



Love Remembered

by

Ellen Fisher

(c) copyright October 2003, Ellen Fisher
Cover art by Eliza Black, (c) copyright October 2003
New Concepts Publishing
5202 Humphreys Rd.
Lake Park, GA 31636
www.newconceptspublishing.com

For Don--
My own romantic hero

*When, in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state...
Haply I think on thee, and then my state
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

William Shakespeare

Prologue

*Williamsburg, Virginia
1752*

He was in hell.

Fifteen-year-old Gwaltney Harris cringed in a corner of his family's small parlor like a trapped animal, watching in fascinated terror as flames leaped and danced with deadly grace around him.

Having finished his work for the day, he had gone upstairs to spend some time alone, away from his family. Ever since his mother had died a year before, his relationship with his father had become increasingly strained, and he found it easier to retreat from the older man's presence whenever possible.

His long day's labor assisting his father, a wheelwright, had left him too tired to bother

taking off his coarse linen shirt, leather breeches, and buckskin apron. He had stretched out his lanky frame on his rough, straw-filled pallet and fallen almost immediately into a light sleep, which had rudely been interrupted when he smelled smoke. Dashing down the narrow stairs, he had found the front door all but concealed behind a line of flames.

Someone had carelessly dropped a lamp, spattering grease across the wooden planks of the floor, which had rapidly ignited. The small house was of clapboard, with heart of pine floors and a wood shingle roof. As a consequence, the resulting blaze had spread with incredible rapidity. As Gwaltney backed into the relative safety of the parlor and stood there blinking stupidly at the flames, his senses dulled by the smoke, he realized the fire had spread along a rag rug on the floor, and the flames were now behind him. There was no way back up the stairs.

Rather slowly, it dawned on him that he would have been better off in his small upstairs chamber. There he could have swung out of the window and dropped to the ground. At the most, he might have suffered a broken ankle. But, responding to instinct, he had fled for the door, and now he was trapped.

Struggling for air, he retreated into a corner and lowered himself to the floor. There the air was only slightly clearer, and he felt with terrifying certainty that he was choking. The smoke was so thick he could scarcely breathe, and the dark, billowing clouds of smoke created the horrifying illusion that the walls were closing in on him. He choked, fighting for every breath, his gaze roving wildly around the chamber as he sought a way out.

Suddenly there was a draft, and the flames jumped wildly. Through blurred eyes Gwaltney saw a monstrous figure lurching through the flames. At first he thought he had died in the fire and that the devil was coming for him. As the horrific apparition loomed closer, however, he saw it was wrapped in a multicolored quilt, and some of his apprehension eased. He was reasonably certain Satan did not come to collect souls clad in a patchwork quilt.

The figure reached him, yanked him up roughly, and hastily wrapped him in something. Despite his smoke-induced grogginess, Gwaltney managed to grasp the fact that it, too, was a patchwork quilt, and that it was dripping with water. The figure draped the corner of the quilt over his head to protect his face from the flames and led him toward the door. Feeling the tremendous heat of the fire even through the sodden quilt, Gwaltney paused, almost too frightened to pass through the flames, but the figure yanked impatiently on his arm, and he had little choice but to follow blindly.

And then he was outside. Staggering away from the heat and the flames, Gwaltney sank to the ground, gulping in the clean, fresh air and wondering how his lungs had survived so long breathing nothing but acrid smoke. The relief of being outside, in safety, away from the poisonous atmosphere, was enormous. Someone was pulling the heavy, water-sodden quilt away from his shoulders, and he looked up to see his older sister, Gladys.

She was still wrapped in her quilt, but she had thrown it back from her face like a hood, exposing her beautiful face and vivid green eyes. Despite the darkness, he could see perfectly well, thanks to the flames avidly consuming his home. In the flickering orange light, he saw that her face was smudged with soot, much as he supposed his own was, and the ends of her dark brown hair were singed. But, to his enormous relief, she did not appear injured. There were no burns marring her flawless face, so far as he could see.

He managed to sit up. "Why did you come back for me?" He coughed, feeling that his throat had been scraped raw by the smoke. "You could have been killed."

Of all his family, Gladys was the one who meant the most to him. His two older brothers

had long ago married and set up households of their own. His father, made colder than ever by the untimely death of his wife, rarely made time for anything besides harsh words for him. But he and Gladys had always been close. At nineteen, she had just become betrothed to a cooper, and when she wed she would leave her family. But she meant more to him than anyone else. The thought that she had risked her life in order to rescue him made his heart clench painfully.

His sister sat beside him in the dirt, smoothing his hair as though he were still a child rather than a tall and gangling young man. "I thought you were still outside, Gwaltney. I never would have let Father leave you inside otherwise."

"You shouldn't have come back for me."

Gwaltney coughed again. Looking up, he saw his father watching him from a distance with cold, unemotional eyes. There was no joy in his face, no relief that his son had been spared a hideous death. With bitter resignation, Gwaltney recognized that his father had exerted no effort to save him.

Just then the roof of the dwelling collapsed, sending up a new burst of flames and sparks, and Gwaltney stared at it. He could have been killed. They both could have died. He remembered the strangling sensation of trying to gasp for air when there was nothing to breathe but smoke, and he shuddered convulsively despite the fierce heat of the fire. It had felt as though he was being buried alive in smoke.

And in five more minutes, he would have been buried alive in sober truth--by the roof and the collapsing walls.

He gasped for breath, drew in the clear evening air, and rasped again, "You shouldn't have done it." Obviously his father hadn't thought he was worth the risk, he thought bitterly. Only Gladys could have been resourceful enough to formulate a hasty plan of borrowing two quilts from a neighbor and dunking them in water to use as a shield against the intense heat. Resourceful--and incredibly courageous. He was certain he wouldn't have thought of it. Even if he had, he knew he would not have dared to brave that inferno.

"I couldn't let you die, Gwaltney."

"Of course not," he agreed in a whisper that could barely be heard over the roaring fire. His throat was too sore to speak normally. "Who would torment you then?"

"Exactly. I wouldn't want to be able to go to sleep without finding frogs in my bed."

"I'll remind you of that the next time you complain."

Gladys smiled shakily and then, to his surprise, burst into tears. Gwaltney put his arms around her and let her cry against his sooty shoulder. He understood how she felt, for he was rather close to tears himself.

He stiffened his shoulders and gritted his teeth together until his jaw hurt, determined not to embarrass himself before the cold, watching eyes of his father. He was fifteen years old now--a man, not a boy. And he was damned if he would admit he had been frightened. He would *not* cry, confound it.

With an enormous effort, he managed to keep the tears that burned in his eyes from falling.

But no amount of determination could blot out the memory of being trapped in hell.

Chapter 1

Williamsburg, Virginia
1765

As Gwaltney Harris leapt from the back of his powerfully built gray stallion onto the busy main street of Williamsburg, he nodded courteously to a group of well-dressed men passing by. They ignored him. A silk-draped lady out for a morning stroll walked past him, and Gwaltney said a polite, "Good morning." But she only drew her skirts aside and swept by without so much as a glance.

He might as well have been invisible.

Gwaltney sighed as he walked up to a large brick cube of a house, distinguished from the other houses that lined the street both by its enormous size and by the unusual chinoiserie fence that surrounded it, and knocked authoritatively on the door. It had always been this way. It would always be this way. Of all the gentry in Virginia, no one would so much as acknowledge his existence, let alone speak to him.

No one, he thought with affection, except Jonathan Powell.

The door was answered by a liveried black butler, who stepped aside respectfully and waved him into the house. "Come in, sir. Mist' Powell 'as been waitin' for ye."

As Gwaltney stepped into the spacious entrance hall, Jonathan strode down the wide staircase. He was a handsome man of medium height. As was typical of men who often wore wigs, he kept his light brown hair trimmed extremely short, in sharp contrast to Gwaltney's long and abundant hair, which fell to his shoulders when it was not gathered into a queue.

Jonathan's dark brown eyes lit up as he grinned at his friend and caught him by the arms in a spontaneous display of affection. They had been friends for most of thirty years, growing up together in Williamsburg, although as a mere wheelwright's son Gwaltney had hardly been fit to mingle with the son of a well-respected lawyer. But his lowly origins had never seemed to concern Jonathan, then or now. "It's good to see you, Gwaltney. Come into the parlor."

Gwaltney cast a dubious glance at the deep blue paneling of the parlor. "Must we?"

"For heaven's sakes, Gwaltney, only for a few minutes. Sit down." Jonathan all but dragged his friend into the chamber and pushed him into a chair, shoving a goblet of perry, a cider made from pear juice, into his hand. Gwaltney clutched it nervously but did not drink.

"You said you had some information for me," he reminded his friend, eyeing the walls uncomfortably.

Jonathan grinned, looking pleased with himself, as he settled into a chair across from his friend. The excellent quality of the carved mahogany chair, as well as the other well-chosen pieces of furniture scattered about the chamber, showed clearly that he was as successful at his law practice as his father had been before him. "I've come up with a solution to your problem," he announced cheerfully.

Gwaltney tore his uneasy gaze away from the walls of his friend's elegantly appointed parlor. "My problem?" he echoed blankly. "What problem?"

Jonathan rolled his eyes. "You need respectability," he explained. "And I have thought of the perfect solution. Gossip has it that Benjamin Ashton is desperate to marry off his daughter. She is of a highly respected family, you know."

Gwaltney gave a small, nervous smile. "Surely you aren't suggesting that I offer for the young woman. If she is so respectable, how in the world could her father be convinced to let her marry me?"

"Don't you listen to gossip at all, man? She's twenty-three, for God's sake. Her family is respectable, there's no doubt of that, but the fact is she's a bit of a shrew. And decidedly on the shelf. Her sharp tongue has managed to drive off every suitor she's had. And of late she has had none to speak of. The last one, I believe, was young Alexander Blair. From what I heard she managed to get rid of him by utterly humiliating him at a ball. I believe her father has despaired of ever seeing her married."

"Even so," Gwaltney said, returning his attention to the walls, "her father is unlikely to grant me the honor of her hand in marriage."

"He's desperate, Gwaltney. If you were to offer a bit of compensation...."

"Are you suggesting that I pay *him* a dowry?"

Jonathan shrugged. "It may not be necessary. As I understand it, she is exceedingly well dowered, and he's despaired of ever seeing her wed. But I suggest you do whatever is necessary to win the young woman. You need a wife, Gwaltney. Without one you can never hope to be accepted in good society, given your, er, background. I'm sorry to speak so bluntly, but you know as well as I do that it's true."

Gwaltney's gaze wavered from the walls to rest affectionately but briefly on his friend's face. "*You* accept me, Jon."

"Perhaps I should have said the rest of good society. With a wife of such excellent breeding--"

His words were cut off as Gwaltney jumped suddenly to his feet. "Let us go outside," he suggested, a tinge of desperation in his voice.

"Gwaltney...."

"I would be very interested in seeing the new colt you were telling me about," Gwaltney continued doggedly as a film of sweat broke out on his forehead. In his anxiety the words ran together until they were scarcely distinguishable.

Sighing, Jonathan put down the goblet of perry he'd been drinking and rose to his feet. Gwaltney strode quickly toward the door, Jonathan trailing at a more sedate pace. Once outside Gwaltney took a deep breath of the warm summer air and sighed with ill-concealed relief.

"You know," Jonathan said, "if you are to offer for Ashton's daughter, you will have to meet him inside. In his parlor, most likely. He's unlikely to agree to meet you outside."

"A rather good reason not to offer for the chit," Gwaltney said. The panic that had filled his voice was gone. "I'd look rather a fool, wouldn't I, going to the man's plantation to offer for the girl and not being able to sit in his parlor for more than five minutes?" He shot Jonathan a wry grin. "Perhaps I could tell him I found his taste in decorating to be nauseating. That would certainly endear me to him."

Jonathan frowned at his friend's awkward attempt at levity. "This is an excellent opportunity, Gwaltney. You must see that. Surely you can manage it somehow."

Gwaltney turned to look at him, his hazel eyes narrowing intently and a trifle suspiciously. "You are certainly bent upon my offering for the girl. Has Ashton been pestering you on the subject?"

"No."

"You seem to have an unusual interest in my marriage to this young woman."

"No, not at all," Jonathan said hastily. "I simply want to see you established in good society, Gwaltney. You are my friend, after all."

Gwaltney sighed. "Jonathan, I am not certain a wife, even one of impeccable breeding, will make me respectable. I very much fear I will never be welcome in Virginia society."

"But you want to be respectable, do you not?"

"Of course. After everything I've done to reach this point, all the sacrifices I've made...." He broke off in angry frustration. Thanks to the lessons imparted by his educated mother, he spoke as well as any member of the gentry, and his manners were impeccable. Yet when the aristocrats of Virginia deigned to look at him they saw nothing more than a rough, uncouth laborer.

It was his greatest dream to become truly accepted by the people that mattered. It was maddening to have come so close, to have accumulated so much wealth and so much land, and yet know he would never be acceptable in their sight.

"Then you should at least try." Jonathan paused. "If you can't do it for yourself, then do it for Mary. After all, she is the reason you are so bent on making yourself respectable. Is she not?"

Gwaltney nodded, staring thoughtfully at his friend as they made their way to the stable. Everything he had done since he had obtained his plantation, River's Edge, and returned to eastern Virginia had been for Mary. Jonathan knew that.

"Very well," he said at last. "I will try."

"I'll come right to the point, Mr. Ashton," Gwaltney said in his most brisk and businesslike voice, hoping it disguised his terror. He wanted to get this meeting over with as fast as possible. "I am interested in marrying your daughter."

Benjamin Ashton, a portly gentleman whose round, fleshy face was framed by an elaborate powdered wig, stared at him with surprise. "Do you mean Cordelia?"

Gwaltney concealed his exasperation. He knew he was fortunate that Benjamin Ashton had condescended to meet with him at all. He had already spent several uncomfortable minutes standing in the entrance hall, where visitors of lesser status were obliged to await the master of the house, rather than being ushered into the parlor as a gentleman would have been, and his nerves were rapidly fraying. *The damned gentry*, he thought savagely, not for the first time.

He presumed Ashton was pretending to be shocked by his suit simply to express his contempt and to emphasize how very inferior he was to the Ashton family. He was, unfortunately, accustomed to such treatment from the gentry. And he was all too convinced of his own inferiority. As a wheelwright's son and a longhunter, he had been virtually subhuman by the standards of the society in which he lived. He had not even possessed the right to vote, for men did not qualify for the franchise unless they owned at least one hundred acres of land. Moreover, men who earned a living with their bare hands, who sweated and struggled and fought for their meals, were considered inferior to the idle rich, who ate their meals off fine porcelain plates and sterling salvers.

The parlor in which he sat had twelve-foot ceilings with elaborately carved plasterwork,

fine moldings, and expensive furniture upholstered in imported French silk damask atop an enormous Oriental carpet--a sharp contrast to the small, crudely finished parlor of his parents' house. The young lady for whom he intended to offer had been raised amidst luxury. He had grown up in a family, which at times could barely afford to put food on the table.

He abruptly found himself aware of the calluses on his hands. Unconsciously, his hands clenched into fists, concealing the work-roughened fingers and palms.

"Yes," he said curtly. "Cordelia."

"Ah. Well, you're a brave young man, Mr. Harris."

Gwaltney felt his jaw drop. "I beg your pardon?"

"I've tried everything to get her married off," Ashton said gloomily. "I keep forcing her to attend social events, though she can't stand them, and she makes my life miserable for days beforehand. I make her dance with young men, but she steps on their toes on purpose. I have gentlemen to dinner, and they have soup poured in their laps. I send her out for romantic walks in the garden with suitors, and she leads them straight to a bees' nest." He fixed Gwaltney with a mournful gaze. "Young Blake Smythe came back with seven stings on his face. His eye was swollen shut. Looked for all the world like he'd been in a fistfight."

Gwaltney had met Smythe and did not care for the way in which the arrogant young man had snubbed him. "One can only applaud Mistress Ashton's excellent taste," he said.

"It isn't a matter of taste," Ashton said heavily. "She hates men. All men."

"Perhaps she hasn't met the right man yet."

The older man looked at him with surprise. "Surely you aren't suggesting *you* might be the right man?"

Gwaltney felt his spine grow rigid. Automatically, he lifted his chin. "I know," he said with stiff pride, "that I am not of sufficiently good birth to be worthy of your daughter. However--"

"Nonsense, Mr. Harris. Your background has nothing to do with it. Cordelia needs a man who won't let her rule him, a man who won't let her get her way and browbeat him into submission, a man who won't give in to her temper." He coughed, embarrassed. "A man, in short, as little like me as possible. I think...." He regarded Gwaltney thoughtfully. "I think perhaps you might be that man after all."

Startled by the other man's pronouncement, Gwaltney inclined his head slightly. "Thank you."

"Oh, you won't thank me when you meet her," Ashton predicted gloomily. Gwaltney glanced nervously about the chamber. The paneled walls were painted an oppressively dark green, and they made him feel caged and apprehensive, no matter how much he tried to ignore them. He knew he could not bear to stay here much longer. Eventually his gaze would be drawn inexorably to the walls, and then the fear would consume him, closing off his throat and choking him until he fled in a panic. "I would like to meet her now, if you don't mind."

Ashton looked rueful. "Actually, Mr. Harris, I expected her here at three o'clock. I commanded her to be here, actually, as I knew you were coming and I gathered from your note that you might have an interest in her. But, I imagine she's forgotten as usual. She has very little sense of time and even less of obedience."

"Where is she?" Gwaltney inquired, standing.

"Most likely at the stable. In no condition to receive a suitor, I assure you."

"On the contrary," Gwaltney said, moving toward the door, "I would prefer to meet her

and see her as she usually is rather than on her best behavior. Surely you can understand that, sir.”

Behind him he heard Ashton mutter something about the girl having no best behavior. He grinned. It sounded as though this young woman might be worth seeing after all.

But worth marrying? That was another question entirely.

He fled through the door of the parlor, trying to make his steps seem purposeful rather than panicked, and sighed deeply as he stepped out into the fresh air, letting the oxygen flood his lungs. It always seemed to him there was no air indoors and that he was in imminent danger of suffocating. Sometimes he even found himself holding his breath.

“Over that way,” Ashton said, pointing at a long, low building.

Gwaltney nodded and led the way from the brick plantation house. As they neared the stable, a red chestnut gelding came cantering up. It had barely come to a stop before its rider lightly vaulted off its back.

“Cordelia!” called Ashton.

The young woman looked around in surprise--whether real or artificial Gwaltney couldn’t tell. “Oh, Father,” she said. “Do we have visitors?”

Ashton strode up to her, clearly irritated. “I told you,” he said, “that we would have a visitor at three o’clock. Is this your idea of how to dress for a visitor? Clad in old clothing, reeking of the stables....”

The young woman lifted her head and stared at Gwaltney for a moment, her gaze raking him contemptuously from his plume-trimmed cocked hat to the tooled silver buckles on his shoes, then gave him a cold smile. “Truly, Father,” she said, “I think it’s quite appropriate, considering the visitor.”

Ashton sputtered. “Cordelia!”

“Well, Father,” she said tartly, “he is, after all, nothing more than a longhunter. He is only seeking a wife to bring respectability to his name.” She looked defiantly over her father’s head at Gwaltney. “Isn’t that true?”

Gwaltney felt his lips twitching involuntarily. *Impudent wench*. “If I were seeking respectability,” he replied politely, “I scarcely think *you* would make me a suitable wife, my dear.”

The young woman stared at him in surprise for a moment, then turned crimson and glanced self-consciously down at her old and wrinkled linen gown. Gwaltney permitted himself to grin. Clearly the chit was not accustomed to men who gave as good as they got. No doubt, he reflected with amusement, most men took to their heels the moment she opened her mouth and unsheathed that sharp tongue of hers.

She looked exactly as he expected a spinster to look--unfashionably tall, dark hair pulled back tightly into a serviceable but unattractive bun, her thin and angular body all but hidden in a shapeless riding habit. And nearsighted, apparently, judging from the spectacles she wore.

Yet despite her plainness, Gwaltney was intrigued. He had never met a woman who spoke her mind to the point of rudeness before. Everyone in Virginia scorned him due to his lowly origins, sneering at him behind his back, or simply ignoring him, but few people had ever dared to say such things to his face before.

He found it oddly refreshing.

Ashton directed a satisfied look at his blushing daughter. “Perhaps you’ll change into something more suitable and join us in the parlor.”

Cordelia lifted her chin. "I refuse to change into my best clothes for *him*, Father."

"No doubt you are saving your best clothes for your myriad other suitors," Gwaltney remarked calmly.

She shot him a look of loathing.

Ashton intervened. "Cordelia. Go change. Join us in the parlor in ten minutes."

Apparently Cordelia's father had at least some control over the wayward young woman, because she flashed one final, acid-filled look at Gwaltney and stalked away haughtily, her chin held at an arrogant angle. Ashton watched her as she marched away, then turned to Gwaltney.

"I'd like to apologize for my daughter's words," he said formally.

"No apology is necessary, sir. You gave me fair warning that Mistress Ashton can be a little difficult."

"Actually," Ashton confided, "she was relatively courteous to you."

"Indeed," Gwaltney said, intrigued despite himself. "What, pray tell, would you consider *rude* behavior on her part?"

"She called Charles Franklin fat in front of a hundred people," Ashton said dolefully. "And she told John Greenhow that his wig made it look as if he were wearing a sheep on his head."

Gwaltney firmly suppressed his laughter in deference to the distressed expression on Ashton's face. "Your daughter has a way with words," he said when he trusted himself to speak.

"Yes, she does. If only she had a way with people as well." Ashton sighed heavily. "Shall we go back into the parlor and wait for her there?"

Gwaltney felt a stab of panic, but he could think of no reasonable excuse to remain standing safely in the sunshine. "Of course," he agreed easily, hoping, *praying* the girl would not take ten minutes to get changed.

Naturally, she took twenty.

It was the longest twenty minutes of Gwaltney's life. He sat staring fixedly at the cherry tea table, struggling to make coherent responses to Ashton's attempts at conversation but completely unaware of whether he was succeeding or not. He ignored the certainty the chamber was shrinking, the horrifying sensation of the walls closing in on him, and focused steadfastly on the tea table. He thought of nothing but that table. He imagined the entire universe had shrunk until there was nothing left but the table.

He absolutely refused to look at the walls.

Just when he thought he must flee the chamber, Ashton's spinster daughter reappeared. He could see little improvement in her appearance. She had exchanged an old shapeless gown for a new shapeless gown, and had taken down her hair, combed the straw out of it, and pulled it back tightly into the same unattractive and unfashionable bun.

She glanced at him. Despite the concealing spectacles, he saw immediately in her eyes that she was aware of his distress, although she could not possibly guess what had caused his anxiety. It was unfortunate she was so astute. She could surely see he was in no condition to continue their verbal warfare.

Cordelia sat down on the settee and gave him a long, measured look. "Mr. Harris looks uncomfortable, Father," she said at last. "Perhaps he would like some more tea. Would you care for some more tea, Mr. Harris?"

"No," Gwaltney croaked, feeling his heart hammering against his ribs.

She smiled serenely. "You're right, of course, Mr. Harris. You aren't fit to drink from our

good porcelain.” Ignoring her father’s indignant look, she went on coolly, “A man of your lowly origins would be more comfortable drinking from pewter, I should think.”

The cool disdain in her eyes gave him strength. He forced a wooden smile onto his lips and counterattacked. “Considering your absolutely charming manners, mistress, it’s a wonder you aren’t already wed.”

“And are *you* an expert on proper manners, Mr. Harris?”

“Not at all,” Gwaltney drawled with as much contempt as he could muster. “But more so, apparently, than you are.”

Behind the spectacles, her eyes flashed, and he half expected her to pour the contents of the teapot over his head, given Benjamin Ashton’s description of her behavior with other suitors. But she only tilted her head and gazed at him. He thought he detected a flicker of respect in her eyes and even, perhaps, a touch of amusement.

“And yet you want to marry me,” she said. “Tell me, Mr. Harris, what do you find attractive about me? My ... how did you put it? ... ‘absolutely charming manners,’ or my dowry?”

“I have not yet decided that I wish to marry you, mistress.”

“Oh, come now, Mr. Harris. Let us be honest with one another. You would not be here if you did not wish to seek my hand in marriage.”

“You are a remarkable young lady,” Gwaltney said, forcing another smile despite his nervousness. “Egotistical as well as ill-mannered.”

He half expected Benjamin Ashton to rise to his feet and order him from the parlor at that remark, but he saw from the corner of his eye that Ashton was observing their confrontation with interest rather than anger.

Mistress Ashton’s lips tightened. The amusement, he noted, had drained from her expression. Her eyes were cold and hard. “How dare you sit here and call me such names?” she snapped.

“Let me remind you that you began the name-calling, Mistress Ashton.”

“Only because you are a ... a....”

“A guest in your father’s house?” Gwaltney supplied helpfully. “Are you always this courteous to your guests, mistress?”

Most planters, he knew, prided themselves on their hospitality. He noted with satisfaction that her cheeks flushed with embarrassment. “I am courteous enough to *gentlemen*,” she returned.

“Ah, yes. Your courtesy to *gentlemen* is legendary throughout the colony.”

Her gaze flickered toward the teapot, and he had the distinct sense she was weighing the pros and cons of dumping it in his hair. Feeling that he had made enough of an impression for the day, and rather desperate to get outside, he stood up. “This has been an interesting visit, Mistress Ashton. Perhaps we will meet again at some point.”

“You’ll forgive me if I say I won’t be looking forward to it.”

Gwaltney grinned. “I will,” he said, and meant it. He inclined his head toward Benjamin Ashton. “Mr. Ashton, I am pleased to have made your acquaintance.”

He saw in Ashton’s warm gaze that the feeling was mutual. Shaking the older man’s hand, he turned and made his way toward the door, almost blindly.

Once safely outside, he stood for a few moments, breathing in the fresh air and enjoying the tremendous relief of being in the open. Suddenly aware that he was not alone, he turned and saw Mistress Ashton standing on the wide brick steps of the house, watching him thoughtfully.

He sent her a crooked smile. “I see you couldn’t bear to part with me, mistress.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she said coldly. “I followed you to speak with you privately. I wish to make certain you have no intention of seeking my hand.”

Gwaltney arched a brow. “Now you flatter yourself. Surely you can’t imagine I could be interested in marrying you after what you said to me in there.”

He saw satisfaction cross her face, only to be quickly wiped away. “I am pleased you realize we would not suit.”

“You made that more than clear, mistress.”

She regarded him intently. “I am glad we understand one another,” she said at last, and turning, walked back into the house. He watched her go.

Mistress Ashton, he thought wryly, would rejoice this afternoon, believing she had succeeded in ridding herself of another unwanted suitor. No doubt the young lady was already congratulating herself, believing she had won this battle.

But the war had just begun.

Chapter 2

“I hate to be so rude.”

Cordelia Ashton paced across her bedchamber. Catching sight of her reflection in the mirror, she made a face of disgust, yanking the glasses from her face and tossing them on the small walnut table next to her bed. “I hate to be rude,” she repeated, “and I hate having to dress like this. And I especially hate this blasted hairstyle.” As she spoke, she pulled hairpins from her hair until the heavy mahogany tresses fell loose around her shoulders.

Her sister, perched on the edge of the bed, shrugged her slender shoulders. “Then don’t be rude and don’t dress that way. And wear your hair another way.”

“I have no choice!” Cordelia burst out angrily, tossing the hairpins at the table. She missed, and they scattered across the wide pine planks of the floor. She did not bother to pick them up. “Father is still trying to marry me off. Even now, when any man in his right mind considers me to be on the shelf. Damn it, can’t he accept that I *want* to be a spinster?”

“He only wants what is best for you, Cordelia,” Elizabeth said in her gentle voice.

“He wants what he *thinks* is best for me. There’s a big difference.” Cordelia stopped pacing and sat down heavily in a beautifully carved mahogany chair, her fingers drumming irritably on the serpentine arms. “You wouldn’t believe who he’s trying to marry me off to this time. *Gwaltney Harris*.”

Elizabeth’s head jerked up, and she stared at her sister in surprise. “Gwaltney Harris?” she choked, then faltered, “Well, they say that Mr. Harris is very ... is very handsome.”

“I suppose,” Cordelia conceded, though the truth was she’d tried her best not to notice. “Admiring Mr. Harris’ features was not high on my list of priorities. Being a shrew is not so easy as you might suppose. One has to constantly be thinking of rude things to say. If you have one day when you can’t think of an insult or an impolite comment, people start thinking you’re becoming a lady.” She sighed, growing more serious. “Mother would be so disappointed in my

behavior. But I tell myself she would understand.”

“I don’t think,” Elizabeth said softly, “that she would understand why you don’t want to be married. And I don’t believe she would have encouraged you to spend your life as a spinster. To her that would have been an outrageous idea.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Cordelia conceded glumly. “Mother believed a woman could have no higher goal in life than to marry well.”

“But marrying Gwaltney Harris is not really marrying well, is it?”

Cordelia bounced up and began pacing again. “Exactly. And that is what has me so worried. Can Father really be so concerned by my unmarried state that he is willing to see me wed to someone like Mr. Harris? The man began life as a wheelwright. And everyone knows he made his fortune as a longhunter. He trapped and sold animal skins, for heaven’s sake. He is hardly the sort of person I’d think Father would consider, no matter how rich he is.”

“We thought Father had resigned himself to your unmarried state.”

“Evidently we were wrong. I thought perhaps Father would think it was sufficient to have one daughter married well.”

“I am not married yet,” Elizabeth said, blushing prettily.

“Yes, but everyone knows Jonathan Powell is interested in you. He’s a fine man, Elizabeth. He is exactly what Father wants for us and precisely what you deserve--a gentleman born and bred, and rich besides. But Gwaltney Harris....” She paused and settled back on the ivory coverlet of the bed, smiling ruefully. “Well, after the dreadful things I said to Mr. Harris I am not overly concerned. He won’t be back.”

“In that case,” Elizabeth pointed out, “you really have very little to worry about, do you?”

Cordelia sighed. “The only thing that really concerns me,” she confessed, “is that Father may find someone worse than Gwaltney Harris to court me.”

“Worse? How could anyone be worse than Gwaltney Harris?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Cordelia said vaguely. “An eighty-year-old with gout would be worse. Wouldn’t he?”

“I have never been more embarrassed in my life!”

Cordelia stared fixedly at the ham on her plate as her father began another in an endless series of lectures. This was the price she paid for her determination to remain a spinster--her father’s disillusionment with her behavior. He, along with the rest of the colony, had grown to believe over the past seven years that Cordelia was simply a virago. It had never occurred to him that she comported herself this way on purpose, for he was incapable of believing a well-bred and properly brought-up woman could want anything other than to be a wife and mother.

As a girl, she had dreamed of romance and true love, of wedding the perfect man and having his children, of sharing her life with him. But the man of her dreams had turned out to be distressingly imperfect, shattering her heart as carelessly as if it had been glass. She had decided it was much safer to remain a spinster. And with the stubborn determination she brought to everything she did, she had bent her will to making certain she remained unwed.

Remaining a spinster had the added benefit of keeping her free to care for her father in his old age, thus carrying out the promise she had made to her dying mother seven years before. She was a perfectly adequate housewife, content to run her father’s household rather than a husband’s.

She didn’t want a husband. Of that she was certain.

Lifting her eyes from her plate, she caught her sister's sympathetic gaze on her and felt a little better. She could never exist without her sister. Only Elizabeth was privy to her thoughts and feelings. Only Elizabeth knew what she was really like beneath the dowdy gowns and spectacles.

Intent upon his lecture, Benjamin was totally oblivious to the look the sisters exchanged. "How could you say such things to Mr. Harris?" he went on, stabbing viciously, if ineffectually, at his ham with his fork. "He was interested in your hand, you foolish girl! And now ... now you will never be wed!"

Cordelia sighed. Each time she succeeded in driving off another suitor, her aggrieved father assured her she would never be married. And yet another suitor always seemed to materialize. She thought with annoyance that Father would still be trying to marry her off when she turned fifty.

"I was not interested in *his* hand, Father," she said tartly. "He is not a gentleman."

"No *gentleman* would be interested in you," her father grumbled. "At this point I'd be willing to marry you off to a wigmaker. And I would suggest you lower your expectations as well, child. At your age I don't see how you can expect to do better than Mr. Harris. He's rich. At least he could take care of you. And furthermore, I think he is a good man despite his origins."

Cordelia set her chin stubbornly. "I won't marry him, Father."

"I imagine you won't get the chance, anyway," her father said glumly. "After the things you said to the man I don't expect him to darken our door again. But he did mention...." He brightened slightly. "He did write in his note he would be at the Governor's mansion on Thursday, when the Governor has his rout."

Elizabeth, who, except for sympathetic glances at her sister, had been politely ignoring the argument, looked at her father in surprise and entered the conversation for the first time. "The Governor invited *Mr. Harris* to his rout?"

Benjamin shrugged. "It is not for us to question the Governor. Mr. Harris is rich, after all. Quite likely he has more influence than is commonly realized." He paused, apparently turning a thought over in his mind. "Tell me, Cordelia," he ventured at last, "would you at least condescend to dance with Mr. Harris if he asks you to?"

"I don't dance well," Cordelia evaded. It was the truth. Although she'd been taught by the same excellent dancing masters as Elizabeth, she had spent too many long years standing along the walls with the old ladies at routs, coldly rebuffing any gentlemen who asked her to dance, in order to maintain her hard won reputation as a shrew. No one ever dared ask her to dance anymore. As a consequence, Elizabeth danced as lightly as a butterfly, whereas she herself danced with all the grace and refinement of an elephant.

She felt an odd flicker of resentment at the thought but suppressed it quickly. It wasn't Elizabeth's fault she was beautiful, charming, and graceful. And it most certainly was Cordelia's fault that she was a spinster. She had wanted her life to be this way, she reminded herself. It had been her decision and hers alone. She couldn't bear to risk falling in love with another man only to be cruelly rebuffed.

And yet, there were days when she wanted to flirt, dance, and have gentlemen give *her* foolishly extravagant compliments about her appearance, rather than simply overhearing the myriad compliments bestowed on her sister.

"Nevertheless," her father said, "if Mr. Harris asks you to dance, I want you to accept." At her mutinous expression, he added plaintively, "For heaven's sake, girl, I'm not saying you

have to marry the man. Simply tell me you'll dance with him!"

"I'm certain he won't ask," Cordelia said, remembering with a stab of guilt the insults she had heaped on his head this afternoon.

"But if he does?"

Cordelia looked at her father's hopeful expression. Poor Father, she thought. He did want what was best for her. If only he wasn't so stubbornly convinced she would be happier if she were married. She supposed dancing once with Gwaltney Harris was a small enough sacrifice to make to ease her father's mind. "If he asks," she said at last, "I will agree to dance with him."

Her father went back to eating his food with a satisfied air. Cordelia nibbled on her ham, smiling slightly.

Gwaltney Harris might ask her to dance once, but he would never ask her a second time. She would make certain of it.

After dinner Cordelia retreated to her chamber. Sitting at a small table, she picked up a brush and began absently brushing watercolors across a blank sheet of paper.

This was the one thing she loved to do above all else--sketching and painting. Most ladies considered art merely as an "accomplishment," a skill acquired simply to increase their worth to potential husbands, to be mastered along with the playing of instruments, singing, and needlework. But to Cordelia it was much more than an accomplishment. It was her life. When she had decided to remain a spinster, she had given up her girlish dreams of loving a man, instead channeling her energies into developing her artistic skills. Over the past seven years, art had become the love of her life.

She had been painting almost in a trance, thinking over the day's events. Now she paused, brush held in her hand, and stared at the painting. It depicted a man with dark brown hair and hazel eyes, blunt cheekbones, and a jutting chin--a man who was remarkably handsome in a very unaristocratic way.

It was rather sketchy, but it was definitely a portrait of Gwaltney Harris.

Disgusted, Cordelia put down her paintbrush and ripped the painting into shreds.

Chapter 3

"How did your visit with the Ashtons go?"

Gwaltney grinned with unrepressed amusement as he poured a drink for his friend. In deference to what Jonathan politely referred to as Gwaltney's "peculiarity," they generally sat on a carved stone bench in the formal garden when Jonathan came to visit at River's Edge. Gwaltney had designed his own parlor carefully, and was capable of sitting in it for hours at a time if need be, but he was nevertheless more comfortable outside. A slave had brought a decanter of Madeira and two fine cut-glass goblets, and Gwaltney poured the dark amber wine with the same ceremony he might have used in his parlor.

"It was dreadful," he said succinctly. "Mistress Ashton took a violent dislike to me on the

spot. Rarely have I been insulted in such imaginatively rude terms. And Heaven knows I have been insulted frequently enough since I returned to this area.”

Jonathan groaned and took a gulp of his drink. “It’s my impression,” he said, “that Mistress Ashton treats every potential suitor that way.”

“In other words, I shouldn’t take it personally? Difficult, given the rather personal nature of the insults she heaped on me.”

“I should have known you wouldn’t care for her,” Jonathan muttered.

“I wouldn’t say I didn’t care for her,” Gwaltney said. “Actually, I found her to be quite fascinating.”

Jonathan’s head jerked up, and he stared at his friend in astounded surprise. “Fascinating?”

“Absolutely.”

Jonathan stared at him a moment longer, his dark eyes wide, then abruptly broke into a grin. “I suspect you are the first man ever to use that word to describe her. Shrewish, plain, viper-tongued—all these I’ve heard. But *fascinating*?”

“It is the only word I can think of to describe her,” Gwaltney said honestly. Cordelia Ashton was no beauty, that was certain. Nor was she a young girl bent on obtaining a husband, even at the cost of saying what she thought. Cordelia had opinions, and she was not in the least shy about sharing them.

Or flaying him with them.

“Does this mean you may actually be considering courting her?”

“No.”

Jonathan sighed, the dejection returning to his features. “I should have known.”

“I am considering nothing,” Gwaltney clarified, amused by Jonathan’s look of unhappiness. He rather enjoyed teasing his serious-minded friend. “I have already decided to court her.”

Jonathan smiled with ill-concealed relief. “I cannot believe you actually like her.”

“I didn’t say I like her. Far from it. I think she is a bad-tempered brat. I think she has been spoiled outrageously by her father and never reprimanded for behavior that would be disgraceful in a ten-year-old. I don’t *like* her at all. But she is interesting. A curiosity, if you will. And as I am something of a curiosity myself, I think perhaps we will suit.”

Jonathan looked at him oddly. “I don’t think of you as a curiosity, Gwaltney.”

“My friend,” Gwaltney said seriously, “you are the only one who does not.” He shrugged and flashed a self-deprecating smile, suddenly aware he had exposed his feelings more than he intended. Despite Jonathan’s unwavering friendship, he often felt alone and isolated. But he did not make a habit of feeling sorry for himself.

“Be that as it may,” he went on, “I believe I will court the young lady. I plan on resuming my courtship tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow! So soon? But won’t her father have the advantage if he sees you are so interested in her?”

Gwaltney grinned. “You misunderstand me, Jonathan. I plan on visiting *her*. I have no intention whatsoever of visiting her father.”

The next morning Cordelia rode out to the tobacco fields, as was her daily habit, to make note of which fields needed their leaves cut. It was a job that should have fallen to Benjamin

Ashton, but her mother had long ago taken over the job and done it so successfully that Ashton had not been inclined to reclaim the chore. After her mother had died, Cordelia had become the *de facto* supervisor of the tobacco fields. Although Ashton had grown up on the plantation, inheriting it when his father died, he had never had a great deal of patience or success with the more tedious chores, such as observing the plants. And he had been pleased enough to let his elder daughter take over, just as his son would have had he had one.

When Cordelia returned to the house, she spent an hour or so going over her father's books, making the necessary entries to show they had sold firewood and fodder at the market in Williamsburg two days before. When at last she walked down to the river with her parchment, pen, and ink, it was early afternoon.

Despite the fact that the English had first settled Virginia a century and a half before, the land was still for the most part untamed forest, since, because of the amount of labor required to cultivate tobacco, no more than five acres per slave could be cultivated at any one time. In addition, land ruined by over planting of tobacco was frequently allowed to be reclaimed by the wilderness. Thus even long-settled areas were still heavily forested.

It was a beautiful day to sit in the solitude of the woods and sketch, sunny and warm, with puffy white clouds sailing across the sky. Cordelia was aware of very little except the landscape she was engrossed in drawing. Consequently, the unexpected voice behind her startled her into pressing down with the quill, breaking the point and causing a large blot on her sketch.

Disgusted and annoyed, she rose to her feet, dropping the ruined sketch on the ground, and turned to face the intruder. She was astounded to see it was Gwaltney Harris.

"Good afternoon," he repeated, then cast an amused look at the parchment that lay on the ground. "Did I startle you?"

"Did you...," Cordelia began, so angry she could barely speak. "Did you startle me? What do you think, Mr. Harris? Do you often make a habit of sneaking up on defenseless women?"

"You are far from defenseless, my dear Mistress Ashton," Gwaltney drawled. "Your tongue is more lethal than a pistol."

"How dare you come here and insult me?" she hissed. "You obviously do not possess the slightest notion of gentlemanly behavior." She was not feigning rudeness now; she was genuinely annoyed by his unexpected appearance, to say nothing of the cutting scorn in his eyes. "I can scarcely believe my father permitted you to come speak with me."

"He didn't. I simply rode onto your property. I wanted to speak with you."

For the first time she noticed his horse, an enormous, muscular gray stallion, standing quietly behind him. Her eyes widened with outrage. "That is completely and totally improper!"

"As opposed to *your* behavior, I presume."

"My behavior is not in question here," Cordelia retorted. "You startled me, causing me to ruin my sketch, and now you tell me you haven't even received permission from my father to visit? It is more than obvious the subtleties of correct social behavior are beyond you, sir. Perhaps you should return to the wilds of Virginia, where you belong."

Gwaltney appeared unperturbed by her attack. "Perhaps you would care to instruct me in the ... what did you call it? ... 'subtleties of correct social behavior.' You are, after all, such an expert."

Unable to find a ready retort, Cordelia contented herself with a withering glare. She had never met a man so willing to give abuse as easily as she gave it. It was rather perplexing. To her horror, she saw he was walking toward her. Hastily, she stepped backward. But he paused and

bent down, retrieving the forgotten sketch.

"Give that to me!" she cried, trying to tear it from his grasp.

Unconcerned, he held it out of her reach and studied it. Cordelia writhed in an agony of self-consciousness. She hated having people see her artwork, rarely even showing her pictures to Elizabeth. "Hmm," he said at last. "It's quite lovely."

"It is merely a sketch," Cordelia said coldly, fighting down her embarrassment.

"On the contrary, it is an excellent representation of the river. Quite different from the usual banal pictures done by young ladies. But of course...." He looked over the sketch and grinned insolently. "You are neither a lady nor young."

Infuriated, Cordelia ripped the sketch from his hands. "And you are a barbarian," she snapped. "What would a wheelwright's son know about art?"

"Very little," Gwaltney admitted. "But I know what a landscape looks like. I am not blind, merely uncultured. And I recognize a good representation of reality when I see it."

"I don't believe you know anything about *reality* at all," Cordelia retorted. "If you did, you would recognize this reality--I don't like you. And I wish you would go away."

"On the contrary, I do realize you don't care for me. But the simple fact is that I find you extremely intriguing."

Cordelia gaped at him for a moment. She had been ruder to this man than she had ever been to any human being in her lifetime, and all he could say was that he found her *intriguing*? He must be insane.

An unfamiliar sensation burned inside her. Ordinarily, despite the insults she heaped on her suitors, she felt no personal animosity toward them. Generally speaking, her suitors did not stay in her vicinity long enough for her to develop any sort of feelings for them whatsoever. But Gwaltney Harris was different.

He was the first man she'd met in the past seven years who had actually inspired some sort of emotion in her. She hated the way he grinned at her insults and made even more cutting remarks in return. And she especially hated the way he looked at her gowns, her unfashionably arranged hair, with one eyebrow raised in that infuriating way that eloquently expressed contempt. She was beginning to genuinely despise the man.

"Well, I find you excruciatingly dull," she said at last, as haughtily as she could manage. "And I demand that you leave my father's property." She turned and sat down on the bank, her back to him in a dismissive way. Picking up another quill, she began to sketch again, as though he were not there.

Undeterred, Gwaltney sat down next to her on the bank. Startled, she looked up and saw his face, too close to her own, and his vivid, striking eyes, intent upon hers. She recognized with an odd sinking in her stomach that he was indeed handsome, just as Elizabeth had said. His coffee-brown hair was tied back neatly in a queue, framing a rugged, solid face. Everything about his face, from the square thrust of his jaw and blunt cheekbones to the set of his well-chiseled mouth, bespoke resolve. There was nothing at all aristocratic about his strong, roughly hewn features, yet there could be no denying that he was an extraordinarily handsome man.

He looked, she realized with dismay, precisely as she had painted him. Despite her assertion to Elizabeth that she had scarcely noticed his face, she had somehow managed to memorize it. Embarrassed at the realization, she averted her gaze, and her eyes fell on his legs, displayed to advantage by the fine silk stockings and linen knee breeches he wore. They were long, incredibly long, and muscular. Her heart began to pound with an unfamiliar thunder.

“Go away,” she said in a hoarse voice quite unlike her usual shrewish tones.

Gwaltney lifted a dark eyebrow at the unexpectedly sultry tone of her voice. “But I like it here. A lovely view, is it not? Small wonder you enjoy drawing this.” He studied her new sketch, which was already remarkably detailed. “You portray everything so clearly,” he said in wondering tones. “The leaves blowing in the breeze, the sunshine over the water--it’s all there. One can almost hear the birds singing.”

Cordelia continued sketching, determined to ignore him. But it was difficult to ignore his compliments. She wondered if perhaps that was his intention, if he had formulated a plan of wooing her with compliments and pretty words. She knew that was how many men courted women, by showering them with compliments on their appearance, their beauty, and their taste in clothing. Gwaltney could not honestly compliment her on such things, so perhaps he had chosen a slightly different tactic--complimenting her one skill.

Of course, that was it, she decided, sketching and determinedly ignoring him. It was empty flattery, nothing more. It never occurred to her that he might genuinely be impressed by her skill.

Gwaltney continued to watch her sketch. “It is an excellent picture,” he said at last, “but I’m not certain where those dark clouds are coming from. I see nothing but blue sky.”

Startled, Cordelia looked at what she had drawn. As Gwaltney had said, there was nothing before them but blue sky and small white clouds. Yet her drawing portrayed dark, ominous ones roiling over the river. She contemplated her drawing a moment longer, then sketched in a bolt of lightning.

Gwaltney seemed to take the hint. He stood, looking down at her. “I believe I’ll be going now,” he said, amusement clear in his hazel eyes, “but I hope to see you at the Governor’s ball this week.”

Cordelia stood as well and stared directly into his eyes. It was a measured, challenging look, very definitely not the sort of look any lady should give her suitor. She realized for the first time that he was much, much taller than she was, but she refused to be intimidated by his height. “I will be there,” she said, “but I do not intend to spend any time with you. And I most decidedly will not dance with you.” She recalled her promise to her father a little guiltily but pushed the guilt away. If she told the man she didn’t want to dance, then he wouldn’t ask. And if he didn’t ask ... well, then her father could hardly expect her to dance with him, could he?

“No doubt you will be besieged by suitors asking you to dance,” Gwaltney agreed gravely, the amusement in his eyes growing stronger, “but perhaps you will permit me to worship you from afar. Bring you punch and that sort of thing.”

“Bring me punch,” Cordelia said between her teeth, “and I shall pour it on your head.”

Gwaltney stifled a grin. “Thank you for the warning. I shall be certain not to wear a wig then.” And with that, he mounted his gray horse and galloped away.

Cordelia stared after him in mounting fury. She generally tried to treat her suitors with cold aloofness, but she was uncomfortably aware that Gwaltney had provoked her to mere petty childishness. Even so, she could scarcely believe he could seriously still be considering her as a wife.

Surely the man couldn’t be so obtuse as to actually plan on seeking her out at the Governor’s ball.

She sat down again and looked at the sketch she had drawn, the stormy weather she had depicted, and she sighed. Some men never learned.

And unfortunately for her, it appeared that Gwaltney Harris was one of those men.

Chapter 4

“You look beautiful, Elizabeth.”

Cordelia admired her sister, who stood before the dressing table, adding the finishing touches to her toilette. Her perfect complexion was powdered white and lightly rouged. Her gown was a stunning confection of sky blue silk and frothy lace, and her hair was powdered gray and arranged into the complex “hedgehog” style, tightly curled on top with long, loose curls draped across the neck and shoulders. She looked, as always, like a flawless gem.

Elizabeth flashed a smile at her sister as she adjusted the curls on either side of her face. “Thank you, Cordelia.” Her smile became almost shy. “Do you think Jonathan will think so?”

Cordelia suppressed a grin. All sisterly bias aside, Elizabeth was one of the most beautiful women in the colony. “Of course. He always does,” she said firmly.

Elizabeth sighed, and her expression became wistful. “I think I really love him, Cordelia.”

“I’m glad. I’ve wanted you to find someone like him. He’s a very nice man.”

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” Elizabeth’s face became dreamy, as if she was imagining the dances she would share with her love. Cordelia turned away. It was hard for her not to envy Elizabeth at times like these. Elizabeth loved balls, loved dancing and laughing with eligible young men, and she herself hated them. And yet a small part of her longed to dance and flirt and be thought beautiful.

She glanced down at her own gown. It was a dark, unbecoming violet, spinsterish in its plainness. No, she amended honestly, it was worse than merely spinsterish. It resembled something that one’s sixty-year-old maiden aunt might wear. It was high-necked and loose fitting. And with her hair pulled tightly into the same unbecoming bun she always wore, she looked ... well, ghastly.

She had worked as hard on her toilette as Elizabeth had on hers, but for an entirely different reason. Whereas Elizabeth sought to impress her suitor, she herself was trying to drive her suitor away. She rather hoped she had dissuaded Gwaltney Harris with the awful things she had said, but her father’s apparent hope that she would dance with the man made her think he suspected Harris was desperate for a wife—even an unattractive, shrewish spinster. And certainly, when they had last spoken, Harris had not seemed in the least discouraged by her rudeness.

She might not have rid herself of him as easily as she had thought.

She smiled as she regarded herself in the mirror over Elizabeth’s shoulder, pleased with her appearance. If Harris approached her tonight, she was certain she would hold no charms for him whatsoever.

“May I have this dance, Mistress Ashton?”

Elizabeth fluttered her painted silk and ivory fan, gracefully extending her hand as Jonathan Powell approached. “Of course,” she murmured. He took her arm and guided her away

from her family.

"I wish to speak with you," she hissed as they walked away.

Noticing the ominous note in her voice, Jonathan sighed inwardly. He was fairly certain he knew what she wanted to discuss with him. "After this dance?" he suggested, hoping to enjoy dancing with her before having to listen to her dressing down. "After all, if we were to go outside before we danced, there might be talk."

She acquiesced with a cool nod of her head.

After a sprightly reel, he escorted her toward the doors that led to the garden. "We can't stay long," he cautioned her. "I do not wish for there to be the slightest taint of scandal surrounding our marriage."

"I have not agreed to marry you yet," Elizabeth said between her teeth.

"That is not fair," Jonathan protested as they stepped into the cool night air in the formal garden. Around them stood couples, sighing over the beauty of the star-studded night sky and the enormous silver moon, and further away less circumspect couples were melting into the geometric precision of the boxwood hedges. Always the gentleman, Jonathan carefully paused near the house. "You agreed to marry me if I would find a suitable suitor for your sister."

Elizabeth tossed her gray-powdered head. "I said I wouldn't marry you or anyone else until Cordelia was married," she proclaimed, pouting prettily. "You were the one who came up with the notion of finding her a suitor. But I expected it to be a suitable man, not that dreadful Gwaltney Harris."

"Gwaltney Harris is my friend."

"I've heard that he once lived among Indians. Some people say he is himself a savage."

"He's quite rich."

"Rich is not enough for my sister."

"He is handsome as well."

Elizabeth scowled, and Jonathan burst out laughing. "I see. For your twenty-three-year old spinster sister, who is known throughout the colony of Virginia as a shrew, a man who is both rich and handsome is simply not good enough."

Elizabeth pouted, obviously aware that she'd been maneuvered into sounding petty and foolish. She chose her next words more carefully. "I cannot deny he is both rich and handsome," she began cautiously, "but it is the question of his origins that concerns me."

Jonathan's levity vanished. "Elizabeth," he said seriously, "there is no question about his origins, none at all. Gwaltney learned his father's trade as a boy. But he found it too tame for his liking, and ran away to the west to become a longhunter. Perhaps he did live among the natives. At the very least he traded with them. He accumulated enough money to buy land, and he has slowly acquired a great quantity of acreage. He is more wealthy than I am."

"But surely you cannot expect my sister to marry such a man. He is so--so common."

"He started from virtually nothing and built an enormous fortune. There is nothing common about that, Elizabeth. I personally find it admirable."

Elizabeth looked at him thoughtfully, obviously realizing from the tone of his voice that he was quite serious. "He means a great deal to you, doesn't he?"

"I told you, Elizabeth. He is my friend. And I can assure you he is not a savage, despite the years he spent in the wilderness. Won't you please give him a chance?"

Elizabeth looked solemnly up into his face for a long moment, then a faint smile touched her mouth. "I think highly of your judgment, Jonathan. You know that. If he means so much to

you, then he must be special. Of course I'll give him a chance." She shrugged, and her smile became rueful. "But I'm afraid I can't say the same for my sister."

Cordelia had spent the better part of the evening standing against the wall, watching an endless stream of swains dance with her younger sister. As she watched her sister gliding about the dance floor, she was approached by Alexander Blair, the last young man who had had the misfortune of attempting to court her. Blair was so very young that she found it difficult to take him seriously, and so extremely thin he reminded her of an egret. He had a face studded with pimples, and wispy, straw-colored hair that tonight was concealed under a massive wig that looked too heavy for his skinny neck. Awkward and young as he was, she felt an unwelcome flicker of compassion for him, despite the strong aversion she had for any man who sought her hand in marriage.

She thought she had effectively discouraged Blair's suit two months before by deliberately tripping him during a dance, making him a public laughingstock, and was annoyed when he dared not only to approach her, but also to request a dance. Fighting down her unwanted sympathy, she fixed him with what she hoped was a dark and forbidding glare.

"I don't dance with scarecrows, Mr. Blair."

Alexander turned bright red and stammered out an apology, turning blindly away and fleeing from her as if she had waved a pistol at him. Firmly squelching her feelings of remorse, Cordelia watched him go. She had the distinct impression that Alexander was even more terrified of her than most of her suitors were, and she wondered why he had dared to approach her a second time.

"What a crushing setback. Though now that you remark on it, young Blair does bear an astonishing resemblance to a scarecrow. Odd that I never noticed before."

At the sound of the well-remembered deep voice, vibrant with suppressed laughter, Cordelia looked up in surprise at the sight of Gwaltney Harris standing next to her.

He had come back despite everything she had said to him. One had to give the man credit for his persistence, if nothing else, she thought.

"I wondered if you cared to dance. Might I hope that you would prefer me to a scarecrow?" he inquired as politely as though they enjoyed a proper conversation the last time they had met. As though she had not cast every aspersion upon his character she could think of.

Cordelia looked at him thoughtfully. He was clad in immaculate, expensive evening clothes--a midnight blue, ornately embroidered satin French frock coat and matching waistcoat, spotless white shirt with lace cravat, and blue knee breeches that clung to his heavily muscled thighs. He was not wearing a wig, which was odd for a man struggling to climb the social ladder. Yet he looked respectable enough, even, she had to admit grudgingly, handsome. And the sight of that startlingly handsome face had such a sensual effect on her that she decided to treat him even more rudely than the usual male.

This man was dangerous.

"No," she said shortly. "I wouldn't, actually."

Rather than looking irritated, Gwaltney grinned, casually leaning one shoulder on the blue wallpaper next to her and standing closer than she would have liked. She could smell his masculine odor--brandy, horses, and some indefinable scent, probably some herbal essence from the soap he used.

It was, she decided, safest to ignore him.

Gwaltney did not take the hint and walk away as a gentleman should have. He seemed perfectly content to be ignored. Cordelia looked away from him and watched her sister flitting across the dance floor with ill-concealed envy. Elizabeth looked so lovely, clad in her blue gown that clung to her torso and belled out over her hips, emphasizing her feminine curves. Cordelia was painfully aware that the dreadful violet gown utterly concealed every charm she possessed. There were times when she wanted new ball gowns in brilliant colors, and swarms of eligible men to cluster about her, and to wear her hair--

“Are you certain?”

Startled, Cordelia looked up into Gwaltney’s hazel eyes. He was bending over her, and his face was closer than she had expected. His eyes, she was amazed to discover, were beautiful--a startling shade of golden topaz, and framed by long, dark lashes that any woman would envy. She felt the blood rushing to her cheeks. “I ... I beg your pardon?”

“Are you certain you don’t wish to dance?” he clarified politely.

Flustered, Cordelia realized that the longing she felt, the unspinsterish desire to dance and be courted, had been plainly written on her face. And what was worse, her toes had unconsciously been tapping to the rhythm of the dance.

“Absolutely certain. At least, I don’t wish to dance with *you*.”

She had the satisfaction of seeing the warmth of his amused smile dim a degree or two. “Indeed,” he returned. “Yet I seem to be the only man who has asked you. And you did seem to want to dance.” His laughing gaze dropped toward her feet, and she realized with mortification that he had noticed her tapping toes.

Gwaltney Harris saw entirely too much.

“If I dance with you,” she said, remembering her promise to her father and her plan to get rid of Harris once and for all, “will you leave me alone?”

“Of course. For the rest of the evening, that is.”

Cordelia took his proffered arm and permitted him to lead her out onto the dance floor, not in the least concerned that he would bother her again after tonight.

Some time later, Gwaltney led Cordelia off the dance floor with ill-concealed relief. In her apparent determination to get rid of him, to give him a disgust of her, she had pretended a spectacular incompetence at dancing. At first, when she had trod on his toes, he had assumed she was clumsy due to her years as a spinster--years during which, he gathered, few men had dared to dance with her for fear of her slashing tongue. But when she danced the wrong way and collided with another young lady he had become suspicious. And when she managed to collide with Governor Fauquier himself, all but knocking him over, his suspicions had been confirmed. Nobody could be *that* poor a dancer.

Nevertheless, he was glad the ordeal was over. Cordelia was plainly determined to get rid of him. Her acidic words had not succeeded in driving him away, so she had cleverly tried another tack.

He eyed her ensemble with thinly veiled amusement. Clearly she had dressed with the intention of impressing him--but she had wanted the impression to be a bad one. He had never seen such a hideous gown. It was a stunningly ugly shade of violet. She had not powdered her hair or face--in fact, it appeared she had never heard of makeup at all.

Either Cordelia had astoundingly poor taste, or she was simply grimly determined to drive away her suitors. He rather believed it was the latter. He was beginning to suspect that behind the

plain facade, the spectacles, and the dowdy gowns hid a clever and obstinate young woman.

Fortunately the ballroom, housed in a wing recently added to the back of the Governor's mansion, was large enough that he did not feel his usual sense of panic from being indoors. The crush of people did not bother him--it was only walls that caused him anxiety. And the walls in this enormous chamber were set far apart. Even so, he thought a walk in the gardens behind the house would be pleasant. The chamber was unpleasantly warm, and the odor of unwashed bodies was rather overpowering, despite the fragrant scent given off by the bayberry and beeswax candles that lighted the room.

"Would you care to step outside?" he asked politely.

"And spend more time in your company? I think not, Mr. Harris."

"I simply thought you might be a little overheated, due to your exertions on the dance floor."

"Not at all," Cordelia said shortly.

"As you wish," Gwaltney said, bowing politely and leaving her. He noticed her expression of unflattering relief and grinned to himself. She still hadn't realized how persistent he could be when he put his mind to something.

But she would.

Overheated was a vast understatement, Cordelia thought, wishing she had a fan. She didn't carry one, not caring for the coquettish air they gave her. She was aware that her cheeks were red with exertion, and she was concerned that the unaccustomed brilliance of her complexion might be--well, *attractive*. Certainly Harris seemed to find her less than revolting. She had certainly had a difficult time ridding herself of him.

She wasn't certain, however, whether the warmth that flooded her cheeks had resulted from the heat of the room or from Gwaltney's nearness.

As Gwaltney's wide shoulders disappeared into the crowd, she made a beeline for the doors leading to the garden. She *was* overly warm, and besides, she loved the Governor's gardens and never failed to step outside to see them when she attended a ball here. After all, she thought ruefully, she was never terribly occupied with dancing.

The Governor had the most spectacular property in Williamsburg. Aside from the formal gardens, the boxwood maze, and the canal, he had a park that encompassed over sixty acres, and the view across acres of manicured lawns was stunning. In the daytime one could often see deer here.

In her customary unladylike manner, she leaned against a tree and looked out over the moon-silvered landscape, her thoughts elsewhere. A bass voice made her jump.

"And you said you didn't want to come out to the garden."

Cordelia whirled, knowing even before she did so that she would find Gwaltney Harris standing behind her. "I said I didn't want to come out to the garden with *you*!" she retorted. Couldn't the man take no for an answer?

Gwaltney placed his hand over his heart. "I am mortally wounded, Mistress Ashton. To think that you prefer solitude to my company. Or could it be you are waiting for someone else?"

Cordelia sputtered with indignation at the implications of his question. "You can't believe I have an ... an assignation!"

"Not really," Gwaltney said, looking over her horrid violet gown with that insulting grin she was growing to know and loathe. The amused contempt in his gaze made her grind her teeth

together.

“You promised to leave me alone if I danced with you,” she reminded him.

The corners of his mouth quirked upward. “I lied.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sakes, do go away and leave me alone!” she snapped.

He looked at her thoughtfully for a long moment. “Tell me, Mistress Ashton, why are you so very determined to remain a spinster?”

Cordelia blinked at the sudden change of subject. “Spinsterhood holds no particular attraction for me,” she lied. “It is simply that no man has interested me.”

“Please,” Gwaltney said. “Surely you do not expect me to believe that you are incapable of being polite. You are a clever young woman, Mistress Ashton. If you saw an advantage to mouthing the usual polite inanities, I am certain you would do so. But I believe you have decided there is an advantage to being a shrew instead. For some reason you *want* to be a spinster.”

For once Cordelia’s sharp tongue failed her. It was galling to realize this man could read her so clearly. Her father, who had never known of the heartbreak she had suffered because of James Spencer’s betrayal, thought she had become embittered when her mother died. Her suitors supposed she was merely a shrew by nature. Yet this man had come to understand her vulnerability, her secret fears, in only three meetings. It only confirmed her suspicions that he was dangerous.

That certainty became stronger when Gwaltney stepped closer--closer than any gentleman had a right to stand. Despite the sheer size of the man, his heavily muscled physique and imposing height, he moved with a smooth feline grace, a feral elegance that she found at once disturbing and compelling. Feeling like a deer pinned by the watchful eyes of a cougar, she forced herself to stand her ground.

“Perhaps,” he said softly, “you simply haven’t had anyone demonstrate the benefits of marriage.” His broad, powerful hand lifted, his knuckles gently brushing across her cheekbone. His deep rumbling voice lowered until it became a velvet whisper, dark and rich with mysterious promise. “Or courtship.”

Cordelia resisted the urge to take a step backward. She had never had a man look at her with that peculiar expression, or heard a man’s voice grow hoarse in that odd way, but she knew well enough what it meant. Her body, at least, understood. She felt a shivering impulse deep within her, an almost irresistible pull toward Gwaltney, toward his hard, muscular body and his beautiful, magnetic eyes.

Warning bells clanged in her head. If she couldn’t get rid of the man--and quickly--he was going to kiss her.

And she had the oddest sensation that she might permit it.

That had to be avoided at all costs. Hastily, she stepped back, away from his caressing hand. The nerve of the man, she thought angrily, stroking her as if she was a horse to be gentled! “Perhaps you would like to see the rest of the gardens,” she suggested quickly.

Gwaltney paused and regarded her with an eyebrow raised, obviously suspicious at her sudden capitulation. “A moment ago you were desperate to get rid of me.”

Cordelia managed to paste a smile onto her mouth. “Perhaps I was wrong.”

Gwaltney’s skeptical expression made it clear how likely he thought that possibility was. “Of course,” he agreed with ungentlemanly sarcasm. “And suddenly you have been smitten by the desire to spend more time in my company. Tell me, Mistress Ashton, what are you planning? To murder me and dispose of my body in the Governor’s park?”

Cordelia swallowed a horrified giggle. "A tempting thought."

Gwaltney studied her for a long moment. "I suppose I'll risk it," he said at last. "I don't see how you could be concealing a pistol."

"I am not." Cordelia led the way across the formal garden.

"You hardly need one," Gwaltney remarked as he fell into step beside her. "That tongue of yours is a deadly weapon."

"Do you always lavish these sorts of compliments on women?"

"I am always honest."

"Small wonder that you are still unmarried."

Gwaltney gave a short, humorless laugh. "And you, Mistress Ashton? Have you amassed your vast quantity of admirers by showering them with empty flattery?"

"Like you, I prefer to be honest."

"Even though it costs you a husband?"

"The simple fact is that I have not yet found a man I could bear to be married to."

"Really? And yet I thought I was the perfect candidate. I'm crushed."

She uttered a sound that sounded very much like a muffled giggle. Glancing covertly at her, Gwaltney saw her eyes shimmering with amusement. He studied her for a few long moments as he walked beside her, perplexed by this unexpected glimpse of her true personality.

Cordelia paused and looked out over the vista. Following her gaze, Gwaltney saw they had walked down the terraced steps leading away from the mansion and stood on the rather steep bank of the canal. Not far away, a footbridge in the Chinese style arched gracefully across the water. It was a lovely setting--quite likely the most romantic area in the entire formal garden.

