

MASQUE
of HONOR



SHARON VIRT

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Masque of Honor
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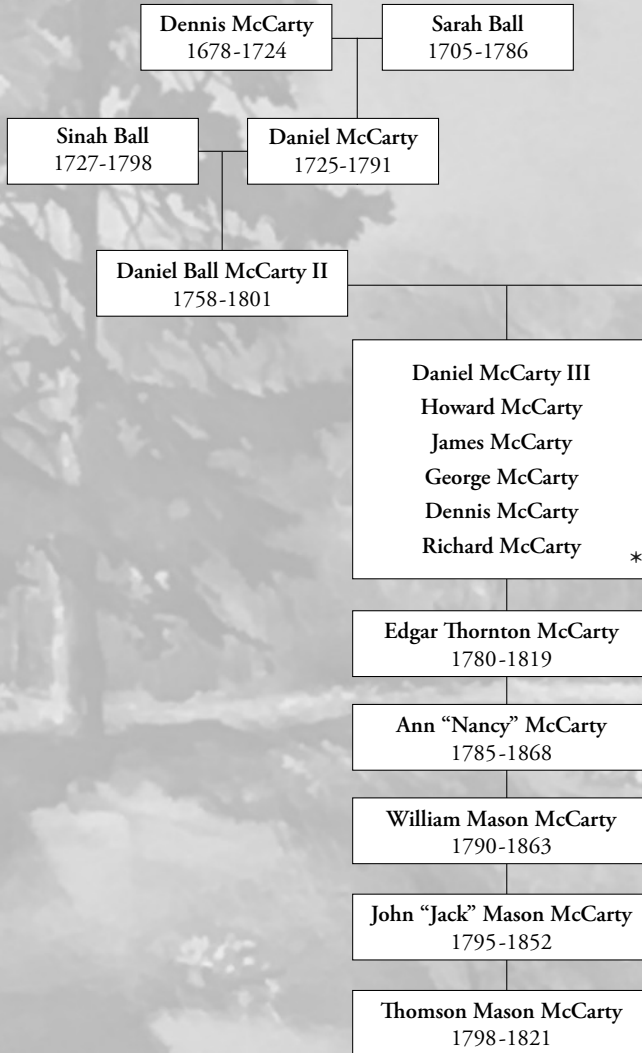
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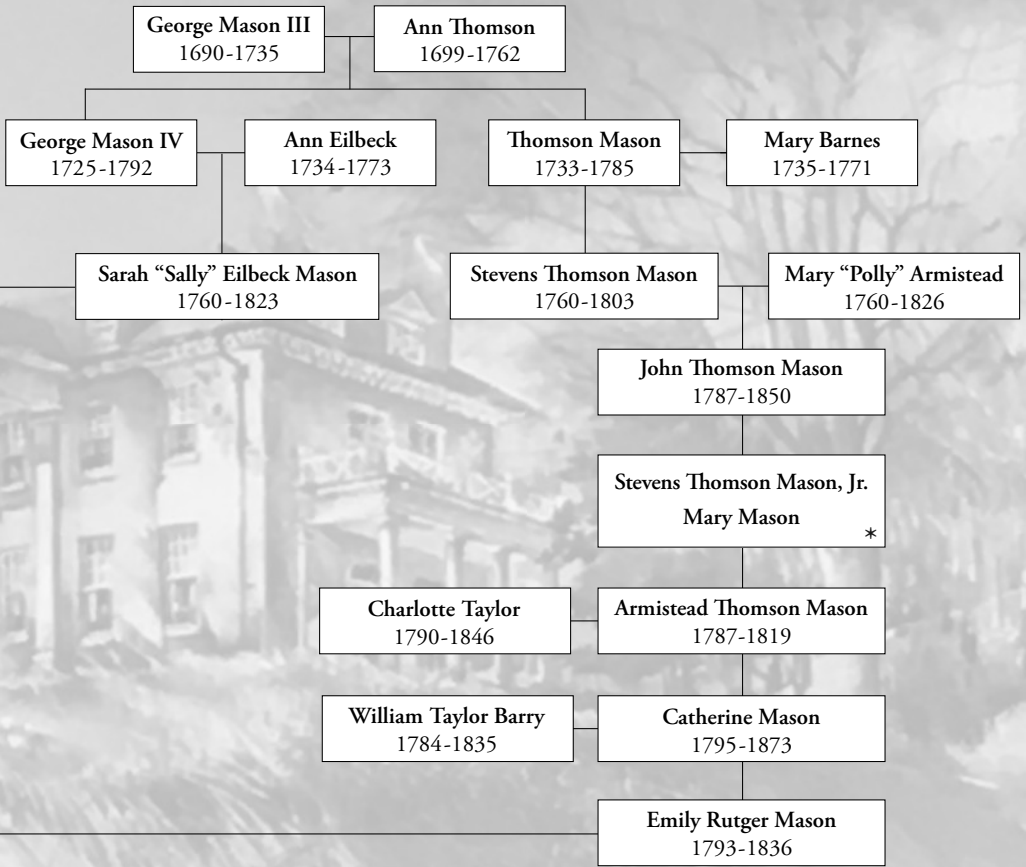
RosettaBooks® 

For my sons: James, Lucas, Zachary, and Nicholas

FIRST FAMILIES OF VIRGINIA

SELECT MCCARTY AND MASON FAMILY TREES





**Deceased before 1816*

FIRST FAMILIES OF VIRGINIA

SELECT LEE FAMILY TREES



Thomas Ludwell Lee
1730-1778

Mary Aylett
1729-1780

Thomas Ludwell Lee II
1752-1808

Frances "Fannie" Carter
1760-1850

Catherine "Katie"
1782-1849

Mary Aylett "Molly"
1786-1826

Elizabeth "Betsy"
1787-1837

Winifred "Winnie"
1790-1833

Frances Carter "Fanny"
1796-1850

Sydney "Sissy"
1797-1820

Anne Lucinda "Lucy"
1798-1854

**“WHOM THE GODS WOULD DESTROY
THEY FIRST MAKE MAD.”**

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “The Masque of Pandora”



PROLOGUE

FEBRUARY 6, 1819,
BLADENSBURG, MARYLAND

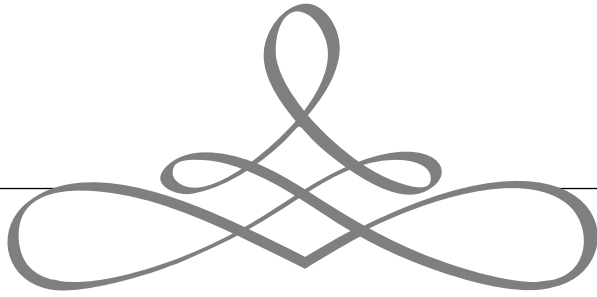
A crowd of onlookers had gathered in the half-light of dawn as wind whipped through the bare branches of alders along the banks of the Blood Run. Despite the unrelenting storm, both the bloodthirsty and the curious had traversed nearly a mile from the edge of town through blowing snow to the grove along this stony tributary to bear witness to this morning's affair of honor. The townspeople gathered in silence, huddled against the tempest and bitter cold, as they waited for the formalities to conclude and the signal to be given.

