the desk, though I don't even remember sitting down. I notice that my coat has been removed, and is lying in a pile on the floor; I don't remember taking that off either. It is morning.

"Sydney, get him some water," says the man who sits down across from me, addressing the giant brute who shook me awake. The same brute who earlier had tied my hands and wrestled me through the fair to this gaol.

"Mr. Kinney, my name is Hoskins. I'm the sheriff." He proceeds to sift through some papers, not looking directly at me. His hair is black and pomade-glazed, reflecting the light to an almost blinding degree.

"I know of you, sir," I reply. "I work for the treasury."

"Ah, how unfortunate for the shire to lose you, then," he laments bluntly. "Those posts are always difficult to fill." I can see I have not found an ally in this man.

Finally, after rifling through his papers once more, he takes up his pen and looks at me. "Sir, have you been informed of the charge?"

"Yes."

"And you understand that, there being a sound witness to the crime, a formal indictment has already been lodged against you?"

"Who... what witness?"

He sifts through his papers once more. "A woman by the name of...Josephine Murray."

Before I can stop myself, my fist slams down against the desk. He jumps a little, and immediately I regret my action. "Sir," I try to reason, "Josephine Murray has been a servant in my house for decades. She is an old woman, and a zealot...In fact, I was told by another servant that she was quite deranged when she was last seen at home."

"Do you allege that the witness was mentally incapable of making an accurate statement?"

"Yes, I...I think she was confused."

He looks at the paper in front of him, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Kinney, but I took Mrs. Murray's statement myself. It seemed lucid and cogent enough to me. Shall I read you an excerpt? '...and through the keyhole, I saw two bodies, in an undressed state, moving against each other in an indecent fashion...and one of the Accused did thereupon take the other's member into his mouth...' Shall I continue, Mr. Kinney?"

"No," my voice comes out a strangled whisper.

"Do those sound like the words of a deranged, unintelligible person?"

I want to say that it actually does not sound like her words at all, but another person's words put into her mouth. I can probably thank the man in front of me for that. Regardless...the accusation is factual, in every way.

And then it all assaults me, as though the very ocean tide were crashing over me. The horrifying magnitude of this moment, and everything leading up to it...all is brutally brought to light. All of our licentiousness, all of the risks we took, all of the close calls...every memory parades itself in front of me, mocking me. Telling me that this is my punishment for being so imprudent. For daring to enjoy an intimate relationship with another man, in defiance of all the world. This is where the road ends.

"Mr. Kinney," Hoskins shouts, shattering my grim reverie. "The crime of sodomy is a particularly abominable one in the eyes of our courts. And indeed in the eyes of all good, moral people."

I bury my face in my hands, feeling the very life drain from me. I want to tell him that he needn't try to chastise me with condemnations. I am mortified enough already.

"The punishment for said crime," he continues, "is death, by hanging."

The silence that ensues is deafening, and I find myself staring blankly at a knot in one of the table boards. It's shaped something like the birthmark on Justin's right arm... Quickly, I shake the thought from my head, it reminding me too keenly of what I have lost. Of everything I stand yet to lose.

"Well, Mr. Kinney? Your response to this allegation?"

I'd almost forgotten. I do get a chance, in this wonderful age, to my own defense. Such as it is.

"It's untrue," I reply, with all the assertive confidence I can muster.

Naturally, the sheriff is not surprised by my response. "Do you deny engaging in the act of sodomy with a male slave of yours?"

He's not a slave anymore, I think, before remembering that he was always a slave in Josephine's mind. "Yes, I deny it," I say, the lie flowing effortlessly this time.

"And you claim that the witness gave a false account."

"Yes."

"Did you sleep in your own bed last night?"

"I did."

"And were you not, at any time, in bed with the other defendant?"

"I..." My words trip upon my tongue, as I suddenly realize what he said. "Other defendant, sir?"

"Yes, the other defendant," he clucks, annoyed with my thickness. Of course there are two defendants! He looks through his files again. "Justin...no last name given. He is your slave, is he not?"

"He is," I reply automatically, the air having left my lungs with that final utterance. Justin. Somehow, in all of this, I have been mired in the catastrophe of my own crime. But the horrifying reality now greets me--it is our crime. Together. And the punishment will come to both of us.

"How long have you owned the slave in question?"

"Two years."

"And am I to understand that he resides inside the house with you, and sleeps in a proper bedroom?"

"Yes," I say, regaining my defensiveness.

"Do you favor him?"

"Favor him? Over whom?"

"Women, for example?" he intones, blatantly mocking me.

"I care for him," I try to explain, "insofar as he is a member of my household."

"But not more than that."

I hesitate, but only for a fraction of a second. "No."

"Well, Mr. Kinney, as soon as I am through speaking to you, I'll be bringing Justin himself in. Can you tell me that his testimony will be in line with yours?"

"Yes. I am sure of it," I reply calmly, though my mind is swimming. Visions of Justin...tied and dragged away from the house...brought here, to this horrible place. Locked in a room, alone and frightened...again... Forced to submit to these demeaning questions. And only to be found guilty, as we surely will be!

"Well, I think we are finished for now," says the sheriff, putting down his pen and capping the ink. "After the other defendant's statement is taken, there will be a trial by jury, and the judge will determine your sentence."

Silently, I watch him clean off his pen and place all the papers into his leather folder. But inside, I am screaming. This cannot be over, already!

"Mr. Kinney," he starts again, folding his hands on the table in front of him. "May I make a suggestion to you?"

I nod, more out of habit than desire.

"Confess. Save yourself, and our court, the trouble of a trial for which we both know the outcome. The fact remains that there is a credible, knowing witness, who has a first-hand account of the event in question. In addition, she will testify that your relationship to the slave has been...unnatural...for the duration of your ownership..."

He watches for my reaction, but I know that my face is impassive as steel. I'm no longer interested in what he has to say.

"The court is not fond of sodomites, Mr. Kinney. Neither of you should expect an acquittal."

He waits silently in anticipation of my response. The air is clearer, suddenly, as though a window on the room has finally been opened. I let out a sigh, from deep within my chest, and lay my palms upon the table.

"You're right," I say softly, staring at the wood under my hands. "I am guilty."

Justin

It is morning, and Brian has not come home. William returned, late last night, and suffered my drilling questions, but to no avail. He had never seen Brian at the fair, nor found Josephine. He had left Hereford, assuming that Brian was headed home as well.

Distractedly, I clean the kitchen after breakfast, having slept not a wink in the night. I can't remember the last night I spent without Brian--if not with me, then at least in the next room. I never realized how much comfort I draw just from his simple presence in the house. And now...now I feel as though my very heart is separated from my chest. Lost somewhere, out on the moors.

William maintains that Brian is merely following a lead in pursuit of Josephine. Perhaps someone in Warbidge saw her take a coach not to Hereford, but to Kington, or south, to Peterchurch. And perhaps Brian went after her, and was forced to stay the night in another town. He was determined to find her, William reminds me.

But I must admit...I don't care if he never finds her! I am glad she has gone. Not that I wish any harm to her, but it was her choice to leave. And something about her letter...I am still afraid of her words. Brian and William contend that she was merely spooked by some shadow and thought it was the devil. But I begin to fear that she saw something more. Something much worse than a shadow.

Brian

"You are...confessing to the crime?" he asks me, both surprised and delighted.

"No. Not to the crime you spoke of," I clarify, hanging my head with remorse. "I am guilty of one much worse."

He waits patiently for me to explain, opening his notebook once again.

"I purchased him...the slave...two years ago," I begin morosely, not able to lift my gaze from the table in front of me. "I bought him, not needing a slave, but with the express purpose of...using him...in the manner which you described."

I pause before speaking again, finding my breaths coming short, and painfully. My voice sounds foreign and small as I continue.

"Immediately upon bringing him home...I placed him in a room adjacent to mine, that I might come and go unnoticed. And on frequent occasions, I went to his room after dark and...assaulted...him."

"Assaulted? In what manner."

I glare at Hoskins briefly. He knows quite well what manner I mean, but seems to enjoy my torment!

"I...held him faced down in the bed and...pulled down his breeches..." my heart is racing, and I clutch my chest as I speak.

"Did he struggle?"

"Yes...always. But he is not as strong as me."

"Did he cry out?"

"Yes," I choke. I feel myself begin to shake, uncontrollably. "The only others in the house were not near enough to hear."

"And then? After you pulled down his breeches?"

"I..." God, this is agony! "I...forced myself...upon him."

"You entered his body?"

"Yes," I whisper, my voice weak.

"Did you emit into him?" Hoskins asks, scribbling furiously in his notebook.

"Yes."

"On how many occasions was this?"

"Almost every night," I lament, pretending to think back on all our nights together with self-loathing, and not with pleasure.

"And why did he not report your behavior?"

"I...threatened to kill him if he spoke of it to anyone. He is only a slave, and...naive. I told him that no one would believe him."

"So you admit to raping and abusing your male slave, on repeated occasions."

"Yes...I do."

"Did he give any signs of enjoyment?"

"No," I choke. "He was terrified."

"The fault lies entirely with you?"

"Yes, entirely."

"Have you anything else to say?"

"No."

"Alright, Mr. Kinney," he says finally, standing up from the table. "You feel better now, having confessed it all, don't you? Better to go with a clear conscience."

My head is too heavy to lift, and I can only nod weakly as he raps on the door for the warden's return.

Chapter 11

Justin

The sound of horse hooves on the road causes me to start, and I bolt up from the table, sending my pens and inkwell clattering to the floor. But I haven't the mind to pick them up now; Brian is back!

I hurl open the door, ready to rush out and into his arms, but I am stopped short by the presence not of Brian, but of two strangers dismounting their horses. One of them--a large, boorish looking man, takes the horses and ties them to the gateposts, while the other approaches me, an unpleasant glimmer in his eye. His long black hair is slicked and fastened back in a tie, suggesting importance.

"You must be Justin," he says, standing before me on the step.

"Yes, sir," I reply, confused by his familiarity. "How may I be of service?"

"May I come in?" he asks, looking to push past me. I stand firm in the doorway, placing one hand on each jamb.

"My master is not at home."

"Indeed," he smiles. "Is there anyone else in the house?"

"Only the servant William...he is in the fields."

"Shall I fetch him?" says the larger man from the yard.

"No, Sydney. Go have a look around the house," Black Hair orders. "I will have a word with Justin alone."

"Sir, I can't let you in while my master is out," I explain, not trusting his demeanor. "You'll have to wait until he returns."

Black Hair leans in, conspiratorially. He smells of leather and pomade. "He's not returning. He was arrested yesterday."

"Arrested?" I cry in shock.

"Yes, my boy. Now, will you let me in?" I stand aside, numbly. He pushes past me into the sitting-room and seats himself at the head of the table. In Brian's chair.

I push shut the heavy door and blandly notice all the air escape from the room as it closes. Turning around, I stare at the man who has now made himself quite comfortable at our table. I can do nothing but fear the next words that come from his mouth.

"Sit, Justin," he gestures to the chair next to him, as if he were the owner of this house and I, the guest. "My name is Hoskins." I stumble weakly to the bench and sit down.

He sighs deeply, as though considering how to begin. "We arrested your master yesterday, based on testimony from your housekeeper, Josephine Murray. You know her, of course."

"Yes," I whisper, my voice having long since retreated into my chest.

"She reported to us that she had witnessed some behavior of a...wicked...nature involving you and Mr. Kinney. At first, we had misinterpreted her account, and had presumed you both to be guilty. Mr. Kinney of course denied any such doing." He chuckles to himself then and looks to my response. I stare down at my hands, held tightly together in my lap to conceal their shaking.

"I explained to him," he continues, "that the case against him was so sound that he had no chance of pardon, and that it would be in the best interest of his Christian soul to admit his guilt. Seek penance. And under my skillful interrogation, he cracked, and has confessed to it all--to more even than I expected! He professed to assaulting you on numerous occasions, in a vile and...detestable...fashion, and to threatening your life if you told anyone.

"His is a base--depraved--corruption, Justin, and you need no longer fear his tyranny. He stands to be hanged in two days."

The last thing I remember is the floor rushing up to meet my head.

Chapter 12

Justin

Consciousness floats back to me as though I am rising to the surface of a deep, black pool. It's warm under the water, and I don't want to come up for air...But then I feel a hand...holding mine...drawing me up. It's Brian...he's come back for me...he's pulling me...

I open my eyes to find Hoskins staring down at me. It is his hand holding mine, and he pats it blandly. "There, there...you've had a fright, lad. Sydney, help me pull him up."

The big man reaches one brawny arm down and pulls me off the floor. My tunic is twisted all about, and suddenly I feel someone pulling it up to my shoulders.

"Look," says Sydney from behind me. I can feel their gazes, tracing the lacerating scars on my back, in confirmation of their assumptions.

My legs are like mush under me, and the two men shuffle me back to the bench, that I might sit. It is now that I notice William standing near the door, staring intently at me with his arms crossed about his chest.

"It wasn't Brian that did that to him!" he shouts, but no one pays him mind.

"You needn't worry any longer," Hoskins says to placate me. "He is in gaol now, and soon to be committed to God's judgement."

"This is absurdity!" William yells. "None of it is true; how can you believe it? I've known Brian his entire life, and I swear to you..."

"Mr. Last!" shouts Hoskins, spinning to face William. "I didn't ask for YOUR opinion on the matter. Were you a witness to the night in question?"

"No, but..."

"No, you were not. But since you are so keen on sharing your intimate knowledge of Mr. Kinney, why don't you answer me this? How old is he?"

"Thirty summers," William states proudly, "and I've known him all of his days."

"Touching. And yet...thirty years old, and still not taken a wife. Did you never find it odd, Mr. Last?"

"I...I did, some. But Brian is very particular."

"I see," Hoskins replies, his voice patronizing. "And did you not find it odd that Mr. Kinney chose to place Justin in the MASTER suite, in a room adjacent to his own, when he might have kept him somewhere more sensible?"

"Well, I did wonder, but..."

"On that matter, can you explain why Mr. Kinney might have seen fit to purchase this slave at all? Did you need an extra hand on the farm?"

"No," William sighs, glancing at me.

"Did you ask Mr. Kinney for his reason?"

"I did."

"And what was his answer?"

"He...had none."

"I see," says Hoskins, smugly.

Some other words are exchanged. More yelling, more arguing...but it all seems far away. Or I'm far away...I wish I could find the water again, where Brian was. But I've lost it, somewhere in my head. And reality is always right there, knocking against my forehead. Fighting to be let in. If I keep my eyes shut...then none of this is happening.

In my head I can almost see him...his face. I have to ask him why...why did you lie to them, Brian? How could you do this to yourself? To us? And he's there, now...I see him, and his mouth is moving...his answer...

"Justin!" William is shaking me, but his voice is still so far away... "Tell them it's not true, dammit!"

Everyone is staring at me--even with my eyes shut I can tell. They are waiting--waiting for me to open my mouth and condemn him. But I am so close in here, so close to finding him. And soon I can see it...that dark pool of water in the ground. But as I approach it, I find that it is now perfectly clear. And when I look down into it, Brian looks up at me from within. And I understand it all. I know now why you did this Brian. I know what I have to do next.

I open my eyes, three faces staring back at me.

"It's true," I whisper. "He has...laid hands on me...and hurt me..."

"You're a liar!" William seethes. "You miserable ingrate! How could you do this, after everything he's given you?"

I see Hoskins pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, and I realize that I've begun to cry. William storms out of the room, nearly shattering the door on its hinges, and I am glad, for I don't want to cry in front of him.

"'Tis alright, lad. We know how relieved you must be. Now it is all over."

I must make a convincingly pathetic display, for even the brute pats me once on the shoulder. If only they knew the reason for my tears!

"When...will it be?" I ask, watching from the doorway as they mount their horses.

"Monday, at noontide," Hoskins calls back to me. "Hangings are always on a Monday."

I manage a 'thank you' before closing the door and crumpling to the floor behind it.

Chapter 13

Justin

"William!" I yell again, continuing to pound on his door to his room. "Please! Come out and speak to me."

"I'll not look twice at you again, you blackguard!" he shouts from the other side.

The hallway is dark now, and chilly. When I had regained consciousness again, lying on the stone floor of the sitting room, I'd found that night had long since fallen. But my mind was clear, and I was breathing normally. And then I came to find William.

"William, please! Let me explain!"

"Go away!"

I stop pounding, my fist becoming numb. Shortly thereafter, I hear him shuffle near to the door, listening to see if I have left.

"William," I say sincerely, trusting that he is listening through the door. "I need your help if I'm to save him."

A few seconds later, the door opens, an angry William glowering at me. "What do you mean, save him?"

William

I trudge after him into the sitting-room, my arms still crossed menacingly. He must not for a moment think that I've forgiven him--or shall ever forgive him! The lying bastard. He has sentenced Brian to death, and here he sits calmly at the table, offering me a drink!

"You little cur," I hiss. "Offering me a drink, when I should rip your lungs out for what you've done!"

"William..." he starts, not surprised by my words.

"Have you even a notion of what you've done, Justin? You've destroyed him!"

I can tell that my words have hit him, as he bites his lip, the tears welling up in his eyes. I'll make him cry harder than that!

"Don't you think I know it?" he whispers, the tears now falling in full force. It is a pitiable sight, and suddenly he looks all of twelve years old. But not too young to send a man to his grave!

"Must I remind you how wretched you were when he found you?" I growl. "He saved your life, Justin! He was the closest you'll ever have to a friend in this world!"

"He was more than that, William!" he sobs. "You don't understand!"

"Then explain it to me!" I shout, angrily. He fights to compose himself, wiping his eyes on his sleeves. He's a young man, but there is only so much of this I will tolerate!

Justin emits a shuddering sigh, signaling the end of his tears. He stares down at his dampened sleeves, twisting at a stray thread of fabric. When he begins, his voice is so small, I have to lean in to hear it.

"What Josephine saw...the other night..." he stops himself and starts again. "It's true...what she said...Brian was in my room...in my bed... And we have been together...in that way...many times before."

"What do you mean, 'together'?"

"As... lovers, William."

"What?" I cry. This is absurd! "Are you off your bird, lad?" He did suffer a fall not long ago...I think he's not right in the head.

"William, I swear it to you," he professes quietly. His countenance is so wearily morose...I begin to feel a queasiness in the pit of my stomach. It can't be true!

"Justin," I begin, "I've known Brian since long before your time. His father was a good Christian, and he raised a good son. Not a..."

"Sodomite?" he finishes, his solemnity shifting to anger. "A buggerer?"

"Ach, Justin," I spit, shuddering at the ugly words.

"Why is it so hard to believe?" he contests. "You said it yourself, you don't know why he has never married in thirty years."

"Brian is particular..."

"Brian doesn't fancy women! That is the truth of it, William!"

The rock in my gut grows a few pounds heavier. And sharper.

After a time, Justin continues, quietly. "He fancies men, William. I think he has all his life. But he never had anyone who shared his feelings. Until...he found me."

He pauses for a time and I realize, with horrifying plainness, that this is not a prank. Justin's words aren't the product of slander, nor even delirium. He is serious. And likely telling the truth.

"He loves me, William. And I love him. As surely as any man and woman might."

"But you accused him of...beating you, and..."

"Brian never hurt me, ever!" he swears. "You were right about that."

Justin takes a deep breath before continuing. "He did this for me! They were ready to accuse us both, William. They would have hanged us both, and Brian knew it. So he changed the story, and confessed to abusing me. He took all the blame, that I might go free!"

"If it's true, Justin," I sigh, "then how could you go along with it?"

"This is the only way, William. If I deny it, they'll think I'm just protecting him out of fear of being punished. If I admit the truth, I'll be sentenced as well. And either way, Brian will perish. At least now...now that I am free, I can work to get him out of there."

"Out of there? Justin, he's in gaol, not in a candy shop! And he's sentenced to the gallows in two days!"

"I can do it, William," he asserts, staring at some unseen spot on the wall. "I WILL do it. He's all that matters to me. I won't fail him."

I sigh, sadly. Though I admit, I am impressed by his determination, I am equally grieved by his foolishness. He has read too many books, this lad, and has a head filled with wild ideas.

"I don't know what you think of me. Of...us," Justin says softly, not looking at me. "But I have one thought--to save him. And this is the only way I know how to do it. If you can put aside your judgements...for Brian's sake...will you help me?"