Why the hell had she brought him here?

He eyed her warily, but her attention seemed to be caught by their surroundings. "It's beautiful here," he commented, probing for information. This hardly seemed like the sort of place a woman bent on preserving her virtue at all costs would bring a man she disliked. It made no sense, none at all. He resolved to be cautious.

"I like it," she said with a little sigh. "Every time I come to the Governor's mansion, I always like to come see the canal."

Gwaltney reached out and gently caressed her tightly bound hair. "It's lovely," he said, permitting his voice to drop into a lower register, "but not as lovely as you."

Cordelia turned her head and stared at him for a long moment, then, to his surprise, she burst out laughing. "Oh, please," she sputtered. "Surely you can do better than that."

"I beg your pardon?" Gwaltney said blankly, so baffled by this unexpected reaction that he dropped his hand with a touch of embarrassment. It was true he was somewhat unaccustomed to giving women compliments, but he had never had one go into a fit of the giggles before.

"And you said you were always honest!" she hooted, laughing harder.

"I try to be," Gwaltney said stiffly.

"Then you should try harder. Lovely!" She giggled again, then got her laughter under control. "Next I suppose you'll be telling me that my eyes are the blue of the summer sky, that my hair is as smooth as silk, and that my skin is as pale and flawless as marble."

Gwaltney grinned reluctantly, aware that his attempt at a compliment had been transparently insincere. The truth was he had scarcely given a thought to her appearance. In fact, he hadn't had the faintest idea what color her eyes were until this moment. "How unfortunate that you have foreseen all my compliments, Mistress Ashton. Although I believe I should have

likened your skin to alabaster rather than marble.”

“You will forgive me if I say I believe you are less than honest, Mr. Harris.”

“Perhaps I was,” Gwaltney admitted. “The truth is that I am not certain what to say to you. I am, quite frankly, unaccustomed to wooing well-bred young ladies.”

Cordelia heard the insecurity in his tone, and it affected her in a way his compliments had not. He was only masquerading as a gentleman, and thus was most likely unsure of the correct way to behave in any given situation. She could not help but feel sympathy for him.

She did her best to harden her heart against him, reminding herself that all he wanted was a wife. Any well-bred woman would do. In that respect, he was very much like the man who had broken her heart years ago.

That thought made her voice tarter than she had intended. “I suppose in the past you have wooed women with money rather than compliments.”

“If by that you mean that I have spent my time with whores rather than ladies, you are correct. Given the choice, I find that I rather prefer whores. They don’t refuse to associate with a man due to his lack of breeding.”

Cordelia felt her cheeks pinken at his blunt words. “But surely I am not the first woman you have actually courted.”

“No. There were two others. The first laughed in my face when I brought her a cup of punch at a rout. She told me she would rather die of thirst than accept it.”

“What about the second?”

“She fell into a swoon when I dared to approach her at a ball. Her father publicly threatened to kill me if I spoke to her again.”

She heard the stiff anger beneath his quiet tone and realized for the first time that despite his lack of breeding, Gwaltney Harris was an extremely proud man. The rejections he had suffered had obviously offended him deeply. It was, she thought, surprising that he would dare to try a third time.

“I see,” she said quietly.

“But I hasten to add that those young ladies were almost courteous compared to you, Mistress Ashton. I have never met a woman who can utter insults so glibly. You have a true gift for discourtesy, madam.”

Any sympathy she might have felt for him quickly dissipated. She glared at him. “Is that intended as a compliment?”

He shrugged. “As I recall, you did say you wanted me to be sincere.”

Cordelia scowled. She had momentarily allowed herself to be distracted by her sympathy for him, but his curt words made her recall the reason she had led him out here. She had a trap to bait. Doing her best to simulate tremulous shyness, she reached out and placed a hand on his arm. Beneath the satin of his coat sleeve, his muscles were hard and unyielding. “I never meant to be so unkind,” she said softly.

Gwaltney looked down at her with open cynicism. “Of course you didn’t,” he drawled. “No doubt when you called me excruciatingly dull, you meant it kindly.”

Cordelia winced. “I ... I didn’t realize other women had been so cruel to you,” she fabricated hastily. “Had I realized, I surely would have tried to treat you more kindly.”

“Nonsense,” Gwaltney said shortly. “Had you realized, you most likely would have studied their techniques.”

She managed to stifle the startled giggle that rose to her lips. “I’m not as awful as that,”

she protested.

“Indeed you are. In fact, you are the most singularly ill-natured young woman I have ever had the misfortune to encounter.”

“More compliments, Mr. Harris?”

“The simple truth, Mistress Ashton.”

Cordelia stared up at him. She knew she should feel relieved that he found her manners repulsive. It meant he would not be pursuing her any further. And yet, in some distant corner of her mind, she wished he didn’t despise her. She wondered what it would be like to be courted by a man like this, a thoroughly masculine, dangerously attractive man.

“I don’t want you to hate me,” she whispered, letting her eyelashes sweep down to conceal her eyes and tilting her face up. She was careful to keep her eyes slitted open. “Please say you don’t hate me.”

“Oddly enough, I don’t. Despite your childish ways, despite the manner in which you have repeatedly snubbed me, I still find you attractive. I can’t imagine why. It can’t be your looks.”

Cordelia bit back the annoyed reply that sprang automatically to her lips. “I’m glad to hear that,” she said softly. She swayed toward him, as if overcome by emotion, and waited.

And still he did not move. She squinted at him through slitted eyes, wondering what he was waiting for. Surely she had been obvious enough, leading him to a secluded part of the garden, screwing her eyes shut, and pursing her lips like a fish. She was behaving precisely like a giggling young ninny desperate to snare a husband. Surely he realized that he ought to kiss her.

Instead, he spoke. “What are you playing at, Cordelia?”

She jumped at his hard tone and opened her eyes. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re up to something. What is it?”

“I’m not up to anything!” she protested. “How can you be so suspicious?”

“I am not suspicious. Merely prudent.”

She hesitated a long moment. “I just wanted to kiss you,” she said in a soft voice. It was, she realized, closer to the truth than she would have liked.

There was a long silence. At last he said in a strangled whisper, “What?”

“I wanted to know what it would be like to kiss you,” she repeated softly.

She saw the bewilderment on his face. He stood silent for long moments, staring blankly at her, apparently at a complete loss for words. Something fiercely savage, something primal, abruptly ignited in the depths of his eyes, and he lowered his head, bending toward her swiftly.

She had been waiting for this and had maneuvered accordingly. Although she was tall for a woman, he was a good deal taller, and she stood beneath him on the bank. As he swooped toward her, he was bent over in a somewhat awkward position. For an instant, she felt like a rodent, cowering helplessly on the ground as a hawk dived swiftly toward her, and she had the wild and irrational notion that she should permit him to kiss her. But only for a moment.

She closed her eyes and swayed toward him as though swept away, completely transported by the mere notion of kissing him. And then, as his lips were only scant inches away, she ducked quickly to the side.

Caught utterly by surprise, Gwaltney pinwheeled for a long moment, then stumbled forward gracelessly. She planted both hands firmly against his back, sending him head over heels. He tumbled down the bank into the canal with a resounding splash.

She heard him sputtering and heard muffled curses as she stepped forward and looked

down the steep bank at him.

"Oh, dear, Mr. Harris, how unfortunate," she cooed. "I believe you've spoiled your good clothes."

"Goddamn it!"

"No doubt," she went on, "you'd be more comfortable in buckskin anyway. Those clothes you're wearing are, after all, suitable for a gentleman--not for you."

Shaking his wet head like a wolf, and continuing to spew furious oaths, Gwaltney started to rise to his feet in what seemed to her an ominous fashion. Motivated by a sudden instinct for self-preservation--an instinct that had obviously been dormant until a moment ago--Cordelia lifted her skirts and sprinted back toward the mansion.

She did not stop until she reached the safety of the ballroom. And then, ignoring the curious looks that were cast in her direction, she allowed herself to collapse into a fit of giggles.

Hidden behind the trailing branches of a willow, Alexander Blair watched the scene at the canal with grim amusement. He grinned maliciously at the sight of Gwaltney Harris struggling from the canal, his immaculate evening garb utterly ruined. It was pleasant to watch the sharp-tongued Cordelia Ashton turn her vicious tongue on another suitor for a change. It salved his wounded ego a bit to realize she treated *all* men with scornful contempt.

And yet he would have given anything to have won Cordelia's hand in marriage. When his father had died last year, he had become ambitious and hungry for land. Since primogeniture was not the rule in the colonies, his father had divided the family land among Alexander and his five sisters, which had, not surprisingly, watered down the estate alarmingly. His holdings were adequate, and the soil was quite fertile, but tobacco destroyed soil at an alarming rate, and he wanted more land. He *needed* more land.

It was widely known that Cordelia's dowry was a large quantity of the best Ashton land--and of course, when her father died she would inherit still more. This made her an excellent catch--the best he was likely to get. He was morosely aware that most beautiful women, such as the younger Ashton sister, were unlikely to give him a second look, nor did their ambitious parents seem willing to take him seriously. But Cordelia was skinny, unattractive, and shrewish. She should have been grateful for his suit.

But she had most definitely not been grateful.

Two months ago, he had foolishly allowed Cordelia's rudeness to frighten him off and forget his ambition altogether. But he had steeled himself to pursue her again. And having made that decision, he was not at all happy to see that he had competition, in the form of a man he particularly detested.

He watched Gwaltney head back toward the mansion, dripping wet and utterly bedraggled, and scowled deeply. Harris would be sorry for daring to interfere with his courtship of Cordelia Ashton. He would see to it.

Alexander turned toward the house himself, only to collide with a woman who had been standing near him, watching him as he watched Harris. He stepped back in surprise. "I ... I beg your p-pardon," he stammered.

The woman looked up at him. She was clad in a startlingly low-cut gown of crimson silk, and, oddly for a woman of obvious means, her dark hair was not powdered. But most peculiar of all, she was wearing a black silk mask, covering the upper half of her face, of the sort that ladies wore to protect their pale skin from the sun. He had never seen a woman wear such a mask at

night before. It gave her an oddly mysterious look while at the same time emphasizing her bow-shaped red lips and the delicacy of her jaw. He would have gambled his last coin that beneath the mask she was beautiful.

"Not at all," she said in a low, intimate voice. "My fault, I'm afraid. I must confess I've been standing here watching you."

"Me?" To his embarrassment, his voice came out as a squeak. The idea that a beautiful woman would lurk in the gardens, staring at him, was ludicrous ... and yet tremendously flattering.

"Yes, you. Alexander Blair, is it not?"

To his mingled alarm and pleasure, she took a step closer to him. He could smell her cologne, which smelled like an exotic flower, and the scent caused his pulse to leap. "Y-yes," he managed. "And you?"

She waved a graceful, dismissive hand, managing to convey that her identity was of no importance whatsoever. "I've been watching you all night."

Her voice was low and husky. She managed to sound as though she had just rolled out of bed--which, given the immaculate state of her gown and hair, was impossible. But it was nevertheless a titillating thought. Alexander felt himself harden as she took another step nearer. She stopped so close that he could feel the erotic sensation of her satin skirts brushing his thighs.

"I may as well be blunt," she whispered, so softly that he had to bend to hear her. Her warm breath caressed his cheek. "I am seeking a protector."

That at least explained why she was wearing a mask--she had not been invited to the Governor's ball. She must have sneaked onto the grounds. Alexander swallowed noisily. Good God, this woman--this beautiful, exciting woman--was offering to be his mistress! His mind immediately filled with images of ripping the satin fabric from her breasts and exposing her nipples, her waist, her....

He forced himself to think more practically.

"I'm terribly flattered," he murmured, "b-but surely a woman such as you already has a protector."

"I have just arrived from Boston. My lover died, and I chose to come here to start a new life. To find a man like you."

"I ... I would be delighted to accept your offer, but the fact is...." He had so little experience with women. Surely this stunning, worldly woman would mock him for his inexperience. "I am awkward with women, madam. I ... I greatly fear you would not find me to your...." He paused uncomfortably, then forged on despite his embarrassment. "Satisfaction."

"I believe you will meet my requirements."

She boldly caressed him through the silk cloth of his knee breeches, and Alexander drew in his breath sharply. It did not, he supposed, require a woman of great sophistication and worldly knowledge to see that he was fully aroused. Already he was straining against the fabric. "I require little," she whispered as her fingers explored him. "A place to live, a few gowns...."

Alexander stared down at her dubiously. It would not take too many gowns of that quality to beggar him. Her last protector must have been incredibly rich.

Why the hell did she want *him*?

"Let me convince you," she whispered throatily.

Falling gracefully to her knees, she unbuttoned his silk breeches, exposing his achingly hard erection to the warm summer breezes. And to her fingers. And her probing, talented tongue.

Alexander buried his hands in her dark mane of hair and succumbed, moaning and sobbing, to ecstasy.

He was convinced.

Chapter 5

The next morning Gwaltney walked into his stable. There was a welcoming nicker from Mist, his big gray stallion, and the horse thrust his head eagerly over the half door of his stall. Gwaltney stroked the velvet muzzle with affection, then opened the door, clipped a lead to the horse's halter, and led Mist out to be saddled. Of course he had stable boys and grooms, but in accordance with Gwaltney's rather unorthodox ideas about the best way to train a horse, he had always handled Mist himself.

He put the saddle on the stallion's broad back, then began to tighten the girth. Abruptly he paused, staring in surprise at the girth.

It was cut nearly in two. No doubt it would have held at a walk or a sedate canter, but the moment strain was put on the leather--say, when he took Mist over a fallen log or other obstacle in the forest--the girth would have given way, and he would have been thrown to the ground.

And injured, or possibly killed.

Gwaltney stared at the cut leather for a long time, wondering. There was no question in his mind that it had been cut. It was more than obvious that this was not simple wear and tear--it had been slashed with a knife. It was fortunate indeed that he saddled his own horse. Such damage to the girth might well have escaped the notice of an inattentive slave.

But who in the world would want to hurt him?

As far as he knew, the only enemy he'd ever had was dead. Of course, the planters in the area all despised him, but they also considered him to be beneath their notice. None of them would have troubled themselves to cause him intentional harm.

So who would do such a thing?

And why?

That morning Cordelia leaned on a worm fence, her elbows resting on the top rail. Her habit of leaning her elbows on rough-hewn wooden fences meant that the ruffles in the sleeves of her gowns invariably looked threadbare, and Elizabeth chastised her for it at least once a week. It was another of the unladylike mannerisms she had cultivated for so long that she would probably never be able to change.

Today she was supervising slaves who were clearing a field. Some time ago a girdle of bark had been stripped from each and every tree, killing the trees. The dead trunks were then removed by burning. Today the stumps were being pulled up and removed by teams of red Devonshire oxen. Even the most powerful draft horses were not strong enough for this kind of work, which was the reason most planters kept oxen to work the fields rather than horses. In Virginia, horses were used for riding, hunting, and pulling carriages, not heavy labor.

Her conscious mind was occupied with supervising the slaves, but her conquest of Gwaltney Harris the night before kept flashing through her mind, making her smile with satisfaction. She had been confident she had vanquished him, yet she was not terribly surprised when she heard his voice behind her. She turned and pinned him with a scornful glare.

"Surely even the dullest intellect could discern by now that I have no interest in you whatsoever."

"Obviously I am remarkably dull," Gwaltney said calmly, leaning on the fence next to her. It seemed he had no more care for his satin coat sleeves than she had for her lace ruffles.

"Amazingly so," she agreed, resisting the urge to sidle away from him. She refused to let him intimidate her. "What do you want?"

"What I want," Gwaltney said, looking her over with a glint of annoyance, "is to throw you in the river." At her alarmed expression, he grinned and added, "But I will settle for a brief chat."

"I do *not* want to talk to you."

"Ah. You prefer to be thrown in the river, then?"

Cordelia gave him a wary look, seeing that the beautiful gray stallion was standing placidly behind his master. Unbidden, a vision of herself being thrown over the saddle like a sack of wheat and carried down to the river to be tossed in flashed into her mind.

Damn the man. He just might do it.

And she had to admit that she would deserve it.

Prodded by that unfortunate instinct for self-preservation that had surfaced last night, she said sullenly, "Very well. What is it you wish to discuss?"

"Nothing in particular. I simply longed for the pleasure of your company." He nodded in the direction of the field, changing the subject before she was able to decide whether he was being sarcastic or serious. "Will you be planting wheat next spring?"

"Corn."

Gwaltney watched the powerful team of oxen for a long moment as they exerted their enormous muscles, yanking a stump forcibly from the field. "Do you know," he said thoughtfully, "three years ago I wouldn't have had the foggiest notion what you might be planting. The first time I decided to plant tobacco I had my slaves clear the field entirely. I had no idea I should leave the stumps in place."

Because tobacco was a crop that ruined the land rapidly, wearing out the soil in no more than three years, planters left the stumps in place and planted the tobacco in hills between the stumps. It made for an unattractive, rather messy-looking field, but it was necessary, for as the stumps decayed, they released minerals into the ground, thus keeping the soil fertile longer.

"Indeed," Cordelia said coolly. "I've known that since I was ten years old."

"Yes, I gather you know a good deal about planting. Tell me, Mistress Ashton, why are you out here supervising your slaves? Shouldn't that task fall to your father?"

Cordelia whipped her head about, fixing him with a withering glare. "I don't believe that's your concern."

"Simple curiosity, my dear. It is rare one meets a young lady who knows sweet-scented tobacco from Orinoco. It is hardly the sort of thing ladies consider an accomplishment. Your father's tobacco is well-regarded, and I'm certain he must do the great majority of the supervision, yet your presence here leaves me puzzled. Surely your father does not trust you to do men's work?"

Stung by his irritating masculine condescension, Cordelia reacted without thought. He already thought she was no lady, so why should she not give him a further disgust of her? Perhaps then he would leave her alone and forget his ridiculous determination to court her. "Men's work!" she repeated scathingly. "For your information, my dear Mr. Harris, I do virtually all of the supervision on this plantation. I decide when tobacco should be planted, when it should be picked and cured, and I keep the books. My father...."

She hesitated, aware that she had said too much. It was one thing to expose one's self as less than feminine in order to drive off an unwanted suitor, quite another to expose her father to ridicule and gossip because of his unfortunate lack of talent as a planter.

"Your father, I gather, is not much of a planter."

Cordelia sighed, knowing she'd already said more than she should have. There was little point in keeping her silence now. "No," she admitted frankly. "He inherited this quarter from his father, who had run it most profitably. But he ... he did not have the patience or the talent to grow tobacco well. My mother did much of the work, and she taught me everything she knew. When she died, I took over the supervision of the plantation."

Gwaltney nodded thoughtfully, eyeing the proud tilt of her chin and the militant gleam of her eyes behind the spectacles as he absorbed this information. Perhaps Cordelia was not the selfish shrew he had thought. It was entirely possible that she worked to protect her father, his land, and his money. He suspected she worked so that her beautiful sister could live well and choose a suitable husband from among her many suitors.

In all likelihood, Cordelia was not the cold, embittered old maid she appeared to be, but simply a headstrong and determined young woman. For the first time he felt reluctant respect welling up, respect for the stubborn pride and cool logic that had chosen the well-being of her family over her own happiness, respect for the enormous sacrifice she had made.

"I believe I will be going now," he said, unaware his silence had lasted a long time. He swung up into the saddle and looked down at her. "I enjoyed our chat, Mistress Ashton. Perhaps I will see you again soon."

"I certainly hope not," Cordelia said sweetly.

Gwaltney kicked his stallion into a canter and rode hastily away before she could see his laughter. Somehow he suspected it would not aid his cause if Cordelia were to see that he found her amusing.

"He *laughed* at me," Cordelia said with fury later that afternoon. She was having tea with her sister, but she was not drinking. Her fingers were clenched around the blue-and-white cup so fiercely that Elizabeth feared for her good porcelain. It had been imported from China, as much of the porcelain in the colony was, and Elizabeth cherished it as a link to their dead mother.

"Have a piece of cornbread," she suggested gently, offering a silver salver to her sister.

Cordelia ignored her. If anything, her fingers tightened on the porcelain. Elizabeth cringed, expecting to hear the delicate cup shatter at any moment. "He laughed at me," she repeated acrimoniously. "He tried to conceal it, but I saw it. I suppose he thinks less of me now simply because he knows I do much of the supervision of the tobacco fields. Well, who does he think he is to cast aspersions on me? He is nothing but a longhunter, a...."

Elizabeth spoke quietly. "I didn't gather from what you said that he cast any sort of aspersion on you. Did he say anything of the kind?"

"He laughed at me," Cordelia repeated for the third time. "That lower-class, manure-

stained, illiterate--”

“Cordelia!” Elizabeth interrupted, aghast and more than a little surprised. She had never seen her sister so annoyed.

Gwaltney Harris seemed to have struck some sort of nerve.

Cordelia seemed to come to herself. She loosened her grip on the china cup and actually took a sip of the tea. She grimaced at finding that it was cold. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth,” she said contritely. “I didn’t mean to sound so....”

“I believe the word you are searching for,” Elizabeth said primly, “is childish. Small wonder he thinks you’re childish, Cordelia, when you indulge in such dreadful language.”

Cordelia smiled fondly at her sister. “Yes, Elizabeth,” she murmured meekly. “I shall endeavor to be more worthy of the family name. I apologize for any unladylike conduct I may have been guilty of.”

Elizabeth scowled at her, clearly aware she was being mocked, then she snatched a piece of cornbread from the salver and threw it at Cordelia’s head. Shrieking with laughter, Cordelia covered her head and tried to protect herself as her sister pelted her with cornbread. In a few moments, there was a full-fledged cornbread battle being waged.

At last, giggling, the combatants called a halt to the war--more because the cornbread was scattered out of reach than because of any recollection of their age and dignity. Brushing crumbs from her golden curls, Elizabeth looked ruefully around the formerly immaculate parlor. “I suppose we should call a slave in here to clean this up.”

Cordelia nibbled thoughtfully at a small piece of cornbread she had found in her lap. “Mother always made us clean up after ourselves when this happened.”

Smiling at the shared memory, the two got down on their hands and knees to pick up the demolished slices of cornbread.

“I’m pleased to see you are in a better mood,” Elizabeth remarked as she piled the crumbling pieces of bread onto the silver salver. “I must be honest; I was surprised Mr. Harris managed to make you so very angry.”

“I was not angry. Merely irritated.”

“Don’t be absurd, Cordelia. You were furious.”

Cordelia sat back on her heels as she considered her sister’s words. “You’re right,” she said at last in a surprised tone. “But I have no idea why. After all, that man is scarcely worthy of my notice. I have no business permitting him to irritate me.”

“Is it possible you are coming to feel something for him?” Elizabeth inquired gently.

Cordelia nodded slowly. “Yes,” she admitted softly. “It is.”

“I thought so,” Elizabeth said with triumph.

Cordelia smothered a smile. Her sister was a confirmed romantic who suspected love lurked everywhere, even within the hardened heart of a determined spinster. “What I feel for him,” Cordelia said, “is total and complete disgust. He is nothing more than a longhunter who is utterly beneath my notice.”

“Oh.”

Cordelia slanted her an amused look. “Elizabeth, you almost sound disappointed.”

“Oh, no, not at all,” Elizabeth said hastily. “It’s just that ... well, Cordelia, it’s been so many years since you’ve been in love with a man.”

Cordelia scowled at the reference to her ill-fated romance. “I don’t plan on falling in love ever again,” she said curtly. “Particularly not with Gwaltney Harris.”

“I think perhaps you’ve gotten the wrong impression of Mr. Harris,” Elizabeth went on earnestly. “Jonathan is a close friend of Mr. Harris. And he likes him. He actually says that Mr. Harris is a very nice man.”

“Obviously he is referring to some other Mr. Harris.”

“No, no. They are friends, Cordelia.”

“Well, it pains me to say it, but Jonathan is wrong. Mr. Harris is most decidedly not a nice man. Do you know that he rode onto our property to visit with me without Father’s approval?”

Elizabeth stared at her in horror. “Oh, no, that cannot be! Surely you misunderstood him.”

“Hardly. He has done it twice now. I am beginning to feel that he is spying on me. Today he found me at the tobacco fields, and a few days ago he found me drawing at the old oak tree near the river. Wherever I go on the plantation, he is certain to appear.”

“Father would be horrified!”

“Don’t tell Father, please,” Cordelia said hastily. She was well aware that she should have told her father of Gwaltney’s behavior herself, but for reasons unclear to her, she had chosen not to. Perhaps she felt she could handle the situation herself, she thought uneasily. Or perhaps, in some secret corner of her heart, she actually looked forward to his visits.

No. That was impossible.

“But Cordelia--”

“Please, Elizabeth. I can handle the man myself. Surely you know better than to imagine I might permit him to take liberties.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth agreed readily. She knew better than anyone how deep Cordelia’s aversion to marriage ran and how hard Cordelia had struggled to avoid it. “But it is not you I am concerned about. It is Mr. Harris.”

Cordelia waved an unconcerned hand. “Don’t concern yourself, Beth. I assure you, I will take care of him.”

But she spoke with a good deal more assurance than she felt.

Chapter 6

“Jonathan, we simply must talk.”

Jonathan Powell manfully concealed his sigh. He frequently rode over to the Ashton residence to see the young lady who had captured his heart, and of late all she ever wanted to discuss was her sister’s unmarried state. He understood her concern for her sister--indeed, he even honored her for it--but it was exasperating to want to whisper words of love into her ear and be forced to hear about her sister’s latest escapade instead.

“Of course, my dear,” he said. “What is it you wish to discuss?”

Elizabeth fixed him with wide, appealing sky blue eyes. “Gwaltney Harris. I know he is a friend of yours, Jonathan, but....” She paused, then burst out distractedly, “He simply does not comport himself as a gentleman should!”

Jonathan suppressed a grin. To Elizabeth, there was little in the world more important than comporting oneself like a lady or a gentleman. She spoke with the same horror she might have used were she informing him that Gwaltney Harris was a murderer or a thief. He supposed he should be glad he was going to win a young lady of such unwavering propriety, but at times it could be just a bit trying.

"Perhaps he does not always behave precisely like those of us who were born to this life," he suggested, "but his intentions are good, I assure you."

"No, they are not! Do you realize that he has been riding onto this plantation to visit my sister *without* my father's knowledge?"

Of course, Jonathan almost said, but he caught himself in time. Clearly this breach of propriety had offended Elizabeth more than he had foreseen. He had imagined she was so eager to see her sister married that she would overlook such niceties, but evidently he had been wrong.

"But my dear," he said in his most reasonable tone, "surely you realize that your sister would never permit any ... unchivalrous behavior." He forbore to remark that he pitied any man who so much as attempted unchivalrous behavior where Cordelia Ashton was concerned. The young lady was more than able to protect her person and her reputation, of that he was certain. He added, "And Gwaltney can be trusted, I assure you."

"Surely you realize that no man can be trusted in such a situation."

Jonathan affected a hurt look. "Do you not trust *me*, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth's anxious expression melted into a smile as she looked at him fondly. "You are an exception, of course," she said softly. "Never before have I met a man as considerate and restrained as you are. You are a true gentleman, Jonathan."

Looking down into her beautiful, trusting face, Jonathan wondered if she realized that he was a man, just like any other man, and that there were times when he indulged in fantasies that would have horrified her, had she been privy to them. There were times when it was all he could do to press a chaste peck to her cheek or forehead rather than claiming her lips in a long, sweet, fierce kiss. There were times when he wanted to....

This was no time for his lustful fantasies, he thought as he realized Elizabeth was still looking at him expectantly. "Thank you," he said humbly, aware that he was not half the gentleman she imagined--not with those erotic images that plagued him. Well, damn it, he was a man, not a saint. And Elizabeth was an astoundingly beautiful woman. "And I assure you, Gwaltney will do your sister no harm."

"Nevertheless," Elizabeth said firmly, "I want you to speak to my father about it."

Jonathan blinked, startled. "You want me to speak to Mr. Ashton? But my dear, I have no authority to do so. I am not a member of the family, after all."

"I want you to speak to my father," Elizabeth repeated, with that steely firmness she so rarely displayed, "and make certain he is made aware of the situation. I do not object to Mr. Harris' suit of my sister, although I think you should know that she claims to dislike him, but I must insist that he court her properly."

"Perhaps if I were to speak to Gwaltney...."

"That will not do," Elizabeth said coolly. "Please speak to Father instead."

Jonathan looked at her in frustration, caught between his loyalty to his best friend and loyalty to the woman he loved and planned to marry. "Why don't you speak to him?"

"I promised Cordelia I would not," Elizabeth showed her lovely white teeth in a brief, oddly feline smile. "But I did not promise I would not tell you and ask you to intervene."

“Very well,” Jonathan said at last, aware that he was trapped. Perhaps, he thought, he could maneuver this situation to his advantage. It was just possible that something good could come of his conversation with Mr. Ashton. God knew Gwaltney would have his head if he knew he’d talked with Cordelia’s father—but there was no reason Gwaltney should find out, was there?

“Very well,” he repeated. “I shall talk to your father, my dear, and apprise him of the situation. Tell me, where have they been meeting?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “She says he has met her twice. Once in the fields and once in the woods near the old oak tree.”

Jonathan nodded. He knew the tree she referred to, a huge, spreading old tree near the river, deep in the woods. “That’s quite a distance from the house,” he observed.

Elizabeth hesitated, then confided, “That is precisely why I am concerned. Cordelia goes out to that spot in the woods almost every day. She went there again this afternoon. She said she refused to change her habits for Mr. Harris, but I suspect ... I suspect that in some corner of her heart she may actually enjoy meeting him.”

“You said she claims to dislike him.”

Elizabeth nodded. “She does, and quite emphatically. Perhaps a little too emphatically. He seems to have affected her in a way no other suitor has.”

“So you want me to ask your father to go into the woods and see if Gwaltney commits this nefarious deed again?”

The amused note in his voice completely escaped her. She looked agitated. “No, no! Don’t tell Father that she has gone into the woods, please. And certainly don’t tell him precisely where she is.”

Jonathan frowned. “I don’t understand, my dear. How can he correct the situation if he is not aware of the details?”

“I wouldn’t want him to....” Elizabeth blushed. “In case Cordelia is engaging in....” Her blush deepened.

“I see. You don’t wish him to catch your sister in untoward behavior, is that it?”

“I am confident Cordelia is behaving as a lady should,” Elizabeth said primly.

“But you would prefer to be certain.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Please, Jonathan. Don’t tell Father where they are meeting. He should be aware of it, but I feel it would be better if he discussed it with her at a later time.”

Jonathan took her hand and smiled down into her eyes. He admired her concern for her sister, her sense of loyalty and protectiveness. “You have my word on it, my dear.”

Elizabeth looked relieved. “Thank you, Jonathan. I knew you would not fail me.”

As she reached up and kissed him lightly on the cheek, Jonathan felt he had received all the reward he could possibly desire. And who knew, perhaps this was for the best anyway.

He was not betraying his friend by speaking to Benjamin Ashton. Far from it. He was simply moving things along the path Gwaltney had chosen more rapidly.

Surely Gwaltney would be grateful if he ever found out about his friend’s intervention.

And yet Jonathan could not help but hope that Gwaltney never found out.

“I hate to be the one to have to tell you this, sir,” Jonathan said a few minutes later. “If I did not feel that I was personally responsible for the situation, I assure you I would not have presumed to intervene.”

“Responsible?” Benjamin Ashton repeated. “How?”

Jonathan managed to paste a suitably contrite expression onto his features. "It was I who suggested to Gwaltney that Mistress Ashton might make him a suitable wife. I thought they might suit. I assure you, I never suspected they would suit so well. I never imagined Gwaltney would behave in such an ungentlemanly manner."

Ashton harrumphed as he stood up and walked restlessly across the chamber. "*I'm* not surprised," he said. "Harris is many things, and in many ways he is admirable, but he is no gentleman. Yet I am convinced he is the right man for my daughter. Unfortunately, Cordelia despises him. I assure you Cordelia has not been meeting him willingly. "

"I got this information from Elizabeth," Jonathan said. "Devoted to propriety as she is, she was horrified to learn that Cordelia has been deliberately meeting Gwaltney in the woods, away from prying eyes. Elizabeth was so concerned that she broke Cordelia's confidence in telling me. And, of course, I have broken her confidence, for she begged me to keep the matter secret. But when the situation is so very grave...."

"Of course, of course." Ashton patted Jonathan's shoulder awkwardly. "You did the right thing in coming to me, my boy. No doubt of that. Perhaps I've been lax in permitting Cordelia free run of the plantation for so many years, but I'm certain she's incapable of this sort of thing. Moreover, I firmly believe she hates Mr. Harris. Perhaps I'm a doting fool, but...."

"Not at all, sir," Jonathan said politely. "But a woman can despise a man and still find him, well, attractive, if you take my meaning."

"I suppose that's true, but I wouldn't have thought it of Cordelia." He hesitated and stared hard at Jonathan. "Is Elizabeth certain of this?"

Jonathan nodded.

"Perhaps," Benjamin said reflectively, "I should discuss this with Elizabeth. Find out exactly...."

"Please, don't, sir." At Ashton's surprised look, Jonathan said in a quick rush of invention, "Please, I've broken her confidence, sir. I promised her I would not speak of this to a living soul, and yet, after deliberation, I felt I had no choice but to tell you of the matter. If Elizabeth were to find out that I told you...."

"Yes. Yes, I can see that. You've placed yourself into an awkward situation for the good of my family, Jonathan, and I appreciate it." He sighed. "But to confront Cordelia on the basis of nothing more than hearsay--how can I accuse my daughter of such behavior with no proof?"

Jonathan took a deep breath. "Why don't you confirm it yourself, sir?"

"Eh?"

Jonathan resolutely squelched his conscience. True, he had promised Elizabeth he would keep Cordelia and Gwaltney's meeting place secret. But it was best, he told himself firmly, that Ashton know all the details. "Elizabeth tells me that Cordelia walks out to much the same place almost every day--the old oak near the river. Why don't you walk out there yourself and see if she is engaged in sketching, or ... or something else?"

"Good idea," Ashton said decisively. "I'll go see what she's up to."

Cordelia had been sketching for quite a long time when she looked up and saw, beyond the emerald canopy of the treetops, the dark clouds of a summer storm rising fiercely against the sky. At the same time she heard an ominous growl of thunder, and she jumped to her feet.

She had been very involved in sketching a redheaded woodpecker that had been pecking a tree, and the time had gotten away from her. She had not realized it was so late. What in the

world had she been thinking to sit out here in the woods for so long?

A jeering voice in her head suggested she had been waiting for Gwaltney, but she shook off that suggestion with disdain. Ridiculous thought! She could barely stand the man. Of course she had not been waiting for him.

But if that was the case, her traitorous mind suggested, why had she been sketching in the very same place where he had found her once before? It would have been so simple to find another place in the woods to sketch today.

"I refuse to change my life for him," she said out loud to the woodpecker. There was another snarling roll of thunder in the distance, and the woodpecker flew away, alarmed.

Picking up her ink, quill, and parchment, she walked hastily toward the house, glancing at the sky. It was a long walk back to the house, and it was more than evident she was going to get wet. She grumbled under her breath, annoyed at her own stupidity. And at that moment, a huge gray stallion ranged up alongside of her on the path.

"Ah," Gwaltney said, looking down at her from atop the stallion, "a damsel in distress. May I assist you, fair damsel?"

"Leave me alone," Cordelia snapped. Her temper was not improved by the thought that insinuated itself into her mind that if he had come earlier, when she expected him, she would not be in this fix.

Damn it, I was not waiting for him!

"It's a long walk back to your house. You'll be drenched."

"I should prefer to be drenched than to accept help from you."

Gwaltney dismounted and walked alongside of her, leading the stallion. "Then the least I can do is to get wet along with you."

"That's foolish. Why don't you ride back to your own plantation?"

"My plantation is a good distance from here. I suspect I will get wet no matter what. No, I thought I would visit with you properly today, in the parlor."

"My father would not admit you to the house if he knew you had been seeking me out in the woods!"

"But for some reason you have not told him, have you?" His voice softened to an intense whisper, becoming as smooth and dark as fine brandy. He paused and ran a caressing finger along her jaw.

Drawn to a helpless standstill by the deep, seductive tones of his voice, Cordelia came to a stop. He was standing less than a foot away from her, but for the first time she did not pull away from him. She could not have moved if she had wanted to. There was something magnetic about the man, something that made him nearly impossible to resist. And his touch sent odd, shimmering sensations through her.

Oh, God, she *had* been waiting for him.

She lifted her face and stared at him in bewilderment, her lips parting in unconscious invitation.

He seemed to sense her capitulation. Something feral glittered in his gaze as he looked down at her with a smoldering golden intensity in his eyes. "I think," he whispered, dropping the stallion's reins and putting his arms around her, "that our secret is safe for now."

His lips brushed over hers, as gently as the spring breeze caresses the trees. There was a loud clap of thunder, and in some distant corner of her mind she was aware that at any moment the heavens would open, soaking them both with summer rain. But she did not care. He was like

satin and steel--his lips tender and caressing, his arms hard and imprisoning. She discovered that she liked to be kissed. And then his mouth opened, and his tongue sought hers.

She knew she should recoil in shock at the dreadfully improper kiss. Before this moment, she had never realized that men kissed women in such an intimate fashion. And yet it seemed so right, so wickedly erotic, that she boldly touched her tongue to his and let him pull her yielding body closer to his. He felt powerfully muscular, broad, *solid*. A tide of desire, hot and liquid and overpowering, washed over her.

At her surrender, she heard a low resonant growl rumble from his chest. His tongue thrust more aggressively against hers, and his hands slipped down over her buttocks, pulling her hips against his, over and over again, in a wickedly slow rhythm that sent ripples of pleasure eddying through her. Something hard and hot thrust against her abdomen, and she pressed against it, driven by instinct and inexplicably pleased by the soft groan he uttered.

When he pulled his mouth away from hers, she almost cried out at the loss. She wanted the warmth of his mouth, his body, with a primitive desperation she had never known before. "Please," she whispered, scarcely aware she had spoken.

"Shh," he murmured, pressing his lips to her throat.

It was a new sensation, but undeniably a pleasant one. The slight roughness of his cheek brushed against her skin as his mouth seemed to find and linger over every sensitive spot with exquisite care. She realized vaguely that he was unhooking her bodice, but she found, rather to her surprise, that she did not care in the least.

And then his lips moved lower, and she caught frantically at his hair. "Gwaltney," she moaned. "Surely you shouldn't..."

"It's all right," he whispered harshly, and brushed his lips across her breast.

The intensity of the sensation took her breath away, and every protest she had intended to utter died instantly. A shaft of pure pleasure lanced through her, and a liquid warmth pooled between her legs. She twisted her fingers in his hair and eagerly, wantonly, pulled him closer.

And at that untimely moment, Benjamin Ashton stepped from the forest.

His eyes were wide with shock and horror. "Cordelia!" he whispered, and then, more loudly, "Cordelia! My God, child, have you no decency?"

The beautiful, extraordinary sensations faded away into shocking humiliation. She felt Gwaltney's arms loosen, and she blindly stumbled a few steps away from him, fumbling at her bodice awkwardly as she tried frantically to fasten the hooks.

The appalled look on her father's face slashed at her conscience. Gwaltney had been kissing her, doing things to her that no decent woman would have tolerated, and she had let him. God help her, she had virtually begged for more. Gwaltney had had his hands on her buttocks and his mouth on her breast, and in all likelihood her father had been a horrified witness to the entire episode. She felt a fiery blush heating her cheekbones and wished with desperate embarrassment that the rain would start.

"Father..." she began breathlessly. She wanted to make the entire situation go away, but she knew all too well it wouldn't. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't even lay the blame entirely at Gwaltney's feet. She had permitted it. She had kissed him like any common doxy willing to lift her skirts in exchange for a coin. "Father, I'm so *sorry*."

"And you!" Benjamin thundered, turning his gaze to Gwaltney, who lowered his eyes, looking for all the world like a schoolboy caught in a prank. "I gave you permission to court my daughter, and you dare to presume to ... to..."

“Sir,” Gwaltney began placatingly, “please don’t blame your daughter. The entire incident was my fault.”

Cordelia glanced at him, surprised. The last thing she had expected was for Gwaltney Harris to defend her.

“I forced myself on her,” Gwaltney continued resolutely. “I assure you that she was not a willing participant.”

Cordelia looked at him, unbelieving. Clearly he was gambling that her father had not seen the entire episode, which was, she realized, quite likely. Father would surely not have stood in the woods watching silently for several minutes. He would have intervened the moment Gwaltney kissed her.

“However,” Gwaltney went on, “despite what you may think, nothing of an ... intimate ... nature occurred. Your daughter is still....”

Ashton glared at him. “Unbroached, Mr. Harris?”

“Precisely,” Gwaltney agreed. He managed to look contrite, although Cordelia suspected it was an affectation. “Therefore, no real damage was done.”

“On the contrary, Mr. Harris, a good deal of damage has been done. If the gossips were ever to get wind of this....”

“I don’t see how that could happen,” Gwaltney said calmly. “We three are the only people who know about this.”

“And can I trust someone like you to keep such a secret?”

Cordelia saw anger flash deep in Gwaltney’s eyes, but he kept his temper and spoke evenly. “Of course you can.”

“I should have known better!” Ashton roared. “I should have known better than to let a man like you court my daughter.”

Cordelia saw Gwaltney flinch at the scorn in her father’s voice. For the first time she realized her father was truly furious--angry enough, perhaps, to do something rash like challenging Gwaltney to a duel, unless she intervened. Moreover, she found she did not care to remain silent while Gwaltney lied to protect her. Honesty had always been one of her greatest virtues, or perhaps her greatest fault.

“Mr. Harris is trying to protect me,” she said shortly. “But he is not telling the truth. He did not force himself on me, Father. I....” She stumbled to a halt, feeling her cheeks flame again, then went on doggedly, meeting her father’s astounded gaze levelly. “I was a willing participant.”

Benjamin looked at her a long moment with sorrow in his eyes. At last he said, “I’m very disappointed in you, Cordelia.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“I rather thought I raised you to be a lady, not a lightskirts.”

“You did,” she said softly. “It was not your fault but my own.”

She had never known before how overpowering lust could be, or how readily a man could sway her senses. Particularly, she thought unhappily, a man like Gwaltney Harris. She could no longer deny, even to herself, that she found him extremely attractive.

Her father looked at her a moment longer, then turned to Gwaltney. “I will expect you to correct this situation at once,” he said in a hard voice.

“Of course.”

Something about Gwaltney’s businesslike tone caused Cordelia’s head to jerk up suspiciously. “Surely,” she said in horror, “you are not going to make me marry him.”

“Don’t be a fool, Cordelia,” her father said tiredly. “What else can I do?”

“I won’t marry him!” she snapped heatedly. “I just finished explaining to you that this entire mess was my fault!”

“Oh, nonsense,” her father returned. “You are hardly such a raving beauty that men find you irresistible. Mr. Harris shares the blame. In fact, he bears most of it for taking advantage of a sheltered young woman.”

“Yes,” Gwaltney said gravely. “It was indeed my fault, Mistress Ashton, for so basely taking advantage of such a weak and defenseless young lady.”

She heard the humor lurking beneath his solemn tone, and her temper flared. “You planned this all along!” she accused furiously. “You set out to compromise me on purpose, damn you!”

Gwaltney appeared slightly taken aback by her attack, then he shot her a crooked smile. “Hardly, my dear. If I had intended to compromise you, I would certainly have done it in a much more public place.”

“You knew Father was watching,” Cordelia accused.

Her father cleared his throat. “Don’t be silly, child. He had no way of knowing.”

“I don’t believe you!” Cordelia cried. She was beginning to feel panicked. “He trapped me into this. I won’t marry him. I won’t!”

Her father shot her a long, level glare. “We will go back to the house now,” he said in a warning tone, “and Mr. Harris and I will discuss it.” He looked at her a long moment. “You will have no say in the matter. None whatsoever. Do I make myself clear?”

Her chest clutched with fury and panic, making speech impossible. There was nothing she could say anyway. She had sealed her fate with her wanton response to Gwaltney’s caresses.

She crossed her arms and marched toward the house in silence.

As they made their way through the woods back toward the house, the first large drops of rain began to fall. Gwaltney scarcely felt the wet drops pelting his face, so occupied was he with his thoughts. Thoughts of Cordelia Ashton.

For the first time in his life, he had totally lost control of himself over a woman. Despite Cordelia’s angry accusations, he had not intended to let things go as far as they had. He had intended only to kiss her, to court her gently, to make her look forward to their next meeting.

He certainly hadn’t expected to lose his head so rapidly.

He had never lost control of himself with a woman before, and certainly not over a skinny, bespectacled, audaciously rude young lady. However, he assured himself, it had all turned out for the best, despite Benjamin Ashton’s unexpected appearance. Ashton would insist that he marry Cordelia. And wasn’t that what he had wanted?

The rain fell harder. Gwaltney cast a sidewise look at Cordelia and saw that her head was bent, as though she was trying to protect her face from the lashing drops. But he suspected that she was merely trying to conceal her expression. He had never seen her bowed down before.

The thought sent a brief stab of guilt through him. Over the past weeks, as he had grown to understand Cordelia, he had grown to respect her. Surely it was wrong of him to force her into marriage. Perhaps, he thought, there was still some way out of this situation. The girl’s maidenhead had not been breached, after all, and there had been no witnesses to his ungentlemanly behavior other than Benjamin Ashton himself. Perhaps Mr. Ashton could be placated by a humble apology.

But he could not give up his dream of respectability. If he did not take advantage of this situation, force Cordelia to marry him, then would she ever? He doubted it. She was too headstrong--stubborn and willful and proud.

No, she would never marry him voluntarily. Of that he was certain.

He held his peace and walked silently through the rain toward the house.

Cordelia stood stiffly in the parlor. A mere hour before, she had been free to wander the woods and sketch, free to spend her time in the pursuits that she loved. But now she was no longer free. Now she had to face Gwaltney, and agree to wed him, and agree to a sham of a marriage, one that could never bring her happiness.

She ached inside.

Booted feet approached, and she stiffened her spine. Regardless of her misery, she couldn't bear to have Gwaltney see her true feelings.

Clinging to her spinsterish persona like a drowning woman clutching at an overhanging branch, she turned and faced him.

He stood on the far side of the blue and red Oriental carpet, eying her cautiously. He looked uncomfortable, as he always did indoors, yet she realized with surprise that there was something more in his expression, a wary uncertainty that betrayed a certain tension. He looked as vulnerable as she herself felt, and she wondered why.

"So," she said shortly. "We are to be married."

Gwaltney stared at her for a long moment, then the slow, ironic grin that she found so irritating broke across his features. "It would appear so," he agreed. "Although I never expected *you* would propose to *me*."

Cordelia felt a fiery flush heat her cheeks. "I didn't...."

"And in so very romantic a fashion, too."

"Perhaps you would prefer it if I went down on one knee," she snapped.

He tilted his head slightly, and the grin widened. "Definitely. And flowers. I believe I should like flowers."

Hot, angry words sizzled in her mouth, but she bit them back. She did not want to be drawn into another war of words with the man. "Very well," she said curtly. "We are betrothed. Now leave me alone."

She turned her back on him in an unmistakable gesture of contempt, waiting to hear the sound of his booted feet leaving the chamber. When several minutes had passed, and she heard nothing, she turned her head and saw him, still standing there, watching her quizzically.

"What do you want now?" she snapped.

He spread his hands in a gesture of truce. "I want to talk, Cordelia. Simply to talk."

"I don't wish to talk to you," she said shortly.

"Why not?"

His tone was even, eminently reasonable, despite her efforts at rudeness, and for some reason his unflappability goaded her to fury. "Because," she said in an icy tone, "you are nothing more than a longhunter. My father should never have permitted you into this parlor to begin with."

With some satisfaction, she saw a muscle leap in his jaw. He gave no other sign of anger, however, only spoke mildly. "I imagine it must be very difficult for you, a planter's daughter, marrying someone like me."

"I never expected to marry someone so...." She looked at him, clad in an immaculate green linen suit with gold braiding, his hands in kid gloves, his feet in riding boots of the finest leather, and burst out unfairly, "So crude and unrefined!"

He did not flinch at the barb. "I rather thought," he said gently, "that you never expected to marry at all."

"You're right," she said sullenly. "I don't want to marry anyone. Least of all you."

"I'm glad."

She glanced up quickly, surprised.

"So many women dream of love and romance in a marriage. I'm relieved you realize there can be none in ours."

"You can be certain I will never love you," she said harshly.

"Of course not. There is no such emotion between a man and a woman."

Cordelia frowned, drawn into an argument despite herself. "I disagree. My mother and father loved one another dearly."

Gwaltney shook his head. "All that can exist between a man and a woman is physical. What society calls love is nothing more than lust."

"That's not true," Cordelia said hotly. "I once...."

Gwaltney eyed her speculatively. "You once what?"

"Never mind," she said curtly, uncomfortably certain she had been lured into a cleverly laid verbal trap.

He looked at her for a long moment. "Were you once in love, Cordelia?"

Her chin came up, and she stared back at him with hard eyes, damning him silently for seeing into her soul the way he did, damning him for understanding her so clearly. "Yes," she said tautly. "When I was sixteen."

"And did he love you?"

"He said he did. He...." She looked away from his clear gaze. "He asked me to marry him."

"And did you agree?"

"I couldn't. Mother had just died, and I couldn't marry so soon after her death. Besides, Father thought I was too young, that I didn't know my own mind."

"I doubt there was ever a time when you didn't know your own mind," Gwaltney said dryly, and she wondered if he intended that as a compliment. He gave her no time to contemplate that question, however. "So what happened?"

Cordelia hesitated a long moment. "He asked another woman to marry him."

"I see."

"A week later," she added with savage bitterness.

Taken aback, Gwaltney blinked at the fierceness in her tone. "I see," he said again. "That was rather, er, callous of him."

She put a hand up to her face, feeling hot tears burning in her eyes, as if the incident had occurred yesterday rather than seven years before. The humiliation of realizing James Spencer had never cared for her in the least still stabbed through her heart like a knife every time she thought of it. "I thought he loved me," she whispered. "I loved him. I really did."

"I believe you," Gwaltney said gently, looking at her with compassion.

The sympathy in his gaze stiffened her spine. She did not want his pity. Lifting her chin proudly, she blinked the tears away. "I was a fool," she said briskly. "He had pressing debts, and

he desperately needed a young woman with a substantial dowry. He couldn't wait a year to marry me, so he simply went on to the next young woman on his list. That was all I was to him. Money."

She remembered vividly how James had fallen to his knees before her, kissing her hands and avowing his eternal love for her. She remembered clinging to him and weeping against his shoulder, swearing she would wed him in a year's time, assuring him that she loved him more than anything.

And then a week later she had heard that he was to marry Lavinia Kensington.

He hadn't even told her himself, the cad.

"I'm sorry," Gwaltney said softly.

The gentle compassion in his deep voice stirred something deep within her, something she didn't want stirred. She looked at him with disdain.

"Don't pretend a sympathy you don't feel, Mr. Harris. After all, I mean nothing more to you than I did to James Spencer all those years ago. To you, I am nothing more than respectability. I am scarcely even a person as far as you are concerned."

He was silent for a long moment. There was, of course, nothing he could say to refute her statement, for it was painfully, obviously true. She was nothing more than a well-bred wife to gain him entree into society.

"And am I a person as far as you are concerned?" he retorted at last.

Cordelia met his challenging gaze without flinching. At last she said, "On the contrary, Mr. Harris. You are nothing to me at all."

He inclined his head, a cynical twist to his mouth. "I'm glad," he said harshly, "that we understand one another." He turned and walked from the chamber.

She did not see him again until their wedding day.

Chapter 7

"You must be joking."

Cordelia sighed deeply as she faced her sister's astounded expression. "I am not joking. I am going to marry Gwaltney Harris."

Elizabeth shook her head, sending golden hair tumbling everywhere. Cordelia had caught her sister in the middle of brushing her hair as she prepared for bed. "Cordelia, you barely know the man. And I thought you didn't care for him overmuch. After everything you said...."

Cordelia gave her a rueful smile, doing her utmost to conceal her own anxieties. Elizabeth must not know how uneasy she was at the thought of this marriage, or she might try to do something rash to save her sister. Cordelia knew better than anyone that Elizabeth's dainty and delicate demeanor concealed a reckless and fiercely protective heart.

For the first time in her life, she dared not confide in Elizabeth. The realization made her feel wretchedly alone.

"Don't be silly," she said lightly. "You are the one who noticed how easily Gwaltney

infuriated me. Don't you know that anger is readily transformed into affection?"

"Rubbish."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You are speaking nonsense, Cordelia. Regardless of whether you have developed an affection for Gwaltney Harris, you would never have agreed to marry him in such haste if there were not some reason for you to do so. It is not proper."

"Unlike you, I do not live my life according to what is proper."

"Perhaps not. But Father would never have agreed to your marrying the man so quickly, either. He wants to see you wed, but not by sacrificing all propriety."

Cordelia stood up, walking restlessly across to the window, and stared out at the glittering stars spread thickly across the night sky. Soon, she realized with an ache, this would not be her house. The thought made her heart squeeze with anguish. She no longer belonged here. She wondered if she would ever belong anywhere again.

Elizabeth had padded quietly across the carpet and stood behind her. "Cordelia, why don't you tell me what really happened?"

Cordelia sighed. She should have known Elizabeth would not be fooled so easily. "He kissed me," she said miserably.

She turned in time to see the delicate line of Elizabeth's jaw tighten. "So. He took advantage of you. This comes of meeting him in the woods, Cordelia."

"I didn't meet him," Cordelia protested, rather feebly. "He found me."

"You made little enough effort to prevent him from finding you," Elizabeth said tartly.

Cordelia made no reply. In her heart she knew Elizabeth was right. She could not deny she had *wanted* Gwaltney to find her. She had somehow come to enjoy his company and the thrust and parry of their conversations.

"He kissed you," Elizabeth repeated more gently, apparently regretting her critical tone. "And then, did he take liberties?"

"I suppose you could call it that," Cordelia confessed weakly. *Liberties* seemed a ludicrously weak word to describe the glorious, overpowering sensations Gwaltney had evoked in her. "I ... I kissed him back," she whispered.

"You what?"

Cordelia's head jerked up at the censorious note in her sister's voice. "I couldn't help it," she snapped. "He is very ... it was...." She paused. "I didn't expect it to be so overwhelming," she said in a whisper.

Elizabeth's lips tightened, but she made a visible effort to choke back her disapproval and spoke coolly. "And then what?"

"Father saw us," Cordelia confessed. She vividly remembered the awful shock of seeing her father step from the cover of the woods, recalled the wrathful expression on his face and her own humiliation at the realization that he had seen everything that had passed. She had wanted to sink through the earth and disappear. "For some reason he was in the woods."

"Indeed," Elizabeth said. Her forehead puckered slightly in a most ladylike frown.

"He must have seen Gwaltney riding on our property and followed him to see what he was up to," Cordelia reasoned. "At any rate, once he saw us together, it was a foregone conclusion he would demand that I marry Gwaltney."

"And you agreed?"

"What choice did I have?"

"Little enough, I suppose. But Cordelia ... are you very sorry to be marrying Mr. Harris?" Cordelia hesitated for a long moment.

"I wish I knew," she said at last.

Elizabeth frowned. "Perhaps," she ventured hopefully, "you and Mr. Harris will have a pleasant enough marriage."

"Perhaps," Cordelia agreed, unwilling to worry her sister.

But she had already determined she was not going to have a real marriage with Gwaltney Harris. She could be forced to wed, but she could never be forced to like the man or to treat him as her husband. The very last thing she wanted was an emotional entanglement.

She refused to get involved with Gwaltney. All she wanted was to live her life in peace. And fortunately, he obviously felt the same way about her. He would keep his distance from her, of that she was certain.

She thought with a sigh that her future looked very lonely.

"She will never give you a moment's peace."

Gwaltney grinned at his friend's dire prediction and poured him a glass of port. "Now, Jonathan," he remonstrated, "it was your idea that I marry the woman."

"I know," Jonathan said glumly, gulping a mouthful of the dark liquid. "But now I'm not certain it is the right thing for you to do."

"Fine time for you to develop a guilty conscience," Gwaltney retorted, sipping his own port more moderately. "It's rather late for me to do anything about it now."

Jonathan looked up quickly, wondering if Gwaltney could see just how guilty his conscience was. But his friend wore his customary amiable expression. He was relieved to realize that Gwaltney knew nothing of his interference. He dropped his eyes and took another large gulp of the port.

It was only his guilty conscience that had made him imagine Gwaltney could have known. Gwaltney would never find out that he had encouraged Benjamin Ashton to spy on his own daughter, even told him where she was. He was certain Benjamin Ashton would never tell him, and God knew he himself would never confess the truth.

"I hope you will be very happy," he managed to choke out, but the words burned in his throat. He had convinced himself that marrying Cordelia Ashton was the best thing for Gwaltney, that it would solve all his friend's problems, but now that his goal had been accomplished he was beginning to doubt his own motives. Had he been motivated by concern and affection for his friend or solely by his own selfish concerns?

The latter seemed more likely.

"I doubt that," Gwaltney said dryly. "I think the most that can be hoped for is that Cordelia and I will learn to tolerate each other. You know my opinions on love, Jonathan--it doesn't exist."

"On the contrary, it certainly does."

"Perhaps," Gwaltney conceded. "I don't doubt love has a place in your life, Jon, but it has no place in mine."

Jonathan felt his heart sink. "Then you do not intend for this to be a real marriage?"

"On the contrary. But marriages should not be based on love but respect. I plan on gaining Cordelia's respect, perhaps even her affection. I believe respect is a sounder basis for marriage than love."

Jonathan swallowed the last dregs of port and held out his glass wordlessly. Gwaltney refilled it, and Jonathan took another long swig. He was relieved to know that Gwaltney intended to make this a real marriage. Perhaps, if Gwaltney and Cordelia both tried to make it work, they could have a happy life together. Anything was possible, he thought bleakly.

But he was desperately afraid that, in his own quest for love, he had condemned his friend to a loveless existence.

"My sister is being forced into marriage with that--that longhunter," Elizabeth said wrathfully the next morning, "and it is all your fault."

Jonathan winced. He was well aware Elizabeth had a temper, for he had endured her anger before. But he had never seen her so enraged. Her blue eyes glowed with a furious light.

"Please, Elizabeth," he objected, "try to be reasonable."

"I am being reasonable. If you had not sent Father out after Cordelia...."

"I did nothing of the kind," Jonathan interrupted. The lie fell from his lips readily. He knew perfectly well a confession would alienate her forever, and there was little chance she could find out the truth. Benjamin Ashton was a man of his word. He would not betray Jonathan. And he had struggled too long to win Elizabeth. He did not intend to lose her now. "I swear to you, I did not send your father out after Cordelia. On the contrary, I tried to warn you, Elizabeth. I did not want to involve your father in this situation, but you insisted. Did it not occur to you that he might follow Cordelia to see if Gwaltney was really meeting her?"

"No," Elizabeth said petulantly. "I thought he would merely discuss the matter with her and prevent her from going again."

"Then you underestimate the protectiveness a man feels toward his daughters, Elizabeth. It was your error. Not mine."

Elizabeth's fury dissolved abruptly, and to his shock two tears spilled onto her cheeks. "I know that," she choked. "I'm sorry I accused you. I am just so--so very angry with myself...."

Her voice broke on a sob, and Jonathan crossed the parlor in three strides and gathered her against his chest, putting his arms around her protectively.

"There, there, darling. It will be all right. I suspect there is actually affection between Gwaltney and your sister, even though neither of them wants to admit it. I believe they may actually have a successful marriage."

"I hope so," she whispered against his chest.

"Trust me, love. I spoke with Gwaltney last night, and he assured me he would try to make this marriage work."

Elizabeth looked up. For the first time her face brightened. "Really?"

He nodded.

"That's good," she said huskily, stepping away from him, to his regret, and brushing at her tears. "For I believe Cordelia has grown to like him, although she would never acknowledge it. If they both try...."

"Exactly," Jonathan said. "If they both try, perhaps they will fall in love." The thought of the sour Cordelia Ashton desperately in love with Gwaltney made his lips twitch, but he stifled his smile. He had to make Elizabeth believe everything would be all right. And who knew--perhaps it would be. Perhaps the shrew was capable of love, after all. Stranger things had happened. He added, "After all, it is not difficult to fall in love."

"No," Elizabeth agreed softly. "It is not."

“It is merely a matter of waiting for the right woman to come along.” Jonathan looked at her a long moment, then added gently, “You are the right woman for me, Elizabeth. I have known for a long time. The only difficulty has been waiting for you.” He took her finger and slid an enormous sapphire ring onto her finger. “And now, I hope, the wait is over.” His voice dropped to a reverent whisper. “Will you marry me, Elizabeth?”

For a few magical moments, her concerns about her sister vanished. She stared down at the ring, seeing the culmination of all her hopes and dreams--both her dreams for herself and for Cordelia. Now they would both be married. And perhaps Cordelia could be as happy as she herself was.

She smiled up at him. “Of course,” she said softly. “After all, that was our bargain, wasn’t it? You succeeded in finding a husband for my sister, and now ... now I am more than willing to be your wife, Jonathan.”

Staring raptly at the spectacular ring, she failed to see the uncomfortable expression that crossed his face.

Chapter 8

As he did each day, Gwaltney galloped Mist down the river road that morning, leaning forward in the saddle, the wind blowing the coarse silver mane back into his face. His own hair streamed, unbound, behind him.

Virginia had very few true roads. Most could be more accurately described as paths, and many had once, long ago, been Indian trails winding through the forest. But the road from Williamsburg that led along the James was relatively straight, and wide enough to accommodate a carriage, due to the number of important planters that owned both country seats along the river and town houses in the capital of Williamsburg, five miles away. Invisible through the dense forest, but not very far away, was a narrow, winding footpath, worn by generations of black slaves who visited friends and family at other plantations after their labor was done.

At last Gwaltney slowed the lathered horse to a walk, admitting to himself that today he was not able to take the pleasure he ordinarily did in the simple joy of physical exertion. His mind was occupied with thoughts of Cordelia Ashton. He was about to be wed. He should be pleased he had found an aristocratic wife. And yet he could not forget the look on her face when she had told him of her betrayal at the hands of another man.

Cordelia was too vulnerable, too fragile, to be forced into a marriage with a man who felt nothing for her.

Fragile, he acknowledged wryly, was not an adjective one would ordinarily apply to the redoubtable Mistress Ashton. And yet, oddly, he felt it was an accurate description. Beneath her prickly exterior, behind the formidable defenses she had erected, she was as brittle as glass, and as easily shattered. That was more than evident, judging from the way she had reacted to James Spencer’s betrayal, the way she had hidden her true self from the world for years to avoid further pain.

Mist pulled eagerly at the reins, and Gwaltney let him canter, his mind still on Cordelia. He had an obligation, he decided, to try to make Mistress Ashton's fate a happy one. He couldn't love her--he wasn't even convinced love existed, and if it did, Cordelia Ashton hardly seemed the sort of woman to inspire it--but he could make certain he treated her with respect and kindness.

Perhaps, he thought slowly, they could be friends.

Despite the fact that his mind was occupied, his senses were alert. He brought his mind back to the present as an odd creaking sound caught his attention. Then a sharp crack echoed through the forest.

Instinctively, Gwaltney leaned forward and slapped Mist's neck, and the stallion leaped forward into a run.

Just behind them, a large pine tree fell to the ground with a resounding crash.

Gwaltney slowed the startled stallion as quickly as he could and circled back to investigate. He thought he had heard the crashing sound of someone running away through the underbrush, but though he strained his eyes, staring through the dark shadows of the forest, he saw no one.

Dismounting, he approached the tree. It was a fairly good-sized pine, and the needles on its branches were still dark green. There was no good reason for it to have fallen, since it was clearly not rotten. Frowning, he walked toward the edge of the road.

He was not particularly surprised to see that the trunk of the tree had been chopped nearly through.

Gwaltney stared at the fallen tree for long moments, then crossed the road again. There was a rope tied to the upper part of the tree. Someone had deliberately cut the tree, left it standing, then pulled it over as he had approached. He had not seen the rope, hidden as it had been amongst the branches that arched over the road. It was, he thought, a cleverly designed trap.

This could be no coincidence. Someone knew his habits, and knew that he galloped down this road every day. And someone had deliberately tried to hurt him, for the second time in a week.

But as far as he knew, he had no enemies--none who hated him enough to injure or kill him, at any rate. There was only one person who might benefit from his death, and that was Cordelia.

He dismissed that notion instantly as absurd. Cordelia might be a sharp-tongued, hard-hearted crosspatch, but she surely didn't dislike him enough to try to hurt him. At any rate, he reminded himself, this was the second attempt on his life, and the first had occurred before his betrothal to Cordelia. She certainly hadn't liked him very much a week ago, but there was no sensible reason in the world for her to have tried to injure him.

He had no way, then, of guessing who had tried to harm him. He would have to be wary, watchful, and try to capture the would-be murderer before there was a successful attempt. But he refused to cringe in fear of his life, holing up in his house like a fox hiding from the hounds. Nor could he, really. He could no more spend large blocks of time indoors than he could live under water. It was impossible for him to hide indoors.

And it was possible that whoever was trying to kill him knew that.

No, he corrected himself, that was a ludicrous thought. As far as he knew, no one in Virginia, with the exception of Jonathan Powell, knew of his weakness.

He stared pensively at the fallen tree a moment longer, baffled by the mystery it represented, then swung up on Mist and galloped back toward River's Edge.

“That bitch!”

Alexander Blair could not remember being so angry in his lifetime. He was possessed of a furious temper, but in public he generally struggled to keep himself composed. Having been an object of scorn all his life from his parents, he hated to call attention to himself in any way. When he lost his temper, he always felt like a fool afterwards.