On the south bank, where the stream ran east through a gauntlet of ice and stone, two men stood out from the rest. Facing each other, they braced against the storm, not four paces apart. Each held a long-barreled musket at his side. One, wearing a rounded cap, heavily skirted overcoat, and calfskin gloves, stood tall and proud with a nobleness of demeanor and a fiery determination in his eyes. The other was coatless, gloveless, and hatless, with raven locks blowing in the violent wind. He, too, was tall, with piercing eyes and an unyielding grittiness about him. The tension between them lay heavily in the air, yet not a word had been uttered. The only sounds were the howling wind and the low gurgle of the icy creek beyond the reeds.

The field marshal muttered something to the contestants, awakening excitement in the crowd, whose size had slowly grown in numbers. As the marshal finished his mumbling, each of the men nodded in response, the one adjusting his shoulders to stand even taller, while the other tightened his grip on the musket, throwing his head back to toss unkempt hair from his brow.

At the marshal's next word—the signal to fire—both men rushed to raise their muskets. They were positioned so close that the ends of the barrels nearly touched. Within a split second, the silence on the field shattered as the guns' hammers sparked the flints, igniting the black powder so loudly that the echo between the hills seemed to rip open the sky. In a fiery burst, cold lead propelled hotly down the muskets' barrels, exploding for but a fragment of a moment into the snowy air before entering each man. The crowd cried out in unison, first startled by the crack of gunfire and then horrified by the gore that immediately ensued. Through the blur of smoke and the acrid smell of burning powder, they gasped as they watched each man fall. Black blood quickly engulfed the whiteness of the snow as the bodies lay motionless on the frozen field. Here, on this remote field in the court of last resort, what lay behind the mask of honor finally was revealed.

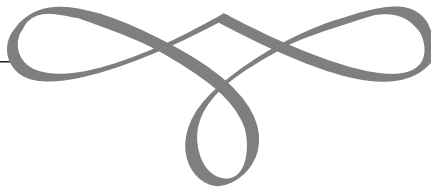




PART ONE

“PREMONITIONS, FORESHADOWINGS
OF SOME TERRIBLE DISASTER
OPPRESS MY HEART.”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *“The Masque of Pandora”*





CHAPTER 1

AUGUST 15, 1813, PEACH ORCHARD CAMP,
FORT NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Lieutenant John “Jack” Mason McCarty woke with a pounding in his head and a stinging on his neck. Swatting at the biting black fly, he shifted on the cot to find a more comfortable position in the sweltering heat. The movement caused the throbbing in his head to worsen. He rolled onto his back and gulped at the hot, muggy air. The hammering in his head pounded even louder. Bringing a hand to his forehead, Jack grasped his temples. Amid the pulsing pain, a voice boomed somewhere above him. He opened an eye. Blinding rays of filtered light cut through the storm thundering inside his skull. He squinted. A shadowy figure stood over him.

“Get up, Jack!”

The shrillness of the voice compounded the intensity of the throbbing. Jack moaned unintelligibly and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Christ Almighty, Jack, you need to get up!”

Jack rolled away toward the tent wall. “Go away!”

“Come on, Jack! Colonel Mason called the officers, and you already missed this morning’s roll. Now, get up!” Lieutenant James Dulaney kicked the leg of the cot where Jack lay.

The thud of James’s boot on the cot’s wood reverberated through Jack’s body like a mallet on a drum. “Stop that!”

"I'll stop when you get up!" James kicked the cot harder.

Jack rolled toward James, his head on fire and his temper beginning to flare. "For chrissake, you are worse than my mother!"

James laughed. "Your mother would have thrown a basin of water on you by now!" Jack grunted. "Come on, Jack. Up, or I'll be forced to turn you out of that cot!"

Jack groaned. With a defeated huff, he sat up and steadied himself on the cot's edge. The pulsing in his head made him woozy.

"God, you look awful!"

"And good morning to you, too, Sally." Jack spit a putrid taste from his mouth onto the floor.

James shook his head. "In the lowers again?" Jack nodded as he rubbed the back of his neck. "You know how Colonel Mason feels about his officers gambling with enlisted men."

Jack scoffed and spit on the floor again. "Colonel Mason!"

Lifting his head, he glared with bloodshot eyes at his friend. Growing up on neighboring plantations in the Northern Neck, the two had known each other since they were children. Both were members of Virginia's landed gentry, with James's home located along the Potomac River adjacent to General Washington's Mount Vernon, and Jack's family seat situated across the Pohick Bay from his grandfather's plantation of Gunston Hall. Having just reached their eighteenth years and following in the footsteps of their fathers who had fought in the Revolution, both were serving as staff officers in this latest war against the British. Like Jack, James was tall, standing just over six feet, with broad shoulders that narrowed to a trim waist. His hazel eyes were shaped like almonds and set wide on either side of a long, aquiline nose. Normally, James's sable-brown hair was brushed neatly from his face, but this morning his locks were as black as Jack's and glued to his forehead in a sweaty paste. Dressed in full uniform, James was glistening with perspiration.

Jack nodded in the direction of James's jacket. "It must be a hundred degrees. Why are you in that?"

"As I said, Colonel Mason's called for us."

“Why?”

James exhaled an exasperated sigh. “That’s what colonels do, Jack. Call their officers ... issue orders.”

Jack threw James a look. “But it’s Sunday. Even God gave it a rest on Sunday.”

“Tell that to the British.”

A sudden seriousness darkened Jack’s face. “Are they coming up the river again?”

