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SAVAGE ODYSSEY

(First Sixty Pages)

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Part One

JESSICA

One

He stayed abreast of them, pale shapes moving through the opposite drift of the forest; six, all white, all young, their progress tracked by the protesting slap, snap, groan of the undergrowth and the noisy clatter of pebbles trickling in their wake. Below and behind them, thin ribbons of mist, sweetened with the odour of stale rum, spiralled slowly and blazed their trail.

Behind their bloodied eyes in the troubled recesses of their minds perhaps they imagined themselves as avenging heroes climbing silently ever upwards on some worthy mission. The night-time bush could do this: soften, obscure, elicit fancy. But the reality of their intent rode the rise and fall of their hoarse whispered banter and snuggled against the reek of their lathered flesh.

Others who watched them may have wondered why they had come into the forest and were perhaps amused by their ineptitude. But one man knew why they had come and was not amused. For he was the warrior Gunroi from west of the ranges and knew something of their language and much of their ways.

Although this was not Gunroi's territory, such was his reputation that his was the name on the lips of those who came across what remained of the six bodies three days later, lying at the foot of a cliff amidst their shattered weapons.

"You reckon it were 'im?" This was Birdling, the youngest member of the group, a tall, gaunt-featured youth whose voice was still spliced with falsetto slivers from earlier years.

"Maybe." This was Sotherby, a slim, broad-shouldered man of middle age whom the others looked upon as the leader of the group.

"Jesus!" Birdling's gaze shifted fitfully from the bodies and skipped about the surrounding bushland.

"And even if it weren't, it's got a definite mark of Myalls about it. Wild blacks."

"Jesus!"

They all then raised their eyes for a time to the dark fringe of tall forest that poked out over the rock-faces that pressed in on them from high above. While they watched, the chime

of tiny bell birds darting through the upper branches of nearby eucalypts was interrupted by the long shrill whistle and sharp crack of a whip bird. Only after the ringing echoes of the call had finally died away in the stony crevices above them did the men turn back. There were ten in the party, all wearing cabbage-tree hats, stiff corduroy breeches, and calico shirts open at the throat. Unlike Birdling, most of them were hard-eyed and seasoned. By the climate. By the times. And all were heavily armed, despite having set out to search for nothing more dangerous than missing cattle.

Birdling lifted a hand that close observation would have revealed was trembling and scratched nervously at a blemish on his neck. “Why wild blacks? Why not the Stony Creek mob?”

“The Stony Creek mob!” Sotherby turned and appraised the other man closely. “Do you know something about this?”

Birdling dodged Sotherby’s gaze and, for a time, weathered the silence. But as he became aware of the weight of other eyes turned in his direction, he capitulated. “That’s who they was huntin’,” he suddenly blurted.

“Huntin’!”

“Accordin’ to those who was at the George that night.” Seeking assistance, his gaze swept the faces around him. “Some of you must have known as well. Even if you weren’t there. It weren’t no great secret. Goin’ to push them off a cliff. The whole mob. Men, women and kids.”

“Push them off a cliff! The Stony Creek mob? The Stony Creek mob’s near tame, for Lord Jesus’ Sake! They wouldn’t hurt nobody.”

“This lot reckoned they was becomin’ a real nuisance. Blamed them for the rise in cattle spearin’. Goin’ to get rid of them once and for all.”

“How in God’s name did they think they were even goin’ to find bush blacks in this kind of country, let alone somehow grab hold of any of them and push them off a flamin’ cliff?”

“Heard that’s what some others did with a mob further up the coast.”

“Then they was hearin’ bullshit. Further up the coast the blacks are wilder, more dangerous, and would be even harder to find. Fools would believe anythin’ if they’d believe you could push any bush black off a cliff, women or kids included when their men were anywhere nearby. It would insult them to think you could.”

“They was pretty drunk.”

“Why didn’t you try to stop them?”

“They wouldn’t have listened to me. Anyway, none of us thought they’d go ahead with it. Thought once they’d slept it off, they’d forget about it. Was only when I didn’t see any of them around for some time after, I started to wonder.”

“Well, I reckon they got what they deserved.”

“Jesus, how can you say that? Nobody coulda deserved this.”

While they were talking, one of those who had been poking about among the remains, passed the barrel of a horse pistol to the man standing beside him. “None of these guns has even been fired. Still primed.”

“Stupid buggers didn’t even know what hit them.”

“Definitely got his mark.”

“Ay.”

“Do you think it be true what they say?”

“What do they say?”

“They say he’s got himself a white wife back there somewhere behind them mountains. Beautiful, they say she be. With long red hair and green eyes.”