He looks at me with hopeful eyes, and I don't know what to see. I don't know what to make of the things that he's told me, or even to believe them. But when I look at his young face--equally grief-stricken and resolved--I see not lies or wickedness. I see sincerity. I see the same boy I've come to trust these past two years.

And I want the same end as him--Brian, alive and free. Whatever the circumstances.

"Aye, Justin. I'll help you."

Chapter 14

Brian

The door to my cell opens for the first time all day; it is that ape Sydney. He slaps a bowl of broth down before the door and stares at me. I sit motionlessly, perched on the stone platform that serves as my bed.

There is no window in this cell (windows are for longer-term prisoners, and I was duly reminded that my stay here will be very brief), but I can tell that it is the evening.

"Well?" he grunts, a hulking mass in the doorway.

"Thank you," I mumble, not moving from my spot. As though I could eat! As though I have a need for it anymore.

I had hoped that he'd leave, but still he stands there, grinning. "We saw your boy today," he sneers.

Startled, my eyes fly up to meet his before I can force them back to the wall. He seems to delight in having caused a reaction in me, and presses further.

"He confirmed it, you know. All of it. Even showed us the scars."

So Justin played along, as I'd hoped. And convincingly too. I lean my head backward against the wall, breathing a sigh of relief.

"You're a sick bastard, Kinney."

I close my eyes against the dim torchlight bleeding in from the hall. "I know," I whisper.

He leaves me, thankfully, without further abuse, and I am once again alone in the dark. By my estimation, today is Saturday, and tomorrow will be my last full day on this earth.

I turn to lie down on the platform, pulling up the blanket that was provided to me. It is moth-eaten and smells of rats, but the air is damp and chilly. And somehow I feel slightly less alone with it wrapped around me.

This whole day, I've been quite successful in not thinking about Justin. I find that if I recite lessons from my days in school, or songs I'd learned from my father, I can avoid seeing his face in my mind, even for a little while.

But now...I've given up, and I decide it's worth the pain only to think about him for just a bit. In my mind he's always surrounded in light. His flaxen hair and glowing smile--such a stark contrast to the darkness that surrounds me now. My angel.

If only I could see him again, I think. Just once...just for a moment. Only to tell him that I love him...that he is everything to me. And not to worry after me. My two brief years with him were the best of my life, and I would do it all again, to this end, if it meant that he was safe.

I try not to think about what I'll miss. Seeing him grow older...the strong, beautiful man I know he'll become. Travelling together, something we'd both dreamed about. Maybe, someday...finding a place that is different. That would accept us. A place where we would no longer have to hide our love. Justin seems to think that Italy might be different...

But I suppose it doesn't matter anymore. I can only hope that Justin will be able to do those things without me. That in his future will be the kind of life he deserves. That he'll become a famous artist and tour the world with his work. And maybe that he'll...find someone... else... to take care of him...

I shut my eyes against the impending tears and force myself to recall my third-grade lesson on the Capitals of Europe.

Justin

Now that night has fallen on our little house, and William has gone to bed, I find my bravado quickly slipping away. I think I needed it at first, just to get over the shock of the sheriff's news. If I had no way, no course of action...If all was truly, truly lost...I think I might never have been able to pick myself up off the sitting-room floor. But I have one chance. One long, desperate shot to save Brian. And it is the sole force that drives me now.

I ascend the dark staircase to my room, not tired, but knowing that I should try to sleep tonight. I enter the master suite, about to open my own bedroom door, when I realize that there is no longer any need for secrecy. So I turn and go into to Brian's room.

As I kick off my breeches and climb into bed, I am instantly aware of his scent, lingering on all the sheets and pillows. I try to ignore it, but it is everywhere...that indescribable mix of soap and tobacco and tea that is Brian. And as I lie here, smelling him...sensing him...all around me, what's left of my bravery and confidence is obliterated.

I wrap the sheets tightly around me and begin to feel that tingle behind my nose that always foretells tears. I don't want to do this again! I don't want to cry, I tell myself, but terrifying thoughts creep into my head. Brian might never be back in this bed, with me. And gradually this scent might go away, and I'll forget it. Forget the way he feels and tastes...forget how his strong hands felt against me...forget the way his beautiful hazel eyes would shine when he smiled. The soft timbre of his voice as he held me in his arms.

God, this is too hard! I need you, Brian. I need you here...even...just for a moment. Just to see your face...and you'll tell me that I can do this. That we'll be together again, no matter what.

It's gone now, all of my conviction. And now I am just a terrified boy, alone, in this too-large room. Assaulted by the smell of him, and the memories of everything we've done...together...in this very bed. I'm surrounded by Brian, but cannot touch him.

If I close my eyes, I can pretend that he is here...next to me under the sheets. And with the smell of him in my nose, it is so very close to real... Even my cock is fooled, as I shamefully realize that it is ready and quite hard. I pull up the hem of my tunic and slide my hand down along my stomach, imagining it to be his hand...pretending...

I flatten my hand and begin to rub it slowly up and down the length of my shaft. Exhaling a shuddering breath, I feel the tension ebbing from my body. Bringing my hand to my mouth again, I lick the palm over and over to wet it. And when I wrap my moistened hand around the head of my cock, it is almost...almost like his mouth. That warm, beautiful wetness...the gradual shifts in pressure...a gentle pulling and squeezing...

My head is thrown back, mouth open, eyes tightly shut against the reality of my solitude. In my mind it is Brian between my legs...his lips move up and down, gradually tightening...strands of his soft brown hair falling over his eyes, tickling my stomach.

I can feel myself swelling, my blood rushing through my veins, but...I need more...need to feel him inside me, filling me up. I lift my knees and reach down with my other hand, letting my fingertips dance over my trembling hole. I slowly push one digit inside and a staggered moan escapes my lips...this is not enough...not even close...I try for another finger but it is a difficult angle and I cannot reach very far.

Frustrated but unbearably aroused, I glance over to the table next to the bed, on which lie a few unused wax tapers. I take one up; it is a couple centimeters thick in diameter...not nearly so much as Brian but certainly better than my fingers. It is smooth and hard, and long. I think for a minute about what I am about to do, and I don't know if it's wrong or obscene...but at this moment I no longer care.

I take the unwick'd end of the taper into my mouth, rolling it around with my tongue. The taste is dreadful, but the shape is agreeably familiar. It is softly rounded at the end and slips easily between my lips.

I pass it down, rubbing it along my rigid cock, and around my sac. I place the end at my entrance, feeling that familiar jolt at the feeling, my muscles already loosening to admit it. I hold my breath and push... slowly...groaning as I feel my ass hole stretching around the stiff rod. Breathing heavily, I gently feed it further inside, feeling it fill me, pretending that it is Brian's cock...buried deep inside.

And it is so close to real...almost believable. I can almost hear him whispering in my ear, telling me how wonderful it feels, how much he loves this...

I begin to stroke myself again, faster, harder...finally ready for a release. Furiously I fist my dripping shaft, needing to reach that place...that beautiful summit we always find together. The tension builds in my groin, and everywhere I feel hot, and so impossibly tight.

My hole clenches fiercely around the staff inside me and I feel a shudder run through my entire body. I cry out, unable to hold back, and with the first spasm feel hot, wet spurts against my stomach.

Gradually I sink back into the pillows, panting and sweaty. But as I come to...spiraling down from the elated heights of orgasm... I cannot help but notice the difference between the unyielding rigidity of the taper and the warm, natural firmness of Brian's cock. My attempt to hold back my tears has failed, and they trail down my face now in a silent, mournful parade.

I remove the taper and reach under the bed for one of our oft-needed cloth rags. Soberly cleaning myself, I pull up the covers once again, feeling my mood quickly diminish. And there is no more pretending. Brian is not here. Not pulling me into his arms and holding me against his warm chest, or stroking my hair as I fall asleep. Brian is...somewhere else. Locked in some cell, alone and probably scared. He thinks he has nothing left to hope for. He thinks it's over.

I'll find you, Brian. I swear it.

Justin

At the first cock crow, I set out across the heath at a gallop, long before William has woken. I have one task to accomplish without him, and if he knew of my intentions...he would probably try to stop me.

When the village of Warbidge is in my sights, I dismount, finding a tree to tie up the horse. I'll go the rest of the way on foot, not daring to alert anyone to my presence. It is Sunday, and the village is sleeping late, but I shall not take any more chances here.

Not a soul is in sight as I creep through the main square of the village. As I'd hoped, the front room of Stryver's shop is equally as dim and deserted. The front door is held with a crude warded lock, of the same type that exists on the barn at our farm.

I pull from my pocket the tiny metal pick that Brian gave me last winter. I'd confessed to him that my time at Abernathy had given me a fear of being locked into rooms or dark places. The next day he came home, gave me this tool, and taught me how to pick locks. I'd never guessed I'd be using it like this.

I drive the tool into the simple lock and wiggle it past the wards. Gently twisting the pick until it lifts the locking lever, I hear a satisfying click, and the bolt shoots easily. I quietly steal inside, not wasting any time. I know exactly what I came for.

It's strange to be back in this place. Almost two years ago, I sat on that very chair in the corner, listening as Brian told Stryver that he trusted me. Not exactly in those words, but I knew his meaning. I couldn't then imagine why he would trust me, but now I understand that he just as desperately wanted me to trust him. And I couldn't...yet.

Shaking the memory from my thoughts, I pick up the chair and place it against the back wall behind the counter. I stand upon it, reaching up for the black doglock pistol mounted on the wall. Happily, it is already loaded and packed.

I sneak out of the shop, back to where my horse is hidden. Opening the saddlebag, I find myself stalling with the pistol in my hands. I take a breath, fingering the long, polished barrel. I don't want it to come to this...I don't want to hurt anyone. But I will do whatever it takes.

And if I fail...if I lose him...I'll have another use for this gun when it's over.

Once at the house again, I wake William and we begin to go about our preparations. Everything portable that is of value in the house is to be taken; we shan't be coming back here. I assign myself Brian's room, and immediately go to the small wooden chest he keeps under the bed. In it are all the jewels that had belonged to his mother. He never speaks of her; I think she died while he was still an infant. But these jewels may aid us in the future.

Also in the chest is a small gold pocket watch that belonged to Brian's father. I know he would be loath to lose it, and I include it in my small pouch. Along with these, William brings out a few silver pieces and all of Brian's money. From the barn, I bid him fetch several lengths of rope and a knife.

I pack everything into the saddlebags, dividing it between our two horses, lest we be separated. For a moment, I think about bringing extra clothes, but we can't afford the weight. Quickly, I grab what else I can--a few flasks of water, some blankets, and two loaves of bread--and carry them outside.

"This is everything, then?" I ask.

"Aye, that I can see," says William. "Have you nothing of your own to take?"

I ponder for a moment. There is nothing material in the house that I need. My drawings, maybe...but there will be plenty of time to make more of those. After Brian is safe.

We set out along the eastern road towards Hereford, the sun still a mere suggestion in the dark sky. By my count, we should arrive in town just as the first bells are tolled for the Sunday service. And if God is on our side, the good townsfolk will be naively sequestered in church for several hours afterwards.

Chapter 16

Justin

From the western hills that look down upon the city, we perch ourselves, listening for the church bells to signal our advance. Dawn has broken, and though we are some distance from town, we can see tiny figures and carriages straggling along streets and avenues toward the church.

Finally, the telltale knell can be heard resounding about the hills, and the stream of people has stopped. It is time.

We ride slowly down the hill and into town, weaving our way quietly through alleys and narrow byways. I trust in William's memory to lead us to the gaol, as he was there long ago to file the paperwork after Mr. Kinney's death.

A dismal chill passes through me as we navigate the narrow winding lanes, cloaked amongst the deep shadows that stretch between buildings. The town is drenched in an eerie silence, such that I have never before experienced. The only sounds to hear are the somber clap of our horses' hooves, accompanied by the occasional unexpected trifle.

I struggle to calm myself, though every tiny noise is alarming. Here, a cat darts in front of us, causing the horses to start; there, I mistake a billowing sheet for a person and nearly take off in fright. William, thankfully, is quite composed, and before long is pointing across a small square to a low brick building that is our destination.

Horried, I discover that next to the building is the gallows, in all its terrible eminence. A single rope dangles from one of its masts, swaying in the morning breeze. It seems to leer ominously at me, and I feel my throat constrict in panic. William follows my gaze and must notice my reaction, for he reaches out to me, briefly patting my forearm. I gain strength from the simple gesture, and fight to return my breathing to normal.

We dismount our horses, tying them up in a covert corridor behind the building. I pull out the pistol from my bag, and William nearly falls over.

"Justin!" he tries to shout in a whisper. "Where did you get that?"

"It doesn't matter," I say, not wanting to argue now.

"So you stole it?"

"It may not be the worst thing I do today," I remind him, and he looks at me morosely. I nervously re-check the powder in the gun and we make our way around the building.

The front door is not locked, I realize nervously. Which means that either the police are very trusting or that some of them are still inside. Quickly I develop a new strategy and pull William back around the side of the building to where our horses are stashed.

"Here," I say, rifling through the saddlebags. I come up with one loaf of bread and a flask, tying them up in a kerchief. "Take these inside, and ask to bring them to Brian."

"What, are you possessed?"

"No, hear me out. You can then determine how many men are inside."

"They'll never let me see him," William protests.

"It doesn't matter."

"Justin..."

"Go, William, it will work. Even if someone recognizes you from yesterday, they will remember that you sympathized with Brian the whole time. It would be only natural for you to want to bring him his last meal."

He agrees grudgingly and goes off, disappearing around the front of the building. Anxiously I wait, nearly overcome with agitation.

William

I step inside the door, eyes darting nervously about. I am in a small receiving room; a desk stands before me with a few chairs, but there is no one in sight. From the back of the room, an open door leads to a darkened hallway; I can assume it is where the prisoners are kept. I rap loudly upon the desk and wait, praying that no officer will appear.

To my dismay, I hear footsteps approaching from down the hall. My heart sinks even further when I realize that it is Sydney.

"You again?" he shouts, laughing gruffly. "Come to plead your master's case?"

"No...sir," I respond with forced timidity. "I wished only to bring him some food on his last day."

He chuckles, folding his burly arms across his chest. "Leave it, then. I'll be certain it gets to him."

"May I see him?"

"You'll see him tomorrow on the gallows," he sneers wickedly, "along with the rest of the town."

I sigh, admitting defeat, and lay the satchel upon the desk.

Justin

A few moments later, William returns with nothing in his hands. Sadly, I realize this means that there are indeed men inside.

"How many?" I ask, dispirited.

"One, it appears."

"One only? That is not terrible."

"It's that boor, Sydney."

"Oh," I lament, feeling the life drain from me. A teen-aged boy and an old man against that beast! Even armed, I dislike our chances.

"There's little hope," William sighs.

"Do you propose to give up?" I ask, angrily.

"No," he replies, finding more confidence. "We'll find a way."

"Good," I say, pacing in thought. Suddenly, it comes to me. "How tall is Sydney?" I ask, glancing around the alleyway.

"He's maybe...six and a half feet."

"And you?"

"Five feet and ten," he replies, confused. "Why?"

"Alright," I say, grabbing a small barrel. "Here is our new plan."

Chapter 17

Justin

I stand atop the barrel at the corner of the building, willing my knees not to shake. In a few moments, if all goes as planned, William will come around this corner, with Sydney right behind. I told him to go back in and tell Sydney that he had seen a wayward fox wander down from the hills, stealing chickens from the shops.

William is to come out before Sydney and round the corner first. Then, in my brilliant plan, I will drive the butt of this pistol into the next face that comes into my vision. It's a foolish scheme, I know, but we have no hope of overpowering Sydney without surprising him first. And I want not to fire this gun if I can help it. I am well aware that I have only one shot.

Suddenly, I hear the door open at the front of the building.

"It took off around this corner, sir," comes William's voice, my cue to know that Sydney is indeed behind him.

My heart is pounding in my throat, and I can feel the pistol slipping in my sweaty hands. It seems an eternity before William's head appears before me, and then...the next shape I see around the wall is Sydney's startled expression, in an instant registering what is about to happen to him. With all my might, I drive the butt of the rifle into his face, not even aiming so much as blindly jamming it where it falls.

He cries out horribly and clutches his face. Quickly, William and I each grab one of his arms, forcing them to his back and tying his wrists together. He struggles wildly, but we manage to wrestle him onto his belly on the ground and bind his ankles as well. I tear off a bit of my shirt to gag him and pull the ring of keys off his belt.

With heaving breaths, I look him over--not terribly wounded, but furiously angry. He spits soggy curses from under the cloth gag. I toss the gun to William. "Watch him. If he moves, shoot him," I order falsely, hoping only that Sydney will be intimidated by my words. I am far too sickened by what I've already done to desire adding murder to my list of crimes.

William, thankfully, picks up the role of enforcer quite seriously--I suspect he has a grudge against our dear old Sydney. He stands near him with grim conviction, the pistol pointed at the back of his head.

I leave the two of them there in the alley, and dart into the building. I run down the back hall, which ends in a "T" shape. To the left and right are rows of doors, each with a tiny opening near the top.

"Brian?" I call out, not too loudly. Several faces appear at the sound of a strange voice, but only one answers me back.

"Justin?" I hear to my left and I run to his cell door, trying every key with shaking hands. Finally the lock clicks and I throw open the door, tossing myself into his arms. I clutch at him madly, frantically, my heart aching as though it had been ripped from my chest and now brutally jammed back in.

I break the embrace, reluctantly, and he gazes at me with wet eyes.

"Justin," he cries, "what are..."

"Come, there's no time," I shout, grabbing his hand and pulling him out the door. "We must go!"

We charge out of the building and into the alley, where William guards over Sydney's prostrate form.

"William!" Brian cries, bewildered, but there is no time for answers. I run to my horse and mount it, pulling Brian up behind me. Once we are safely at the ready, William leaves Sydney on the ground and mounts his own horse. We take off, flying down the main avenue of Hereford, just as the first toll of the noon Angelus begins to echo throughout the town.

Chapter 18

Justin

For hours we ride southward, as swiftly as our horses will take us. None of us speaks, concentrating solely on putting as much distance between Hereford and us as possible. I feel Brian behind me, clutching tightly to my waist, and it is heaven. Though we are far from escaped...though we have just consigned ourselves as criminals in flight from the law...I feel relieved and peaceful.

Just as night begins to fall, we come upon the narrow River Trothy, as promised by the map I'd found in Brian's library. We follow it into a dense forest and decide this to be a good place to stop and rest the night. William offers to start a fire, and suggests that Brian and I water the horses.

All three of us dismount wearily, sore from our ride. Brian and I lead the horses down the bank and wait as they take their fill. I pull out one of the flasks I'd stowed and pass it to him, feeling a current run through me as his hand grazes over mine. He looks at me longingly over the backs of the horses... I desire so desperately to kiss him...to

wrap my arms around him and never let go. But none of that is possible while William is with us. So I must be content with the wonderful vision of him, alive, and standing before me once again.

Brian

All three of us are visibly exhausted after the ride, and after sharing a loaf of bread, we sit languidly around the fire. Rather, William and I sit, as Justin has long since fallen asleep. He lies on his side, a few feet away but facing me, as though he could watch me in his sleep. That angelic face I feared I'd never see again... It takes every ounce of restraint in my body not to throw myself at him and wrap him up in my arms.

"So to which of you can I attribute this scheme?" I ask of William.

"'Twas the boy's idea. I admit I thought it senseless at first, but he was...persistent."

"He's a bull-dog," I agree, unable to conceal my smile. I look over at the beast in question, curled into a ball under his blanket and looking all of twelve years old.

I glance at William then, who has followed my gaze.

"William," I begin solemnly, "I can't ever thank you enough for what you've done. You've...saved my life, and probably at the expense of your own."

"I still breathe, Brian," he chuckles.

"Yes, but what is next? By trying to help me, you've...both of you...have made yourselves criminals."

"Brian," he sighs, pausing for several moments, "in the last conversation I had with your dear father, I promised him that I would watch out for you, for as long as I could. In all these years it has been a great joy to me to watch you grow into a wise, kind young man. You are an honor to your father, and a dear friend to me. And no false criminal charge will change that."

His words cut me through the heart, and I know...it is time for the truth. I owe him that, and so much more...though I worry that in telling him, I'll be destroying a friendship I'd known a lifetime.