“Not today. At least not yet.” James glanced at the floor before bringing his eyes back to Jack’s. “Captain Alexander’s patrol captured McNally this morning.”

“Shane?” James nodded. “Jesus.” Shane McNally had grown up on the McCarty family estate, and Jack and James had known him all their lives. “Where?”

“Dunno. But you need to get cleaned up. The colonel called us at ten.” James pulled a timepiece from his waistcoat. “Which by my watch is in twelve minutes.”

Jack lifted his head and drew in a long breath, gathering the where-withal to stand.

James shook his head. “That’s what happens when you imbibe that coffin varnish the enlisted men drink.” Jack shot James another dirty look as he stood from the cot. He noticed his boots were still on from the night before. With his first step, Jack stumbled over his hat and nearly fell into the washstand. James reached for Jack’s arm to steady him. “Careful there.” James scanned the floor and spotted the coat of Jack’s uniform lying half under the cot. He picked it up from the floor and brushed dirt from the sleeve with his hand. “Your quarters are a mess.”

“Yeah, well.” At the washstand, Jack skimmed dead insects from the basin before pouring more stagnant water from the pitcher. He cupped his hands and splashed his face.

“It’s not helping, my friend. You still look like hell.”

Jack took a handful of water in his mouth and rinsed before spitting it on the floor. “Tastes like something died.”

“Probably a drowned rat at the bottom of one of those crocks you were drinking from last night.”

Jack threw another look in James’s direction. “And when did you become a saint?”

James laughed. “I’m no saint. I’m just of no mind to punish myself so.”

Jack wiped a hand over the stubble on his chin before pushing water from his fingers through his hair. He tucked the shirt into his trousers and straightened his collar. “Do you see my waistcoat?”

Glancing around the canvas walls, James spotted the vest on the back of a chair. He grabbed it and tossed it to Jack and watched as Jack struggled to put it on. “I’m worried about you, my friend. Since William left, you’ve been—”

Jack stopped buttoning the waistcoat and glared at James. “Since my brother left, I’ve been what? Being who I am?”

“You’re not one of the enlisted, Jack.”

“How do you know what I am?”

James lowered his eyes, kicking the toe of his boot into the floor before looking back at Jack, who was still staring at him. “We need to make haste. We don’t want to keep Colonel Mason waiting.”

Jack scoffed. “That man has little patience for anything.” James remained silent while Jack finished dressing and the two exited the stifling heat of the tent.

What once had been rows of fruited trees surrounded by mounds of grass and golden mustard were now axed stumps engulfed in powdered dirt that turned to thick black mud when it rained. Built to protect Fort Norfolk’s flank, Peach Orchard Camp was a mix of tents and log cabins aligned in a grid, with officers’ quarters near the gate and enlisted men’s at the rear. Far from the eyes of the officers were shelters along the camp’s rear earthen wall. Jack was all too familiar with “the lowers,” where jugs of grog were plentiful, and games of hazard could be found on any given night.

With little breeze stirring and the August sun baking overhead, the temperature outside was oppressive, the air pungent with fetid odors of men and death. The suffocating misery of heat and sickness was routine

in the lowlands along the Elizabeth River. During the day, biting flies and swarming gnats tortured the encamped soldiers. At night it was mosquitos that plagued them. But their greatest source of suffering came from boredom and a longing for home.

As Jack and James made their way across camp, a wagon carrying the bodies of two men kicked up a cloud of dust as it rolled by on its way to the grave-pit. Jack pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his nose and mouth, fighting to keep from losing his stomach. He had been told that he would get used to the smell, but he had not.

The officers of the Fifty-Sixth Regiment of Virginia's militia had gathered outside their commanding officer's quarters. As Jack and James approached, Major George Rust, with dark, deep-set eyes, gave Jack a once-over and a disapproving look. Jack lowered his gaze and fell in with the others waiting in the hot summer sun for the colonel to emerge. When the last officer had joined the group, Captain Gerard Alexander leaned through the doorway of the log cabin and called inside. Within moments, Colonel Armistead Mason stepped from the shadows, the epaulets on his shoulders and the buttons on his dark-blue coat glimmering in the hazy sunshine. His trousers were white and crisply pressed, and his black boots polished to a high gloss. A round hat, tilted to the left with a black cockade, covered most of his auburn hair. Despite the sweltering heat, there was not a visible drop of sweat on the colonel. He gleamed in the morning light, every part of his appearance in perfect order. At his emergence, the officers saluted. Jack, too, straightened his shoulders and raised his right hand to his temple.

"At ease, gentlemen. At ease." The men relaxed their salute, but the tension was as thick as the sweltering air. Colonel Mason cleared his throat and scanned their weathered faces. "Upon my arrival here two weeks ago, this regiment was in complete disarray. My first priority has been to establish order and instill discipline among the men. As you would expect, not all are happy with the rigor of military doctrine. Last week, three of these dissenters abandoned their posts and absconded from camp. Desertion, gentlemen, next to insubordination, is the greatest enemy of an army. And I will tolerate neither." Colonel Mason

removed his hat from his head and tucked it under his arm. Pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, he dabbed his hairline.

He sweats after all, Jack thought as the colonel pushed the handkerchief across his forehead and back into his pocket.

“Captain Alexander’s patrol apprehended one of the deserters this morning and has returned the man to camp.” Colonel Mason turned to Gerard Alexander. “Well done, Captain. Well done, indeed.” The colonel outstretched his hand to shake the captain’s as officers nodded. Gerard Alexander, who was sporting an ear-to-ear grin, reminded Jack of an obedient puppy waiting for a bone and a pat on the head.

“Gentlemen,” Colonel Mason said, his brown eyes nearly black with intensity, “we must set an example among the men that desertion will not be tolerated.” Jack’s stomach tightened into knots. “The federal army has experienced these same issues and has implemented policy to execute absconders. Since then, desertion has largely ceased in the federal ranks. Now their regiments in the northern campaign are stronger than ever against the enemy. I have studied these methods and discussed it with General Taylor and the governor. We all agree on the need for a firm hand.”

The knot in Jack’s gut began to twist. Officers shifted their stances and exchanged glances.

Major Rust cleared his throat and broke the silence. “Are you suggesting, sir, that we execute McNally?”

“I’m not making a suggestion, Major. I’m issuing an order. Once Captain Alexander convenes a firing squad, we shall muster the men onto the quad and execute the private as an example to the others.”