But, he reassured himself, he was not in public now. He was with Maggie. And she seemed to understand him, more than anyone else ever had.

His new mistress looked at him quizzically. “I hope that sentiment is not aimed at me, Alexander.”

“Hardly,” Alexander said bitterly, slamming the door closed behind him.

He had housed Maggie in a tenement, a small dwelling he held for rent, in Williamsburg. It was not a terribly imposing building, consisting of an entrance hall on the side, a parlor, a dining chamber, and two bedrooms upstairs, but she seemed content. He had done his best to compensate for the unimpressive house by providing her with a spectacular wardrobe of gowns, most of which were still being made up, a well-sprung, two-wheeled carriage called a chair, and one of the fleetest horses from his stables, a glorious chestnut mare sired by his best stallion.

The only difficulty was that Alexander could not get enough of Maggie’s spectacular body. It was irritating to have to ride all the way to Williamsburg every time the urge to make love to her struck, for it seemed to strike several times a day. She was beautiful, everything a man could want in a bed partner, and although he was realistic enough to know that the only reason a lovely woman like Maggie was willing to be his mistress was the gifts he lavished upon her, he was comfortable with the relationship. Maggie satisfied his needs--and not only his sexual ones. She was somehow able to make a pimply, skinny young man feel attractive.

She was the only person in his lonely life to ever do so.

He felt a wry smile twist his lips as he looked at her. Dressed in a vivid red silk gown, with her black hair tumbling lushly over her shoulders, she was gorgeous. He felt a stab of desire. She was older than he was, he was certain, but how much older he could not say. Her skin was flawless and unlined, her voluptuous figure as shapely as that of a sixteen-year-old. It was only the air of sophistication surrounding her that made him certain she was older.

Her sophistication, and the fact that she was incredibly, sensuously knowledgeable in bed.

And the simple fact was that she made him feel a little gauche. In her presence he was uncomfortably aware of his own unattractiveness, both in bed and out of it. He was awkward and clumsy in bed, having had little enough experience until recently. And out of bed, next to her flawless face and figure, he became acutely conscious of his pimples and his lanky limbs that were apparently never going to develop the muscles of a man like Gwaltney Harris.

Yet Maggie somehow managed to put him at his ease. Perhaps it was her stunning beauty, or perhaps it was the way she seemed to hang on his every word, listening to him in a way no woman had ever bothered to before. It was, he thought wistfully, almost as if she cared for him.

Already she had distracted him from his angry thoughts. His temper and hurt pride were draining away rapidly and replaced by aching lust. She crossed the entrance hall and looked up into his face. “What has you so irritated, Alexander?”

Recalled from his thoughts to the bitter unpleasantness of reality, Alexander pressed his lips together. “I heard a rumor last night, and by this morning it was all over town,” he said angrily. “Cordelia Ashton is betrothed.”

“Ah. And she is the one you were dangling after, is she not?”

“Precisely,” Alexander said shortly. “And what’s worse is, she’s marrying that damned bastard Gwaltney Harris.”

Maggie tilted her head slightly. “He’s a planter, is he not?”

“He’s a dog masquerading as a planter,” Alexander snapped. “And I despise him. I can’t believe Cordelia chose that lowborn son of a bitch over me.”

“Hard to believe,” Maggie agreed, running a hand down his chest in total disregard of the slave who served as her butler, who had stood silently waiting to see if they needed anything else. He turned and left the chamber hastily.

“Let me make you feel better,” Maggie whispered suggestively.

Alexander looked down at her lovely, upturned face. That, of course, was why he had come here--to forget that his plans to acquire the land he needed so badly had been carelessly destroyed by Gwaltney Harris, the man he despised most in the world. And to forget that Cordelia Ashton would rather marry a wheelwright’s son than himself, the only son of an old and respected family. No decent woman would have him.

But Maggie wanted him. There was little doubt of that.

Exactly why she wanted him he had no idea. She had obviously been in need of a protector, but he could not imagine why she had chosen him. He supposed she had listened to enough gossip in town to know that he was wealthy, but he thought his inexperience in bed would have put her off.

But perhaps, he thought, she enjoyed taking his innocence bit by bit. There were, he knew, older women who enjoyed the naiveté of younger men. Most likely she was one of them.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he said, drawing her hastily up the narrow staircase. She followed eagerly, despite the fact that he had come unannounced in the middle of the afternoon, as though she existed solely to give him pleasure.

Once they were in the privacy of her small bedchamber, she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him with a dazzling expertise. She was the perfect mistress, exciting and beautiful, very nearly enough to make him forget the wreckage of all his plans and his humiliation at Gwaltney Harris’ hands, very nearly enough to make him forget his mortification and his desperate desire for revenge.

Very nearly enough.

But not quite.

Chapter 9

“I hope you realize that I want nothing whatsoever to do with you.”

Gwaltney Harris regarded his new wife with amusement. “An unfortunate sentiment to start off a new marriage,” he said, “but hardly unexpected. I did not imagine that you would grow to love me in the space of three short weeks.”

Cordelia Ashton--Cordelia *Harris*, he reminded himself--gave him a harsh look over the

rim of her spectacles. "I'm afraid you misunderstood," she said calmly. "It has nothing to do with my feelings, or lack thereof, for you. I simply do not want to spend any time with you. I do not wish to be in the same chamber with you. I do not even intend to acknowledge your presence in the house. In short, I want my life to go on as if nothing ever happened between us."

Gwaltney only grinned. "Then it appears that we shall have an entirely normal married life."

"Damn you!" Cordelia exploded. "I don't want to be married to you, don't you understand that?"

Despite his stab of sympathy Gwaltney's smile faded slightly at her display of temper. "The time to decide that was *before* you married me, my dear. There is nothing to be done about it now."

Cordelia dropped her gaze and sulkily regarded the wide green lawn she sat upon. She had been absentmindedly picking dandelions and yanking the petals off, one by one. There was a small pile of decapitated and demolished flowers at her feet. "I had no choice," she said in a low voice. "You know that as well as I do."

"Neither did I," Gwaltney pointed out in a reasonable tone.

"That's different! You wanted to marry me. Things could hardly have worked out better from your point of view. In fact, I think you planned the entire episode."

"Not at all," Gwaltney said mildly. "I was overcome with passion for you, my dear. You should feel flattered."

"I don't," she snapped.

"How crushing."

She narrowed her eyes at him, obviously aware that he was making fun of her, and ripped the yellow petals from another dandelion, making no reply.

"After all," Gwaltney pointed out, "you seemed rather overcome with passion yourself."

"Don't flatter yourself. I found your kisses to be quite dull. Perhaps even repulsive."

"You didn't seem to object at the time."

"I was taken by surprise," she said defensively. "I think you knew my father was watching us, and you took advantage of me on purpose."

Gwaltney sighed. "I give you my word I did not."

"Your word as a *gentleman*?"

Her tone was mocking and Gwaltney winced. Heaven knew she had lost none of her shrewishness. "Cordelia," he said gently, "we are married. There is no way around it now. Can't you at least try to make this work?"

Her head jerked up, and he realized he had made an error in sounding as though he were asking for her cooperation. If there was one thing the young woman was incapable of, it was cooperation. He could see from the militant gleam in her eyes that she thought he had put himself at a disadvantage.

"You want to make our marriage work?" she asked, a little too sweetly. Mentally, Gwaltney steeled himself against whatever outlandish bargain she might be about to strike with him.

"Yes," he said honestly. "I do."

"Then promise me we will sleep in separate chambers."

Gwaltney hesitated, wondering what precisely was behind this request. As upper-class houses in Virginia had grown larger, most aristocrats had adopted the English custom of separate

chambers for the master and lady of a house, and he had already had a separate bedchamber set aside for her. He really had no choice anyway. He generally spent the nights in his bedchamber, for his terror of the indoors was far more intense in a parlor than in a bedchamber, yet sometimes he grew anxious even in his own bedchamber, and went outside to sleep. He could not sleep in the same chamber as she did without her guessing the extent of his fear of the indoors, and he refused to expose his vulnerabilities in that fashion.

"You want us to sleep in separate chambers? That's all? If I give you that, you will try to make our marriage work?"

Cordelia turned slightly pink. "I'm not certain how to put this," she said delicately. "But...."

"Ah," Gwaltney said. A shocking stab of disappointment, startling in its intensity, lanced through his chest. He realized that ever since the kiss they had shared, four weeks before, he had actually been looking forward to bedding her. God only knew why, he thought, looking at her scraped-back hair and spectacles. She was no beauty, but there was more passion in her than he had suspected. And in some corner of his mind he had been looking forward to experiencing that passion again.

He spoke sardonically, trying to mask his feelings. "It all becomes clear now. You want a marriage in name only."

She cocked her head to the side. "That seems a reasonable way of putting it. I want you to leave me alone."

"You don't want to have sex with me."

She turned red, and, despite his hurt, Gwaltney felt the corners of his mouth twitch upward. *God save me from twenty-three-year-old virgins.* "Yes," she said.

For the first time he cursed her directness. He had never known a woman who could make her preferences known so readily. She was a shrew, true enough, but she was also a determined young woman who knew her own mind.

He struggled to conceal his churning emotions, his humiliation at the realization that she felt she could not bear to be touched by him, and retaliated, allowing a bit of disdain to creep into his voice. "Surely you did not believe I would want to sleep with *you*?"

Her head jerked up, and she stared at him in shock. Gwaltney felt a grim satisfaction at her startled look. He had intended to hurt her as she had hurt him, and he had clearly succeeded. It was obvious he had wounded her vanity--though such a plain woman could have little enough of that. Nevertheless, she looked annoyed.

"I *beg* your pardon," she said at last, her eyes beginning to glitter with anger. He held up a placating hand.

"Now, now, Cordelia. It is hardly fair for you to tell me you are not interested in bedding me, then become irritated when I tell you I have no interest in you."

He could see her mind spinning rapidly, sorting through the implications of his words. "But you said you wanted this to be a real marriage."

Gwaltney shook his head. "I believe what I said is that I wanted to make our marriage work. I did not necessarily mean to imply we should have a normal marriage." He forced a condescending smile, hoping he looked like a man of the world rather than a man whose ego had just been slashed to shreds. "I simply want to go about my life without constantly fearing you will slide a knife between my ribs."

Cordelia regarded him through narrowed eyes, clearly suspicious. "Then why did you

marry me?"

"Come now, my dear. You know the answer to that."

"You wanted respectability," she said slowly.

"Respectability. And nothing more."

To himself he acknowledged he had wanted something more, but God knew he had no intention of admitting that to her. The truth was, he was not certain exactly what he had wanted from this marriage. But for the past four weeks he had been indulging in vague dreams, and Cordelia had been at the center of them. He could not put a name to those dreams, could not describe them in even the most nebulous terms. But he had certainly had no intention of letting her remain a virgin.

Cordelia frowned slightly. "I simply don't understand exactly why respectability is so important to you. Why should you care what others think of you?"

Gwaltney stood and looked down at her, not deigning to answer. He spoke in a hard voice designed to put an end to her questions. "I hardly think that's any of your business."

He saw her eyes flash at his tone, but she had the sense not to provoke him further. He said shortly, "Now that we understand each other, let us return to the house."

Cordelia rose slowly to her feet. After their wedding at her father's house--a wedding during which Gwaltney had been inexplicably edgy and clearly nervous--she had ridden here in his carriage, with Gwaltney, oddly, following on his gray stallion. The fact that he had not even wanted to spend a half hour in her presence in the carriage had annoyed her, putting her into a more shrewish mood than usual.

When they arrived at River's Edge, he had proposed they walk about and see the grounds before they went into the house. And yet they had not gone far before they had gotten embroiled in this argument. She did not want to return to the house, to be forced to spend time in the company of a man who despised her every bit as much as she despised him.

Nevertheless, she followed him without argument, feeling they had argued enough for the day. She fully intended to make his life miserable, but there was no need to do it all at once.

He led the way up to the house, a sprawling white clapboard structure with a peculiarly unbalanced look. It was nicely situated on a high piece of land where a small creek met the James River. Built over fifty years ago, it had originally been a simple cube, with four chambers on each floor built around a central chimney, and with a small, unimpressive entrance on the side of the dwelling that faced the creek.

Sometime fairly recently an owner had apparently been struck by the desire to have a more imposing house, and had accordingly added a large two-story wing with an entrance hall facing the river. Unfortunately, the addition had utterly failed to make the house look as grand as many of the Georgian-style dwellings that lined the river. It appeared more lopsided than impressive.

As Gwaltney opened the door, there was an immediate commotion upstairs. A black-spotted dog came charging down the wide staircase, its toenails clattering loudly on the floorboards, and behind it came a small child. Cordelia stared blankly in shock and surprise as the little girl, perhaps five or six years old, flung herself joyfully into Gwaltney's arms.

Holding the child with one arm and giving the dog dancing at his feet an affectionate pat with his free hand, Gwaltney straightened, and his gaze met Cordelia's over the girl's dark, curly head. There was a peculiarly defiant expression in his eyes, as though he dared her to comment.

Aghast, Cordelia stared at the little girl in shock. "Now I understand," she whispered at

last, numbly. “You have a daughter.”

Chapter 10

Gwaltney lifted the child up onto his shoulders in an easy movement, as though she weighed no more than a feather, and she clutched his fingers tightly as he walked slowly toward the parlor. “No,” he said curtly. “This is my niece, my sister’s child. She lives here.”

Cordelia frowned. “Why does she not live with her mother? Or does her mother live here?”

Gwaltney tossed the little girl into the air several times until she was wriggling with delight, then gently put her down on the floor. “Mary,” he said, “go to your chamber now. I’ll be up to see you in a few minutes.”

The little girl pointed silently to Cordelia.

“You can meet her later. Go now.”

Like a wraith, the little girl disappeared silently, the dog at her heels. Gwaltney led the way into the parlor, a spectacularly large chamber with eight tall windows. The two windows at the far end of the chamber flanked the marble fireplace and were framed by arched alcoves. The entire chamber was paneled from floor to ceiling, with pilasters framing each door and window, and the pine paneling was painted a brilliant, sunny yellow. It was a stunning chamber, made more so by the view of the James River visible through three windows. Gwaltney stared at the river for a long moment, then turned back toward his wife.

“Her mother is dead,” he said.

“Oh,” Cordelia said, sitting down on a crimson-upholstered settee. She was utterly unable to think of anything to say. She had been ready to attack Gwaltney, to chastise him for his lack of morals, when it appeared he had a bastard daughter. But the fact that he had taken in his dead sister’s child put a rather different face on things. It made him seem rather less like a monster and more like a caring human being.

She did not want to think of him as a human being.

“You see,” Gwaltney went on, “why I wish our marriage to appear to be normal, at least on the surface. I do not wish Mary to grow up in a household where the adults are continually sniping at one another. I would like her life to be as normal as possible.”

Cordelia sat silent for long minutes, her mind apparently turning over the implications. “How long has her mother been dead?”

“Over two years.”

“And her father?”

“The same.”

“Then, for all intents and purposes, you have been her only father for as long as she can remember.”

Gwaltney nodded. “Yes. I think of her as ... as a daughter.”

That admission cost him. Already wary of her, he did not want to appear vulnerable,

fearing it might give her the edge in their marriage. It was dangerous to admit to any weakness in the presence of this woman. Yet he could not deny the child was precious to him.

"And you did all this for her," she said slowly, looking around at the house. "You obtained all the land, the house, and are trying to gain respectability for her sake."

Gwaltney did not answer, only watched her warily.

"And you're not comfortable with it at all, are you?"

Gwaltney tilted his head slightly. "With what?"

She waved her hand to indicate their surroundings. "The house, the silver, the furnishings ... any of it. You always look so ill at ease when you're indoors. You'd prefer to be outside, would you not?"

Gwaltney relaxed his shoulders slightly. She was every bit as astute as he had feared. She had noticed his discomfort in enclosed spaces, but fortunately for him she attributed it to his lower-class upbringing, assuming he preferred the outdoors. She had not yet realized the extent of his panic when he was forced indoors for any length of time. With any luck, if he kept his distance from her, she might never realize it.

And the truth was he was not panicked here in his own parlor. When he obtained the house, which had been rather small and unimpressive, he had added the large wing housing an unusually large parlor, with the eight tall windows letting in abundant light. He had painted the walls a bright yellow, making it seem even more spacious than it was. This chamber bothered him only slightly. He could sit here and pretend to be normal for hours at a time.

But the undeniable fact was that he would have been happier outdoors.

"Perhaps you're right," he conceded. "But I need respectability. For her."

Cordelia narrowed her eyes. "I hardly think you stand a chance of achieving it," she said.

The viper-tongued virago was back. Gwaltney bit back a grin, knowing she would resent his amusement. "Perhaps not. But I have to try. And I want you to help me."

"You weren't listening to me earlier, were you? I want nothing to do with you at all. Can't you understand that?"

"I understand perfectly. You want to go on hiding from the world, pretending that nothing in your life has changed." Slowly, he walked across the chamber and sat down next to her, stretching out his hand. His fingers brushed gently across her cheek. "Can't you see that everything *has* changed, Cordelia?"

At his touch, she stiffened. "No," she said harshly.

"It's time to stop hiding," he said in a low voice, trailing his finger along the high sweep of her cheekbone.

He saw her eyes flash with defiant pride. "I'm not hiding."

"Of course you are, Cordelia. You're hiding from the world and from me. But most of all, you're hiding from yourself."

She yanked her head away from his fingers and regarded him with contempt. "You have no idea what you're talking about. You don't know me at all, damn you."

He remembered her description of the way James Spencer had carelessly hurt her, the pain that had been in her eyes as she related the story, and he looked at her with sympathy. Ignoring her rejection, he closed his hand over hers. "You're frightened, Cordelia. Admit it."

He saw the quick, familiar flare of anger behind the spectacles. "Frightened?" she repeated with scorn. "Of what? A man with filthy, callused hands who isn't fit to touch me, let alone marry me?"

Gwaltney yanked his hand away as if she had burned him. Her words stung painfully. He knew she was baiting him deliberately, trying to drive him away, fighting against the sympathy in his voice, and yet that particular choice of words hurt. *Filthy, callused hands.*

Goddamned gentry, he thought with sudden bitterness.

He did not trust himself to speak another word. Silently, he rose to his feet and left the chamber.

After Gwaltney stalked from the chamber, Cordelia sat alone in the silent parlor, feeling more like an intruder than the lady of the house. She had absolutely no idea what she was to do next. Good heavens, she didn't even have the faintest idea where her bedchamber was!

As she sat deliberating, a black woman dressed in a simple linen blouse, skirt, and mobcap materialized. "Mistress 'Arris?" she said with a shy smile. "Mist' 'Arris sent me to show ye to yer chamber. If ye'll follow me."

Trying to conceal her enormous relief that Gwaltney had not totally abandoned her, Cordelia rose to her feet and followed the woman up the stairs, noticing vaguely that there was a series of prints hung along the stairs, fashionably depicting the seasons. The staircase itself was spectacular, with steps fully five feet wide, the spindles of the balustrade constructed of heavily turned walnut. At the landing was an enormously tall window with an arched top, which lit the entire staircase with sunshine.

Once they reached the second floor, the woman opened a door, and Cordelia almost automatically stepped inside.

Her eyes grew wide as she stared at the chamber. "This is for *me*?"

"Of course."

She felt it was a rather foolish question as she saw her steerhide-covered pine trunk, studded with brass nails, in a corner. This chamber was clearly intended for her. But it was somehow not the sort of chamber she expected Gwaltney to have had prepared for her. It was so very ... feminine.

She walked slowly across the floor, looking around with rapidly growing delight. The walls of the chamber, which were paneled from floor to ceiling, had been painted a brilliant sky blue. A huge mahogany bed dominated the chamber. It was adorned with white linen hangings, which had been embroidered in multicolored crewel yarn in a floral pattern, and a coverlet, embellished to match the bed hangings. It was really quite beautiful. She was pleased to notice a small table near the bed, stocked with watercolors, parchment, pens, and ink.

Two large windows permitted light to stream into the room, and an abundance of glittering silver candlesticks was scattered throughout the chamber, on every available surface. Even at night the room would be brightly lit.

Near an enormous clothespress she saw a narrow staircase leading downstairs, probably the staircase that was original to the dwelling, before the more impressive entrance hall was added. This chamber, then, was original to the dwelling as well, which was why it was rather small in comparison to the enormous parlor. But small or not, it was a wonderful chamber, and she instantly felt at home in it, though why Gwaltney would have chosen such a dainty room for her she had no idea.

Surely he did not think of her as feminine.

She came to herself with a start and looked at the black woman, who was waiting in the doorway expectantly. "Will someone be coming to help me with my clothes?" she asked,

berating herself instantly for sounding so hesitant. She was now the mistress of this house, and she had to sound as though she were in command.

“Actually, Mist’r Arris says I’m to be yer maid--that is, if it’s all right with ye, mistress.”

At the anxious note in the other’s voice, Cordelia noticed for the first time that she was actually little more than a girl. No doubt this was the most important position she had ever held in the household. “Of course,” she said, kneeling and opening the trunk. “Help me put these clothes in the press, please,” She began handing her gowns to the girl, who placed them into the clothespress, taking great care to spread each gown perfectly flat. She took far more care with the gowns than they deserved, Cordelia thought wryly, wrinkling her nose with disgust as she pulled out a hideous gray woolen gown and handed it to the girl.

As the trunk emptied, however, Cordelia felt herself growing more and more homesick. The more settled in she became here, the further she felt from home. She was lonely and found that she missed Elizabeth and Father desperately--missed her old life.

But she knew there was no going back.

That evening Cordelia dined alone. Located as it was in the older section of the house, the dining chamber was a good deal smaller than the parlor, but surprisingly sumptuous, and she wondered idly if Gwaltney had chosen the furniture and silver or if he had acquired it with the house. The chamber was lit by a brass chandelier and two of the most extravagantly rococo sterling branches of candles she had ever seen. The linen-covered table sat on a canvas floorcloth, a popular and practical alternative to carpets. This one was painted in a black and white checkerboard pattern. It was perhaps not surprising that a colony that depended so heavily on shipping had discovered a use for worn-out sails. Rather than simply destroy them, the ships’ masters sold the canvas to the gentry, who then had it cut to appropriate size and painted.

Despite the harsh words they had exchanged that afternoon, she was a bit surprised her husband had chosen to leave her alone, for after all, hadn’t he been the one to insist they pretend to have a “normal” marriage? She wasn’t entirely certain what constituted normal, but she was absolutely sure that married people were supposed to dine together. Her mother and father had always eaten dinner together until her mother’s death seven years before.

Of course, she thought with a savage stab at the fish on her plate, Gwaltney was probably eating with his niece. Children rarely ate in the dining chamber, and it was evident that Gwaltney loved his niece very much. Obviously he preferred the child’s company to hers.

And why should that bother her? Puzzled, she stopped and thought about it, wondering why she became so annoyed when she thought of Gwaltney upstairs in the nursery, laughing and relaxed as he played with his niece. Surely she was not jealous of a six-year-old!

After all, Gwaltney Harris meant nothing to her. She cared nothing that she was a married woman now. It was really best if her life did not change at all.

But, she realized as she looked around at the table, laden with expensive creamware and incredibly ornate silver, her life had totally, irrevocably changed. At home she had had her father, whom she loved dearly despite his constant, irritating attempts to get her properly wed, and Elizabeth. Dear Elizabeth, the only person in the world who truly understood her. She desperately missed her long talks with her sister already.

She was a married woman. And she had never felt so lonely in her life.

Chapter 11

Cordelia's mood did not improve the following morning, when she found herself eating breakfast alone. She sulked about the house, conscious that she should familiarize herself with the running of the household, yet unwilling to make the effort to be a dutiful wife when her husband would not even perform the simple courtesy of eating in her presence.

She discovered that the narrow staircase in her chamber descended to a back parlor, small and unimpressive compared to the large addition, but rather appealing in spite of its lack of grandeur. Gwaltney had evidently not bothered to replace the furniture in this chamber when he acquired the house, for the damask covering on the large easy chair was worn, and the Oriental carpet was threadbare. There was a glass-fronted bookcase filled with a variety of books, which she guessed had belonged to the previous owner of the house. She found a leather-bound copy of Shakespeare's sonnets and settled down on the worn fabric of the big chair to read, her feet dangling over the arm of the chair in a most unladylike fashion.

Her mood improved as she read, but she was still aware of an underlying sense of loneliness. Lovely though Shakespeare's sonnets were, they could not compensate for lack of human contact. When her sister was shown into the parlor by the butler, Cordelia dropped the book and jumped to her feet. "Elizabeth!" she cried joyfully.

Elizabeth returned her embrace with enthusiasm, but she seemed a little puzzled by her sister's obvious delight as she drew away and sat gracefully in a scuffed and scratched mahogany Chippendale chair. "Are you so lonely already, Cordelia?" she asked.

Cordelia hesitated, unwilling to discuss the matter. After all, she had promised Gwaltney she would pretend to be the loving wife. "Not at all," she responded. "I was simply pleased to see you."

"I had hoped your husband would be here so that I could get to know him better."

"I believe he is out supervising the slaves in the fields," Cordelia lied. In truth, she had no idea where he might be, nor did she care.

Elizabeth looked at her shrewdly. "You are not happy, I see."

Cordelia frowned. She should have known her sister would not be so readily convinced all was well with her. Elizabeth had always been able to see through her. "How do you know that?"

"Look at you," Elizabeth said, gesturing at her ugly gray gown. "You are still wearing your spectacles and those dreadful clothes. That gown is the most awful one you own. And you still have your hair drawn up that way."

Cordelia's hands flew to her hair in surprise. It had actually never occurred to her to arrange her hair differently. She had, after all, been wearing it this way for seven years now. And she had completely forgotten she could leave her spectacles off if she wanted to.

"You only dressed that way to drive off potential suitors," Elizabeth went on with relentless logic, "so now the only possible reason to wear such clothing is to drive your husband away. If you cared for his opinion at all, you would dress as attractively as possible."

Cordelia sighed. "You know I didn't want to marry him, Elizabeth."

"I know. But you weren't given a choice."

"Yes. But the fact is he didn't really want to marry me either."

"What?" Elizabeth said, puzzled. "That's absurd, Cordelia. Of course he wanted to marry you. He was courting you, wasn't he?"

Cordelia scowled. "He wanted a wife--any wife, as long as her breeding was respectable. He isn't interested in *me* in the least."

"Well, he knows nothing about you," Elizabeth pointed out reassuringly. "Perhaps when he gets to know you better...."

"He won't."

"He won't what?"

"He won't get to know me better. He has no plans of getting to know me at all. He told me yesterday that he wants a marriage of convenience, nothing more."

"You mean...." Elizabeth turned a delicate shade of pink.

"Yes. That is precisely what I mean. He has no interest in me whatsoever." Cordelia attempted a smile. "But perhaps it is just as well, since I have no interest in him either."

"Oh, Cordelia," Elizabeth whispered. "I am so sorry. What a dreadful situation for you to be caught in."

"I wasn't caught in it by accident," Cordelia said shortly. "He trapped me the way a fox snares a rabbit."

Elizabeth frowned. "I don't understand. Surely you realize that you bear some of the responsibility for what happened. You admitted, after all, that you kissed him back."

Cordelia stood up and stalked restlessly across the small chamber. "I know that was my fault, but I think he knew Father was watching us, Elizabeth. Why else would he have kissed me to begin with? I think he compromised me on purpose."

"You think he knew Father was there?"

"I'm certain of it."

"But that makes no sense," Elizabeth protested. "If Mr. Harris was trying to compromise you, why didn't he do it in public?"

"If he did it in public," Cordelia suggested, "then my reputation might have been damaged. He wanted a respectable wife, not one whose reputation had been besmirched. Besides, he wouldn't want people to think the only way he could win me was by compromising me."

"Father might have challenged him to a duel instead of forcing him to marry you," Elizabeth suggested, but her tone was dubious.

Cordelia snorted in an unladylike manner. "Mr. Harris would have to be the veriest fool to think that Father might challenge him to a duel. Even in his youth, Father was not noted for being hotheaded. And furthermore, it is widely known that Father couldn't shoot a tree three yards in front of him." She gave a long sigh. "I simply wish I knew why Father was there to begin with. My life was ruined that day."

Elizabeth stared at her a long moment, her eyes beginning to glitter. Anyone who did not know her well would have seen nothing but a demure, ladylike creature. But Cordelia could see the cracks in her composure. Elizabeth was decidedly distressed.

"What is it, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth stood up abruptly. "I have to go," she said hastily.

"But you just got here," Cordelia protested.

Elizabeth did not seem to hear her objection. She stood up abruptly and stalked

purposefully across the chamber, toward the door. "Excuse me, Cordelia. I need to talk to Father."

"But Elizabeth--"

Elizabeth looked back over her shoulder, resolute. "I will come see you again later in the week, I promise. But right now there is something I must do."

Elizabeth rode her gentle mare at a canter up the river road. Against her will her thoughts strayed to Jonathan.

I swear to you, I did not send your father out after Cordelia.

Jonathan had given his word that he had not sent Benjamin out after Cordelia. Jonathan would never have done such a thing after she had asked him not to, and he certainly wouldn't have lied about it. He simply couldn't have. It was impossible.

She trusted him.

And yet, how else could her father have known exactly where to find Cordelia?

Arriving at the Ashton plantation, she was pleased to find her father in his study, seated at his desk. "Hello, Papa," she said, bending and kissing him on the cheek.

Benjamin looked up from the papers he was scowling at, and his expression lightened. "Hello, Beth. Did you enjoy your visit with your sister?"

Elizabeth smiled guilelessly as she perched on the arm of his big leather chair. "I did indeed. I am delighted to see her so happy, Papa. I really feel her marriage to Mr. Harris was the best thing that could have happened to her."

Her father's jowly face creased in a smile. "I'm glad to hear that, child. I don't mind telling you I was concerned. She fought against marriage so long and so hard. But I suspected Mr. Harris might be the right man for her."

"You were right. She is simply glowing, Father. You were absolutely right to encourage her to marry him."

She stood up and began to tidy the papers on his desk, as she did every day. Ashton cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Well, it was a bit more than encouragement, m'dear. You see, your sister and Mr. Harris...."

He trailed off, plainly uncomfortable. Elizabeth widened her eyes in maidenly horror, as she knew her father would expect her to do. "Oh," she said. "Well, it has all turned out for the best, hasn't it?"

Her father smiled. "Yes, it appears it has."

She dropped a kiss on top of his head. "All thanks to you, Father."

She picked up a handful of books and headed for the bookcase. Behind her she heard her father mutter under his breath, "Thank heavens Jonathan told me where...."

A stab of pain went through her at this confirmation that Jonathan had been involved. Obviously he had sent her father out into the woods after Gwaltney and Cordelia. She remembered his voice, gentle and reassuring: *I swear to you, I did not send your father out after Cordelia.*

Just as she had suspected, he'd lied to her. And even worse, if Cordelia was right--and it seemed all too likely that she was--he'd conspired with Gwaltney to trap Cordelia.

Struggling to control her emotions, she opened the glass-doored bookcase and looked over her shoulder with a sweet, ingenuous smile. "I'm sorry, Father. Did you say something?"

"No," Ashton said hastily. "Nothing at all, my dear. Just going over the accounts."

Elizabeth felt tears sting her eyes as she placed the leather-bound books carefully into the bookcase. Until today, she would have trusted Jonathan with her life. But in order to win her hand, he had betrayed her trust. And then he had looked her in the eyes with his forthright, honest gaze ... and lied.

She did not for a moment doubt that he loved her. But she knew with a bleak certainty that she could never trust him again.

A few hours later, Jonathan walked eagerly into the parlor, his dark eyes lighting up at the sight of Elizabeth. He strode swiftly across the blue and crimson Oriental carpet and took her hand, pressing an ardent kiss to the back of it. "My dear," he said warmly, admiring her dainty hand and the enormous sapphire ring that adorned it, "your beauty is enhanced by that ring. It makes your eyes appear bluer than ever."

"Actually," Elizabeth said coolly, "I don't think it does a thing for me."

Jonathan glanced up, staring into her eyes with surprise and a little hurt. "I beg to differ, my dear."

"In fact," Elizabeth went on, ignoring with difficulty the pained expression in his beautiful dark eyes, "I wish to give it back to you."

Now Jonathan appeared truly shocked. "I beg your pardon?" he whispered at last, in a ragged voice that conveyed all too clearly how much she had hurt him. "Elizabeth, surely you don't mean...."

Summoning every shred of her rapidly fraying willpower, Elizabeth yanked the ring from her finger and held it out to him like a queen displeased with a gift from her subject. "Take it. I don't want it anymore."

"I don't understand."

Elizabeth lifted her head and looked straight into his eyes. "I don't like it," she said fiercely. "And I don't like you. And I've decided ... I've decided I don't want to marry you after all."

Stunned, Jonathan reached out automatically, taking the ring from her open palm. He stared at it for long moments, bewildered. "But Elizabeth," he whispered at last, clearly too wounded to marshal his pride, "I love you."

Elizabeth stiffly turned her back on him to conceal the tears in her own eyes. She could no longer bear to look at his agonized face. "Unfortunate for you," she said shortly, managing to control the quaver in her voice. "But that means nothing to me."

She did not turn back to face him. Only when he ran from the chamber, slamming the front door in hurt and fury on his way out, did she turn back from her contemplation of the fireplace. And then she sank into a chair and wept as though her heart was breaking.

As, indeed, it was.

Cordelia spent the remainder of the afternoon in her chamber, painting. She had been slightly hurt by her sister's abrupt departure. Without Elizabeth, she felt she had nothing to cling to, nothing at all. And so she painted pictures of home--the dear old brick house, the view of the river from her favorite spot on the bank, the small cabin she and Elizabeth had constructed from fallen branches when they were children which had long since vanished. She painted scenes of her childhood. And she wished desperately that she could go home.

At last, deciding she had wallowed in self-pity long enough, she rose from the table and

decided to walk about the formal garden. Perhaps she could determine what she wanted to do with her life, now that she was here forever.

The elaborate parterres at River's Edge were lovely, with straight, brick-lined paths that led between boxwood hedges forming diamond designs. Walking along the main path in the garden, she found herself heading for a rose-covered arbor. The fragrance that floated from the pink roses was delightful. But as she approached she became aware that somebody was already there. She paused, irresolute, as she heard Gwaltney's rumbling bass voice, tempted to flee back to the house.

"This is called a leaf, Mary. Can you say leaf?"

There was no answer.

"And this is a kind of flower called a rose. It's pretty, isn't it? Come here and smell it." A slight shuffling sound. "Doesn't it smell pretty?"

Still no answer.

"Here's a rose for you, Mary. Can you say rose?"

Despite herself, Cordelia crept a bit nearer. She walked as quietly as possible, but as she approached she saw Gwaltney's head snap around anyway. Nothing escaped the man. She supposed that was only to be expected for a man who had made his fortune in the wilds of western Virginia.

He regarded her warily. "Good afternoon," he said.

Cordelia noticed he did not invite her to sit. It was obvious she was not welcome in this small circle of affection. And she thought she knew why. "She doesn't talk, does she?"

A change came over Gwaltney's face. Ordinarily he seemed rather even-tempered, more amused by her shrewishness than offended by it, but every now and then he managed to look as haughty and remote as an emperor. This was one of those times. He looked at her as though she was a bit of dung on his immaculate knee breeches.

"Mary," he said without glancing at the child, "why don't you run on back to the house?"

Mary stood up obediently and started up the path. Cordelia stopped her by kneeling in her way. The little girl, she noticed, still wore the short, plain linen gown that children of both sexes wore until five or six, when they began wearing small but elaborate versions of the same clothing grownups wore. She guessed her approximation of the child's age as five was more or less correct.

"Just a moment, Mary," she said gently. "Don't you want to meet me?"

Mary paused a few feet away and regarded her intently.

"My name is Cordelia. I'm Gwaltney's new wife. Can you say Cordelia?"

The girl said nothing. Baffled, and uncertain how to befriend the child, Cordelia paused, then took another tack.

"That's fine. You don't have to say it. But why don't you take my hand?" She extended her hand, and, to her surprise, the little girl grasped it. Cordelia squeezed the little fingers gently.

"That's a very pretty rose you have," she said as she let the little girl's hand go.

Mary glanced down at the flower she held clutched in her chubby fingers, then held it up. As she lifted her right arm, her sleeve fell back, exposing a dreadful, puckered scar, clearly caused by a burn that ran along her upper arm. Cordelia stared at it a long moment, horrified by the pain the child must have suffered. Suddenly aware that Gwaltney was glowering at her, she hastily turned her attention back to the child, who was waiting patiently for her to sniff the flower.

“Oh, may I smell it?” Cordelia bent over and sniffed deeply. “My, that smells nice!” Delighted, the little girl grinned happily.

“It was nice to meet you,” Cordelia said softly. “Why don’t you go back to the house now? We’ll talk later.”

Mary nodded and trotted up the path toward the house, still clutching her rose like a treasure.

When Cordelia arose, she found Gwaltney regarding her with a peculiar expression, his forehead wrinkled as though something was puzzling him. Obviously her behavior toward Mary had not been what he had expected. She lifted an eyebrow. “May I sit?”

Shrugging, Gwaltney indicated the bench next to him. “As you wish.”

Cordelia sat, watching the little girl until she disappeared into the house. Then she turned to him. She knew she had to tread carefully, for she was walking on new ground in their relationship. She could not remember an interaction they had had that did not involve insults. “She doesn’t talk at all?”

Gwaltney hesitated, clearly reluctant to discuss the matter, then shook his head. “She has never spoken since she has been here.”

“Is she deaf?”

“No.”

“She is five years old?”

“Six.”

Cordelia frowned, refusing to be discouraged from the subject by his curt monosyllabic answers. “She seems intelligent enough. When I mentioned the flower, she looked right down at it, even though I didn’t point to it. It was obvious she understood the word. Why doesn’t she talk?”

“Why do you care?” Gwaltney countered. His voice sounded hard, as though he thought she was involving herself in something that was none of her business. She noticed he had intentionally avoided answering her question. Something about the sharp look he gave her made her suspect he knew perfectly well the reason Mary could not talk, but that he was eager to change the subject for some reason. She supposed he was being protective of his niece.

She had for the moment utterly forgotten she was supposed to be a shrew. Little wonder, after her callous words of the day before, that the wariness in his eyes was more pronounced than ever. He had little reason to trust her, and every reason to dislike her.

“I am your wife now,” she said carefully, “and you told me you wanted me to act the part of a proper wife. I assumed that meant I am to act in the role of a surrogate mother to your niece.”

“Your assumption was wrong,” Gwaltney said shortly. “I want you to have nothing to do with the child. Nothing at all. Do you understand?”

“No. If we will both be living here....”

“She is my responsibility and mine alone. I do not want you to have anything to do with her.”

“But....”

“She is, after all, lower class,” Gwaltney went on savagely. “The daughter of a cooper, nothing more. Hardly worthy to touch your skirts.”

“She is only a child,” Cordelia protested. “I do not hold her father’s occupation against her.”

“And yet you hold my father’s occupation against me? Don’t be absurd, mistress. Of course you despise her for her origins, just as you despise me. I won’t have you sneering at my sister’s child and giving her ideas about her proper status in life. Do you hear me? I won’t tolerate it, damn you!”

His voice had risen in fury, and Cordelia stood up abruptly, deciding it would be best to feign surrender. She had never seen Gwaltney so angry. It was obvious he was highly protective of the child, and she could not blame him. In just those few moments when she had talked to Mary, the child had somehow slipped under her defenses. She was a very endearing little girl.

“As you wish,” she said tonelessly. “If you want me to leave her alone I will.”

Gwaltney nodded shortly.

“Excuse me, please.” Cordelia stalked away from him, which had the fortunate effect of concealing her rebellious expression. She was not going to ignore Mary and pretend she didn’t exist, regardless of Gwaltney’s wishes. She simply could not behave in such a fashion. How would the child react to having someone in the household who never spoke to her? Surely she would feel rejected and hurt by what would be, to her, Cordelia’s inexplicable actions.

Besides, it was impossible to expect her to live here the rest of her life without ever forming any emotional connections. The thought was unbearable. She was already lonely, and she needed someone to care for. Perhaps Mary could be that person.

She remembered her half-formed, long-ago dreams of having children. Dreams that James Spencer had ripped from her. Dreams that she had long ago given up in the expectation of living out her life alone. And yet now she had a ready-made daughter. Regardless of the child’s origins, Mary was her responsibility now.

Whether Gwaltney agreed or not.

Chapter 12

Gwaltney did not appear at dinner again that evening. Cordelia started to sit down at the gleaming walnut table, then, annoyed by her husband’s continued absences, abruptly decided against it. “Where is Mr. Harris?” she inquired of the slave who was ladling peanut soup into an ivory-hued creamware bowl.

The slave paused. “Mr. ’Arris?”

“Yes, Mr. Harris. My husband. Doesn’t he ever eat in his own dining chamber?”

The elderly black man looked anxious. “Not that I know of, mistress.”

That was slightly reassuring. Perhaps, Cordelia reasoned, he had not been eating dinner with her because he simply was not comfortable amid all this grandeur. After all, the man had not been brought up to eat off creamware. Perhaps his failure to eat with her signified more his discomfort with good silver and porcelain than that he despised her.

She wondered why it mattered to her.

“In that case,” she said shortly, “I don’t believe I’ll eat here, either.”

Walking from the chamber and leaving the slave with his mouth hanging open, she made

a thorough search of the rambling house, but she could find neither Gwaltney nor Mary. At last she accosted the butler, a white-haired, wrinkled slave named Abraham, and demanded to know Gwaltney's whereabouts.

The butler looked as astounded by her questions as the footman in the dining chamber had. Apparently the slaves were unaccustomed to having Gwaltney's actions questioned. Reluctantly, he admitted, "I believe 'e's in the garden, mistress."

A bit puzzled, Cordelia walked purposefully toward the garden. Didn't the man ever stay indoors? No wonder, she thought ruefully, that his skin was so very bronzed. If she began eating in the garden with him, she would no doubt become as brown as he very shortly.

Rather to her surprise, Gwaltney and Mary were seated on a blanket on the lawn, eating a picnic supper. It was a cozy domestic scene, and Cordelia halted a few feet away, a trifle bemused. They looked for all the world like a father and daughter enjoying the warm summer evening. There seemed to be an easy camaraderie between them, with Gwaltney appearing to completely understand the little girl despite her refusal to speak.

Completing the little family circle was the black-spotted dog she had seen the day she arrived. As she approached, he lifted his head, regarding her with watchful eyes. His tail did not wag, but neither did he show his teeth. He looked wary rather than unfriendly ... which, she thought wryly, was more than she could say for her husband.

Gwaltney looked up as she approached, and his eyebrows drew together in a quick frown. Ashamed of her suspicious thoughts, Cordelia opened her mouth, intending to say something conciliatory, even friendly, but she had played the part of the shrew for too many years. She was no longer accustomed to being polite. "I am beginning to tire of eating by myself," she said tartly. "I am accustomed to company when I eat."

"You had best accustom yourself to eating alone," Gwaltney said mildly. "I eat with my niece."

"Then I will eat here," Cordelia said, settling onto the blanket before he could recover from his surprise enough to object.

Gwaltney seemed rather taken aback. No doubt he had not been expecting a lady to be willing to get grass stains on her skirts. Of course, Cordelia cared little enough for any of her gowns--most of them were so ugly that grass stains could only improve them. Apparently Gwaltney realized this, for he seemed to regain his equilibrium. He spoke courteously but firmly. "There is only enough here for two, I'm afraid."

Cordelia matched his polite tone, understanding he did not wish them to argue in front of the child. "The slaves can bring more, I am certain."

Gwaltney paused. At last he acquiesced with a short nod. The attending slave brought Cordelia a plate heaped with excellently prepared food.

As Cordelia ate, she noticed the dog watching her more alertly than ever. Seeing an opportunity for conversation, she nodded in his direction. "I've never seen a dog quite like that before. What is his name?"

Apparently startled that she wished to talk, Gwaltney paused for a long moment. "Django. He is a coach dog. Some people call them plum pudding dogs."

"Django," Cordelia repeated, trying out the unfamiliar syllables. "What an odd name."

"It's a Gypsy name," Gwaltney explained. "This type of dog is often found traveling with Gypsies; in fact, some people believe the Gypsies were responsible for introducing them into England. At any rate, when I found him he was as ragged and wild as any Gypsy ever was."

“He was a stray, then?”

Gwaltney nodded. “I found him not long after I moved here. He was wandering about in the woods, stealing food from my slaves. He was only half-grown, and, if you can believe it, thinner than he is now.”

Cordelia looked at the dog. Beneath the short-haired white and black coat, the dog was thin, but it appeared to be his natural build, rather than due to any lack of food. There was a certain appearance of muscle, a depth to his chest, suggesting he was a rather athletic dog. “How did you get him to trust you?”

“Simple. I offered him food. It’s a sure way to any animal’s heart. That is what I like about dogs. They are easy to befriend, and, once you have befriended them, absolutely loyal. It’s unfortunate the same cannot be said for people.”

Apparently hearing a wistful note in his master’s voice, the dog whined and pressed his head against Gwaltney’s knee. Gwaltney dropped a casual hand on the dog’s head, scratching behind his ears, and he fell silent.

Cordelia ate the rest of her ham in silence. But she was unable to help feeling a pang of pity for Gwaltney, so alien in the world in which he lived that he considered a dog to be one of his best friends.

That night, as Cordelia was preparing for bed, there was an authoritative rap on the door. Hastily she caught up her glasses and perched them on her nose. She was uncertain why she was so bent on maintaining her disguise, now that she was married, but she did not seem able to give up the masquerade. “Come in,” she called.

She was not entirely surprised when the door opened to reveal her husband. She refused to take a step back, only regarded him with an unfriendly glare. “Do you need something?”

Gwaltney’s eyes roved over her, pausing as his gaze fell on her long, unbound hair. She thought she saw him give a start. “I thought it never came down.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Your hair. I thought perhaps you slept with it up in a bun.”

Her hands flew self-consciously to her hair as she remembered that it was tumbling loose around her shoulders. She had just unpinned it a few moments before. “I brush it every evening and morning,” she snapped, wondering why she should be so unaccountably annoyed by his remark. It was, after all, entirely irrational for her to be annoyed. She *wanted* him to see her as an unattractive, spinsterish shrew, for all that she was technically his wife. She had been careless to permit him to come in while her hair was unbound.

She didn’t want him to see her as a woman at all.

Gwaltney was still looking at her with that odd, considering expression, and she felt unaccountably nervous. “What do you *want*?” she demanded in her most acerbic tone.

Gwaltney seemed to come to himself with a start. “What I want,” he said with a hint of steel in his voice, “is for you to stay away from my niece. I thought I made that clear this afternoon.”

“Surely you don’t expect me to eat alone at every meal.”

“I eat with my niece, not with you.”

“I will be happy to eat with both of you.”

“That is unacceptable,” Gwaltney said sharply. She noticed with surprise that his voice was rising again. Ordinarily he seemed so calm, so unruffled by any event, that it surprised her

how easily he was riled over the subject of his niece. "I want you to leave her alone."

Cordelia regarded him suspiciously through narrowed eyes. "She *is* your daughter, isn't she?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Mary. She's your daughter."

Gwaltney sighed. "I explained this to you already. She is my sister's child."

"Then why are you so protective of her? No, I think she is your natural daughter."

Gwaltney stepped forward, his eyes blazing with fury. Cordelia took an involuntary step back, startled and intimidated by his expression. "How dare you suggest such a thing?" he growled.

Cordelia understood his defensiveness, for she could not deny she held Gwaltney's origins against him, looking down on him because of his lowly birth. And yet, although she knew it was irrational, it was almost impossible for her to scorn that charming, adorable little girl because of an accident of birth. Regardless of the child's origin, she could not be held accountable for the circumstances surrounding her birth. If Mary was illegitimate, it was the fault of her parents.

But the rage on Gwaltney's face only made her more suspicious the little girl was in fact his daughter.

"I am sorry," she said at last, struggling for a more conciliatory tone. "But you and she are so much alike."

Gwaltney looked at her through narrowed eyes for a long moment, then he made an obvious effort to control himself. Some of the fury left his features. "My sister and I looked a great deal alike," he said, more calmly. "It is not surprising that Mary resembles me."

Cordelia hesitated, then decided to take advantage of his change in mood to obtain information about the little girl. "What happened to your sister?"

She saw the flash of sorrow in his eyes, quickly veiled. "She died of a stomach ailment."

"I'm so sorry. What happened to Mary's father?"

"Her father had died not long before."

"I see. So you took her in after your sister died."

Gwaltney shook his head. She saw the sorrow deep in his eyes. "She lived with her Aunt Margaret, her father's sister, for some time. But when I returned to this part of Virginia..." He hesitated and his steady gaze wavered. "Margaret wanted to go to England, so I took Mary."

"So her nearest relative besides you lives in England?"

"No. Margaret's ship sank on the way to England. There were no survivors."

Cordelia mulled this over for a few moments. "Mary has lost a great many people in her life, then, has she not?"

Gwaltney barely inclined his head.

"I see why you are so determined to keep us apart," she said gently. "You're afraid I might hurt her. And you don't want her to be hurt anymore. Is that it?"

Gwaltney hesitated. "She has been hurt enough," he said at last, softly.

He was standing a little closer to her than she would have liked, and again she became aware of how masculine, of how *attractive*, he was. His eyes glowed amber in the candlelight, and his features were thrown into relief by the light, making the harsh planes and angles of his face even more pronounced than usual.

More attractive to her than his looks, however, was his determination to protect an

innocent child. She found that she respected his motives, respected his fierce desire to keep Mary safe from the evils of the world.

Cordelia took a deep breath. "Gwaltney, I would never hurt a child deliberately."

Gwaltney looked at her a long moment. "I wish," he said softly, almost to himself, "that I could be certain of that."

Annoyed, she narrowed her eyes at him, then turned her back. Staring at her reflection in the looking glass, she began to brush out her hair. She was aware of his hazel eyes in the mirror watching her every move. "You don't trust many people, do you?" she inquired.

"Most people are not trustworthy."

"What a pleasant attitude to go through life with."

"As opposed to yours," he said with ironic amusement.

Her eyes met his in the mirror. "Why do you feel compelled to turn every comment I make into a criticism of my behavior?"

Gwaltney shrugged. "Perhaps if your behavior were more ladylike I would not be so inclined to criticize."

Cordelia snorted. "I doubt you would know ladylike behavior if you saw it. How many *ladies* have you met?"

She saw the curve of his mouth in the looking glass. "None, I'm sorry to say."

She flinched involuntarily at the criticism.

"I struck a nerve, I see."

"Not at all," she said stiffly. "I brushed through a snarl in my hair. It hurt."

"Tell me something, Cordelia." He took a step closer to her. His eyes locked on hers in the mirror. "Do you really consider yourself to be a lady?"

She lifted her chin as she placed the brush on the table and began deftly plaiting her hair. "I am the daughter of a respected planter."

"And did your father approve of your behavior?"

Her eyes flickered away from his. "No," she said softly, compelled by her innate honesty to answer truthfully. "Not in the least."

"Then if your father thought your behavior was poor, can you tell me why I should trust you to behave as a suitable model for my niece?"

Cordelia's hands stilled. She stared at the dressing table and made no answer. There was nothing she could say, for she knew he was right. She was hardly a suitable example for a little girl.

"I see we agree," Gwaltney said.

Bleakly, she nodded. She scarcely noticed when he quietly left the chamber.

After their conversation, Gwaltney escaped to the lawn, where he walked about for a while, enjoying the cool night air. And thinking about his wife's unexpectedly gorgeous mane of hair.

Her hair. God, he couldn't get it out of his mind. She had worn it up in that horrid, unfashionable bun ever since he'd known her, and he had thought of it as an indefinite shade of dark brown. When he had seen it down around her shoulders, a burnished, waving mass of dark bronze shot through with cinnamon-red highlights, he had felt his mouth hanging open. It had been all he could do to remember why he'd gone to her chamber in the first place.

He strongly suspected he had made a fool of himself staring at her hair. And that was all

he needed, for her to realize she had an effect on him, and a powerful effect at that. No doubt she'd see her advantage and keep wearing her hair down, just to throw him off.

No, he reflected, that was damned unlikely. Because surely she had seen in his expression that he wanted to run his hands through it, caress it, and bury his face in the silken strands. He'd never seen such beautiful hair in his life. And if there was one thing Cordelia was desperate to avoid, it was his callused, unworthy hands on her person.

Of course, he reflected, he'd thought he had no desire to touch her either. He had seen nothing attractive in her face or figure. And now, suddenly, it was all he could do to restrain himself. For the first time he'd seen Cordelia as a woman, and he didn't care for it. He couldn't trust Cordelia. He couldn't afford to, for Mary's sake.

The last thing Mary needed, he thought soberly, was another woman who pretended to love her and then hurt her. Cordelia could not be trusted with his emotionally fragile niece. No woman could. Mary was his responsibility and his alone, and he had to ensure that Cordelia did not get the opportunity to hurt her. He could not permit the slight softening of feeling he had involuntarily experienced toward her this afternoon, when she was so unexpectedly gentle with Mary, to confuse him. Cordelia was harsh and unkind. She could not be trusted.

He remembered the stark hurt in her eyes this evening, when he had pointed out her unsuitability as a role model, and suppressed his unwanted sympathy. Cordelia might be lonely, but she was not a lady, and Mary would be better served if Cordelia kept her distance.

And yet he had been thinking lustful thoughts about the woman ... or at the least her hair. He sighed and shut his eyes against the memory of that burnished mass of mahogany. Tomorrow she'd put it up in a bun again, and he would be able to forget how incredibly beautiful it was.

Thank God, he thought, there was nothing at all attractive about the woman besides her hair.

Chapter 13

"You seem a bit quiet tonight, my dear," Benjamin Ashton remarked the next evening at dinner. "Are you feeling quite well?"

Elizabeth looked up from her morose contemplation of her full plate and gave a wan smile. "Yes, Father. I am fine." As if to prove the point, she raised a goblet of wine to her lips.

Benjamin looked at her with fatherly anxiety. "I had another visit from Jonathan Powell today," he said with false casualness.

Elizabeth, caught in the act of swallowing, choked and sputtered. For the first time in her graceful existence, wine sprayed from her mouth onto the spotless linen tablecloth as she gasped for breath. Alarmed, Benjamin started from his chair, but she waved him back.

"I'm fine, Father," she said a little breathlessly. "Just fine. But I'm terribly sorry about...." She waved a hand at the red stain on the tablecloth.

"If you're fine," Benjamin said, "then why on earth did you break off your engagement with young Powell?"

Elizabeth looked affectionately across at her father. Despite her father's blustering ways, she knew he loved his children. And she had known how disappointed he would be when he discovered she had broken her betrothal. Not only was Jonathan Powell rich and eligible, but her father thought highly of him. "I simply decided he wasn't the right man for me, Father."

"And yet you thought he was the right man three weeks ago?"

Elizabeth lowered her eyes. It was a gesture she had perfected long ago, the demure lowering of long golden lashes over her eyes to hide her thoughts--to conceal unladylike rebellion or private sorrow. She could not permit her father to see the anguish in her eyes, because he would then know how unhappy she was at being forced to break off her engagement. And then he would surely wonder why Jonathan Powell was not the "right man."

"I made a mistake, Father," she said in a perfectly even tone. "I'm very sorry."

Benjamin studied her thoughtfully for a moment. "Are you quite certain you aren't trying to emulate your sister's ways?"

She looked up abruptly. "Absolutely," she said, a bit more sharply than she had intended. No, she was nothing like Cordelia, nothing at all. She would never hide behind a mask of spinsterhood, too frightened to risk loving another person. She wanted nothing more out of life than a loving husband, children, and a happy home. And she had been certain, so certain, that Jonathan Powell could give her all those things.

And yet, she reminded herself, she had obviously been wrong. A man who would intentionally force her sister into a compromising situation just so he could marry Elizabeth was not a man she could respect. And a man who lied was even worse.

Jonathan was dishonest and untrustworthy.

She was really much better off without him.

"No," she said again. "I'm not becoming a shrew, Father. I simply don't want to marry Jonathan Powell."

Benjamin looked at her for a long moment, then said tentatively, "I wondered if perhaps you overheard...."

Elizabeth felt a flicker of trepidation. She didn't want her father to blame himself for Jonathan's misdeeds or to blame himself for her failure to find happiness. She flashed him an innocent smile. "Overheard what, Father?"

"Er...." She saw him relax slightly as he concluded she hadn't overheard his remark about Jonathan the day before. "Well, nothing, really, my dear. I'm just concerned.... You don't somehow think young Jonathan had anything to do with Cordelia's marriage, do you?"

Elizabeth forced herself to look blank. "I don't understand, Father."

"Well ... you know Mr. Harris and Jonathan are friends."

"Yes. I know Jonathan encouraged Mr. Harris to press his suit. But I don't blame Jonathan for that. Cordelia seems...." She choked slightly on the lie. "She seems very happy. I want that kind of happiness for myself, Father. I want to marry a man who will make me happy. I've simply come to realize Jonathan isn't that man."

The tension went out of Benjamin's shoulders, and he gave her a beaming smile. "Well, we'll see that you marry the man of your choice, my dear. I'm confident you can marry whomever you choose. After all, we've successfully married off your sister, even though I'd long ago despaired of doing so. Surely we can find a husband for you."

But I found a husband, Elizabeth wanted to say. I found the man I wanted--and I let him go.

She looked down at her left hand, which looked appallingly bare without the sapphire ring she had so proudly worn for three weeks, and she decided it was wisest to say nothing at all.

"I can't understand it," Jonathan Powell said the next day. He was leaning despondently on a split-rail fence, his shoulders bent as though the weight of the world pressed down onto them. "Three weeks ago she seemed so happy when I asked her to marry me. And then--"

Gwaltney regarded his friend with sympathy, if not understanding. He himself had never been in love, nor did he intend to be. "Didn't she give you any reason why she broke off your engagement?"

"She said she didn't love me. No, she said she didn't even *like* me. And she gave the ring back to me. She all but threw it in my face. I just don't understand it."

Gwaltney frowned slightly. "That is peculiar," he agreed at last. "It certainly appeared to me that she loved you the last time I saw you together." He remembered Elizabeth and Jonathan standing together at his wedding. It had seemed as though they had eyes for nothing but each other. He was certain Elizabeth had been sincerely in love with his friend.

"I thought so," Jonathan said wretchedly. "Apparently we were both wrong."

"I can't accept that," Gwaltney countered. "If she didn't love you, then what was her motivation for agreeing to marry you in the first place? Money, or perhaps position, is the only obvious reason. But you've suffered no reverses of late, have you?"

Jonathan shook his head.

"Then it seems evident she loved you. And we must assume she still does. Surely even the most fickle of women could not fall out of love in three short weeks. And I do not believe that Elizabeth Ashton is the most fickle of women."

"Perhaps shrewishness runs in the family," Jonathan said gloomily.

Gwaltney thought of the demure, gentle blonde, so totally unlike her sister, and he patted his friend awkwardly on the shoulder. "I hardly think so, Jon. I believe something else is bothering her. You need to find out what that something could be."

For the first time Jonathan appeared to brighten. He lifted his head and looked at Gwaltney with a light in his eyes. "You're married to her sister," he said.

"Unfortunately, yes. What has that to do with anything?"

"Can't you prevail upon Cordelia to find out what is bothering Elizabeth?"

It was Gwaltney's turn to look uncomfortable. "Jonathan ... surely you realize Cordelia and I are not exactly close."

Jonathan looked at him oddly. "You've been married to the woman less than a week. Is she already tired of the sight of you?"

"In a manner of speaking. The fact is that she and I have, er, decided to have a marriage of, well, convenience only."

Jonathan stared at him in horror. "You're joking. You assured me you were going to try to make this marriage work."

"It was a foolish notion," Gwaltney said shortly.

"But Gwaltney, *why*?"

"You know I married for position only, and I had little enough choice after that scene in the woods. But...." He remembered the way Cordelia had spoken to Mary, the unexpected gentleness in her voice, and struggled to harden his heart against her, forcing himself to remember what she had said to him. *Filthy, callused hands*. Forcing himself to remember that

she despised him. "She doesn't care for me, and I can't say I'm fond of her either. I'm certainly not going to bed her." He could not bring himself to confess, even to his best friend, that Cordelia had summarily rejected him. It was too humiliating to discuss.

"My God," Jonathan whispered. He had gone ashen. "No wonder. Elizabeth must think it's my fault--and it is. Oh, God, it is."

"What are you talking about?"

Jonathan turned to him with a furious expression on his face. "You son of a bitch, how could you do this to her? How could you do this to her sister?"

Gwaltney actually took a step back at the naked fury on his friend's features. "I beg your pardon?" he said, unable to believe he'd heard correctly. Never before had Jonathan cursed at him. With him, surely, but not at him.

"Why didn't you tell me you had no intention of making this a real marriage, you bastard?"

Gwaltney stared at him in rapidly mounting shock. "I told you, I changed my mind. Jonathan, what...?"

Jonathan turned his back and stalked away. Baffled by his friend's behavior, Gwaltney called after him, "Jonathan, what are you...?"

"Go to hell."

Yanking himself out of his startled state of shock, Gwaltney took two long strides, catching up with Jonathan, and placed a none too gentle hand on his friend's shoulder, spinning him around. "Just a moment," he said in a harsh tone he had never before used with his friend. "You cannot call me names, curse at me, and then simply walk away. What the hell is wrong with you, Jon?"

Jonathan shook his hand off angrily. "Elizabeth must be beside herself," he said angrily. "She wanted me to find Cordelia a husband. I assured her you would be a good husband, that you would make Cordelia happy. And now you tell me you aren't even making the attempt."

Gwaltney looked at him thoughtfully. He had been aware that Jonathan had some ulterior motive in encouraging him to marry Cordelia. Once he had realized Jonathan was in love with Elizabeth, he'd even suspected Jonathan's actions had been at Elizabeth's urging. But it had never occurred to him that Elizabeth might blame Jonathan if their marriage did not go smoothly.

"I don't see how she can blame you," he said calmly. "If anyone is to blame, it is Cordelia herself. Surely no man could be expected to bed *her*."

Jonathan suddenly swung wildly at him. Gwaltney's quick reflexes, which had saved his life more than once in the wilds of western Virginia, saved him from a black eye. He ducked, then caught his friend's wrist and twisted, hard. Jonathan grunted in pain.

"Jonathan," he said, holding his friend immobile, "whatever made you so certain I would succeed in having a real marriage with Cordelia?"

"Let go of my hand," Jonathan gritted between his teeth.

"Only if you promise not to strike at me again."

Jonathan nodded jerkily, clearly in pain, and Gwaltney released him without further comment. "Perhaps it was wishful thinking," Jonathan said, rubbing his wrist ruefully, "but I can see how lonely you are."

"I am not lonely," Gwaltney retorted, proudly but untruthfully. "I have Mary."

Jonathan looked at him ruefully. "Gwaltney, no one loves Mary more than I do. But don't you think I know that the love and adoration of a six-year-old isn't the same as having a woman

love you? And after you said you found Cordelia fascinating.”

“As I recall, what I said was that she is a curiosity.”

“I thought perhaps that was a positive sign.” He shook his head. “Gwaltney, I’m sorry I lost my temper. I’m sorry, more than I can say, that I said such things to you. But Elizabeth wanted me to find a husband for Cordelia, someone she had a chance of developing a relationship with. Someone who could give her a chance at happiness.”

“And I was the only man you believed would be desperate enough.”

Jonathan laughed, a short bitter sound. “I must have been insane even to consider it. Elizabeth swears that her sister isn’t as bad as she leads people to believe, but no man has ever been known to spend more than twenty minutes in her company. I cannot believe I was foolish enough to imagine you and she might get along. I was deluding myself. And Elizabeth probably thinks I intentionally deluded her as well.”

“And you think that is why she broke off your engagement?”

“What other reason could there be?”

Gwaltney frowned in thought. “Suppose,” he said slowly, “that my lovely bride and I were to reconcile. What then?”

Jonathan gaped at him a long moment before finding his voice. “Gwaltney! You can’t mean it!”

“And further suppose,” Gwaltney went on, “that Elizabeth could be convinced that you were the one who succeeded in bringing us together. Do you suppose she might be pleased?”

“Pleased? *Pleased*? Gwaltney, her sister means everything to her. She would take me back, I know she would.” He hesitated in his burst of excitement. “But....”

“What?”

“Gwaltney, it’s noble of you to pretend that all is well with your marriage in order to make mine possible. But you can’t speak for Cordelia. Regardless of whether you’re willing to make your marriage work, what about her?”

Gwaltney affected a hurt expression. “Are you suggesting I’m not handsome enough to gain the woman’s affections, Jon?”

Jonathan studied his friend carefully. With his blunt cheekbones and jutting chin, Gwaltney was handsome, in an extremely masculine way. And his eyes were an astounding color that would make any woman look twice. But Jonathan had rarely seen those eyes exert their seductive influence on a woman of the gentry. Generally speaking, Gwaltney only exerted his charms around lightskirts.

Cordelia Ashton Harris was definitely not a lightskirts.

“It’s not a question of your looks,” Jonathan said at last. “I suppose you’re handsome enough, although....” He grinned wryly. “You aren’t my type. I prefer blondes, as you well know. It’s simply that it sounds as though Cordelia has made up her mind to dislike you. As she dislikes all men, it seems. Do you really think you can win her affection?”

“Absolutely.”

When Jonathan still looked skeptical, Gwaltney went on, “Look at it this way, Jon. I married Cordelia in order to obtain respectability. But we will have to go out in public. How much respectability will I have gained if she makes it clear that she hates me? People will only laugh at me the more, saying I married above myself and that my wife knows it. Cordelia promised me she would pretend to be a good wife--but I am not sure the woman knows the meaning of the word discretion. In fact, I’m certain she does not. I would feel more secure, more

confident of her behavior in public, if she truly cared for me.”