"William," I sigh, "there is something I must tell you...and I fear that if you know it, you will not think so highly of my character...or so positively of your decision to rescue me." I glance over at Justin's innocent form before continuing.

"Justin and I..." I begin, my breath shaking.

"Brian," he interrupts, quietly. "I know."

"You do?" I reply, my shock evident.

"Justin has told me everything,"

"He...when?"

"Yesterday, before telling me of his plan to save you," says William.

"So you know that Josephine's...accusations...were true."

"Yes."

"And you still wanted to come for me?"

"Brian," he starts and then stops, searching for the words. "I don't...understand it...nor do I think it best for you..."

"I know..." I agree. "I can't tell you that I understand it either. But somehow...I know that there is no other way for me."

William sighs, not hiding his disappointment. "So shall I never live to see your wedding day?"

"I'm sorry," I say weakly, shaking my head. "I think it quite unlikely."

"Aye," he whispers sadly, returning his gaze to the dying fire. Resigned, I determine that this is the best I could have expected from this conversation. As we wrap ourselves in blankets and lie down for sleep, I wish only that he and I were not on such shaky ground as this.

A few minutes later, I hear William's voice and turn my head to face him.

"Brian...I wish that you weren't...this way... But that doesn't mean that I don't care for you," he says earnestly. "I always will."

"And I you, dear friend," I answer, feeling as though a pin has finally been pulled out of my heart. "Thank you...for everything."

He nods briefly and we turn our faces back to the canopy of trees above, allowing the last crackling embers to lull us to sleep.

Epilogue

Brian

When my eyes open again it is dawn, pink streaks of light streaming through the forest. Justin and William still sleep soundly on either side of me, and slowly I creep away towards the riverbank. Stripping quickly from my clothes, I wade into the chilly water, teeth chattering. It is a small price to pay to be clean after two nights in that dank cell.

Not long am I in the water before Justin appears, still squinting with sleep. His white shirt hangs loosely in the early breeze, only barely covering his naked thighs.

"Good morning," he smiles, perching himself on a large rock.

"Won't you come in?" I ask, already feeling the water grow much warmer at the thought.

"I...should not," he says reluctantly, gesturing to where William sleeps not twenty paces away.

I nod soberly in agreement. "What is our next step?" I ask, quietly swimming over to where he sits.

"If we continue to head south, and then west along the Severn, we should reach the Welsh port of Cardiff by nightfall," he answers. "From there, many ships leave for the Colonies, and we can seek to buy passage, or work for it. Once we are over the ocean, there will be no chance of finding us."

"You have indeed thought this all out carefully,"

"There are not many options," he says lightly. "We must get out of Britain, and quickly. Perhaps... things will be different for us, over there."

I reach out a wet hand to hold his, and he takes it, sighing contentedly. For a moment, we merely exist together.

"I want to be angry with you," I confess after a time. "For putting your life in danger like that. You could have been locked away, Justin...or worse."

"And I should be angry with you," he replies, "for throwing yourself to the flames in order to save me."

"I wanted you to live, Justin," I explain.

"And indeed I want to," he laughs, "but not without you. What sort of a life can I have without the one person I love?"

"What sort of life will you have now, as an outlaw?"

"As long as we are outlaws together, it matters not," he says, simply, before growing more somber. "You told me once that men...like us...will only ever have each other. It's true, Brian. You're all that matters in my life, and I won't let you be taken from me."

"You ARE a bull-dog," I say, dodging as he reaches into the water to splash me.

Drawing close to him again, I squeeze his hand lightly. "Will you bring me my breeches?"

He nods, clearly disappointed. Hoping that I'd say...something. Meaningful. But I have yet one surprise in store for him. He crawls back out onto the rock and hands me my breeches. I remain in the waist-deep water and search through the pockets as he watches me, confused.

Finally, my fingers set upon the object I'd been seeking and I toss my breeches back up onto the bank. Wading close to where he sits, I take his hand in mine and place the small ring in his palm. He gasps loudly, almost falling off the rock, and I reach out to steady him.

"If you drop it in this river, I won't forgive you," I tease. But he clutches it fiercely, captivated by the tiny circle. Where it catches the light, I can see its brilliance reflected in his wide blue eyes.

"Brian," he whispers, "it's beautiful! Where did you find this?"

"At the fair, before everything...went wrong. I wanted..." I begin, struggling with the words. "I wanted to show you...what you mean to me. How much you've changed my life in two years. And how I will love you...for the next two years, and every one after that."

He smiles at me through teary eyes and looks back down at the ring. "How shall I wear it?"

"However you choose," I reply, though in honesty I am quite anxious to know his choice.

Without hesitation, he slips it on the ring finger of his left hand. "It fits perfectly."

"Good," I smile, relieved for that bit of luck. I wonder if he knows what else this ring symbolizes for us. A new life, a new home...wherever it may be. Everything I'd previously known in life is lost to me now, but one constant shall remain. Us.

He looks down at me again from the rock, beaming with radiance, and I find myself saying a quick prayer for all that I've gained--and gained back--through him.

"When you first met me," I confess earnestly, "I was drifting through life as one who has no soul. But you gave me your love and I began to live, truly, as a man. When I was ill last year... it was you alone that restored me. And yesterday... you saved my life again. What can I ever give to repay you?"

He ponders for a moment before relaying his response.

"A kiss," he says with a tiny smile.

I lean up out of the water, pressing a kiss to his soft mouth. His tongue pushes eagerly between my lips and I moan at the sweet contact. The circle is once again complete, and the simple harmony of us resumes its gentle flow. Our tongues dance slowly--languidly--around each other as we revel in the surety of this moment.

And just like magic, the world outside falls away and there is only us, this kiss, and the infinite expanse of tomorrow.

America

Prologue

November, 1772

Justin

Each time the ship tosses, as it does now, I'm pressed up against him, and this is my heaven. I don't even have to try for it, or make excuses if someone were to see. On nights of wild storms, when the sea is angry at us, I'm thrown quite on top of him. Those are the best nights.

It's all right that we're sleeping together. This is common enough. In fact, for lack of space, every bunk on this ship is shared by two men. None thinks more of it than that, except perhaps William, who knows the truth about Brian and me. But he is sleeping soundly on the next bed to my right, along with his own bunkmate, a strange one-legged fellow who prays in his sleep.

The hold is freezing and I can see my breath, even with the blanket pulled tight to my chin. Brian is enviably asleep next to me, rolled onto his right side. Sometimes we switch sides in the bunk, as one side of the platform is warped and uncomfortable, but always he faces the same way in deep slumber. I wonder whether he knows that in sleep he always faces east. Always facing the home we left behind.

Certain that none are watching, I snake my hand along under the blanket and search Brian's wool-covered back for an opening. Finally twining up under the hem of his sweater, I find it. A bare patch of warm, smooth skin. Physical contact, that blissful thing of which we have been so long deprived.

Needless to say, Brian and I cannot so much as glance too long at each other on this ship. I didn't know it would be as difficult as all this, and here we've only been a month in. There are plans to stop in Jamaica before we reach Maryland, so it means several months more before we're through. It's torture to be so close and not to touch him.

I sleep very little these days, but it doesn't bother me. I try to appreciate the rare quiet of the hold at night, only broken by snoring here and there, and by the scratching of the rats that run underneath our bunks. I huddle closer to Brian for fear of being bitten; one man who had unwittingly fallen asleep with his arm over his bunk's edge had lost a finger.

When I do sleep, I dream of land, and what it heralds. Warmth... food... a release from the dark, putrid stench of hundreds of unwashed men. Most importantly, though, it means the chance to be together with Brian again. I dream of his body, warm and hard over mine, leaving languid kisses along my jaw. The delicious weight of him, the warm slickness of our sweat and seed pressed between us. I long for him, and my ache is like the very cold. At times it shakes my entire body; at others, it exists as a nagging shiver along my spine. But it is omnipresent and all pervading, preventing me from focusing too long on anything else.

The ship keeps watch over my silent vigil with its harmony of great groans and creaks. We can't hear the water down here, or see it. But sometimes I imagine the walls are glass, and that I can see vast hordes of fish swimming alongside our hulls. Monsters of the deep, perplexed at the huge wooden whale that glides sullenly along the blue-black sea, propelling us ever gradually towards a new world.

Chapter 1

May, 1773

Brian

When we first set sight of land, all of us who were able quickly clambered above deck, and for once, I forgot all propriety. So choked with gratitude and gladness, I grabbed Justin and squeezed him to me, trapping his joyous sobs against my chest. Ours wasn't the only embrace on the bow that afternoon. Men everywhere were cheering and hugging, singing through their merry smiles.

Now, as I walk off the ship on wobbling legs, Justin at my shoulder, I am nearly overcome by relief. I had spent much of the journey terrified, certain that our positions as jobless, penniless fugitives would place us near to beggars in our new lives. Or worse. But here on land, with the fresh, swift air of new life in my lungs, I feel only optimism. Fortune, as Justin often reminded me, smiles warmest when one is most in want of it.

Baltimore seems akin to London in that it is hot, crowded, and noisy. Yet that is where the similarities end. Where London was pervaded with the foul smell of poverty and pestilence, it is tobacco here, and fish. The decent smells of salt water and wood.

We trudge through the narrow cobbled streets in search of lodging, carrying one solitary, modest parcel between the three of us. In the shadows of alleys and doorways I find my old fear settling back in. We have nothing, and know not a soul on this entire continent. We have to find work, and quickly, for the gold William salvaged in our flight was nearly depleted by the purchase of our passage here.

Most of the other men on the Marianna bought their fares by indenturing themselves to future labor on farms and plantations. But we had no time to make such arrangements, and I feared that doing so would make it too hard for the three of us to stay together. Not for anything will I risk losing Justin again, and William is the only friend--and ally--I have left in this world.

We spend most of the day being turned away from every lodging establishment at which we inquire. It's the busy season, they explain. Three tea ships landed in the Chesapeake not a fortnight ago, and all those men needed rooms, too. So on we forge, further and further away from the harbor and its potential for employment.

Finally, late in the evening, as we are beginning to pass lamplighters at their task, we find an inn with room to spare. One room. It is in the poorest, dirtiest neighborhood we've seen, on the edge of town, but we sigh and accept our lot, too tired to care. Tonight we three will share a bed, grateful for the passably clean sheets and relative privacy.

For four days, this is our life. At sunup we rise and set out in three different directions in search of work, only to report back at sundown with long faces and empty pockets.

So I trust to Justin's Fortune and to William's prayers.

Justin

William has found employment at a house in town. Today, he left to start his work there, which is good news, and not only for him. He'll be put up in the house (a very grand place by his description), and he can scout out potential work for Brian and me as well.

Wickedly though, I am not really thinking about all that. Instead, my main concern is that tonight, Brian and I will be alone together for the first time in almost eight months.

I wait on pins and needles for Brian to return, as the shadows grow longer and longer across the floor. This room is barely large enough for the bed and contains no other furniture. It seems to be in the hottest, filthiest part of town, a

difficult walk to the harbor, where most of the work to be had is situated. But it was cheap and available, and the innkeeper's wife gives us eggs and tea in the morning.

Brian is late, and I am growing nervous. For the twelfth time I run my fingers through my slowly-drying hair, willing it not to collect in tangles. I had found a small bath-house on my way home today, and spent some of our scarce food money on a proper hot bath with soap, such as I'd been denied for months. Perhaps Brian will scold me for being frivolous and wasteful when we are so despondent. But when I learned that tonight we would be alone together for the first time in so long...my decision was made for me. I could not bear to go to him in the state that I was in.

Finally, hearing his step on the stair, I nearly jump out of my skin. The door opens to reveal him, and I can see why he was late. His hair is damp and clean and his face is newly shaven. He notes my similar state and for a few moments, we smile sheepishly at each other while my heart nearly bursts for love of him.

He bolts the door behind him and moves toward me, pausing to pull a strange object out of his pocket. At first I wonder what it is, but as he places it on the floor beside the bed, I realize that it is small jar of cooking grease. My heart begins to pound in my chest, and I feel a sort of odd, virginal excitement. It has indeed been far too long.

I have no words but a long, shuddering sigh, and I am in his arms. We topple over onto the bed, kissing feverishly. Rolling about, we wrestle for maximum contact with each other, delighted by the feeling of old embraces made new again. I kiss his smooth silky face, his soft hair that smells of rose water, his ears and neck and throat. His hands are everywhere on me, tangled in my hair, and teasing under the collar of my shirt.

Pulling away finally, he kneels over me on the bed, and slowly strips me of my clothes. I can see his hands are shaking.

"We must be quiet," he warns, panting. "The family is at dinner just below us." I nod, knowing that I could as soon keep quiet as tame a tiger, but I'll try to try.

When we are finally stripped of all that separates us, he stretches himself on top of me, pressing us together at all points. I want to stay like this, just to cherish the feeling of his skin against mine. But there will be time for that later. Now, I want him inside me, pressed as deep as he can possibly go.

I reach down for the jar of grease and twist it open, fingering a little bit of it. He positions himself above me, and I reach for his engorged member. Gasping loudly, he watches me with heavy-lidded eyes as I rub the cool, slick stuff along his shaft. I wrap my legs around his waist as he settles down, elbows on either side of my shoulders.

When finally he slides into me, I feel my head fall back against the pillow, as though my spine had melted clear away. I clutch him tightly to me and he stays deep inside, stretching me with all the pain and pleasure and overpowering sensation I'd missed these long months. He presses his feverish cheek against mine, and I feel his breath coming hot and quickly in my ear. Impatiently I grasp his hips with both hands, nudging him deeper still.

Soon he begins to rock his hips against me, a slow, circular grind, and I hear the torrential rush of my own blood in my ears. I can feel my hole being stretched and worked wider and wider in an exquisite hot burn. With each push a tortured moan escapes my lips, and I can hear his silky voice in my ear, telling me how badly he's wanted me, how hard and hot he'd get just being too near me on that ship. Calling me his angel, his beautiful prince.

Gradually his pace and force increases, thrusting hard, and soon I am whimpering like a little child. I cry out, begging him not to stop, feeling that sweet humming flutter inside my shaking groin. He reaches down and presses his palm against my dripping member, trapping it against my belly. He begins to rub up and down the shaft, in time with his thrusts, and I pull my bottom lip into my mouth to keep from screaming.

Seconds later I go, jerking under him as my hot seed shoots out of me, streaming through his fingers. My body quakes as I come down and I surrender myself to his hard thrusts, now growing quicker and shallower. He falls forward suddenly to bury his face against my neck and a great muffled groan comes from him, his body shuddering its release. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and pull his shaking form against me.

As our trembling muscles gradually relax against each other, I surmise that I was never homesick for England because I've brought my home with me.

Later, he holds me in the dark, our naked bodies still delighting in their adjacency. My face is pressed against his neck, and he strokes my hair in the quiet.

"It's gotten so long," he murmurs idly.

"I know," I say through a yawn. "I'll soon be able to tie it back."

"Don't," he whispers before drifting off to sleep, his fingers still tangled in my hair.

June, 1773

Brian

Today I received a card from William, who is now currently employed on the wealthy north side of the town. He asked me to come at once to see him and to meet his employer, a Lord Edmund Frye. In truth I'd quite rather not go, as a day spent with William means another day I don't find a job. And Justin and I are on the last leg of our food money.

I trace the ordered streets until I come upon the house, a quite large one by urban standards. This must be the way of things in America. William greets me at the door and we embrace, though it has scarce been a sennight since last I saw him.

"Brian, I'm glad you've come," he says warmly.

I nod and smile, embarrassed at my having only shabby clothes to wear while he is in brand new livery, finer than he ever had with us back in England.

"I want you to meet the master," William continues, ushering me up the wide marble staircase. "As expected, upon my arrival he asked after my history, and I explained my coming across with you and Justin--your...cousin, of course. As we agreed, correct?" he adds quietly.

"Yes," I laugh.

"And naturally," he continues in a whisper, "he knows nothing of the...incident...in Hereford. I told him that you'd lost your fortune in a fire, and came here to find honest work."

He guides me into the master suite and opens the door to a large, darkly shaded bedchamber. There, lying in an enormous mahogany bed surrounded by white linens is an elderly man, pale and withdrawn. He points a shaking hand at his bed table, on which lie his spectacles. William snatches them up quickly and places them on his face.

"Ah, William," he begins, "this must be your godson of whom you've spoken so highly."

I blush inwardly at the compliment, reminded of how truly blessed I am to have William taking my part.

"Well, my boy," continues Lord Frye, "sit by me and let's talk awhile."

William exits and I sit awkwardly by the bed, not expecting this private audience. I glance discreetly around the opulent but old-fashioned room. It feels as though I have suddenly been transported back to the English countryside.

"Mr. Kent," he begins. I stifle the instinct to correct him, not yet accustomed to the pseudonym. "William informs me that you are an actuary."

"Well...yes, sir, I was trained as such. Though I've done mostly bookkeeping."

"'Tis no matt..." he chokes, ending in a string of congested coughs. I wait politely, subtly taking in his frail form. His hair is thin and stringy from decades of wigs, and his face is careworn. I wonder how much longer he has on this earth.

"Forgive me, Mr. Kent," he says weakly. "You see I've not been well."

"I'm sorry to hear it, sir."

He waves off my concern. "It happens that I am in need of a new clerk, at least temporarily. My other man is at Rent's Hill during the warm seasons-- do you know of the place?"

"No, sir. I'm only recently arrived."

"Ah. It's a beautiful estate, one of my finest. Quite south of here, along the James in Virginia colony. Tobacco is the chief crop at Rent's Hill. I have 400 head."

I cringe inwardly at his boastful count of slaves, but pretend to be duly impressed. In truth, he is an even richer man than I guessed. Especially if that is only one of several plantations he must own.

"The tobacco season is very long, you know. And since the Inspection Act, it's quite a deal of work to get so many hogsheads shipped to my merchant in London. So my accountant is spending more and more time overseeing affairs at Rent's Hill, and I find I need another man to assist me up here."

I nod, understanding where this is going.

"You're wanting work, or so William tells me," he states.

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"You must understand, Mr. Kent, that it is not my custom to just hire men off the street. In fact, to my eye, most of these young colonials are naught but miscreants and drunkards."

I don't know whether to agree, so I do nothing.

"But as it happens, I've quite taken to William, and he speaks highly of your abilities and character." (Here, he begins another coughing spell, and again I wait awkwardly for him to repair.)

"And," he goes on with a graver tone, "of most serious import, you are an Englishman, and William assures me of your loyalty to the crown and to our mother country."

"Yes...of course," I affirm, realizing that I'm prepared to agree to just about anything.

"Good," he says with an exasperated air. "I won't tell you the sort of claptrap that's about these days; you'll find out soon enough yourself. Such nonsense."

I smile and nod again, which will soon become a move of habit.

"In any case," he goes on, "I shall need you to start immediately. Your pay to start will be 50 pounds per month, with boarding. If all goes well, I may increase your wage to 60 pounds."

Dear God, I think, what happy fortune! Justin and I can live quite handsomely on such a sum.

"Thank you, sir," I say sincerely, trying not to sound too overeager. "You shan't be disappointed with me."

"I trust not," he replies. "You can take up in the Oriental room. My daughter will see that you are comfortably lodged." He reaches over suddenly to ring a small bell, one of several on the night table. Each is a different size and must give a unique ring. I suppose one will eventually be for me.

"Tomorrow at nine o'clock," he instructs, "you will report to me, and I will show you all the ledgers."

"Yes sir," I reply. "Again, thank you, sir."

The door opens suddenly to admit a young, rather plain-looking woman in a green frock dress.

"Ahh," says Frye, "she appears. Mr. Kent, this is my daughter Henrietta. She is a beautiful girl, is she not?"

"Indeed, sir," I lie politely, bowing to meet her.

"Father, you embarrass me," she says genially, and I notice that her face is pleasanter in a smile. Her chestnut hair is nearly black, and her skin has the natural tone of one who rides often, or spends time outdoors. Her vibrancy is in stark contrast to the pallor of her father, though their eyes show the telltale likeness of family.

"Mr. Kent will be my new clerk. Will you show him to the Oriental room?"

"Certainly, father," she replies, going over to the bedside. "Can I get you anything else when I return?"

"Some iced water, my dear," he says. One cannot miss the closeness between them, nor her devotion to him.

She pats his hand and turns to me. "Follow me, then, Mr. Kent."