“You can’t be serious!” The words flew from Jack’s mouth before his lips had time to stop them.

Colonel Mason tilted his head in Jack’s direction. “Excuse me, Lieutenant?”

“McNally is sixteen years old, Colonel. He’s not a soldier, but a boy!” James moved behind Jack and squeezed Jack’s elbow in warning.

Colonel Mason’s dark eyes narrowed. “Who asked you to speak? Are you questioning my authority, Lieutenant?” Colonel Mason

scanned Jack from head to toe. “Look at yourself. You’re completely out of order.”

“Colonel Mercer would never have issued such a command,” Jack said, feeling blood rush up his neck, desperate to do something—anything—to intervene.

“Colonel Mercer isn’t in charge here anymore, now, is he?” Colonel Mason snapped. “Might I remind you that Colonel Mercer was too sick to command. Not that he was effective in leading his regiment in good health either!”

Captain Alexander snickered under his breath at Colonel Mason’s insult as the other officers exchanged cautionary glances. An angry flush spread from Jack’s neck to his face. Colonel Charles Fenton Mercer, a mentor and friend, had recruited Jack into the regiment, and Jack had served as both Mercer’s aide-de-camp and his personal secretary. By all accounts Fenton Mercer was brilliant and had taught Jack more than any teacher he’d ever known. James increased his grip on Jack’s elbow. Jack shrugged free as Major Rust interceded.

“Colonel, I believe Lieutenant McCarty’s reaction is representative of the response we may receive from the entire regiment should we execute McNally as you suggest. It’s not that I nor any one of the officers question your orders, sir, but such punishment will most certainly erode morale and could possibly incite desertion *en masse* or, worse, mutiny. With all due respect, Colonel, I believe we should be measured in this instance. Punish the soldier, yes. But having him face a firing squad without knowing the consequence of his actions beforehand may be considered extreme.”

Colonel Mason fixed his pensive eyes on the major. The major stared back, unwavering. Not a word was uttered, and the silence between the two men grew awkward.

Another long minute passed before Colonel Mason shifted his eyes away from Major Rust to a point beyond the camp. Then Colonel Mason nodded, seemingly to himself, before looking back at the major.

“Very well, then,” Colonel Mason said. He pinched his shoulders and straightened his posture before looking back at his officers.

“Colonel Mercer’s lack of leadership is at fault here. Had he provided proper training and adequate discipline, we would not have such in-subordinate behavior and the ensuing morale issue.” Colonel Mason paused his lecture and raised his voice to declare his verdict. “McNally shall be lashed. Going forward, should he or any man abscond from their post, they shall be executed. Let this be the first and final warning. Deserters will be hunted down and dragged back to camp to stand before a firing squad. Might I remind each and every one of you that my father, like your fathers, sacrificed greatly to free this country from the tyranny of the British. And we, gentlemen, have been called once again to face the enemy. It is kill or be killed, and we shall not relinquish our responsibility—the responsibility to defend Virginia and to preserve our nation’s freedom!”

With sweat now glowing on his brow, Colonel Mason again removed the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead before returning the hat to his head. “Captain Alexander, order every man to the quad to witness the lashing of Private McNally.”

Jack squinted, shading his eyes from the blistering sun with a hand while he watched them drag Shane McNally to the quad. Shane seemed small as he stumbled through the dust, his face smudged and scratched, his ginger hair dirty and matted. There was fear in his eyes, but he shed not a tear as his hands were tied to the post. *Stay strong, Shane*, Jack thought as the boy’s soiled shirt was pulled from his shoulders and left hanging from the waist of his trousers.

As Captain Alexander raised the whip, Jack turned his head. At the first whistle and crack of the lash, Jack closed his eyes. When the whip cracked on the boy’s back a second time, Jack flinched.

The whip whistled and cracked again. Shane McNally screamed. Jack clenched a fist and held it close at his side. *Stay strong.*

WHACK! Shane McNally began to cry, pleading for forgiveness. With his eyes still closed, Jack shook his head and clutched his fist tighter. *Don’t beg, Shane. They won’t forgive you.*

MASQUE *of* HONOR

WHACK! Shane screamed again. Jack dug his thumb into the side of his leg as he clenched his fingers tighter and tighter, remembering the feel of the leather strap and his own warm blood running down his side before the world had gone white.



CHAPTER 2

APRIL 6, 1816, LEESBURG, VIRGINIA

WHACK! Jack flinched when a low branch smacked the window as the carriage jerked to and fro through the mud and ruts of the Carolina Road. Pulling a heavy gold watch from his vest, he checked the time. Nearly half past five. Snapping its lid closed, his eyes caught the portrait of the smiling maiden enameled on its casing. *Grandma Sinah.*

Jack moved his gaze from his grandmother's image to the bleakness of the early-spring roadside beyond the window. *Of all the families William could have married into!* He rubbed a thumb over the face on the watch's casing as his apprehension churned.

"Now, now, Jack. Don't you fret about the time. All those pretty girls will still be waiting for you and Tommy when we get there."

Jack turned his attention to his mother sitting across from him. Her visage was lively and animated under a bundle of winter trappings. With all the fur around her face, she looked as if she were embarking on a northern expedition into Indian territory rather than traveling in the family's coach to an engagement party. A chinchilla stole was wrapped so high on her neck that it blended into the matching cap on her head. Her heavy cape was pulled up to her chin, and the rest of her was

hidden under a woolen blanket draped over her lap. Her eyes twinkled with delight at toying with him as she waited impatiently for him to take the bait. Jack released a long sigh before obliging.

“You know that you’ve made us late, Sally.”

His mother insisted that her children call her by her first name, since mothers, in the world of Sally McCarty, were “old, matronly, and boring.”

“Of course we’re late! By design, my dear Jackie. By my own design,” Sally said.

Jack glanced at his younger brother Thomson sitting next to him. Sally tossed her head with a laugh. “Better to give Cousin Polly something of my choosing to gossip about than to have her invent something to suit her fancy.” She laughed again with a sparkle of mischief in her eyes.

Jack grunted. She had a point. The Masons of Raspberry Plain had a knack for drama. And for the life of him, Jack could not understand why his mother still considered Polly Mason family when it was Polly’s late husband, Senator Stevens Mason, who was her first cousin.