“Never. No chance.”

“It be pretty strong, that story.”

“It be pretty strong bullshit. Work it out, for Christ’s sake. What white woman would be livin’ with him, willin’? And if not willin’, what white woman wouldn’t have killed herself first chance she got?”

“Ay. Suppose you’re right.”

“Beats me the things some people want to believe. Sign of a crippled nature, if you asks me. Always wantin’ to believe the worst. Regardless of how unlikely. Warmin’ themselves with it. Rubbin’ themselves in it like a cat on heat. Blacks bein’ pushed off a cliff somewheres. White women livin’ with them somewheres. No better than the sick bastards I seen in Valparaiso floggin’ their own backs with barbed whips. You’d think civilized people would have better comforts to wrap around themselves.”

In response to his mother’s whispered encouragement, the small boy wrapped his arms around his sister, who was sitting between his outstretched legs, and helped her to wriggle further back with him into the tight tangle of tree roots that supported the shelf of riverbank that formed an uneven ceiling above them. A trickle of water squeezed from the mud by the weight of their bodies tracked down to the stream and painted a thin stain along the water’s

edge. It was this, perhaps more than the fear her children might betray their presence by momentarily forgetting to use their practiced tiny-lizard talk, that concerned their mother. She extended an arm full length and gently pressed her palm, first against her eighteen-months old daughter's cheek, and then her four-year old son's. And she ached with the need to wrap herself around them both, but the thick roots within which her own body was enmeshed prevented all but this distant touch of one hand. So, with all of the strength of mind she could bring to bear, she willed that her quivering fingertips were delivering a strong flow of the overwhelming love she felt for them and that they were comforted.

The gurgle of the water was suddenly interrupted by a harsh mix of clattering and splashing as shod hooves impacted at speed with the pebbled bed of the stream. The woman's breath caught in her throat. In response to her son's silent, wide-eyed query, she drew a finger across his lips. He in turn pressed the flat of his hand against his sister's mouth, removing it almost immediately when she shook her head violently.

"Don't!" the little girl snapped in a half-whisper before her mother's fingers brushed lightly against her lips. Her eyes locked with her mother's and her furrowed brow signalled her resentment of her brother's treatment of her. But perhaps placated by her mother's nod and smile of understanding, her little face relaxed once more. and she remained silent. Wavering reflections from the surface of the stream pulsed over them and their subterranean surrounds as the clattering and splashing rose and fell in uneven bursts interspersed with gradually lengthening periods of silence.

Long after the noise had finally died away and the sounds of the bush had returned to normal, the woman signalled the children to remain where they were and began to disengage carefully from her cramped confines. She had just risen to her knees and was at the point of moving from beneath the overhang when she was gripped by a sudden premonition of danger. Her head was lowered, her eyes locked on the thin, muddy stain their presence had created at the edge of the stream. The palm of one hand remained planted in the mud beneath her and the other remained suspended in mid-air in a bird-dog freeze. For a time, she could not determine the cause of her concern. And then she gradually realised that she was listening to two double-beats: one, the pounding of her heart; the other, the rhythmic double thud of a horse's hooves approaching along the bank above them. She drew back and winced as her head collided with a stone embedded in the underside of the bank.

The horse came steadily closer and was perhaps almost overhead when a muffled shout sounded somewhere in the distance. The horse stopped. They could hear its laboured breathing and the jingle of a bridle.

“Say again!” a voice bellowed above them, startling those beneath the bank with its proximity and causing all three to cringe. Tears welled in the children’s eyes and the little girl began to whimper.

The distant shout was repeated.

“Wait where you are!” the voice above them bellowed. “I’ll come directly.”

The woman drew in a sudden breath as she recognised the creak of a saddle caused by the rider dismounting. Signalling her children to remain still, she carefully prized out a water-worn stone the size of an axe-head from the soil above her head and held it in her lap.

A few seconds later an arc of urine speared out into the stream from directly above those crouching below and collided with the muddy stain still plainly visible a few feet in front of them. While the woman’s gaze remained locked on the stain that she feared could betray their presence, the man’s gaze swept the deep shadows of the opposite bank. As he buttoned his flap and began to turn away, his eye lingered for a moment on the bubbles and disturbance to the normal flow of the stream he had created at the water’s edge below him.

Perhaps sensing that he had paused, the woman tightened her grip on the stone. A distant cry sounded again from somewhere and the man responded with an oath. “All right, all right. I’m coming.”

A few seconds later she heard the saddle creak and the bridle jingle. But only when a gradually accelerating pounding of hooves marked the rider urging his mount into a departing canter did she allow the tension coiled within her to relax, and then only to assume an archer’s *détendre*.