"Do you find it suitable?" she asks, as I look around the large room.

"Quite," I reply honestly.

The room is larger even than the master room at my home in England, and much more lavish. A huge bed of dark wood commands the chamber, and everywhere else can be found varying shades of blue, from cerulean curtains to a lush Oriental carpet in deep cobalt. A large dark wardrobe stands beside me, and I realize that I will very quickly need to find new clothes with which to fill it.

"Mr. Kent," she starts, breaking into my adulation of the decor. "If you are living here, I should like you and I to be friends."

"Of course," I agree.

"You see, my father is grown quite sickly of late, and is a very cautious man."

"Miss Frye, I swear I shall not disappoint..."

She politely raises her hand to silence me. "I only wish to say that I hope you will not give him any cause for undue anxiety. If there are problems that arise--financially or otherwise--I wish you'd consult with me before worrying him. I am his only heir, and so you must not feel it is inappropriate to talk to me simply because I am a woman. I'm not merely a silly girl that needs coddling."

"No, Miss Frye," I say, smiling at her pluckiness. Her thoughtful eyes regard me seriously, and I feel an immediate measure of respect for her, something rare in my dealings with women. "I can surely see that you are not."

"Good. And you may call me Henrietta," she says, extending her hand as a man might.

"Brian," I reply, shaking it firmly.

"Shall I have Mrs. Carroll seat you at supper tonight, then, Brian?" she asks.

"No, thank you..." I stammer, remembering that Justin is waiting for me. "I have...arrangements to make tonight. I shall return with my things in the morning."

"Very well," she says with a smile, and leaves me to my new surroundings.

"Fifty pounds!" Justin cries breathlessly "That's incredible!"

"I know," I reply, rolling off of him. I force myself up and amble over to the window to open it wider. The tiny room is hot from our exertions and I look back to find Justin sprawled naked across the sheets.

"It's supposed only to be temporary," I continue, "but for the time being, it's perfect."

"Except..." he says dourly.

"Well, near to perfect," I amend, climbing back onto the bed. "But I think this can be a very good thing for us."

"I know, Brian. I agree with you. I'm only feeling sore about it."

"Sit up," I command, seating myself behind him with my back against the wall. I begin to gently rub his warm, sweat-dampened shoulders.

"Not that kind of sore," he laughs.

"Shall I stop then?"

"No," he says quickly, sighing his contentment. "It's only...I feel as though I just got you back. And now I have to give you up again. It's not rational, I know, but..."

"Justin, I feel the same. I don't like that we'll have to live apart, but it's only for a while. The accountant will come back by the end of the year--if Frye doesn't die before then!"

"Mmm..." he murmurs, falling prey to the kneading of my hands at the back of his neck. "If he dies, you'll be out of work altogether."

"Perhaps not. His daughter seems to be quite knowing of his affairs, and I imagine that she would take up his holdings until they're passed on to the next male kinsman."

"A daughter? Has he no sons?"

"None. She is his sole heir," I explain.

"She's not married?"

"No."

"How tragic."

"I know. A shame, too, as she seems quite competent for a woman."

"Hmm. How old is she?"

"About your age, I would guess."

He's quiet for a while, so I think he might have drifted off, when he speaks again.

"What shall I do all this time?" he asks.

"Anything you like. I'll be earning enough for both of us, so you needn't look for work anymore. And every month I'll put aside money, so that eventually we can find a flat in a better neighborhood."

"I have to work, Brian. I have to do something."

"Alright."

"I don't want you always taking care of me."

"I know."

"We should be partners."

"Alright, Justin!" I say, laughing. "I understand! I didn't mean to insult you. We ARE partners. But that means you'll accept my help if you need it. Just as I would from you."

He nods in agreement, and twists around to kiss me once, before settling back against my chest. I envelop him in a tight hug, and he begins to run his hands lightly up and down my thighs. I feel his head loll back against my shoulder and a long breath issues from his mouth.

"I love you," he whispers. I pull his left hand up to my lips, kissing the simple metal band there, before lacing his fingers together with mine.

Chapter 3

J,

Met with one of Lord Frye's captains today to inventory a shipment of tea. Looks to be that delightful Ceylon sort you so enjoy; I'll get some for you. Be warned that the sailors are speaking of a tornado that's due. If you have money left, buy yourself a good coat. If not, write to me, and I will send you one of mine. Lord F. sent me to his tailor and I now seem to have more clothes than the King himself.

Am more settled now, and think I can make an escape for the night. W. will surely provide me an alibi if needed. Tomorrow night, then?

I await your response.

B.

Justin

I stuff the letter into my pocket and set out into the darkening night. It's been a week now since Brian left for Lord Frye's, and if I'd harbored any childish notions of his forgetting me, I needn't have. He has written similar letters to me almost every day since, keeping me posted as to his work, and promising to come to see me as soon as he's able.

In the meantime, I bide my time looking for work (though admittedly with less urgency than before). I find odd jobs sometimes: a shilling here or there to sweep out a courtyard or lift some barrels. But nothing permanent.

I find, however, that I enjoy exploring the city with little aim. I wander around the busy harbor, watching the stevedores carry crates of tea off the ships and barrels of tobacco back onto them. In midday, I seek the shade of the narrow residential streets, where the smell of baking apples wafts down from the windows and tomcats chase each other across the rooftops.

Today, though, I decided to go exploring at night, eager to see for myself how a city can do without sleep. Most of my life experience was in the countryside, or on a ship. In either of those cases, the night is an unfortunate inefficiency, something to sleep through until work can be begun again at dawn. But I know that a city's schedule has no such limit.

It is quite late by the time I reach Preston Street, and approach my destination: the opera house. It is a magnificently stylish building, one that I desperately want to sketch as soon as I can afford the charcoal again. Yet I have only seen it during the day, solemn and deserted, waiting for the nighttime when it may come to life once again.

Now in the dark, even from several streets away, I can tell where it is. For above it hangs a halo of light against the cloudy, iron-black sky. I turn the corner and finally see the building, ablaze with light that seems to illuminate even the darkest buildings nearby. All its lamps are aglow, outside and in, accompanying the commotion of literally hundreds of carriages crowding the front entrance.

The performance, sadly, has already ended. I had hoped to hide myself near enough the doors that I might hear some of it. But alas, I am resigned to watching the operagoers pile out of the building in a great sea of feathers and tri-corner hats. I decide that this is interesting enough entertainment, and seek out a good vantage point across the street.

I climb easily up a drainage pipe to the roof of a small shop and settle myself on my stomach. From here, I'm reasonably sure that none can see me, though I have quite a good view of the goings-on. By now all the patrons are outside, and gradually milling into their carriages. The wigs and fashions are magnificent! I have never seen such colors in fabrics, nor such elaborately painted faces. Even the horses are dressed brilliantly!

One by one, the carriages depart. Comfortable at my perch, I watch patiently as the last of them leave, a lingering "clop clop clop" echoing along the streets behind them. With silence settling upon the street once again, I am at first certain that all the patrons have left. But suddenly, I notice movement under one of the streetlamps. A boy, about my age, leans leisurely against the post, encircled by the warm yellow glow. He stands with his hands in the pockets of his coat, and seems to be doing nothing in particular.

Minutes, even hours, pass, and finally the doors to the theater are closed, and the lights within extinguished. But the boy remains, looking calmly about him, nothing more. I can see that his hair is fair like mine but longer, and tied back with wide ribbon in the typical fashion.

My curiosity overtakes me and I decide to go and talk to him. I climb back down the drainpipe rather noisily, and he notices me. I can see him watching from across the street, but he makes no motion towards me. Suddenly, his head jerks to the side, looking down the road, and I hear horse hooves approaching from a distance. Something in his body language shifts, and I change my mind about crossing the street to meet him.

I linger in the shadows as the carriage approaches, and watch as it pulls up to the lamppost, blocking my view of the boy. I hear a man's voice, though the words are unintelligible. Soon, the carriage bucks slightly from the addition of weight, and takes off again down the blackened street. The boy is gone.

Chapter 4

Brian

I remain in the study all day, hoping to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. By outward appearance, I am hard at work on Frye's ship registries. Though this is, in fact, true, I am also closely watching the shadows that fall upon my desk. When the shade cast by this iron tiger statue falls upon the compass sitting at the corner of the desk, I know it is four o'clock. And it is then that I will make my escape.

Suddenly, a knock sounds at the door, with all the doom of hell in it.

"Come in," I sigh.

It is only Henrietta. Somehow, I'm not too disappointed.

"Hello, Brian. My, haven't you been busy today."

"I'm hoping to finish up soon," I reply, shuffling papers idly back and forth.

"Feel up to another spot of whist tonight?"

I laugh warmly. "You might ask William first. I'm sure he'd like to change partners after last night's debacle."

"Oh, come now, Brian, you weren't all that bad. You merely lacked concentration."

"And now I lack a full 200 shillings. You're a shark, Henrietta. You and the cook."

She feigns insult and laughs. "Well, if whist is not your game, we can surely find another."

"No, thank you, my dear, but I will not be in tonight. You must play without me."

"Brian, that's cruel! " she says, jokingly. "You know we need four players. What's so important that you've got to muck up the evening for all of us?"

"I...promised I'd have dinner with my cousin," I say, with passable coolness.

"Ahh, the infamous cousin! William has mentioned him."

"Has he?" I say, not looking at her.

"Only as a matter of circumstance. So when shall we get to meet him? Or do you have him squirreled away somewhere?"

I clear my throat. "No, of course not."

"Then invite him to supper some night. I should love to see a new face at the table. Only a week in and already yours has grown so dreadfully tedious..." she taunts.

"Amusing," I say glibly, but with a smile.

"Monday night then. I shall hold you to it!" she says on her way out the door. "After all, you've already met all MY family."

"Goodbye, Henrietta," I shout after her.

The shadow has eclipsed the compass and I am free.

Justin

When Brian arrives finally, I nearly throw myself on him before he can cross the threshold. We kiss madly, as though it has been years and not mere days. It is not until several minutes later that I finally pull him into the room, and can see him fully.

He is dressed in a knee-length justaucorps coat of brilliant scarlet, with matching red waistcoat and breeches. He reaches up to take off his black tricorn hat, and runs his long fingers self-consciously through his hair. I think I have never seen anything handsomer.

"What's wrong?" he asks, perplexed. "Why do you stare like that?"

"You're magnificent," I whisper, barely able to reclaim my voice.

He shrugs modestly and sits down on the bed. "It's Frye's tailor. He has all the latest fashions."

"But on other men they seem so ordinary," I explain. "You were made for those clothes."

He snorts softly and shrugs out of his coat, revealing the long arms of his white silk shirt. I trap his hands as he reaches to undo the buttons of his waistcoat.

"Let me," I say slyly, kneeling in front of him. He raises an eyebrow only, and gives over to my control.

"Henrietta has asked to meet you," says Brian as we are spooned naked together on the straw-tick bed. "She has invited you to supper next week."

"Brian, I have nothing to wear!"

"I'll send you to Frye's tailor. He will let me borrow against my wages."

I squeeze his hand in thanks. How exciting it will be to have stylish new clothes!

"And Henrietta?" I ask.

"She thinks you're my cousin, as does everyone. She's quite decent, you'll see."

"You like her," I say, rather than ask.

"Of course I do. She's pleasant to talk to," he replies, and then pauses. "You're not jealous?"

"Have I cause to be?"

Brian begins laughing so hard at this that the bed shakes, and I realize my own foolishness. Embarrassed, I roll onto my front and bury my face in the pillow. He stops chuckling finally and shifts closer to me. He sighs and lays his head upon my back, slowly running one hand down my side and over my buttocks, to rest in the soft, light hair on the back of my thigh.

Chapter 5

Justin

I've spent almost all day at the tailor, being prodded and measured and feeling like quite the aristocrat! I found out that Brian told the tailor to give me whatever I wanted, and at first I was too apprehensive to choose anything! But eventually I realized that if I'm to be seen with Brian in the city, I ought to be dressed nicely.

After a full afternoon of playing the puppet, I ended up choosing a few new shirts and breeches, and vests in varying colors. Most of the clothes are still suited for my age; I would feel a little cocksure walking around in full gentlemen's dress when I still have no name or rank. But I do want to have ONE good suit that I might wear to

supper at Lord Frye's. So I chose a knee-length satin coat in cornflower blue with matching waistcoat. I put it over a simple white cotton shirt and tan breeches, so that I wouldn't feel too silly. The breeches fit very snugly--so much so that I blushed when first showing myself to the tailor. But he assured me that this is the style of the day!

Together with new white stockings and brown buckled shoes, I must say that it looks quite trim. I hope Brian will like it! I request that all the clothes be packaged and delivered to the inn where I'm lodging, and set off for home.

As I traipse back down Light Street, something compels me to stop. It's not yet sundown, and suddenly I realize I can make it to the opera house in time for tonight's performance. And in truth, I'm also curious to see if that same boy is there, keeping his long vigil alone by the lamppost. I turn around and head briskly in the direction of the theater.

Nestled among the wine barrels in the alley behind the opera house, I sit and listen to the muffled--but beautiful--sounds from within. According to the posted bill, it is Pergolesi's *La Serva Padrona*, "The Servant as Mistress." I would love to see it someday with Brian, and not only for its relevance to our own relationship. In truth, I'd love to do anything with him in public society. But I suppose it is impossible.

A few stray cats mill around me, but for the most part, my peaceful solitude is unbroken. Until, toward the end of the second act, I hear soft footfalls approaching and look up. It is the boy from before. He sees me and a scowl crosses his face. At first I think he'll see fit to leave, but then he marches right up to me with his hands in fists.

"You again," he snarls. "I know what you're up to." I scramble to stand, not knowing if he intends to do me violence.

"This is my section," he says menacingly. "You figure to steal my business?"

"No, I swear," I plead. "I'm only recently here from England. I don't know anything about your business."

He snorts in disbelief.

"I only meant to listen to the opera," I say, not enjoying being scolded by someone of my own age. "I'll go."

"Naw, it's alright," he says, stopping me with a hand on my arm. "I suppose you can stay till it's done. Just mind you get lost when the doors open."

"Alright," I say, sitting back down.

"Have any tobacco, do you?" he asks, seating himself next to me.

"No," I reply, surprised at his sudden cordiality. We sit in amiable silence for a few moments, our backs to the brick wall. When a bass note is hit, I can feel it in my spine.

"Why were you spying on me the other night?" he asks.

"I wasn't spying," I say indignantly. "Only...watching. I wanted to know what you were waiting for."

"Well, now you know."

"Do I?"

He looks at me incredulously through long eyelashes. I notice that his eyes are green, not blue like mine.

"Come now, you can't fool me with that. I know YOU are quite familiar with what I do."

I can feel my blush to the tips of my ears. "How...how can you tell?"

"I don't know. I suppose I just have an eye for it. And you needn't whisper after all, there's no one else here."

"Right," I say, embarrassed.

"So what were you charging the men back in the mother country?" he asks, as though this is the most natural conversation in the world.

"I...I wasn't charging. I mean I've never...asked money for it."

"Pfff. That's your mistake then," he says, shaking his head.

"So is it only for money that you do it?"

"Mostly. It's better pay than my other job. But sometimes..." he says, breaking into a small smile. "Well, it can be nice too."

I grin in agreement, finding myself fascinated to have found another companion in this...whatever it is.

"Are there many others?" I ask.

"What, men like us, you mean?"

I nod.

"Hoo! You ARE a dense one. You're from England, sure, and not the moon?"

"This is my first time in a city is all," I explain defensively.

"Well, you'll find 'us' everywhere, I can tell you that. The devil has long arms, he does."

"You don't believe the devil made us, do you?" I say, somewhat startled.

"No," he laughs.

Suddenly I notice that the music has stopped, and a low, quiet rushing sound begins. The audience's applause.

"Your cue to leave," says my companion, rising to brush off his coat.

I stand up too, watching him as he combs through his sandy blonde hair with long fingers, and dusts off the tips of his shoes.

"Come around again sometime," he says. "It's good to have company. As long as you promise you're not in the trade."

"No, I promise," I affirm.

"My name's Amos," he states, extending a hand to shake mine.

"Justin," I reply. "Good luck tonight."

He smiles and rolls his eyes at me, before disappearing around the corner. I exit the alley from the other side and head back home in the dark, my mind ablaze with the crystalline sparks of discovery.

Chapter 6

July, 1773

Brian

I nearly fly down the main staircase at the first knock, but William is already there. He is greeting Justin warmly and clapping him on the back. When I finally reach the ground floor, I can feel my jaw drop open.

"Hello, cousin," says Justin coolly, with only the hint of a sly smile. He is dressed in an elegant blue satin suit that somehow makes his brilliant eyes even more breathtaking. I stammer some nonsense, before finally thinking to press his hand and greet him in kind.

It is with great effort that I finally release his hand, instead wishing to drag him by it straight to my bedroom. Thankfully, Henrietta's approach snaps me to my senses.

"Ah, the long-awaited cousin," she says, regarding Justin with a smile. "Welcome."

"Justin, this is Miss Henrietta Frye."

"Enchanted," he says sweetly, bowing before her. I want to ravish him there on the spot.

We four of us sit to a casual supper, along with the rest of the other household staff: the cook Mrs. Carroll, and Henrietta's shy maidservant Rachel. At first, Henrietta thought it inappropriate to have Justin dining with the servants, but I assured her that he had no such class snobbery.

In truth, it is a pleasant evening, though Justin periodically rubs his knee against mine under the table, and I lose all pace with the conversation. Whenever I can manage, I glance inconspicuously down to his lap, captivated by his tight fawn-colored breeches that hug his groin with intoxicating lewdness.

Justin

By some shameful strain of pettiness, I am glad to find that Henrietta is quite plain. She seems nice enough, though it is still odd to find Brian so friendly with a woman. Usually he cannot stand them, and I suppose I was suspicious of his regard for her. But I must not forget that I am a guest in her father's house, and must not think ill of her.

All through the meal, I am burning with the desire to tell Brian what I learned at the opera house, and about my new friend Amos. The idea that there are others like us--MANY others-- it's exhilarating! But also somewhat terrifying. If Amos could so easily spot me, might I be so obvious to others?

When the meal is finished, the women servants depart in classic English style, so that the men might banter over brandy and pipe tobacco. At first, I am worried that Henrietta will choose to stay--she has such queer, forward habits. But she leaves to take a plate up to her father, leaving William, Brian and I alone. We three talk about

common things for a few moments, before William tactfully excuses himself. The door has not even finished swinging on its hinges before Brian's lips are on mine.

"Let me give you a tour of my rooms," he says breathlessly. I nod in agreement and we make for the main staircase, checking our pace to appear nonchalant and appropriate. After all, it is only natural for a cousin to want to see where his fellow kinsman might be taking residence.

Once inside the bedroom, Brian grabs me from behind and assaults my neck with hot kisses. One hand reaches around my front to grasp the bulge of my breeches. I can feel my groin heating up under his fingers, and the fabric quickly becomes painfully tight.

My knees begin to weaken under me and he promptly pushes me over to the large brocaded armchair in the corner. Kneeling between my legs, he leans down to press his mouth against the fullness of my groin. The thin layer of satin grows hot under his breath, and I find myself moaning and arching against his mouth.

Finally, he reaches under the waist of my breeches, freeing my swollen, aching member. He grasps the base with his hand, feeding the rest between his reddened lips, and I feel the delicious drenching fire of his mouth, spreading with long fingers throughout my veins.

Though my head falls back against the soft lushness of the chair, my back is arched away from it, desperate to force myself closer to his touch. Deep within his warm mouth, I feel his tongue swirling and sucking, drawing me closer and closer to release. My knuckles are bleached white, clutching the arms of the chair with animal ferocity.

I cry out suddenly, clasping one hand to my mouth, as the fire takes over and my body begins to shake. My breath catches sharply in my throat, and I feel the hot thick fluid pour out of me. He takes it in his throat, swallowing twice to get it all down. Through unfocused eyes I watch a tiny stream escape the corner of his lips. He releases me and reaches up his thumb to reclaim the last little bit from his chin, before sucking it back into his mouth.

Brian

Not willing to arouse suspicion by remaining upstairs for too great a time, we returned downstairs. Justin quickly requested a tour of the neighborhood, so we might be alone together a little longer.