“I hadn’t thought of it in that way, but you’re right.” Jonathan’s expression had lightened. For the first time in days, he felt hopeful. “I can hardly wait to tell Elizabeth.”

“Good Lord, don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Wait until I’ve won Cordelia’s affections. Then tell her. And I will be happy to tell her that you are the one who convinced me of the error of my ways.”

“But Gwaltney, suppose Elizabeth meets someone else?”

“Don’t be absurd. I saw the way she looked at you at our wedding. There is no one else for her. Be patient, Jonathan. It won’t take me long to win my bride. She has never been wooed before, and she will be an easy target. In a week, or at the most two, you will be able to tell Elizabeth that we are well on our way to becoming a happy couple.”

“Do you have a moment?”

Startled once again by the unexpected sound of her husband’s deep voice, Cordelia spun around. She had been peacefully walking in the garden, listening to the birds singing, and admiring the flowers that grew amidst the boxwoods. The slaves had informed her that Mr. Harris had ridden to Williamsburg this morning, and she was surprised to see him back so soon. The simple truth was she had rather hoped he would be gone for a few days. Or, preferably, a few weeks.

“I am not busy,” she said, then, annoyed by the thought that he might believe she had been idling away the afternoon waiting for him, added tartly, “As you can plainly see.”

Gwaltney did not betray any irritation at her snappish tone by so much as the twitch of an eyelash. “I have something for you,” he said softly.

Cordelia looked at him warily, puzzled by the unusually gentle tone of his voice. At the rumbling, almost seductive tone, an odd prickling sensation rushed along her nerves, followed by a defensive and slightly mistrustful thought: *He’s up to something.*

“An annulment, perhaps?” she suggested pleasantly.

She saw his mouth quirk, whether with amusement or annoyance she was uncertain. “Not at all,” he said. “I brought you a present.”

Cordelia’s chin jerked up, and she stared at him in shock. Gwaltney grinned at her startled expression, obviously feeling he had scored a point. He held out the paper-wrapped parcel.

“Would you care to see it?”

Aware that she had lost some ground in their battle of wills, Cordelia reacted with cold anger. “Why would I want to see it? I want nothing from you except to be left alone.”

She could see no anger, no hurt on his sharply etched features as he said calmly, “But you see, I went to Williamsburg solely to get you a present. Surely you would not refuse to open it.”

She was tempted to refuse, just to make certain he knew just how shrewish she could be, but her curiosity got the better of her. Why had her husband gone all the way to Williamsburg to get her a present? What was he up to?

And what was in the package?

Taking the parcel from his hands, she turned it over warily, as though looking for hidden traps. “What exactly is this?” she inquired suspiciously.

“What do you think it might be?”

“A snake,” she speculated. “A poisonous one.”

She saw the gleam of humor in his beautiful eyes. "Perhaps next time."

Trying to refrain from any appearance of eagerness, she tore the paper wrapping off and found he had selected a boudoir box, a box in which ladies kept their cosmetics and jewelry. "It's lovely!" she exclaimed, almost involuntarily, forgetting her habitual shrewishness as she ran her fingers over the box, caressing the smooth, satiny fruitwood, then opening it and fingering the fine silk which lined it.

"I'm glad you like it."

"I do," she said, her eyes aglow as she looked at the box. "I've never had so fine a boudoir box."

"Then you admit a wheelwright's son can have good taste?"

His sharp question broke the spell she had fallen under. Cordelia looked at him askance, startled by his bitterness. Her childlike delight in the gift faded. "Yes," she said at last, without a trace of shrewishness. "I believe I can honestly say you have excellent taste."

"I'm glad," Gwaltney said, pushing away his animosity with an obvious effort and giving her a forced smile. He added with elaborate casualness, "I also brought you a few things to put in the box--cosmetics and so forth."

Cordelia eyed him warily, beginning to suspect he had bought the box solely as a way of getting her to wear cosmetics. "I don't wear powder," she said ominously.

"I can understand that," Gwaltney said hastily. "After all, I don't wear a wig."

Slightly diverted, and realizing that he understood, she nodded. "Yes, I've noticed that. Why not?"

"Simple. I don't care for lice."

It was true that wigs, which were habitually only cleaned once a week, almost invariably harbored lice and fleas. And since they were cleaned only with sand, the cleanings did little to rid them of the vermin. But Cordelia thought it odd that Gwaltney, who had lived in the wilderness for ten years, was so fastidious. Surely he was no stranger to lice. Perhaps, though, that was the reason he avoided them now.

"I understand why you don't care for makeup for everyday use," he said coaxingly, "but we've been invited to a rout. Surely you'll want to wear powder."

"A rout?"

"Yes. A day-long affair, with horse racing during the day and dancing at night. The Greysons were kind enough to invite us."

"Edward and Jennifer Greyson?"

Gwaltney nodded.

"I scarcely know them. I presume they are friends of yours?"

"Hardly," Gwaltney said, unable to disguise the scorn that curled in his voice. "They have never before asked me to their home. I imagine they have heard of our marriage and are interested in nothing more than the gossip surrounding it."

Cordelia looked at him, seeing the bitterness he always struggled to hide. He had never been invited to the Greyson home ... and now that he had married her he was suddenly welcome. And probably just as fodder for gossip.

"It may not be exactly what you think," she said carefully. "The Greysons have been subjects of gossip themselves in the past. Have you heard any of it?"

"I am rarely privy to gossip."

"Edward Greyson married Jennifer--who is his second wife, by the way--who was

nothing more than a tavern maid at the time. He created a terrific scandal. But Jennifer is an accepted part of society now.”

“Interesting.” Gwaltney dismissed the Greysons’ motives with a shrug. “I also took the liberty of having the milliner make up a few gowns for you.”

“But surely I’ll need to be fitted.”

“I took one of your old gowns along,” Gwaltney said, grinning with unrepentant triumph. “The new ones will fit well enough, I imagine. And when they get here, I’ll expect you to give your old ones to the slaves. Or burn them.”

Cordelia bristled. “How dare you!”

“Cordelia, surely you know your old gowns have no redeeming qualities whatsoever. They are not even remotely suitable for your place in society. I won’t tolerate you wearing them any longer.”

“Who are you to tell me what I may do?”

Gwaltney appeared unperturbed by her acerbic tone. His grin widened. “Your husband.”

His obvious amusement annoyed her further, and she frowned. “I will wear anything I wish, thank you. It is not for you to choose my gowns.”

Gwaltney raised an eyebrow and gazed at her gown. “Are you really so attached to that fashion, mistress?”

To her irritation, she felt a blush running up her cheeks. He was, of course, correct. Her gowns were all perfectly hideous, and not at all appropriate for her station in life. And yet ... she had hidden behind this facade so long she was reluctant to abandon it now.

“I *like* this fashion.”

Gwaltney snorted. “Then you have the most singularly appalling taste I have ever encountered.”

“Who are you to criticize my taste?” she snapped.

A look of remorse, which she was certain was feigned, settled onto his features. “I apologize,” he said meekly. “I take back what I said.”

She inclined her head. “Thank you.”

“I can’t criticize your taste,” he went on, “because you haven’t any.”

She stared at him a long moment, infuriated by his coolly amused rejoinder. For a moment she considered smashing the boudoir box to the ground and grinding it beneath her heel, but she couldn’t bring herself to destroy something so lovely. At any rate, such behavior was beneath her. She wondered with annoyance how he managed to make her act like a child so readily.

“Don’t concern yourself, Cordelia,” Gwaltney said. She looked up and saw the unholy light of amusement dancing in his eyes. “Unlike you, *I* have excellent taste. I think you will like the gowns.”

“I would have preferred to choose them,” she said stiffly.

“Fortunately I know what you like. Gray, linen, and ugly.”

“Are you saying you ordered ugly gray gowns?” she said with disbelief.

He grinned. “Are you saying you’re interested?”

“Absolutely not,” she said sharply. “I don’t care in the slightest what you purchased.”

“Indeed,” he returned. “Then you won’t mind waiting a week to find out what they look like.”

“A week?” she said involuntarily, and could have bitten her tongue at the look of

satisfaction on his face.

“A week,” he repeated. “Surely you can wait that long.”

“Of course,” she said stiffly, thinking privately that a week was a very long time to wait. But she would have died before admitting it.

Chapter 14

The next morning Cordelia ate breakfast alone. After she had eaten, she left the dining chamber with the intention of going to the stable. She had been at the plantation for most of a week and had seen little of it except her own chamber and the river. If she was going to remain here the rest of her days, she might as well become familiar with what was grown here. She could have asked Gwaltney for a tour, but she did not particularly want to be burdened with his company ... especially after yesterday, when he had inexplicably given her a gift. She still did not know what to make of his actions.

But the box had taken up a place of honor on her dressing table.

She came to an abrupt halt as she passed the parlor, seeing Django stretched out on the fine Oriental carpet. His head lifted as she paused, and he regarded her steadily with his dark eyes.

Remembering her resolution to befriend Mary, she paused. Mary was very close to this animal. It occurred to her that if she befriended the dog, she might be able to befriend Mary as well. She knelt on the floor and held out her hand.

“Hello, Django,” she said coaxingly. “Come here, old fellow.”

The dog’s ears twitched a bit, and he looked at her hand and sniffed carefully. Unimpressed, he put his head back on his paws.

Cordelia sighed. It seemed that everyone and everything in this house was determined to be cool to her. And then she remembered Gwaltney’s assertion that food was the way to any animal’s heart. Quickly she stood and went back into the dining chamber. The slaves had not yet cleared the food away from the sideboard, and she grabbed a slab of ham and walked back into the hall.

“Here, boy,” she said, holding out a chunk of ham. “Come see me, that’s a good fellow.”

The dog’s head lifted again, his nostrils quivered, and his whiplike tail began to slash across the rug. He stood, stretching fore and aft, and crossed to her quickly, his nails clicking on the heart of pine floorboards in the hall. Politely, he removed the ham from her hand, gulped it, then looked up hopefully into her face for more, his tail whipping back and forth.

Delighted with her success, Cordelia fed him the entire slice of ham, then cautiously attempted to pat him. To her shock, he wrinkled up his nose, exposing his teeth. She yanked back her hand, certain the dog was about to bite it, but the dog instantly whined and put up a pleading paw. Hesitantly she reached out and rubbed his ears, and he instantly wrinkled up his nose again, his tail wagging wildly.

He was not snarling, she realized with amusement. He was smiling. She had never seen a

dog smile before, but it was perfectly obvious that he was grinning, delighted by the attention. She played with the dog a while longer, scratching his ears and even rubbing his stomach when he rolled over like a puppy and waved his legs in the air. At last she stood and headed for the stable. Her newfound friend attempted to follow her, but she closed the door on his disappointed nose.

"I want to take a ride this morning," she said to the black groom as she entered the stable. "Can you point out a mount suitable for a lady?"

The groom thought for a moment, then walked down to a stall. "This'n'd do, I think."

Cordelia looked over the door and saw a beautiful red chestnut mare with a flashy white stripe down her nose. "She's lovely," she agreed. "Is she gentle?"

"'Bout the gentlest we got, mistress."

"Then saddle her, please."

As she was leaving the stable she saw a gray head thrust over one of the half doors and intelligent brown eyes watching her intently. She paused, seeing that it was Gwaltney's enormous stallion. She walked closer, cautiously, but the beast did not seem to mind her approach.

Hesitantly, she reached out and stroked the velvet nose. The horse nuzzled her, looking for sugar.

"You're beautiful," she said in an awed whisper.

The slave paused and glanced back. "Oh, that's th' master's 'orse."

Cordelia nodded, studying the beast more intently than she had previously. Although his body was concealed in the shadows in the stall, she could see that he was huge, easily the biggest stallion she had ever seen. She guessed that he stood close to seventeen hands. He was obviously a thoroughbred, but his Arabian blood showed clearly in his dished face and arching neck.

"I would love to see how he runs," she whispered.

"No one but th' master's permitted t'ride 'im," the slave said hastily.

"Oh, I didn't want to ride him! I'd sooner try to ride the wind." She was no more than an adequate horsewoman, and she knew the stallion would be far beyond her ability to handle. She hoped, however, that she would see Gwaltney galloping the stallion at some point in time. She wanted to see the great horse's action, to see if he ran as swiftly as she imagined he could.

Giving the horse a final pat, she followed the slave out into the sunshine. When he had saddled the mare up, she mounted. Finding the chestnut to be biddable and easy to handle, she headed toward the woods.

They trotted easily down the path that led through the forest. Cordelia barely spared an eye for her surroundings, for the woods were no different here than they were at home--white oaks, some nearly a hundred feet high, with branches spreading nearly as wide; towering loblolly pines; dogwoods and hollies; and thick underbrush entangled in vines. She reined in her mare, however, as the sunshine through the trees ahead indicated they were approaching a field.

She was not surprised to see the crop was tobacco. Most likely, Gwaltney grew a great deal of tobacco, the main crop of Virginia, which could be shipped to England and sold for large amounts of money. Most planters grew a few subsidiary crops, such as apples, corn, and wheat, which were either used for food and drink or sold in Williamsburg, and flax, which was woven into cloth and shipped to England. But they were not the main business of a Virginia plantation.

She paused just within the trees, seeing that the slaves were working this field. It was August, and the tobacco leaves were being cut. Being August in Virginia, it was hot, unpleasantly so, and she was grateful for the shade of the trees. The slaves, of course, had no such comfort. Most of the men had stripped their shirts off, and their backs, glistening with sweat, shone like

ebony. A few, of course, had lighter skin, ranging in shade from coffee-colored to golden. And one....

Cordelia caught her breath as she realized that one man in the field, although deeply bronzed, was white. At first she thought he was an indentured servant. Indentured servitude, usually for a period of seven years, had been a common way for people to gain passage to Virginia in the last century, and in fact the first blacks brought over from Africa had been indentured servants rather than slaves. Although indentured servitude was rare nowadays, it was not completely unheard of. The sole white man in the field must be an indentured servant.

Then she realized with a shock that it was Gwaltney.

She had never heard of a planter working in the fields alongside his slaves. Overseeing them, yes, although most planters hired a white overseer and only rarely observed the slaves themselves. But Gwaltney was actually working, cutting the plants himself, doing the same backbreaking work his slaves were doing. Small wonder, she thought, that he was so bronzed, and that his hands were still so callused, if he did the work of a slave every day. And little wonder, too, that she so rarely saw him during the day. Those working the fields labored from dawn to dusk.

She stared in disbelief a few moments longer. Gwaltney paused in his work, totally unaware of her startled perusal, and straightened, stretching the cramped muscles of his back. Like the slaves, he was not wearing a shirt, and she watched in stunned fascination as the muscles in his back flowed and rippled like water beneath his tanned skin. His shoulders were incredibly broad, and so, she noted as he turned slightly toward her, was his chest. Dark brown hair, which looked soft from this distance, furred his chest. Unable to prevent the scandalous direction of her thoughts, Cordelia wondered what it would feel like beneath her hand.

And then she shook herself. She was a lady, a planter's daughter, and she had absolutely no business sitting here, ogling a man's bare chest as though she were a lightskirt. Suppose Gwaltney were to glance in this direction and glimpse her through the trees, staring like a schoolgirl? Irritated with herself, she hastily guided her mare back to the path. As she did so, a flash of movement further down the path caught her eye.

At first she thought it was a deer, but then it moved again, and she saw that despite its golden hide it was much too large to be a deer. It was a horse, and there was a rider on its back.

Curious, she directed her mare in that direction, but the instant she did so the rider swung his crop hard down on his mount's flank, and the other horse bolted away. Instinctively, her curiosity fired by the other rider's suspicious actions, Cordelia gave chase.

Though her well-bred mare galloped hard, they were unable to gain on the other horse. As the path opened out for a moment, she caught a brief glimpse of the other rider, but she could see little through the whipping branches except to see the other rider wore plain breeches, a white shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat, pulled down over his face.

She saw the other horse soar suddenly into the air. Just in front of them was a large tree, blown down by one of the recent summer storms. She leaned forward, readying herself for the jump, but was caught unprepared when her mount, apparently deciding the obstacle was too large, suddenly swerved to a halt. Startled, she clutched desperately at the horse's mane to keep from falling. By the time she had regained her balance and looked up again, the other rider had disappeared.

Cordelia did not bother to give further chase. She was not certain why she had pursued the other rider in the first place, except the fact that the rider had fled when she spotted him

indicated he had no business being on the plantation. Probably a poacher, she decided, someone hunting on the land who knew they did not belong here.

And yet, if the stranger was a poacher, why had he been sitting on his horse in the woods watching Gwaltney?

“You should tell Gwaltney that someone was watching him,” Elizabeth said. She was seated in the parlor that afternoon, drinking sweetened tea and listening intently as Cordelia related the odd story of the person in the woods.

“I’m sure it’s not important,” Cordelia said dismissively.

“Nonetheless, it is quite peculiar. Why on earth would someone be sitting on a horse in the woods watching your husband?”

I was, Cordelia thought with embarrassment. She had absolutely no intention of telling Gwaltney about the incident, because she would be humiliated if he were to guess she had been watching him. He might get the notion that she was interested in him, somehow. And she had no interest in him whatsoever.

She thought morosely that she was merely interested in his chest.

“I have no idea,” she said.

“You should tell him.”

“I don’t want to talk to him about it. I don’t want to talk to him at all.”

“Are things that strained between the two of you?”

Cordelia sighed. “I simply don’t understand him,” she confessed. “He gave me a present yesterday. He told me he wanted nothing to do with me, then suddenly he gave me a present. I can’t understand the man.”

“Perhaps he wants a real marriage more than he let you believe,” Elizabeth suggested.

Cordelia was relieved to have someone to talk to, especially Elizabeth, who knew her better than she knew herself. She was utterly confused by Gwaltney’s actions and even more baffled by her own reactions.

“I don’t know,” Cordelia said dubiously, thinking of the way Gwaltney had held himself at a distance from her since she had arrived. “It doesn’t seem to fit with what I know of the man.”

“I disagree,” Elizabeth said quietly. “I think he has been remarkably generous.”

Cordelia lifted an eyebrow. “Because he gave me a boudoir box? I hardly think that can be considered a startling display of generosity.”

“What about your wedding present?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Elizabeth studied her for a long moment. “He didn’t tell you, did he?”

Cordelia shrugged, confused. “He didn’t give me a present, Elizabeth. I don’t know what he told you, but....”

“He did give you a present,” Elizabeth said quietly. “Something you would value more than anything else. I’m not sure why he didn’t tell you.”

“That’s absurd,” Cordelia snapped. “Think, Elizabeth. If he’d given me something that valuable, wouldn’t I have noticed?”

“Not this,” Elizabeth said. “You see, he sent his overseer to work for Father.”

Cordelia paused, struck dumb. Father’s well-being had been one of her greatest concerns over the past weeks. She knew he was not capable of running the plantation competently. But with a good overseer....

"He assures us that the man is the best to be had," Elizabeth went on. "He says he never could have made River's Edge profitable without him."

That much was probably true. Given Gwaltney's background, he had probably been even less competent than her father two years ago. Cordelia shook her head, bewildered by her husband's unexpected generosity. "I didn't know," she said in a whisper. "He didn't tell me."

"Probably because you never gave him a chance," Elizabeth said sharply.

That was true, Cordelia realized with a sinking heart. When she first came to River's Edge, she had hardly been in a mood to talk. With a stab of guilt, she recalled that she had precipitated an argument with her husband within moments of her arrival.

"Why would he do such a nice thing?" she asked. "He told me didn't want a real marriage. Why would he be so kind?"

"Perhaps," Elizabeth suggested, "he really does want a real marriage with you."

"I doubt that."

"I don't. After all, he gave you that box yesterday. That could be construed as a peace offering. Perhaps he has seen what you are really like and is growing to admire you."

"Nonsense. He doesn't care what I'm really like."

"Has it ever occurred to you that you've never given him a chance to see you as you are?"

"He saw me with my hair down the other night."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. The spectacles and the ugly gowns are a disguise, but you've disguised your personality, too. Have you ever had a real conversation with him--the kind we have?"

"I can't talk to anyone else the way I talk to you, Elizabeth."

"Why not?"

Because I would feel exposed, Cordelia thought. She had long ago fallen into the habit of sharing her innermost thoughts and feelings with no one but her sister. She had no friends besides Elizabeth. And allowing herself to open up to anyone, especially Gwaltney Harris, was an impossible task. She would rather go to church stark naked before all the parish than bare her feelings to that man.

"I just can't," she said at last.

Elizabeth looked at her steadily for a long time, and Cordelia had the unnerving feeling she understood Cordelia's reluctance all too clearly. "Why don't you at least drop the physical disguise, even if you can't bring yourself to drop the emotional one? Get rid of the spectacles and wear a nice gown. Surely your husband can be convinced to buy you some new gowns."

"He already has," Cordelia admitted.

"So change your appearance. Perhaps you'll then find it easier to change the way you act."

Cordelia sighed. "I'll think about it, Beth. There are times, though, that I wish I had a relationship with a man like you have with Jonathan Powell."

She was not so wrapped up in her own concerns that she could miss the naked pain that slashed across Elizabeth's face. She looked at her sister's hand and realized with a shock that the beautiful sapphire ring was missing. "Elizabeth! What happened?"

Elizabeth hesitated. "I decided ... not to marry him," she said at last.

"Whyever not?" Cordelia demanded.

"He simply wasn't right for me, Cordelia."

"Nonsense," Cordelia said with spirit. "You told me you were in love with him only a

month ago. And you were so proud when he gave you that ring. What in the world happened to make you change your mind?"

Elizabeth lifted her chin with the stubbornness she so rarely displayed in front of others. "I don't care to talk about it."

"But...."

"No, Cordelia. I won't discuss it."

Recognizing that her sister was, in this mood, intractable, Cordelia said nothing further on the subject. But privately she wondered a good deal. In order for Elizabeth to break her engagement, Jonathan Powell must have done something truly awful.

Poor Elizabeth.

She had loved Jonathan so very much.

Not long after Elizabeth had left, Gwaltney found Cordelia in the back parlor, reading. "Are you busy?"

Cordelia looked up, startled at the change in his appearance. He had bathed and changed into a gentleman's attire, wearing fine linen knee breeches and silk stockings. He wore a finely embroidered waistcoat, but his lawn shirt was open at the throat, and he had evidently discarded his coat in deference to the heat. He looked every inch the elegant gentleman of leisure.

And yet as she stared at him, all she could see in her mind was the memory of his heavily muscled bare chest and the flat slab of his stomach, flexing as he stretched.

"Yes," she said shortly, lifting the leather-bound book she was reading.

Apparently her sharp tone did not deter him. He smiled gently across at her. "I wonder if you would join me for dinner tonight."

Cordelia lifted an eyebrow, instantly suspicious. Until today he had been reluctant to have her at dinner and had struggled to keep her at a distance. Once again the thought flashed through her mind: *What is he up to?* And yet it was a flattering notion that he wanted to spend time with her, that he might go out of his way to ensure she would eat with him.

Even so, she was unable to curb her long-cultivated sharp tongue. "Surely you don't intend to eat in the dining chamber tonight? What a novel idea!"

"No. I intend to eat outside. It's a shame to be inside in such glorious weather as this."

She sensed there was more to it than that excuse, so glibly uttered, but she wisely did not pursue the subject. "Very well," she said shortly, aware she should thank him for the invitation but not particularly inclined to. She was his wife, after all. They were *expected* to eat together. "I would like to see Mary again."

Something unpleasant flickered in the depths of Gwaltney's odd eyes, and she abruptly remembered he did not consider her suitable company for his niece. He masked his reaction almost instantly. "Actually, Mary will be eating in the nursery. I wanted to eat with you. Alone."

His voice dropped into a lower register, rumbling, almost like a caress. Cordelia looked at him warily. She would have to be on her guard tonight.

She wasn't sure what he was up to, but she was certain she wasn't going to like it.

Chapter 15

Their dinner was a sumptuous affair, starting with she-crab soup, proceeding through the usual two courses of meat and vegetables, and ending with dessert, fruit, and nuts. Cordelia ate rather more greedily than a woman should. For the first time she was aware she had not eaten enough since she came here. When she ate by herself she was inclined to eat no more than the bare amount needed for sustenance.

She looked up from her queen's cake, a currant-studded dessert, to see Gwaltney regarding her with a flicker of amusement in his eyes. "It surprises me to see you eating so well," he remarked. "I assumed you rarely ate at all, to judge from your figure."

Cordelia felt a ferocious blush heating her cheeks. Despite the loose-fitting gowns she favored, she knew it was obvious she was thin. But it had nothing to do with her eating habits; she had simply always been that way. In fact, before her mother died, she had intentionally tried to gain weight to obtain a more fashionably rounded figure. But it had been a pointless effort.

"The food is wonderful," she said awkwardly. Somehow compliments did not flow smoothly from her tongue. "You chose an excellent cook."

"I didn't choose her at all. She came with the plantation."

Cordelia could not resist a barb, which came to her lips so much more readily than compliments. "I suppose when you first came here you knew nothing about telling good food from bad."

Gwaltney gave her a flashing grin, apparently unoffended. "Let us just say that after my years living in the wild I was happy enough to have a steady supply of food. The quality was not my first concern."

"Evidently the man you bought this plantation from thought otherwise. He chose well."

Something flickered in the depths of Gwaltney's eyes. "Cordelia," he said gently, "I did not *buy* this plantation."

Cordelia tilted her head. She knew she should not ask, but curiosity prompted her to dig for the truth. "I suspected as much. Gossip had it that you obtained the plantation through ungentlemanly means."

"Gossips," Gwaltney said dryly, "are always willing to assume that I am no gentleman."

She watched him covertly from beneath her lashes as he raised a wineglass to his lips, observing his hands, those strong, broad laborer's hands. The goblet's slender stem looked ridiculously fragile caught between his powerful fingers. No, she thought with a shiver. He was no gentleman.

With an effort, she forced her mind back to the subject at hand. "Well, then, how did you obtain it?"

Gwaltney tossed back his head and laughed at the blunt question. "It's good to know that you suffer from the universal female failing of curiosity," he said at last, chuckling.

Cordelia bristled. "Very well, then, forget I asked."

"Not at all, my dear. I'm perfectly happy to tell you how I obtained it. There was nothing underhanded or sinister about it, I assure you. I won it playing at dice with its previous owner, William Carr."

"You won it by *gambling*?"

Gwaltney nodded.

Cordelia stared at him, astounded. Gambling was a thoroughly entrenched vice throughout the colony, and the unfortunate William Carr was certainly not the first young man to lose all his holdings on the turn of a card or the fall of a die. Foolish young planters, particularly ones already in debt, regularly gambled, often risking far more than they could safely afford.

Yet she was astonished at the colossal nerve of Gwaltney, who had in all likelihood risked everything he had owned for this plantation. He could have lost everything as readily as William Carr could have. Rather than becoming a planter, he could have lost all the wealth he had painstakingly acquired.

She was not certain whether to be impressed by his audacity or disgusted by his recklessness.

“What happened to William Carr?” she asked at last.

Gwaltney’s impassive expression slipped slightly. A slight shadow of vulnerability touched his eyes. “I don’t care to discuss it,” he said curtly.

Cordelia nodded. Obviously William Carr had been ruined. No doubt he had left the area or possibly even the colony. She decided it was best not to pursue the subject. “I’m sorry if I asked too many personal questions.”

Gwaltney lay back on the blanket, folding his hands behind his head, and stared at the sky, beginning to streak with pink and crimson. “There’s a first time for everything,” he remarked irrelevantly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I’ve never heard you utter those words before, Cordelia. I never expected to.”

“What words?”

“The words *I’m sorry*.” He sat up abruptly and faced her across the blanket they sat on. “You’ve insulted me time and time again, made it clear you think of me as an inferior, and even dunked me in a canal. And never before have you said those words. I rather thought they were not part of your vocabulary.”

Cordelia stared at him a long moment, assaulted by her conscience. Perhaps she had played the part of the sharp-tongued spinster for so long that it was no longer merely a role. Perhaps she had allowed it to become her true self. That was not a comforting thought.

“Elizabeth told me you sent your overseer to work for my father,” she blurted at last.

He hesitated a moment, clearly surprised. “Yes,” he admitted. “I did.”

“Why?”

Gwaltney shrugged. “I knew you were concerned for your father,” he said. “I didn’t want you to worry about him. And I certainly didn’t want him to suffer financially because I married his daughter.” His tone was carefully offhand, as if his concern for her family was nothing of consequence.

“It was very thoughtful of you,” she said. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I meant to when you arrived at River’s Edge,” he confessed. “But we began arguing, and I... Cordelia, I believe we got off on the wrong foot. I said some things I’m not proud of.”

Cordelia blinked at him. “Surely *you* are not saying you’re sorry.”

“Yes, I am. I...” He hesitated, then went on haltingly, “When you told me you didn’t care to share a bed with me, I felt that I had to ... lash back at you.” He gave her a rueful, disarming grin. “No man likes to think he’s totally unattractive.”

“Oh, but you’re not!” Cordelia said, then could have bitten her tongue out. What in the world had possessed her to say *that*? The last thing she wanted was for Gwaltney to think she

found him attractive. "I mean, most women ... well, many women might ... that is...."

"But not you."

There was an odd note in his voice, a note of insecurity, almost of pain, and for the first time Cordelia saw him as a vulnerable human being. Her conscience smote her again. She had hurt his feelings, and what was worse, she had intended to.

And until this moment, she had not cared in the least.

"Actually," she said slowly, uncomfortably aware that she was making herself vulnerable in return, "I do think you are a very handsome man." The image of his bare chest flashed through her mind, making her feel a sudden, unladylike stab of longing to see it again. "It's simply that I don't want to ... to...."

Gwaltney leaned forward, taking her hand in a peculiarly comforting gesture. "Cordelia," he said softly, "are you afraid?"

"No. At least, I don't think so."

"Then why don't you want to become my wife in more than name only?"

Earlier today she would have retorted, "Because I despise you." But in the last few moments she had come to the realization that she could not say that honestly. The simple fact was that she did not despise him. Where he was concerned, her emotions were a snarled tangle of aristocratic distaste and powerful attraction. He was capable of making her amused one moment and furious the next. She was utterly unable to define exactly what she felt for him.

She only knew he was the first man she had met in the past seven years for whom she had felt anything other than contempt.

"I am not certain what I feel," she said in a ragged voice barely above a whisper. "Until I know, I don't want to complicate matters."

Gwaltney's other hand came up to cup her cheek. "Cordelia," he murmured, "matters have already become complicated."

He touched his lips to hers with infinite gentleness. Cordelia felt a tremor run down her spine, a shuddering sensation composed equally of fear and desire. She *was* afraid, frightened of the power Gwaltney had over her, frightened of how intensely he could make her feel with just a simple touch.

And yet she yearned for more.

She slid her arms around his neck, opening her lips and eagerly seeking his tongue with hers. It was an honest response, if not entirely ladylike. At her fervent reaction, the nature of the kiss altered. His mouth became hot and hungry, demanding a response rather than coaxing one from her. She pressed ardently against his body, soft and hot and yielding as a melting candle.

And then his hand sought her breast. Her breath caught, and a sound almost like a whimper emerged from her throat. He stroked her nipple gently, and she felt the sensation clear down to her toes. She could not seem to prevent herself from moaning in helpless, overwhelming pleasure.

And then he was pushing her back to the blanket, his mouth devouring hers, his hands exploring her breasts, and suddenly she felt an overwhelming panic, a sudden awareness that this could easily go much, much further than she had intended. "No!" she cried against his mouth. "Please, let me up."

Reluctantly, Gwaltney lifted his head and stared at her. His eyes were brilliantly golden and glittering with passion. "You *are* afraid," he whispered. "Cordelia, let me show you...."

"No!" She pushed forcefully against his chest, and, sighing, Gwaltney sat up. The

moment his weight had lifted from her, Cordelia jumped to her feet and raced away, running desperately for the shelter of her own chamber. Once she was there, she flung herself face down on the bed, burying her hot face in the softness of the feather pillow.

Gwaltney was right. She was afraid. But not of him.

She was afraid of herself, and her own reactions.

After Cordelia had fled, Gwaltney sat in the garden for quite some time, watching the last colors of the sunset fade and the stars begin to appear. Django materialized, wagging his spotted tail to show he was pleased to see Gwaltney, and then lay down close to his master. Gwaltney supposed Cordelia had let the dog out by accident as she fled into the house. He patted the dog's head absently.

He had hardly expected his seduction of Cordelia to go so smoothly. The fact was that he had intended only to kiss her, but at her surprisingly wanton response he had utterly lost control of his reactions. And as a consequence he had frightened her when he had intended only to titillate her, to leave her aching for more.

He swore under his breath. He had never been a great lover by any stretch of the imagination. He had never needed to be. Nevertheless, it irritated him that he had lost control of himself in such a fashion, just as he had lost control of himself the last time he had kissed her. Clearly it had been too long since he had availed himself of a woman. Otherwise, why would he have been swept away by passion for a skinny, unattractive, sharp-tongued wench?

He remembered the way she had sought his tongue with hers, the little gasping noises she had made when he stroked her nipple, awakening her to real passion for the first time, and he felt himself throbbing at the intensity of the memory. It was ridiculous, but he couldn't seem to get the incident out of his mind. Particularly her breasts.

For a skinny woman, she had amazingly nice breasts. Round, firm, and not too big. Just big enough.

He sighed. He had made an error in pushing her too fast. He had panicked her, and now he would have to slow down, seduce her more slowly and deliberately. He had been an idiot to let a twenty-three year old virgin make him lose his head, his self-control, that way. His cause had definitely suffered a setback.

But, he decided as he remembered the feel of her breasts in his hands, it had been worth it.

Chapter 16

A week later, Cordelia sat in her chamber, fingering the folds of the incredible gowns delivered to the plantation that morning. The gowns were spectacular, created in the latest styles by the milliner in Williamsburg. Every last one of them was of silk, a fabric that had long been absent from her wardrobe. She had worn nothing but plain woolen and linen gowns for years now. And Gwaltney, damn him, had noticed that. He had guessed she would be unable to resist

silk--and he was right. She was in heaven just caressing the fabric.

The gown she was studying was a day gown, but far more glamorous and low-cut than any gown she had ever worn. Its low round neckline was adorned with frothy hairpin lace, and there was more lace edging the ruffled sleeves. The silk was a brilliant yellow, adorned with dark blue needlework in an ornate pattern of vines and leaves. The petticoat, exposed at the front of the gown, was also a deep blue, a color that precisely matched her eyes--though she doubted that Gwaltney had noticed that, as much as her eyes were concealed by the spectacles. More likely he had simply chosen the most vivid colors possible, as different from the dull colors she had worn for seven years as could be imagined.

She sighed. At Gwaltney's command, a slave had removed her old wardrobe as soon as the parcels were delivered, and she really had no choice. Tomorrow she would have to wear this gown. Tomorrow they would be riding to Greyhaven, the Greysons' plantation, and she would be trapped in a carriage with a husband who of late seemed determined to be kind to her, even generous, despite the dreadful things she had said to him. And for the first time she would look--not beautiful, perhaps. But ... well....

Passable.

Her masquerade was over. She felt alarm welling up within her at the very idea, for she had played the part of the unattractive spinster for so long that it had become her mental image of herself. And yet part of her felt irrepressible delight at the prospect of shedding her ugly clothes like a cocoon and becoming a beautiful, silk-clad butterfly. She felt torn.

At last she sat down at her table and began sketching absently. As she drew, there was a knock on her door. Cordelia's head jerked up, and she stared at it, startled. She supposed it must be Gwaltney, come to inquire whether she liked her new gowns. For some reason her heart began to pound erratically, and a vivid memory of the way his mouth had felt against hers leaped into her mind. Since that evening a sennight ago, Gwaltney had been polite enough to her, but nothing else untoward had happened between them. Cordelia had almost expected him to knock on her door that night demanding his husbandly rights after all, but nothing of the kind had happened. He had treated her with the distant courtesy due a guest, not betraying by so much as a flicker of the eye the passion that had so briefly flamed in him.

Cordelia told herself she was relieved.

And yet the thought that Gwaltney was knocking on her door made her heart leap into her throat. "Come in," she called, annoyed to hear the breathless note in her voice.

She was both relieved and oddly disappointed to see Mary, rather than Gwaltney, when the door swung open. She masked the inexplicable twinge of disappointment she felt and smiled brightly at the little girl. "Good morning, Mary. How are you?"

The little girl smiled timidly, hesitating at the doorway. Clearly she was aware that she might be intruding. But Cordelia was absurdly pleased, rather than annoyed, by the interruption. It was the first time Mary had sought her out.

"Come in, please," she urged, waving the child into the chamber.

Shyly, Mary came across the chamber. She paused next to the table where Cordelia had been working and studied her sketch, a picture of an egret.

"Do you like it?"

Mary nodded.

"It's an egret. Can you say egret?"

Mary's dark eyes widened, and a look of fear crept into them. Cordelia frowned, puzzled

by the little girl's reaction. She had thought Mary unable to speak, but it was clear from her expression that the idea terrified her. For some reason, she realized, Mary was *afraid* to speak.

"Never mind," she said, unwilling to undermine the little girl's timid overture at friendship. Mary had sought her out, and the last thing she wanted was for Mary to be frightened away.

But Mary was no longer looking at her. Her wistful brown eyes had focused on the quill, and a sudden inspiration came to Cordelia. "Mary," she said, "do you like to draw?"

Mary's gaze jumped back to her face, and she saw hope and delight in the little girl's dark eyes. "You've never drawn before, have you?"

Mary shook her head.

"But you'd like to learn?"

Mary nodded eagerly.

"Very well. Let's find you a chair, then." She stood up, pulled a chair across to the table next to her own, and Mary scrambled up into it, sitting on her knees. She beamed with pride and delight when Cordelia gave her a piece of parchment and a quill. Cordelia absently doodled on a new piece of parchment, surreptitiously watching the little girl as she scribbled industriously with the quill, drawing ornate but completely abstract patterns. She looked totally absorbed in her creation, much in the same way Cordelia tended to be.

She was glad she had thought of encouraging the little girl to draw. This, perhaps, would be a shared interest that could bring them closer together. She firmly pushed away her guilt. Surely, she rationalized, Gwaltney couldn't object to her befriending his niece as long as she comported herself properly.

They scribbled together for a long time. At last Mary's nurse came to the door. "Time for Mary's nap, mistress."

"Oh," Cordelia said, surprised. She had not realized it was already midafternoon. She laid her own sketch aside and smiled at the little girl. "I had a nice time with you, Mary. We'll draw again soon."

Mary grinned, waved, and bounded out of the chamber. Cordelia watched her go. Despite the fact that Mary apparently could not speak, she could not rid herself of the certainty that the child was intelligent. She was so bright and alert that Cordelia could not believe anything was wrong with her mind.

Idly, she looked down at her most recent sketch. The parchment showed a picture of a woman in full formal dress, her skirts belled out over side hoops, her waist nipped in tightly by stays, and her hair piled atop her head. It was, she realized almost in shock, a drawing of herself in the lovely yellow-and-blue gown.

She stood up, and her gaze fell again on the gorgeous gown, still spread carelessly on the bed. Slowly she walked over and touched it, then turned and stared at herself in the looking glass.

This was what people saw when they looked at her--a sour, unattractive spinster. This was what Mary and Gwaltney saw. She had been hiding for seven years. She was hiding herself from the world, hiding herself from the people who were now her family.

She couldn't hide forever.

They had a right to know who she was.

Slowly she pulled off the spectacles and pulled the pins from her hair, letting the heavy mass fall around her shoulders. She looked at her face in the looking glass, really seeing her reflection for the first time in a very long time, then picked up the drawing of herself and stared

at it. She was startled by the intensity of the longing that welled up within her. The longing to be a young, passionate woman again, rather than a dried-up husk of a spinster.

Abruptly she came to a decision. She would do more than wear the gown tomorrow. She would wear powder and rouge and dress her hair as a lady should.

And for the first time in seven years, she would leave off the damned spectacles.

She found that she was looking forward to Gwaltney's reaction.

Cordelia was rather disappointed the next day to find herself riding alone in the carriage, but not particularly surprised. "Mist' 'Arris took th' gray stallion ahead," the slave who drove the carriage informed her. "'E's enterin' 'im in th' race." Sometime over the past few weeks she had come to realize that Gwaltney did not particularly care for riding in carriages. She wondered if, like some people, he was prone to motion sickness.

She was content enough in the gently swaying carriage, leaning her head back against the soft cushions, her beautiful yellow skirts spread out around her. She had powdered her face lightly, rouged her lips, and wore her hair in a high-piled coiffure that was infinitely more fashionable than her habitual bun. Her hair was unpowdered, although she had brought rice flour and pomade to powder her hair for the evening. Atop her hair she wore a *bergere*, or shepherdess hat, a wide-brimmed, low-crowned straw hat trimmed with blue ribbon. On her feet she wore embroidered blue silk slippers with kidskin soles. And she had left her spectacles at home.

Greyhaven was only three miles from Gwaltney's plantation, and a scant two miles from the plantation where she had grown up, but Cordelia had never seen it. She could not keep her mouth from falling open when Greyhaven loomed into view. Gwaltney's plantation was a sprawling clapboard structure, with the additions that had been made giving it a rather comfortably lopsided look. Greyhaven, on the other hand, had obviously been carefully and lovingly designed according to the rules of Palladian architecture. An enormous red brick building, it had a formal symmetry that was quite pleasing, if not as homelike as River's Edge.

There were already vast quantities of people milling about on the emerald expanse of lawn, and Cordelia felt her chest tighten uncomfortably. It was not that she had been a recluse over the past seven years; on the contrary, she had gone to as many balls, routs, and barbecues as her sister. It was simply that she had always dealt with society from behind her facade of spinsterhood. Now that facade was gone. She was no longer a spinster, and in the stylish clothing and coiffure she looked as presentable as one could expect. She could no longer even hide behind her spectacles. Not for the first time, she wondered if she had been foolhardy in abandoning her disguise all at once.

And too, she wondered about her motives. Was she trying to impress Gwaltney? And if so, why?

She remembered the way he had kissed her a week before, the overwhelming, alarming sensations he had evoked in her, and she sighed. She had an uncomfortable feeling she knew why.

As the carriage jolted to a halt, the black coachman jumped down and opened the door. Holding her head high, Cordelia alighted from the carriage. Unconsciously, she looked for Gwaltney. She was somewhat startled to find his eyes, which in the brilliant daylight were vividly golden, locked on her with shock. And then she remembered he had never seen her look like anything other than a maiden aunt.

Pleased by his reaction, she gave him a tentative smile.

Gwaltney started toward her, and she realized with a start he was not the only one who had been staring at her. The entire crowd seemed frozen in surprise as she stepped down. That was odd. True, they had never seen her dressed like this before, but surely it wasn't *that* much of a change. Abruptly, as Gwaltney reached her, everyone began talking again, but their eyes still seemed riveted on her.

"I'm looking for my wife," Gwaltney said as he took her hand. His gaze, oddly intent, did not leave her face. "Did she come with you, by any chance?"

The glint of mischief in his eyes caused an involuntary answering smile to tilt the corners of her mouth. "I'm looking for my husband," she retorted. "Have you seen him about anywhere?"

"Ah, but I haven't changed since yesterday," Gwaltney countered lightly. "But what have you done to yourself, Cordelia?"

"You are the one who purchased the gown."

"Yes, but...." Gwaltney lifted a hand in apparent confusion. "I surely can't take credit for this enormous change. What happened to the spectacles?"

"I left them at home."

"And yet you don't seem to be squinting. Did you ever really need those spectacles at all, Cordelia?"

Cordelia smiled serenely at him and said absolutely nothing.

Realizing she was not going to make any damaging admissions, Gwaltney shrugged. "Come. Let me introduce you to our host and hostess." He led Cordelia through the crowd to the thickest knot of people. They parted like the Red Sea before Gwaltney's height, and Cordelia found herself standing before a handsome couple.

Although she had met Jennifer Greyson in passing once or twice, she had never noticed just how lovely the other woman was. She was even smaller and more delicate than Elizabeth, although she had an underlying look of strength about her. Then, too, she was blonde, although her hair was darker than Elizabeth's. All in all she reminded Cordelia strongly of her sister, and she felt an instant warmth toward the woman.

The man, on the other hand, inspired no feelings of warmth whatsoever. He had eyes of glacial ice, which did not thaw at all as he glanced at her. His features were well-carved, with a curving nose that could politely be called strong, although privately Cordelia thought of it as simply large. His attitude did not warm at all as he turned his cold gaze toward her husband, and Cordelia sensed Gwaltney's discomfort without even glancing in his direction. She knew he was certain Edward Greyson was snubbing him due to his background, his *inferiority*, and yet she was certain that was not the case. Greyson, after all, had married a tavern wench. She suspected he treated everyone, regardless of their origins, with cold detachment.

But Gwaltney had no way of knowing that.

She felt an odd pang of sympathy for her husband. For the first time she began to appreciate what Gwaltney suffered. He could go nowhere, do nothing, without encountering hostility and contempt. And he naturally assumed that every planter in Virginia despised him.

Moved by an impulse she could not explain, she stepped closer to Gwaltney and placed her hand possessively on his arm. Gwaltney had been kind to her this past week, and she felt a need to present a united front before this scowling aristocrat. Gwaltney glanced down at her hand with a startled expression, then he looked into her face and smiled slowly.

"Won't you please introduce me to our hosts, Gwaltney?"

"Of course, my dear," Gwaltney said, as smoothly as though they had always been on the

best of terms. "This is Edward Greyson and his wife, Jennifer. And this is my wife, Cordelia Harris." He managed to imbue his voice with the pride that a newlywed man was expected to display, although Cordelia knew perfectly well it was a sham.

She extended her hand as gracefully as she could, emulating Elizabeth. In the past she had rarely extended her hand to any man. "So nice to meet you," she said.

Edward Greyson took her hand in a perfunctory manner, squeezing her fingers briefly, but to her annoyance he did not deign to make a reply. Perhaps a little embarrassed by her husband's reticence, Jennifer Greyson spoke up hastily. "It is nice to see you again, Mistress Harris. Perhaps you remember that we spoke briefly at the Turners' ball, six months ago or so."

"Of course," Cordelia agreed, smiling gratefully at the woman. She was beginning to wonder how Mistress Greyson could bear to live with her husband. Those wintry eyes were disturbing. Some imp of mischief provoked her to carry on the conversation as if Greyson was not there--which might as well be the case. "Will your husband be riding in the race?" she inquired.

"Of course. And I expect he will win, too. His stallion is one of the fastest horses in the colony."

"My husband's stallion is a fine animal as well," Cordelia said, hoping it was true. The beast certainly had perfect conformation and massive size--but conformation did not make a racehorse. She hoped Gwaltney and his mount would not drag in last. It would only add to the scornful laughter behind his back.

"Indeed," Edward Greyson drawled. Icicles dripped from his voice, as though he thoroughly resented having to converse with them. "Have you been breeding horses long, Mr. Harris?"

Cordelia glanced up at her husband quickly. Of course Greyson knew he had not been breeding horses for more than two or three years, for until that time he had been a longhunter. She saw Gwaltney's jaw tighten with annoyance, but it was not reflected in his voice as he said coolly, "No, Mr. Greyson, I bought the stallion as a yearling. I hope to breed some good colts with him as my stud, however." He turned and glanced back quickly at his hosts. "Perhaps you will excuse us? I believe I see Jonathan Powell over there. We must say hello." And rather quickly, he led Cordelia away.

"What a dreadful man!" she said as they walked away, dropping her hand from his arm. "I've heard rumors he was rather cold, but I've never had the misfortune to meet him before. Cold isn't an adequate adjective to describe the man."

"Please, Cordelia," Gwaltney interjected, "sheathe your tongue."

"But he was so dreadful."

"And he is a very influential man. Kindly don't speak ill of him."

Cordelia paused and looked up at him indignantly. "Are you so desperate for social position that you are willing to be courteous to such a rude man? If you are, you are more spineless than I believed."

Gwaltney winced. "Cordelia, please. We will discuss it later, at a more appropriate time."

An hour later the men prepared to mount their horses. Horse racing had always been a favorite sport in Virginia. In the last century, quarter racing had been popular. As its name suggested, the races had been run over a quarter mile, and they had involved rather rough riding, with the riders bumping their horses and sometimes even attempting to unseat each other. When

thoroughbreds had been introduced into the colony, however, longer events, called course races, became popular. There was a mile long racetrack just east of Williamsburg, where many races were held, but many planters created rough racetracks on their plantations as well and held informal competitions. Edward Greyson, who had long been interested in fine horseflesh, had created a track a year before.

Gwaltney crossed to his stallion and shortened the stirrup leathers. He was well aware of the snickering of the crowd, and even heard a few rude comments that the onlookers did not bother to disguise with whispers.

“The fool doesn’t even know how to ride a horse!”

“It’s obvious he’s no gentleman.”

Gwaltney ignored the snide remarks as he swung up into the saddle. He had learned, through long experimentation, that Mist seemed to run more swiftly if he shortened his stirrups, rose in the saddle, and leaned forward, distributing his considerable weight over the horse’s withers rather than his back. Of course, although this peculiar seat gave him an advantage when it came to speed, it had a rather profound disadvantage as well. Without the ability to grip the horse’s side with his calves, if Mist stumbled, he was almost certain to lose his seat. It was a dangerous risk to take, since falling under the hooves of tons of horseflesh meant a hasty and unpleasant demise.

He was aware of the other men giving him contemptuous looks as they began to ride their horses toward the track. They all rode their horses as gentlemen should, sitting tall and straight in the saddle. He knew the crowd had been betting on the horses, as had many of the riders themselves. But despite Mist’s impressive conformation and size, he suspected few of them had placed bets on him.

Gwaltney himself had placed no bets whatsoever. Betting, whether on horse races, cockfights, or dice, was virtually an epidemic among the upper classes, and three years before he had taken advantage of that fact to acquire his plantation. It was not the first time a plantation had changed hands on the roll of the dice, nor would it be the last. But the aftermath of his successful gamble had left him shaken, to say the least. He had sworn never to gamble again.

At any rate, in his opinion a rich man had no need to gamble. What more could any of these planters need?

The horses reached the track, milling about at the starting line. Gwaltney pulled his mind from the unpleasant memories of three years before and concentrated, turning the great stallion in the proper direction. The other horses danced and shuffled nervously, their coats shining with sweat, but Mist only stood calmly, more like a plow horse than a blooded stallion.

The instant the gun fired, however, Mist leapt into a run. He lunged forward, pushing his nose, then his neck in front of the other horses with grim determination. Gwaltney pulled back on the reins slightly, and the stallion obediently slowed. He loved to run, and he would have delighted in running all out, but Gwaltney knew the horse could not sustain that pace for two miles. No horse could.

He took up position behind Edward Greyson’s bay stallion, watching the beast’s powerful hindquarters churning. Chunks of sod were thrown back in their faces, but Mist ran steadily on. The frontrunners were engaged in a suicidally fast duel, and Gwaltney was content to wait until they tired. Apparently Edward Greyson had made the same decision, for he did not urge his horse to greater speed.

They passed before the crowd for the first time, and Gwaltney knew most of them were

congratulating themselves for not betting on the gray horse. In fifth place, he was not showing any great speed, except for the brief burst at the beginning of the race. Probably most of them suspected he was a beaten horse. But Gwaltney could feel the powerful muscles moving smoothly beneath him and knew that his horse had all the stamina he needed.

As they went down the backstretch the frontrunners began to fade, and Gwaltney loosened the reins slightly. Mist responded with an enormous explosion of speed that took him past Greyson's stallion in two leaps. Glancing to the side, Gwaltney saw a comical look of surprise on the other man's face, then Greyson slapped his horse's neck and his stallion gallantly bounded forth in pursuit.

Gwaltney was unconcerned by the bay stallion's pursuit. He urged his mount to greater speed, knowing that nothing could stop Mist now. There was only one horse before them, a golden chestnut ridden by Alexander Blair. He sent Mist after the chestnut. Rapidly his horse pulled up to the other horse's tail, despite all of Blair's desperate plying of the crop against his horse's sweated flank. But as they pulled closer Blair's crop suddenly swung outward and struck viciously against Mist's tender nostrils.

Startled and hurt, the stallion abruptly swerved to the right. Only his considerable riding skills prevented Gwaltney from being unseated and trampled by the tons of horseflesh to their rear. Somehow he managed to keep his balance, despite the shortness of his stirrups, and gently straightened his mount out. Not surprisingly, the field had caught them. Through the dust he saw that Greyson's bay was in front, passing Blair's straining chestnut. With a sudden spurt of fury at the unsportsmanlike trick that had been played upon him, he slapped the reins against his horse's neck.

Mist recovered his aplomb and sprinted forward, plunging past most of the field in three bounds. Gwaltney went around Blair wide on the outside. Though it cost his horse a good deal of ground, he was not about to risk another blow that might lose him the race and quite possibly ruin Mist as a racehorse forever. With Blair safely behind him, he sent Mist after the leader, the bay stallion ridden by Greyson.

Mist raced doggedly, his neck extended, ears flat against his head. The ground he had lost due to Blair's ungentlemanly trick was telling on him, and he was beginning to tire. Gwaltney did not press him further, knowing his horse had raced as well as he could under the circumstances. As they neared the finish, however, Mist put on a final, incredible burst of speed, drawing even with Greyson's stallion, then passing the finish with his gray nose in front of the bay.

There was only scattered applause among the crowd, and, he noted tiredly, some catcalls. *Damned gentry*, he thought, not for the first time. Despite the enormous effort his horse had put forth, despite the remarkable race he had run, these people were unimpressed with his win. He slowed the exhausted stallion, letting the horse canter down the racetrack, away from the others.

He was sick and tired of the gentry. Damn them all to hell. Blair had intentionally struck his horse, risking Gwaltney's life, and he seriously doubted anyone cared. If he were to complain, he would most likely be mocked, and it would be suggested once again that he was no gentleman.

He swore lividly under his breath. So far as he was concerned, *gentlemen* did not strike each other's horses.

Once he had his temper under control, he turned the lathered stallion and walked him back toward the crowd. Dismounting and handing the reins to a black stable boy, he was startled to hear Edward Greyson's voice raised in fury--in his defense.

“I want you off my property, Blair! There was no excuse for what you tried to do, none at all.”

The pimpled and skinny Alexander Blair looked sullenly up at the older man. “Harris should not even have been in the race,” he protested.

“Harris won,” Greyson shot back. “Clearly he belonged in the race more than you did. Good Lord, Blair, our fathers deliberately tried to unseat each other, but that sort of racing has been considered unsportsmanlike for years now.”

Surprised that Greyson, who had sneered at him earlier, was now defending him, Gwaltney stepped forward and intervened. “Mr. Greyson,” he said, “thank you for your concern, but it is not necessary. Young Blair here did not intentionally strike my horse. It was an accident.”

Greyson turned and looked at Gwaltney with narrowed silver eyes. All of them knew perfectly well it had been no accident. Since Blair and Gwaltney had been leading the field, nearly all of the riders had plainly seen Blair deliberately strike out with his crop--especially Greyson, who had been directly behind them. And yet, it was most gentlemanly of Gwaltney to insist it had been an accident. It eased the awkward situation enormously.

“Very well,” Greyson said at last, with clear reluctance. “Since Mr. Harris insists it was an accident, I retract what I said, Alexander. You may stay. But I want to make one thing clear. You will never ride a race on my property again. I won’t risk another *accident*. Do you understand?”

There was a brief smattering of laughter at the young man’s expense. Crimson-faced, he nodded, but before he melted into the crowd, he shot a look of virulent hatred at Gwaltney. Gwaltney only grinned at him, unintimidated by the young man’s glower. He had met his type before, unscrupulous but easily put in his place.

As they made their way through the crowd, Gwaltney was surprised to find Greyson walking by his side. Greyson turned to Gwaltney as they strode toward the house. “That was an excellent race you rode, despite your ... accident. And your stallion is most impressive. I don’t suppose you have any foals sired by him?”

“A few.”

“Might I come out to your plantation to see them sometime?”

Gwaltney glanced at the other man, startled. Despite the unyielding arrogance of the other man’s expression, he recognized that Greyson had accepted him as an equal, thanks to his gentlemanly refusal to become involved in a dispute with Blair. The corners of his mouth lifted slightly as he decided he would have to thank Blair for his interference. Edward Greyson was a powerful man to have as a friend.

“Of course, Mr. Greyson. I have a black yearling you might be interested in.”

Greyson looked at him a moment longer, then the arrogance suddenly melted, and he flashed a friendly grin. “I might indeed, if he takes after his father. And Gwaltney ... call me Grey.”

Chapter 17

Cordelia looked at her reflection in the dressing glass with distaste. She was unaccustomed to seeing herself clad in satin and lace, and the powder on her face and hair was even more peculiar. It seemed as though a stranger was staring out of the mirror at her. Hesitantly, she touched a hand to her hair, as though trying to confirm that the tall, white-powdered mass was actually attached to her head.

Jennifer Greyson stood next to Cordelia, putting the finishing touches on her own toilette for the dance. Elizabeth, of course, was much more accustomed to applying makeup, and she had finished quite some time ago, leaving Cordelia with a few other ladies who were still preparing themselves.

"You look very nice," Jennifer commented, giving Cordelia a wry, sideways smile. "I believe this look suits you better than spectacles and dowdy gowns."

"I feel so strange," Cordelia said. "My hair looks like a sugar cone."

Jennifer burst out laughing. It was true--the tall, powdered edifice of hair on Cordelia's head bore more than a passing resemblance to one of the white cones of sugar that were shipped to the colony. "I never powder my hair," she said. "Edward doesn't care for it, and I've always considered it rather a silly fashion anyway."

"I wish I hadn't let Elizabeth talk me into it," Cordelia confided in a low voice, glancing around to make certain her sister was no longer in the chamber. It had taken well over an hour to create the towering coiffure. Many women left their hair in such a style for weeks, wearing a net to bed and sleeping with their head on a wooden block to preserve the hairdo. Cordelia, however, had privately resolved to brush every speck of powder from her hair the moment she got home. Her neck already ached from the unaccustomed weight.

"Nevertheless, you look very attractive. I'm sure your husband will be impressed."

Cordelia tilted her chin slightly. "I don't really care what he thinks," she said coolly, but her traitorous mind insisted on playing scenes from the coming ball--Gwaltney watching the beautiful woman she had been magically transformed into, Gwaltney dancing attendance on her all evening, blind to all other women ... Gwaltney kissing her again.

She shook her head at her own foolishness. A little powder and satin did not transform a plain woman into a beautiful one. She was not beautiful, only well dressed.

And for heaven's sakes, she didn't want Gwaltney to kiss her again anyway.

Nevertheless, she felt her heart pounding with an odd mixture of anticipation and eagerness as she slowly descended the wide staircase, noting with a little disappointment that her husband was not waiting for her at the foot of the stairs. Her imagination had pictured the stunned look he would wear as she walked gracefully down to place her hand on his arm....

She was doing it again.

Trying to rein in her ludicrous imagination, she made her way toward the ballroom, expecting to see Gwaltney there. But when she entered the ballroom, her gaze passing over the crowd, she saw that her husband was missing. The chamber was large, but not as huge as the ballroom at the Governor's mansion, and despite the crush of people Gwaltney would have been immediately obvious by virtue of his enormous height. He was not there.

Jennifer made her way over to her own husband, and Cordelia stood frozen in place next to the door, feeling conspicuous with her stiff mountain of white hair--foolishly so, since it was a very fashionable coiffure and most of the other ladies wore their hair just as high and powdered

just as much. She had never felt so awkward in her life. She was accustomed to standing along the walls and being ignored, but always before she had been dressed plainly. Tonight she had gone to great pains with her toilette, and yet it seemed she was still doomed to stand by herself and watch others laugh and talk and dance.

Fortunately, Elizabeth noticed her plight and hurried over before Cordelia was able to begin feeling enormously sorry for herself. "Cordelia!" she exclaimed, holding out her hands and kissing her sister on the cheek as effusively as if she had not put the finishing touches on Cordelia's toilette only fifteen minutes before. "And where is Gwaltney?"

"I have no idea," Cordelia said, permitting Elizabeth to pull her toward the punch bowl. She looked at her sister's forced smile, seeing the strain on her lovely face, and abruptly forgot her own troubles in her concern for her sister. She stopped, forcing Elizabeth to come to a halt as well. "Elizabeth," she said softly, "are you certain you're all right?"

"Oh, absolutely. I'm fine, really. I'm so happy to be here. Isn't this a stunning ballroom? Every bit as lovely as the Governor's mansion, I think. Don't you?"

Despite the stream of platitudes Elizabeth uttered in a bright, cheerful voice, Cordelia saw that her attention was riveted on something on the far side of the ballroom. Glancing in that direction, Cordelia saw Jonathan Powell, talking with a lovely young lady who was showing a great deal of cleavage and all of her teeth in a predatory smile.

"Elizabeth..."

"No, really, I'm perfectly all right," Elizabeth said hastily, tearing her attention away from her former fiancé and smiling bitterly into Cordelia's eyes.

"Of course you are," Cordelia retorted. "And you don't care at all about that girl who is kissing Jonathan."

Elizabeth glanced back at Jonathan, startled. "He's *kissing* her?" Seeing the two of them involved in a perfectly proper conversation, she broke off and gave her sister a reproachful glance, aware she'd been tricked.

"You see? You do care."

"Of course I do," Elizabeth said with a sigh. "But he doesn't. Look at him, Cordelia. He's not even aware I'm in the room."

"He certainly is," Cordelia said hotly. "Can't you see he's trying to make you jealous? He's never before paid the slightest bit of attention to Sarah Carter. He doesn't care a fig for her."

"Do you really think so?"

"Elizabeth, if you still want him, why don't you tell him so?"

"I can't do that. I don't want him."

"You're a very poor liar."

Elizabeth sighed again. "Perhaps I do want him. But I can't have him. Don't ask me to tell you why. I simply can never trust him again."

"So you're going to let him make you jealous all evening?"

Elizabeth got a determined glint in her eye, that hint of steel that sometimes appeared beneath her serene demeanor. "No," she said, smiling a little. "Two can play at this game. I'm going to make *him* jealous. Excuse me, Cordelia." And she made her way toward the punch bowl.

Cordelia was enormously relieved to see Gwaltney pushing his way through the crowd toward her. Elizabeth, distracted by the sight of Jonathan, had obviously forgotten her noble intention of keeping her sister from being a wallflower. But now that Gwaltney was here, she

wouldn't have to stand alone next to the wall, looking like an overdressed fool. She sent him a blinding smile, born mostly of relief, and was surprised when he came to a halt and stared at her.

For a long moment he looked at her, and the expression in his eyes, stunned, almost dazed, filled her with an odd sensation. Vanity, perhaps. She had never felt vain before, and she found to her surprise that she rather liked it. Then he came forward, looking down into her eyes.

"You look beautiful," he said in a husky voice. She had heard that tone before ... just before he kissed her. The memory raised gooseflesh on the bare skin of her arms, and she stared up into the glittering gold of his eyes, mesmerized by the intensity of his gaze.

"I hardly think so," she murmured at last, feeling that something should be said. Feeling that otherwise she would simply stare into his beautiful eyes all evening and make an utter fool of herself.

"Trust me. You are stunning." He extended his hand and offered her a cup of punch. "Would you care for a drink?"

She took the silver cup from his hand and drank from it hastily, using the action to cover her confusion and awkwardness. He had said she was beautiful. And he had actually looked as though he meant it. The realization started her heart pounding all over again. No man had ever before found her attractive. And of all the men she had ever known, for this man, this handsome, vital, powerful man, to find her attractive--it was bewildering, but pleasantly so. The admiring expression in his eyes totally obliterated all other thoughts, except one.

He thought she was beautiful.

Through the thoughts whirling in her brain she noticed the minuet was beginning. Couples were beginning to assemble in the middle of the chamber. "Oh, look," she said, trying to cover the awkward moment, "they're starting the dance. Shall we join them?"

Gwaltney stared at her a long minute, then broke into a slow, amused grin. "I'm delighted you would like to dance," he said, "especially when I recall how coldly you refused me when I asked you to dance at the Governor's house. Would that I had realized you prefer to do the asking."

Cordelia flushed crimson under the white lead makeup, realizing she had committed a *faux pas* of horrendous proportions by asking a man to dance--even though the man was her husband. Gwaltney, however, did not appear annoyed by her forward behavior. He took her hand and led her toward the center of the floor.

They danced together, Cordelia thought dreamily, as though they were made for each other. It seemed that her awkwardness was gone and that she was dancing as gracefully as her sister ever had. She felt Gwaltney's eyes upon her during the entire dance. For the first time in her life she felt herself to be attractive, dangerously attractive. Almost irresistible. It was foolish, perhaps, but Gwaltney's intense gaze made her feel that way.

At the end of the minuet Gwaltney brought her another silver cup of punch, then excused himself. To her puzzlement she saw him going out through one of the doors that led to the garden. She watched him disappear, confused. Why did the man never remain inside for more than a few moments at a time? She could understand that he felt ill at ease in this beautifully furnished dwelling, amidst the aristocracy of Virginia, yet his pride should have compelled him to stay with his wife. No man wanted his wife to stand alone along the wall, surely.

Puzzled by his behavior, she decided to follow him and see if she could gain some insight into the man.

Outside, she admired the formal garden by the light of the half moon that rode high in the

sky. Beyond the garden, a dark swath of lawn rolled down to the James River, which glinted silver in the moonlight. She wandered down the paths, feeling that ambling about in the garden was preferable to standing alone in the ballroom. And then she came to a sudden halt as she heard his voice, rumbling and low, but unmistakable. The deep voice sent a prickle of awareness coursing through her body, and for a long moment she listened to the low murmur of his voice.

It took quite some time before the import of his words struck her.