Her thoughts then began to tumble: This running, this hiding, this crippling fear has become such a part of me ... a part of me ... I have trouble knowing whether ... whether ... what is real ... what is imagining or dreaming or imagining or dreaming ... or saying or thinking. This running. This hiding. This crippling fear for the safe ... the safe ... the safety of the children. This screaming in my head for the fear to stop. To stop. I can’t recall when it was other ... other ... otherwise. Is that a word, otherwise? Or two words, other wise? That doesn’t sound right. Had it ever been otherwise? Yes? No? I remember good times. Long ago. Not so long ago. Dancing with the children helps. Reading with the children helps. Listening to them laugh. Listening to myself laugh. Dancing with ... with Will. Is that a memory or a wish? A long ... a longing. Is that a word, longing? It doesn’t sound right. Memories and longing are becoming more difficult to separate. Dancing with Tom Jones at a ball. No, with Will at a ball. But I’ve never danced with Will at a ball. It must have been Tom Jones. When I first wake, I can’t tell who I danced with. The children save me from going

mad. I think. I think. Or does the crippling worry about them make madness more certain. Madness? Is that one word or two? Mad and ness? I must practice words with them more often. Is that one word or two? More often? Is that one word or two? I must stay sane. Stay sane. For the children. They need me.

Determinedly, she managed to drag herself from her reverie as her gaze settled on her children and her hand pressed absently against the twine basket at her side. Among her scant possessions – balls of twine, digging sticks, wooden and bone needles, lumps of beeswax and leaf-wrapped packages of eucalyptus balm – were battered, fire-singed remnants of copies of Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* that she had salvaged from the burnt remains of a shepherd's hut. Whenever she was able – and never within sight or hearing of other than her own children – she greedily devoured and redevoured the diverse adventures of these unlikely bedfellows. When possible, and to the delight of her children if they were present, she read what remained of the stories aloud, savouring and repeating individual words and phrases and occasionally acting out the antics of the protagonists. When Crusoe's Friday danced and sang and gyrated about, she danced and sang and gyrated about; when the irascible Jones paraded around a ballroom so did she parade with her shoulders thrown back and her jaw held high.

The name of the man who had stood on the bank above her was Graeme Gately, a Yorkshireman and former army corporal, transported for cracking the skull of a subordinate in a drunken brawl. He joined up with three others who had dismounted a few hundred yards downstream. "What's up?"

"A halfcocked misfire is all," a tall weather-marked man answered as he moved to remount his horse. "Gumpy reckoned we had one cornered under the bank. Turned out to be nothin' but a big fuckin' goanna. Some fuckin' expert tracker! Can't tell the difference between a fuckin' black and a fuckin' lizard. I reckon the silly bugger's been too long in the sun!"

"Lizard or not, you should have seen this lot shit themselves when it barreled out of there," Gumpy, a squat, broad-shouldered man, responded with a harsh cackle.

Gately's lip curled. "If you can't tell the difference between a lizard's footprint and a man's, Gumpy, I reckon you're wastin' the boss's feed and time." He stood up in the stirrups and looked about him. "Where is the boss?"

The tall man swung into the saddle. "He and the others are scouting the next brush,"

Gumpy snatched the reins of his horse and prepared to mount. “I didn’t see no fuckin’ footprint. A trickle of muddy water from under the bank was all I seen and that could have been down to a black. You’d miss a lot of blacks not checkin’ somethin’ like that.”

When they were all mounted, the tall man glanced at Gately who was looking back the way he had come. “We’d better join up with the boss before he starts to wonder what’s keepin’ us.” Gately did not respond. “What can you see?”

“What?” Gately shook his head. “Nothin’. You go on ahead. I’m goin’ to take another look back there.”

“You want us to come?”

“No. It’s probably nothin’. Best you catch up with the boss in case he needs you.”

Jessica raised her head slowly above the riverbank and scanned her surrounds. Satisfied that no one was within sight, she helped her children to clamber onto the bank. She then ushered them ahead of her, urging them to run so that they would be exposed for the briefest time necessary before reaching the blanket of thick forest that flanked the bank. They were within a few yards of cover when a loud shout assailed them from downstream. She gasped and swept her daughter under one arm and her son under the other. Spurred on by the pounding of approaching hooves, she plunged into the forest and weaved between the trees. The children cried out in alarm and pain as they were slapped by the underbrush that pressed in on them from all sides.