Sally pulled a mittened hand from under the blanket and patted her son’s knee. “It’s quite all right, Jackie, my boy. You let me handle ol’ Polly Mason. You just focus your attention on those Lee sisters. Or on that Taylor girl that Armistead is so sweet on. Now, if you could turn her attention, that would surely get ol’ Polly’s tongue wagging.”

“I have no interest in turning the head of any woman attracted to the likes of Armistead Mason.”

Sally raised an eyebrow. “Now, John McCarty!” she said. “That is not the attitude to take into Raspberry Plain tonight! Whatever bone you have with Armistead, I will not have you pick it this evening.”

“I find him more of a tool than a bone,” Jack said, leaning back on the bench. Thomson chuckled.

Sally raised her right brow higher as her left eye narrowed. “And you, my clever monkey, will not be making a cat’s paw of him this evening either. Are we clear, Jack?”

Jack glanced out the carriage window at the row of oaks standing tall and bare above the roadside brambles before bringing his eyes back to hers. This was not the first time she had invoked the fable of the monkey who convinced a gullible cat to pull chestnuts from a hot fire with its paw. And not the first time she had called him her clever monkey.

“Of course, Sally. I have no chestnuts to roast tonight, but roast him I might with the toast I have planned for William.”

Sally gave him another sharp look. “A toast? Considering how moody you’ve been over this engagement, I question your motives.”

“Since Armistead is about to become my brother-in-law, I will simply offer him the same congratulations I offer to William. There’s no harm in that now, is there?”

Sally narrowed her eyes as she studied his face. “I don’t know what you are up to, John McCarty. But there’s enough trouble lurking outside a door without having to invite it in.”

Jack turned his attention back to the window. The sun was hovering just above the ridgeline to the west. *Perhaps you should have this conversation with William. He’s the one who invited trouble by proposing to Armistead’s sister!*

The coach rattled and jolted as it lurched through another muddy rut.

“So, Jack,” Sally said, breaking the quiet and the seriousness that had settled among them. “You boys were up with Fenton half the night last evening. Anything exciting happening in the Statehouse that would interest your dear old mother?”

Here we go, Jack thought, welcoming the change in subject. While he appreciated his mother’s interest in politics and shared many of her viewpoints, her often quirky and outrageous observations could, at times, drive him to madness. And she was anything but old. For a widow who had raised nearly a dozen children on her own, she was amazingly youthful. Hardly a gray hair on her head, and the only wrinkles on her face were laugh lines around her eyes and her smile. Her heart was huge with generosity and kindness. Her mind was as

sharp as a tack, and her wit equally as keen. Sally McCarty was an amazing woman, and Jack knew it.

“We spent most of the evening playing cards—”

“And drinking whiskey,” Sally interrupted.

“And, yes,” Jack said, “there was a little whiskey to accompany the card game.” Indeed, there had been more than a little whiskey poured at Fenton Mercer’s house at Aldie where they had overnighted, but Jack wasn’t admitting that to his mother. “We talked more about what was going on in Washington City,” Jack said. If Jack knew his mother, Sally would want to know all the latest gossip.

“Washington City?” said Sally. “Any news on Mr. Madison’s plans to campaign for a third term?”

“With the president leaving Washington defenseless during the last war, I cannot imagine a scenario in which Mr. Madison wins reelection. But let’s pray that he does run again. I believe it’s our best chance of taking back the presidency.”

“In addition to the presidency, our Federalist Party could gain more seats in the House of Representatives this election cycle,” Thomson said. “Men across the country are in an uproar over Congress giving themselves a pay increase.”

“And that gives our man Fenton an opportunity,” Jack said. A puzzled look fell over Sally’s face. “Our congressman, Joe Lewis, voted for the pay increase. If old Joe can be convinced not to campaign for reelection, it would clear the way for Fenton to become the Federalist candidate for the House of Representatives.”

“I know who Joe Lewis is, Jack!” Sally snapped. “And for the life of me, I do not understand why you boys are so enamored of Fenton Mercer. He was overindulged as a child, coddled as an adolescent, and now he’s, well, besides all his ‘woe-is-me’ nonsense, he’s just too opinionated and pompous for my liking!”

“He’s brilliant, Sally,” Jack replied. “He can argue the law better than anyone I know. And his ideas on industrialization will revolutionize our economy and our country.”

“Industrialization? Rubbish! That’s the last thing we need in the South. Fenton’s ideas are too liberal for Virginians. Your brother William would be better suited for Congress to represent us.”

“William?” Jack said in disbelief.

“And why not?” Sally asked. “He’s got a good head on his shoulders. He’s conservative. And certainly better-looking and has a much better disposition than Mr. Melancholy!”

“That’s not nice, Sally,” Jack said. Beneath her cape, Sally folded her arms across her chest.

“But William has never held office,” said Thomson.

“Doesn’t matter,” Sally retorted. “William’s the only one with any hope to win against Armistead.”

“Armistead?!” Jack and Thomson said in unison.

“Yes. Armistead. He ran for the Republicans last time. I would imagine Armistead will run again,” Sally said with a confident nod.

“Armistead was just appointed to the United States Senate,” Jack said. “Why would he campaign for a seat in the House of Representatives?”

“Don’t you boys underestimate what Thomas Jefferson and his Jacobins will do for total power and the destruction of General Washington’s legacy!” Sally exclaimed.

“Agreed, but what has that got to do with Armistead?” Jack asked.

“If someone of your brother’s stature steps forward for the Federalists, Mr. Jefferson’s Republicans will be forced to field their best candidate. As I see it, Armistead is the best they’ve got. And since they control the Virginia legislature, they can easily elect another Republican to the Senate in Armistead’s place. I’m betting they force him to run for the House, whether he wants to or not,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes, the one that glimmered when she knew she was right.

“No way Armistead will resign from the Senate, Sally. No way,” said Jack.

Sally leaned forward, putting a hand on Jack’s knee. “Mark my words, boys. Mark ol’ Sally’s words. Mr. Madison will announce his

retirement. It'll be Mr. Monroe running for president. And it'll be Armistead Mason who campaigns for the House."

Jack was about to challenge her further when the coach abruptly stopped. From the window he could see the white columns of the portico that fronted the manor house of Raspberry Plain. With all the discussion, he hadn't noticed their turn off the Carolina Road and the drive up to the Mason estate.

"Well, my heavens," Sally said, leaning back and looking out the window to gather her bearings. "We've made it here already? I haven't had time to prepare myself."