“Seducing Cordelia is not going to be the chore I originally believed,” Gwaltney was saying. “Christ, Jonathan, why didn’t you tell me how beautiful she was beneath those dowdy clothes?”

“I didn’t know,” Jonathan retorted. “She’s dressed that way for most of her adult life, I believe. I had no idea she was so lovely. She’s almost as beautiful as Elizabeth.”

More, Gwaltney thought, but he had the tact not to say it aloud. Elizabeth was attractive enough, but to him she looked like a hundred other blondes--pale, insipid, and washed-out. But Cordelia....

Her flawless skin glowed like moonlight, and her eyes were the deep and fathomless blue of the ocean. Her features, which he had previously thought of as sharp and pointed, were aristocratic, finely etched, saved from delicacy only by the strong line of her jaw. She was not classically beautiful, he supposed, for her cheekbones were a little too high, her forehead a trifle too wide, for perfect beauty. But he found her strikingly unusual face extremely appealing. And her hair, that magnificent mane of fire-touched mahogany, defied description.

Before this morning, when she stepped out of the carriage dressed like a duchess, he had never imagined she had such beauty.

No, seducing her was definitely not going to be a chore.

“She’s responding to me already,” he said with a trifle more satisfaction than he intended. He had not originally planned on enjoying bedding her--but that had been before he realized she had been concealing her spectacular looks. He was already beginning to anticipate it. “I plan on bedding her before the week is out. And then you can tell Elizabeth you were responsible for bringing us together.”

“Gwaltney, I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this,” Jonathan said sincerely.

“Elizabeth was so angry, but now I think she’ll forgive me.”

“Think no more of it,” Gwaltney said cheerfully. “No matter that the woman is a shrew. If I can convince her to keep her mouth shut in bed, I daresay I’ll enjoy her body well enough.”

“*If* you can keep her mouth shut.”

Gwaltney grinned. “Trust me, Jonathan. I’ve managed to keep her quiet before. There are ways, believe me.” As he spoke he remembered kissing Cordelia, remembered the warmth that had inexplicably pulsed through him, driving away his control, and felt more of the same heat. He understood it better now. His body had recognized she was an attractive woman, even if his mind had been fooled.

He decided he would kiss her again tonight. She was ready. He had seen the look of mingled excitement and bewilderment in her eyes, and he knew what it meant. Cordelia found him attractive.

Just as he had thought, seducing her would be simple indeed.

Behind a boxwood hedge, Cordelia stood motionless, listening to the conversation

between the two men. She felt ill with humiliation and self-loathing. She had been a fool, an utter fool, to imagine Gwaltney was actually starting to care for her. Evidently Jonathan was striving to impress his former fiancée by trying to bring Cordelia and Gwaltney together, and Gwaltney had agreed to help his friend by seducing her.

She realized with a stab of pain that Gwaltney had been kind to her this past week solely because he had promised Jonathan he would seduce her.

He still thought she was a shrew. He didn't even *like* her, for God's sake.

True, his words had made it abundantly clear he thought she was attractive, but that only made it worse. Now that he realized she was beautiful, rather than the plain shrew she had pretended to be, he no longer regarded making love to her as painful. If she were to have sex with him, he would see her as an object, not a person. She might as well be a whore.

Seducing Cordelia is not going to be the chore I originally believed.

Her head swam, and she wanted desperately to sit down and cry. But rage was welling in her, driving away her embarrassment and her sorrow. Damn Gwaltney Harris! She would revenge herself on him if it was the last thing she did. The moment he walked back into the ballroom, she would dump the punchbowl over his head.

She groaned inwardly as she realized she couldn't do that. If she did, Gwaltney would surely realize she had overheard his conversation with Jonathan. And then her humiliation would be utterly and totally complete.

No, she would have to pretend he hadn't hurt her, pretend she hadn't heard his words. And then, when he was least expecting it, she would strike.

But how to hurt him? That was the question.

As she stood there, her mind seething with rage and pain, she slowly began to remember the expression in Gwaltney's eyes as he looked at her. That expression of stunned disbelief had not been solely for her benefit. He did find her attractive, there was no question.

Standing alone in the garden, she began to laugh softly.

Two could play at that game. But only one could win.

She intended to be the winner.

By the time Cordelia had collected herself enough to walk back into the ballroom, Elizabeth had amassed a rather large circle of admirers, all drawn by her beauty and held captive by her sparkling personality.

Cordelia regarded her sister with amusement, and another emotion dangerously close to envy. There were times when she wished she had the ability to manipulate men that way, to wrap them around her finger at her will.

For a brief moment she considered trying to make Gwaltney jealous by collecting a bevy of men, the way Elizabeth had, but then she discarded the idea. Men had never flocked to her before, and she saw no reason they should now, simply because she was dressed presentably. She knew well enough that men did not hover around Elizabeth simply because she was beautiful--they were attracted to her humor, her proper, ladylike demeanor, and her warmth.

Cordelia was uncomfortably aware she was not a warm person.

Far better, she decided, to attempt to work her feminine wiles, such as they were, on Gwaltney. She already knew her husband was attracted to her. Obviously he had been playing her for a fool, pretending to tolerate her company when in fact he despised her--but she was certain that although his affection was feigned, his attraction to her was not totally artificial.

She remembered the look in his eyes as she had alighted from the carriage, the startled glance that had quickly changed to warm admiration, and the way he had stared at her during the dance, and she felt strangely hot at the memory. He had not feigned that look, and she had definitely not imagined it. No, she was certain at least part of his professed attraction was real.

Standing at the wall, she saw Gwaltney entering the ballroom from the garden door. He glanced around the chamber, and, seeing her, made his way toward her. Cordelia forced her most brilliant smile as he approached.

"I missed you," she said in a husky voice, placing her hand on his arm.

I despise you, you bastard.

Gwaltney looked down on her, smiling in return, and she realized, not for the first time, how very tall he was. She was tall, unfashionably so, and she stood taller than many men. And yet the top of her head was on a level with his chin. "I'm glad," he replied. "Could I perhaps get you another cup of punch?"

"Why don't we talk for a while instead?"

I'm going to cut your heart out and trample it while you watch.

Gwaltney appeared surprised but not in the least bit displeased by the suggestion. "A good idea," he agreed, leaning against the wall and taking her hand in a husbandly gesture. An odd, languid heat stole through her at the casual caress of his fingers, and she moaned inwardly. She had no idea how she was to bring Gwaltney to his knees when his slightest touch affected her so.

But somehow she was going to find a way.

She looked up to find Gwaltney staring down at her. "You are the most beautiful woman here," he said in a throaty whisper. It sounded as though the words were being drawn from him against his will.

Inexplicably, her heart began to pound. It was simply part of his plot to seduce her, she told herself firmly. He knew the effect he had on her, and he was shamelessly using it to his advantage.

And yet she could not slow the rapid drumming of her heart.

"Thank you," she said softly, smiling up at him as sincerely as she could.

"It wasn't a compliment. Just the simple truth."

Cordelia glanced around, seeing the beautiful women in their silks and brocades, all their best features displayed to advantage. Did Gwaltney think she was a fool to believe such an extravagant statement? Surely, in her powder and satin gown, she looked more presentable than before, but to call her beautiful, especially when compared to her sister, or Jennifer Greyson, or Sarah Carter, was nothing short of absurd.

"You're very kind."

You're a hypocritical liar.

Gwaltney was beginning to look around anxiously, and she saw with surprise there was sweat beading on his brow. Even with the press of bodies and the heat from the large quantity of candles, it was rather cool tonight. The air outside was unseasonably chilly. "Perhaps," he suggested uneasily, "we could take a walk in the garden."

"I'd like that," she agreed.

Perhaps you could take a walk straight to hell.

More than one pair of eyes watched them as they crossed the chamber. More than one mouth began whispering speculatively. Cordelia knew that people had wondered if she and

Gwaltney had a happy marriage. The fact that they were going outside to be alone was suggestive of a certain intimacy that most couples did not possess.

As they crossed the ballroom, Cordelia was aware of Gwaltney's haste, his barely leashed impatience to escape the chamber, and she wondered once again exactly why he found such difficulty in staying inside. His aversion to being inside for any length of time was beginning to seem downright peculiar.

As they stepped outside Cordelia heard Gwaltney's deep intake of breath, almost a gasp of relief. He led her away from the ballroom, toward the small formal garden. At last, when they had come a respectable distance from the house, he paused, looking down at her. Silhouetted as he was against the sky, his face was unreadable, yet she could sense his intensity.

He wanted her. Every feminine instinct in her body told her so.

She tilted her face up, shutting her eyes against the intensity of his gaze.

At that interesting moment there was a sharp and bitter laugh. Cordelia turned, opening her eyes, to see Alexander Blair watching them.

"So," he said thickly, and Cordelia remembered seeing him on the fringes of the ballroom, watching Gwaltney with undisguised hatred. It was obvious from his slurred speech that he was drunk. "You think to buy respectability with this whore."

Gwaltney's expression altered instantly, his eyes narrowing and his mouth compressing as he took a threatening step forward. "I believe you should retract that, Blair," he warned in a tone of soft menace.

Cordelia stood a step behind him, slightly surprised at the swift way he had stepped to her defense. For a moment he had looked every bit as furious as he had looked on the night when she had hinted Mary must be his natural daughter. And yet she knew, she *knew*, he had no feelings for her whatsoever. It must simply be, she reasoned, that he felt possessive of her, in much the same way he felt possessive of his horse.

She was nothing but a possession to him. She knew that. And yet she could not help but be warmed by his protective reaction.

Blair stared at Gwaltney a long moment, then he shrugged and looked past him at Cordelia. "I apologize, Mistress Harris," he drawled. "My quarrel is not with you but with your ill-bred husband."

"I hardly see why you have any reason to quarrel with my husband," Cordelia said hotly, unable to prevent her own protective response. Why she should feel protective of the man who had humiliated her earlier, she had no idea. But she had never been one to overanalyze her own feelings, and thus she spoke without thinking. "You are the one who struck his horse, not the other way around."

"He made me look like a fool."

"On the contrary," Cordelia shot back, "you were born a fool."

Gwaltney glanced back swiftly over his shoulder, and Cordelia understood from his expression that he wanted her to be quiet. She subsided into silence--temporarily, at least.

"You had no reason to strike my horse," Gwaltney said evenly. Something in his tone suggested to Cordelia, who was beginning to know him better than she really cared to, that he was angry but struggling to keep his anger under control. She was starting to realize he did not like to lose his temper. "Mist was the best stallion today. You had no right to interfere."

Blair scowled. "*You* had no right in the race, you bloody longhunter."

"Edward Greyson invited me. That gave me the right."

"If Greyson knew the things about you I knew, he would never have permitted you on his property."

Gwaltney lifted his eyebrows and grinned coldly. "Greyson knows I am a longhunter and a wheelwright's son. It doesn't seem to bother him."

"That's not what I'm referring to," Blair said thickly. "You're a murderer, damn you."

Gwaltney looked puzzled. "I beg your pardon?"

"You killed my cousin, you bastard."

Gwaltney frowned a moment longer, then he shrugged off the younger man's angry words. "Blair," he said easily, "you're drunk. And you've confused me with someone else. Now, if you will excuse me."

He turned, and Blair caught him by the shoulder in an attempt to spin him around, managing only to throw him slightly off balance. Blair was thin and poorly muscled, barely out of adolescence--hardly a match for the powerful man who had spent ten years carving out an existence in the wilderness. "I'm not confused," he snarled, "though God knows I'm drunk. To see the son of a bitch who murdered my cousin treated like a gentleman makes me ill."

Gwaltney's face darkened, and Cordelia sensed he was warring with himself. He looked as if he would like to strike Blair, but his sense of decency held him back. They were on another man's land, and both of them had been invited by that man. To brawl was to cause yet another embarrassing situation for Edward Greyson. And besides, Cordelia thought, watching Blair as he weaved slightly, Blair was no match for Gwaltney in this condition. It was obvious her husband recognized that fact.

"Because you are drunk, Blair," Gwaltney growled at last, "I will forget this conversation ever took place." He took Cordelia's arm and steered her toward the house, then looked back over his shoulder and added in a tone of savage warning, "But if you ever say words like that to me or my wife when you are sober--God help you."

Cordelia thought over the incident as she rode home in the luxurious carriage. It was dark, and their way through the forest was lit only by the lanterns on the carriage and the half-full moon, yet the horses found their way down the road with unerring accuracy. She knew that Gwaltney was riding just behind the carriage on his great gray stallion.

She could not seem to drag her thoughts away from Gwaltney. She had sworn earlier this evening to humiliate him, to make him sorry for the way he had humiliated her, and yet she could hardly stop herself from feeling proud of the way he had handled Blair. Given the insults Blair had hurled at him, especially considering the incident on the racetrack, he would have had every right to strike the other man or even to challenge him to a duel. And yet, because Blair had been inebriated, he had all but ignored the other man's ugly words, issuing only a warning.

It showed an innate nobility of character, an inborn quality of gallantry, that he had refused to be provoked by Blair's words because the other man was drunk. For the first time she began to suspect that Gwaltney really was a gentleman at heart.

She groaned and leaned her head back wearily against the cushions. That was all she needed--to begin feeling respect for the man. It would only complicate her plans for revenge. Already it was hard to maintain her feeling of angry dislike. She did not want to respect him.

He was, very definitely, not worthy of her respect.

Chapter 18

The flames leaped and danced around Gwaltney, the billowing smoke choking him, the unbearable heat burning his throat and eyes. He huddled in the corner, knowing with agonizing certainty that he was going to die. And then the flames parted, and a figure, draped in a patchwork quilt, appeared.

Gwaltney stared through the flames, hope springing to life in him for the first time. He had not been abandoned in the conflagration. Someone had come to save him. Someone had cared enough for him to save his life.

And then the apparition threw back the quilt, and for the first time he could see its face, lit by the eerie orange light. He stared in horror.

The empty eye sockets of a skull looked back at him.

Gwaltney awakened with a violent start in his bedchamber. He lay still for a few moments, aware of his own terrified gasping, of the sweat that soaked the linen sheets. These nightmares, these horrifying distorted memories, were what sent him racing from his bedchamber every now and then. Despite the fact that he had carefully designed the bedchamber so that he could usually sleep in it, he could not stay here with the memory of smoke filling his mind. He could still smell the smoke, feel the savage heat on his face, and the thought of being indoors, of being trapped inside, was utterly unbearable. Panic seared through him, driving away his customary calm and replacing it with terror.

Hastily he scrambled from the bed, threw on clothing, and fled from the house, into the safety of the dark night.

In the morning Cordelia sat by her window, peering through the Venetian blinds, until she saw Gwaltney leave the house. He was dressed in laborer's clothes--coarse homespun breeches, a plain, unruffled shirt, and an uncocked, wide-brimmed straw hat. Clearly he was going to the fields to work.

Once he had disappeared, she rose to her feet, caught up a piece of paper, and made her way purposefully out of her chamber and across the central hall, knocking on a door. There was no answer, but of course she had not expected one. She pushed the heavy door open.

"Mary? It's me, Cordelia."

As she had expected, the little girl was sitting on the rag rug in her chamber in a pool of sunlight, playing with a Jacob's ladder, a popular toy, and next to her was the faithful Django. The little girl looked up and grinned widely, and at the same time the dog's tail thumped out a welcome on the floor. Cordelia entered the chamber, trying to maintain her dignity and conceal how delighted she was by this enthusiastic welcome. With a great deal of effort she managed to repress her wide smile.

She sat down on the floor next to the little girl. Django wiggled over next to her and thrust his head into her lap, and she patted him absently, totally uncaring of the quantity of white hairs that were adhering to her dark green silk riding habit. She had lived too many years caring

nothing for her gowns to begin worrying about them now.

"I brought you something," she said to Mary.

Mary regarded her alertly, cocking her head to one side, but said nothing.

Cordelia handed her a sheet of parchment. On it she had drawn Django, and across the top of the paper she had carefully lettered the word DOG. She had worked hard on the sketch, and she was pleased with the way she had captured the dog's mischievous expression. Judging from her reaction, Mary was pleased too. She broke into a broad, delighted smile.

"Do you know who that is?"

Mary pointed to Django.

"That's right. It's Django. It's a dog. And that word," she pointed to the word at the top of the page, "says 'dog.' Do you like the picture?"

Mary nodded emphatically.

"You can keep it," Cordelia said, then, at Mary's joyous expression, added quickly, "provided you say the word *dog* for me. Can you say it?"

Mary's smile faded almost instantly, and a look of intense anxiety crossed her face. She shook her head hastily.

"Mary, just try it," Cordelia insisted. "It's a simple word. Dog. Can you say dog?"

Silence.

Cordelia reached out for the parchment. "You can keep it when you say the word."

She saw the tears welling in the little girl's dark brown eyes and hastily took her hand away, regretting her stern tone immediately. Something in the little girl's woebegone aspect struck at her heart, and she rapidly changed her mind about the wisdom of her scheme. "Never mind, Mary," she said gently. "You may keep the picture. And tomorrow I'll bring you another picture, of something else you like. All right?"

The little girl nodded and gave her a hesitant, tremulous smile.

"And maybe tomorrow you can say *dog* for me. Or perhaps the day after that."

Mary rose to her feet, still clutching the sketch in her small hand, and much to Cordelia's surprise, approached her cautiously. Quickly she placed a kiss on her cheek and then retreated.

Cordelia felt a genuine smile cross her face. This time she did not bother to repress it. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mary."

She rose to her feet and left the chamber hastily. In her own chamber she sat down and looked at herself in the mirror, intending to check her appearance before she went out for a ride.

She was surprised to see that despite the smile she still wore, there were tears streaking her cheeks.

After her ride, Cordelia went upstairs to change and wash away the odor of the stables that clung to her skin. Having changed into the simplest of the gowns Gwaltney had provided for her, she walked down the winding back staircase, intending to find a book to read.

She came to a sudden halt on the landing when she saw Gwaltney waiting for her in the back parlor.

For a long moment she said nothing, only stared down at him. She remembered the humiliation that had burned in her chest like acid last night, and thought how much she hated him. Then she remembered his restraint with the drunken Alexander Blair, and she thought how much she admired him. The conflicting emotions warred inside her.

Gwaltney seemed to feel no such conflict. He smiled gently up at her. "Do you have a

moment to talk, Cordelia?"

Feeling idiotic for having hesitated, as though she were intimidated by his mere presence, Cordelia swept briskly down the remainder of the narrow stairs. "Of course," she said. "What is it that you wish to discuss?"

She stopped on the bottom step and stared directly, almost challengingly, into his eyes. Gwaltney smiled slightly and brushed his knuckle across her cheek, a casual caress that inexplicably sent shivers down her spine.

"Us," he said.

There is no us, you fool, she almost snapped at him, but then she remembered her resolution to hurt him as he had hurt her. In order to bring him to his knees, she had to be attractive. Gentle. Ladylike. In short, as much like Elizabeth as possible. Elizabeth, she knew, did not make a habit of calling men fools to their faces.

She looked deeply into his eyes, giving him a slow, seductive smile that promised a great deal more than she intended to give. "Indeed," she said softly. "Can you be more specific?"

"I enjoyed spending time with you last night."

"I enjoyed the evening, too," she said softly, aware that it was more true than she wanted it to be.

"I wondered if perhaps you would like to go to the theater tonight."

Cordelia's mouth fell open. Of all the things she had expected him to suggest, that was most definitely not one. Remembering as she did his assertion to Jonathan Powell that she would be in his bed in a week, she had rather expected him to crassly attempt to seduce her over dinner again. He was more devious than she had realized.

She squared her shoulders slightly as a plan occurred to her, and a faint smile touched her lips. She could be devious too.

And the theater was a perfect place for her to carry out her plan. In the midst of a crowd, it would be easy enough to utterly humiliate Gwaltney, to make him a laughingstock.

"Of course," she agreed, taking care to keep her voice soft. "I would love to attend the theater with you, sir." She met his gaze, smiled again, and added with perfect sincerity, "I shall be looking forward to it."

Cordelia was rather surprised when Gwaltney himself handed her into the carriage, then jumped easily in himself, sitting across from her and somehow seeming to fill the carriage with his presence. His broad shoulders and long legs took up a good deal of the available space. He was a very large man, she thought, and wondered if that was why he was uncomfortable in enclosed spaces. She watched him swallow and clench his jaw as the carriage began to sway and bounce.

He had promised Jonathan he would seduce her, she thought wryly. He could hardly do that if he never spent any time with her. He really had no choice but to ride with her. She shot a look at him from beneath her lashes, noticing with grim amusement that he already looked a little green.

Despite the fact that he said very little, Cordelia enjoyed the ride. The jouncing of the carriage as it passed over the rough road disturbed her not at all. She made no effort at conversation, merely tried to perfect her plan for this evening. She remembered the stunned look in his eyes when he had first seen her dressed like a lady at the Greysons'. She had to make him look at her like that again, to stare at her, besotted, before everyone in Williamsburg.

And then she would utter some sarcastic comment, make it clear that she cared nothing at all for him, and utterly humiliate him.

That would be easy enough. She thought with grim humor that she excelled at making barbed comments. The first part of her plan, however, was much more difficult. In order to make Gwaltney look a perfect fool, she first had to captivate him. She was no practiced flirt like her sister, and no great beauty, yet she hoped her appearance would be enough to attract him. Despite his hurtful words in the garden, she was certain he had been attracted to her. Hadn't he said as much to Jonathan?

She had chosen one of her prettiest, most feminine gowns, a pale pink gown strewn with embroidered flowers. The fabric was from France, and because the French had recently invented a machine that could embroider, the flowers had been applied by machine even though the gown itself was hand sewn. The bodice was low cut, and the ruffled skirt cascaded over bell-shaped hoops.

She had been uncertain about the effect of the pink gown against the red highlights of her hair, so she had had her maid apply rice powder, despite her earlier resolution to never, ever powder her hair again. The soft pink, however, did make her complexion look startlingly pale and lovely. She wore white lead powder on her face, and her lips had been lightly rouged with the salve made from beeswax and red lead paint, but her cheeks had not been reddened at all. The makeup drew attention to the remarkable clarity of her white skin, and to the lush fullness of her lips. She had been delighted with the overall effect.

Rather to her annoyance, however, Gwaltney scarcely seemed to have noticed her appearance. He merely sat across from her, silent and brooding.

The theater was located behind the Capitol building, across from the Blue Bell Tavern. Virginia had been the first colony to have a theater, and it was now the only colony able to boast of a professional troupe of actors, the Virginia Company of Comedians. Performed here were the same plays one might see in London, by playwrights such as William Shakespeare, David Garrick, and Colley Cibber.

As they traveled toward the theater, the silence that filled the carriage became oppressive, and Cordelia decided she must fill it. Elizabeth, after all, kept up a steady stream of chatter with her admirers. "What play are we going to see?" she inquired. Not that she cared. The only thing she really cared about tonight was making Gwaltney pay for his arrogance.

At her question Gwaltney's head jerked around, and she realized he had been staring fixedly out the window into the evening gloom. "Two, actually," he replied. His voice sounded strained. "A farce, called *The Anatomist*, and then *The Merchant of Venice*, which I don't doubt you are familiar with."

Cordelia nodded and quoted softly, "'I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano--/ A stage, where every man must play a part;/ And mine a sad one.'"

Gwaltney cocked his head. "You know the play, then."

"Of course."

Gwaltney looked at her a moment longer, then dropped his eyes. "Truth be told," he said softly, "I've never cared much for Shakespeare."

She recognized the veiled admission that he had never read the play. In all likelihood, she mused, he had read very little. A wheelwright's son would have had little exposure to such things, in stark contrast to planters' sons, who were expected to be well-read and literate in several languages. It was yet another difference between a laborer's son and the scions of

aristocratic families, part of the yawning chasm that separated Gwaltney from other planters. How strange, how *alien*, the life of a planter must be to him.

She did her best to ignore the sympathy that lanced through her.

A stage, where every man must play a part;/ And mine a sad one. She would be on stage tonight, she realized. All of Williamsburg would be watching her with avid curiosity, trying to discern whether she held her husband in contempt or whether she had genuine affection for him. Gwaltney wanted the world to know he was married to a respectable, upper-class woman. That was, of course, why he was taking such care to show her off in public, to take her to routs and plays.

And he was trying to seduce her as well. She mustn't forget that, not for a second.

"I think you will enjoy the play," she said, forcing a brittle smile. "It is not that difficult. Not like *Lear* or *Macbeth*."

Gwaltney gave her a strained smile. "I see. Simple enough for my peasant mind to comprehend, then."

"That is not what I said," she snapped irritably, annoyed that he thought she was insulting him even when she was trying to attract him. Clearly, she thought, she needed to study Elizabeth's techniques further.

The uncomfortable silence fell, and this time neither did anything to fill the void.

Finally the carriage rumbled to a stop in front of the theater. Gwaltney leapt from the carriage, with rather patent relief, and helped Cordelia from the carriage. She felt his work-roughened fingers on her arm, and a shiver passed through her. A shiver of revulsion, she assured herself firmly.

As they entered the theater all heads swiveled to stare, and painted fans snapped up so that ladies could whisper behind them to their escorts. Cordelia felt her cheeks heating rapidly. She stole a glance at Gwaltney and saw that the square thrust of his jaw was more pronounced than usual, his head held high, as he marched across the crowded room. He was doing his best to appear oblivious to the staring eyes.

She walked beside her husband as he escorted her toward one of the side boxes. The common planters and townspeople watched the performances from the pit; the middling sort of person sat in the gallery; but Gwaltney had somehow obtained a box such as most planters had. Which meant that everyone would be able to see them.

He seated her and sat next to her. The multitude of eyes watching them did not waver. She glanced at him and saw that he did not look comfortable. His jaw was set rigidly, and he looked pale.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Fine," he said curtly, looking straight ahead.

She caught his chin gently with her fingers and turned his head so that he had no choice but to look at her. There was something in his eyes that played upon her sympathy, something that ran far deeper than the embarrassment she had expected to see. His eyes were vividly golden, filled with a powerful emotion. She held his gaze for a long moment, until she was certain what she saw there.

Gwaltney was frightened.

She had planned to humiliate him, to let the whole world know that she considered him beneath her. She had planned to say something so outrageously insulting that it would be repeated and laughed over at every rout in Virginia for the next year. But looking into the

vulnerable depths of his eyes she found herself unable to hurt him. Moved by a sudden impulse, she took his hand and squeezed it.

The whispering intensified. Gwaltney looked at her with sudden surprise, then a slow, oddly sensual smile curved his mouth. He lifted her hand and kissed it.

The whispers rose to a muted roar.

"It's like being on a damned stage," he said in a taut voice, looking into her eyes. "They're always watching me, waiting for me to make a mistake, waiting for some piece of gossip." He held her hand like a drowning man clutching a rope. "Damned gentry."

Without thinking, Cordelia whispered, "'A stage, where every man must play a part;/ And mine a sad one.'"

He stared into her eyes a long moment, then grinned wryly and dropped her hand. "Bloody appropriate," he muttered, almost to himself. "I believe I'm starting to like Shakespeare after all."

After the play and farce were over, Gwaltney and Cordelia escaped from the crowd in the theater. The fresh, cool night air felt and smelled wonderful after the overpowering odor of unwashed bodies and cloying perfumes that had permeated the theater.

Gwaltney hesitated near the waiting coach. "I thought," he said a little tentatively, "that we could take a walk before returning home."

Cordelia winced, thinking of her high-heeled slippers and of the stays she wore, laced much more tightly than was her custom. "Must we?"

Gwaltney hesitated and looked at the coach-and-four. "I can't go back in that carriage right now," he said, almost in a whisper.

Puzzled, she looked at him, noting the tension in the set of his shoulders, the pallor of his skin. He obviously was not feeling well, and she wondered that he did not want to go home immediately. "Why not?"

"I simply mean that it's a lovely evening," Gwaltney said hastily.

She suspected there was more to it than that. There was something important here, something that she was missing. But she could not quite make sense of the pattern. "Very well," she said.

They walked on in silence. Cordelia berated herself for failing to carry through her plan. At the crucial moment, her conscience had stopped her. Gwaltney had seemed too fragile for her to be able to hurt him further.

No matter that the woman is a shrew.

Fool, she berated herself, squaring her shoulders. There was nothing vulnerable about the man at all. On the contrary, he was shrewd and calculating, able to manipulate her emotions with ludicrous ease. She had been foolish to hesitate.

She would not miss her opportunity next time.

It was a lovely evening, warm, but with only a trace of the humidity that was typical of Virginia in summertime. No clouds concealed the stars cascading across the sky, and a gentle breeze blew as they walked through the nearly empty street. Although it was the largest town in Virginia, Williamsburg was not a bustling city such as Philadelphia or Boston. It was little more than a peaceful village.

In a gesture that might have melted her heart had she not overheard his conversation with Jonathan last night, Gwaltney reached out and took her hand. Remembering the role she was

playing, she smiled at him, all the while hearing his callous words ringing in her head.

Seducing Cordelia is not going to be the chore I originally believed. If I can convince her to keep her mouth shut in bed, I daresay I'll enjoy her body well enough.

Humiliation washed over her in a suffocating wave.

"I'm sorry," she said suddenly, yanking her hand back. "I can't do this. I just can't."

Ignoring his bewildered look, she stepped away blindly and stumbled away from him, down a side street.

At that moment she heard rapidly drumming hoof beats and looked up to see a wild-eyed horse bearing down on her.

Terror immobilized her. She stood frozen, unable to get out of the way or to move her legs, incapable of doing anything but stare in shock at the half-ton of horseflesh hurtling towards her.

Suddenly a heavy weight slammed into her, knocking her to the ground.

Snorting, the horse galloped past and into the night as Cordelia struck the road painfully, Gwaltney's entire weight pressing her down into the dirt. She gasped and scrabbled ineffectively at him, feeling that her ribs would not take any more punishment. He lifted his weight off her and propped himself up on his hands, looking down into her face anxiously.

"Cordelia! Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said breathlessly, a little winded. She was already short of breath, due to the tightly laced stays digging into her ribs, and his weight on top of her had not helped matters any. But she felt no unfamiliar pains. Apparently she had come through the incident unscathed.

"You little idiot. Why didn't you get out of the way?"

"I couldn't," she whispered. "I just couldn't."

"You could have been killed, damn it!"

"I know. I ... I just couldn't move."

Gwaltney stared down at her a moment longer, then growled something savage under his breath and bent to kiss her.

His lips captured hers roughly, almost angrily, and took possession of her mouth as desperately as though he had been waiting to do this all his life, as though his entire lifetime had led him to this moment. She felt the warm, powerful vitality of him, his overpowering masculinity, and her volition was swept away in her awareness of the raging passion that surged beneath his placid surface. She opened her lips helplessly, returning his kiss. A soft moan was torn from her throat.

In that brief instant of time, it was over. He lifted his head from hers and stared down into her eyes for a moment, then abruptly pulled away from her, getting effortlessly to his feet. Cordelia experienced a sensation of loss as the warmth of his body withdrew from hers. Wordlessly, she accepted his helping hand and came to her feet.

"Are you certain you are all right?"

No, she wanted to whisper. He had kissed her before, but never like that, with a violent, overwhelming passion she knew she would never forget. Her mind swam with images of the incredible sensation of his warm mouth against hers, his powerful body, hard and lean, as it pressed into hers.

She was not certain she was all right, not at all.

"Yes," she replied calmly. "Yes. I'm fine."

Chapter 19

All he could think about was Cordelia.

Gwaltney lay in bed, his mind spinning. For once, he scarcely noticed the walls of his chamber. He hardly knew he was inside. His mind was in Williamsburg, insisting on replaying the scene over and over again. He sighed, cursing himself for an idiot.

He could not stop thinking about her.

The memory of the way he had kissed her, and the way she had kissed him back, haunted him.

He really had no idea what had come over him. She had been very nearly trampled to death by a horse, and he had knocked her out of the way almost reflexively. Up until that moment he had behaved as a decent man should. But as he lay atop her, he had become uncomfortably aware of her nearness, her warm and pliant body and vividly beautiful face. And her lips, those incredibly full and lush lips, had been so very close to his....

It did not help his uncomfortable state of mind, and body, that her chamber was right down the hall from his. She was so near, and yet she might have been a thousand miles away. He uttered a groan and turned over, burying his face in the pillow and closing his eyes as if he could shut out the erotic images that were burned into his mind. It didn't help.

He had meant to seduce her slowly. He had been in control of the situation, totally in control, until he had found his lips inches from hers. And for the third time, he had found himself kissing her, utterly out of control of his own actions.

He hated losing control of himself, damn it.

He had been brought up by a harsh father who demanded that he exert self-control at a very early age, a man who had whipped him readily for any small transgression. As a boy, Gwaltney had learned quickly that the price for losing his control and speaking out of turn was swift and painful punishment.

As a man, the lesson had been reinforced in western Virginia. The wilds of Virginia were no place for the undisciplined. Had he not taken care to control every situation in which he found himself, he quite likely would not have survived ten years. The few times he had lost his mental focus in the wilderness he had barely escaped with his life.

Until he had met Cordelia, the only thing that could make him lose control of his emotions was being inside. It was the reason he was so ashamed of his irrational fear of the indoors, because when he was inside he felt shockingly, terrifyingly out of control.

It was not a sensation he enjoyed.

He sighed, admitting glumly that Cordelia could make him lose control as readily as his irrational terror could. But more irritating was the fact that he didn't seem able to affect her the same way. Part of him had hoped she was affected by his kiss, had hoped that she might be moved to actually become his wife in more than name only, but that small hope had shriveled and died when she spoke so coolly. He remembered her placid, unshaken voice.

Yes. Yes, I'm fine.

Gwaltney groaned into the pillow. It was more than obvious that she had not found his kiss stimulating in the slightest. But, after all, what had he expected?

God knew he was not much of a lover.

Gwaltney could barely meet Cordelia's eyes over breakfast the next morning. She seemed calm, as though nothing at all out of the ordinary had happened last night. She did not appear in the least angry. On the contrary, she seemed completely unmoved.

He was desperately embarrassed about his actions. She seemed to have entirely forgotten them.

A dozen times during breakfast, the words "I'm sorry" rose to his lips, only to be checked by the calm indifference on her face. He could not bring himself to utter the words. And, if he was honest with himself, they were not true. Despite his embarrassment, despite his disgust at his own lack of control, he was not in the least sorry that he had kissed her.

He could not remember ever enjoying a kiss more.

Cordelia excused herself from breakfast as soon as she could. Going upstairs, she retrieved parchment, a quill, and a silver inkpot and left the house. She wanted to be alone.

She wanted to be as far away from Gwaltney as possible.

She walked a very long way. Finding a remote spot in the woods, she sat down to sketch. She set to work, sketching a bluebird with ruthless intensity, but soon she found herself sitting idle, the quill stopping almost of its own accord.

Sighing, she dropped the sketch on the ground, drew her knees up, and rested her chin on them thoughtfully, her mind drawn inexorably to the events of last night. Against her will, the memory of Gwaltney's kiss filled her mind.

He had never kissed her in such a way before. His earlier kisses had been intense, perhaps even ardent, but they had never before flamed with such a vehement passion. Clearly the fact that she had nearly been killed had affected him.

It was, she thought slowly, almost as though she had come to mean something to him.

Which was a ridiculous notion, considering his conversation with Jonathan Powell. It was obvious she meant nothing to him at all.

A shrew. If I can convince her to keep her mouth shut in bed....

She shook her head, bewildered. He had spoken of her to Jonathan almost with contempt. And yet he had not seemed contemptuous of her last night. She remembered the way he had held her hand, as if she was the only person in the theater he trusted not to hurt him.

She admitted to herself that that poignant gesture was the reason she had not humiliated him.

She had planned to spurn him in front of all of Williamsburg, to make him a laughingstock. And yet, when she had gazed into his eyes and realized he looked as vulnerable as a lost child, she had found herself utterly unable to hurt him further.

She closed her eyes for a long moment. Perhaps she meant nothing to Gwaltney Harris, she thought grimly, but she was terribly afraid that he was beginning to mean something to her.

At last, bewildered by her own muddled emotions, she gathered up her supplies and walked the long distance back to the house.

As she entered the house, stepping onto the wide floorboards of the entrance hall, she looked up and saw Mary huddled on the landing, her small white face peering between the

heavily turned balusters. Cordelia started to wave to the little girl, but her foot skidded slightly, sending her off balance. Looking down at the floor, she saw dark droplets trailing across the floor, leading to the parlor. The doors to the parlor were shut, and just outside them crouched Django, his nose pressed to the crack beneath the door. The lines of his sturdy body were vibrant with anxiety. He glanced back at her and gave a pleading whine.

Forgetting entirely about Mary for the moment, Cordelia dropped her parchment and quill, strode across the hallway, and flung the doors open. Django bounded into the chamber, and Cordelia followed slowly, looking at the knot of slaves clustered around the settee.

On the settee reclined Gwaltney.

Cordelia took one look at his pale face, at his closed eyes, and his expression, drawn tightly with pain, and she felt a shock of fear explode in her chest. "What has happened?" she demanded.

The butler, who was the senior house slave, stood up and stared across the chamber at her. "The master 'as been shot," he replied succinctly.

Chapter 20

"Shot?" Cordelia repeated in horror. She took another quick glance at Gwaltney's face, seeing the unnatural pallor beneath his bronzed skin and the sweat that had broken out on his forehead. It was evident he was still breathing, but he was obviously in great pain.

Steeling herself, she moved forward. She was, after all, mistress of this household. It was her responsibility to take charge in situations such as these. She had treated sick and injured slaves often enough, applying dressings, prescribing herbal remedies, and even sewing up gashes. She knew of a great many herbal treatments, and if her own store of knowledge failed, she could consult Nicholas Culpeper's *The Complete Herbal* or one of the like volumes she possessed. If an injury was not too severe, she was perfectly capable of repairing it.

But she had never before treated an injury to a member of her own family.

"Where is the wound?" she asked, hoping that she sounded authoritative.

The slaves moved aside, and she saw the wound. Someone had cut the crude laborer's breeches away from Gwaltney's thigh, and she saw a ragged hole high in his leg, blood still oozing sluggishly from the wound. She stared at it a long moment.

"Is there an exit wound?" she managed finally. She did not want to move or jostle Gwaltney if she could help it, even to examine him.

"No," the butler said.

Cordelia swallowed. Such an injury was far beyond her capacity to handle. The lead ball had to be removed, and it would have to be determined whether the thighbone had been shattered or not. If it had been, Gwaltney's leg would most likely have to be amputated. He would never walk again.

She forced back the image that called up, of this powerful, vital man who loved the outdoors confined to chairs and settees and parlors for the rest of his life, and spoke with a calm

she did not feel. "Has the doctor been summoned?"

"Yes," the butler said. "An hour ago, mistress."

"Then all we can do is make him comfortable." Fighting back her misgivings, Cordelia moved briskly to Gwaltney's side. She struggled to project an aura of confident authority.

"Someone bring me a chair, a blanket, and some cloths and water. Abraham, you may remain. The rest of you, please leave the chamber. And someone please get Django out of here."

The anxious knot of slaves began to disperse. One of the house slaves reached down obediently to catch Django by the scruff of his neck, but the dog snarled, his lips curling up threateningly from his sharp ivory teeth, and an ominous sound rumbling from his throat. The slave snatched back his hand, glancing at Cordelia for further instructions.

"Never mind," she said, recalling that Gwaltney considered Django part of the family. "Let him stay." She spoke sharply to the dog, telling him to lie down and stay. Rather to her surprise, the dog obeyed her command with as much alacrity as he would have obeyed Gwaltney.

Soon the slaves were all gone, except for Abraham, the butler, who sat quietly in the corner and awaited instructions. Cordelia applied a crude bandage to the wound, managing to stop the bleeding, then covered Gwaltney with the blanket, knowing with such an injury it was necessary to keep the patient warm despite the heat of the late summer day. She then moistened a cloth and mopped the beads of sweat from Gwaltney's forehead. It was really all she could do. She did not dare attempt to probe the wound--she might make the situation worse rather than better.

She wondered glumly if the slaves had worsened the wound by carrying Gwaltney here from the fields. She suspected they had, but there was nothing to be done about it now. And who knew--quite likely he was better off here, in the clean, cool parlor, rather than lying in the dirt of the field, waiting for the doctor while the sun beat down on him. It might take many hours for the doctor to arrive, for the nearest surgeon was in Williamsburg.

She sincerely hoped nothing happened to detain him. True, she had her quarrels with Gwaltney, but she surely did not want him to die or be crippled for life.

As the thought crossed her mind, it occurred to her to wonder exactly how Gwaltney had been shot. He had been working in the fields, with slaves, none of whom were permitted to use a gun. It could not possibly have been an accidental shooting.

Could someone have deliberately attempted to kill Gwaltney?

As she sponged off Gwaltney's forehead, his eyelids flickered open. He stared at her a long moment, clearly confused, then suddenly tried to jerk upright. He gasped and fell back onto the settee.

"Jesus Christ, that hurts," he whispered harshly.

"It was foolish of you to attempt to move," Cordelia informed him tartly. "You have a gunshot wound in your leg."

Gwaltney regarded her through half-open lids and snarled through his teeth, gritted against the pain. "How fortunate that I have you to tell me these things. I might never have noticed."

Cordelia ignored his sarcastic response. "Are you in a great deal of pain?"

"No. I'm extremely comfortable, you little idiot. Of course I am in pain. Where the hell's the doctor?"

Cordelia ignored the question and looked over her shoulder. "Abraham, bring a bottle of brandy, if you will."

"I need something stronger than brandy," Gwaltney gritted out between his teeth.

"I'm sure the doctor will bring laudanum," Cordelia said calmly, although not without sympathy. She was certain the pain from his wound must be excruciating. "Unfortunately, Abraham tells me we have none in the house. Until then, brandy will have to suffice."

Abraham brought a bottle of brandy. Gwaltney levered himself slightly upright, gasping and breaking out in a sweat as he did so, and quickly gulped a rather large quantity of the liquor. He then collapsed back onto the settee. Cordelia took the bottle and set it on the floor.

"Do you feel better?"

"I will soon. Where the hell's that damn doctor?"

"He'll be here soon," Cordelia lied as reassuringly as she was able.

Fortunately for all concerned, Gwaltney soon lapsed into unconsciousness again, aided both by the brandy and by the fact that he was already developing a fever. Cordelia sat next to him, mopping his forehead and feeling rather helpless. Looking across the chamber and seeing the faithful dog lying motionless on the carpet, his gaze fastened on his master, she suddenly remembered that she had seen Mary watching from the landing with that same wistfully alarmed expression. In all likelihood, Mary had seen the unconscious Gwaltney carried in and realized that he was injured, and yet no one had taken the time to reassure her.

Asking Abraham to watch the patient and alert her at once if there was any change, Cordelia made her way up the stairs and knocked on Mary's door. Opening the heavy oaken door, she saw Mary sitting on the carpet, looking intently at the picture of Django and tracing her finger over the letters.

She felt a ridiculous surge of pleasure at the fact that her simple gift had been so well received, followed by a wave of anxiety at the news she must impart to the little girl. Swallowing, she walked across the carpet and sat down next to the child. Mary stared up anxiously into her face.

"Mary," she began hesitantly, "I have some bad news. Gwaltney was injured--he'll be all right," she added hastily when the little girl's eyes widened with panic, "but he was injured. I saw you watching when I came in. Perhaps you heard the commotion downstairs. We have summoned the doctor, and he will be here soon. But Gwaltney won't be able to have dinner with you tonight. And perhaps not tomorrow either." Or perhaps, she amended mentally, not ever. Even a simple gunshot wound could develop into a deadly infection. And if Gwaltney's leg had to be amputated, the odds of survival were extremely poor. But there was no need to frighten Mary yet.

Mary stared at her searchingly a long moment, and Cordelia had the unnerving sensation that the child was studying her closely to ascertain whether she was being falsely hopeful. Despite the fact that the child could not talk, Cordelia once again had the odd impression she was extraordinarily bright. She said nothing, but her eyes said quite clearly, *Will he really be all right?*

"I'm certain Gwaltney will be fine," she lied, stroking the little girl's hair in an automatic, reassuring gesture. "I will take care of him, I promise. And so will Django. In fact, Django is with him now. We will both watch him to make certain nothing happens to him."

Mary nodded, but her expression was solemn. Cordelia caressed the child's hair once again, then rose to her feet. She hated to leave Mary alone at such a time--but Gwaltney needed her supervision more than Mary needed her company tonight.

"I will have dinner sent up in a few hours," she promised. "And perhaps tomorrow you

will be able to see him or perhaps the day after that. All right?"

Mary nodded. Swiftly Cordelia left the chamber, before she had to look at the child's woebegone expression again. It was the first time she had felt needed since she had come to this plantation.

It was really quite unfortunate that she was needed by two people at once.

She took up her vigil in the parlor once again. At last, many long hours later, Dr. Easton arrived. He was a small, rotund, balding man, clad in the unadorned black suit favored by professional men. He removed the crude bandage, examined Gwaltney quickly and professionally, then told Cordelia he would need her to assist.

Cordelia stared at him in blank horror. She had sewn up some rather appalling gashes, but she had never before had to deal with such a deep and ugly wound. "Me?"

"I will perform the operation, of course, Mistress Harris, and you must have two strong slaves hold him still. But you must remain at hand to calm him if needed. Unfortunately, he is unlikely to remain unconscious while I probe the wound."

Cordelia swallowed hard at the ghastly thought, then nodded. Abraham, who was too old to be effective, summoned two strong young black men who took hold of Gwaltney's arms. Hopefully they could pin him down adequately. She knew the patient's thrashing would not improve the outcome of the operation. Cordelia stood by, ready to calm Gwaltney if necessary--although privately she wondered how calming he would find her presence to be.

The doctor began to probe in the deep wound with a long, wicked-looking instrument, a spoon-shaped forceps designed especially for such a purpose. Gwaltney moaned and stirred almost instantly. Cordelia stroked his forehead, feeling a good deal of sympathy. It had to be an excruciatingly painful procedure. She heard the metal instrument scrape against bone and winced, feeling the bile rise in her throat. She swallowed fiercely against the nausea, determined not to disgrace herself by vomiting.

Gwaltney's eyes flickered open. They were wide and wild, like a trapped animal's, and he wore the expression of a man who has no idea what is being done to him but who does not care for it in the least. Despite the pinning weight of the two slaves, he fought frantically to shake them off and sit up.

"Hold still!" Cordelia commanded fiercely, hoping he was lucid enough to understand her. "The doctor is operating on your leg. You must not move, do you understand me? Hold *still!*"

Gwaltney's brilliant eyes focused on her face, and she felt a wave of relief. He was lucid, despite the pain and the fever. Hopefully he would refrain from struggling.

"Hurts," he said in a harsh whisper.

"Just for a few moments. It will be over soon."

Gwaltney closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, enduring the ordeal soundlessly. Cordelia felt another, unwanted wave of respect for the man and his incredible strength. She was quite certain she herself would have screamed throughout the entire procedure.

In fact she was rather tempted now. And it wasn't her leg the doctor was probing.

In another moment the doctor made a sound of satisfaction and withdrew the blood-covered instrument from the wound along with the ball. "And now I will administer laudanum to the patient and bandage the wound," he told Cordelia.

Cordelia nodded and squeezed Gwaltney's hand. "It's all over," she whispered. "All over."

Gwaltney opened his eyes and regarded her with a ghost of his old smile. "Easy for you to say," he managed in a hoarse whisper. "It still hurts like hell."

In a few minutes, however, the opium took effect, and he was mercifully unconscious while Dr. Easton bandaged the wound. Cordelia waited patiently. At last the doctor stood up and smiled at her.

"You did very well, Mistress Harris. Almost as well as your husband."

"Will he be all right?"

"I believe so. He was most fortunate. The bone was not shattered, and the damage was minimal. I believe he will walk again, perhaps without so much as a limp."

Cordelia let out a breath she was not even aware she had been holding. Despite the fact that she and Gwaltney were not close, she could scarcely bear the idea of him trapped in a crippled body.

"Of course, he will have a fever," the doctor went on, "but he is young and strong. He should shake it off with little difficulty. And tomorrow I will return to bleed him."

"Bleed him?" Cordelia echoed. "Why?"

The doctor frowned slightly, as though annoyed that a mere woman should dare to question his professional expertise. He adopted a patronizing tone. "Why, surely you know that a man must be bled under such circumstances, Mistress Harris. When one has a fever, the vessels overflow with thick dense blood that must be released by means of a phlebotomy. Otherwise Mr. Harris could die."

Cordelia hesitated. The word "phlebotomy" had an impressively scientific sound, but she had seen people bled before, had seen the veins opened by the cruelly sharp instrument known as a lancet, the blood flow encouraged by the application of a heated cup, and the blood streaming from the patient's arm into a special graduated pewter bowl used to measure the flow of blood. Such a procedure seemed barbaric to her rather than scientific. And the very idea sickened her, for she knew full well Gwaltney had already lost a good deal of blood--she clearly remembered seeing the droplets of his blood staining the hallway floor as she had entered the house. And there was a rust colored trail of blood staining the parlor carpet as well.

But everyone knew bleeding was necessary, after all.

"Very well," she said at last. "We will expect you tomorrow, sir."

Dr. Easton smiled, his good humor restored by her capitulation. "In the meantime," he said briskly, "don't move him and keep him as comfortable as possible. Administer the laudanum as needed. And don't worry, Mistress Harris. He will be fine."

Chapter 21

Gwaltney was not an ideal patient.

Cordelia slept in the parlor on a straw-filled pallet that night, rising every hour or so to check on the well-being of her patient. His forehead remained warm to the touch throughout the night, though he never felt as though he was burning with an extremely high fever, and he tossed

and muttered irritably in his sleep. Whether he was moaning with pain or delirium she was not certain. Toward dawn the worst of the fever abated, and he slept more heavily.

He awakened late in the morning. Exhausted from her virtually sleepless night, Cordelia was still asleep, resting quite comfortably despite the fact that a straw-filled pallet was a far cry from the feather-stuffed mattresses she was accustomed to. She was awakened by his muffled grunts of pain.

Blinking sleepily, she sat up to see that Gwaltney was sitting up and weakly attempting to stand up.

Her sleepiness forgotten instantly, she bounded to her feet. "Are you mad?" she demanded, stalking to the settee and pushing him back. Weakened by pain and laudanum, he fell back with little resistance. "Do you want to make your injury worse, you fool?"

"I can't ... I can't stay here," Gwaltney said hoarsely.

"Don't be an idiot. You can, and you will. If you are in pain, there is more laudanum."

"It's not that."

In his eyes there was a panicked look, an expression that struck a chord of memory in her mind. In her sleep-deprived state, she was unable to remember exactly where she had seen that expression before, but she knew it was familiar. She had seen him look that way on more than one occasion.

"I will give you some more laudanum."

"No," he whispered weakly.

"Yes. Don't be a fool, Gwaltney." She poured out a dose of the medicine, mixing the bitter-tasting medicine with water to make it slightly more palatable, and held out the glass to him. He eyed it suspiciously.

"Will you drink it, or shall I summon the slaves to hold you down while I pour it down your throat?"

Reluctantly, he reached out a hand, grasped the glass, and gulped down the medicine. In a moment he seemed to relax. He leaned his head back against the arm of the settee and shut his eyes.

"You can't keep me drugged forever," he said softly.

"Pity," Cordelia returned tartly. "I rather prefer you when you're unconscious."

With an obvious effort, Gwaltney lifted his lids a fraction and regarded her through half-open eyes, smiling slightly. "Liar. You much prefer me when I'm conscious. Can't kiss an unconscious man, can you?"

To her embarrassment, Cordelia felt her cheeks flushing hotly. In an effort to cover the reaction, she spoke sharply. "You have an overly inflated idea of yourself, sir. I do not like to kiss you at all."

"I like to kiss *you*..."

His eyelids drifted shut, and his head lolled back. Clearly the laudanum had done its work. Cordelia stared at him for a few seconds, bemused, and noticed that several locks of long, coffee-colored hair had fallen across his forehead in his disoriented attempt to gain his feet. She felt an urge to smooth the rumpled hair back into its place, an urge that should have been more maternal than sexual, given the fact that he was unconscious. And yet, judging from the peculiar shivering sensation in her stomach, that urge was not maternal in the slightest.

Giving in to her uncomfortable, growing awareness of herself as a sensual being, she permitted her hand to reach toward his hair. After all, she reasoned, what could it hurt to simply

touch his hair?

No one would ever know.

He would never know.

Smoothing the disheveled strands away from his face, she felt the irresistible urge to let her hand run caressingly through his long hair and succumbed to it. It felt like coarse silk against her fingers, oddly soft and smooth, in stark contrast to the rest of him, which was as hard and unyielding as granite.

She yanked her hand away at the thought. She must be becoming depraved to be behaving in such an unladylike manner--to be yielding to such ridiculous whims. Never before had she touched a man's hair in such a fashion.

But what really frightened her was the appalling realization that she ached to touch more than his hair.

Not for the first time, she decided she was quite losing her mind where Gwaltney Harris was concerned.

Gwaltney remained in a drug-induced stupor until Dr. Easton arrived. The small, round doctor felt his forehead and checked his pulse, then smiled at Cordelia and Abraham, who hovered nearby. "He's doing remarkably well," he assured them, readying the lancet and the bowl.

Cordelia blanched at the sight of the graduated pewter bowl. "Doctor," she began hesitantly, "is it really necessary to--"

The doctor turned and regarded her with a condescending look, which inadequately concealed the hostility in his eyes. Clearly he was not used to having his medical knowledge questioned in such a fashion. Doctors were generally regarded with respect despite the fact that very few doctors had university degrees, and almost none had medical degrees, since there was only one medical school in all of the colonies, and that in Pennsylvania. Medicine was far more of an art than a science, and Cordelia, with her knowledge of herbal medicine, knew that as well as anyone. "Now, mistress, we've already discussed that."

"But if he's doing so well...."

The doctor shook his head and picked up Gwaltney's arm, peeling the shirt away so that his forearm was exposed. "It's necessary, my dear. Trust me." He studied Gwaltney's arm for a moment, then picked up the lancet.

In a smooth movement, Gwaltney's other hand caught his arm, imprisoning it just before the wickedly sharp lancet pierced the skin of his forearm.

The doctor let out a small squawk of alarm. Looking up, he found himself staring into the bright hazel eyes of his patient.

"I do not wish to be bled," Gwaltney said politely, without releasing his iron grip on the doctor's arm.

The doctor scowled. "You're delirious, sir. Mistress Harris, if you would bring the laudanum."

He gave a yelp as Gwaltney's grip tightened. The lancet clattered to the floor, released from the doctor's suddenly nerveless fingers, as Gwaltney went on with incongruous courtesy, "I assure you, I am not delirious. I simply do not care to be bled."

"But you must realize that your recovery will be aided by--"

Dr. Easton abruptly broke off, wincing. Gwaltney said evenly, "I saw my mother die of

being bled. I don't care to have the same fate befall me."

"Your mother...." Gwaltney released the pressure on the doctor's wrist slightly, and the little man continued doggedly. "No doubt your mother died of whatever illness she had rather than the bleeding."

"I doubt it. She had a miscarriage, and had bled heavily already. But she was beginning to recover--until the doctor came." Gwaltney let go of the doctor's arm and shoved him away abruptly. The smaller man stumbled away from the settee. "Get out of here."

Still rubbing his wrist, Dr. Easton appealed to Cordelia. "Mistress Harris--"

"I'm sorry," Cordelia said with courteous firmness. "Mr. Harris does not wish to be bled, and I feel we should respect his wishes. I do regret, however, the way he made his wishes known. No doubt Mr. Harris is beside himself with pain. It is most unlike him to comport himself in such an ungentlemanly manner." She followed up this string of lies with a reproving glance at Gwaltney, irritated to see a faint ghost of his amused grin curving his lips. "I do hope you will return tomorrow, sir."

The doctor scowled. "That won't be necessary, since Mr. Harris refuses treatment. However...." He rubbed his wrist and stared up into her eyes, then added grudgingly, "You may summon me if you have need of me."

"Thank you," Cordelia said with honest gratitude. "Abraham, see the doctor to the door, if you please."

The moment the doctor had left the parlor she whirled on Gwaltney, who was still regarding her with a slightly amused gleam in his eyes. Before she could speak, he drawled, "So unlike me to behave in an ungentlemanly manner, is it? Why, Mistress Harris, I had no idea you held me in such high esteem."

"I was lying," Cordelia said shortly. Her lack of sleep, coupled with her irritation at Gwaltney's behavior, made her more snappish than usual. "But even knowing as I do the depths to which someone of your poor breeding can sink, I was horrified by your treatment of the doctor. Do you realize that man has traveled from Williamsburg twice to tend to your wounds? *Twice*? And you repaid him by very nearly breaking his arm."

"He was going to bleed me."

Cordelia bit her lip at his implacable tone. "I'm sorry. I did not realize how strongly you were opposed to the idea, or I would have refused to permit it. But that was still no reason to manhandle him in such a fashion."

"Clearly I am--how did you put it?--beside myself with pain."

Dismissing the subject, Gwaltney looked away from her, across the chamber. At the sound of his master's voice, Django had risen to his feet. Now he stood, vibrating with eagerness, but too well trained to disobey Cordelia's command to stay. Gwaltney called to him softly, and the dog bounded across the chamber, wiggling with joy, his lips curled back and black nose wrinkled in an ecstatic smile. His tail whipped frantically against Cordelia's skirts as he licked Gwaltney's outstretched hand.

Gwaltney rubbed the dog's ears for a few moments, then said, "Has he eaten?"

"No. He's hardly left this chamber since you were brought in."

"See to it that he eats, will you?"

"Of course."

"And how is Mary?"

"I spoke with her last night. I let her know that you were injured, but that you will be all

right. I've scarcely had a chance to speak to her since, though I did promise her that she would be able to see you today or tomorrow."

Gwaltney dropped his hand from the dog's head and lay back with a groan. "Tomorrow, perhaps. I would love to see her, but...." One of the corners of his mouth lifted slightly. "I'm afraid I'd frighten her, as dreadful as I must look."

"I'll tell her, then." Cordelia studied him for a long moment, seeing the weary way in which his head had fallen back. "You *are* in pain," she said, feeling a pang of regret for her earlier sarcastic comment. "Perhaps some more laudanum?"

"Perhaps a bit would be welcome," Gwaltney admitted. He shifted position slightly and groaned again. "Yes, definitely. But please, not as much as you have been giving me. I don't wish to become addicted."

Cordelia poured half a dosage into a glass of water and watched as he drank it. In a few moments the lines in his forehead smoothed out, and the worst of his pain seemed to recede. "You know," she said cautiously, trying to find an answer to the question that had plagued her since yesterday, "you were very lucky. The ball could very well have shattered the bone in your thigh."

"I was more lucky than you know," Gwaltney muttered thickly. "He wasn't aiming for my leg."

Cordelia put the glass back on the table, fixing him with a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"The son of a bitch who shot me...." Gwaltney shut his eyes and rubbed at his forehead tiredly. His voice dropped to a near whisper. "I saw him in the trees."

A shock of horror burst within her at this confirmation that Gwaltney's injury had been no accident. "Really? Could you see who it was?"

"I couldn't see him that clearly. He was half-hidden in the underbrush. But I saw how he pointed the gun. He wasn't trying to kill me, or he would have aimed higher."

"I don't understand."

Gwaltney opened his eyes to meet her gaze and spoke bluntly.

"He was trying to shoot my balls off."

After Cordelia all but ran from the parlor, clearly embarrassed by his words, Gwaltney shut his eyes for a long moment, then opened them and gazed around at the chamber. To do so cost him a world of effort, for his eyelids felt as though they were weighted down with lead, yet it was impossible for him to drift back to sleep. He had awakened perfectly lucid, and he was uncomfortably, wretchedly conscious of being trapped inside. He was miserably aware he would have to stay here for days. And he had no idea how he would accomplish such a feat.

Resolutely he shut his eyes and tried to direct his mind to other subjects. Cordelia, for instance. And how startlingly beautiful she had looked that morning with her hair tumbling loose around her shoulders. Despite the dark violet shadows beneath her eyes, smudges on her otherwise flawless skin, she had looked as he imagined an angel should. And this afternoon, she had reverted to her old, tightly drawn bun, probably because she had no time for a more ornate hairstyle--and yet she had still looked beautiful.

For some reason she always looked beautiful to him now.

He lay there a few more minutes, eyes shut tightly, thinking about the paradox that was his wife. She was an ice-cold spinster who melted passionately in his arms whenever he kissed

her; she flung insults at him on a regular basis, then stroked his hair as tenderly as a Madonna caressing her child when she thought he was unconscious.

He had never understood women. Cordelia Ashton Harris he understood least of all.

Even thoughts of his beautiful, complicated wife could not keep him distracted forever. At last, unable to help himself, he opened his eyes and looked at the parlor. The walls were still there.

And they were getting closer.

Chapter 22

Cordelia spent the evening in Mary's chamber, assuring the little girl with words as well as by her presence that Gwaltney would be fine. "You'll see him tomorrow," she said cheerfully as she piled Mary's plate high with food. "He's looking forward to seeing you. He told me so."

Mary bit her lip and stared thoughtfully at the food on her plate. Cordelia knew her well enough by now to know that the child had a question, even though she was not able to articulate it. The child had a remarkably expressive face. "Mary?" she questioned gently. "What is it?"

Mary looked up at her, and Cordelia was startled to see tears brimming in the dark brown eyes and the small lower lip trembling. "What's wrong?" she asked, before the ludicrousness of such a question struck her. Gwaltney was the only parent Mary had--of course the child was upset! The only surprise was that the child had not cried up till now.

Of course, she realized, in all likelihood Mary had spent last night weeping into her pillow. She felt a wave of guilt for her apparent failure to calm the frightened child but quickly repressed it. She had had no choice but to care for Gwaltney last night. In his feverish state, he had needed her care more than Mary had.

She wondered how parents ever managed to be in all the places they needed to be at once.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, reaching out and patting the little girl on her shoulder. "That was a silly question. Of course you're upset. You're worried about Gwaltney, aren't you?"

Mary nodded, and tears spilled onto her cheeks. Her lower lip quivered pitifully.

"I understand. The truth is, I was worried about him too."

Mary glanced up at her, a question in her wet eyes.

"Well, adults worry too, you know. I was very concerned until the doctor came. But once he took care of Gwaltney's injury and assured me he'd be all right, I stopped worrying. But you weren't there to hear the doctor, were you?"

Mary shook her head.

"And I've seen Gwaltney and seen for myself that he is getting better. But you haven't. I suppose if I were you, I'd be worried too." She let her voice become more intense. "But Mary, I assure you he is all right. He is getting better, I promise. And you can see that for yourself tomorrow." She took Mary's hand and looked down into the small, anxious face, realizing for the first time just how lost the little girl felt without her surrogate father.

Remembering, with a pang of empathy, how utterly lost she herself had felt when she lost

her mother. And she had been sixteen--old enough to understand what was happening, old enough to cope.

Mary was too young to comprehend more than the mere fact of Gwaltney's injury. For all the little girl knew, she was going to lose Gwaltney. For a child who had already lost both her real parents, as well as the aunt who had cared for her after her parents' deaths, that had to be a horrifying thought.

"Do you trust me, Mary?"

The little girl nodded.

"Then believe me when I tell you Gwaltney is fine, and that you will see him tomorrow. All right?"

Mary stood up and threw her arms around Cordelia, burying her face in her shoulder and weeping soundlessly. At a total loss as to how to react, Cordelia held the child and stroked her hair. Apparently that was the right thing to do, for the little girl clung to her, trembling and sobbing. Cordelia held her, realizing that this was what it felt like to be a parent.

To be needed.

When Cordelia had succeeded in calming Mary down and had tucked her into bed for the evening, she went down the stairs, intending to check in on Gwaltney. She was surprised to hear a clamor coming from the parlor.

Alarmed by the bedlam, she slammed the door open and stalked in. The sight that met her eyes caused her to stop dead in her tracks. Gwaltney was upright, standing--albeit on one leg--and attempting to throw off three slaves who were struggling to force him back onto the settee. Django crouched nearby, growling savagely, obviously under the mistaken impression that the slaves intended to harm his master. He looked ready to attack.

"Django, down!" she commanded, and to her relief the dog sank to the floor, still emitting an ugly snarling sound. She strode into the chamber and crossed to Gwaltney, staring up indignantly into his face. "What in the world do you think you are doing?"

"I have to get out of here."

In his eyes she saw the same look of panic, of irrational and unreasoning fear, that she had seen early this morning. Now that she was awake and alert, she was able to place the expression. She had seen him look that way on the first occasion they met, when Gwaltney had come to court her and had all but fled five minutes after she entered the parlor. And then again in the carriage.

She remembered the way he never stayed indoors for one second more than necessary, taking his meals in the garden wherever possible, spending his time in the fields rather than in his study, and the entire mystery abruptly resolved itself in her mind. Looking at the sheer terror etched clearly on his face, it was suddenly obvious.

She had thought Gwaltney felt uncomfortable and awkward in these gracious surroundings. But he was more than merely uncomfortable.

He was terrified.

She decided to try reason, although she was not certain reason would reach him. "Gwaltney," she said in her sharpest tone. "Sit down. You will aggravate your injury."

Gwaltney shook his head violently, and his already disheveled hair cascaded wildly across his wide, panicked eyes. "I have to get outside," he ground out in a hoarse, tormented voice. "The walls...."

Cordelia bit her lip. She had heard of people with such an irrational fear before, people

who were afraid to be indoors, or out of doors, or terrified of water or heights, but she had no idea how to deal with such a person. He was clearly incapable of responding to any sort of reasoned argument.

The obvious course was to let him go outside.

She dismissed that idea the instant it occurred to her. It was dark, and a heavy dew was beginning to wet the grass. Such conditions would do nothing to improve his fever. Tomorrow, during the day, she would have the slaves carry him outside. But tonight it seemed there was only one solution.