The night is balmy and cloudless, perfect for a late stroll. Innumerable stars dot the blackened sky, and crickets serenade us from the shadows. We wander along quiet Pratt Street, and I begin to feel a keen sense of regret.

"I miss the feel of your hand in mine," I say quietly, thinking back to our many nightly strolls across the isolated moors.

Justin looks up at me sadly and reaches out his hand for mine. I clutch it desperately, fleetingly, for a moment. Then, we hear a door open down the lane and must quickly disengage once again.

"Brian, I nearly forgot!" he exclaims suddenly, before lowering his voice to a near whisper. "I met another...like us."

"What do you mean?"

"I was at the opera house the other night, lingering about outside so that I could hear the music. And I met a boy there. We began to talk, and he KNEW about me. He said he could see it."

I feel oddly uncomfortable about this. "I'm not sure that's possible, Justin."

"I hope it's not!" he replies. "In any case, maybe we are only secretly visible to each other."

"Sounds rather silly to me," I say.

"I know," he says, smiling. "But I like the thought. That there are many of us. A sort of... secret community. I want to meet every one of them, and see what they're like. It makes me feel like...we're not as alone in this."

I nod, in understanding, though I still feel a strange apprehension in the back of my mind. "So who is this boy?" I ask.

"His name is Amos."

"And how did you breach this sensitive topic? I don't think it a common thing to talk about in the streets."

"I had asked him what was his occupation, and he said that..." Justin pauses a moment, "...that he waits outside the opera house at night, and goes with men for money."

Suddenly my apprehension jumps to full-blown alarm.

"Justin..." I start, but he looks at me with such ready stubbornness that I am thwarted. His eyes remind me that he has no job, that I left him alone in a strange city, and that I dare not begrudge him his one friend. All of this is communicated in his face, and quickly I feel very much like the petulant wife. I hold my tongue.

Chapter 7

August, 1773

Justin

"Hello," calls a voice from the shadow. A body emerges as that of Amos. "I didn't know if you'd come back again."

"Why shouldn't I?" I ask.

He shrugs and sits down beside me. The wall behind our backs vibrates with the sounds of the orchestra getting into tune. "Horrid weather lately. It's bad for business. Men usually stay home."

I nod in sympathy. The predicted storm had come just as the sailors foretold: swiftly and brutally. It assaulted the city for days, during which I stayed in most of the time, and read whatever I could borrow from the innkeeper. Brian has had a mess with damaged shipments, and wrote to say that he would not have an evening free for some time.

Now, the first dry day of the week, the city ventures out once again, through the puddles and rivulets that decorate the cobblestones. Bits of food and sodden paper are strewn about the streets, collecting in clutches beside the buildings and in corners. Though the storm has passed, the sky remains sullen and dark, with bloated grey clouds hanging nearly low enough to touch.

Amos sighs, discontented, and stands up suddenly. "I'm not of a mind to play the peacock tonight. You game for a drink?"

"Alright," I say, hoping to sound nonchalant and not overeager. Having a friend is a novel enough experience for me, but to be invited to a pub as well! It feels so delightfully... normal.

"So," Amos says conversationally as we walk along the grey-cast streets. "What brought you across the pond?"

"A fire," I say mechanically, having spent all my months on the Marianna preparing the story. "We lost everything, and thought to start anew here."

"We? You and your family?"

"Yes...of sorts."

He picks up on my hesitation immediately. "You and your gent."

I blush, more out of guilt than modesty. Part of my brain is yelling that I was supposed to tell everyone that Brian is my cousin. That was the plan. But the other part of me reasons that Amos is a special case, and would never be a threat to Brian and me. After all, why would one of "us" snitch on another?

"So what is he like?" Amos asks, and I realize that my delay had been affirmation enough of his suspicions. I find myself smiling shyly in search of an answer.

"He's...wonderful."

"He give you that nice ring?"

"Yes," I reply proudly, rubbing it with my fingers.

"Rich, then?" he asks.

"No," I say, a little thrown by the question.

"Married?"

"No!"

"Well. He does sound good," Amos concludes, as we turn down a dark alley adjacent to the pier.

The passage is so narrow that one cannot even raise one's arms to the sides. In the dark, I can barely see his back in front of me, and I feel an unusual trepidation. Night was never scary in the countryside.

A bolted metal door presents itself to us at the end of the long, cavernous alley. I look wistfully backwards to the entrance, now merely a foggy blue square in the distance. The air seems colder here, and I rub my arms for warmth.

Amos raps three times on the door, but receives no answer.

"Is this the tavern, truly?" I say in disbelief, hoping not to sound as nervous as I feel.

Before he can answer, a voice calls out from behind the door. "Who's there?"

"Molly," Amos calls back, nudging me teasingly in the dark.

The door opens slowly at first, then easily as the man inside apparently recognizes the face.

"Come on, then," Amos says, and pulls me inside after him.

Once inside, I find that it rightly is a tavern, at least as far as I imagined one to be. We gaze around the small, cramped room, dimly lit and with a low-hanging ceiling clouded by tobacco smoke.

A long bar supports the right side of the room, behind which stands a tallish man idly wiping glasses. In the center are a few round tables, crudely made and strewn with playing cards. On the left side are several small couches, arranged conveniently for conversation, and not at all for modesty.

Most notable, though, are the men, of which there are maybe a dozen, and all with eyes fixed squarely on us.

Amos heads toward the left side, pulling me along behind him. We take our place on one of the small couches, and I look to my companion for clues. He settles back easily with a casual smile on his face, and I struggle to do the same.

Gradually the other patrons return to their previous occupations, and I discreetly look around. There are men of every age here, from the grey-haired to boys even younger than us. Most are seated at the tables, talking amiably. Some decorate the couches as we do, having what appear to be very intimate conversations.

"Hey. Justin." Amos calls. "You quite alright? You look white as a sheet."

"I'm alright."

"Want to leave?" he offers.

"No," I say, feeling childish. "Shall I go and buy our drinks?" He looks at me incredulously, and shakes his head at what must be my utter naivete.

From the corner of my eye, I catch a man slowly weaving his way toward us through the sea of tables. I glance over at Amos, to find his gaze now trained on the man like a pointer after a pheasant.

"Hello, my dear," says the man approaching Amos, stooping down to press a kiss to his cheek. "We haven't had the pleasure of your presence in a while. And who is this?"

"This is James," Amos says, meaning me.

"Enchanted, James," says the man, smiling pleasantly, but not offering his own name. I guess by the one-sided introduction that anonymity is canon in this place.

Amos' friend buys us each a mug of spiced wine, and himself a cognac. He settles down on the chair next to Amos and the two begin to talk with their heads very close together. Amos' left arm lies on the side of the settee between them, and one of the man's hands rests lightly on his wrist. I drink the wine quickly for lack of better occupation, feeling rather awkward, but not keen on showing it.

Shortly, another man approaches, this time seating himself in the chair beside me.

"Fancy another?" he asks, politely pointing to my empty mug. Admittedly grateful for something to do, I accept.

I drink the wine, enjoying the new warmth running through my body, and try to listen attentively to the man beside me. He asks me several questions about myself, and I find the lies coming easier now with the wine. He is not an unpleasant man, but I feel an acute sense of foreboding, as though at any moment this exchange will cross a line, with him on one side and me making apologies on the other.

Some time later, the conversation lulls, and I find the man looking closely at me.

"You are remarkably beautiful," he muses, with no preamble.

"I...thank you," I stammer uncomfortably, suddenly pretending to be very interested in my lap.

"And modest," he says. I can hear the smile in his voice, as though he is pleased with the discovery. He reaches a hand up to lightly draw a bit of my hair back behind my ear. "Would you like come sit here with me?"

"No, thank you," I answer, looking over to Amos for help. But he has already removed himself to the other man's couch, and is sitting in his lap. Though his back is to me, I can tell they are kissing, the man's arm wrapped possessively around Amos' slender waist.

Harshly tossed back into my own calamity, I suddenly find that the man has placed his hand upon my knee. And here you are, Justin, I think to myself. You wanted so badly to meet other men like "us," and now look at what you've gotten yourself into. What did you expect?

I breathe heavily, almost too afraid to react one way or another, when I feel his fingers lightly trace the line where my breeches end and the thin layer of stocking begins. Quickly it is too much, and I jump up, knocking over his drink in the process.

"I'm sorry," I stutter clumsily, not able to look at him. As though burned by fire, I run for the door and am out of the tavern before noticing whether Amos saw me leave.

Chapter 8

September, 1773

Brian

"Come in, Mr. Kent."

I enter the bedroom, where the weak but nonetheless vigorous Lord Frye lies, papers strewn around him on the blanket. I reach for my usual chair, pulling it up to the bed. He pats my hand lightly, a fatherly gesture, one of many that he has adopted of late.

"You know the emergency," he says soberly.

"Yes," I reply. The calamity to which he refers is that of several of his commissioned merchants, who have been attacked by local tea traders. Episodes of this type are becoming more and more common, since Britain made duty concessions to the East India Tea Company this spring.

The act, intended to improve business for British tea exporters who were in trouble, has infuriated smaller, colonial-based tea merchants. As a result, violent skirmishes are breaking out, and Frye (who has loyally worked with the Tea Company, and thereby benefited from the concessions) has had to deal with sabotaged shipments, boycotts, and violence toward his men. The atmosphere in Baltimore is one of a palpable, growing tension, which even the most conservative of loyalists cannot deny.

"It's that incendiary Adams," says Frye bitterly. "He's got all the wrong ideas, and these know-nothings are all too eager to hear them."

I nod supportively. Samuel Adams' speeches are the talk of the city, and one can barely walk down the street without hearing his name mentioned. Often with disdain, by those (typically older) men, who are still vehemently loyal to the crown. But mostly with reverence, and awe. Caches of young colonials, who wear their hair naturally and unpowdered, and who have never even seen the shores of England, talk wistfully of Adams and the other radicals as though they were on a mission from on high.

"I trust you to stay on top of things, Mr. Kent. I don't usually put my trust in such young men, but you're not like the others here. I can see you have a good heart. These people," Frye continues with acid in his voice, "are like spoiled children, who care nothing for the good of the family, only of themselves. This is the way I think of the British Empire, Mr. Kent, a family. Just because we are far from home, we are no less responsible to it."

"Yes, sir," I say as usual, too grateful for his kindness and generosity to disagree with this feeble old man.

"Ahh," he sighs, leaning back against his pillows. "I think often of family these days. I worry about my Henrietta. She's such a beautiful girl, and smart as a fox. I don't like to think of what will happen when I die, if she is left unmarried."

"She won't be destitute, surely?"

"No. I've made provisions for her, as much as I'm able. But she will lose the way of life to which she has grown accustomed: the house she grew up in, her beloved horses, and Rachel--her handmaiden that she has known dearly since childhood. She should be allowed to keep these things, but, instead, my fortune must be liquidated and divided among my business associates. Simply because she is unmarried. Of course, this is the way of things."

"It's most unfortunate, sir," I say with honesty. I do like Henrietta, and wish a better fate for her.

"Yes..." he laments wearily. "If only she were to marry... Then I could leave her--and her husband--everything. He would be a very fortunate man, in many ways. To be so well set, and have such a lovely wife..."

The unspoken suggestion is made, as clear as though he had written it on the very walls of the room.

Justin

"It's quite simple," Amos explains. "You merely stand about on the corner here, and shout the headlines at everyone you meet."

I clutch the large stack of Baltimore Advertiser papers to me, sheltering them against the drizzling morning rain.

"Sometimes I put a little inflection in my voice," he continues, "Make it sound more interesting. See, you could read it like this: 'Lord North Issues New Writ of Taxation,' but that's boring, isn't it? Instead, I'd say something like: 'North Sticks It to Us Again!'"

I chuckle, and try for myself, bellowing as loud as I can: "That Bastard North Sticks It to Us Again!"

"There, now that will sell papers!" says Amos, laughing. And indeed it does sell, as a few passersby stop to buy some.

"How much is Beszick giving you?" Amos inquires.

"A farthing against every paper."

"Hoo..." he whistles. "That's a rub. But that's because you're only selling the dailies now, and they're just penny and a half. If you do a good job, he'll move you up to the special papers, and you can earn more by them."

"It's alright," I say, honestly. "In truth, I'm just cheered to be working."

"Well, be glad it's a choice for you. Remember we don't all have rich gents to keep us in satin breeches!" he teases, and I punch him lightly on the arm.

"I do appreciate your getting me this job," I say. "It's awfully decent of you."

He gestures away my thanks. "We're mates, aren't we?"

I nod in agreement, glad for his affirmation. In truth, I thought he'd be angry with me for cutting out on him at that tavern a while back. When I went to apologize, he said that HE was the sorry one. He'd assumed I'd been on the lookout same as him, and didn't know I was "as serious as all that" with my "gent." Thankfully, we worked it out simply and have been good friends since.

"Well, I'd best be getting to my own corner," he says, tucking his own stack of papers under the arm.

"Meet for supper after?" I ask.

"Naw," he shakes his head in apology. "I have a special 'engagement ' tonight."

"Does Beszick know about your other occupation?" I ask, laughing.

"Know?" he says incredulously, "How do you think I met him in the first place?"

He winks slyly at me and trots off down the street, shouting his own colorful version of the headlines along the way.

J,

I'm glad you have found a job, and hope it suits you. I've heard of this Simon Beszick; I only ask that you keep your eyes open with him. He's been in trouble with the law, you know. It's said he's sympathetic to the radicals. I don't know for sure, but do be chary with whom you take company. One can never be too careful.

This young friend of yours too...I hope he is not indiscreet. You know we cannot afford such an association.

I'm sorry I've been so occupied lately; you know the reason why. But it grows intolerable, and I miss you. I'll be there the moment I have a free night.

B

B,

Beswick is an odd sort, but I find him a good man. He's been very generous to me, and I ask that you trust me to know my own judgement. As for Amos, I might remind you that he is more often available to keep me company than you are, and he has done nothing to deserve your distrust.

I'm sorry if I sound cross; I'm only ill at ease with being apart so long. Swear you'll come as soon as you're able. I miss you too.

J

Chapter 9

November, 1773

Justin

I creep down the huge marble staircase in the early dawn, praying against all hope that no one will see me before I make it to the door.

"Why, Justin!" issues a voice from behind me. I know without looking that it is Henrietta, and the sound comes like a death sentence. "What a surprise!"

I turn to face her with a guilty smile, quickly inventing an alibi. "Yes, I'm afraid you've caught me. Brian and I... we...had much too much to drink last night at cards, and... I fell asleep on the sofa. I'll just be going now..."

"No, I won't hear of it. You must stay for breakfast."

Defeated, I follow her into the parlor. The room is almost blinding in the first-morning sunlight. Diagonal yellow streams pour through the windowpanes, giving everything a richer, yet somehow harsher, glow. Such a contrast from the warm coziness of last night, when Mrs. Carroll read from Shakespeare after supper, and Brian and I made eyes at each other across the quiet room.

"It's a pity Brian isn't ever up this early. You'll have to do with just me," she says, baiting me.

"It would be an honor," I reply courteously, with no more interest than is absolutely due.

"I would have had breakfast prepared for you if I'd known you were here," she says in apology. "Only I've been awake since five, and didn't see you."

I look about the parlor, noting that the cards are still strewn about the table as Brian and I had conspicuously placed them, but that the sofa had clearly not been slept on.

"I... Well, Brian woke me and moved me upstairs."

"Oh, how decent of him," she says. I read condescension in her smile. "He's such a thoughtful person, isn't he? Did you find his rooms comfortable enough?"

I bristle at the question, and glance up at her. She seems the picture of innocence.

"Yes, thank you," I reply, hoping she will pick up the note of finality in my voice.

"Here, do have some cream with your coffee."

"Thank you."

"Would you like some blueberries?"

"No, thank you."

"You know, it's curious. For cousins, you and Brian look nothing alike."

I nearly drop the pitcher of cream. "We are distant cousins," I try, weakly.

"I see. Well, Justin, I must say I find it perfectly pleasant that you're here. I wish you'd come more often. Brian works so hard, you know, and needs the diversion. Of course, I try my best to keep him amused... but he does seem to especially enjoy YOUR company."

I hesitate, struggling to determine whether she is luring me, or simply being innocently friendly. She couldn't suspect...could she? Her face betrays nothing, but I can't help picking up on her note of competition.

"We know each other as brothers," I throw back, fully intending the sting.

"Yes, I expect you must," she replies flatly, not as injured as I'd hoped. "He was such an enigma to ME, at least at first. But I think gradually I am beginning to know him."

She smiles to herself languidly and I raise my cup of coffee to my mouth, hoping to disguise the sound of my teeth grating against each other.

I mill about the shop, watching as the other newsboys come to get their papers, and leave again for their respective street corners. Eventually, I alone remain, sitting before the closed door of Beszick's office, waiting to be called

inside. Finally, the door opens and another boy, younger than me, exits. He looks at me sharply, before Beszick calls out from inside the room.

"Come in, Justin," he shouts. "Close the door."

I enter as he commanded, and sit down before his desk.

"You've done good work, Justin," he begins. "Your sales prove it."

"Thank you, sir."

"I think you may be ready for a more serious task. One that demands a good deal of responsibility."

"Sir?"

He clears his throat, narrowing his eyes at me. "This is an important time in history, Justin. You know what I mean, don't you?"

"Yes...I think so, sir."

"Very soon, it will be necessary for every man to choose a side, such as his conscience dictates. You understand this?"

"I think so."

"And it is likewise important for the people to KNOW what choices there are. To be educated about what is going on. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. There are those that think otherwise, Justin. They want to keep all men under their thumb, and subject them to all sorts of tyranny for the sake of profit. I believe that the people have a right to determine their own fates. This is where you come in."

Beszick lifts his heavy body up from the chair and moves around to a locked safe against the corner. From it, he pulls a short stack of printed broadsides, placing them in my lap. I read the headline on the first: "For the Future of All Marylanders, Park's Lane Tavern, November 18th. SECRET MEETING."

Watching my face carefully, Beszick hands me a list of names and addresses of various houses around the city. "Deliver these and I'll give you half a guinea."

Chapter 10

December, 1773

Justin

"I think Henrietta suspects us," I whisper, nestled up against Brian in the dark seclusion of my room. After our first--and only--desperate tryst at Frye's house, we determined it was a risk that should not be repeated. So, like before, Brian gets here whenever he can escape without notice. Though the occasions are growing more and more rare.

Brian shakes his head. "I don't think it's possible. Why?"

"She looks oddly at me. The few times I've been to supper, I often catch her at it."

"Probably because she thinks you dislike her. She told me so."

I hold my tongue, not wanting to say that she's right. "You and she have grown awfully close."

Brian sighs, catching my implication. "You're being unfair."

"She fancies you, Brian. If you can't see it, I can."

"Well, if that's true, it's not from any encouragement on my part. Or don't you believe me?"

"I do. I just don't want her to cause trouble."

"It seems like the only person bent on causing trouble is you," says Brian hotly.

I pull away angrily, more at his tone than his words, but he recants immediately, drawing me back to him. "Justin, let's not quarrel. Henrietta is nothing to me but a friend. And I can't very well have it otherwise when her father is paying me, and giving me a place to live."

"Alright, I'm sorry," I sigh in concession.

"I'll swear it if you like, Justin. There's nothing between me and her."

I nod in false acceptance, wishing I had never breached the topic. I remind myself that I get a scant few hours with him a week, and the last thing I want is to spend the time arguing. Still, if I am to be truly honest with myself, I can feel the jealousy running through my body as tangible as blood.

"And how is Lord Frye?" I ask, wishing to change the subject.

"Not well, after a bout of pneumonia. He grows weaker every day."

"He should be at rest in the country, it seems."

"I know," Brian agrees. "He gets terribly distressed at times. It's not good for his health. Only last month, one of his shipments was sabotaged by radicals, and he became so agitated, I thought it would be the end of him."

"What was the shipment?"

"Tea, of course. Something perfectly innocent."

"Well," I reason. "I suppose it's not innocent to some. The Tea Company is monopolizing the business, and many local colonists can't compete."

"It's not Britain's fault they can't run their businesses well enough."

"It IS, when the king heaps taxes on the colonial merchants, but exempts his own," I say bitterly.

"Justin," says Brian with heat in his voice, "Don't be so easily convinced by what your young friends are gossiping about on the streets. These radicals aren't having noble debates about fair trade. They're trying to throw off England altogether."