Jack watched his mother's sudden shift from speculating about the next election to unbundling from her winter garb. All worries about Fenton Mercer and Jefferson's Jacobins were gone from her mind as she physically transformed from "Sally, Northern Explorer" to "Sally, Party Queen." She flung off the blanket and kicked it under her feet. She pulled off her mittens and tossed them on the seat beside her, released the collar of her cloak from her chin, and pulled the chinchilla stole from her neck to a much lower spot on her shoulders. She wiggled about inside her cloak, adjusting God knows what, patted her cheeks several times to make them flushed, and rubbed her lips together to redistribute the waxy paint she had applied before leaving Aldie.

She caught Jack chortling at her fidgeting and snapped at him. "Now, don't you start, young man! And put your cap on that wild head of yours. You boys need to look like proper gentlemen and not like sons of an overseer pretending to be genteel."

Jack gave his mother a wistful smile. "Now, Mother, that would mean that you'd have had to marry an overseer, and I just can't fathom you doing the likes of that."

Sally humphed back at him. "Well, right about that you are. And don't 'Mother' me, please!"

With both hands she removed her chinchilla cap and let her hair, which had been set in one long curl, fall to her left shoulder. She

smoothed the strands that had been displaced by the hat and reformed the soft curls around her face with her fingers.

“How do I look?” she asked.

They nodded approval.

“Come on now,” she announced, “let me show off my handsome boys to the ol’ Polly-girl.”

Jack laughed under his breath and pulled a rounded black hat over the thick waves of his ebony hair, which refused to stay out of his eyes. Glancing at Thomson, he nodded in silent acknowledgment. It was going to be one hell of a party with Sally McCarty tonight.



A decorative flourish consisting of several overlapping, looping lines in a light gray color, framing the chapter title.

CHAPTER 3

APRIL 6, 1816, RASPBERRY PLAIN PLANTATION,
LEESBURG, VIRGINIA

The Great Hall of Raspberry Plain, with its high, white, plastered walls and walnut trim, was alive tonight with the laughter of guests enjoying whiskey and wine. The gaiety of the gathering offset the somber portraits of dead Masons that hung high on the walls, their watchful eyes downcast on the living souls below. The chandelier glowed brightly, its tallow candles casting prisms of light on the faces of revelers as they talked and laughed and drank. There were even more guests in the parlor, where a giant Madeira-filled punch bowl sat in the middle of the room. Somewhere a harp was entertaining the crowd with a melody almost indiscernible over the noise of the party.

As they worked their way through the crowded hall, Jack and Thomson conspicuously drew the attention of unmarried ladies in the room. The McCarty men, known for their striking good looks and charismatic charm, were the wealthiest bachelors of neighboring Fairfax County. They were of Irish descent, athletically built, with thick black hair and piercing blue eyes. Jack, the second youngest of the clan, was the tallest, with broad shoulders and a form that looked to have been chiseled by Michelangelo himself. Thomson, a few years his junior, possessed the same good looks on a slightly smaller and thinner frame. The

bachelors' arrival had turned a number of heads in their direction, and Jack enjoyed the attention.

A raven-haired beauty with dark eyes caught Thomson by the elbow. "Why, Thomson McCarty! Were you about to walk right past me without so much as saying hello?" She batted her eyelashes at Thomson as she smiled.

A black widow luring prey into her web, Jack thought, for the beautiful Fanny Lee had been torturing Thomson for years.

"Why no, Miss Fanny! I was headed this way just now to find you, as I had been looking forward to seeing you all day," said Thomson. Young Thomson was smoother than Jack had thought.

Where there was one Lee girl, the others weren't far behind. There were seven altogether, each one more beautiful than the next. Fanny, with her high cheekbones, arched brows, and flirty eyes, was third youngest and hadn't changed a bit since the last time Jack had seen her. She had a figure like Venus, voluptuous curves in a tight-fitting dress that accentuated her slender waist and firm breasts. It would be a challenge to keep Thomson from being distracted by her this evening.

Jack looked around for the other Lee sisters who were usually surrounded by a gaggle of doting admirers. He didn't have to look far. Winnie Lee, the fiery, red-haired, hazel-eyed beauty, was directly behind Fanny, sitting in an oversized chair between the fair-haired Sissy and the dark-haired Molly. There were nearly a half dozen men at their feet. Just as Jack was about to interrupt their soiree, a young woman touched his sleeve. She was a pretty girl with a heart-shaped face and pouty lips the color of the flush on her cheeks. Her long blond hair was swept off her face and styled in loose curls that fell about her slight shoulders. But it was her eyes that captivated Jack. They sparkled with mischief and mystery and were the blue of cornflowers blooming in early summer. Miss Blue Eyes was draped in a soft pink gown with balloon-cap sleeves and a neckline cut low enough to reveal most of her shapely breasts. Between the low neckline and her eyes, Jack had a difficult time maintaining his focus.

“John McCarty? Is that you?!” Miss Blue Eyes asked with the gentle drawl of a proper Southern lady. *Do I know her?* Certainly had he met her before, he would have remembered.

“Yes,” Jack said. “I am John McCarty, miss, but my friends call me Jack.” He bowed to her politely as Miss Blue Eyes placed both hands on her hips.

“You don’t recognize me, do you?” Searching her face, he glimpsed familiarity, but for the life of him he couldn’t place her. She stood without a word, waiting for him to remember. Desperate for a clue, he noticed the mischievous glint in those pools of blue. It took a moment for the memory to come. It was after the Battle of Bladensburg two years before, when his regiment had taken respite at the Lee family plantation on their return to Leesburg, battered, beaten.

Lucy Lee! She was younger then, still a child in face and form. She and her sisters had been helping to serve the soldiers with biscuits and gravy that awful morning. And those eyes, so blue and filled with mystery. He remembered how they had intrigued him as he watched her through steam while she poured him coffee. “Lucy Lee! I hardly recognized you. You’ve grown up so.”

Lucy extended her hand. “Lucinda Lee, if you please. Only my friends call me Lucy.”

Jack took her extended hand and held her gaze with his own. Surprisingly, she didn’t glance away, her spirited eyes daring him further. He gently drew her gloved hand toward his lips, not once moving his eyes from hers, pressed his lips against her hand, and allowed the warmth of his breath to penetrate the glove’s weave. Only when blush ran hot through her cheeks did he move her hand from his mouth to touch it to his own cheek. Lucy narrowed her eyes.