"Abraham!" she called sharply, and a brief moment later the butler materialized at the entrance to the parlor. His sharp old eyes seemed to take in the situation in one glance.

"We have to get him back on the settee," she said tersely.

Abraham nodded and crossed the chamber. With the combined efforts of four men, they managed to force Gwaltney onto the settee, despite his increasingly frantic struggles. "Hold him still," she commanded, pouring a dosage of the laudanum into a glass of water. She approached Gwaltney with the glass, but a sudden, unexpected thrashing of his arms knocked it onto the carpet.

"Damn," Cordelia hissed, grateful that at least he hadn't managed to knock over the bottle. "Abraham, all of you, hold him still. Force his head back." She poured another draught, with a slightly heavier dosage than usual in order to make certain he would remain unconscious through the night. The last thing she wanted was to deal with a frantic Gwaltney in the darkness of the parlor.

With the help of the slaves she managed to force the draught down Gwaltney's throat. In a few more minutes he relaxed and fell back against the settee, insensible. Cordelia stepped back and regarded the ring of startled faces, all of which mirrored her own shock. It was evident that no one in the household had guessed the extent of Gwaltney's distaste for the indoors. "Abraham, I'd like you to remain downstairs during the night, within earshot, in case I need you," she said curtly. "The rest of you may go now."

She checked Gwaltney's thigh, ascertaining that no damage had been done, and sighed. It appeared that she would be spending another uncomfortable night on a straw-filled pallet. God knew she couldn't risk leaving Gwaltney alone.

Gwaltney slept through the night, only stirring toward dawn. In his disoriented state Cordelia was able to administer another dose of laudanum without any resistance on his part. She bit her lip as she placed the glass back on the table. She hated to keep administering the drug to him in such large doses, for she was perfectly aware that opium was habit forming. The last remnants of his fever had already abated, and he no longer seemed to be in a great deal of pain.

She decided to have the slaves carry him outside when next he woke up. There was, of course, a risk of aggravating the injury, but probably less than if he insisted on attempting to make it outside on his own--and she knew well enough by now that was bound to happen.

Deciding against trying to get any further sleep, she sat in a mahogany chair next to the settee, studying his features, which were peaceful enough under the influence of the laudanum. She wondered exactly how such a calm and unflappable man had developed such a terror of being inside. It did not seem to fit with the rest of his personality. He had dealt with the excruciating pain of having the ball removed from his leg with staunch courage. And yet a simple thing like being confined inside sent him into near hysterics.

It occurred to her that if someone was in fact trying to kill Gwaltney, the worst thing she could do was to leave him outside without protection. It seemed ridiculous to think someone could have deliberately shot at him, yet his own words seemed to imply that he thought that was in fact the case. Having nursed him through this, she would be damned if she would let him be harmed again.

She stiffened her spine. She would be certain he was surrounded by slaves at all times. That should prevent any more attempts on his life.

But she wished she had some idea why anyone would try to kill him.

When Gwaltney woke up, she decided grimly, they were going to have a little discussion.

“What the hell happened?”

Cordelia’s head jerked up, and she looked around, blinking. She realized she had fallen asleep in the mahogany chair next to the settee. Well, that was hardly a surprise. She hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep for two days. But she was surprised to see Jonathan Powell striding into the chamber. It had been his voice, not Gwaltney’s, that had awakened her.

Despite her surprise, she was relieved to see him. She had already decided she needed to talk with him about Elizabeth. Now it occurred to her that he might have some insight into Gwaltney’s fear of the indoors as well. After all, he was Gwaltney’s only friend, and they had been friends for years. She stood up and faced him. Despite her relief, she could not help but remember the night at the Greysons’ she had overheard him and Gwaltney discussing her in such insulting terms. Consequently, the first words that leapt to her tongue were shrewish rather than courteous.

“I had always understood that it was customary to wait in the hall while the slaves announced one’s presence.”

Jonathan ignored her and walked across to the settee, looking down on the unconscious form of his friend. “What happened?” he repeated. “I heard a rumor that Gwaltney had been shot.”

Cordelia felt a brief pang of guilt. Gwaltney considered this man his best friend, and she had not bothered to send a note letting him know of the incident. She had been occupied with more important matters, but she was uncomfortably aware that was a poor excuse. “Yes,” she said briefly. “He was.”

“How did it happen?”

Cordelia bit her lip. “I’d like to discuss that with you, actually. But we should leave Gwaltney to rest. Would you come to the hall?”

Jonathan nodded and followed her from the chamber. In the entrance hall, which was often used as a less formal parlor in the summer when no fireplace was needed for warmth, they sat in two of the chairs lining the wall. Jonathan looked at her expectantly.

“I don’t know who shot him,” Cordelia said bluntly, “but I am reasonably certain it was not an accident. Do you have any idea who might wish to harm Gwaltney?”

Jonathan stared at her a long moment. “Surely you are jesting, Cordelia. Are you suggesting someone intentionally tried to kill him?”

“Or harm him,” she said, unwilling to repeat Gwaltney’s more specific opinion on the matter. Ladies did not discuss male anatomy, even under extenuating circumstances. She had never concerned herself overmuch with propriety, but such a discussion, or even a hint of it, would utterly embarrass her and Jonathan as well.

“It must have been an accident.”

“I would have assumed so, except ... Gwaltney doesn’t seem to believe it was. He claimed he saw someone concealed in the underbrush, holding a gun, just before he was shot. And to make matters more confusing, I saw someone watching him from the woods a week or so ago.”

Jonathan lifted his head and stared at her alertly. “Indeed. Who?”

“I don’t know. I chased him, but he got away. But whoever that person was, he was watching Gwaltney in the very same field the slaves told me where he was shot. That seems more than coincidental, does it not?”

Jonathan shook his head. “I think we need more information before we begin leaping to wild conclusions, Cordelia. If Gwaltney actually thinks he is being shot at, then perhaps he has some notion as to who the perpetrator is.” He frowned, then seemed to dismiss the matter, turning his attention to more pressing concerns. “Is he recovering well?”

“Yes. He was extremely lucky. The ball did not shatter his thighbone, and the doctor says he will walk again, most likely without even a limp. And his fever is already gone. But....”

Jonathan cocked an eyebrow.

“I have had some difficulty in keeping him inside. I had not previously realized the depth of Gwaltney’s ... aversion ... to the indoors,” she said awkwardly.

Jonathan sighed. “No doubt he hoped he could keep it from you. But it was inevitable that you find out, I suppose.”

“Yesterday evening he was so distressed that I had to administer laudanum,” Cordelia said, carefully describing the incident in terms that would not humiliate Gwaltney were he to find that she had discussed the matter with his friend. *Distressed*, she thought wryly, was not really an adequate word to describe his reaction. *Terrified* would have been more apt. “I don’t think I can keep him inside today.”

“Then have the slaves take him outside,” Jonathan suggested practically. “I’ve never followed the conventional wisdom that fresh air is bad for those recovering from illness anyway. Gwaltney spent most of his life outdoors for ten years. If fresh air was so very poisonous, he’d be dead by now.”

“Is that why he’s...?” She almost said *frightened* but corrected herself quickly. “Uncomfortable indoors? Because he spent so much time outside as a longhunter?”

“It was the other way around, actually, I believe.”

Cordelia tried to make sense of that rather cryptic comment but couldn’t. “I beg your pardon?”

Jonathan waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Never mind. You should be asking these questions of Gwaltney, not me.”

“But....”

“Ask Gwaltney.”

There was a note of steel in his mild voice that made her aware she would get no more information on the subject from him. She did not wish to embarrass Gwaltney further by asking him for the reasons behind his irrational behavior, but it seemed she would have little choice if she wanted to know why he feared the indoors. Although, she admitted to herself, it was entirely possible Gwaltney would refuse to discuss the matter. She supposed that it was in fact none of her business, since their marriage had been one of convenience rather than of affection.

The thought of marriage made her remember the other matter she wanted to discuss with Jonathan. She sought for a tactful way to inquire what precisely had happened between them. “I

noticed you and Elizabeth were not dancing together at the Greysons' rout," she said cautiously.

Jonathan's pleasant features froze into an icy mask. "I assumed she had told you," he returned. "We are no longer engaged."

"She said as much," Cordelia admitted. "I am very sorry, Jonathan."

The ice in his expression thawed marginally. "Thank you."

"I can't understand it," Cordelia said. "She was so much in love with you."

"I thought so as well. Evidently we were wrong."

Cordelia looked at him a long moment. Gwaltney had plotted to seduce her so that Jonathan could claim credit for bringing them together. But what was it Jonathan had said?

Elizabeth was so angry, but now I think she'll forgive me.

"I gather she was annoyed with you," she said cautiously. "Did the two of you quarrel?"

Jonathan blinked at her. "I wouldn't say that. She simply gave me back the ring and told me she didn't want to marry me."

"Why?"

Jonathan hesitated a long moment. "I have no idea."

Something in his manner made her certain he was lying. He had a good idea what he had done to provoke Elizabeth. He simply didn't want to tell her. And apparently whatever lay between them had something to do with her and Gwaltney. It seemed that Jonathan thought Elizabeth somehow held him accountable for the unpleasant state of Cordelia's marriage.

Which made absolutely no sense at all.

"I apologize for my abrupt arrival," Jonathan said, reverting to the courteous, gentlemanly facade she had always known. "I hoped Gwaltney would be awake. But since he is not...."

"Oh, please don't ride all the way back to Williamsburg!" Cordelia said hastily. She knew that her husband would be pleased to see his friend when he awakened. "Gwaltney would want you to stay," she said, holding out a hand to him. "Please, wait until he wakes up. It shouldn't be long now. Would you care for some tea?"

Cordelia had the slaves remove a comfortable, blue-and-white upholstered easy chair from Gwaltney's chamber and take it and a footstool to the garden, leaving orders for the slaves to carry Gwaltney out to the garden when he awoke and for his valet to see to his needs.

Having done everything she could for her patient, she then went upstairs, washed up, and changed into a fresh gown, the simplest one Gwaltney had provided for her, a plain gown of sky blue silk. She combed her hair, taking the time to knot it into a looser and more becoming style than her habitual bun, and then went downstairs. Abraham informed her that Mr. Harris had awakened and was in the garden.

"Excellent," she said. "Is Mr. Powell with him?"

"Yes, mistress."

Cordelia went out the river side of the house and walked into the garden. The slaves had placed Gwaltney in the shade even though it was a pleasantly cool early fall day. She nodded to Jonathan and crossed to Gwaltney, seeing that his valet had done as ordered. He was wearing a fresh shirt, and his disheveled mane of hair had been brushed and neatly pulled back into a queue. A blanket covered his legs.

"How are you feeling?"

Gwaltney lifted his head to look at her, but his eyes only met hers for a fraction of a second before his gaze flickered away. "Fine."

"I find that unlikely. Would you care for more laudanum?"

"No."

There was an unmistakably hostile tone in his curt answers, and Cordelia hesitated, feeling oddly hurt. She had spent the last forty-eight hours doing absolutely nothing but taking care of him. She supposed gratitude was too much to expect, but the least he could do was pretend civility. "Perhaps some brandy, then," she persisted.

"Not right now."

"Have you had breakfast?"

"I am talking with my friend, Cordelia," Gwaltney said shortly. "Please leave us."

Unbidden, the memory of the last time she had overheard the two men talking flashed into her mind, and she flushed crimson. For the past two days, she had been so occupied by caring for Gwaltney that she had all but forgotten they did not have a true marriage. Now the reality of the situation rushed back into her consciousness. Gwaltney had nothing but scorn for her. He had only pretended to care for her in an attempt to woo her into his bed.

And Jonathan knew that. He knew precisely how Gwaltney felt about her.

The humiliation exploded over her in a wave that threatened to drown her. Gwaltney had planned to make love to her solely to benefit his friend. He had pretended an affection for her he did not feel. And she liked him no more than he liked her.

And yet, somehow, over the past days ... she had forgotten all that.

Embarrassment and anger flooding through her, she turned on her heel without another word and stalked back to the house.

Jonathan watched Cordelia as she disappeared into the house. The set line of her shoulders made it clear she was furious. "I see you have your bride gentled already," he remarked with sarcasm. "Has she welcomed you into her bed yet?"

"I've been in no condition to be seducing women."

"I suppose not," Jonathan admitted. "But the fact is, Gwaltney, this may be the ideal time."

Gwaltney shot him an annoyed look. "It would probably kill me."

"I don't mean the ideal time to actually bed her, idiot. I simply meant ... well, when I arrived virtually the first questions out of her mouth were about you. She's obviously been very concerned about you, Gwaltney. I think she cares for you more than she lets on."

"Perhaps she did."

"What do you mean by that?"

Gwaltney looked at him for a moment, then dropped his gaze. "Never mind," he said softly. "I don't think I want to discuss it further, Jonathan. I'm tired. Perhaps you will excuse me?"

Jonathan stared at him for a long moment. He would have sworn Gwaltney was not really tired, and that his normally scrupulously honest friend was using that as an excuse to end their conversation. But what could make Gwaltney so uncomfortable that he wanted to end their conversation so abruptly? His assertion that Cordelia cared about Gwaltney?

Or something else?

Chapter 23

“I want to talk to you.”

Gwaltney did not bother to turn his gaze in Cordelia’s direction. His hazel eyes were fixed on the sky, watching the clouds as they drifted lazily across the vivid blue vault. “Indeed,” he said without glancing in her direction, so that he seemed to be addressing the sky rather than her. “But I don’t wish to speak with you.”

Cordelia felt her teeth grind together so hard her jaw hurt. Gwaltney seemed to have that effect on her more and more often these days. “We need to talk,” she said, standing directly in front of him so that he had little recourse but to look at her. His gaze reluctantly came to rest on her face.

“Very well. What the hell do you want?”

His cold tone grated on her already raw nerves. “Why are you being so difficult?” she burst out.

“I suppose,” Gwaltney drawled with cool disdain, “that is a role you want reserved for yourself.”

“I simply don’t understand why you are behaving this way. I spent two days doing nothing but caring for you. Is there a reason you dislike me for it?”

Gwaltney directed his gaze back toward the sky. “I’m an ungrateful bastard, I suppose.”

“Obviously.”

His eyes flickered back briefly in her direction, and she could have sworn she saw a hint of amusement in their depths. “You’re never at a loss for insults, are you, mistress?”

“You said it first,” Cordelia said shortly. “I simply agreed with you, as a good wife should.”

“Ah. A model of wifely behavior, no doubt.” He sighed, and the flicker of humor that had briefly lit his eyes vanished, leaving them as cold as stone. He stared at the sky and addressed it again. “What is it that you wish to discuss?”

Cordelia hesitated, trying to think of some tactful way to bring up the subject. But the sullen coldness on Gwaltney’s features made her reluctant to waste time chatting about incidentals, lest he grow impatient and dismiss her before she had a chance to discuss her concerns. She decided to be forthright. “Why does somebody want to hurt you?”

Gwaltney’s gaze slid back to her face. “What makes you think somebody wants to hurt me?” he countered cautiously.

“Don’t be foolish, Gwaltney. I don’t see how this shooting could have been an accident. Besides, you were nearly trampled by a horse in Williamsburg. Or have you forgotten?”

Gwaltney studied her for a long moment. “As I recall, you were the one who was nearly trampled by the horse.”

Cordelia shrugged. “I had assumed it was an accident. But under the circumstances, I’m beginning to suspect it was deliberate and meant for you.”

Gwaltney’s eyebrows lifted in surprise at her perspicacity. “I think you may be right,” he said at last. “There is little doubt that someone has been trying to injure me. Once the girth on the saddle I use was cut, and not a week later someone tried to drop a tree on me.”

Her eyes went wide. "A tree?"

Gwaltney nodded. "And then there was that incident in Williamsburg. At first, like you, I supposed that was an accident, but given the other events it seems entirely too coincidental. Evidently someone doesn't like me."

"Who hates you that much?"

Gwaltney shrugged. His eyes were still ice cold. "Quite a few people despise me, thanks to my attempts to mingle with people whose boots I'm not fit to kiss. But none of those people hate me enough to try to kill or maim me. As far as they're concerned, I'm beneath contempt." His eyes added eloquently, *And as far as you're concerned as well.*

"Those have been the only attempts on your life?"

"Not enough for you?"

Cordelia ignored his bitter sarcasm. "There is something else you may not have been aware of. One day, just after I arrived, I was riding through the woods. I saw you working in the fields." She remembered the way he had looked working half-naked, the sinewy strength of his powerful arms and chest, and a rush of hot blood stung her cheeks. She went on hastily, "The same field where you were later shot, as a matter of fact. There was someone else in the woods watching you. And when he saw me, he fled."

Gwaltney stiffened slightly. "Did you see who it was?"

"No. I actually pursued him, but he got away."

"Why in the world did you chase him? The man is clearly dangerous. He might have killed you, you little fool."

"Well, I had no idea someone was trying to injure you," Cordelia said self-righteously. "How in the world would I have known, since you didn't see fit to tell me?"

"Perhaps that was an error on my part," Gwaltney admitted. "It never occurred to me that anyone else might be in danger."

"And I believe you've omitted at least one attempt to injure you."

Gwaltney frowned in thought. "Not that I'm aware of."

Cordelia looked down at him with an intense expression. "Alexander Blair. At the Greysons' rout. Remember? He struck your stallion with his crop."

Gwaltney blinked in surprise. "Alexander Blair? He's nothing more than a spoiled brat, Cordelia. His father kept him under control while he was alive, but since the elder Blair died, Alexander's behavior has gotten more and more out of hand. He was simply angry that Mist was the better horse, and he didn't possess enough self-control to stop himself from lashing out."

"Perhaps. At least, that is what I assumed at the time, and so did everyone else. But you could have been injured very easily, or killed, for that matter. You and Mist were in front of eight or nine horses."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Gwaltney said slowly. He had difficulty imagining the skinny, pimpled young man as a homicidal maniac, but he had to admit Blair's actions could have injured or killed him. That made Blair the logical suspect.

"Is it possible Alexander Blair is trying to kill you?"

Gwaltney countered with the obvious question. "Why in the world would Blair want to kill me?"

"I have no idea. But I do recall that evening, in the Greysons' garden, he raved about how you had murdered his cousin. Is it possible...?"

"I have never murdered a man," Gwaltney said sharply.

"I know that," Cordelia said hastily, alarmed by the wintry look in his eyes. "But at the time you thought perhaps Blair had somehow confused you with someone else. Isn't that possible?"

"Anything's possible. It seems damned unlikely, though." He scowled. "But it is the only thing that makes the slightest bit of sense. When my leg heals perhaps I'll pay a call on Mr. Blair."

"Please don't risk confronting him by yourself."

Gwaltney frowned again. "Do you take me for a fool, Cordelia?"

"Yes, I do," she retorted. "You've known for weeks that someone was trying to hurt you."

"I've suspected for weeks. There's a difference."

"And yet you've gone out and worked in the fields every day, exposing yourself to someone who clearly hates you."

Gwaltney set his mouth in a thin line. "I thought perhaps that if I made myself accessible, the bastard would expose himself. I don't like being hunted like some sort of animal."

"If you'd stayed in the house...."

She trailed off at Gwaltney's expression. "I can't stay in the house," he said harshly. "You know it as well as I do now, damn it. There's no use in concealing it anymore." He stumbled to an awkward halt, then went on with difficulty, "I'm a coward. A craven coward."

The expression in his eyes was one of bitter, painful humiliation. Abruptly Cordelia realized why he had been so distant, so hostile to her today. He was agonizingly embarrassed that she had seen him in such a state.

She knew his darkest secret.

She vividly remembered the way he had soundlessly endured the excruciating procedure of having the ball extracted from his leg. That had required a depth of courage, of strength that most men simply did not possess. As far as she was concerned, he was no coward.

It was on the tip of her tongue to say so, to reassure him that she did not see him as a coward, but rather as a powerful and courageous man, but she managed to choke the words back. It was evident from the expression on his face, from the way he refused to meet her eyes for more than a few seconds at a time, that he was embarrassed, ashamed, utterly mortified.

In short, he felt just as she had when she overheard his conversation with Jonathan Powell at the Greysons' rout.

She remembered her rage that night. Infuriated and hurt by his callousness, she had sworn to humiliate him in return. And now she had the perfect opportunity.

"I won't deny it," she said coldly, refraining from saying that in truth she *could* have denied it. She felt a pang of guilt, but it was drowned out by the rush of satisfaction she felt at seeing the humiliation that burned in his brilliant eyes. Now, perhaps, he knew what it felt like to be embarrassed.

It served him right, the arrogant bastard.

"Regardless of that," she said briskly, "I expect you not to expose yourself to such danger again. Several slaves have been assigned to stay near you at all times." She gestured at the four well-muscled black men who stood a discreet distance away.

"Damn you, Cordelia. I don't need nursemaids."

"I know your leg is healing, and you will be able to walk about shortly, but see to it that you remain in sight of the slaves I have assigned to you. If you don't, I'll have you brought indoors and tied to the settee. Do I make myself clear?"

Gwaltney's gaze shifted abruptly to her face. In his eyes she saw the humiliation and embarrassment she'd seen before, but another expression glittered there as well.

Loathing.

Clearly he thought she'd gone too far with that last threat. And perhaps she had.

She turned on her heel and marched away before she could be tempted to offer an apology. She knew as well as he did that the thing she had threatened was unforgivable. Gwaltney would never survive if she were to confine him indoors. They both knew that. He would lose his sanity.

She wavered in her determined march toward the house, faltered, started to come to a halt. She really should apologize for that last remark, explain to him that she had spoken in anger and that she would never do such a thing to him. True, they had their differences, but she would never, ever confine him against his will. He should know that she might be shrewish, but she was not cruel. She paused, intending to turn and beg his pardon.

And then she heard his voice, low and rumbling with menace.

"Bitch."

Her good intentions vanished in an instant. Squaring her shoulders, she stalked back to the house.

Gwaltney watched her go, stiff-backed and head held high. In her cerulean gown, with the frothy white lace at the neckline and elbows, she reminded him of the sky and the clouds he had been idly watching. She looked beautiful, as fresh and warm and lovely as a summer day.

And, he thought with fury, she was a coldhearted bitch.

He remembered the threat she had made, and a fresh explosion of indignation welled up inside him. How dare she threaten to tie him in the parlor like a dog!

He was disappointed, but not really surprised by her ugly threat. With his weakness exposed for all the world to see, he had been humiliated to the very depths of his soul. In his mind, he heard the echo of his father's cold voice. *You're nothing but a craven coward, Gwaltney. I won't tolerate a coward in my household, damn it.*

It was the reason he had run away at fifteen, because the icy hostility that his father had treated him with for so long had escalated into biting disdain when Gwaltney found he could no longer bear to remain in a parlor for more than a few moments at a time. His father had been furiously contemptuous of his cowardice.

It had been easier to run away from the humiliation, from his father's scorn, than stay in Williamsburg and try to combat his fears.

Coward that he was, he wished he could run away now. After all these years, the humiliation was as powerful, as agonizing as ever. But he felt another sensation as well.

Fear.

He had long suspected that it would be dangerous to expose his vulnerabilities to Cordelia. Recently, blinded to her true nature by her unexpected beauty, he had attempted to fool himself into believing Cordelia was only pretending to be a cold spinster. On the inside, he had imagined she was warm and passionate, and possibly even capable of affection. But he had obviously been deluding himself.

Her ugly reaction to his show of independence, her vicious threat, proved him wrong, utterly wrong. She was as far from warm and passionate as a human being could be. She was a cruel woman, one who took shameless advantage of those less strong than herself. A woman who

could not be trusted, even for a second.

She was hateful. Despicable.

Writhing with humiliation and impotent fury, he watched her disappear into the house.

As Cordelia entered the house, she was startled to hear a high-pitched wailing sound coming from the second floor. She knew immediately who it was, even though she had never before heard that voice in speech, let alone raised in terror. "Mary," she gasped in horror, racing for the stairs.

She took the stairs two at a time, despite the constriction of her stays, which made her pant by the time she reached the landing. She ran down the hall to the nursery, dashing past a black maid in the hallway with scarcely a glance, and flung the door open. Mary was huddled in her bed, her wide brown eyes fixed on the door, screeching at the top of her lungs.

"Mary," Cordelia repeated, dashing across the chamber and sitting on the edge of the bed as she gathered the child into her arms. She checked the child hastily for injuries and was relieved to find none. Mary had not suffered so much as a skinned knee so far as she could tell. "What in the world is wrong?"

Mary only howled more loudly.

Cordelia cuddled the little girl, and gradually the terrified shrieks died away to pitiful whimpers, then to a silence, punctuated only with sniffles. Cordelia tilted the small face up, brushing away the remaining tears, and stared into the depths of the dark eyes.

"What happened, Mary?"

The little girl shook her head violently, and more tears welled up.

"It's all right," Cordelia said hastily. "You don't have to tell me now." She glanced around the chamber, hoping to find some clue as to what had frightened the child. As far as she could tell, nothing had changed. She saw only the girl's black nurse, standing anxiously at the doorway.

"What's wrong with 'er, mistress?"

"I don't know. I hoped you would know. Was she alone up here?"

"Far's I know. I left 'er up 'ere nappin'."

Cordelia nodded slowly. "She must have had a bad dream then. Probably because of her concerns about Gwaltney." The stress and anxiety the little girl felt because of Gwaltney's injury must be manifesting itself in nightmares, she reasoned. That had to be it.

But it had certainly been startling, hearing such bloodcurdling shrieks coming from a throat that had been silent for so long.

She decided that distraction would be the best medicine for the child, who still looked as though she might dissolve into tears at any moment. "Mary," she suggested, "why don't you go to visit with Gwaltney now?"

The little girl's stricken expression melted almost instantly into a look of rapture.

"Yes. He's in the garden. Go with your nurse."

Mary wiggled out of her arms, jumped lightly to the floor, and darted out the door, her nurse following in her wake. Cordelia smiled slightly as she watched the little girl all but fly from the chamber.

Of course, she thought, Mary was still concerned for Gwaltney. A visit with him would do her good--and, she thought wryly, do Gwaltney good as well, if he had happened to hear any of those shrieks. They had been ear-splitting enough to carry to the garden through the open

windows, and if Gwaltney had heard them, he was probably on his way to the house now. A little thing like a badly injured leg would not stop him from hobbling up to find out what had frightened his niece so badly.

She sat on the edge of the bed, feeling her heart still pounding in her chest. The alarming sound of those shrieks had rattled her more badly than she had first thought. Hearing the little girl's cries, she had instantly leapt to the mistaken conclusion that Mary had been injured. She had run into the nursery imagining the bloody worst. It had been something of a relief to find the child had been alarmed by nothing more substantial than a nightmare. Having just dealt with Gwaltney's injury, Cordelia was not certain she could deal with an injury to Mary as well.

Sometime over the past weeks, she realized, she had grown to think of Gwaltney and Mary as family.

She wished she dared to tell Gwaltney. She longed to confide in him the way she had confided in her sister over the years. She longed to trust him with the hopes and dreams she had never dared share with anyone. If only she could bring herself to confess that she wanted a marriage that was more than a distant relationship between strangers.

Even if she were to tell him, she thought with a pang of despair, he wouldn't believe her, not after the unkind words she had uttered in the garden. He thought she hated him.

He had no idea how wrong he was.

Chapter 24

Gwaltney spent the next week recuperating from his injury. He spent the days outside in the garden, with Mary and Django keeping him company, and the evenings in his bedchamber. Although he clearly did not like being confined, he seemed able to remain in his bedchamber at night, and Cordelia wondered why, given his all-consuming terror of being in the parlor. But there did not seem to be any way to ask. After their last acrimonious conversation, Gwaltney had become totally unapproachable, barely acknowledging her presence at all.

She missed eating dinners with Mary but was too proud to intrude on the little girl's time with Gwaltney. The one night she made the effort, Gwaltney ignored her coldly, not even pretending to be civil. She missed Mary.

And, she had to admit, she missed Gwaltney as well.

She spent the lonely week learning the ways of the household. Since Gwaltney had lived here as a bachelor for almost three years, his household was very well-regulated, and all but ran itself. The black woman who served as cook scarcely needed Cordelia's suggestions for appropriate menus, and she was such an excellent cook that little improvement could be made to the food itself. The slaves were already collecting apples from the orchard and pressing them for cider and apple brandy, and performing the million other tasks that needed doing on a large plantation. As a housewife, Cordelia felt utterly unnecessary.

Since Gwaltney was indisposed, she decided to supervise the slaves as they hung the cut

tobacco to dry in the curing shed. Supervision was crucial at every stage of the process, as an error could ruin a year's work. In October the cured tobacco would be packed into hogsheads, the huge casks, a full four feet high and nearly three feet in diameter, in which tobacco was shipped. She planned on supervising this too, since an error could ruin the contents of an entire thousand-pound hogshead, causing them to arrive in a state of useless rot at their destination.

She was able to distract herself from some of her concerns by focusing on work. And yet she often found her thoughts drifting back to her husband, and to their last confrontation. For the first time in many years, she was genuinely sorry for what she had said, sorry for the threatening words she had uttered.

She understood readily enough why her husband felt uncomfortable in her presence. Gwaltney Harris was not the sort of man who enjoyed having his weaknesses displayed. And her threat had only made things worse.

After a long sennight of soul-searching, she finally decided to find Gwaltney and talk to him, to really talk, regardless of how cold and cutting he became. She couldn't go on this way, isolated and alone. And lonely.

It was twilight when she wandered out into the garden to find Gwaltney. Although it was September, the days were still relatively long, and Gwaltney was prone to staying in the garden as long as possible. Given the mysterious circumstances surrounding his injury, she did not think it was a good idea for him to stay outside so much, but he had all but snarled at her repeated suggestion that he should remain in the house more. Realizing this was one battle she was not going to win, Cordelia had left him alone.

She found him where the wide lawn met the formal garden, seated on a blanket with Mary. The four slaves she had assigned to watch Gwaltney at all times stood off to one side deferentially, and two other house slaves were clearing away the remnants of the evening meal. At her approach, Django, lying off to the side, lifted his head and thumped his tail in a friendly manner, and Mary looked up and grinned happily. Cordelia smiled back, relieved that Mary, at least, still considered her to be a friend.

Gwaltney noticed the little girl's greeting too, and all too obviously it did not please him. "Mary," he said shortly, "run back to the house. It's almost bedtime." He glanced at the slaves. "And you four may leave as well."

The slaves glanced at Cordelia for confirmation, to Gwaltney's obvious annoyance, and she nodded, not particularly eager to have them witness the argument that was likely to erupt when she spoke with her husband. They strode off toward the slave quarters. Mary obediently rose, kissed him on the cheek, and trotted back toward the house in the company of the two house slaves--but not before she waved happily at Cordelia. Cordelia waved back, then turned her attention back to Gwaltney. He was scowling at her.

"Why the hell are you pretending to be so friendly with Mary?"

Cordelia hesitated an instant, then decided to speak frankly. It was, after all, exceedingly difficult for her to speak any other way. "I'm not pretending."

Gwaltney's heavy brows slanted dangerously over his eyes. "I told you to stay away from her."

"I haven't hurt her, Gwaltney. She was lonely. She needed someone to comfort her when you were hurt."

"The last thing she needs," Gwaltney said between his teeth, "is you."

Cordelia stared at him a long moment, taken aback by his savage tone, then looked away,

blinking rapidly to dispel the tears that inexplicably welled in her eyes. This was going even worse than she had imagined. Gwaltney hated her. He would never listen to her explanation or her apology. He was far too angry to listen to her at all. He despised her.

And she deserved it.

She took a deep breath, controlling her quavering voice, and changed the subject. "Are you feeling better?"

"Do you care?" Gwaltney countered.

She met his eyes squarely. "Yes. I do."

Gwaltney seemed slightly taken aback by her answer. He paused for a long moment, then answered, clearly still reluctant to be drawn into the conversation. "I am much improved, thank you, mistress."

The words were stilted and formal, but Cordelia felt a surge of relief. At least he was talking to her. "Are you walking well?"

"I am managing with the use of the cane," Gwaltney said, nodding toward the ornately carved cane set with semi-precious gems he had been using to get around. Many men used such canes for ornamentation, and it did not seem to embarrass him to acknowledge the dependence. But his leg had improved so greatly that it appeared likely he would eventually recover totally, walking without a limp.

"I'm glad."

Gwaltney looked at her oddly, then apparently decided to cut through her rather poor attempts at polite inanities. "Why are you here, Cordelia?"

"I don't understand."

"You've made it clear enough you scarcely care if I live or die. Why did you come out here tonight?"

More tears sprang to her eyes. Did he truly believe that of her, that she was so hardhearted she did not care if he was alive or dead? Why in the world did he imagine she had spent two nearly sleepless days and nights taking care of him if she cared nothing for his well-being at all?

A single tear escaped her control and slid down her cheek.

Gwaltney saw it and leaned forward, his eyes widening in surprise. "Good God," he said incredulously, as though he could hardly believe it. "You're crying."

Embarrassed by her own lack of self-control, Cordelia started to scramble to her feet, but Gwaltney reached out and caught her arm in an iron grip, making it impossible for her to escape. He stretched out his other hand and gently brushed the tear from her cheek. "Cordelia," he said softly, "whatever is the matter with you?"

"You hate me," she whispered in a choked voice.

More tears flowed in a silver river down her cheeks, and Gwaltney brushed them away with his thumb. "I don't hate you."

"You do," she choked. "You've hardly spoken to me in a week. And I..." Her voice broke off on a sob.

Gwaltney stared at her, utterly baffled, hardly able to believe this was the same woman who had coldly threatened to confine him, to tie him to the settee, if he misbehaved. Somehow he had never imagined that the stiff, prim Cordelia was capable of tears. And seeing her like this, upset, practically distraught, was oddly distressing. "I don't hate you," he repeated gently. "I wish to God I did. I've spent the last week trying to hate you."

"You should."

"I know," he agreed gravely. "But I can't."

She seemed to find his confession an enormous relief. Staring up into his face, she began earnestly, "Gwaltney, I'm so very sorry for what I said...."

Her words choked off into silence, and fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

Stunned by the fact that the woman he had condemned not a week ago as a vicious, coldhearted bitch was actually apologizing to him, he reacted without thought, putting his arms around her and pulling her against his chest. She gave into the tears and sobbed.

She was sobbing. Actually *sobbing*. He could hardly believe it.

Cordelia Ashton Harris was human after all.

"It's all right," he breathed into her hair. "It's fine. I'm not angry, really."

She managed to get control enough of herself to gasp out one word, and Gwaltney grinned against her hair.

She'd called him a liar.

"Very well, I *was* angry," he admitted. "I thought perhaps you really meant what you said to me."

Cordelia pressed her face into his neck. He could feel the heat of her wet cheeks against his throat. "I can't believe you'd actually think that of me," she whispered hoarsely. "I was upset. I was worried about you."

That confession was uttered in such a low voice he could scarcely hear it, and yet it did odd things to his pulse. She had actually been distressed over him.

For the first time, he struggled to examine his laudanum-blurred memories. If he concentrated, he could remember her standing calmly by, holding him down as he struggled frantically against her, reassuring him as the doctor dug the ball from his thigh. She had been incredibly strong throughout the entire ordeal, never so much as wincing. Few women had that kind of emotional strength. Most women of his acquaintance would have either fled the chamber or swooned.

Then, too, he clearly remembered her support for his refusal to be bled. She could have easily permitted the doctor to drug him and bleed him against his will. But she hadn't.

And then she had forced laudanum down his throat when he'd lost control of himself and panicked.

He pushed that memory away. She had had his best interests at heart, he recognized that now. His frantic, thrashing struggles could not have been good for his wound. But he could barely stand to remember the awful panic, the hideous certainty that he was about to be crushed by the walls.

And he could hardly bear to remember that she had seen him that way, vulnerable and terrified and weak.

But tonight their roles had been reversed. For the first time since he had known her, she was the vulnerable one. "Cordelia," he murmured into her hair. "I've been an idiot. I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am."

"Every bit as sorry as you are."

"Impossible. I'm so terribly sorry."

Gwaltney found the corners of his mouth twitching up again and marveled how she always managed to make him smile--generally at the same time she made him long to strangle her. "This could go on all night," he pointed out with amusement. "Arguing about which of us is sorrier for our behavior, I mean. Shall we simply agree that we are both equally sorry?"

Cordelia nodded. Her face was still hidden against his throat, but he was aware that she was no longer weeping, for her shoulders no longer shook convulsively. But he was strangely reluctant to let her go.

It felt right to hold her.

Drawing a long, shuddering breath, he tilted her head up and kissed her.

For an endless moment, she paused, frozen with surprise, more like the cold spinster she had long pretended to be than the warm and passionate woman she really was. Then her arms slid around his neck, and her lips parted.

His tongue probed boldly into her mouth, and she gasped at his assault--whether with shock or passion he was not certain. Probably, he thought wryly, both. He forced himself to go slowly, knowing that she was a virgin, and one who had most likely never been kissed before, except by him.

He stroked her tongue gently with his own, marveling at the velvet texture of her mouth, the taste of her, the way the sensations seemed to spread from his mouth throughout his entire body, making him tremble with longing. He felt as dazed as when he'd taken the laudanum. His tongue thrust against hers more aggressively, and she moaned.

Slowly, slowly, so as not to frighten her, his fingers found her hair and pulled the hairpins from it, one by one. Her hair, unbelievably soft and fine, cascaded over his hands and arms, and he let his fingers sink deeply into the heavy silken mass. It was what he had wanted to do, what he had secretly longed to do, for weeks. He pulled his mouth from hers and buried his face in the dark flames of her hair, breathing in the fragrance of rosewater, and beneath it, her own feminine scent.

The feel of her hair in his hands was unspeakably erotic. It brushed lightly across his skin, and the fragrance surrounded him until he was helplessly lightheaded, until he felt the hot pull of lust in his groin. He stroked the long strands, and she tilted her head back in wanton response to the caress.

His lips trailed down her throat until he was kissing the tops of her breasts, all but concealed by silk and frothing lace. He vividly remembered the last time he had held her in his arms, how he had caressed her nipples, and the feverish way in which she had responded. This time he did not intend to stop at simply touching her. He wanted more, much more.

Pressing her backward until she lay stretched out beneath him on the blanket, he tugged at the low neckline of her gown until her swollen, rigid nipples were exposed to the cool evening air. They were as lovely and as feminine as the rest of her, small pink rosebuds blooming against the snowy white mounds of her breasts. Bending, he stroked his tongue across one, and she writhed against him, moaning, burying her long, slender fingers in his hair. Encouraged by her response, he drew her nipple hungrily into his mouth.

Cordelia's response was electrifying. Her body arched against his frantically, and through the haze of desire that surrounded him he heard her crying out. And the word she was crying out, over and over again, made his heart thunder madly. She was sobbing his name.

She wanted him.

For the first time in their relationship, the very first time, she did not see him as a longhunter or as a wheelwright's son, but as a man. A man she desired. And, if he was very lucky, a man she cared about.

He found himself praying to God that she cared about him.

Enchanted by her fiercely passionate reaction, he reached down and caressed her

incredibly long, slim legs. The layers of her skirts had been pushed up to her knees, and he sought beneath the hem of her gown, stroking her thigh, which was so soft and smooth he could scarcely tell where the silk of her stockings ended and her skin began. He was suddenly uncomfortably aware of how callused and rough his fingers were. But driven inexorably by need and longing, his hand moved slowly upward, until his fingers brushed the soft curls at the juncture of her legs.

He delved into her curls, parting her soft, yielding flesh and discovering that she was already wet and hot.

For him.

A surge of heat like nothing he'd ever experienced washed through him at this confirmation that he was truly bringing her pleasure. He wanted to be inside of her, to be part of her, more than he'd ever wanted anything. He lifted his head from her breast and pressed his lips against hers ardently, plunging his tongue into her mouth at the same time his fingers explored her, sliding deeply into her, discovering the dark, hidden secrets of her body. She whimpered against his mouth, then moved her head away and caught at his hand, shoving rather ineffectually at his chest.

"No," she whispered faintly.

Gwaltney closed his eyes and pressed his face into her shoulder, stifling a groan of frustration. He had to remember she was a virgin and easily frightened. He had to be patient. But God knew it wasn't easy.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he murmured softly, sliding his arms around her waist and holding her close.

Despite his reassurance, Cordelia pushed him away, none too gently. Gwaltney winced as he sat up, feeling the strain in his healing thigh. She sat up as well, staring at him, her eyes flaring with what he thought was outraged modesty.

"How dare you?" she hissed.

"I'm sorry I frightened you," Gwaltney said, taking care to keep his voice low and reassuring. He was not surprised his ardor had startled and alarmed her. God knew it had taken him by surprise as well. Never in his life had he wanted a woman so badly. Never before had he ached for a woman with such violent, wrenching desire. He reached out a hand. "It can be overwhelming, I know. I'll promise, I'll try to go more slowly."

Cordelia jerked away from his outstretched hand as if he had proposed taking a whip to her back. "Get away from me," she snarled. "You aren't fit to touch me, you filthy longhunter."

The unexpected words sliced through him like a sword through his entrails. He hesitated for a long moment, bewildered and hurt, then said in a shocked voice, "I beg your pardon?"

Had their relationship been on a better footing, he might have seen fear and uncertainty in her gaze. As it was, he expected to see nothing but contempt, and accordingly contempt was all he saw. To his eyes she looked as remote, as haughty as a queen, passing sentence on one of her subjects. The passion and the fire that had animated her seemed to have utterly disappeared.

"I suppose you think I've been waiting for you to bestow the honor of your touch upon me," she said, yanking down the heavy material of her skirts. Beneath the cool arrogance in her voice was a scarcely audible tremor. "I suppose you've deluded yourself into thinking I *want* to share a bed with you. I assure you, you couldn't be more wrong."

Gwaltney stared at her a moment longer, utterly confused by her sudden change in attitude, then the fog of desire that had suffused his mind began to lift, and his frozen brain

started to work again. She was playing some sort of game with him, he realized bitterly. Now that some of his passion had abated, he was able to see precisely how she had manipulated him. She had wept pitifully, garnering his sympathy, and then she had pressed against him with her lushly slender body until he had lost his head. And then, with her sudden apparent change of heart, she had managed to make him look like a fool--and not for the first time.

He didn't fully understand what her motivations were and why she was playing this little game with him. Perhaps she enjoyed humiliating him, or perhaps she simply wanted to exert some control over him. Or perhaps she was merely bored, and he had provided an interesting diversion. Idiot that he was, he had foolishly exposed his vulnerabilities again, and she had struck viciously and without mercy, like the rattlesnake she was.

For a few seconds, he had dared to imagine that she had accepted him as an equal, dared to hope that she cared for him, but the simple, painful truth was she had no feelings for him whatsoever. And that she still thought of him as nothing more than a longhunter.

She didn't want him, and she certainly didn't care for him. She simply enjoyed seeing him abase himself.

The thought brought a bitter surge of rage like nothing he had ever before experienced. And burning beneath the rage was the acrid knowledge that she was right. He wasn't fit to touch her with his coarse, rough hands, hands that were more suited to hard, backbreaking labor than to lovemaking. He wasn't worthy of her and never would be. No matter how he might strive to improve himself, he was nothing more than a laborer at heart.

In that moment, he hated the gentry, hated his *wife*, with a gut-wrenching, savage intensity. And the hatred was only intensified by his realization that he still burned for her beautiful body.

She didn't realize just how dangerous this game could be.

He reached out and caught her by the wrist before she could get up. "I think you do want me," he said in a dangerous, low voice.

Cordelia fixed him with a look of cold distaste. "I think you overestimate your own appeal," she said coldly, but he heard the tremor of uncertainty in her voice. No doubt she had imagined she could create passion in him, drive him to his knees and then reject him, without experiencing any passion herself, and had been startled to find that she was almost as aroused as he himself was. She was, after all, inexperienced in these matters. She knew nothing of the pleasures that could be had between a man and a woman.

And that was going to be her downfall.

"I don't think so," he growled, putting an arm around her waist and pulling her up against his chest so that her still-bare nipple pressed against the fine lawn of his shirt. He heard her gasp, uncertain whether it was a noise of passion or of protest. He took her nipple between his forefinger and thumb and stroked it until it was rigid, eliciting a moan he was certain was *not* a protest.

He took her mouth in a gentle kiss, careful not to hurt her, coaxing rather than demanding a response despite the fact that he would have liked nothing better than to hurt her as she had hurt him. Another man might have been tempted to inflict physical pain under these circumstances, but he was neither a rapist nor abusive. There were other, more subtle ways of hurting another person. Cordelia had never in her lifetime been subtle--but he was.

His tongue slowly traced the outlines of her mouth, exploring those soft, lush lips that had been driving him insane for weeks. Evidently surprised by his gentleness, she parted her lips, and

he slid his tongue inside and began to explore her mouth with a slow, leisurely thoroughness. Tentatively, her tongue touched his, and the throbbing ache in his groin intensified until it was almost unbearable. Hunger, irresistible and urgent, seized him.

He forced back the turbulent passion that rolled inside him like waves in a storm, threatening to engulf him. He was in control of this situation, and he refused to surrender his control. He refused to surrender to *her*.

He pulled her skirts up again and let his hands freely roam over her legs, stroking every smooth contour, every inch of her satiny skin, arousing her with the touch of his rough, unworthy hands. When her arms were wrapped around him, when she was moaning with pleasure at his every caress, he very gently pressed her back against the blanket and leaned over her.

He found her curls, parted them, and let his fingers slide over her damp, exquisitely sensitive flesh. She sobbed, trying to muffle the sound against his shoulder, but he kissed her throat, bending her head back so that she had no choice but to cry out. He enjoyed hearing the sound of her surrender.

He was in control.

In her naiveté, she had imagined she could manipulate the situation to her advantage, manipulate *him*, but he was grimly determined to show her she had been wrong. He was, after all, more experienced in sexual matters. She should have known better than to try to best him.

With one hand he hastily unfastened his breeches, freeing his aching hard erection. Gently he parted her slender thighs and slowly slid between them, rubbing against her moist, hot entrance, making her writhe and twist against him, making her sob with a wild longing for something she'd never experienced but instinctively craved.

He teased her for long moments, sliding across her soft, damp flesh, probing, tormenting, but refusing her clear invitation to enter, lingering at the entrance to her body until his shaft was slick with her moisture, until they both panted for air, until both of them trembled on the verge of climax.

Finally she clutched frantically at his back, scoring him with her nails even through his linen shirt. "*Please*," she whispered hoarsely. That faintly uttered plea was enough for him, sufficient proof that he'd forced her to admit she wanted him, despite what she might think about his origins, no matter how much she might despise him.

In one powerful thrust, he sheathed himself in her liquid warmth. The overwhelming shock of the sensation, the unbelievable ecstasy of finally being inside her, drove the air from his lungs and tore a low, involuntary growl of pleasure from his chest.

Beneath him, Cordelia stiffened slightly in pain and shock, and Gwaltney paused, careful to give her enough time to adjust to his invasion, knowing she was a virgin. Or had been until this moment. She was hot and slick, and he felt his muscles go rigid. Holding himself motionless within a woman's hot, eager body was a stunning experience, one he'd never known before. It was mingled ecstasy and agony to remain still when every nerve in his body was on edge and demanding release. But somehow, with fierce determination, he managed to discipline himself.

In a few moments he moved again, carefully, slowly, and she arched against him eagerly. Evidently her pain had receded. He began to thrust into her rhythmically, and almost immediately she cried out. He could feel the shimmering pulsations of her climax, deep within her body, as she shuddered and twisted against him, and the exquisite sensation nearly cost him his hard-earned control. He paused, panting in short harsh breaths, and gritted his teeth, determined to master his reactions at all costs.

He was in control.

He would make her realize the idiocy of trying to best him. He would force *her* to be vulnerable for a change.

After a few moments, confident he had his reactions under tight rein, he resumed his attack, sliding deep into her. She thrashed beneath him, moaning and gasping for breath as she climaxed again ... and again. Gwaltney thrust into her body with a feeling of grim satisfaction, enjoying her surrender, knowing that he was the victor in this battle.

He was in control, damn it.

And then, suddenly, he wasn't in control anymore. The unexpectedly savage force of the white-hot explosion that shook him wrenched a long, drawn-out groan from his chest, and his body shuddered convulsively as his restraint shattered in spasm after spasm of liquid flame. The agonizing pleasure of it left him weak, and he collapsed on top of Cordelia, burying his face in her hair and gasping for breath.

And cursing her. Because she had somehow managed to be the victor after all.

After a few moments of silence, broken only by their ragged gasps for air, Gwaltney sat up and stared down at her. She looked up at him, expectantly, her lips parted and an oddly tender, almost dreamy expression on her face. She was clearly waiting for him to say something.

He struggled to his feet awkwardly, buttoned his breeches and straightened his disheveled clothing, and caught up his gem-studded cane. Looking down, he caught Cordelia's expectant gaze on him. And he spoke the only words that came to mind.

"I despise you," he said.

Cordelia watched Gwaltney hobble back to the house, but she made no move to follow. Despite the warmth of the evening, she felt frozen in place. She had no idea how she was ever to face Gwaltney again, for she was wretchedly aware she had responded to his lovemaking like a trollop.

Worse. Like a whore.

Looking down at herself, she saw the rumpled skirt of her gown pushed up around her waist, the neckline of her gown haphazardly pushed down, exposing her breasts, and she felt the heat of embarrassment rush to her cheeks as she remembered the startling pleasure he had brought her--and the icy words he had uttered afterward.

She could not understand how a man could indulge in such intimacy when his feelings toward her were so very cold.

She admitted to herself that the entire mess had really been her own fault. She had been so carried away by his ardor at first that she had utterly forgotten that awful conversation she had overheard in the Greysons' garden. And then, suddenly, she had remembered. Remembered that he didn't want her because he cared anything for her, remembered that she meant nothing to him at all. And she had fought to keep him from hurting her, seeking to drive him away by hurting him first. She had fallen back on her sharp tongue to make him go away and leave her in peace.

But he hadn't left. And she had been too foolishly weak to force him to go.

Pushing down the skirts of her gown, she covered the dampness on her thighs, his moisture mingled with her blood. She sat alone on the vast sweep of lawn, staring at the stars that lit the dark sky. They were beautiful and incredibly distant. Just as Gwaltney was.

The shimmering sparks of light in the sky blurred and ran together like watercolors as tears gathered in her eyes once again. She brushed impatiently at the moisture on her cheeks,

tired of this weakness. She had wept not once this evening, but twice. All because of Gwaltney. She had struggled to keep him at arm's length, but her utter failure to do so made her realize for the first time how much Gwaltney meant to her. She cared more for him than she had ever intended to.

Chapter 25

Cordelia had never been more relieved to see Elizabeth than she was the next morning. She desperately needed someone to talk to, to help her work out the snarl of conflicting emotions she had somehow become trapped in. She smiled with the first genuine happiness she had felt in days as she entered the yellow-and-crimson parlor.

She seated herself on the settee across from her sister and had a slave bring in tea and cornbread. "How is your husband?" Elizabeth asked, leaning forward in concern.

"Much improved, thank you." She hesitated, wanting to confide in Elizabeth, wanting to tell her everything that had transpired between Gwaltney and herself, yet unwilling to admit to the intimacy she and her husband had shared. And, she admitted, reluctant to confess the fact that much of the hopeless situation she was mired in was her own foolish fault.

"Such a terrible accident," Elizabeth said, her forehead wrinkling with concern as she sipped her tea. "How in the world did such a thing happen?"

Beneath the even courtesy that Elizabeth always displayed, Cordelia sensed real concern. She hesitated, not wanting to concern her sister unduly, then decided to be blunt. There was no real purpose in keeping anything from Elizabeth, since her sister had always possessed the ability to see through her fabrications in an instant.

"It wasn't an accident," she said. "Gwaltney believes someone is trying to injure him on purpose."

"Why on earth would someone do that?"

"I don't know. But..." Cordelia told Elizabeth the story of the runaway horse in Williamsburg. "So you see," she concluded, "it wasn't the first time by any means."

"How dreadful."

Cordelia hesitated, then blurted out, "I'm worried about him, Elizabeth. I really am."

"I don't doubt it." Elizabeth paused. "I take it, then, that your relationship with Gwaltney has improved?"

"I wouldn't say that," Cordelia said stiffly. "Nothing has really changed. He hates me as much as ever."

Elizabeth leaned forward and took her hand. "Nonsense, Cordelia. He doesn't hate you."

"He does," Cordelia whispered. Inexplicably she felt tears sting her eyes. "And I deserve it. After what I said..."

Elizabeth squeezed her hand reassuringly. "No, Cordelia. It's not your fault."

"It is. I told him..." She could not bring herself to tell Elizabeth exactly what had transpired between them last night. It was still too new, too raw a memory, for her to discuss it.

And she could barely stand to remember what she had said to Gwaltney. She had uttered those horribly insulting words in self-defense, but she had not meant a word of it. "I tried to humiliate him on purpose," she said instead. "You see, a few weeks ago I overheard him talking about me, and I was so angry...."

"What exactly did he say to make you angry?"

Cordelia hesitated a long moment. But even in the interest of sparing Elizabeth's feelings, she could not stop her long-established habit of confiding in her sister. "He was talking with Jonathan in the Greysons' garden," she burst out. "Jonathan seemed to think that you had broken off your engagement because you held him accountable for the failure of our marriage somehow. And so Gwaltney promised to seduce me and let Jonathan take the credit for bringing us together." She blinked hard and looked away from Elizabeth's startled gaze. "I have never been so humiliated in my life," she whispered.

Elizabeth sat staring at her for a long moment. "I was right," she murmured at last. "This entire disaster is of my making."

Cordelia smiled at her through the haze of tears that burned in her eyes. "Don't be ridiculous, Elizabeth. No one is to blame. No one except Gwaltney and myself."

"No. I'm to blame. Truly, I am." She held out a hand when Cordelia would have spoken again. "Listen to me, Cordelia. Please, you must listen. I'm the one who started all this. I told Jonathan I wouldn't marry him unless he found someone to marry you first."

"I don't understand."

"I refused to marry him until you were married. Don't you understand, Cordelia? It was Jonathan who asked Gwaltney Harris to court you. It was never Gwaltney's idea."

Cordelia stared at her, bewildered. In her wildest dreams she had never suspected Elizabeth of such a betrayal. She had thought Elizabeth understood her, accepted her for what she was, and instead Elizabeth had been as determined to see her wed as her father was--but had been more devious. And then the meaning of what her sister had said sunk in, and she felt even more ill. "Gwaltney courted me as a favor to Jonathan?" she whispered.

"I don't think so. I think Jonathan managed to convince Gwaltney that you would make him an excellent wife. But you have to believe me, I meant for Jonathan to find you a suitable suitor, not someone like Gwaltney Harris."

"And yet you let Gwaltney court me."

Elizabeth bit her lip. "At the time I trusted Jonathan, and I believed he would never do anything to hurt you. Jonathan assured me Gwaltney was a good man. And I thought you were coming to care for him. I imagined that you might be happy together."

Elizabeth had, of course, been right. She had come to care for him. She cared for him more deeply than she had ever imagined possible. It was on the tip of her tongue to blurt out the truth to her sister, but she was still reeling from the shock of her sister's betrayal.

"I didn't want to get married," she said between her teeth. "I thought you knew that. I thought you understood."

"I believed you would be happier if you were married."

"So you took it on yourself to manipulate me? To run my life the way you thought it should be run? Elizabeth, how could you do that to me?"

"You and I both know you didn't really want to be a spinster for the rest of your life," Elizabeth said softly. "You weren't really happy at home, Cordelia. You know you weren't."

"But I'm not happy here, either." Cordelia looked away, then stared back at her sister,

stiffening her spine with resolve and speaking as coldly as she was able.

“Perhaps you had better leave now.”

Elizabeth blinked rapidly and stood up. “I understand why you’re angry,” she said softly. “In your place, I’d be angry too. But I have to tell you one other thing. Jonathan was the one who sent Father out after Gwaltney to watch you in the woods. Jonathan was the one who saw to it that you were ruined, that you had no choice but to marry Gwaltney. I told him where you sketched, and he told Father.”

“I see,” Cordelia said woodenly. “Then this is all Jonathan’s fault.”

Elizabeth lifted her chin in the stubborn gesture that Cordelia knew all too well. “No,” she said frankly. “Jonathan lied to me, and for that I can never forgive him. But I’m the one who asked him to intervene. I’m the one who manipulated you, and I’m the one who is ultimately responsible for your marriage to Gwaltney Harris.” She swallowed and looked at her sister through clear blue eyes.

“It was my fault, Cordelia.”

Without another word she walked to the door and left the chamber.

She did not try to beg Cordelia’s pardon, to apologize for what she had done, and Cordelia understood why. Some transgressions were too dreadful for one to ever gain forgiveness, and this was one of them. She could never forgive Elizabeth for what she had done.

Just as Gwaltney would never forgive her for what *she* had done.

Chapter 26

After Elizabeth left, Cordelia sequestered herself in her chamber for the remainder of the morning, for she could not bear the thought of facing Gwaltney. She did not want to face his disdain. The words he had uttered kept springing to her mind. *I despise you*. She thought with bitter amusement that those were not the three words that a woman who had just been made love to longed to hear.

Rather than take a chance of running into Gwaltney downstairs, she remained in her chamber and painted. She had been painting for some time when she was startled by the sound of a knock.

For a brief moment her heart leapt into her throat. Surely, she thought, it must be Gwaltney. He had come to apologize. He had come to permit her to apologize. And she would. She would humble herself before him, fall to her knees and beg his forgiveness, if only he would tell her that he forgave her in return. After the startling beauty of their lovemaking, it was unbearable that he should remain so angry with her.

She forced her voice into a normal register, hoping she sounded calmer than she felt. Her heart was pounding frantically. “Come in.”

The door opened, and she experienced a surge of bitter disappointment at the realization that it was only Mary. She was a fool, she told herself bitterly. Gwaltney was never going to give her the chance to apologize. He was much too angry, and the fact was he had every right to be.

She might never be given the chance to put things right between them.

She had lost Gwaltney.

No, she thought bleakly, she had never really had him to begin with.

"Hello, Mary," she said, forcing artificial cheer into her voice. Mary seemed uncannily perceptive at times, and she did not want the little girl to be concerned about her. "Would you care to come in?"

Mary walked across to the table and looked at the painting. To her embarrassment, Cordelia realized she'd painted a likeness of Gwaltney, depicting him in one of his good moods. His eyes were crinkled at the corners, and his mouth curved up in the lazily insolent grin that she found so annoying--and that she would have been delighted to see any time in the past week. Or today. Especially today.

Even more embarrassing, she had poured out everything she felt for him. Every brushstroke, every detail was somehow infused with bittersweet emotion. She sincerely hoped Mary was oblivious to such nuances.

"It's for you," Cordelia said hastily, not wanting Mary to think she had been sitting in her chamber and moping over Gwaltney, although that was in fact the case. "Here." She caught up her quill and lettered the word GWALTNEY across the top. "You'll have to wait until it dries, though."

Mary studied the painting for a long moment, then pointed to the word, a questioning expression on her small face.

"That says Gwaltney," Cordelia explained.

Mary gave her a look of exasperation, almost, but not quite, rolling her eyes. Her expression made it eloquently clear that was not the question.

"Letters," Cordelia hazarded. "Those are letters. G-W-A-L-T-N-E-Y."

Mary broke into a delighted smile.

"Do you want to learn more letters?"

Mary looked at her quizzically, tilting her head slightly.

"Or more words," Cordelia suggested. "Do you want to learn more words?"

Mary nodded eagerly.

"Well, then, sit down," Cordelia said. The little girl scrambled up into the chair next to her and watched intently as she scribbled a hasty sketch of a woman, a man, and a child, then scratched out several words with her quill. "This says 'mother'," she said, pointing at the first set of letters. "M-O-T-H-E-R."

Mary wiggled with delight and bounced in her chair.

After Mary left, Cordelia spent the early afternoon alone in her chamber, sketching any fancy that occurred to her. She was vaguely aware she was trying to avoid the reality of her situation, but she did not care. Right now she was so wretchedly unhappy that she wished she could stay in her chamber forever. She was startled back to reality, however, when a slave knocked on her door to announce that they had a visitor.

"A visitor?" she repeated in surprise. The hope that it might be Elizabeth blossomed within her, startling her with its strength. She realized wryly that despite her anger, she still loved her sister dearly.

"Yes, mistress. Mr. Powell."

Cordelia jumped to her feet in surprise. Jonathan had visited only yesterday, and she had

not expected him to return so soon. Pausing by the looking glass to check her hairstyle, she added a few pins to her loose and becoming coiffure, then she paused by the washstand to scrub the ink from her fingers with reasonable success. Satisfied that she looked her best, she descended the wide staircase.

But whether she was interested in looking her best for their guest or for Gwaltney she was really not certain.

Going out into the garden, she saw that Gwaltney was already seated in his chair and talking companionably with Jonathan, who sprawled on the grass, looking entirely comfortable. Her eyes went instantly to Gwaltney, and she saw that he was dressed as a gentleman, in a plain, dark green coat and waistcoat with buff knee breeches. Not surprisingly, she thought, for although he was healing he was not yet capable of performing heavy labor in the fields.

For the first time she realized she was a trifle jealous of Gwaltney's closeness with his friend. She wished that Gwaltney thought of her as a friend, perhaps even his best friend. Instead they barely spoke to one another. There was an easy camaraderie in Gwaltney's conversation with Jonathan that she envied. As she approached, however, the conversation faltered to a halt.

Gwaltney's eyes met hers, and in them there was no hint of emotion--neither pleasure at the sight of her nor loathing. She would almost have preferred his fury or his hatred to the utter blandness of his expression now. And she certainly would have preferred a glimmer of the passion that had filled his eyes last night.

"Ah," he said in a perfectly even voice. "Here is Cordelia."

Jonathan rose instantly to his feet and bent over her hand, as meticulously courteous as ever. She realized, however, that there was no affection in his gaze, merely a distant civility. This man, she thought with a sudden pang, had very nearly been her brother-in-law, and yet he did not even like her.

Abruptly she wished she was a warm, likable person such as her sister. She was tired of people watching her warily, waiting to be stabbed by one of her pointed verbal barbs. She was tired of people avoiding her in the fear that her sharp witticisms might be directed at them. For the first time she wished she had never embarked upon her long and determined campaign to be a spinster.

She wished that people liked her.

Aware that Gwaltney and Jonathan were watching her, wondering at her long silence, she came to herself with a start. "Please, do sit down," she said quickly. She saw that Gwaltney had not yet had port or Madeira brought to the garden. "Would you care for some port?" she asked Jonathan politely.

"Abraham will be bringing refreshments any moment," Gwaltney informed her shortly.

"Oh." Feeling a little foolish and decidedly awkward, Cordelia hesitated for a moment, then sat on the grass, a distance from both men. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt the conversation."

"Not at all. We were merely chatting about inconsequentials," Gwaltney said. His voice was calm and distant, as though she were a stranger, and Cordelia squirmed inwardly, knowing as she did that the calmness concealed loathing.

Jonathan cleared his throat. "Actually, Gwaltney, now that Cordelia is here I have something I need to tell you."

Gwaltney lifted an eyebrow. "I must admit, I was rather surprised when you came to see me twice in a sennight," he said wryly. "But I attributed it to your overdeveloped sense of

loyalty.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Gwaltney. You know I’m here because I was worried about you. Are you walking better now?”

“Yes, thank you. The doctor says I will recover without a noticeable limp.”

“How fortunate.”

“Most fortunate, indeed,” Gwaltney said dryly.

Jonathan hesitated. “I wondered ... I wondered if you had found the person responsible.”

Cordelia looked up, surprised. Last week she had suggested that someone was trying to injure Gwaltney, and Jonathan had brushed off the notion as ludicrous. And yet his attitude now seemed to imply that the act had been deliberate. She wondered exactly what had happened to change his mind.

“No,” Gwaltney said shortly. “Obviously someone doesn’t like me, but I have no idea who.”

“I have an idea who it might be,” Cordelia said abruptly, startling herself as well as Gwaltney. She saw his annoyed gaze on her, telling her without words to be quiet, but she wanted Jonathan’s opinion on the matter. After all, Jonathan knew Gwaltney better than anyone, and it followed logically that he knew best who Gwaltney’s enemies were. He might have some insight into the matter.

“Indeed,” Jonathan said. His dark eyes watched her curiously. “Whom do you suspect, Cordelia?”

Cordelia spoke firmly. “Alexander Blair.”

She had the satisfaction of seeing Jonathan’s eyes widen slightly and a look almost of respect fill them. “How did you reach that conclusion, pray tell?”

“He tried to kill my husband during the race at Edward Greyson’s plantation. We all saw it.”

“That was an accident,” Gwaltney said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jonathan said. “It certainly was not an accident, Gwaltney. Even in the crowd we could all see that Blair struck your horse deliberately. And Cordelia is quite correct. He could easily have killed you.”

“That makes him the logical suspect,” Cordelia said triumphantly.

Jonathan hesitated for a long moment. “Actually, Gwaltney, I suspect Blair as well. That is actually why I came to visit you, to warn you. Everyone knows the young man hates you. But of late he has been spending a great deal of time in Williamsburg, drinking too much and becoming loose of tongue. And every time he drinks, he talks about how he means to hurt you.”

Gwaltney’s heavy eyebrows drew together with puzzlement. “I don’t understand. Why does he hate me?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I’ve never done anything to the man.”

“You’ve done more to him than you realize. The fact is that Alexander Blair was William Carr’s cousin.”

Watching Gwaltney, Cordelia saw a look of shock pass over his face, followed by dawning comprehension. For a long moment the information meant nothing to her, then she recalled that William Carr was the man from whom Gwaltney had won River’s Edge. When Gwaltney had told her about it, she recalled, she had had a vague memory of having overheard William Carr’s name in some snatch of gossip or other. Now she remembered that she had heard

his name linked together with Alexander Blair's.