I sit up angrily in the dark, resentful of his patronizing tone. He speaks to me as an adult would to a disobedient child. "What do YOU know of it? Men like Frye are profiting off the hardships of the colonists, and England is patting them on the back for it. And you're helping him!"

"And what would you do, Justin?" he seethes. "Disown England altogether, like some ungrateful, petulant child, just because a few colonists feel they're getting a raw deal?"

I toss off the blankets and get out of bed, feeling my blood boiling under my skin. Despite the frigid drafts seeping unchecked through the window frame, the room seems hot, and even smaller than before. His sudden patriotism is ridiculous, and I tell him so. "England tried to kill you, Brian, or have you already forgotten? We came here to escape England."

In the dark, I can see him shaking his head.

"Brian," I say, trying to calm my voice back to normal. "There's a new spirit here. It's growing; I can feel it. These people... these 'radicals'...are trying to cast off the very things that are unjust about British law. They want to make laws that are fairer, to everyone. This can be good for men like us."

"Men like us! Since when did you become such a dreamer, Justin?" says Brian, incredulously. "Or has your new 'friend' given you those grand ideas?"

I bite my lip in silence, dually incensed by his condescension and by his newly exposed distrust.

"You don't know a thing about him," I say carefully. And as an added, random insult, from somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I see Henrietta laughing at my blindness.

"I think I know quite well," says Brian tersely. "You made the acquaintance of some tramp off the streets, and now you're suddenly at one with the Great Order of Sodomites, is that right?"

The line is down, and now crossed. My next words are out before I can stop them, calculated to bite. "He's not the only one I've been acquainted with."

Thankfully, I cannot see his eyes in the dark, though his silence speaks loudly enough. For the first time, I feel as though I've thrown myself down a flight of stairs, and against all my attempts to stop, I only continue to tumble faster.

"Don't jest with me," he says slowly, and with barely controlled wrath.

But it is too late. I'm already falling, and hurting more and more with each sharp step.

"You might allow me some diversion," I say, in a voice I can't even recognize as my own, "While you spend all your days in perfect domestic bliss."

The silence that follows is deafening. Finally, he speaks, his voice drawn and weary.

"Alright, Justin," he says, distractedly. I watch, immobile, as he pulls on his clothes and walks out.

I stand motionless until the sun rises, body frozen but mind whirling rapidly. Light grows and spreads in my bleak, desolate room, as all the while I try to figure out whether that exchange really just happened.

Chapter 11

Justin

I peddled papers this morning like a condemned man on his last day. I watched the slow creep of the sun in nervous agitation, hands shaking with single-minded unease. For with each paper sold I was one shred closer to the plan I had concocted earlier that morning: to run to Brian and throw myself at his feet. To beg him to forget everything I said the night before. Never has a more motivated newsboy existed than I was today.

All I want is to beg his forgiveness. Swear that I trust him and that he has no reason to doubt my loyalty. Explain that my tongue had been so sharp only because our protracted periods of separation had made me spiteful. And that I didn't mean any of it.

This morning I finally, honestly, acknowledged the source of my bitter words. Petty, groundless jealousy towards Henrietta. Once I admitted it to myself, everything became startlingly clear. I resented her for having what I could not at the moment: a life that largely involves Brian. So I lashed out at him like a suspicious wife, though he has sworn to me time and again that there is nothing between them.

Now, my stack of papers finally depleted, I sprint towards Frye's house in the dry cold of late morning. I have only one enduring thought, one purpose in life: Brian. And the minutiae of my plan--how to get him alone, whether it is appropriate to interrupt him at work--all these are inconsequential.

At last, drenched in sweat and legs shivering from fatigue, I come upon Frye's house. Not caring what state I'm in, I pound on the door, certain that William will answer it anyway. But I am mistaken. The door opens to reveal a slight, shy-looking young woman that I immediately recognize to be Henrietta's maidservant. Her name escapes me.

"Good morning, Mr. Kent," she says in formal greeting. I am suddenly ashamed of my newsboy attire and haggard appearance.

"Is Bri-- the other Mr. Kent-- here?" I ask.

"I'm sorry," she says sadly. "Mr. Kent has gone with the others to Richmond."

"Gone to Richmond!?"

She looks curiously at me through red-rimmed eyes, and for the first time I notice that she is dressed entirely in black.

"For the funeral, of course."

Brian

The carriage stumbles along dry country roads, between acres of brown, shorn fields, long past the growing season. I watch the window with feigned interest, unable to summon even the slightest bit of grief for Frye that decency would require of me. Instead, I can only think of Justin, and what he--we--said to each other last night. And worse, what was insinuated without words. The conversation, though technically in the past, still exists in my present as a black, tar-like mass in the pit of my stomach.

Lord Frye died last night, alone, when most of the household was at supper and when I was with Justin. Henrietta found him when she went to take him a plate of food. She said he appeared to have died peacefully, with a stack of sealed letters on his chest, addressed to various friends and business partners, to the newspaper, and to the local magistrate. Apparently, he knew his time was near, and thought to conduct his final affairs himself, without disturbing anyone in the house.

Henrietta now sits sullenly across from me, uncharacteristically quiet, while the weeping Mrs. Carroll cries enough for all of us. Before we crossed the Potomac, I'd asked Henrietta how she was managing. She said only that she'd been grieving for her father for three years--the length of his illness--and that this day was one she had been trained for. I remarked at her strength, and her maturity, noting that I'd also lost both my parents, but had handled it with far less grace than she.

Every now and then, though, I catch a tear trickle down her face, before she impatiently wipes it away and resumes her leaden gaze out the window.

It is three days later, and all is done. The body of the late Lord Frye has been committed to the frozen Virginia ground, on his vast Rent's Hill estate. I remember his first describing it to me some half a year ago, when life on this side of the Atlantic still seemed so tenuous and unreal.

Has it really been so long that we have been here? And in all this time, how rarely have Justin and I been able to be together...a few stolen hours one evening, then weeks to go before the next. It has all been my doing; in taking Frye's offer, I have segregated myself from Justin. Though I estimated it to be the soundest long-term plan for us both, I have left him to create a new life for himself, utterly alone. And how dare I criticize him for making that life without me, when I condemned him to it? I recognize now the black lump in my stomach for shame.

We take supper at the estate, and I am glad to find that we will be going home to Baltimore the morning after next. I encouraged a speedy return, claiming to have many accounts to settle with Frye's associates in the city. But in truth I just want to see Justin again before he decides not to forgive me. I can picture him now in that horrible tiny room, wondering why I won't come. It's breaking my heart to have something like this between us.

The long supper concluded, I am about to head out for a walk in the solitude of my own brooding, when Henrietta runs after and asks to accompany me. I am hard-pressed to refuse, so I agree. For a long time we stroll in silence along the quiet hunting path, wooded by tall overgrown trees and a dense canopy. The air is crisp and humorless, suggesting that snow is soon to come.

"Does this region get much snow in the winter?" I ask, not really interested in the answer.

"No, not typically," she replies, even less interested.

"I'm truly sorry, Hen," I say inadequately, verbally apologizing for her loss, while mentally adding my own laxity to the list. I can't very well admit to her that I've been thinking only about Justin for these three days, and not at all about her father.

"Thank you, Brian," she says hesitantly, and I can see something unspoken in her face.

"What?" I ask.

"Brian..." she starts, not lifting her gaze from the leaf-strewn ground in front of us. "I've done something quite horrid, and I hope you'll forgive me."

"What is it?"

"The evening that father died... I knew that he was dying. I'd sat with him all that day, and he would send me away several times, claiming to be busy writing letters. And then call for me a few hours later, just to have me sit by him again. I knew...that his time was soon."

"It must have been terrible for you," I say with sympathy, which she acknowledges briefly.

"He asked for you," she states, not an accusation. I feel it as one anyway.

"I'm sorry. I was visiting my cousin..."

"I know. But... he was so adamant about seeing you, I'd almost sent a carriage to find you."

"Why?"

She pauses, her little mouth moving slightly, as she tries to find the right words.

"I think father wanted...oh, dear, this is so very awkward! I think...he was hoping that...you and I would be married before he died."

"Oh," I say blankly, not really surprised. Frye had recently hinted at such when he spoke to me; I suppose it only natural that he'd have dropped hints for his daughter as well.

"It's all so embarrassing, really," she says with a forced laugh.

"Yes," I say, mine equally forced.

"He was...fretful. I think he was despairing of me being alone. He always has been, you know. He was so protective of me."

Her chin begins to quiver, and I worry that now will come the deluge of tears she'd long been holding back. However, she rights herself after a few seconds, and is once again her typical valiant self.

"You must understand, Brian, I never would have done what I did... except... I knew he was dying, and he was so upset. I wanted him to leave this world unburdened by distress for me...so... I told him that you had asked me to marry you earlier that day, and were just then out buying a ring."

"I see," I say, not sure what a better answer might be. "Well, that's alright, I suppose."

"You're not angry?"

"No, of course not. Why should I be? I understand why you said it."

"Thank goodness," she says, the relief evident on her face. "I knew it was silly of me to worry."

"After all, it doesn't really matter, does it?" I conclude.

"No..." she says, and I am unable to deny the flicker of disappointment on her face. She'd hoped I'd say something else entirely. "I suppose it doesn't matter."

Justin

"How long before he's back?" Amos asks. We sit perched atop John Smith's Hill in the first frost of morning, watching the ships' sails glittering along the bay.

"I don't know. Soon, I hope. I can't stand this."

"You also look like you've lost half a stone. Here, eat some of my apple."

"No, thanks. I'm not hungry." Amos has been a tremendous friend, but I know he doesn't understand Brian and me. Not fully. For as many other like-minded men as I've learned about here, there seem to be few that can claim what Brian and I have. Or... had. Oh God, the thought...

Amos sighs and shakes his head at me, pointing at the newspaper in my thickly mittened hands. "Keep reading, then. I want to hear the rest."

"Alright," I say, returning to my place on the front page of the Maryland Gazette. "...setting off a mass of riots around the Boston area. The estimated cost of the tea dumped into the harbor was over 9,000 pounds sterling..."

"Grand!" shouts Amos, cheering at the figure.

I laugh and swat him with the newspaper. "If you keep interrupting, we'll never..."

Suddenly I stop; my breathing stops, the world stops. I feel an unnatural frost run through my blood, as my gaze for the first time falls on the back of the newspaper. The society news.

B A L T I M O R E.

December 18, 1773

The Banns of Marriage are hereby announced:

Anna Blackwood to Sir John Hanwright. Christ Church, Canton.

Lady Henrietta Frye to Mr. Brian Kent. Saint Mary's Church, Baltimore-Town.

Chapter 12

Brian

The instant we returned to Baltimore, I turned all my aims to finding Justin. Ignoring Henrietta's questions and William's wary glance, I did not even set foot in the house while the others were unloading from the carriage. Instead, I had the groom unhitch the first horse within reach and took off across town at a gallop.

Now, as I ride down the shabby dirt road that leads to Justin's inn, I feel an immense sense of relief. It has been four days since that senseless row between us, and I want nothing more than to beg his forgiveness and take him into my arms again.

Once inside the inn, I toss a careless wave in the direction of the keeper's wife, not needing to explain my presence. She knows I am a regular visitor. I ascend the narrow dark stairs, two at a time, heart pounding in anticipation. It is late afternoon; I have no reason to believe he will be home, but somehow I cannot picture him otherwise.

Remembering too late to knock, I shoulder open the door and burst into Justin's room. My first emotion is an irrational bewilderment, upon discovering him not there. Then, as I look more carefully around the room, I find that he is not only not present, but truly gone. I am startled by the sudden presence of the innkeeper's wife behind me.

"Ah," she says, huffing from the exertion of climbing the stairs after me. "I tried to stop you but you went flying up so fast."

"Where is he?"

"Left this morning," she says, matter-of-factly. "Said he'd acquired new lodging elsewhere."

"Where?" I plead, with more desperation than I would like to betray. "Didn't he say?"

She shakes her head and shrugs before tottering back down the staircase.

I ride back to the house in a stupor. Could Justin really have been so angry after our fight as to disappear, without telling me where? Surely, if he had come to find me, he would have discovered that I had no choice but to go to Richmond.

Finally at home, I walk sluggishly up the stairs, realizing that my brows have been knit in confusion probably since I left the inn. Would he have really left no word? It isn't possible.

"Brian," comes a voice behind me. I look down the stairs to find William climbing up after me. "A letter for you, from Justin. Rachel said it arrived this morning."

Oh, thank God! I think, gratefully taking the letter from him. I nearly stumble over myself running up the stairs to my room.

Desiring of privacy, I lock the bedroom door behind me and seat myself on the large bed. I tear open the envelope with as much delicacy as my shaking hands can muster, noting oddly that it is thick and a rather awkward shape. Curiously, I find not a letter inside, but a small, much-folded clipping of newspaper.

I painstakingly unfold the lumpy bit of paper, getting ever closer to the mysterious hard object wrapped inside. Finally, to the bed falls a small silver ring, inlaid with gold.

Chapter 13

Justin

"It's not a palace, sure, but we don't have rats," says Amos proudly, showing me inside.

I look around the small--but comfortable--flat that Amos shares with two of his friends. From first glance, it is quite obviously the home of three youths, and not an established family, as much of the furniture is mismatched. Crude linens dress the windows and aged, unsold stacks of newspapers serve as tea tables.

"Still a happy improvement over my old room at the inn," I say, with honesty.

Two young men, about my age, emerge from the kitchen. They are introduced to me as Ralph and Francis, also paper carriers. Both shake my hand with friendly smiles.

"Justin's just been given the heel by his man and needs a place to stay for a bit," Amos explains to them. "Will the floor do alright for you?" he asks, turning to me.

I nod wide-eyed, still shocked that he would reveal me to these two boys.

"Oh. Don't worry about these chaps," he says with a wide grin, noting my unease. He puts his arm around Francis' shoulder and gives him a quick buss on the cheek. "They're in the family too."

All three boys laugh, and my fears are immediately allayed. For an instant, I can see what fun it might be to live with friends my own age. Especially ones with whom I have so much in common.

But then I am immediately reminded of why I had to come here at all. I cannot help but look down at the unadorned band of pale skin on my left ring finger, and the nausea begins again.

Brian

"You forgot to mention this," I say with unguarded rage, throwing down the piece of newspaper before Henrietta. Startled by my tone, she pauses in her unpacking and sits down to read the clipping. I watch her moving eyes with agitation, mentally recalling every horrible word.

"Brian..." she whispers. To her credit, she appears actually shocked. "What is this?"

"Don't pretend you didn't know."

"I didn't! Brian, I swear! Why would I do something like this?"

"You tell me."

"You honestly think I would try to trap you into marriage by placing false banns in the paper? How foolish do you think me?"

"You said yourself that you told your father we were engaged."

"Yes, but that was just to ease his... Oh, dear God. The letters!" She runs to the door of her room, calling out into the hallway. "Rachel! Please, come quickly!"

"Are you saying your father did this?" I ask, my head feeling light.

"He was writing letters all that day. I didn't even think..." Her contemplation is interrupted by the sudden appearance of Rachel, who looks as though she'd sprinted up the stairs.

"Rachel," says Henrietta, her voice like an impassioned plea. "The day my father died...you took his letters to the post."

"Yes," Rachel answers, her confused eyes darting back and forth from Henrietta to me.

"Was there a letter to the Gazette among them?"

"Yes...I believe so."

"Did you know what it contained?" asks Henrietta, showing the paper. Rachel reads it with a shocked expression.

"Dear God, no!" she replies, gazing imploringly at Henrietta. "Do you think I would let this happen if I knew?" She glances at me briefly, and I catch a look I can't quite interpret.

"No, of course not...I just...I'm sorry," says Henrietta wearily, before dropping into a chair. "He must have thought...I don't know. I can't imagine why he would take it upon himself to do this...it's so old-fashioned, anyway."

A silent pause, and I remain on the bed, my arms crossed in suspicion.

"Brian, I am so sorry," Henrietta pleads. "You must think I planned all of this. It does look so horribly contrived...but I swear to you, I would never even dream of such a thing. It was only my father's....well-meaning..."

"Never mind," I say tiredly. "It's done, anyway."

"I'll go to the paper on Monday and cancel the banns," she says. "It's not as though it's legally binding...just a social contrivance. I doubt anyone even reads these. What harm could it possibly cause?"

"Of course," I say morosely, fingering the silver band that now sits awkwardly on my little finger. "No harm at all".

Chapter 14

Brian

I stop the carriage in a darkened corner and look up the road. Sure enough, I see someone there, propped against the wall of the opera house. It is a lad, about Justin's age, with long sand-colored hair and no apparent destination or activity. He must be the one.

I approach slowly, inwardly boiling to find that he is rather good-looking. In my deepest thoughts I suppose I'd hoped Justin would only make friends with the feeble and ugly.

Before long he notices me, and instantly his posture changes. Instead of hugging his arms against the cold, he now arches his back casually against the wall. He shifts part of his coat aside, revealing a slim, jauntily poised hip that sticks out under shabby breeches. He must be freezing.

"Evening, sir" he says, looking me over as I draw nearer. "I'm afraid you've already missed the first act."

"A pity," I say, playing along, needing to be sure. I scan my gaze along the grand entrance to the theater. "I suppose there's no point in me going in, then."

He shakes his head with a small smile. "I'm afraid not."

"Well," I return, leaning against the wall next to him. "That quite mucks up my plans for the evening, doesn't it?"

"You'll be needing new plans then," he says, pulling his bottom lip into his mouth coyly. This is definitely the right boy.

"I don't suppose you have any suggestions?"

"Lead the way," he replies, and we begin to walk side by side up the road, back towards my carriage.

Once there, I usher him inside the dark coach and latch the door.

"Where is your driver?" he asks.

"I drove myself."

"Then you just want to do it in here?" he looks at me strangely. "It's not safe."

"I don't want to do anything," I reply. "I just want to talk to you."

Immediately this situation strikes him as abnormal--and therefore dangerous. He makes for the door but I grab him, pushing him back against the wall of the carriage. He struggles against me, the terror evident in his lambent green eyes.

"I'll scream!" he vows, frantically kicking at my legs.

"Stop it, Amos! I won't hurt you," I implore.

I can see the name register in his face, though he is no less terrified. I grip him firmly by his upper arms, my body weight thrown against his to hold him fast.

"I only want to ask you a question," I growl. "I'll let go of you if you'll just answer me."

"What, then?" he seethes, and I release him, still blocking access to the door. He shifts to the other side of the carriage, as far away from me as possible.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," I say in apology. "But I need you to tell me where Justin is. I know you know."

Recognition dawns on him finally, as he figures out who I am. "Why would I tell you anything?" he sneers. "You've been beastly to him."

"I...I know," I agree, his words hurting me more than he can imagine. Even the thought that Justin is angry with me... it is such a foreign, awful feeling. "Amos, I need to explain to him what happened. Please. It's important. I need to see him."

"What if he doesn't want to see you?"

"I'll take my chances."

He exhales a long breath through his nose and looks out the carriage window. I can see his fear arguing with his loyalty to Justin.

"Alright. I won't tell you where he is, but I'll ask him to see you, how is that? If he wants to talk, I'll bring him here tomorrow night. If you see me alone, that means he doesn't want to see you. And then you'll just leave me be, right?"

"How can I trust that you'll really ask him?"

He shrugs, a defiant look on his face. "I suppose you'll just have to."

I concede to his stubbornness and nod in agreement. I can see easily why Justin chose him for a friend.

"Thank you," I say, opening the door to let him out.

"I'm not doing it for you," he spits, turning to look at me angrily, before running off down the road.

Chapter 15

Justin

The moment the sun goes down, I practically drag Amos out the door. Thankfully, night comes earlier with the approach of winter, though I was so preoccupied upon leaving that Ralph had to shout after me to wear my coat.

I have diverse feelings about seeing Brian. My enthusiasm must definitely not be construed as forgiveness. In truth, I'm furious, confused, hurt, and more than anything, stunned. But I feel that his wanting to see me **MUST** mean that he has an explanation. Perhaps I have been mistaken. I can't help but cling to the idea that I've dreamed all of this, and I'll wake up tomorrow morning, nestled in his arms.