“Are you always so fresh, Mr. McCarty?”

He moved her hand from his face without releasing it. “As fresh as is the month of May, Miss.”

“I see that you are a scholar of Chaucer.” Of the numerous occasions on which Jack had been accused of being fresh, Lucinda Lee was the first woman he’d met who called him out on quoting Chaucer.

“Ah, but the greatest scholars are not usually the wisest people.”

Lucinda recited in kind. “Full wise is he, Mr. McCarty, that can himself know.”

Now Jack was impressed. “And if he is indeed full wise, he himself must know that she, Miss Lee, is as fair as is the rose of May.”

Lucinda smiled again. “A rose I may be, but it’s a thorn I might give you, Mr. McCarty.”

“But if you prick me, Miss Lucinda, I may bleed.”

“There will be no blood tonight, Mr. McCarty.” She laughed out loud and pulled her hand away. “So, Mr. McCarty, where have you been keeping yourself? It has been forever since I’ve seen you.”

Jack moved closer, engrossed by her beauty and demonstrated intelligence. “In Williamsburg, finishing my law degree.”

“Impressive. And now? Will you become a planter-politician like the rest of them?”

“Like the rest of whom?”

“Isn’t that what you gentlemen do once you come of age? Receive your birthright, inherit your lands, build your plantations, and launch your political careers? I mean, just take a look around, Mr. McCarty.” Lucinda gave an exaggerated look about the room. “All I see are planters and politicians.”

“I have no interest in becoming a farmer, Miss Lucinda.”

“My apologies if I offended you. But if not a farmer, then what?”

“No offense taken, but farming requires growing roots. Something that I have no interest in doing. And you, Miss Lucinda? I assume that you, like the rest of the ladies in this room, are looking for a planter-politician husband?”

“To the contrary, Mr. McCarty. I can assure you that what I am looking for is not in this room.”

Jack moved his hands to his lapels, straightening his coat, and lifted his chin. “Well, Miss Lee, since I have only just arrived, I am not sure you can make such a statement.”

“Let me assure you otherwise, Mr. McCarty.”

Jack placed a hand on his chest, feigning injury. “You cut me to the quick! If not me, then who is the lucky gentleman who holds your heart?”

“Not who, sir, but what.”

Jack tilted his head, intrigued. “And what might that be?”

Mischief sparkled in her eyes. “Now, Mr. McCarty, why on earth would I share my heart with a near stranger?”

“Well, in that case, my lady, I shan’t be a stranger should I get to know you better.”

Thomson emerged from the crowd. “Pardon my interruption, Miss Lucinda, but I must borrow my brother.” Jack could tell by the look on Thomson’s face that he had had enough of Fanny Lee’s tormenting for now.

“If you borrow him, you’d have to return him. Perhaps you could keep him for the evening,” Lucinda said with a clever smile.

“You did not answer my question, Miss Lucinda. Perhaps I might call upon you sometime?”

“Only if you should bring your handsome brother Thomson along to save me from Chaucer and Shakespeare,” Lucinda said with an eyebrow raised at Thomson.

“I can’t fathom the need for rescue from dead poets, but I am happy to oblige and bring Thomson along for entertainment,” said Jack.

“Very well then, if you will excuse me.” Lucinda curtsied and turned her attention to another gentleman she recognized in the hall.

“Be careful with that one, Jack,” Thomson said under his breath as Jack watched her walk away. “She uses her heart like a weapon.” Jack shot his brother a quizzical glance as the two made their way down the corridor to find their brothers, stiff whiskey, and spirited conversation.



CHAPTER 4

The study of the late General Stevens Thomson Mason was situated in the far northeast corner of the manor, isolated from the rest of the house. Tonight the room was filled with the restless energy of young men and impassioned discussion on the latest political quandaries of the fledgling nation. From the corridor, Jack could hear the buzz of conversation reverberating down the hallway.

As the pair reached the room, Jack grabbed Thomson's sleeve. "Hold up a second," Jack said, stopping at the study's doorway. Jack scanned the room through a haze of heavy smoke and spotted his brother William in the far corner. Swirling a glass filled with whiskey, William was hard to miss. Taller than most men, he was impeccably dressed, wearing red tartan knickers and a deep-blue jacket embroidered with the McCarty family crest—a mailed fist holding a lizard with words in the Celtic language declaring bravery and honor.

Loud laughter erupted on the other side of the room, diverting Jack's attention. Dressed in a general's uniform with black leather boots buffed to a high polish, Armistead Mason reclined against the edge of a desk. More than a dozen uniformed officers surrounded him. Armistead lifted his chin and said something that caused the men to laugh heartily again. The sight of the newly promoted General Mason holding court with his retinue made Jack's stomach churn.

Jack's attention was diverted again as their brother Edgar emerged from the haze and walked toward them. Edgar, William, and Thomson were all that were left of Jack's nine brothers. At the death of his twin, Edgar became the eldest of the remaining McCarty clan. He was also the shortest and the stoutest. With a mass of hair on his head and much the same on his arms and the back of his hands, he reminded Jack of a big black bear. Edgar was always happy and smiling, ready with a joke or a hug depending on the need. Without exception, Jack couldn't name a soul on earth who didn't love Edgar McCarty.

"Edgar!" Thomson said as Edgar approached.

"Greetings, brother!" Edgar said, opening his big, burly arms and embracing Thomson.

"You're leaving already?" Jack asked.

"Only momentarily to relieve myself of some of the drink!" Edgar said, as he adjusted the waistband of his trousers under his round belly.

Jack glanced over Edgar's shoulder at Armistead, who was laughing again. "Sounds like a hornet's nest in there."

"Hornets indeed," Edgar said. "Now you mind yourself, brother. You don't need to poke at a hornet to get yourself stung." Grasping Jack's forearm, he leaned close and lowered his voice. "They sting just because they can."

From concerns over planting in this year's colder-than-normal weather to the establishment of an American colony in Africa for manumitted and freed people of color, the study was electric with words of clashing opinions and clinking glasses of whiskey and rye. Jack had slipped into the room behind Thomson and had found his way to a wall of oak shelving lined with leather and clothbound books as conversations whirred around him. At one corner of the room, a group of physicians was discussing recent correspondence with the Necker Institute in Paris regarding a listening device to diagnose disorders of the heart and lungs. The topic monopolizing the throng around General Armistead Mason was a highly controversial bill recently passed by the Fourteenth

Congress to impose a duty on goods imported from the territories and provinces of His Majesty of Britannica.