Gwaltney had ruined Blair's cousin. Small wonder that Blair hated him.

"You never told me," Gwaltney said. His dark eyebrows drew together in a thunderous frown, making him look dangerous.

Jonathan shrugged, unimpressed by his friend's glower. "I didn't think you'd need to know, Gwaltney. And I knew how sensitive you were on the subject. I didn't want to bring it up unless I had to. I thought perhaps you had heard the gossip anyway."

"I've never been privy to gossip," Gwaltney said curtly.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said softly. "I should have told you."

Gwaltney shook his head. "It's all right, Jon. But now I think I need you to tell me everything you know. Were Blair and Carr close?"

"Like brothers, from everything I heard. Blair had no brothers of his own, you know, just sisters. He and Carr were close to the same age, and they grew up together. Blair's plantation isn't very far up the river."

Gwaltney nodded his head slowly. "This explains everything," he said at last. "I had no idea."

"It still isn't proof that he shot you," Jonathan added, interjecting a note of caution.

"But it certainly makes it a damn sight more likely."

Cordelia had been sitting very still, thinking. There was yet another piece of the puzzle, an elusive memory niggling at the back of her mind. Abruptly the memory resolved itself in her mind. "Gwaltney," she said with sudden excitement. "I just remembered something else. The day I saw the rider sitting in the woods, watching you..."

"Was it Blair?"

"I don't know. He was too far away for me to identify him. But I do remember that at first I mistook his horse for a deer due to its color. He was riding a golden chestnut, Gwaltney."

"Blair," Jonathan said, nodding his head.

"Very probably." Gwaltney stood up abruptly and grasped his cane. His eyes were glittering, and the gentle expression that ordinarily softened them had disappeared. They looked as hard as topaz. "You'll have to excuse me. I need to pay a visit to Mr. Blair."

"You can't go alone," Cordelia protested.

"Certainly not," Jonathan agreed, rising to his feet. "I'll come with you."

Some of the hardness melted from Gwaltney's eyes as he gave his friend an affectionate smile. "This isn't your affair, Jon."

"Do you think I'm going to send you to Blair's house by yourself, Gwaltney? The man hates you. He tried to kill you twice. What do you think he might do to you if you arrive on his doorstep alone?"

Gwaltney hesitated, pride obviously warring with common sense. "Truth be told, Jon, I prefer to take care of myself."

"Don't be a fool. I'm coming with you."

The two men stared at each other a few moments longer in a silent battle of wills, then Gwaltney dropped his eyes and shrugged. "As you wish."

They strode from the garden shoulder to shoulder. As they walked away, Cordelia called out, "Be careful." She had not meant to say anything, but the words seemed to leap from her mouth of their own accord, as words had a disconcerting habit of doing.

Gwaltney turned back, fixing her with an oddly cynical look. "I'll be as careful as always,

my dear,” he drawled.

Cordelia watched until the two men disappeared behind the boxwood hedges of the formal garden. “Why don’t I find that reassuring?” she said to herself.

Gwaltney was relieved to find that he was capable of sitting in the saddle with some degree of comfort. He mounted Mist, and Jonathan swung onto his bay gelding. The two men took off at a canter for Blair’s plantation, scarcely two miles away.

“There’s another reason Blair doesn’t like you,” Jonathan said, “one I hesitated to discuss in front of your wife. It’s well-known that Blair courted Cordelia and that she rejected him.”

“Yes, I remember,” Gwaltney said thoughtfully, remembering Cordelia’s cutting remark comparing Alexander Blair, all too accurately, to a scarecrow. In his mind he saw the beautiful woman he had married paired with the ludicrously thin and awkward Blair, and he had to stifle a laugh. Of course, he had to amend fairly, Cordelia had concealed her true looks so artfully that no one in Virginia had had any idea she was so attractive. “Why the hell is he annoyed with me about that? He should be down on his knees thanking me.”

Jonathan glanced at him, clearly hearing the bitterness beneath the bantering tone. “I think it’s a combination of things,” he said slowly. “Blair needed the land Cordelia’s father provided as her dowry. He needed it badly.”

“I thought Blair land was extensive.”

“It was, but when Alexander’s father died, it was divided among Alexander and his five sisters. The sisters got much of the arable land. Alexander got the plantation house and some land, but not enough to sustain tobacco growth over time. Moreover, I think Alexander hates you simply because Cordelia rejected him and not you.”

Wryly Gwaltney thought that if Alexander had any idea how many times Cordelia had rejected him, he wouldn’t resent him on *that* basis.

He shook his head ruefully. He still had difficulty imagining that Alexander could have really intended to kill him, despite all the evidence that pointed in that direction. Alexander was spoiled and bad-tempered, true enough, but he was also as timid as a kicked puppy. He remembered the way Alexander had turned crimson and beaten a hasty retreat when Cordelia insulted him. Could a man that cowardly bring himself to attempt murder?

On the other hand, did *brave* men ever try to commit murder?

He supposed that Alexander might be the sort of frightened but aggressive man who was prone to being a bully, a skinny and underdeveloped young man who did not dare to attack another man to his face, but who didn’t hesitate to strike from behind. The fact was, he decided at last, he really didn’t know Blair well enough to be certain.

Hopefully this visit would clear up a few of his questions.

When they arrived at Blair’s plantation and were ushered into the parlor, Blair stared at them with unmistakable hostility, but his words were addressed to Jonathan, as if Gwaltney was not worthy of being spoken to at all. “What the hell do you mean by bringing this bastard into my house?”

Gwaltney noted that Blair was cocky enough on his own territory. The fact that he had been insulted virtually escaped his notice, so accustomed was he to being treated in such a fashion.

Jonathan appeared more annoyed by the slight than Gwaltney himself. His expression darkened ominously. “We want to talk to you, Blair.”

"I don't intend to speak to *him*."

Jonathan took three steps across the chamber and caught Blair by his skinny neck. Blair was taller than he was but significantly less well muscled. Jonathan tightened his fingers on the younger man's throat. "I suggest," he said in a mild voice, "that you speak to him. And to me as well. Any objections?"

Blair struggled frantically but was unable to free himself. At last, turning purple, he shook his head.

"Good," Jonathan said calmly, releasing the young man, who caught at his throat, wheezing and gasping for breath. Gwaltney watched, his mouth twisted with wry amusement. It was difficult to believe that any Virginia-bred gentleman could shake his conditioning enough to attack another man in his own parlor, let alone Jonathan, who had always been the most peaceful of men. Clearly Jonathan was extremely annoyed with Blair.

Gwaltney would have liked to have strangled the young man himself, but given the barely healed wound in his leg he was not really up to such physical exertion. Already he could feel his thigh throbbing from the unaccustomed strain of sitting in a saddle again. He settled into a chair and fixed Blair with a hard look.

"Have you been trying to kill me, Alexander?"

Blair had recovered his breath sufficiently to speak. "I beg your pardon," he said. There was resentment burning in his eyes, but he was clearly intimidated, and much of his arrogance had melted away. He seemed willing enough to address Gwaltney now. "Why would I do that?"

"Someone has been trying to kill me. I think it's you."

A distinctly nervous expression settled onto Blair's features as he realized that Gwaltney was serious. "Why in the world would I want to kill you?"

"Don't play the innocent, Blair," Gwaltney said sharply. "You tried to kill me that day at the Greysons'. We all saw you strike my horse."

"That was an accident!"

"Nonsense," Jonathan said. "Perhaps everyone concerned agreed to pretend it was an accident, but we all know it wasn't. I saw you strike Gwaltney's stallion, Blair. Everyone saw it. We know you hit him on purpose."

Blair's eyes widened as he looked from one grim face to the other. "I wasn't trying to kill him," he whined. "I just didn't want to lose the race to a damned longhunter. Surely you can understand that."

"What I understand," said Jonathan in an uncharacteristically harsh voice, "is that he could have easily been killed."

"I didn't even intend for him to get injured!"

"Did you shoot at me?" Gwaltney inquired.

"What?" Blair said incredulously. His voice, so cocky when they had first entered, had altered to an unctuous whine. Evidently he had realized the gravity of the situation. "Why would I do that?"

"You accosted me in the Greysons' garden that night, remember? You babbled on and on about your cousin. I didn't realize at the time that your cousin was William Carr."

"W-what of it?"

"Clearly you hold me responsible for what happened to your cousin."

Blair looked away for a long moment, then turned his head back and stared at Gwaltney. There was a deadly rage in his watery blue eyes. "You *are* responsible for what happened to him,

you son of a bitch. You destroyed him.”

“He destroyed himself,” Gwaltney said, but with less conviction than he had intended. “And now you’re trying to destroy me.”

Blair’s expression did not alter. “I’ve never killed anyone. That’s more than you can say, you bastard.”

Gwaltney was annoyed to find his gaze flickering away from Blair’s cold blue stare. Jonathan did not appear to notice. “No one is saying you killed anyone, Blair. We simply believe you’ve been trying to kill Gwaltney.”

“You can’t prove it. It isn’t true.”

“You’ve been spending your time getting drunk in taverns and talking about how much you hate him, Blair. Do you really expect us to believe you are innocent?”

Alexander took a long breath, then burst out, “I do hate him. But I haven’t been trying to kill him!”

“Why have you been on my plantation watching me, then?”

Blair shifted his attention back to Gwaltney with apparent confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“My wife saw you watching me. She chased you, and you rode away.”

“She’s as crazy as you are,” Blair said angrily. “I’ve never done such a thing in my life.”

Gwaltney looked across at Jonathan. In the face of the young man’s belligerent denials, it was obvious they were getting nowhere. He was more convinced now of Alexander’s guilt than he had been previously, considering the depth of Alexander’s hatred for him. He had had no way of knowing how close Alexander had been to William Carr. But given Alexander’s furiously bitter reaction, it was clear that Jonathan had been right. The two young men had obviously been every bit as close as brothers.

“Very well, Alexander,” Gwaltney said, getting to his feet with the aid of the cane. He took a few steps closer to Alexander, and Jonathan did likewise. Together they glared at Alexander, who quailed visibly. “But if there is one more attempt on my life, one more threat made against me in a tavern, I’ll see to it that you are arrested and tried for assaulting me. Do I make myself clear?”

Alexander said nothing, only shrank against the wall.

Gwaltney turned and stalked from the chamber with Jonathan at his heels. Going to the stables, Gwaltney awkwardly struggled into the saddle, and Jonathan mounted in his customary smooth fashion. As they sent their mounts into a canter, Jonathan looked over at Gwaltney, anxiety clear in his eyes.

“He really hates you, you know.”

“I know.”

“Do you really think that threat you made will discourage him from trying again?”

Gwaltney grinned coldly. “On the contrary, Jon. I’m quite certain it won’t. In fact, I’m hoping that it won’t.”

Chapter 27

Cordelia spent the better part of the next morning in her chamber again. Having to face Gwaltney's polite, distant courtesy was worse than having to face his anger. The last thing she wanted to do was encounter him.

Fortunately, Mary knocked on her door in the middle of the morning and shyly came into the chamber, drawn by the lure of parchment and ink. Grateful for the company, Cordelia once again seated the little girl at the table and encouraged her to draw. This time Mary looked more carefully at Cordelia's drawing, then tried to draw something more representative. The furrows in her brow showed how very hard she was concentrating.

At last she was finished. She sat back and proudly pushed her creation across to Cordelia. Cordelia studied it thoughtfully. It depicted a small circle perched atop a larger one, with four sticks sticking out at various angles at the bottom and a longer stick at the top of the large circle.

"That's very nice," she said, uncertain as to what it was supposed to be and unwilling to hazard a guess, lest her guess be wrong. She did not want to discourage the child.

Mary's face fell slightly. She pulled the drawing back to her side of the table, looked at it thoughtfully, and added dots all over the creature, then pushed it back for Cordelia's inspection.

"It's Django!" Cordelia exclaimed.

The little girl smiled and nodded happily. Then, to Cordelia's enormous surprise, she pulled back the drawing and carefully lettered DOG across the top.

Cordelia stared at the childish lettering in shock. The letters D and O were tipsy, and the G was tilted so far over on its back that it only bore a marginal relationship to the letter it was intended to represent, but the meaning was clear. Evidently Mary had studied Cordelia's sketch of Django so long and so carefully that she was able to reproduce the word.

She felt an odd surge of parental pride, and, without thinking, started to get to her feet, catching up the piece of parchment as she did so. She had to show the picture to Gwaltney. He would be so enormously proud of the little girl's achievement.

And then she halted, remembering all over again that Gwaltney hated her, and that he wanted her to have nothing whatsoever to do with Mary. She remembered the words he had all but snarled. *The last thing she needs is you.*

Gwaltney thought Mary would be better off without her influence. He didn't realize how much Mary needed a mother figure in her life. He didn't realize how much Cordelia needed Mary, and, if he did, he might force Mary to stop spending time with her simply to hurt her. If he were to realize they had been spending time together in the mornings, sketching, he might well put a stop to it.

She couldn't risk that.

She sat back down at the table and pasted a determined smile onto her face, trying to ignore the unhappy turn of her thoughts. She looked down at the little girl and spoke as cheerfully as she could, trying to conceal her melancholy.

"Can you draw a horse, too?"

That afternoon Mary's nurse sent her to the nursery for a nap, and Cordelia sat alone again, sketching. She knew she should go do something more constructive, but she was so wretchedly unhappy that she could hardly bring herself to get up in the mornings, let alone accomplish anything. It was the first time in her life she had ever succumbed to the quicksand

pull of depression.

She was idly sketching a picture of Mary when her door burst open. Startled, Cordelia turned in her chair to see Abraham standing there. She rose to her feet, shocked and surprised that the proper old butler had not knocked first. But the expression of distress on his face froze the reprimand she had intended to utter in her mouth.

"Abraham, what is it?" she asked, dreading the answer. A violent terror poured through her, freezing her body at the same time her mind ran wild. Gwaltney had been shot again. Gwaltney was bleeding to death. Gwaltney was dead.

Abraham swallowed convulsively several times, looking rather green beneath his dark skin, then stared at her with wide eyes. "Ye'd better come downstairs, mistress. Th' master--"

Cordelia waited to hear no more. Shaking off the paralysis of fear that had gripped her, she pushed past Abraham and ran down the stairs. The front door had been left open, and she dashed outside into the sunshine, already dreading what she might find there.

She stopped short at the sight of Gwaltney, sitting on the ground near the steps next to Django, idly patting the dog.

He was all right, she thought with sudden, dizzying relief. He hadn't been hurt. He was perfectly all right.

But the expression in his eyes shocked her. His face was utterly, completely blank, but his eyes were glittering, filled with uncontrollable, churning emotions. He looked caught halfway between fury and violent grief. She could not imagine what could make him look that way.

In those first seconds of terror her thoughts had been only for Gwaltney. Then she glanced down, following Gwaltney's gaze, and looked at Django for the first time, seeing the blood that splotched the white fur. A gaping wound had ripped open the dog's abdomen.

"My God," she breathed, looking back at Gwaltney. "What happened?"

Gwaltney lifted his head and stared at her. His eyes were filled with raging fury and pain, but she saw it was not directed at her. "The son of a bitch hurt my dog," he said softly. His voice was low but shaking with violent menace.

Cordelia stepped closer and knelt next to the injured dog, across from Gwaltney. She knew how much the dog meant to Gwaltney, and she wished passionately that there was something she could do to ease her husband's pain, but just now her main concern had to be for Django. She looked at the wound closely and saw it appeared to be a slash inflicted by a knife. It was, she thought, curious that someone could have gotten close enough to cut the dog. Django took his duties as guard dog quite seriously.

Gwaltney appeared oblivious to her presence. "Abraham," he said in an utterly calm voice, "bring my pistol."

"Gwaltney," Cordelia protested, but he barely favored her with a glance as he spoke impatiently. His voice was like ice.

"Don't be a fool, Cordelia. There's nothing else to be done."

"No," she said more forcefully, and Abraham hesitated. "I think I can help him, Gwaltney." Her hands probed the wound with the quick experience of a woman who had treated myriad injuries. The dog was clearly badly hurt, but she thought he could be saved if she could stop the bleeding. It could have been worse, she thought. An inch or two lower and the dog would have been disemboweled.

The dog whined and moved his head, nuzzling Gwaltney's hand as he sought comfort. He struggled to get up, but it was obvious his injuries were too severe. Gwaltney narrowed his eyes

as he glared at her. "I don't want him to suffer, damn it."

"I understand," she said, pressing the hem of her gown against the wound to stanch the flow of blood. "I don't want him to suffer either. But I don't think the injury is as severe as it appears." Lifting her head, she gave orders to Abraham, who hastened away to get thread and a needle. She looked back at Gwaltney, seeing his rigid face. "If we sew up the wound, I think he'll recover," she said softly.

Gwaltney sat for a few moments longer with that odd, frozen expression on his face, absently rubbing the dog's ears. His eyes, still glittering with emotion, seemed to have turned to an oddly vivid gold. As Abraham approached, Gwaltney finally lifted his eyes and stared at Cordelia.

"If he dies, Mary...."

He didn't finish the sentence, but she understood clearly enough what he meant. Mary would be distraught if her pet died. Mary had suffered enough already. "I'll do my best," she said curtly, threading the needle. "You'll need to hold his head, however, or he will most likely try to take my hand off."

"I can't blame him for that," he said with the first hint of humor he'd shown. He took the dog's muzzle firmly in his hand, and Cordelia began to stitch the gaping wound with quick, efficient movements.

Once Django's wound was sewn up and the dog lay more or less comfortably on a blanket in the parlor, Gwaltney spent an hour in the woods, scouring the grounds for clues to Django's attacker. When he found nothing, he wasted no time in riding to Blair's plantation. He didn't need proof to be certain Blair was to blame. This situation, he decided with rage, had gone on long enough. It was one thing to shoot at a man, quite another to attack an innocent animal. And what really infuriated him was that the cowardly bastard had deliberately, malevolently left Django to suffer. Blair had obviously wanted Gwaltney to find the dog, suffering and in agony.

The grotesque brutality of it made Gwaltney want to shoot Blair and leave *him* to suffer, perhaps to die a slow, excruciating death.

Of course, he had no real intention of shooting Blair. He was not exactly sure what he intended to do to the young man, however. It would be easy enough to turn him over to the magistrate, but that was a decidedly unsatisfying notion.

At this juncture, slamming his fists repeatedly into Blair's pimpled face sounded much more appealing.

He rode Mist hard the two miles to Blair's plantation, ignoring the persistent ache in his thigh. And ignoring the persistent aching lump he felt in his throat every time he thought of Django's bloodied body sprawled on the grass.

At Blair's house he pulled up Mist and tied him to the gate, deciding against taking the stallion to the stables. He had no intention of delivering his horse into the hands of Blair's slaves, given the unpleasant fate Django had suffered. At this point he wouldn't put it past Blair to order the stallion hamstrung. He stalked up to the house and impatiently slammed the heavy brass doorknocker against the oaken door several times.

The door swung open rather quickly in response to his loud, angry banging, and a liveried slave regarded him. "Yes?"

Gwaltney brushed past him into the hall, not bothering to wait to be invited inside. He strongly suspected he wouldn't have been invited in anyway. "I'm here to speak to your master,"

he said curtly. "Bring him to me. Now."

He glanced at the parlor, through the open door of the study, then up at the landing. Blair was nowhere to be seen. Behind him he heard a faint scraping sound, and with his hunter's instincts and the sharp hearing that had been honed in western Virginia, he was instantly aware that it was not the slave's footsteps he heard. He began to spin around. But he was too late.

An agonizing pain exploded in his head, and he fell to the ground without a sound.

Chapter 28

Gwaltney awakened slowly, aware first of an odd, strong smell that aroused an unreasonable panic in him. He fought back the inexplicable rush of fear, forcing himself to calmly analyze the situation in which he found himself. Slowly he became aware that his hands and feet had been tied tightly with coarse ropes, and that his head still ached. It was not difficult to deduce that someone had struck the back of his skull with a hard object.

Despite the throbbing pain in his head, he forced his eyelids open, expecting to find himself in the woods somewhere, left to starve. That seemed rather like Blair's style. Instead, as his eyes flickered open, he saw that he was in a very small structure, not more than a few feet wide. It was, he realized, a smokehouse, used for curing hams. The oppressive, overpowering reek of smoke filled the place.

He blinked as he looked up, his eyes painfully assaulted by a narrow rectangle of brilliant sunlight in front of him. Slitting his eyes against the light, he squinted and saw that Blair himself stood in front of him, smiling maliciously as he looked down on his captive.

The sight of that irritating smile made Gwaltney remember his desire to slam his fists into the young man's face. But now that goal no longer seemed adequate. "Blair," he growled under his breath. "I'm going to kill you."

Alexander grinned triumphantly at him, looking remarkably cocky now that he had Gwaltney tied and helpless. The awkward, timid boy seemed to have been replaced by a swaggering, self-confident man. "I think we both know that's an empty threat, Harris."

Gwaltney looked at him coolly, wondering exactly what the younger man intended. If he meant to shoot Gwaltney, it would certainly be a great deal more sensible to do it out in the woods or near the river where his body could be disposed of more easily. He couldn't imagine why Blair had bundled him into a smokehouse, of all places.

"I don't think so," he said at last. "I mean it sincerely."

Unconcerned by the savage tone in Gwaltney's voice, Blair stared down at him a moment longer, the odd, triumphant gleam still lighting his eyes. "I understand you don't like to be indoors, Harris."

Abruptly, Gwaltney understood why he was here, and he flinched inwardly. Good God, how had Blair found *that* out? As far as he knew, the only people who knew his secret were Jonathan Powell and Cordelia. He knew Jonathan wouldn't have betrayed his secret. He trusted Jonathan with his life.

He realized with misery that at least four or five slaves now knew his secret as well. Just like anyone else, slaves indulged in gossip among themselves. No doubt Blair had heard the story of Gwaltney's fear of the indoors from his slaves. He cringed at the thought that his cowardice was a subject for common gossip.

He opened his eyes and looked directly at Blair, hoping to bluff his way out of the situation. "I lived outdoors for ten years," he said in what he hoped was a calm voice. "I've never really grown accustomed to being inside again."

Blair smiled coldly, clearly not fooled by his placid tone. "It's more than that, from what I hear. You absolutely can't bear to be indoors. You don't care for smoke, either. Isn't that right?"

Gwaltney refused to answer, but he felt a tremor of trepidation run down his spine.

Blair shrugged. "Well, we'll see, won't we?"

The words jumped from Gwaltney's mouth before he could stop himself. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to leave you here," Blair said. "Shut up in the dark."

Gwaltney swallowed noisily. He would rather have been shot through the heart than confined in this place for more than a few minutes, and it was obvious that Blair knew it. The nearness of the walls and the appalling reek of smoke were already making his heart pound with dread. Behind his back, he tested the strength of his bonds, straining to pull his wrists apart. But it was impossible. The ropes were knotted too tightly.

"Of course," Blair added, his malicious smile widening fractionally, "if you beg for mercy, I just might let you go." He waited expectantly.

Gwaltney ground his teeth together, fighting back his fear, the shuddering panic that had gripped him at the realization of precisely what Blair intended to do to him. He knew perfectly well Blair had absolutely no intention of letting him go. Blair would like nothing better than to see him beg and grovel for mercy and then shut him up in the dark despite his pleas.

Intellectually, he knew these things perfectly well. But it took every iota of his self-control to restrain himself from begging for mercy anyway.

Somehow he managed to fight back the waves of terror that buffeted him and stared at Blair coldly, doing his utmost to keep his panic from showing on his face.

"Go to hell."

His words seem to hang in the air. Blair looked at him a moment longer, then shrugged and stepped forward, tying a cloth over Gwaltney's mouth to muffle any shouts for help. Then he turned and walked from the small building, slamming the door behind him and leaving Gwaltney in utter darkness.

Or, he realized, not quite darkness. There were small slots for ventilation just beneath the roof of the structure. As his eyes adjusted, he found there was just enough light to see the walls, to see how suffocatingly close they were. He would have rather been in total darkness, he thought, screwing his eyes tightly shut against the sight of the walls looming above him in the gloom.

Unfortunately, that did not improve things either, for with his eyes shut the powerful, smoky smell of the place was overwhelming, filling his nostrils, his throat, his lungs. And the smell brought back memories, terrifying memories that he did not want to remember with such vivid clarity. Thirteen-year-old memories that were as clear in his mind as if they had happened yesterday.

The memory of being trapped in a parlor, feeling the searing heat on his face, scorching

his skin and singeing his hair. The memory of feeling his lungs labor frantically as the air was consumed by the fire, leaving nothing for him to breathe except smoke.

And perhaps worst of all, the memory of his father's cold, emotionless voice, a week after the fire. *You're nothing but a craven coward, Gwaltney. I won't tolerate a coward in my household, damn it.*

And his father had been right. He was a coward, beyond any shadow of a doubt.

Because if Blair had stepped back into the smokehouse at that moment, Gwaltney would have offered him anything--his plantation, all his hard-earned wealth, anything at all--to be released from the confines of the building.

But Blair did not return.

He struggled to think calmly and logically, to try to think of a way out of this trap, but it was useless. He was far beyond rational thought. In his mind he was trapped in a burning house, thirteen years before, a house that was going to collapse on him and bury him alive at any moment. In his mind he was utterly unable to breathe, and all the air was gone, leaving nothing but thick, choking smoke.

He fought wildly against his bonds, but the rough hemp ropes only cut more deeply into his wrists and ankles. As he struggled he fell to his side and lay curled on the dirt floor, unable even to muster the strength to sit back up. He was vaguely aware that he was whimpering deep in his throat, like a trapped and wounded animal, but he did not care. Any remnants of dignity he had ever possessed were gone.

Nothing but a craven coward.

He had no idea how long he lay there cringing, shuddering uncontrollably with fear, the noises coming from his throat rising to muffled shrieks. Lost in the depths of his own terror, he was scarcely aware when the door opened, letting sunlight stream into the structure. A figure stepped in, cutting his bonds, dragging him forcibly to his feet, and hastily urging him from the smokehouse. Stumbling out into the sunshine, he collapsed to the ground, burying his face in his hands and huddling in a pathetic heap in the dirt.

He was vaguely aware that it was Cordelia who had released him, that she was stroking his hair and speaking to him in a soft and reassuring voice, but he could not understand what she was saying. The pattern of her words did not seem to make any sense. He realized vaguely that he had gone totally insane.

But it did not seem to matter very much. The brilliant sunshine was fading, and a welcoming darkness enveloped him, a dark fog that drove the memories and the terror from his mind. He buried his face in the dirt and let the darkness take away the fear.

When he awakened again, there was an annoying stinging sensation in his cheeks. He opened his eyes and saw Cordelia kneeling next to him, slapping his face sharply. He rolled away abruptly, sat up, and stared at her, rubbing at his reddened cheeks with annoyance.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Cordelia fixed him with an annoyed glare. "Waking you up. We need to get away from here. But I might ask the same of you. What did you think *you* were doing, facing Blair by yourself?"

The mention of Blair made Gwaltney look around alertly, expecting to see the young man lurking about. But the yard was deserted.

"I waited until he had left," Cordelia explained shortly. "I was sorry to leave you in the

smokehouse so long, but it couldn't be helped."

"When did he leave?"

"After you..." Cordelia glanced at his taut features. "After it became obvious that you were ... in distress."

Blair had waited outside, listening, until he had succumbed to terror, Gwaltney realized with a violent stab of self-disgust. He had wanted to be certain his captive was as frightened as he had expected and must have been amused to realize that Gwaltney was as terrified as a small child in the dark. He remembered the muffled sounds of anguished fear he had made and realized that Blair had heard it all.

And so, he supposed, had Cordelia.

Damned coward, he thought with savage self-loathing.

"What are you doing here?" he asked abruptly.

"I waited until you had saddled Mist, then I followed you here," Cordelia said. "I knew after you found Django that you would come here."

And so did Blair, thought Gwaltney. That was why the young man had mutilated his dog, to render him so blindly furious he would come to face the dog's would-be killer without any thought of common sense or prudence. And like the fool that he was, he had come without so much as telling anyone where he had went.

If Cordelia had not followed him, he was bleakly certain he would have been driven totally mad by his ordeal.

She stood up. Still kneeling on the ground, he took both her hands in a humble gesture and looked up at her, intending to thank her from the bottom of his heart for saving him from his own private hell. The words died in his throat when he looked into her face.

There was pity in her gaze.

He scowled. Once again, she had seen the depths of his cowardice, had heard him whimpering like an animal, had seen him cowering with fear. God, what must she think of him?

Embarrassment overwhelmed him. The absolute last thing he wanted was her pity.

He dropped her hands as if they had scalded him, stood up, and looked down at her with hard eyes. "We had best go before Blair returns," he said shortly.

"Gwaltney," she murmured. She reached out a hand and touched his forearm with unaccustomed gentleness, but he yanked his arm away.

The reproach in her eyes slashed at his heart. He owed her more than his life, he knew. He owed her his sanity. But he didn't dare let her touch him, for his self-control was hanging by a thread. He wanted, desperately, to take her in his arms and hold onto her, to cling to her for support, to drive away the dark memories of terror by pressing his body against hers.

But given what had passed between them last time, she was unlikely to let him touch her in any intimate fashion. And if she did, it would be because she felt sorry for what he had suffered. It would be because she pitied him.

He would be damned if he would accept her pity.

Chapter 29

Gwaltney was relieved to find Mist still waiting at the gate, unharmed. At the least he had thought Alexander might take the horse and run him into the ground. At the most--

He remembered Django's gaping wound and swallowed hard. He had been an idiot to bring Mist here.

And yet, he mused as he swung up onto the stallion, it was odd that Blair *hadn't* hurt Mist in any way. The man was obviously vicious and heartless, and Gwaltney suspected he hated Mist as much as he hated Gwaltney himself because they had both bested him in a race. The fact that Mist was still standing here, calmly awaiting his master, was a piece of the puzzle that did not quite fit.

Cordelia, more sensible than he, had tied her mare in the forest, out of sight of the house. He rode up the path until he caught up with her and glanced over at Cordelia's chestnut mare, seeing that the animal's red hide was covered with splashes of drying sweat, as though the horse had been pressed to her limits. That was no surprise, for he had ridden Mist hard, and no other horse in his stable could be expected to match such a pace.

He said nothing to Cordelia, merely turned Mist toward home, keeping the stallion to a walk, both out of concern for the horses and out of deference to his aching head. The pain in his thigh was almost negligible when compared to the stabbing pain that radiated outward from the lump on the back of his skull.

He supposed bleakly he'd best have the magistrate haul Alexander Blair into the gaol in Williamsburg before the young man managed to kill him.

It was dusk when they arrived at River's Edge, and Gwaltney wanted nothing more than to lie down. His head hurt, his thigh ached, and he was still cringing inside from the knowledge that he had been exposed to the world as a coward. He swung off the stallion at the stable and stumbled, almost falling to his knees.

Cordelia was instantly at his side, holding his arm. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he muttered irritably, yanking his arm from her grasp. He might be a coward, but he was damned if he'd be a weakling as well. She looked up at him with hurt etched unmistakably onto her features but said nothing.

After giving the slaves curt instructions to walk the horses and curry them thoroughly, Gwaltney strode determinedly toward the house, Cordelia trailing in his wake. He felt that his knees might give way at any moment, but he'd rather die than let Cordelia see his weakness. She had seen enough of his weaknesses today. He was going to make it to the house. He was going to check on Django's condition and give the loyal beast a pat or two.

And then he was going to go to his bedchamber and collapse.

As he entered the house, however, he was startled to hear a high-pitched wailing from upstairs. Cordelia bolted for the stairs, and he caught her arm and spun her around, giving her a savage glare.

"Leave her alone. I'll go."

"This happened once before when you were injured," Cordelia said hastily. "I believe it was a bad dream."

"Leave her alone," Gwaltney repeated, hobbling up the stairs as rapidly as he was able and resolutely ignoring the throbbing pain in his thigh. Behind him he heard Cordelia following

closely. He did not bother to tell her again. He simply dashed into Mary's chamber and slammed the door in Cordelia's face.

Cordelia stood outside in the darkening hallway, hearing Gwaltney's voice, muffled by the heavy door, and Mary's sniffles, slowly dying away to silence. She stared at the door, angry and hurt. She should have been there for Mary too, helping to reassure the little girl. Damn Gwaltney to hell. Couldn't he understand Mary depended on her too?

She remembered his dark, ominous silence on the ride home and sighed. She understood Gwaltney's problem readily enough. Once again his weakness had been exposed, and once again he was ashamed to face her. He hadn't even thanked her for saving him from the smokehouse.

And, she thought, after what she had said last time, she could hardly blame him. She had agreed he was a coward solely to humiliate him.

Regardless of what he had done to hurt her, she wished she had never said such a thing.

She became aware of stealthy movement down the hall. A slave emerged from Gwaltney's bedchamber and started toward her, halted, then continued onward. Cordelia looked at the woman as she passed. It was, she saw, a young and pretty black woman, the same slave who had been upstairs last time when Mary had had her nightmare.

The woman passed her, her head bent, but as she walked past her eyes flickered up for a brief second and met Cordelia's. Cordelia stared at her in surprise, seeing that the woman had vivid blue eyes. It was, of course, not unheard of for slaves to have blue or green eyes, since unfortunately they were occasionally used for purposes other than mere labor, but her eyes were stunning. Cordelia turned to thoughtfully stare at the slave as she made her way down the staircase.

It occurred to her that the slave might have an idea what was provoking the child's bad dreams. Perhaps she had heard Mary crying out in her sleep. Perhaps she had heard whatever words the child might have uttered. Cordelia was not yet thoroughly acquainted with all the house slaves, but she only recalled seeing the woman once, and she certainly couldn't remember the woman's name. She decided she would ask Abraham in the morning.

In the meantime, she was damned if she was going to let Gwaltney intimidate her. She took a deep breath, then turned the doorknob and stepped inside.

As she entered, Mary looked up with obvious trepidation. The fear in her eyes, however, melted quickly away, and she gave Cordelia a tentative, watery smile.

"Good evening, Mary," Cordelia said, avoiding Gwaltney's pointed glare. "Are you all right?"

Mary made an uncertain motion with her hands. Cordelia sat next to her on the bed, and Mary immediately left the refuge of Gwaltney's embrace and crawled into her lap. Cordelia put her arms around the child, noticing with mild amusement that Gwaltney looked infuriated.

"I had to tell her about Django," Gwaltney said harshly. "She was indicating she wanted him."

Cordelia sighed as she cuddled the little girl. How unfortunate for the child, awaking from a nightmare to find that her dog had been hurt. But she supposed Mary had to find out sometime. At least Gwaltney had not had to tell her the dog had died. With luck, Django would survive.

"I'm so sorry, Mary," she said gently. "But I think Django is going to be all right. Perhaps you can go see him later."

Mary buried her face in Cordelia's shoulder and sobbed noiselessly. It was odd, Cordelia mused, how even the injury of her beloved pet did not compel her to make noise. Only her nightmares seemed able to do that.

"Did you have a bad dream, Mary?"

Mary's tear-streaked face looked up at her, and she shook her head emphatically.

"No? Then what happened?"

Mary's lower lip began to tremble.

"Never mind," Cordelia soothed, easing the child's head back to her shoulder. Over Mary's head she met Gwaltney's gaze. He still looked irritated, as though he was angered by the notion that Mary might seek comfort from someone other than himself, yet there was another emotion in his gaze as well, one she couldn't identify. Peculiarly flustered, she dropped her eyes and stared at the floor instead.

Gwaltney stood up irritably and began to prowling the chamber, as if looking for clues to Mary's distress. Cordelia watched him covertly from beneath her lashes, noticing that although his limp was more pronounced than usual, the bleak exhaustion and defeat that had etched his features seemed to have disappeared. In his concern for his niece, it seemed, he had utterly forgotten his own difficulties. He paused next to a stack of parchment atop Mary's dressing table and began to flip through them. In a moment he turned back and stared at her accusingly.

"Did you draw these, madam?"

Cordelia met his eyes and said nothing in response to the obviously rhetorical question. Plainly Gwaltney was surprised and irritated to find out that she and Mary had been spending time together for some weeks. Mary, however, did not appear to notice his annoyance. She wriggled out of Cordelia's arms, jumped off the bed, and trotted across the chamber, her tears forgotten. She carefully took a sketch that depicted Mist from Gwaltney's hands, pointed to the picture of the stallion, then pointed to the word HORSE.

"Yes, it's a horse. I see that," Gwaltney agreed. He shuffled through the stack a little further and found the portrait of himself. He studied the picture for a long moment, then lifted his eyes and stared at Cordelia rather oddly. She flushed and looked away from his gaze, feeling certain the affection she felt for him had been obvious in every brushstroke, and that she had made herself more vulnerable than she had intended.

Mary caught up another, smaller pile of parchment and handed Gwaltney a sketch. Cordelia could see that it was the crude drawing of Django. Gwaltney stared at it for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was oddly hoarse. "Mary," he said, very softly, "did you write this?"

Mary nodded.

Gwaltney stared at the picture, the childish lettering, for a long moment, then looked across the chamber at Cordelia. "Mary," he said, in that same gentle voice, "I need to speak with Cordelia. We'll be right back, I promise."

He put down the picture and limped across the chamber. Cordelia followed him. To her surprise, he led the way to a chamber she had never seen before--his bedchamber. Immediately she saw why he had little difficulty remaining in this room. It had been built over the parlor and was equally large, with eight tall windows letting in abundant light. The walls were paneled from floor to ceiling with red oak, a rare and expensive wood that had been left unpainted, as was customary with such an excellent quality wood. The hangings on the bed and the upholstery on the chairs were white and blue, making her think of puffy white clouds in the sky on a summer

day.

Overall, it was an extremely masculine room, but she suspected that was probably not the reason he had designed it that way. He had designed the chamber to remind him of the outdoors as much as possible.

Gwaltney closed the door behind her and looked down at her. He said nothing, only stared at her with a strangely thoughtful look, and Cordelia felt compelled to speak.

"I suppose you're angry that I've been encouraging her to draw and write," she said defensively. "But I was lonely, and I wanted to make friends with her. I know you told me to stay away from her, but I couldn't. I just couldn't."

Gwaltney stared at her a moment longer, then spoke at last. "I'm not angry," he said gently. "In fact, I'm grateful."

Cordelia's head jerked up in surprise. That was the last thing she had expected him to say. "I beg your pardon?"

"She can communicate," Gwaltney said. His voice was low and wondering, like a man who has been present at a miracle. "She can actually communicate."

"Of course she can communicate. Did you doubt it?"

"I was beginning to, yes."

"She's quite capable of talking, I'm certain of that," Cordelia said. "But the more I get to know her the more certain I am that she is afraid to."

Gwaltney lifted his dark brows. "Afraid? Afraid of what?"

"I have no idea. But when I try to convince her to speak, she looks--frightened, somehow."

Gwaltney's expression did not alter, but she somehow got the impression that he was eager to change the subject. Not for the first time, she wondered if he knew more about Mary's inability to speak than he cared to disclose. "You've achieved more than I have with her," he said gently. "It never occurred to me she could learn to write before she could speak. I want to thank you."

He turned as if to leave, but Cordelia reached out and caught his arm, knowing she was risking another rejection but unable to prevent herself from touching him. "Just a minute, Gwaltney. I want to know what you intend to do about Blair."

His features went rigid, and all the warmth and pride that had animated his face flowed out of it, leaving it as hard as marble. "Why do you care?"

"He hurt Django," she said fiercely. "He hurt you. I want to see him brought to justice." She paused for a long moment, then added softly, "How could I not care?"

Gwaltney looked down at her fingers, curled protectively around the taut muscles of his forearm, and some of the cold fury drained out of his features. "I don't know," he said slowly. "At first I intended to have the magistrate on him. But now I am not certain."

"What? Gwaltney, he's been trying to kill you. You can't let him continue this way."

"Perhaps I deserve to die."

He spoke so softly that she was not certain she had heard him correctly. She stared at him for a long moment, hearing the anguished vulnerability in his voice, certain there was more to this situation than she knew. "Gwaltney," she ventured at last, "why does Blair hate you so much?"

"You know the answer to that."

"No, I don't. You won this plantation from his cousin gambling at dice, I know that. But

why does Blair hate you for it? Simply because you bested his cousin? That doesn't seem to make any sense. Young men have lost plantations through foolish gambles before. Is it because you were a longhunter?"

Gwaltney turned his back on her and walked to the window, looking out at the lawn, and beyond it the vast sweep of virgin forest that stretched seemingly forever. The trees looked black and shadowed in the twilight. "I won this quarter from William Carr," he said softly. "He was in the western part of the colony, surveying some land he owned out there. I wanted a plantation, land, *prestige*, more than anything. So I plied the young man with drink, and then I took advantage of his inebriated state. I encouraged him to gamble recklessly, and I won everything he owned. I won everything, everything in the world he had to live for. And I was so bloody pleased with myself, so self-satisfied and smug, because I thought I had gotten everything I ever wanted."

He turned, and his eyes met her gaze squarely. "And the next morning William Carr was found dangling from a tree. He killed himself."

Cordelia heard her own sharp intake of breath. The agony in his eyes slashed at her heart, and instinctively, she offered the only comfort she could. "It wasn't your fault, Gwaltney."

Gwaltney stared at her, his eyes cold and golden. "Oh, of course not," he agreed with harsh sarcasm. "I got the young man so drunk he could scarcely see the dice, convinced him to gamble his entire plantation, his entire livelihood, and then stripped him of everything without a second thought. But it wasn't my fault." He laughed mirthlessly. "I tried to convince myself of that, Cordelia. I really did. But you know as well as I do that it *was* my fault. I killed that young man as surely as if I had tied the rope around his neck myself."

His bitter amusement faded, and he took a deep, shuddering breath. "And the worst part of it is that I did it all without conscience. I was completely heartless. I felt no remorse, nothing but triumph, until the next day, when his body was found. And then--*then* I felt remorse. But by then it was too damned late."

The raw pain in his eyes was so intense that she found herself grasping at straws, seeking something, anything, that would comfort him. "You did it for a reason," she whispered. "You did it for Mary."

Gwaltney gave a short, caustic bark of laughter. "Don't be an idiot, Cordelia. This occurred nearly three years ago. I'd been in western Virginia for ten long years. I had never met Mary, I didn't know Mary, and she wasn't my responsibility. Don't you understand? Mary had nothing to do with it. I did it for *myself*. I ruined William Carr without a second thought because I was so damned desperate for respectability that a little thing like the total destruction of another human being meant nothing to me. I did it because I was a self-centered, greedy, avaricious son of a bitch."

He paused. "I don't blame Alexander Blair for hating me. I hate myself." His mouth twisted wryly in a travesty of a smile. "Hell, everyone in Virginia despises me, and it's right that they should."

"I don't hate you," Cordelia whispered. She took a step toward him and looked up into his beautiful eyes, eyes grown cold with self-loathing. She could not bear to see him punishing himself this way, and the words rose from her heart without conscious volition. "I love you, Gwaltney."

He said nothing, only stared down at her for an endless moment, shock and another, indefinable emotion battling in his gaze. At last he spoke.

"You're a bigger fool than I realized, Cordelia."

He brushed past her and strode from the chamber.

Chapter 30

She loved him.

Gwaltney sat in the garden, staring bleakly at the stars. He was alone, which, he supposed, was only fitting. He didn't deserve company. He didn't deserve anyone.

He surely didn't deserve to be loved.

He had come out here by himself, without his bodyguard of slaves, without anyone. If Alexander Blair shot him, he thought he would be grateful. Telling Cordelia about the events of three years ago had brought the past back to him with agonizing force. And being trapped in the smokehouse this afternoon had brought back a more distant and even more painful past.

You're nothing but a craven coward.

He was such a coward that he had destroyed a man ruthlessly, without thought or mercy.

He could not imagine how Cordelia could fancy herself in love with him.

Could she really be in love with him? Or was she playing some sort of game again?

He remembered her assertion that Blair should be taken before the magistrate, her fierce protectiveness reminding him of a cougar protecting her cubs. He remembered the way she had tried to comfort him, the feeble but loyal excuses for his behavior she had offered, and he felt warmed despite himself.

He desperately wanted to believe she really loved him.

If only he deserved it.

He sat for a long time, trying to reconcile Cordelia's astounding statement with what he knew of the woman. When they had made love, he had walked away from her convinced that she was a vicious, cold bitch. But he remembered the expression on her face when she made her declaration of love, the way she had looked at him with her heart shining from her eyes, and he simply could not believe she was the cold, unfeeling woman he had thought.

He wondered if he was deluding himself. If so, it would not be for the first time where Cordelia was concerned.

Abruptly he became conscious that he was not alone after all. He could not have said how he knew this, but he was aware that someone was nearby, lurking in the boxwoods. A prickle of awareness ran along his skin, making him instantly alert. The half-suicidal impulse that had driven him to the garden alone fled instantly, buried beneath his powerful instincts for survival.

And buried beneath his savage desire for revenge.

The person in the boxwoods, after all, had to be Alexander Blair. He waited, still and silent, until a cloud covered the bright sphere of the moon, then came slowly to a crouching position, creeping toward the manicured bushes. He was damned if he would sit here and let Blair shoot him, maim him, the way the bastard had maimed his dog. The way Blair had attempted to maim him two weeks before.

He moved slowly, hoping his motion was concealed by the darkness and hoping Blair did

not fire before he got there. He was bloody tired of being stalked like an animal.

It was time for this to end.

He saw a shadow, half hidden in the bushes, and the gleam of glittering metal in the shadow's hand. A pistol, its stock worked heavily with silver. A gentleman's pistol.

With a sudden lunge, he caught the shadowy figure by the throat and pressed the person into the dirt, catching his assailant's wrist and twisting it until the pistol fell impotently to the ground.

There was a shrill half-shriek of protest, a high sound that was cut off almost instantly by the pressure of his fingers.

Gwaltney paused in surprise and let his fingers, which had tightened in a savage grip, release the pressure slightly. "Cordelia?" he said incredulously. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Cordelia stared up at him with ill-concealed fury. Her lips had tightened in a way that he found oddly reminiscent of her spinsterish pose. "Watching out for you, as always."

His mouth twisted wryly, and he released her arm. "Don't you think I can take care of myself, Cordelia?"

Cordelia sat up and looked at him with annoyance. "Obviously not," she said curtly, "or you wouldn't be sitting out here in the dark, waiting for someone to kill you."

"You exaggerate, my dear."

"I do not!" she said shrilly. "Don't you realize I could have shot you? Don't you realize anyone could have gotten as close as I did?"

The frightened anguish in her eyes began to register on him. He felt an unaccustomed lump gathering in his throat. "You do care," he said softly.

"Of course I care, you idiot!" she exploded. "Didn't I say so earlier?"

The urge to catch her in his arms and press her against his chest became nearly overwhelming. *She loved him.* And yet, a mere week ago.... Confused by the conflicting emotions that battled within him, Gwaltney stood up and stalked away from her. "I didn't believe you," he said hoarsely.

"Why not?"

He turned abruptly, finding she had followed him, that she was standing next to him, much too close. He resisted the urge to step away. "Why should I have believed you?" he demanded. "Last week I tried to seduce you, and you called me a...." Bitterness twisted in his chest, choking him, forcing him to stumble to a halt.

"A filthy longhunter," she finished softly.

"And before that you threatened to tie me to the settee. You know what that would have done to me, Cordelia."

Cordelia glanced away from him. "I intended to apologize about that," she said honestly. "But you called me a bitch, and I lost my temper."

"The fact that you said it in the first place...."

"I said it in the first place," Cordelia snapped, "in order to retaliate for what I overheard you saying to Jonathan Powell in the Greysons' garden."

Gwaltney stared at her blankly.

"When you told Jonathan that you were going to make love to me so that Elizabeth would think all was well between us. Even though you didn't care for me." She took a deep breath, then spat out in an unpleasant mimicry of his voice, "'Bedding Cordelia is not going to be the chore I

originally imagined.’ And then, even knowing how you felt, I....” She took a shuddering intake of breath. “I was foolish enough, *weak* enough, to let you seduce me anyway. I must have been insane.”

“I had no idea you’d overheard that,” Gwaltney said softly.

“Obviously not,” she said stiffly.

Gwaltney closed his eyes for a long moment, overcome with remorse. She had overheard those unpleasant, unflattering, *ugly* things he had said. Small wonder she had been angry. Small wonder she had retaliated with the ugliest things she could think of. First she had threatened to tie him to the settee, and then she had called him names. But her words, he thought grimly, had not been any more unpleasant than his own.

He had humiliated her, albeit without the slightest intention of doing so. He could scarcely blame her for trying to humiliate him in return.

He felt as though an enormous weight had been lifted from his chest, freeing him to breathe for the first time in many days. She didn’t hate him. She had simply been angry and humiliated, and being Cordelia, she had retaliated.

“I’m so sorry,” he said softly.

Cordelia cocked her head and stared at him in surprise. “I think I should be the one to apologize, Gwaltney.”

“No,” he said firmly. “It was entirely my fault. I’m so damned sorry you overheard that conversation.” Almost shyly, he reached out and took her hand, looking into her eyes with humility and remorse. “Will you forgive me, Cordelia?”

Rather to his surprise, she did not yank her hand away. Her fingers pressed, warm and soft, against his palm, conveying without words that she accepted his apology. “What I said was worse,” she said gently. “Threatening to tie you to the settee was perfectly dreadful of me.”

Gwaltney dropped his eyes and tried to pull his hand away. “If I weren’t such a coward....”

She did not release his hand. “You are not a coward,” she said sharply. “On the contrary, you are one of the bravest men I have ever known.”

He looked up quickly, expecting to see sarcasm or at least pity on her features. But her eyes shone with sincerity and honesty. He felt some of his self-doubts and his insecurities melt away. “Thank you,” he whispered humbly.

She paused for a long moment, staring consideringly at him. At last, curiosity apparently overriding her reticence, she said hesitantly, “Gwaltney ... perhaps this is none of my business, but....”

“But why am I afraid of the indoors?”

She nodded.

Gwaltney sighed. He hated discussing the subject, for it reminded him too clearly of his vulnerability, his weakness, but he could hardly blame her for her curiosity. He blurted out the simplest explanation he could. “I was trapped in a fire when I was fifteen.”

Cordelia looked at him with sympathy, and, he saw with wonder, dawning respect. “That must have been terrifying.”

“It was. It was like being trapped in hell. I would have been killed but for Gladys.”

“Your sister?”

“Yes. She came back for me and got me out. But I’ve never been able to forget....” Aware that his voice was rising, he forced a smile, struggling to sound more nonchalant. “That’s why I

panicked so quickly when Blair shut me into the smokehouse. It wasn't just the close quarters, although God knows that was bad enough. It was the smell of smoke. It was *horrible*."

He felt her fingers squeeze his own with sympathetic understanding and permitted himself to clutch her hand more tightly. He had never experienced sympathy before. Jonathan Powell, embarrassed by his friend's weakness, ignored the problem as much as possible, and his father had scorned him for it. Sympathy was something of a novelty to him.

"So," Cordelia said slowly, "it seems Blair somehow knew that the smell of smoke would affect you, as well as being confined indoors."

Gwaltney glanced up quickly. That idea had not occurred to him, and he recognized with a shock that it had to be true. Abruptly he recalled Blair's mocking words. *You absolutely can't bear to be indoors. You don't care for smoke, either. Isn't that right?*

But he instantly dissembled, recognizing that the idea led to an unbearable conclusion. "I didn't say that," he said hastily. "It must have been a coincidence."

"Are you certain?"

"But no one knows about the fire. The slaves don't know. You didn't know until tonight."

"Did Jonathan Powell know?"

Gwaltney felt his hand tighten on hers, clinging to her for support like a child. "It wasn't Jonathan, Cordelia. It couldn't have been."

Cordelia lifted her head and met his anguished gaze. "Did he know about the fire, Gwaltney?"

"Yes," Gwaltney admitted raggedly. "But it couldn't be Jonathan, Cordelia. He is the one who suggested Blair was after me. He came to Blair's plantation with me. He even threatened Blair. If he and Blair were working together, why would he have done that?"

"To throw you off the trail, perhaps," Cordelia said thoughtfully. "Isn't it possible he and Blair set up that scene to confuse you?"

Gwaltney scowled at the ground. "I don't see why they would do that. If Jonathan wanted to kill me, it would be easy enough for him to do so. But there is no reason in the world for him to do so, none at all."

"Are you absolutely certain? Was there ever any sort of argument between the two of you? Is there anything in your possession that he wants?"

Gwaltney glanced up quickly.

"What is it?" Cordelia asked gently.

"I have something Jonathan loves," Gwaltney said softly. "Something he loves more than anything else."

"What is it?" Cordelia inquired curiously.

"I can't tell you that."

"Is it something he would kill to acquire?"

"I wouldn't have thought so. But...."

"But now you're not certain."

Silently, Gwaltney nodded. *No one else had known. It had to be Jonathan*, he thought, feeling the thought twisting in his stomach like poison. He and Jonathan had been closer than brothers for over twenty years. It was impossible. It simply couldn't be.

But he could see no other solution to the puzzle.

"Tomorrow," he said at last, "I'm going to pay another call on Alexander Blair. And this

time ... I'm going to find out the truth."

Chapter 31

"I'm sorry, mistress."

Cordelia stared at Abraham with puzzlement. "I don't understand. I've seen her twice."

Abraham shook his head. "I've never seen a woman like that, mistress."

Cordelia scowled with growing annoyance. A slave with blue eyes should be easy enough to find. There were a limited number of house slaves anyway, and she had thought she was familiar with all of them. But Abraham surely knew them all.

"Perhaps she was visitin' from another plantation," Abraham suggested.

Cordelia frowned, realizing that was a possibility. When their work was done, the slaves were permitted to visit the neighboring plantations. But their visits should have been confined to slave quarters. No slave from another plantation had any business being inside the main house.

She opened her mouth to say more but was distracted by the sight of Gwaltney coming down the stairs. She noticed that his limp was almost gone. Evidently he had gotten enough rest, and his sore muscles were easing. She turned her back on Abraham, forgetting the problem of the slave for now, and marched across the entrance hall to meet Gwaltney at the foot of the stairs. "I'm coming with you."

Gwaltney looked at her with annoyance. "Don't be ridiculous, Cordelia. It could be dangerous."

For the first time she noticed the pistol in his hand. "Less dangerous," she said curtly, "than if you go by yourself. Have you forgotten what Blair did to you yesterday?"

Gwaltney hesitated. He had definitely *not* forgotten. He was painfully aware that he could not bear being locked away again. But he was not certain that Cordelia's presence would deter Blair.

"How do you think it would help if you came?" he inquired at last.

Cordelia gave him a sudden, surprising smile. "Blair is terrified of me. Have you forgotten?"

Involuntarily, Gwaltney grinned in return, remembering the way the young man had fallen over his own feet retreating from Cordelia when she called him a scarecrow. It was true, he had to admit. Blair was more terrified of Cordelia's tongue than of Gwaltney's threats, or he wouldn't have dared to lock Gwaltney away yesterday. He had heard rumors that the young man had been verbally lashed by his parents until the day of their deaths, and supposed it wasn't too surprising that verbal abuse frightened the young man more than threats of physical force. He remembered his own father's scorn, his pointed insults, all too clearly.

"Very well," he said at last, hoping he wasn't risking Cordelia's neck by permitting her to come along. He was reasonably certain that if he forbade her to come, she would follow at a distance anyway. He preferred to have her where he could keep an eye on her and, hopefully, prevent her from behaving recklessly. "You may come." He thought with sudden bitterness that

ordinarily he would have asked Jonathan Powell, his best friend, to come with him.

But until he confronted Blair and found the source of the young man's information, he did not dare trust Jonathan.

He pushed the unpleasant thoughts from him, focusing on the task at hand. "Wait here," he said, walking across the hall to his study. He returned a moment later with another pistol, which he handed to Cordelia. She clutched the polished walnut stock awkwardly, and he looked at her suspiciously.

"Have you ever fired a gun, Cordelia?"

Embarrassed, Cordelia shook her head.

Gwaltney looked at her with amusement mingled with respect. "And yet, last night, you were intent upon defending me with a pistol."

"It can't be that complicated," Cordelia said defensively. "One aims the pistol, cocks it, and pulls the trigger."

Gwaltney broke out in laughter and carefully removed the pistol from her fingers. "Never mind," he said, grinning down at her. "You don't need a pistol. Your tongue is no doubt sufficient to protect you."

Cordelia bristled slightly but was unable to take any real offense at his words, uttered as they were in an almost affectionate tone. She followed him to the stable where Mist was waiting, already saddled. She watched him place one of the pistols into an elaborately tooled holster on the side of the saddle. The other he tucked inside his coat.

When her own mare was saddled, she mounted and rode down the road behind him. It had not rained for over a week, and their passage raised a cloud of dust which settled onto the horses, dulling the blood-red sheen of her mare's hide and making Mist's coat look more tan than gray. She could sense Gwaltney's impatience to get to the bottom of this situation, but he held the stallion to a moderate pace, apparently remembering how hard he had pushed the horse yesterday.

Before long the tall chimneys of Alexander Blair's large brick house appeared, looming over the trees, and Gwaltney halted the stallion. "Let's leave them here," he suggested. Cordelia nodded, dismounting and tying the mare to a tree, and followed Gwaltney to the house. He knocked authoritatively on the door, which was opened by the butler. His dark eyes widened in surprise at Gwaltney's appearance.

"I'd like to speak with Blair, please," Gwaltney said curtly.

The slave shook his head. "'E's not available right now."

He started to swing the heavy door shut, but Gwaltney interposed his massive shoulder, and the door came to a sudden halt. He lifted the pistol, which he had been holding unobtrusively in his hand, and pointed it at the slave.

"I think it would be in your best interest to let me see Blair now," he said mildly.

The butler's eyes widened with panic and shock. Clearly he was unaccustomed to gentlemen forcing their way into the house in such a fashion. It was evident from his expression that he thought Gwaltney was a madman rather than a gentleman. Either way, he was not willing to argue. He stepped back and permitted them into the entrance hall.

"Mast' Blair is in th' parlor," he said hastily.

"Thank you for your help," Gwaltney said courteously, brushing past the slave. Cordelia did not fail to notice his cautious glance around. Obviously he did not intend to be taken by surprise for a second time.

She followed as he stalked stealthily toward the parlor. He walked, she noticed, without making the slightest sound. She could readily believe the rumors he had lived with natives. He moved like an Indian or a cougar. She stood behind him as he flung open the parlor door.

Alexander Blair sat in the parlor, crumpled in a settee, facing toward the fireplace. In one hand he clutched the neck of a half-empty decanter. His other arm dangled limply behind the chair, hidden from sight. As they watched he lifted the cut-glass decanter to his lips and took a deep swallow of the dark ruby liquid it contained.

"I told you," he said thickly, without glancing around, "that I didn't want to be bothered."

"How unfortunate," Gwaltney said.

At the sound of the unexpected voice, Blair's head whipped around, and he stared at them in surprise. His eyes widened as he noticed the pistol held casually in Gwaltney's hand.

"So," he said at last. There was no mistaking the thick drawl in his voice. He had clearly had a great deal to drink despite the early hour. "You've come to kill me, you bastard. Just like you killed my cousin."

Cordelia saw Gwaltney wince at the mention of William Carr, but Blair did not appear to notice. She supposed that Blair was too inebriated to notice much of anything. "I have no intentions of killing you," Gwaltney said, "although I must admit the thought is tempting. I simply need the answers to a few questions."

"How the hell did you get out of the smokehouse, you bastard?"

"Cordelia let me out."

Blair's eyes fastened blearily on Cordelia. "Meddling bitch."

"That's quite enough," Gwaltney said sharply. Once again, she noticed, he sounded fiercely protective, and she wondered why. Was it simply that she was his wife--a possession to be protected like his dog and his plantation?

Or was it something more?

Gwaltney left her little time to ponder the question. "I want to know who told you I was...." He faltered, then went on determinedly, "Afraid of being inside."

Blair looked at him through half-closed eyes. "I don't want to talk to you," he said wretchedly. "Just leave me alone."

"I need to know," Gwaltney said implacably. He lifted the pistol menacingly so that it was pointing at Blair's chest.

Blair looked at the pistol for a long moment, then, surprisingly, he began to laugh. It was a bitter, almost hysterical sound.

"Go ahead and shoot me," he said at last, vehemently. "I don't care. She doesn't love me. I asked her to marry me, and she said no."

Cordelia felt an unwanted stab of sympathy for the young man. Obviously he was reeling from rejection, suffering through the end of a major love affair, and the ache in his voice struck a chord in her. She knew how he felt. She tried to harden her heart against him, knowing that he was responsible for at least some of what had befallen her husband lately, but it was difficult, especially when she saw the tears trickling slowly down his pimply cheeks.

"Blair," Gwaltney said impatiently, but Alexander ignored him.

"I thought she loved me. No one has ever been so kind to me. I couldn't help loving her. And I wanted her to marry me."

It was evident he was too lost in his own problems to care that a very angry man was holding a pistol on him. Cordelia wondered if perhaps it would be wise to pretend sympathy,

taking advantage of his drunken state. It seemed a more likely way to glean the information they needed. She decided to try it.

“Alexander,” she said gently, “who refused to marry you?”

She was aware of Gwaltney’s glance, a look of mingled surprise and exasperation, but she ignored him. After all, he had not had any success in prying information from the young man.

Alexander stared at her a long moment as if stunned into immobility by the sympathy in her voice. At last he spoke. “My mistress.”

“You asked your mistress to marry you?” Gwaltney said skeptically.

Cordelia shot him a look, silently warning him to be quiet. But she could readily understand his skepticism. Planters did not wed their mistresses. Such a thing was simply not done. Men had affairs with loose women but married respectable women. To marry one’s mistress meant facing the kind of ostracism Gwaltney had faced for the past three years. It meant that one’s wife would be a social outcast, an object of ridicule, scorned by every aristocrat in Virginia. She could hardly imagine that Alexander Blair had the sort of fortitude needed to shun the opinion of society and marry his mistress.

“I love her, damn it.”

He must have loved her very much indeed, Cordelia thought. Or imagined he did. As insecure as Alexander was, she suspected it would have been easy enough for a woman to manipulate him, to make him love her. He had obviously been starved for love most of his life.

“But she didn’t love you?” she inquired gently.

Alexander shook his head, and fresh tears began to slide down his cheeks. “She called me--she called me a young fool,” he said with a choked sob. “She said I was an idiot to believe she could ever want a skinny boy like me. I thought ... I thought she *cared*.”

“I’m sorry,” Cordelia said softly.

“I’m not,” Gwaltney said sharply. Cordelia glanced at him quickly, but he only frowned at her. “Don’t be foolish, Cordelia. What are you trying to accomplish by pretending sympathy for this young idiot?” He raised the pistol and aimed it squarely at Alexander’s skull. “I doubt you’re as willing to die as you think, Blair. I want some answers. Did you try to disembowel my dog?”

He intended it as a purely rhetorical question and was surprised when Blair looked at him with obvious bemusement. “Course not,” he said blearily. “I love dogs. Got a setter of my own. Take good care of the beast. Ask anyone.”

“Liar,” Gwaltney snarled. The memory of Django’s bloodied white fur rose up unbidden, and he felt his finger tighten on the trigger. It was tempting, damned tempting, to simply kill Blair and be done with it. The man didn’t deserve to live.

With a conscious effort, he relaxed his finger. He was not a murderer. “You cut his stomach wide open, damn you. You left him to *suffer*. He could have died.”

Blair looked puzzled for a long moment, then, as Gwaltney’s words sank into his alcohol-befuddled brain, he looked ill. “Don’ be an idiot, Harris. I wouldn’t do that to a dog.”

“But you’d lock me into a smokehouse.”

Blair glowered. “Not really the same thing, is it? I jus’ intended to scare you. You threatened me the day before, and I was angry.”

“How the hell did you know...?” Gwaltney paused uncomfortably. “How did you know what effect the smokehouse would have on me?”

“She told me.”

Gwaltney slanted a quick look toward Cordelia. Could Cordelia have been the one who

had betrayed him? Impossible, he decided. He was certain now that she would never harm him. At any rate, she had not had any idea that the smell of smoke terrified him until yesterday. “I don’t believe you.”

“It’s true.”

Realizing that the two men were talking at cross-purposes, Cordelia intervened.

“Alexander,” she said softly, “who told you about Gwaltney’s fear of the indoors?”

“Maggie,” Alexander said. Tears began to flow down his cheeks again, and Cordelia and Gwaltney traded a quick look of exasperation. Clearly young Blair had drunk far more than he could handle.

“Who is Maggie?” Cordelia inquired with exaggerated patience.

“My mistress.”

“Ridiculous,” Gwaltney said impatiently. “How could your mistress know?”

“I know everything about you, Gwaltney.”

At the voice behind them, Gwaltney and Cordelia both turned. Cordelia saw Gwaltney’s visible start, saw him utterly forget Blair, his attention riveted on the beautiful, black-haired woman who stood at the doorway. He said nothing for an endless moment.

At last he spoke a single word.

“*Margaret.*”

Chapter 32

Cordelia stared at the woman, bewildered. The woman looked oddly familiar, and yet she was certain she had never seen her before in her life. She was not the sort of person one could easily forget. She was stunningly lovely, with creamy white skin, long black hair, and brilliantly blue eyes.

Abruptly a piece of the puzzle fell into place. *Blue eyes.* The woman’s face was familiar to her because she had passed her in the hallway twice. This woman had been visiting Mary in the guise of a house slave. It was, of course, easier for a black to gain admittance into the house than for a white, since most planters took little enough notice of their slaves. This woman had disguised herself, darkening her skin and donning the simple clothes of a slave, in order to visit Mary.

But why?

She might never have met the woman, but Mary must know her. Cordelia remembered Mary’s reactions, the fear that had been so great it had driven away her normal silence. She remembered the child’s terrified wailing. Had Mary feared this woman would take her away from Gwaltney?