We arrive at the opera house just as the last patrons are going inside, and the hired coaches are pulling away. Waiting for a few moments in the shadowy concealment of the alley, we watch as all but one carriage remains. Suddenly my legs lose all their former initiative, and it is Amos who must pull me towards the street. We stand together under a lamplight, staring down the road at the lone carriage parked sullenly at the corner.

The door opens within seconds. First come his long, beautiful legs, with the rest of him appearing soon after. As he stands beside the open carriage door, the wind tosses his hair gently like something out of a dream. He stares at me, and I at him, before I feel Amos' hand touch my back, and I take my first steps toward him.

Like a falcon, his eyes track me as I approach, two hazel hurricanes of mixed emotion. Even in the dark, I can see that his face is tired, his eyes sad. I suppose I'm not unhappy to see it.

For a moment, we stand at arm's length, our respective breath joining between our faces in fragile white clouds.

"Will you come inside?" he gestures toward the carriage door, as though he were inviting me into his home. I realize with some malaise that we have nowhere else to go that has any semblance of privacy.

I mount the carriage, glad to be sheltered from the wind, and seat myself on the back bench. He climbs in after and sits across from me, and I am instantly thrown backwards in time, to another awkward carriage trip. My posture immediately reverts as well, and I find myself sitting with my hands in my lap, looking everywhere but at him. I'm not used to being uncomfortable with Brian, and I don't like the feeling.

"Justin," he, thankfully, speaks first. "To start, I'm sorry about...the things that I said to you...in that room. I was terrible."

"No," I interrupt. "I was in the wrong. I said... I implied...awful things. I didn't mean any of it. I was just frustrated with...the circumstances."

"And so have I been," he nods in agreement. "I forgot that it was I who put us into this situation, and I took my anger out on you."

"I was being impudent."

"No, I was being judgemental."

"And...I'm sorry, Brian. About Frye."

He nods soberly. "And I as well. He was a good man. I wish...you had known him better."

"I know. I didn't mean what I said about him."

"It doesn't matter. Do let's forget all that."

"Agreed," I say, already feeling ten pounds lighter.

"Justin, you have to know that...what you saw in the paper...was a mistake."

"It was?" I ask hesitantly, thinking more beautiful words had never been spoken.

"Yes. Of course! In Richmond, Henrietta admitted to me that she lied to her father about our 'engagement' when he was on his deathbed. It seems he had wished it all along... Anyway, he published the announcement to the paper in his last hours, and no one knew until it was already posted. It was all a mix-up."

"Thank God!" I say joyously, reaching over the space between us to grasp his hand in mine. For the first time I notice my silver ring, loosely positioned on his little finger. He follows my gaze, and pulls off the ring, reinstating it on my left hand. It feels like everything is blissfully right again.

He nods in accord, a smile present in his mouth, but not his eyes.

"Brian...what?"

"Justin...the banns were a mistake. You must believe me about that."

"I do! If you say it's so, I believe you."

"But you won't. Not when..." He takes a deep breath, clutching my hand almost painfully tight. "Henrietta came to me today...to talk. It turns out...well, I suppose your suspicions about her were truer than I thought."

I feel the ten pounds of weight pile back into my gut with cataclysmic force.

"She...she wants to marry me," he states, and I feel the old spark of my jealousy blaze like wildfire through my limbs. His eyes rise guiltily to meet mine, and his admission dawns in them like daylight. He didn't say no.

"I knew it," I growl through clenched teeth.

"No. Justin, it's not like you think," he protests quickly, a proleptic spasm. "She came to me with...almost a business proposal. She said she needs a husband if she wants to keep her home, and that we--she and I--seem to 'get along agreeably well.' Those were her words. She said nothing about her own feelings, and she doesn't entertain any delusions about my feelings for her. That much I'm sure of."

I snort bitterly, pulling my hand out of his grasp.

"Listen, Justin, please. This can be an enormous boon to us."

"How dare you talk about 'us?' You're only thinking about YOU."

"That's not true. If you'd think about this rationally for a moment, you'd see what I'm saying. The house, Frye's property, the businesses, the money...all of that would be mine. I could move you into the house immediately. You'd have your own suite--your own floor, if you want it! And we could live together again."

"And BE together, when? After your WIFE nods off to sleep? On whenever occasion that you tire of your little domestic fantasy, and want to remember what it's like to be with a man?"

"It's not like that."

"Admit it! You love the idea, because it's everything you've ever wanted. You get to be 'normal', finally, and still have me on the side for when the mood strikes you."

"Justin, that's nonsense! I don't want to be normal, and I don't want her!"

"To the devil with 'her' Brian!" I shout, my rage not surprising either of us. "All that concerns me is YOU! And you didn't say no. Did you?"

"I didn't say yes."

"Do you love her?"

"No! God, Justin, no. I love YOU."

"Yet somehow I doubt you told her as much."

"Of course I didn't...I couldn't."

"God," I spit, feeling the bile rising in my throat. I reach for the door handle, needing to get away from him, from everything.

"Stop. Justin! You're being absolutely ridiculous about this."

My hand freezes on the door, and I sit back down. My entire body is shaking in wrath. "I'M being ridiculous?"

"Quite. I'm doing this for US, Justin. Trying to figure out a viable plan for our future. I know you don't like the circumstances, and nor do I. But if you would truly THINK about it..."

"I've thought enough about it, Brian! I think you decided that being with me is too hard, and being with Henrietta would be easy."

"Yes, you're partly right. I am looking for something that would be easier. For both of us! There's no 'happily married' for men like us, Justin. We have to go with what gets us by. How much longer do you think we could have lived together at that inn, before someone started asking questions? Even if people believed our "cousins" charade now, do you think they will in ten years? In twenty? When we're old men still living together?"

I scowl tiredly in response. He's missing the point...

"Your folly, Justin, is that you don't ever think about the future."

I exhale a breath, all my energy having seeped out of me. My voice comes quiet, and I recognize my own defeat in it. "I do think about the future, Brian; I thought you were it."

He blinks momentarily, as if struck. "What are you saying?"

I shrug my shoulders wearily. "You've already decided, Brian. It's obvious."

"Justin, it makes sense. For both of us. I wish you'd see reason."

"You just wish for my permission. So here it is." With shaking hands I once again remove the ring from my finger and toss it into his lap. "For your new bride."

I am out of the carriage and running into the night before seeing whether he'd even bothered to follow.

Chapter 16

February, 1774

Brian

"When were you planning on telling me?"

"So you've heard," I sigh, not moving from where I sit, staring dully out the window.

"Yes," William retorts. "I had to hear it from Mrs. Carroll."

"We didn't want too many people to know." I reply blandly.

"Brian! Since when am I 'too many people' to know that you're getting married?"

"I'm sorry William," I turn to face him finally. "I thought... honestly... I thought you'd be happy for me, and I couldn't bear the felicitations right now."

"I'm too confused to be happy for you! I must say it was something of a shock."

"I know," I concede. "It wasn't planned."

He sits back and fixes me with narrowed eyes. "You didn't fix Miss Henrietta...in a state...did you?"

"No! God, William, nothing like that."

"Well, what else should I think? I didn't even know that you fancied her."

"I..." I start, quickly lowering my voice. "I don't. She just came to me with the idea, so that she could keep her inheritance."

"Well! Awfully cheeky of her, isn't it? I suppose I'm not surprised; she's nothing if not pragmatic. But Brian, that's tremendous good fortune for you! You'll be a wealthy man. This whole house... everything. You're set for life!"

"I know," I say eagerly, glad that someone finally sees the point of all this.

"And Justin must be thrilled! Perhaps he could even move in here now? How I've missed that sunny face..."

Involuntarily, my head drops into my hands. After a moment, when I glance up again, I see William staring at me with his mouth agape.

"You haven't told him yet," he says, realization bright in his eyes.

I shudder a bitter laugh. "I told him. I was sure he'd understand."

"He didn't?"

"He..." the word chokes in my throat. Even now, months later, I still cannot come to terms with it. "He left me."

March 1774

Justin

Almost three months, and no word.

Every evening, I race the stairs expectantly, and demand from Ralph the contents of the post. But there is never a letter. And then I remind myself that such an expectation is ludicrous. Brian doesn't even know where I live now. And, I don't want him to...do I?

I suppose at first it was my way of punishing him. Knowing it must be infuriating him not to know where I am. If...he even cares. If he's even looked for me. Amos, too, faces my interrogation every night, but he reports that Brian has never returned to the opera house. And I'm sure he could find where I live, if he tried. He must...simply...not care.

Tonight, I trudge home in the bitter rain, glad for the sting. I left off crying weeks ago; left off screaming and beating my fists into the walls even before that. Now, all that's left is anger, an emotion I cling to like a drowning man. Because I know what comes after the anger. Sadness. Acceptance.

The feeling of betrayal in me is palpable. Sometimes, I detest the thought of him. That, after everything we've been through, he could cast me aside so readily. And worse, that he would think that I could bear to be his...his...concubine! His mistress! In a house he shares with his wife. It sickens me! And in years to come, am I to smile at their darling children too? Be gracious and glad for Brian, since he could never know the joys of fatherhood through me?

And Henrietta. The very name, soundless in my head, sets my teeth on edge. Maybe it's true that Brian doesn't love her. I... want to believe as much, anyhow. But he is utterly, utterly mad if he believes that she is not in love with him! A blind fool could see it! I wouldn't be surprised if she had wished for her father's death, as it would provide the perfect means to secure Brian in her snares!

I find myself, now nearing home, wincing visibly at the taste of bile in my throat. My bitterness all but consumes me. And yet...here I am, nearing our building, and I can't convince my legs not to run. I can't convince myself not to take the stairs two by two. Can't force myself not to shout to Ralph, asking where is today's mail? Can't make myself not...hope...

Chapter 17

April, 1774

Brian

"Henrietta? You sent for me?" I say tentatively from the doorway.

"Yes, Brian, do come in."

I walk into the room, and sit down in a chair by the window. I'm not well acquainted with Henrietta's part of the house. Her rooms resemble mine in every respect but color. It's almost as though the architect designed half the house, then gave up and decided to mirror the other half by the first. All the furniture is the same, as is the layout of the room. But where I have an overabundance of blue, she is swimming in burgundy. I glance at the giant wine-red bedspread and wince, reminded of the awkwardness that is sure to come after the wedding.

Suddenly I hear a swish of fabric, and catch Rachel in the corner. I hadn't even noticed she was there. She glowers at me briefly before exiting the room, shutting the door loudly behind her. She's been cold to me since talk of weddings was first introduced, and I think she suspects me for the fraud that I am. Sometimes I've wondered whether I should at least attempt to pitch woo to Henrietta, at least when Rachel or Mrs. Carroll is around. But I don't have the stomach for it.

"I've finally heard from the chaplain," she says distractedly, rifling through some papers at her desk. "He said we might be married by St. John's Day."

"Oh...so soon?" I ask, smothering my immediate sense of dread at the news.

"It's over a month. That's quite a long time."

"Are you so anxious?" The words are out before I can close my mouth.

"Yes," she says, a bit flustered. "I suppose I am. After all, what is to be gained by waiting? Have you changed your mind?"

Yes! I want to scream. Yes, this was a horrible idea. Because I'm in love with someone else.

"No," is my actual answer. Coward. Justin's voice this time.

Justin

I wake the same as always, eyes searching the dark with passive interest, wondering where I am. A slight shift; I feel the warm body pressed against my back, and remember. I am in Amos' cramped wooden bed, the one he graciously offered to share with me. I refused at first, but when the floor became so cold that my shivering bones would knock against the floor in my sleep...I acquiesced.

Before long I become aware of the sound that roused me from sleep: a low, insistent moaning, muffled slightly by the thin wall in between. Too deep a voice to belong to Francis; it must be Ralph this time. I'm surprised they have the energy tonight after the long meeting. But then, perhaps the inflamed talk of revolution fevered their bodies as well as their minds.

Tonight's meeting was the third this week, and the second held in our-- Amos'-- flat. The numbers of attendees are growing rapidly. No longer only charged circles of idealistic young boys, these gatherings are now fully organized affairs, with a growing constituency of workers and tradesmen from every walk of life. Tonight there were even women in attendance.

The impetus for this upswing: four ships full of British soldiers landed in Boston a few weeks ago. With that news, everything changed. What once seemed a mischievous game to many colonists--dumped tea and illegally posted bills-- is quickly turning into a dangerous reality. The arrival of these soldiers was the final affront for many. Those who might have tolerated Britain's patronizing half-rule will not stand being beaten into submission. There is talk of uniting the colonies, of sending delegates to Philadelphia, even of arming ourselves.

The fervor of gestating revolution is not lost on my flatmates. From morning to night, there is talk of little else, and Beszick has us working extra hours delivering the "special" papers. The insurgent spirit has infected me as well, though I must admit that I am inspired equally by morality and by fear of the British soldiers themselves. But above all, this social upheaval has proven to be a very conveniently timed distraction. Sometimes I can even go a half-hour without thinking about Brian.

Tonight though, as my ears are filled with the primitive, muffled noises of lovemaking, it is more than my emotions can bear. Even my traitorous body is not immune; my member is stirring, inspired by the sounds, and by the memories of once making them. For a time I softly lie, willing my groin to desist as tears slip quietly in horizontal tracks across my cheeks.

I roll onto my back, (foolishly!) assuming that Amos was asleep. But, turning my head on the pillow, my eyes are met by his own, a ghostly pair glimmering in the darkness, watching me. The amorous sounds from the next room exist between us with an almost physical presence, dancing with the breath between our faces; taunting. Too loud to pretend we cannot hear them, too soft--too intimate--to laugh at.

Frozen by embarrassment, I can only watch as silently, calmly, he reaches up to wipe a tear off my warm cheek. At the contact, I crumble altogether. A horrible sob bursts from my throat, as fresh tears stream down to my ears.

Amos pulls me to him, my head against his chest, and wraps his slim arms around my shaking frame. He strokes my back softly, whispering sweetly unintelligible sounds into my hair. And, though it is horrible to think, this gesture...the warmth of human contact...is not without its effect. My member, pressed against his hip, is become painfully stiff, a solid reminder of my loneliness and need.

With compassionate sobriety, he guides me onto my back, and slowly pulls down my drawers. I watch as if from afar: my shaft springs out in readiness, and Amos settles himself next to me. Propped on one elbow, he watches my face unquestioningly as he takes me in his hand. The contact, so long missed, causes a cry to escape my lips. And in that moment, it doesn't feel wrong, or deceitful... All I feel is a warm, soft hand soothing me, like a salve on a painful wound.

It is over in seconds, and to his credit, he pretends not to notice the influx of new, remorseful tears that followed my release. He rolls onto his back once again and yawns once, a kind gesture indicating that he does not demand

reciprocation. But of course I must give it, after everything he's done for me. And besides... I am long past the threshold of innocence now.

I reach under his waistband for his thick, smallish rod, warm and smooth in my trembling hand.

Chapter 18

Brian

The night air filters lightly through my hair, a weak therapy for my throbbing head. The dually offensive smells of onions and manure accompany me as I sit huddled in solitude behind the stables. This is quickly becoming a ritual: each night, after a strained supper, I flee to this narrow alley, a bottle of gin in hand. Only tonight, apparently, I did not come alone. With my face buried in my arms, I hear, rather than see, William's approach.

"So it's to here that you've disappeared every night after supper."

I lift my aching head slowly and glance up at him. I notice his neutral demeanor shift to anger when he spies the bottle at my side.

"Brian..." he scolds, snatching the bottle from me. He sits down next to me against the wall, and immediately I feel ashamed for being here.

"Let's just go inside," I say, struggling to get up. He pulls me back down.

"No, let's sit here a spell."

"I don't want to talk, William."

"When I married my Claire, God rest her soul," he says, wistfully ignoring me, "it was for love. That was a rare thing in those days."

I slump silently against the wall, accepting this as my penance for sneaking out.

"She was a wonderful girl, so bright and beautiful... a true find. She died, as you know, long before I came to work for your father. It was a hard thing for me then. You were too young to remember, but I was a bitter, angry soul." He chuckles and shakes his head, with the nonchalance that only decades of time can bring.

"But...strangely," he goes on, "when your father lost your mother, he and I became bonded in a way... it may seem morbid to speak of it, but we gained strength from sharing our grief. And we both had you. Just a babe then, but we watched you grow, and that was comfort too. In a way, we both felt like we were starting over.

"I had loved my Claire, just as your father loved your mother, and we both suffered for it. And yet... I would do it all over again, even the sadness, if I could. Because love is so uncommon, Brian. Not every man in this world will find it."

"Why are you telling me this?" I grumble, feeling worse than before.

"Because you're acting like a damned fool," he barks, with a sharpness that catches me off guard. "I'm telling you, love is rare, and men don't often get a second chance at it. I don't know what sort of squabble you've had with Justin, but you should just fix it and be done with it!"

I stare openmouthed at him, shocked by this uncharacteristic outburst, but his face remains passively incensed. I sigh and lean my head back against the wall. "It's not so easy as you make it sound, William."

"Of course it's not," he says impatiently. "But if you don't fix things, you'll regret it for the rest of your life. That, I can promise you. I know you don't love Miss Frye, Brian. But I do agree that marrying her is a wise choice for you."

"But Justin doesn't understand that," I plead.

"Well, wouldn't you allow that he has good reason to hate the idea? It would be a far greater sacrifice for him than for you."

"Yes..." I admit. "But there are advantages for him too. He refuses to consider them."

"At first he may have refused," he says. "But he's had plenty of time to think since then."

"No," I say, mired in self-pity. "If he'd changed his mind, he would have come to see me."

"Don't be petty," William scolds. "Put yourself in his shoes."

After a moment, I nod in concession, feeling suddenly better than I have in weeks. "I'll go. I'll find him."

"Good," says William, claspng me on the shoulder and raising himself to his feet. Then, as he pulls me up with a smirk, "I'm weary of seeing you moping around."

Chapter 19

Justin

"My friends and countrymen, you may have heard the news. Boston--and indeed the entire Massachusetts colony--is under siege." Beszick's basso voice resounds around the cramped cellar where we, some three dozen head, are gathered.

"The latest of Britain's obscene laws," he continues, "are more intolerable than ever. He's closed the port of Boston and usurped their governor, replacing town council members with his own royal puppets. Private citizens are made to quarter unruly British soldiers. I've even heard of women being raped by the very soldiers they give shelter to, and the bastards go unpunished, as they are now immune to colonial laws."

A collective shudder is issued by all the women of the room. I glance around for the first time and notice that there are more people here than I thought. In addition to the forty or so that surround Beszick in the room proper, another dozen are crowded in the stairwell, trying to hear, if not see.

The cellar is dark and hotly cramped, but we dare not open a window or light another lamp. These meetings grow more perilous each day.

"The time has come, men and women of Baltimore, to act. Boston cannot fight England alone. What is happening there now will soon happen here, and we cannot fight them alone either. But if the colonies were to unite...stand together..." He reaches inside his coat pocket then, and produces a letter. Holding it in the air he looks around the room, encouraging us to see it for all its incendiary mettle. "I have here in my hand an invitation, to a secret gathering in Philadelphia. Revolutionary leaders from every colony are asked to attend, and we will draft a petition to the King himself, demanding the repeal of these unjust acts. For the first time, we will band together, and use our collective might to force the King to listen!"

"And if he refuses?" shouts a voice from the crowd.

"Then," says Beszick gleefully, "he must prepare for war."

A rousing cheer sounds among the crowd, and Beszick rides its crest. He jumps on top of a paper crate, shouting from the base of his chest. "It is time to let the King know that we will no longer abide his tyranny!" Another cheer, louder, a tempest of red human energy. "If he will not treat us as British citizens, then he must forfeit his claim to us!"

Uproar shakes the foundations of the building, men on the stairs pounding their heels against the creaking boards. Everywhere around me, calloused, careworn fists are raised into the air, buoyed by cries of "Unite!" and "Freedom!"

After the meeting, the other boys and I stay with Beszick, talking--listening--long into the night. I watch them, their eyes glazed, beset by ideas of glory, or honor, or the pure masculine charge of action. I...am not immune, I know. But where Amos and Ralph and Francis have lofty dreams to propel their spirits, I have the absence of dreams. A bleak, yawning nothingness, to which choosing any action seems a burden. So I chose the first one available to me.