“You see, gentlemen, this is not simply a matter of protecting northern industries, but of protecting the nation as a whole,” Armistead said, leaning against the front of his father’s desk with a glass of rye whiskey in hand. “We must never surrender to the British, militarily or economically.”

“If the tariff will pay our war debt and what is still owed to our militiamen, then you have my support, Armistead,” said the recently promoted Colonel George Rust.

“I’m in agreement with you, Armistead,” Captain William McCarty said, having joined the group. “The British cannot be trusted to uphold any accord they make. Treaty after treaty, they interfere with our commerce and threaten our independence.”

Despite Edgar’s warning, Jack was unable to hold his tongue. “While I certainly agree that the British cannot be trusted, I cannot agree with the general’s position on the tariff.”

“Come again?” Armistead asked, frowning as he shifted on the desk to see who was behind him. “Lieutenant Jack McCarty! How did you manage to slip in without my notice? Now, why is it that you disagree with my position?”

“It’s Captain McCarty now. And it’s a reckless policy and one that threatens the stability of Virginia’s economy.”

“My apologies, *Captain*.” Jack felt Armistead’s sarcasm. “But the British are undermining the ability of our industries to manufacture goods at profitable prices.”

“Virginia doesn’t rely on the selling of manufactured goods,” Jack said as he stepped closer to the desk. “Our economy relies on exporting tobacco and grain to England and Europe. Have you considered the impact on your farm’s profits if the British retaliate with a tariff of their own?”

Armistead appeared amused, as the epaulets on his shoulders caught the reflection of the lanterns overhead. “I will agree that there is a risk, but it is high time to stop Britain’s interference once and for all.” Armistead rocked his glass, the ice clinking repetitively against the

crystal. "Without a duty to normalize pricing, they will continue to buy our economic future with our own dollars. And we will be made their slaves once more and fools all the while!"

"Hear, hear!" George said, lifting his glass with a pipe clenched between his teeth, its smoke rippling in the air.

"Hear, hear!" the men chanted with glasses raised.

"As long as it doesn't lead to war again," Jack said. Armistead's friends were unaccustomed to the general being challenged by anyone, especially in his own house. They bristled, shifting shoulders uncomfortably as they muttered among themselves.

"And what would you know about war, son?" asked Armistead, his patience clearly growing thin.

"You are familiar with my service, General, and I am familiar with your proposed changes to the militia bill. If enacted, your amendments will completely undermine our ability to defend ourselves against the British or any other aggressors who wish us harm." A number of the uniformed officers mumbled their disagreement with Jack's view while others nodded in concurrence.

"Am I to assume that in addition to my vote on the tariff, you disagree with my proposed amendments to the militia bill?" Armistead's face reddened and his agitation showed.

"I am completely opposed to such amendments," said Jack.

"I must agree with my brother on this one, Armistead," said William. "We cannot allow the government to buy substitutions for those unwilling to serve their country."

"Not those unwilling to serve, William, but those who are morally opposed to war due to their religious convictions," Armistead clarified.

"And what about boys too young to serve?" Jack asked.

Armistead stood from the desk and turned toward Jack. "Tell me you aren't still smarting over that."

"Jack's simply pointing out an oversight of the amendment," George said, interrupting the escalation of the exchange.

"And what might that be, George?" Armistead asked, the annoyance in his voice continuing to grow.

“That every coward will claim a religious exemption,” said Jack.

“The Quakers are not cowards,” Armistead said. “While the ones under my command may not have held a gun, they were never afraid to be on the battlefield, unlike those who served as secretaries and aides.”

“What are you implying, General? That because I served as aide-de-camp, I was afraid to fight?” An uneasiness crawled over the men surrounding the desk.

“I am aware of your service and that you were behind the lines.”

Glances were exchanged as Jack stepped toward the desk. William placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “He followed his orders, Armistead,” William said.

“And a fine aide-de-camp you were, Jack,” George said, throwing a glance at Armistead. “We all served as we were ordered. And I think we can all agree that there is not a coward among us.” The officers nodded in agreement.

“Agreed, Colonel. Not a coward in the room,” Edgar McCarty said as he reentered the study holding a glass of whiskey high in the air. The men around the desk nodded with raised glasses and pipes.

The chimes for supper sounded with a loud clanging that momentarily muted their voices. Armistead cleared his throat and straightened his jacket. “Gentlemen, I believe it is time to retire to the dining room. We certainly do not wish to keep Mrs. Mason waiting.” Armistead pushed his chin forward and started for the doorway. The officers fell in behind him, and he led them from the room.

William grabbed Jack’s arm and held him back from following the others. “You ought not goad him like that, Jack. It only inflames him,” William said in a low voice, his brow heavy with concern.

Jack shrugged away from his brother’s grip. “Inflame him? He inflamed me! How dare he question my service, especially after Bladensburg and what I endured at Peach Orchard Camp.”

“I understand, Jack. I do.”

“You couldn’t possibly understand, because you left.”

“My tour had ended! What would you have me do? Just stick around because Mercer went home sick?”

“And now you are bringing this bully into our family!”

William blanched. “What are you talking about, Jack? The Masons are already family. Not close relations, but still family. And I’m bringing his sister into our fold, not Armistead.”

Jack shook his head. “You don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“Whatever it is, Jack, you need to let it go.”

Jack drew in a long breath and shook his head again. “You forgive what you want, Will.”

William dropped his gaze to the floor. After a long moment, he lifted his head and looked at Jack. “For one night, can you put whatever it is aside for me, Jack? I have found the love of a lifetime and all I want is to share my happiness with you and our family. Just get to know Emily. I promise that she is nothing like the rest of the Masons.”

Moving his gaze to the window, Jack pushed his hair from his forehead and sighed before looking back at his brother. “All right, Will. I will remain impartial regarding your fiancée. I promise to do nothing further to interrupt the harmony of the evening.”

“It means a lot to me, Jack.”

Jack nodded. “It’s your night, after all.”

“It is, isn’t it!” William slapped Jack on the back and put an arm around his shoulder. “Come now. Let’s find Sally and hope that she has left some Madeira for the other guests!”