Or had something else frightened her?

She had no opportunity to ponder the question. Margaret smiled with a feline savagery that Cordelia found inexplicably disturbing.

“Aren’t you glad to see me, Gwaltney?”

Gwaltney looked as though he had seen a ghost. "You're dead," he whispered, as if trying to convince himself. "You're *dead*."

"Obviously not."

Margaret's smile widened and her eyes narrowed. Something about the expression made Gwaltney seem to come to himself. He lifted the pistol, which had been dangling limply from his hand, and aimed it squarely at her chest. His eyes turned to molten gold. "I told you," he said coldly, "that if I ever saw you again, I would kill you."

Cordelia took a swift, involuntary step forward. How could Gwaltney threaten a woman this way? "Gwaltney," she objected.

Some of the confusion and horror she felt must have shown on her face, for Margaret glanced at her and laughed. It was not a pleasant sound.

"You've shocked your wife, Gwaltney. Surely you don't really intend to kill me."

Gwaltney stared at her. His eyes were vividly golden, mirroring his anger and shock. "I received word you died on the way to England, when the ship you were on sank," he said at last.

"I never went to England," Margaret said coolly. "It was too far away. I decided to go to Massachusetts for a year or two instead." She smiled that disturbing feline smile. "I thought it best to let you think I was dead, considering how you felt about me."

"I don't understand," Cordelia interrupted. The pistol was still aimed at Margaret's chest. She could not stand quietly by and let Gwaltney murder a woman in cold blood. "Gwaltney, who is this woman?"

"Her brother was married to my sister, Gladys," Gwaltney said softly. He did not take his gaze from Margaret, regarding her with the steady caution with which he might have eyed a rattlesnake. "She hated Gladys and did everything she could to make her life miserable. And when she had Mary, Margaret...."

He paused for a long moment. Cordelia glanced back and forth between them, seeing the anger crackling between them.

"She doesn't deserve to live," he said at last.

"You cannot possibly mean that," Cordelia said.

"You don't know what she did to Mary," Gwaltney said. "You don't know what she *did*." His voice remained deliberately even, but there was a hint of savage fury beneath the surface that bewildered Cordelia. No, not fury, she realized slowly. Hatred.

Virulent, burning hatred.

Whatever this woman had done to Gwaltney's family, he loathed her for it. Quite possibly enough to kill her.

"Gladys destroyed my brother's life," Margaret snapped. "It almost killed him when he discovered she'd had an affair."

"Gladys had an affair because you and Cade made her life a living hell," Gwaltney retorted angrily. "She was a decent, honorable woman who would never have betrayed her marriage vows if Cade had treated her with any sort of kindness."

"She hurt Cade," Margaret repeated irrationally. "And when Mary was born, it hurt him even more. I had to hurt them back. I had to."

"I don't understand," Cordelia interjected, desperate to intervene somehow. The expression in Gwaltney's eyes made her terribly afraid that he really was ready to kill the woman in cold blood. She had to prevent that at any cost. She was certain he could never forgive himself for such an action. "What did Margaret do, Gwaltney?"

"She killed Gladys," Gwaltney said. He was clearly struggling to keep his voice down, to keep from shouting in rage. Cordelia felt a shiver run down her spine as he continued. "And then, once she had Mary all to herself, she beat the child every time she made a sound. She burned her once. Burned a helpless baby, can you imagine? She held a candle to her arm and dripped hot wax on her."

Abruptly Cordelia remembered the dreadful scar on Mary's arm. She swallowed against the nausea that rose in her throat.

"How could you?" she whispered, staring at Margaret in horror. "That beautiful little girl. How could you do that to her?"

"That beautiful little girl was the reason my brother was killed," Margaret said savagely. "He had every reason to beat Gladys. But he didn't go far enough. He didn't listen to me. I told him to kill her."

Cordelia blinked, shocked and horrified, as Margaret went on in a harsh voice, "Cade should have killed her. But he didn't. He locked Gladys in her chamber and beat her."

"I don't understand. Why was he so angry?"

"Because he wasn't able to have children," Margaret said. Her voice was glacial. "*He knew Mary wasn't his child.*"

Abruptly the entire scenario made a horrid kind of sense to Cordelia. Gladys had evidently had an affair, and her husband had punished her by hurting her, perhaps by beating her, perhaps by even more painful means. And Margaret had encouraged it, perhaps because she had never liked Gladys to begin with, perhaps because she had been vengeful on her brother's behalf.

"But he didn't kill her," she said. "What happened then?"

"Gladys killed him," Margaret said in a hissing whisper. "She killed my brother."

Hearing the agonized sorrow in Margaret's voice, she almost felt sorry for the other woman. Then she remembered the scar on Mary's arm, and her compassion fled.

Gwaltney, she saw, felt no compassion whatsoever. His eyes were very cold and hard. "That doesn't excuse what you did," he said between his teeth. "Gladys killed Cade because she had no choice. She had to defend herself."

"A husband has every right to beat his wife," Margaret retorted. "If she had been a dutiful wife, none of this would have happened."

Gwaltney scowled. "Regardless of what happened between Gladys and Cade, you had no right to hurt Mary. What happened wasn't her fault, damn you. Do you realize the child still doesn't talk? Still? After all this time?"

"Yes," Margaret said. Appallingly, she seemed rather pleased with herself. "I've visited her a couple of times lately. She still remembers me."

"Visited her?" Gwaltney said blankly.

"She disguised herself as a slave," Cordelia interjected. "That's what has been causing Mary to scream. It wasn't nightmares after all. It was *her*."

Gwaltney stared at Margaret with revulsion. "Death," he said coldly, "is too good for you."

"Oh, don't be absurd, Gwaltney," Margaret seemed coolly confident. "You won't kill me. You can't."

"I don't see why I shouldn't. You've been behind everything that's happened, haven't you? You hurt my dog. You shot *me*."

"Mary's dog," Margaret corrected coolly. "That's why I had to hurt the brute. I had every

intention of killing him.”

“You’re insane,” Cordelia said in horror.

“Nevertheless, Gwaltney won’t kill me. If he intended to, he would have done so by now. Gwaltney isn’t one to hesitate.”

“I can’t simply send you away again,” Gwaltney said. “I can’t risk your returning again. I can’t risk having Mary ever go through this again.”

“I have no intention of leaving,” Margaret said calmly. “In fact, I intend to take Mary from you. It’s what I’ve wanted all along. But first I wanted to punish you, to make you suffer for everything your sister put me through.”

Cordelia saw a flash of rage on Gwaltney’s features. “I won’t let you have Mary,” he growled.

Margaret’s lips tightened, and she took a step forward, regarding him through narrowed eyes. “If you hadn’t abandoned Gladys and run away to the west, none of this would have happened,” she said harshly. “She used to tell me you were the only person she’d ever loved. If she’d had you to rely on, she might not have been so desperate. She might not have had to kill Cade.”

Cordelia saw Gwaltney’s hand shake slightly. “I didn’t know,” he whispered, almost imploringly. “If I had only known....”

Margaret appeared not to hear him. Her eyes were blank, as if she were seeing the past all over again. “You abandoned her,” she repeated stonily. “Everything that happened to her was all your fault. And I had to punish you for what she did and for taking Mary from me. I want Mary back. I’m taking her back, Gwaltney.”

“Over my dead body.”

“That would be perfect.”

Margaret looked over his shoulder, and her gaze filled with a dreadful triumph. From the corner of her eye Cordelia saw a movement. She turned and saw Alexander Blair standing, rather woosily, behind them.

“Gwaltney,” she whispered. “He has a pistol.”

Gwaltney turned, stepping to the side so that he could keep an eye on both Margaret and Alexander. He did not drop his own gun. “So, Blair,” he said coolly, “this was all a setup, was it?”

“No,” Alexander said wretchedly. “No, I swear it wasn’t. But I can’t let you kill her, Harris. I love her.”

Gwaltney sighed. “Blair,” he said tiredly, “can’t you see that she’s mad? Didn’t you hear me describing what she did to my dog? What she did to a helpless baby? Surely you must realize you have no future with the woman. She destroys everything she touches.”

“I love her,” Blair repeated rather blurrily. The hand holding the gun wove back and forth erratically, and Cordelia watched him with horror, thinking he might pull the trigger without intending to. He was clearly much too drunk to be holding a pistol.

“You love an illusion, an illusion she created to trap you. She *made* you fall in love with her, Blair. She is a master manipulator. But you must realize she doesn’t love you. Didn’t she say as much to you?”

“I don’t care,” Alexander repeated with the sullen persistence of the extremely inebriated. “I’m gonna marry her, and we’ll live together forever.”

“Yes, Alexander,” Margaret said eagerly. “Save me from Gwaltney. Save me, and I’ll

marry you. I promise.”

Her sudden capitulation made Alexander, drunken though he was, look at her with surprised suspicion. “You said you didn’t love me. You called me a ... a pimply boy.”

“I was wrong,” Margaret said earnestly. “I never before realized how much I love you, Alexander.”

Alexander’s eyes narrowed. For a long moment he stared at her. Then he spoke, and for the first time he sounded sober. “Harris is right,” he said, almost to himself. “You never really loved me at all, did you?”

“Don’t be absurd, Alexander. Of course I did.”

“No,” Alexander said. In his eyes Cordelia could see dawning clarity, and along with it, agonized pain. “You were using me to get to Harris. You knew how much I hated him. You used me, Maggie.”

“Shoot him,” Margaret hissed. “Shoot him, damn you.”

“He’s accounted an excellent shot,” Alexander said. “He’d shoot me before I could pull the trigger. But you don’t really care about that, do you? You never really loved me at all.”

The ineffable sadness in his voice touched Cordelia to the core. Alexander, she realized, had been searching for love all his life, and he had imagined he had at last found it. The realization that he had never truly been loved must cut deeply.

Her gaze fell on the pistol in his hand. For the first time it occurred to her to wonder why he had been holding it, if he had not been part of a scheme to capture them.

And then she looked into his empty eyes, and she knew why.

She saw the sudden motion of his hand. “Alexander!” she said sharply. “Don’t!”

Gwaltney was faster. He dropped his own pistol and flung himself across the chamber, wrenching the pistol from Alexander’s grasp. The pistol that the young man had been aiming at his own temple.

Cordelia bent quickly to retrieve the pistol that Gwaltney had dropped and turned.

She was not particularly surprised to see that Margaret had disappeared.

Chapter 33

“I don’t think she’ll be back.”

The confidence in Gwaltney’s voice sounded forced, artificial, to Cordelia. “Of course she will be,” she retorted. “Margaret hates you, Gwaltney. Although I must confess, I really don’t understand why.”

Gwaltney shook his head. They were seated outside in the garden, eating the midday meal. “I took Mary away from her,” he said, nodding at the little girl playing just a short distance away. “Killing Gladys didn’t satisfy her desire for vengeance. Once she killed Gladys, Mary was the only way she could imagine she was still punishing Gladys.”

“And now she imagines she’s using you to punish Gladys, too.”

“Perhaps,” Gwaltney agreed bleakly.

Cordelia looked down at her soup and swirled her spoon idly around the bowl.
“Gwaltney.”

“Yes?”

“What was Gladys like?”

Gwaltney swallowed. “Everything I told you about the way she saved me from the fire was true. She was brave and good and the only member of my family who gave a damn about me. But then....”

He sighed and put down his fork. “Everything changed when she married, I think. I don’t know, but I suspect Cade was beating her before Mary came. After Mary was conceived, though, he made her life a living hell. Or so I heard afterward. I wasn’t here. If I had been....” The savage look on his face said plainly what he would have done to Gladys’ husband.

“You feel guilty about what happened, don’t you?”

Gwaltney’s lips tightened. “I was off seeking my fortune, and my sister was being hurt so badly she felt she had no recourse but to kill her own husband. How the hell do you expect me to feel?”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I ran away and left my sister to her fate,” Gwaltney said harshly. “By abandoning Gladys, I forced her into murder. Margaret was right. I should have been there for Gladys, but I wasn’t.”

“Gwaltney...” Cordelia took his hand. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“She saved me,” Gwaltney whispered. “She saved my life. And in return, I abandoned her.”

“You didn’t know, Gwaltney. You couldn’t have known.”

“If I had only been here....”

Cordelia held his hand, silent. It was obvious there was nothing she could say to make him forgive himself, so she offered wordless empathy. At last she said, “Do you really think Margaret won’t be back for Mary?”

“I won’t let her have Mary,” Gwaltney said fiercely. “I swear it.”

Cordelia squeezed his hand and spoke with equal fervor. “We won’t let her have Mary, Gwaltney.”

That afternoon Cordelia leaned into Mary’s bedchamber, seeing that the little girl was still perched on the side of her bed. “It’s time for your nap. Shouldn’t you be in bed, Mary?”

Mary grinned and bounced.

“Waiting for me, I suppose.”

Mary nodded with enthusiasm.

“Very well,” Cordelia said, coming into the chamber. “I’ll tuck you in. But you have to get under the covers.”

Mary shook her head and held out a paper.

“Oh, you want to show me something first?”

Mary nodded, more shyly this time. Curious, Cordelia took the paper. It depicted a figure, clearly a woman, to judge from the full skirt that belled around the figure. Across the top of the paper was written, in tipsy capitals, MOTHER.

“Oh,” Cordelia said, rather blankly. “Is this your mother?”

Mary nodded, then, shyly, pointed to Cordelia.

Cordelia stared at her a long moment. At last she said, hoarsely, "I see." Her voice was husky with tears, but she managed to go on. "You mean ... you mean that I am your mother."

Mary nodded, smiling happily, clearly delighted that Cordelia had understood.

Cordelia sat on the bed suddenly and gathered the little girl in her arms. "Mary," she whispered. "Thank you."

She felt the fragile arms slide around her neck and buried her face in the child's silken hair.

A single tear slipped down her cheek.

"I'm going to miss Mary," Cordelia said, watching the little girl, who was involved in a complicated game of her own invention. The game seemed to involve running from settee to tea table and back again. Thus far all the furniture in the parlor seemed to have survived, miraculously enough.

"She's only going to stay with Jonathan until I'm certain Margaret is gone for good," Gwaltney said.

"But Margaret knows where Jonathan lives, doesn't she?"

Gwaltney nodded. "They won't be staying in his house. Jonathan can find somewhere else to stay for a few days. Margaret won't be able to find Mary, Cordelia. Don't worry."

"I can't help worrying," Cordelia said softly.

He studied her a long moment, then gave her a roguish grin. "You'll make a good mother, Cordelia."

Assuming we ever have children, Cordelia thought glumly, then pushed the thought away. She had a child. Mary had called her mother.

Outside, someone knocked peremptorily, and Jonathan slammed the door open and strode in without bothering to wait for a slave to answer. "I came as soon as I got your note," he said, nodding a greeting to Cordelia. "What has happened? Is Mary all right?"

Gwaltney looked at him a long moment. "Mary," he said softly, "go upstairs." Mary obediently left the chamber, waving in a friendly manner to Jonathan, and her nurse followed close behind.

"Now tell me what happened. Your note said it was about Mary."

His voice sounded unusually anxious. Gwaltney sighed. "There's no easy way to tell you this, Jon." He paused, swallowing, and then said bluntly, "Margaret is alive."

Shock, horror, and bewilderment chased across Jonathan's face. He sat down, hard, in an easy chair. "Are you certain?"

Gwaltney looked at his friend with sympathy. "She's the one behind the attempts on my life, Jon. She manipulated Blair into locking me in his smokehouse, but I don't think he was responsible for any of the other attempts. The poor young fool thought he was in love with her."

"Good God."

"He proposed to her, and was so hurt by her rejection that he all but shot himself through the head. Fortunately I was able to stop him in time. I left him in the care of the Greysons. Now that he's had a chance to sober up, I imagine he's thought better of killing himself over her. I certainly hope so."

Jonathan stared at his friend. "I thought she was dead," he whispered.

"So did I, my friend. So did I." Gwaltney's hands balled into fists. "When I saw her alive, I..." He hesitated. "I've never been so horrified."

Jonathan scowled. "Did she hurt Mary?"

"No. But that was why I asked you to come here. I need you to get Mary out of here."

"For how long?"

"Until I know for certain she is safe again."

Jonathan nodded emphatically. "Of course, Gwaltney. I won't let anything happen to her. I swear it. I care about her as much as you do. You know that."

At the passion in his voice, Cordelia stared at him in surprise. "I didn't realize Mary meant so much to you, Jonathan," she said slowly.

Jonathan looked at her, a peculiar expression of defiance in his dark eyes. "I love her," he said defensively. "I always have. I have no claim on her, but I love her very much."

Cordelia stared at him, aghast. His dark, expressive eyes suddenly looked very familiar to her, and she recalled Gwaltney's words. *I have something Jonathan loves. Something he loves more than anything else in the world.* A horrid suspicion began to take shape in her mind. "You don't mean that you're..."

Jonathan met her shocked gaze without flinching. "I'm Mary's father, Cordelia."

"Oh, my God." Cordelia sat down on the settee heavily. "You're the one who ruined her life," she whispered. "You destroyed Gladys."

"Gladys entered into our affair of her own free will," Jonathan said sharply. "She was miserable, trapped in a marriage with a man she loathed, and she had no one to turn to after Gwaltney left. We had always been friends, and she was a beautiful woman." He scowled. "I make no apologies for what I did."

"After all," Cordelia challenged, "she was only a cooper's wife."

"That had nothing to do with it!" Jonathan snapped. "Do you think I scorned her for her station in life any more than I scorned her brother?"

"No," Cordelia said, somewhat taken aback by his vehemence. "No, I don't suppose you did."

"I didn't mean to make her pregnant," Jonathan said, more quietly. "We took precautions, but ... well, precautions don't always work. And when she found she was with child, her husband became more abusive."

"Couldn't you help her?"

"I tried. I threatened her husband, but it had no effect other than to enrage him. I offered to send her away, but she refused. I did everything I could short of murdering Cade. And Margaret, who lived with them, made things worse by constantly harping on Gladys' pregnant state, on the fact that it clearly wasn't Cade's child. I didn't realize how bad things were. I didn't realize Cade was beating Gladys, or I swear I would have killed the bastard." Jonathan swallowed, and his dark eyes filled with grief. "Eventually Gladys took care of him."

"She killed him."

"He had a bit too much to drink one night and fell down a flight of stairs. I suspect she killed him in self-defense, although I have no way of knowing for sure. To be honest, I could scarcely blame her. But Margaret was certain Gladys killed Cade, and she became obsessed with avenging her brother."

"She killed Gladys."

Jonathan nodded numbly. "Gladys was found dead one morning. Poisoned, most likely. As Mary's only legal relative, Margaret kept Mary. She wouldn't let me see her, and I didn't dare press too hard for fear someone might realize our relationship. But I didn't know what Margaret

was doing to Mary. I swear I didn't, or I would have moved heaven and earth to stop her."

"About that time I arrived back home," Gwaltney said. "Margaret couldn't keep me away from Mary, and it didn't take a great deal of observation on my part to see what she had been doing to her. It was impossible to prove she'd killed Gladys, but when I found out what she'd done to Mary, I sent her to England and threatened to kill her if she ever came back. I received word that the ship she was on sank with no survivors. Evidently she jumped ship before the ship sailed." He took a deep, shuddering breath. "I thought she was gone forever."

Cordelia stared at Gwaltney, bewildered. "You don't blame Jonathan for any of this?"

"Jonathan is not the first man to bed a married woman, particularly an unhappily married one. Besides, Jonathan had no way of knowing the extent of what Gladys and Mary were suffering through. If anything, it was my fault. I should have been there for Gladys."

"We've been over that before, Gwaltney," Jonathan said quietly. "You're not to blame. You had no way of knowing."

Cordelia sighed. "Elizabeth needs to know about this, Jonathan."

Jonathan looked at her with surprise. She saw the flash of pain in the depths of his dark eyes before he averted his gaze and stared at the floor. "Elizabeth cares nothing for me, Cordelia."

"Don't be a fool, Jonathan. Of course she does. But she somehow realized that you sent Father out after me and Gwaltney."

Jonathan's head jerked up. "She knows about that?"

"She knows that you lied to her, yes. It's the reason she broke off the engagement."

"But I thought..."

He fell silent. Cordelia went on stubbornly. "Jonathan, she loves you, I am certain of that. But she no longer trusts you. If you were to apologize and explain..."

"She will never marry a man she cannot trust," Jonathan said. "I lied to her, Cordelia. Even worse, I concealed the truth about Mary. Elizabeth deserves a better man than I."

"Perhaps she does. But she doesn't love a better man, Jonathan. She loves you."

"Are you certain?"

Cordelia heard the fragile thread of hope in his voice. "I think Elizabeth idealized you, imagined that you were some sort of knight in shining armor, and when her illusions were shattered she was so distraught she ended your engagement without even discussing it with you. But you are not perfect, Jonathan, no more than any other man is. You need to talk to her. Confess that you lied and tell her the truth about Mary. Who knows? Perhaps she will understand."

"I am not the man she thought I was. I don't believe she will ever forgive me."

"She may. She loves you more than you know. At any rate, you should never have asked her to wed you without telling her the truth."

Jonathan nodded slowly. "You're right, of course. She deserves the truth. But I was afraid she would despise me for it."

Cordelia smiled slightly. In that moment she knew she would forgive Elizabeth for her duplicity. Her sister had only wanted to make her happy. And perhaps, she acknowledged wryly, Elizabeth had known her better than she knew herself. "She may understand better now. She has made some mistakes of her own."

"I hope you're right." Jonathan looked at her a moment longer, then stood. "Should I be going now, Gwaltney?"

“Yes, but not to your house,” Gwaltney said. “Margaret knows well enough where it is.” Jonathan thought for a long moment. “What about the Carters’ plantation? They’ll agree to put me up for a few nights, I feel certain.”

“Very well. And I have one more favor to ask.”

“Anything, Gwaltney. You know that.”

Gwaltney paused. His gaze fell on his wife. “Take Cordelia with you.”

“Are you mad?” Cordelia demanded, springing to her feet. “I won’t leave you alone, Gwaltney.”

“I am in no danger,” Gwaltney said with forced calm. “I’m certain Margaret has already left the area.”

“Stuff and nonsense,” Cordelia retorted tartly. “If you were so certain of that, you wouldn’t be sending Mary away.”

“Margaret knows I won’t let her get Mary now. It wouldn’t be logical of her to stay here.”

Cordelia remembered Margaret’s beautiful sapphire eyes, filled with gleeful malice, and a shudder of cold dread ran through her. “She isn’t logical, Gwaltney. She’s quite mad.”

“I’ll be fine. But I’d feel better if you weren’t here, just in case.”

“Just in case she tries to hurt you again?” Cordelia heard her own voice rising hysterically, but she could not seem to help herself. “In case she tries to kill you, Gwaltney? No, damn it. I won’t leave you here by yourself. I *won’t*.”

Gwaltney shot a helpless look at Jonathan, who shrugged. “You can’t change her mind, Gwaltney. She’s as stubborn as Elizabeth.”

“Very well,” Gwaltney said. His brows drew together with annoyance, but he did not waste time attempting to change her mind. “Take Mary and get the hell out of here, Jonathan. Take Django, too. And Jon--make certain no one follows you.”

Jonathan nodded. Within moments he, Mary, and Django had climbed into his carriage and were rolling away, leaving nothing but dust in their wake.

Cordelia lay in bed, thinking of Mary. She had placed the drawing in a place of honor on her dressing table. She could not see it in the darkness, yet her thoughts kept reverting irresistibly to it.

MOTHER.

Mary thought of her as a mother. It was one of the proudest accomplishments of her life.

She prayed that Mary would be all right. She was certain Jonathan would take good care of her, but Margaret was not only insane, she was determined. There was still the possibility that Mary could be kidnapped or hurt. She shuddered to think of the little girl in the hands of that woman.

As she lay there, her intrusive thoughts keeping her from sleep, there was a knock on the door. “Come in,” she called.

The door opened slowly. Cordelia sat up in shock. Even through the darkness she could see it was Gwaltney.

He hesitated a long moment while she watched him warily. “I didn’t mean to startle you,” he said at last.

Cordelia modestly clutched the sheet to her breasts. “You didn’t,” she lied.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he murmured.

“Neither could I.” Feeling awkward and exposed, she added shortly, “What do you

want?"

There was a long silence. At last his voice said, very softly, "You. I want you, Cordelia."

Her heart slammed against her chest, and her throat tightened, cutting off speech. At last she managed, "I don't understand."

"I think you do," he returned quietly.

Cordelia shook her head numbly. "The last time...."

"It was dreadful. I know."

"It was like a war," she whispered hoarsely. "A war that neither of us won."

"It shouldn't have been like that, Cordelia. I made it into something it wasn't. Because I didn't trust you enough. I'm sorry."

Cordelia shut her eyes, remembering the odd sensations of their last mating, the small pain fading into insignificance, the overwhelming, shattering ecstasy, the deep emotional bonding that had abruptly been ripped asunder.

Remembering the ugly things she had said, and the cold words he had uttered in return.

She wasn't sure she could bare her soul to Gwaltney a second time.

After all, he hadn't said that he loved her. Only that he wanted her. And they certainly weren't the same thing, were they?

But God help her, she loved him.

"Cordelia," he whispered in a voice like velvet. "I need you."

The desperate longing in his voice was her undoing. He sounded so lonely, so lost, without her. *He needed her*. It was not hyperbole or exaggeration, she realized. It was the simple truth.

Slowly she stood up, letting the sheet fall to the bed, and walked toward him. She looked up at him, seeing the firmly etched planes of his face set into harsh lines despite the dim light, seeing all his insecurities, all of his uncertainties, clearly written on his taut features.

She placed a tentative hand on his chest.

His arms came around her then, pulling her to his chest and holding her, all but crushing her with the force of his embrace. He buried his face in her hair as if trying to hide from the troubles of the world.

"Thank you," he murmured raggedly.

"For what?"

"I thought...." He rubbed his cheek against her hair. "I thought perhaps you'd never want me again. I'm grateful that you do. So very grateful."

Cordelia lifted her head and stepped away from him. Gwaltney let her go reluctantly.

"Did I say something wrong?" he asked, sounding so anxious that she barely restrained a smile.

"Don't sound so humble," she admonished him.

Gwaltney frowned in confusion. "I beg your pardon?"

"You sound as if you never expected me to agree to this."

"I didn't," Gwaltney admitted. Rather hesitantly, he added, "The truth is I've never had very good luck with women. Most of them have, er, scorned me. Because I am nothing but a longhunter, after all."

"Gwaltney," Cordelia said firmly. "Listen to me carefully, because I am only going to tell you this once. *Any woman would be lucky to have you*. Do you understand me?"

Gwaltney hesitated, clearly bewildered. "I'm glad you think so, but...."

"Furthermore," Cordelia went on, "any woman in her right mind would want you."

“I hardly think....”

“You are kind, intelligent, and the most incredibly handsome man it has ever been my privilege to know.”

Gwaltney appeared to be struck dumb. “Oh,” he said at last.

“That being said, do you have any questions?”

Gwaltney stared at her a long moment longer, then the reckless grin she loved broke over his features. “Just one,” he said. “Your bed or mine?”

They chose his.

Gwaltney carried her across the hall, laid her down on the blue-and-white coverlet atop his bed, and stared at her a long moment. “I think you’re wonderful,” he whispered at last.

Slowly, almost reverently, he touched her face, his hand curving along her cheek, his fingers trailing down to trace her jaw line. She shivered at his gentle touch and reached up to capture his hand.

“Don’t,” she whispered.

He paused, and a flicker of uncertainty, of vulnerability, leapt into his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said humbly, trying to draw his hand away. She held it fast.

“I didn’t mean it that way. I simply meant....” She gazed up at him in the dark. “Don’t treat me like a piece of porcelain, Gwaltney. I’m not fragile, and I won’t break.”

She saw the flare of relief in his eyes and wondered how long it would be before he truly believed she wanted him, before he genuinely believed he was lovable.

She was going to do everything she could tonight to make him believe it.

Sitting up, she slipped her arms around his neck. She felt his surprise, felt the instant of hesitation before he slid his arms around her waist in return. He seemed oddly stiff, and she realized he was still afraid of rejection. She wondered how many so-called ladies had laughed at his advances, how many had snubbed him, how many had called him names.

She remembered her own ugly words the last time they had made love. *You aren’t fit to touch me, you filthy longhunter.* Burning regret lanced through her.

Gwaltney, she thought with sympathy, had every right to be anxious.

She kissed his throat, feeling his tension begin to ebb away. Slowly, his arms tightened around her.

“May I take your hair down?” he whispered.

“Of course.”

He loosened her braid, let his fingers slide caressingly through the heavy cinnamon mass, buried his hands in her hair as it fell unfettered to her waist.

“You have the most beautiful hair I’ve ever seen,” he muttered thickly.

“Don’t be silly, Gwaltney. It’s brown.”

“It’s gorgeous,” he said, so hoarsely that she actually believed he meant it. She had never thought of her hair as particularly attractive compared to Elizabeth’s brilliant gold tresses, but obviously he found it appealing. His hands continued to stroke her hair, an oddly intimate sensation, and she leaned her head against his chest and sighed. Her body ached for his touch, but he seemed content to do nothing other than run his fingers through her hair.

“Are you planning on making love to me,” she whispered at last, “or simply my hair?”

Gwaltney looked down at her with surprise. Abruptly a corner of his mouth quirked upward. “A difficult decision, to be sure.”

“Perhaps,” she ventured, a little surprised at herself, “I can help you make up your mind.” And she reached up and pressed her lips against his.

Again she felt the hesitation. His response was almost timid. Slowly he deepened the kiss, his tongue delving gently into her mouth. She moaned, aware that he was holding back, concealing the passionate depths of his soul from her, afraid of the hurt she could inflict with a word or a look. She pressed her body against his chest, wanting more than this gentle tenderness, more than to be touched with gentlemanly reserve.

She needed heat. Passion. Fierceness.

Driven by an emotion she had no control over, she pressed her mouth against his harder, almost desperately. His response was immediate. He pushed her backward on the coverlet, kissing her hard, his hand fumbling at her shift, pushing it up over her hips, then her head. He threw it aside, leaving her nude.

She pushed frantically at his shirt, managing to get some of the buttons unfastened. Others popped loose, falling from the bed and rolling across the floor. At last she pushed the shirt from his shoulders, hearing the fabric tear in the process. She felt his chest shake.

“I’ve never had a woman rip my clothing off before,” he murmured in a low growl of amusement.

She tossed the ruined shirt on the floor and ran her fingers across him, feeling the solidity of his furred chest, the heavy, corded muscles over his ribcage, and the flatter muscles of his abdomen. A soft murmur of pleasure rumbled from his throat.

“I plan on ripping your breeches off, too,” she said softly.

He lifted his head and stared at her for a long moment. Cordelia grinned.

“I see I’ve shocked you,” she said, delighted.

“You haven’t merely shocked me,” Gwaltney said, his mouth quirked. “You’ve scandalized me.”

“Even better,” she said gleefully.

“Nevertheless, to save wear and tear on my clothing...” He sat up briefly and removed his shoes, his breeches, and his silk stockings, tossing them in a careless heap atop the ripped shirt.

She stretched out luxuriously on the coverlet and regarded him thoughtfully. Her gaze roved over him, admiring his broad chest, his long, powerful legs, and his solid shoulders. “I hadn’t realized it before,” she said, “but you are even more handsome with your clothes off.”

Gwaltney leaned over her, imprisoning her between his arms. “Take care, madam, lest you scandalize me further.”

His light tone warmed Cordelia’s spirits. She had succeeded in what she had meant to do, easing his anxieties and making him feel comfortable. Her arms slipped around his neck. “I have an idea,” she suggested in his ear. “Why don’t you scandalize me instead?”

“That’s exactly what I plan to do.”

His mouth captured hers in a hard, passionate kiss that consumed her. It was what she wanted, what she longed for, this white-hot, searing sensation that exploded through her like lightning. She moaned and arched her body against his, feeling his muscles go rigid, feeling the damp skin of his chest against her breasts.

His mouth slid down her throat and sought her nipples, and the remembered sensation made the ache in her body intensify until she cried out with pleasure. And then his mouth trailed lower, across her flat belly, and his powerful hands parted her thighs. He kissed her, very gently, amidst her curls. A scorching bolt of pleasure, more violent than anything she’d ever

experienced, shot through her, and she stiffened and clutched at his hair.

“Gwaltney.”

“Ah, good,” he murmured, his warm breath blowing across her, stimulating her tender flesh so that she writhed helplessly against the sheets. “I’ve scandalized you.”

“Surely you shouldn’t....”

He lifted his head and looked up at her, his eyes glittering with a feral passion that was evident even in the darkness. “Cordelia,” he said, seriously, “there is nothing wrong with lovemaking between a husband and a wife.”

She felt her cheeks flame in the dark. The intimacy of that caress was too shockingly intense to be proper. “But ... but to kiss me there....”

“Cordelia,” he whispered, “you are my wife. I want to kiss you everywhere.”

“But....”

“Shh,” he whispered. “It’s all right. Let me show you.”

He lowered his head again, slowly, and his lips brushed across her soft, damp flesh. She felt an irresistible response, a rush of heat and moisture, and the protest she had intended to utter faded into an inarticulate moan. She smelled the fragrance of her own desire, surrounding them like a heady perfume, felt the dampness gather between her legs like dew on a humid summer night.

He caressed her with his lips, very slowly, very gently, until her hands clenched into fists, until she gripped the sheets in white-knuckled frustration.

“Gwaltney.”

“What do you want, Cordelia?” he whispered softly against her.

The gentle puffs of air as he spoke drove her nearly to madness. In her nearly virginal innocence, she had no real idea what it was she wanted, and no way of describing her desires, diffuse and unfocused as they were. She settled for hoarsely murmuring one word.

“More.”

She heard his faint, satisfied chuckle, and then he bent his head to her again. This time she felt his warm, moist tongue, probing her delicately, and the overwhelming shock of pleasure nearly made her faint. She flung back her head against the pillow and gave herself up to his mouth, all her objections forgotten.

His tongue laid all her secrets bare, leisurely exploring until he found her most sensitive spot, then stroking it in circles, slowly at first, then faster, until her hips moved in a primitive, uncontrollable rhythm, until her fingers twisted in his hair. He evoked in her a wild passion, a desperate craving she had never known before. She arched against his mouth, almost frantic with desire as the heat and the pressure spiraled upward.

And then he stopped.

She shuddered, unfulfilled. “Please,” she whispered harshly.

“I don’t want to rush you,” he breathed tautly. He slid up the bed and stretched out full-length next to her. She felt his body, rigid against hers, and knew he was exerting his self-control to the utmost.

Somehow the idea that he had to fight to control himself pleased her, and an imp of mischief seized her even in the midst of her need. She very much wanted to make him lose his steady control, wanted to make him beg for her touch the way she’d begged for his.

She placed her palm on his chest. The muscles jumped beneath her hand, and she slid her hand downward, across his sculpted abdomen, until she found what she was looking for,

rampantly swollen and unbelievably hot. Her fingers wrapped around him, and she heard his breath coming in uneven, shallow gasps.

“Do men like to be touched this way?”

She moved her hand and heard him moan in response. Pleased by the discovery of her own power, she laughed softly. “I assume that’s a yes.”

She slid her hand down him, noticing how his erection jutted out, incredibly thick and long, from a nest of dense, dark curls. His skin was soft and satin smooth, stretched over what felt like hot iron, except iron could never throb and pulse in such a way. Curious, she looked down, squinting in the faint light from the window, and saw the broad, blunt tip, glistening with moisture.

Experimentally, she brushed her thumb across the tip, and Gwaltney’s whole body jerked. “*Jesus*,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“Apparently men like that as well.”

“Apparently,” he agreed weakly.

Pleased by the tacit admission that she was the only woman ever to touch him this way, she let the pad of her thumb slide back and forth across the tip, feeling the moisture, the heat of him, hearing his guttural groans and sharp inhalations. At last he caught her hand, forcing her to stop.

“You don’t like it anymore?” she whispered.

“I like it entirely too well,” he muttered hoarsely, lying back flat against the mattress and closing his eyes, as if trying to regain his self-control.

She didn’t particularly want him to reestablish control of himself, not when she felt so close to the edge of restraint herself. She stared down his body at his erection, trembling and quivering as if it were a separate, living creature, and wondered if the experience she had found so incredible might please him as well. The shocking thought made heated excitement pool in her lower abdomen, a heat composed of embarrassment as well as lust, yet once she thought of it the notion was utterly irresistible.

She came to her knees, bent slowly, and let her lips brush gently across his shaft.

A small, anguished noise caught her attention, and she glanced up, seeing his head tilted back, his teeth clenched together, his hands balled tightly into fists. He looked every bit as overcome as she imagined she had mere moments before.

She leaned over again, touched her lips to his erection a second time, and then, very slowly, let her tongue caress the wet, velvety tip.

His body shuddered violently beneath her, and he sat up abruptly and caught her arms, pushing her back against the sheets. “Now,” he rasped in a hoarse, rough voice. “It has to be *now*.”

He rolled on top of her, and she heard his ragged intake of breath as his body slid inside hers, felt them become one at last. He plunged into her, filling her to utter completion, moving in a fast, hard rhythm, a rhythm so totally compelling that the world faded away and nothing else existed.

She cried out, scarcely hearing his moans of pleasure as he thrust into her desperately. Sweet, fiery contractions gripped her womb, and waves of heat rippled through her body as she exploded in a shattering blaze of light. Then he went limp against her, burying his face against her shoulder and clutching her to his chest. She wrapped her arms around him and clung to him fiercely.

She knew she would remember this moment for the rest of her life.

Gwaltney lay in the darkness, feeling the pliant heat of her body in his arms. His face was pressed against her fragrant hair, and he felt the warmth of her breath against his throat.

And then he heard the words he had been dreading, uttered softly, but with heartrending sincerity.

"I love you."

He stiffened. "I think perhaps you had better go back to your own room now," he said, rather awkwardly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's late," he said. He unwrapped his arms from her waist and pulled away from her. "You really should be going."

Cordelia sat up and looked at him. Her eyes glittered with annoyance. "How dare you?"

"Cordelia..."

"That's simply a polite way of telling me to go to hell, isn't it?"

Gwaltney winced, recalling the unpleasant words he had uttered the last time they had been intimate. *I despise you*. He knew he didn't despise her, but he couldn't say honestly that he loved her either. He wished to God he could. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt her again. "It's simply that it is customary for husbands and wives to sleep in separate chambers," he said, trying his best to sound reasonable.

"I don't care what's customary," she snapped. "I won't be treated like a whore."

"I beg your pardon?" he said, rather shocked by her choice of words.

"When you use my body and then ask me to leave, that's precisely what I feel like."

"I didn't *use* your body," Gwaltney said defensively, stung by the unpleasant phrasing. "We made love. But now..."

"But now that you've been satisfied, you'd like me to leave."

He crossed his arms behind his head and stared at her speculatively. "I rather thought you were satisfied as well, madam."

"That's not the point!"

He lifted an eyebrow. "Perhaps I wasn't enough for you after all."

Her eyes flamed with fury. "Damn it," she said tautly, "stop putting words into my mouth. And please, for heaven's sakes, stop thinking of yourself as beneath me. You are every bit my equal, damn you. Otherwise I couldn't love you, could I?" She stood up, utterly unconscious of the fact that she was stark naked, and began punctuating her words with her finger. "Otherwise I wouldn't want to spend the night in your bed, would I?"

Gwaltney was silent.

"You're so convinced that you're my inferior," she went on angrily, "that you can't accept the fact that I love you. Well, that's your problem. I do love you, regardless of whether or not you approve. I love you. *For always*." She stalked toward the door, not bothering to pick up her clothing, and disappeared through the doorway. He heard her chamber door slam behind her.

Briefly he toyed with the notion of following her, but he discarded it. He couldn't tell her he loved her, and he knew that was what she really wanted. He had no idea whether he loved her or not. Certainly he found her attractive. Certainly he thought she was admirable and courageous and strong. But whether he loved her or not, he was not certain.

He was not even certain whether love between a man and a woman was possible, or

merely a pleasing fiction to conceal the blunt truth of lust. Heaven knew he lusted for her. But did he love her?

He fell asleep without an answer.

Gwaltney awoke with a start. His heart was pounding, his breath coming in rapid, shallow gasps. He lay in the darkness for a long moment, struggling to calm his breathing. He knew what had awakened him--his recurring nightmare. In his mind he had smelled smoke and seen fire. In his dreams he had been trapped behind a dancing line of flames.

He wanted desperately to get outside.

He lay there a moment longer, trying to clear his head. The dream had been an especially frightening one. In his nostrils there still lingered the smell of smoke.

With a sudden spurt of agonizing terror he realized that it had been no dream.

The smoke was real.

Chapter 34

Gwaltney sat bolt upright, his hands clenched tightly into fists, as he heard the unmistakable crackling and roaring of unleashed fire. The familiar terror flooded him, closing off his throat and suffocating him. Fear exploded within his mind, driving out sanity, driving out everything except one thought.

He had to get outside.

Frantic with fear, he lunged to his feet, dashing across the chamber and flinging the door open. The smoke was thicker in the hall, dense and choking, searing his lungs, burning his eyes, and filling him with desperate panic. Coughing, he made for the stairs and leapt down them three at a time.

At the landing he stopped.

Cordelia was still upstairs.

"Cordelia!" he screamed, but there was no answer, at least none that he could hear over the crackling thunder of the fire. The downstairs, he saw, was consumed with flames. Before long the upper floor would collapse. Already the air was unbearably, excruciatingly hot, scorching his skin and his eyes, clawing at his lungs with every breath.

Every instinct told him to run away. The urge to flee was overpowering, nearly irresistible.

He rationalized desperately. There was a narrow flight of stairs that led down from her chamber. Perhaps she had already escaped. Perhaps she was already safely outside.

But he knew that couldn't be so. Because Cordelia would never have left him in a burning house to die.

And God help him, he couldn't leave her.

Slowly, he turned back toward the second floor.

Memories flashed through his mind. He remembered the way Cordelia had clung to him

when they made love, the way she had whispered his name. He remembered the way she had fearlessly faced a drunken man with a gun on his behalf. He remembered the way she had stood by him, supporting him, when the doctor had operated on his leg.

Even through the haze of terror, he remembered.

He squared his shoulders with fierce determination. He could not leave Cordelia to die.

He would rather die himself.

Feeling like a man ascending the gallows, he ran back up the stairs with grim determination, though the effort cost every iota of self-control he had. The choking smoke swirled around him, burning his throat and his eyes, making him cough uncontrollably. He dropped to the floor, where the air was a trifle clearer, and crawled forward on hands and knees. The floor, he noticed wretchedly, was hot. Fear clutched at his chest.

Oh, God. I'm going to be burned to death.

Summoning every shattered fragment of courage he possessed, he kept going.

He reached Cordelia's chamber and flung the door open, barely noticing that the brass doorknob burned his hand. A blast of savagely unbearable heat buffeted him, and he saw with horror that the bedclothes were on fire.

Cordelia was going to be burned alive.

The choking smoke was forgotten instantly. Lunging to his feet, he surged forward, flinging the flaming bedcover to the floor. It burned his hands, but he scarcely noticed. His earlier terror was receding, driven away by his desperate concern for Cordelia. All he could see was her inert form. She was all that mattered.

She stirred and looked up at him, clearly disoriented. There was a bruise where something had struck her on the forehead. She spoke his name in a dazed whisper.

On the floor behind him, the coverlet continued to burn, and the carpet beneath it began to smolder as well. There was no time to reassure her, no time to utter a single word. He swung her into his arms and ran for the door.

"Not so fast."

Gwaltney hesitated, turning, squinting through the smoke. Cordelia had not spoken. Through the haze he saw a tall, slender figure with black hair.

"Margaret," he rasped, unbelieving. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Margaret laughed. She had come up the narrow staircase that led from the back parlor. She stood at the top of the stairs, her hair disheveled, her eyes wild. "Who did you think set the fire, Gwaltney?"

Gwaltney blinked. He had not had time to think the situation through sufficiently to realize that the fire had been set rather than accidental. It slowly sank into his smoke-befuddled brain that the fire had been set in at least two places--downstairs and in Cordelia's chamber.

He looked down at Cordelia, seeing the bruise on her forehead. Margaret, he realized with dawning anger, had rendered Cordelia unconscious and deliberately set fire to her bedclothes. Margaret had deliberately tried to kill Cordelia simply because she was his wife. A wave of protective fury, more savage and primitive than anything he had ever known before, suffused him.

"Get the hell out of my way," he said harshly, stepping toward her.

Margaret held up a pistol. "Stop, Gwaltney. You aren't going anywhere."

Gwaltney stared at her coldly. "You can't mean to let me burn to death, Margaret. You'll die too."

"Perhaps," Margaret agreed, smiling slightly. "But at least I'll have the satisfaction of seeing you die."

"You're mad," he said in a horrified whisper.

She leveled the gun at his chest--at Cordelia, whom he still held clutched protectively against his chest. "Back away, Gwaltney."

He realized that she had no intention of burning to death with him. She was going to close them into this chamber. To die.

He hesitated. He would rather take his chances with a gun than burn to death.

"Back away," she said impatiently. "Or I'll shoot her."

He let Cordelia's legs slide down his body, forcing her to stand. She swayed in his arms, still groggy from the blow she had taken and probably from the smoke as well. He shoved her away, toward the door that led to the hallway, and looked at Margaret. "Let her go," he pleaded in a hoarse whisper. "Let her go, and you can kill me."

"You're in no position to bargain," Margaret said sharply. "I intend to kill both of you."

"But we don't intend to die," Cordelia said softly. Unsteady but resolute, she took two steps back and stood next to Gwaltney.

"How unfortunate," Margaret said mockingly. She did not take her eyes off Gwaltney, nor did the gun waver from his chest. "You are both going to die. And when you're dead, I'll take Mary from Jonathan."

"Why do you want Mary so badly?" Cordelia inquired as calmly as if the house were not in the process of being consumed by flames. Gwaltney realized vaguely she was trying to distract Margaret.

"I want her because she belonged to Gladys," Margaret snarled. "I killed Gladys because of what she did to my brother, but it wasn't enough. I want to hurt Mary. She wasn't my brother's child, and she hurt Cade just by being born. She's just a bastard. I want her back."

"Mary is not a thing!" Cordelia snapped. "She is a person. And all you've ever done to her is hurt her. How can you bear to hurt a defenseless little girl?"

"I'm going to take her from you," Margaret repeated, irrationally. "And then I can do whatever I want with her. She's *nothing*, do you understand? Nothing at all."

There was a sudden crashing sound, and Gwaltney realized with a spurt of terror that the house was beginning to collapse. They were all going to be buried alive beneath the flames. His heart clutched in his chest.

He took an involuntary step forward, but Margaret's finger tightened on the gun, and he hesitated.

At his side, Cordelia took advantage of the distraction he had unwittingly provided. She moved with startling suddenness, grabbing something from the floor and flinging it at Margaret.

The gun clattered to the floor, and Margaret staggered backward, shrieking. Gwaltney realized that Cordelia had thrown the flaming coverlet at Margaret. Entangled in the heavy material, she was rapidly becoming engulfed in flames.

Struggling frantically to free herself from the blazing material, she suddenly screamed as she fell backward, arms flailing, down the narrow back staircase.

Gwaltney didn't hesitate. He caught up Cordelia in his arms and bounded down the narrow, twisting stairs. At the bottom he paused and stared at Margaret. She lay still, unmoving, her neck bent at an unnatural angle. The flames began to engulf her body.

Gladys, he thought numbly, was avenged.

He hesitated, looking at Margaret's inert form for a long moment, then a sudden crash galvanized him into action. He ran for the door. In moments they were outside in the cool night air.

Gwaltney collapsed on the grass, Cordelia clutched in his arms, and breathed in long, desperate gulps of air. Behind them the roof of the house caved in with a resounding crash. All about them was the bustle of slaves, trying diligently to save the outbuildings from burning. Gwaltney heard nothing, saw nothing, except Cordelia. He pressed his face into her hair, holding her tightly against his chest. For a long time there was no noise but the roaring flames.

"Are you all right?" he said at last.

She nodded, her face pressed against his shoulder. "You?"

His hands smarted dreadfully, and there were numerous small burns on his face and arms. His throat was raw and painful, and his eyes stung. But he was alive. *Alive*.

Thanks to Cordelia.

"Fine," he said softly. "I'm fine."

Chapter 35

Jonathan stood in the woods, watching Elizabeth. Seated under the old oak tree, she was staring at the river in the distance, clearly absorbed in her thoughts, and hadn't heard him approach. He felt his heart squeeze painfully at the sight of her. Until this moment, he hadn't realized how desperately he missed her.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, and Elizabeth looked up, startled. Her eyes widened in shock. Slowly she rose to her feet and stared at him coldly.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"I want to talk to you, Elizabeth." When she only maintained an icy silence, he sighed and held out a hand to her. "*Please*."

Almost imperceptibly, she nodded. He took a step forward and looked down into her eyes. "Do you know that I love you?" he whispered.

He thought he saw her flinch at his declaration, but perhaps it was merely his imagination. She drew herself up proudly. "It is most improper of you to tell me that," she said. "You know I care nothing for you."

"I don't care what's proper, damn it," Jonathan said harshly. "I love you, Elizabeth, and I think you love me. And you're going to listen to me, whether you want to or not." He took a deep breath. "Cordelia says you realized I sent your father out after them and lied about it."

Startled, Elizabeth stared at him with her vivid blue eyes. At last she nodded.

"I did lie to you, Elizabeth, I admit it. I can't tell you how terribly sorry I am. I wanted you to marry me. I wanted you so desperately that I was willing to sacrifice my honor. It was an inexcusable thing to do." He hesitated. "And that is not the worst of it. I should never have proposed to you without telling you the entire truth."

Elizabeth's eyes widened at his grim tone. "What do you mean?"

Jonathan looked down at her. He was certain Elizabeth, with her dedication to propriety, would be shocked and horrified when he told her the truth about Mary. He fully expected she would never speak to him again once she heard the story, but he knew he could no longer keep it from her. He turned away from her honest gaze, unable to bear the shocked disdain he knew would fill her eyes when she knew the truth.

“Seven years ago I had an affair with Gwaltney’s sister Gladys,” he said roughly. “I sired a child, although I did not intend to do so. Gwaltney’s niece Mary is my natural daughter.”

There was a long silence behind him. “I see,” Elizabeth said at last.

“I can never acknowledge her as my daughter,” Jonathan went on, “nor is there any need for me to do so, for Gwaltney loves the child as if she were his own. Mary is happy with Gwaltney and Cordelia, and for me to acknowledge her would make her the subject of vicious gossip, ruining her life. It would be selfish and wrong. I have made too many mistakes already, hurt too many people. I cannot hurt Mary.”

“Did you love her?”

“Mary?” Jonathan nodded bleakly. “Yes, I love her.”

“No, Mary’s mother. Gladys.”

Jonathan paused. “I did not love Gladys,” he said quietly, “but like any man, I had certain....” He hesitated, then shook his head. “I was going to justify my actions by saying I had masculine needs, Elizabeth, but that doesn’t excuse my behavior. There is no reason a man cannot be chaste until marriage just as a woman is expected to be. I simply made a mistake. I was fond of Gladys and allowed my affection to lead me into folly. What made it even worse was that she was married. I ruined her life for the sake of mere sexual satisfaction.”

He did not dare glance around to see the horrified shock on her face. He stared at the ground and went on grimly. “I wish I could be the chaste man you wanted, Elizabeth. I have made too many mistakes, too many wrong choices, to be worthy of a woman like you. You deserve a Galahad, a man who is pure in body as well as spirit, a man as exemplary as you are.” His voice fell to a rough whisper. “I wish I could have been that man.”

Behind him there was silence. He stood in misery, his head bowed, his eyes clenched shut against the tears that burned there, knowing she was walking away from him. Knowing she was walking out of his life forever.

And then her hand came down gently on his shoulder.

Unbelieving, he turned and saw her gazing up at him.

“I don’t want a perfect man,” she said softly. “I want you.”

And to his shock, she drew his head down and kissed him on the mouth.

When she let him go he lifted his head and looked at her in blank confusion. “Elizabeth,” he whispered, bewildered, “haven’t you heard a word I’ve said?”

“I heard all of it.”

“I sired an illegitimate daughter. And I never told you.”

“You’ve told me now,” she said calmly. “You made two mistakes, one of them seven years ago, and I don’t think you’ve ever forgiven yourself. But Jonathan, everyone makes mistakes. I’ve made mistakes too.” She hesitated. “The worst mistake I ever made was telling you I didn’t want to marry you.”

A tiny flame of hope began to glow in his heart. “Are you telling me you want to marry me?”

She smiled. “I’m proposing to you, Jonathan. If you’ll have me.”

He laughed out loud, a sound composed of equal parts of joy and utter relief, and flung his arms around her waist, swinging her around. "You can't propose to me," he pointed out, still chuckling against her golden hair. "It isn't in the least proper."

"I've discovered I am less concerned with propriety than I used to be." She wrapped her arms around him, pressed her body against his, and kissed him with a passion that left him dizzy. Desperate with longing, he found himself unhooking the bodice of her gown, and, somewhat to his surprise, she did not tell him to stop. In fact, he realized, she was cooperating. At last he lifted his head.

"I feel constrained to point out," he said, smiling down into her eyes, "that this is virtually the very spot in the woods where your father found Gwaltney and Cordelia. Suppose your father were to follow us here?"

Elizabeth met his gaze solemnly. "I suppose he could force us to get married."

"But we're already engaged."

"In that case," she said, unfastening his shirt, "we really haven't anything to worry about, have we?"

The first amber leaves of autumn drifted through the air and adorned the blackened remains of the house. Gwaltney stood staring at the ashes, the ashes of everything he'd once wanted so desperately. Everything he'd fought so long and hard to acquire.

He was surprised to find he didn't feel the least bit of loss.

Django, stretched out at his feet, lifted his head and growled. Gwaltney looked behind him and saw, to his surprise, Alexander Blair. Blair was dressed in casual riding clothes. There was a bulge in his coat that made Gwaltney suspect something was concealed beneath it. He hoped to God it wasn't a gun.

"Blair," he said cautiously.

Alexander looked at him a long moment. "I need to talk to you," he said at last.

Gwaltney met the young man's eyes, seeing nothing there that looked like a desire for vengeance. Which was just as well. There had been enough vengeance already. It was time for the bloodshed to stop, time for life to return to normal. "I'm sorry about Margaret," he said at last.

Alexander's gaze wavered and fell. "I thought I loved her," he said in a low voice. "But I think I was wrong."

"It wasn't your fault, Blair. She used you to get to me. She made a fool of you."

Alexander shook his head, and his mouth slanted wryly. "No. Your wife was right. She couldn't have made a fool of me if I hadn't been a fool to begin with."

Gwaltney looked at the young man, and some of his irritation melted away. Alexander was, after all, only twenty. He was a young, lonely man who had been manipulated by an older woman.

"At any rate," Alexander said, looking uncomfortable, "I just wanted to apologize for some of the things I said. And for what I did to you last week."

Gwaltney hesitated a long moment, then inclined his head. "I accept your apology."

"Thank you." Alexander's eyes shifted toward the ashes, and suddenly Gwaltney realized why Blair was here. He decided to leave him alone.

"Excuse me," he said. "I need to go see Cordelia."

He stepped away and headed toward the woods, Django limping at his heels. A moment

later he looked back over his shoulder and saw the young man kneeling in front of the ruins of the house.

He saw Blair place a bouquet of flowers on the ashes.

Gwaltney's brief conversation with Alexander crystallized a thought that had been nagging at the back of his mind for several days now. He had a decision to make, and he realized he couldn't make it without Cordelia. He went to look for her, and found her near the smokehouse, supervising the slaves as they worked to preserve a recently butchered hog. Django sniffed the air with interest.

She turned and gave him a hesitant smile, which wavered at the serious expression on his face. "Is everything all right?" she asked.

"I'm not certain. Can we talk?"

Cordelia nodded and followed him away from the area. Intrigued by the odor of fresh pork, Django did not follow. They stopped in the woods, and she looked up anxiously into his face.

"What is it, Gwaltney?"

Gwaltney hesitated a long moment. "I've been thinking," he said at last. "I want to ... to atone for what I did to William Carr as best I can. Carr had no relatives except for Alexander Blair and his sisters. And Blair needs land." She was silent, and he finished in a rush. "I believe I should give this land back to Carr's family. To Alexander Blair."

She gazed at him, unblinking, giving him no clue to what she was thinking. "So you want to give all your wealth away."

"Not all my wealth. About one-half of it. The rest of it I acquired by honorable methods. But this land...." He remembered William Carr's body swinging slowly in the breeze. "I cannot continue to live here, Cordelia."

"I rather thought you would come to that eventually," she said gently.

His head jerked up, and he looked at her, startled. "You don't object?"

"I don't see how you can bear to live here, feeling the way you do. Blaming yourself for what happened. I think your solution is a good one."

"I have other land," Gwaltney said, "but it's further up the river, and it has never been cleared. It will take some work to make it profitable. In the meantime, I may not be able to support you as well as you deserve."

A corner of her mouth lifted. "So I may have to wear old gowns? Surely you know by now, Gwaltney, that I do not consider that a fate worse than death."

"We may not be welcome in good society. Even you may be shunned."

"We have the land that comprised my dowry," she reminded him. "We could continue to live in this area."

"I wish to save that for our children," Gwaltney said firmly. The fierce pride that had driven him to acquire land would not allow him to use his wife's land to begin a new life.

She lifted her eyebrows, and he sensed he had offended her. "So you wish to begin again, but without any help from me."

"Of course I want your help. I trust you will oversee the tobacco production when the plantation becomes productive."

A hint of a smile appeared at the corner of her mouth. "Me? Really?"

Gwaltney shrugged. "You know more about tobacco than most men."

She chuckled. "We will surely be shunned if that becomes common knowledge."

"We will likely be shunned in any event." Gwaltney took a deep breath and spoke in a rush. "I will never be able to afford a house or furnishings this splendid again. You will have to accustom yourself to a less grand lifestyle."

He felt something in his chest go taut and cold as he waited for her answer. All his life he had been inferior. Few people had ever valued him simply because of who he was.

Cordelia thought she loved him. But would she love him if he had less money, if he couldn't provide her with everything she wanted?

"To tell you the truth," Cordelia said, glancing down at her gown and picking at the sleeve, where a few threads had unraveled, "I grow rather weary of these extravagant gowns. I still cannot remember not to rest my elbows on the fences, and they wear much too easily."

"Then you do not object?"

She looked up and smiled. "I think it is a very good idea." She took his hand in hers, turned it over, and caressed the callused palm. "I love you, Gwaltney. Not your money, and not our 'grand lifestyle.' *You*."

The ice in his chest melted, and his fingers wrapped around hers. "And I love you," he said softly, knowing it was true. She meant more to him than he could ever have imagined.

She looked up into his face, blinking hard. "Oh, Gwaltney. You've never said that to me before."

He bent to kiss her. "You had best accustom yourself to hearing it," he advised her in a whisper. "I'll be saying it on a regular basis from now on."

Epilogue

"If you don't stop pacing, you're going to wear a hole in that carpet, Gwaltney."

Gwaltney paused for a moment and glared at Jonathan. He'd been walking back and forth across his parlor for the past hour. The new house he'd built for his family was quite small, but being inside didn't make him nervous anymore--having faced his worst fear, he'd conquered it. But listening to the sounds of Cordelia's labor was more unnerving than being indoors had ever been. "If it were your wife up there screaming, you'd be pacing too."

"It will be my wife in a few months," Jonathan said calmly. "Although I rather doubt Elizabeth will curse as vividly as Cordelia has been doing this past hour."

Despite his anxiety, the corners of Gwaltney's mouth twitched involuntarily as he heard another string of curses from the room overhead. Mary had been sent to play outside with her nurse so as not to be unnecessarily frightened when Cordelia went into labor. And a good thing, too, or she'd be learning language that eight-year-old young ladies were not ordinarily exposed to.

When Jonathan and Elizabeth had married, the four of them had all had a long discussion about Mary, and eventually they had decided it was best for her to continue to live with Gwaltney and Cordelia. She could never know that Jonathan was her father, but she loved her "Uncle Jon"

and adored his visits.

Mary seemed very happy in the new house that they'd built with materials from the heavily forested land. In fact, all of them were happier than Gwaltney could have imagined. Because of concerns about fire, he had insisted the house be built of brick, but otherwise it was little fancier than a common planters' house, with only two small rooms on each floor. Gwaltney worked from dawn to dusk in the fields with his few slaves, and Cordelia worked right beside him many days, when she wasn't busy preparing food or sewing clothing. Even Mary spent a lot of time in the fields, doing simple chores such as pulling worms off the tobacco. Her life would have been easier in Williamsburg, but she seemed happy on the new quarter.

It wasn't the life he'd wanted to give his family--it wasn't an easy life by any means--yet Cordelia and Mary seemed content. Gwaltney had finally come to understand that Cordelia didn't want to be a powdered, silk-draped, idle lady. She might have been born gentry, but she'd never been a lady at heart. She was happiest doing work that mattered. And what mattered to her was making their new plantation a productive one. She'd worked in the fields right up until she'd gone into labor.

"Cordelia must be in a great deal of pain," he said softly.

Jonathan stood up, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Women have been having babies forever, Gwaltney. She'll be fine."

Gwaltney growled and resumed pacing. "How do they stand it?"

"I have no idea. I'm glad it's not something we have to do. It sounds rather ... unpleasant."

Horrific was more like it, Gwaltney thought. Fortunately, Cordelia was being midwifed by Jennifer Greyson, who'd had two babies of her own, and Elizabeth. He hoped they would be able to help Cordelia through her delivery. He'd wanted to stay with her himself, but Jennifer and Elizabeth had been appalled at that suggestion and promptly ushered him from the chamber.

Which was just as well, as he strongly suspected he would have disgraced himself by swooning.

He heard a light footstep on the staircase and looked up hopefully as Jennifer Greyson looked around the corner. She smiled reassuringly at him.

"The baby is here, Gwaltney."

Relief exploded in his chest. At last, his wife's ordeal was over. "What about Cordelia?" he said harshly. "Is she all right?"

"She's fine."

"I want to see the baby," he said. "I want to see Cordelia."

"Come upstairs, then. She wants to see you, too."

Gwaltney turned toward the stairs, then hesitated. "Jonathan, why don't you go get Mary now? I imagine she'd like to meet the baby, too."

He took the narrow stairs three at a time and bounded into the bedchamber, barely noticing Elizabeth standing next to the window. Cordelia lay in the bed, clearly exhausted. She was pale and sweaty with huge purple circles under her eyes, and her long hair fell, lank and disheveled, over her shoulders. He'd never seen her look so beautiful.

"Cordelia," he whispered, sitting on the bed next to her. He took her hand, and she smiled tiredly at him. The baby was lying, wrapped in a blanket, in her lap. It was incredibly tiny.

"You have a son," she said softly.

A son. Gwaltney gazed at the baby, afraid to touch him. He had never seen anything so

delicate, so fragile, in his life. "He's so small."

"Actually," Elizabeth interjected helpfully, "Jennifer says he's rather large for a newborn."

The baby had a red, wrinkled face and an oddly shaped head topped with a fuzzy thatch of dark hair. Gwaltney reached out hesitantly and touched the tip of his finger to the small cheek, and the baby turned his head, looking for milk. Gwaltney smiled.

"He's beautiful," he said softly.

Cordelia chuckled. "You're quite deluded, Gwaltney. I think he's rather odd-looking. But Jennifer says all new babies look this way."

Gwaltney shook his head. "No, he's beautiful," he said firmly. "And so are you."

"You are definitely delusional. Brought on by the stress of being a father, I imagine."

At that moment the door burst open, and Mary came bounding in with Django clattering at her heels. "Mama!" she cried. Her voice was high and sweet, and Gwaltney still loved to hear it. Cordelia had taught her to write, and she'd finally begun talking not long thereafter. "May I please see the new baby?"

Without waiting for a reply, she ran over to the bed while Django sat down next to the door in obedient response to Gwaltney's hand signal. Mary stared at the baby for a long, thoughtful moment.

"Do you like him?" Gwaltney asked.

Mary wrinkled her nose. "He's not very pretty, is he?"

Cordelia grinned over her head at Gwaltney. "I told you," she said.

Mary gently touched the fuzzy dark hair, and the baby opened his eyes wide and stared at her with perplexity. Mary broke into a beaming smile. "He's *adorable*," she whispered in awe.

Elizabeth stepped forward, rather awkwardly due to her rounded belly. She wasn't precisely waddling yet, but she could no longer be described as graceful either. "Mary," she said, "your mama needs her rest now. Why don't you run along outside?"

Mary stood up obediently, kissing Cordelia on the cheek and then trotting out of the room, Django behind her as always. Elizabeth fastened her commanding blue gaze on Gwaltney next. "You should be going, too."

"In a moment," Gwaltney said. He wanted to stare at the incredible miracle of his son. He didn't think he'd ever grow tired of sitting here and gazing at him.

"I'll give you a *brief* moment," Elizabeth said in her sternest voice, "but when I return you are going to leave." She left the chamber, and Cordelia smiled wanly.

"She's become quite the martinet, hasn't she?"

"You'll get your turn to order her around in a few months," Gwaltney said, dragging his gaze away from the baby. Looking into her eyes, he cupped his hand against her cheek, no longer made self-conscious by his callused palms, and spoke in a low, intense voice.

"I love you, you know."

"Yes," she said, the corners of her eyes crinkling with amusement. "I seem to recall you've said that before, once or twice."

In fact he said those words approximately a dozen times a day. He loved her and their life together more than he'd ever thought possible. He bent and kissed her cheek as Elizabeth came back into the chamber. "I suppose I must go now. But I want you to remember how much I love you."

"Don't worry, I won't forget. And remember, I love you too."

He smiled. "I'll remember," he said.