Glumly, I wander home after the meeting, behind the buoyant bodies of my friends. Amos hangs back though, a wary eye turned occasionally to me. Ever since...that night... he watches me, though he has never mentioned what transpired. I am blessed for his silence; I couldn't bear to discuss it.

Gratefully, though, he has kept a watchful distance. I might even attribute his attentiveness more to friendly concern over my depressed mood than to amorousness. I think--hope--that what happened between us meant very little to him. Indeed, I have witnessed the capriciousness with which he regards physical relationships. Ralph and Francis are the same; In fact, I'm rather certain that all three of them have lain with each other at some point or another. It seems to be rather a trifle to them.

Unlike me, for whom that rueful night meant a great deal: the end of everything.

Chapter 20

May, 1774

Brian

It is only days until the wedding and I cannot find him. I've set out with this goal every evening, more than eager to find occupation outside of the house. Away from Henrietta, and talk of weddings, and the impending doom of my near future. But every night I return home alone, frustrated and grieved.

His little friend has not once returned to the opera house; I've lurked there in wait for him every night. I even sought out Beszick but found his shop closed and boarded. It seems almost as though every trace of Justin is vanished. And the sands that are my future--my very happiness--are slowly slipping away.

Tonight, I begin once again the defeated journey back through town, to a house for which I traded my heart and soul. Something, though, perhaps born of desperation, compels me to double-back past Beszick's paper shop. Now the street is fully dark, and utterly deserted. My horse drags lazily along the road, wasting time on my command. Neither of us is in any hurry to get home.

Passing by the shop, my delusional fantasies are disappointed to find it still abandoned, the windows still blacked out by wooden boards. And yet...straining, I dare say I can see a shred of light, flickering weakly through a crack in one of the boards. Closer I draw to it, and yes! There is indeed light, coming from the cellar windows.

Wretched curiosity drives me to investigate. I hitch my horse inconspicuously and creep around to the alley behind the row of narrow shops. Counting backwards I come upon the print shop once again, this time from the rear. Only some loosely positioned planks--and an impromptu sentry--bar the cellar staircase. The man, drooped over on his side from a seated position, has fallen asleep at his post.

Creeping stealthily past the witless, dozing guard, I crouch down to one of the cellar windows and pry open a bit of board. Inside the torch-lit room, I can see the tops of dozens of heads, crowded together like herded sheep. The

object of their attention is too far away for me to see at this angle, so I pry the board off altogether. Flattening myself onto my stomach, I peer once again through the window, and see all that I need to see.

Among the sea of dark heads, a shock of blonde hair, and there--his unmistakable face.

For two hours I hide myself further down the alley, before the congregation begins to depart. I watch as people of all ages and trades pour out of the cellar, alone and in groups. Some with sober faces; others with energetic glints in their eyes. All devoutly serious.

But there is one man that concerns me, and I wait for him to emerge. It must be that a hundred people have passed my eyes--more so than seems could have possibly fit in that cramped basement. The outpouring slows to a stream, then a trickle, then nothing. Soon, even the lazy guard has departed. Justin is still inside.

I crawl back to the window and peer in once again. Beszick is still there, along with several fresh-faced young men. They are milling about, some cleaning up or gathering discarded leaflets; others are talking animatedly to him. I watch as Beszick puts his beefy arm around the young boy nearest him, his hand idly stroking the lad's dark curls. My abdomen recoils at the sight.

Gradually I notice a few more boys re-enter the room, carrying blankets and thin pallets. They set to work putting aside the chairs and boxes that were used in the night's meeting, and laying down their makeshift beds upon the floor. One of them, I flinch to discover, is Justin.

Desperation floods through me, and not only out of a need to speak with Justin. The sight of my darling love (estranged though we may be), preparing his berth in a dank, hollow basement...it is too much to stomach.

Beszick seems now to be addressing the entire congregation, some dozen boys, all about Justin's age. They are rapt to his words, like kittens to a moving shadow. Finally Beszick leaves the room--and my line of vision. A sudden creaking noise beside me, and I realize that he is coming up the cellar stairs. I dart behind some scattered crates just as the storm door is pushed open.

I listen to the gradual decrescendo of Beszick's retreating footfalls, and do not emerge until he is at the far end of the alley. Most likely headed for his comfortable home somewhere, leaving his devoted proteges to their bleak cellar. Though I notice, grimly, that the curly-haired lad is still with him, clinging to his arm.

Justin

I have yet one more task before I can go to sleep: the removing of the candles to the storeroom. Most are extinguished, but the minutes-takers are still using the last lighted tapers to finish their accounts of the meeting. I think about re-barricading the staircase, but that is Francis' job, and I am too tired. Most of the boys have already settled down to sleep. So I take up a box and collect what candles I can without disturbing the two clerks.

It has been only a few days since Amos and I, along with the others, moved ourselves to this subterranean stronghold. And yet it seems like an eternity; already my existence before this seems a vague, distant dream. My life now is consumed by the Revolution, or more accurately, the preparations required for bringing it about.

We--these boys and I--have one great common principle: aiding the insurrection. To them, it is politics, or the struggle between good and evil. To me, this single-minded maxim serves a very different purpose: numbness. Long nights, difficult toil, lack of privacy: convenient means, all, of forgetting what I've done. And what I've lost.

Having picked up most of the candles, I step around sundry sleeping bodies and trudge down the long shadowy hallway towards the storage pantry. Once inside the room, I set about my task with mechanical dimness. One by one, I place the fat candlesticks upon the dusty shelves, eyes bleary in the weak light.

When finally the job is done, I reach for the candle I'd used to guide myself, and suddenly hear a great crash. At first, I surmise that I'd dropped something to the floor. Then, the next horrible instant, I realize that the sound was the storeroom door, being slammed shut behind me.

Startled, I try to spin around, knocking my one lit candle to the floor. I stumble backward over upended crates, feeling my way awkwardly in the darkened clutter. I can see nothing; all is blackness. And someone is in here with me.

Chapter 21

Justin

"Don't!" I shout, the only word I can think to utter, before I am thrust back against the shelves, and a strong hand covers my mouth.

"Shh! Justin, it's me," he whispers, unnecessarily. His breath on my face, the smell of his skin... even in pitch-blackness, I know it is Brian. He pulls his hand away, needing it to right himself after slipping on some press tiles strewn errantly on the floor.

When he recovers, I can feel his face, inches from mine. His hands are on the shelf edges at either side of my head, trapping me in front of him. For several moments neither of us speaks. I should ask what he is doing here. How he found me. But I cannot open my mouth. I am too...captivated...by the feeling of being close to him, again, after so long a separation. My heart shudders in my chest, like a hummingbird finally having found its supper. I can't think, can't speak, can't reason. Nothing exists at this moment but the diaphanous barrier between our two bodies.

It was said that men on the Crusades, having been at war for twenty years, would return to their homeland and collapse, lifeless, to the soil. All their energy had been poured into one single driving ambition--home--and they had no design or purpose for what would come after. I feel something like this now, weak-kneed and mute, in Brian's intangible, questioning hold.

Of their own will, my hands reach tentatively up to his face, burning at the sudden contact. He grasps me to him unexpectedly, pressing our chests together in a crushing embrace. I exhale a shivering breath, feeling the rapid pulse of his heart against my own. It is falling into a pool of water, after months of agonizing thirst. Almost too overwhelming to bear.

Without words or suggestions, our lips are pressed together, tongues furious to taste and touch every inch of each other. All that is unsaid between us--and all that was said horribly in the past--is gone. We are two bodies only, determined as magnets to reunite.

His hands roam my back wildly, clutching and tugging at my thin shirt, before ripping it clean off my body. I gasp in surprise and excitement, finding my heartbeat newly elevated. Fumbling a bit in the cluttered darkness, he is soon on his knees before me.

In one clean tug, he has my breeches around my ankles. He works off my shoes and stockings with furious drive, until I am fully unclothed. My solid, heavy shaft bobs before his face, in time with my labored breaths.

I feel his hands grasp my hips, and furious, sharp kisses along my inner thighs. I feel my knees begin to shake in anticipation. His tongue now, in little wet circles, dances along the crease between my thigh and groin. I moan in hypersensitive frustration, feeling my pelvis shifting forward with its own needy urgency. How can he bear to be so patient?

My question is answered forthwith, as he finally takes my weeping cap into his mouth, suckling it hungrily. I groan immodestly, the sensation of warmth and wet and that intoxicating pull... My hands are lost in his soft, unruly hair; my spine in a taut arch. My head falls back against the shelf behind me in a dull, painless thud. This is, quite literally, breathtaking. But I need more.

"Brian..." I moan in a whisper, feebly pulling him back into a standing position. My eyes search the darkness for his, finding only the vague shape of his face. I press my turgid, swollen member into his own groin, stiff beneath his tented breeches.

I whisper again, this time hotly at his ear. "Please..." It comes out a desperate whine, the bare vocalization of my need. "Don't make me beg for it."

He moans from deep in his throat and grasps me to him. His lips crush mine, bruising, biting. Somewhere, I taste blood, and it inflames my senses like gunpowder. He lifts me off of my feet, still kissing me, and then we are stumbling, falling backwards over some things and sending others crashing to the ground.

Then the back of my thighs hit the hard edge of something--a table. We fall over onto it, Brian on top of me, my loins humming at the familiar feel of his weight between my legs. Sharp...somethings...on the table stab into my back, but to free them would mean releasing Brian from my hold, and I won't. Can't.

His hands fumble between our groins, desperately trying to free himself of his belt. Finally, I feel that enormous, velvety rod, pressed against the bone of my pelvis. My legs are up and around his waist before he has even worked his breeches down to his knees.

He falls forward, dropping to his elbows on either side of me. My knees are pressed into my chest, and I will not wait for preparation. Feeling that large, smooth horn pressed teasingly against my ready hole, I grasp his hips forcefully and draw him into me.

I cannot help my scream at the pain of it; raw, hot, sharp. Indeed, for the first few seconds it seems that the sting is all I can feel. Brian clasps a hand over my mouth as he fills me completely, and my shout becomes a muffled groan. He begins to move in short, fast jabs, stretching my hole wider and wider, breathing warm sighs of pleasure against my neck. And as always, in that mysterious miracle, the pain gives way to awesome, staggering bliss.

His pace quickens, as does his breathing. Pounding, driving into me, his force is animalistic...and exhilarating. I have never been so rapidly spiraling towards release, so ecstatically high with pleasure. Through unfocused ears I hear the table underneath us, its lurid bang bang bang against the wall. In my head I hear more, more, more.

Brian's sighs escalate to short, urgent groans. The raw, burning edges of my hole are almost numbed by the onslaught; I feel now only what's on the inside. That secret, unnamed treasure deep within me that he strikes, over and over, like the perfect chord in a towering, inevitable crescendo.

Jagged, miscellaneous objects--ground between the tabletop and me--are digging into my back, but I feel no pain; only drops of wet, sticky blood. I grasp his hand--still pressed against my mouth--sharply in my teeth, a feral gesture of possession. I bite down hard and see shots of colored light--his pain or mine, I can't distinguish--then pure, white dizzying rapture; then nothing but black.

Chapter 22

Brian

"Justin...Justin!" I whisper, weakly patting his feverish cheek. My vision, adjusted little to the dark, strains to see his eyes finally flutter and open. "You blacked out."

"Yes," he hums, drowsy and contended.

I exhale my relief and drop my tired head to his chest. My softening member has slipped out of him and now is sticking coarsely to his thigh. The rest of me, too, is in danger of permanently adhering, and I slowly pull myself off of him. He sits up none too eagerly, picking shards and bits of metal from his back.

"Are you bleeding?"

"Yes," he says distractedly, uncaring, still feeling around his back. He reaches further down, into the crevasse of his buttocks, touching tentatively at his hole.

"There also?" I ask, dreading the answer.

"Yes."

"I'm--"

"Don't apologize," he says quickly, silencing my pending words with his fingertips against my mouth. He replaces the hand with a soft kiss, and a whisper. "I wanted it...exactly like that. It was perfect." I can't mistake the melancholy that just entered into his voice.

"Justin," I beseech, forcing him to look at me. "Come home with me."

He sighs sadly, as though in anticipation of the question, and unhappy with having to consider it.

"Justin," I try again. "I know this settles nothing, and I blame myself for...everything...the way things are between us. But please, just... come home with me tonight." I can feel him withdrawing from me, physically and emotionally, and I grow desperate.

"After everything," I continue, "don't we deserve better than this... this quick...menage...in a dark closet?"

"No," he says simply, quietly. "I don't."

"Don't what?"

"I don't deserve better."

"What do you mean? Justin?"

He pushes roughly away from me, stumbling to find his strewn clothes. I watch, stunned, as he pulls on his breeches, and struggles to find the arms in his hopelessly torn shirt. "Brian, just...go. Please. The others will hear us--if they haven't already."

"I'm not going anywhere until you answer me."

Even in the dark, I can tell his gaze is cemented to the floor. "I can't go with you, Brian. I'm grateful to you for trying to...save...this. But...it's over." He makes for the storeroom door and I, too shocked to move, almost let him. But in the last moment I find my legs, and nearly fly at him, pinning him to the door.

"What?" I shout, not caring who hears. "Justin, what the devil are you talking about?"

"Brian, it's too late!" he cries, and I can hear the tears appearing in his voice. "I can't come back with you."

"Why not?"

"I'm..." he stops, suddenly, and I sense him change direction in his mind. His head is turned to the side, away from me, and his voice is small when he speaks again. "Brian...I've...been unfaithful."

The words hit me like a blow. Amos. I knew it. I even step back slightly in defense, thinking too late to conceal my disgust.

I haven't spoken, but he nods slightly, as though I'm right to despise him. His voice changes tone, growing distant, impersonal. "I'm leaving. We're leaving--the others and I. Beszick is forming an underground militia. The Baltimore Independent Cadets. We depart for Pennsylvania in the morning to being training."

He's crying. I can hear it in his voice, though he tries to sound brave and resolute. He takes advantage of the space between us and shifts away from me, hand on the doorknob.

"Goodbye, Brian," he chokes, any attempt at concealed emotion failed.

"Wait," I say, slamming my hand heavily against the door. "Just wait."

I rifle around desperately for a candle--there are several strewn around--and a piece of metal. Dimly I am aware of my half-dressed state, and make an attempt at least to fasten the ties on my breeches.

"Do you have a flint?"

He nods, resigned to his being trapped, and feels around the shelves for a box. After a brief struggle, I manage to light one of the candles, and for the first time, we see each other clearly. His face is as I'd suspected: tear-tracked and withdrawn.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks tiredly.

"To be sure it was you," I reply, simply. "The same boy I found at the Hereford fair, bruised and covered in blood. Who came into my home and turned my life on its end. The man who battled his own past and who showed me, for the first time, what love was. Is. The man who risked his life to save my own."

His lips quivering, he closes his eyes, and fresh tears spill down his cheeks. I feel a pinch at the bridge of my nose, for the first time since I can remember.

"Justin," I say, "you're the strongest person I've ever encountered. Why are you running away from this?"

He shakes his head, sobbing furiously. "Brian, I've ruined this! I was so hurt for so long...fearing that it was hopeless...afraid you'd stopped loving me... and then, in one stupid, horrible night, I did the one thing that would make my fears a reality. I betrayed you."

"Justin--"

"So now I know there's nothing left, and that's why I'm going. It's too hard, Brian," he chokes. "It's too hard to be here and know what I've lost. And this...tonight... I should never have let this happen."

"Justin!" I shout, trying to stop his talking. I grasp his arms, pressing a bruising kiss to his mouth in an attempt to quiet him, but he pushes me away. "Justin, it doesn't matter..."

"Convince yourself of that, Brian. You can lie to yourself, but not to me. I know you hate what I've done."

"I...," start, and then stop. He's right, somewhat. I can't pretend to be happy about it. But there's too much more at stake. "Justin, if nothing else, being away from you taught me perspective. The difference between what's important, and what's not. THIS is what's important, Justin. You and me. What happened with...Amos...?"

He winces, then nods.

"...was meaningless. I forgive you."

"Stop it, Brian," he says weakly, shaking his head. "You shouldn't forgive me. And even if you did, I can't forgive myself."

"Why not? For having betrayed me? Justin, if you've been unfaithful in the flesh, it is nothing to what I've done to you. I told you we were partners, and then I betrayed your honor--your dignity--by making decisions without you, and expecting you to comply. I am the traitor here, Justin. You owe me nothing."

I watch as his face crumples, tired. He falls back against the door and buries his face in his hands, sobbing in frustration and fatigue and needless remorse. I pull him into my arms and press him in a tight embrace, as much to quell my shaking nerves as his. His sobs wrack his own body and mine; we are one, and I only hold him tighter.

He only pulls away slightly to reach up to my face, touching my own aberrant tears as they slowly track down my neck to find him.

Epilogue

Justin

The most curious thing about life is its persistence. You might try to halt the passage of time or feel as though its cessation is eminent, but then, there dawns another day, against your will, to spite or to spirit you. Knowing this can be either a comfort or a burden, and in this, at least you have a choice. I made my choice last night.

Now, as another day dawns, I lie awake, relaxed in the quietude of the time that has become my own over the years. It's funny that my body has always remembered this; a habit that was born long ago, and on the other side of the ocean. Sometimes, I still wake thinking that I can hear Josephine's voice shouting at me through my sleep. It is just before dawn, in that diaphanous and narrow period after the last of the stars have gone to bed, but before the first rays of sun have emerged.

I drag myself out of Brian's bed and into my clothes, watching him in the dim light. His reckless hair makes me smile; it stands out in all directions, seeming to scoff at his peacefully sleeping face. For a while I linger in the great upholstered chair in the corner, watching faint pink beams of first-morning light as they creep around the room. I'm not yet ready to leave for the guest suite--which is to be my new home.

Brian will be married in two days. I'll admit-- I am still no less vexed at the prospect of having to share him with Henrietta. But sharing him is preferable to losing him; months of sadness and loneliness taught me that. I've pledged to stay with him, by whatever means, and by whatever definition. Henrietta may have his name, but I will have his heart. That much, he's sworn to me.

If only I were so convinced about HER heart. If I could believe that she was truly marrying him for financial security (ha!), and not for affection...then, I might be better able to endure it. But her intentions remain a mystery to me, and therefore suspect.

Still, if I have learned anything from this entire affair, since we came to America, it is that what exists between Brian and me is our own. No involvement of others--whether meddling women or well-meaning friends--can tear us apart. Only we, of our own power, can do it. A lesson we learned painfully, and shall not take so lightly again.

And Brian acknowledged that I need to be considered as his equal, and not in words only. He certainly proved his new resolve to me last night... my cheeks feel warm even at the memory! For the first time, he allowed me to enter him, giving over the dominant role to me. It was an unbelievable experience! I think I've never felt closer to him. Not only was our reversal of roles an exquisite adventure, I believe we both gained a better understanding of each

other. And even though, afterwards, we both agreed that our regular positions are more suited to our natures, I think that from time to time we will choose to experience each other in that way again.

So, my vision of the future is one of determined optimism, even if I am still uncomfortable with certain aspects of Brian's "plan." A hastily scrawled apology, left last night on Amos' pillow, ended my involvement with the Cadets. I will miss my friends, and hope to see them again someday. But my heart was not with theirs. It was here, all the while.

My greatest lament, though, is how soon that Brian and I must go back into hiding, something I've hated since the beginning. But sadly, I will acquiesce. He is right; this is the only outcome for us, and it is better than being apart. Or in prison. Or worse.

I toss one last wistful look at my sleeping lover and resume my occupation: creeping back to my own room downstairs. Once outside his door, I head down the hall with the same great measure of stealth that I'd acquired over the years. Were I to be discovered leaving Brian's room, dressed in yesterday's attire... I should not relish the questions I'd have to answer! However, I don't expect to find another soul at this godforsaken hour.

Suddenly, I turn the corner and nearly choke--I was horribly mistaken! To my astonishment I chance upon two bodies at the end of the hall. They discover me just as I discover them, with shock equal to my own. Immediately, they pull apart from what was--(can it be?)--an embrace. It is a clean second before I realize that it is I who have stumbled upon their secret, and not the other way around.

The meeker of the two--Rachel--darts away and out of sight. Henrietta, on the other hand, remains rigidly still, her lips red, skin still flushed from the kiss.

Frozen, I stare down the hall at her, and she at me, before our gaping mouths are gradually overtaken by smiles.

END