Her strength gave out shortly after the slope began to steepen. By then her breath had become a hoarse, gasping groan of utter despair. She managed to reach a patch of waist-high bracken before her legs finally gave out. She fell first to her knees and then on her face with her arms still wrapped around her whimpering children.

By then Gately had dismounted. After securing his horse he pulled a long-barreled horse-pistol from a holster secured to one side of the pommel of his saddle and a navy-issue cutlass from where its scabbard hung from the other. With a weapon clasped in each hand, he strode into the brush, his boots crunching through the carpet of dead twigs and leaf litter.

Whether it was the children’s whimpering that led him to the patch of bracken, or Jessica’s failure to reduce the noise of her breathing to less than a wheezing gasp, Gately did eventually locate them. By then he was lathered in sweat and breathing deeply himself. Any surprise he may have harboured that she had managed to come so far into the forest carrying

her children was overshadowed by his surprise on discovering who it was he had run to ground.

“Well, lookee here!” He released a low whistle. “You need a good bath, woman. Swore you was one of them.”

Jessica turned around and scrambled onto her haunches, flinging both arms back to help shield the children behind her.

“Thrustin’ your titties at me won’t do you any good. Won’t save your heathin’ half-breed brats. The boss will be tickled pink when I delivers you, but he’d tear a strip off me if I brought these two back. Havin’ to get rid of ’m ’imself would take the shine off his day.” He shook his head. “I thought he was dreamin’, sayin’ you could still be alive. Who’d ’ave believed it! A white woman paradin’ herself naked among a bunch of fuckin’ savages. What would your parents say if they could see you now? Naked, caked in mud, ye legs splayed like a dock-side whore?”

He began to move around her and she struggled to keep herself between him and the children. “Told you thrustin’ your titties at me won’t help your brats, lass. Not that friendly behaviour won’t improve your time with me before we shows ourselves.” He raised the pistol to point it at her son and she moved quickly to shield him behind her head. “I could do you the favour of blowin’ your brains out here and now.” He lowered the gun. “On t’other hand you deserve all that’s comin’ to you, you shameless bitch!”

“Please!” The word a harsh rasp. Her face a mask of anguish.

“What did you say? No use you jabbering black talk to me. Have you forgotten how to speak the King’s English?”

“Please!” she repeated, uncertain now of the sounds she made. “Please spare my children!”

“Please! So that’s what you were tryin’ to say? You sound like you could do with a drink of water. You and me both. We’ll have one too, when we get back to the river. But first I have a little job to put behind me, so move out of the way or I’ll knock you out of it.”

“No!” She swung her back to him, cradling the children against her. When her knee brushed against a heavy stone lying among the leaf debris, her hand closed over it.

“Jesus! You’re only making it harder on yourself and on me. Let go of them.” He reached out and drew the flat of the cutlass across her shoulder.

She suddenly spun away from the blade and sprang to her feet with the stone clutched high behind her shoulder. Her action caught him by surprise, and he stepped away from her. Before he could raise his pistol and before she could hurl the stone, a crack like the sound of

a limb being torn from a tree rang through the forest. He stood staring at her wide eyed for a moment and then sank slowly to the ground, the top of his head an intermeshed confusion of splintered bone, brains and bubbling blood.

A surge of overwhelming relief flooded through her as she realised the tall, coal-black, grey-striped figure that stepped over the fallen man and handed her a bloodied club was not an apparition. “Quickly,” Gunroi signalled with his fingers as she placed a trembling hand against his chest. He then stooped and, sweeping the two children into his arms, bounded off up the slope with long athletic strides. She averted her gaze from Gately’s still trembling body and followed. At one point she paused to brush blood and human debris from the stone head of the club in a thick clump of bracken. With her stomach lurching, she then continued her flight stopping only when she met up with the others at the crest of the spur.

From a leafy vantage they looked down on the riverbank and the flurry of activity initiated by the discovery of Gately’s horse. Shortly afterwards, a wild shout and the roar of a musket from deep within the forest below them heralded the discovery of his body. When all the riders finally headed off downstream with Gately draped over his horse’s back, Gunroi and Jessica carrying one child each, made their way to the river beyond where it passed through a high rocky bluff. But no sooner had they crossed to the other side, that Jessica’s fear that they were moving too soon was realised. An approaching thunder of hooves sounded from downstream.

Moments after they scurried for cover within the dark confines of a dense brush that climbed away steeply from where they crossed, four riders galloped by on the opposite bank, musket butts propped on their thighs, their heads snapping to the left and right. As they watched them pass, Gunroi remained motionless, compressing his eyelids to slits that rendered him invisible within his surrounds, the children lowered their heads and whimpered, and Jessica sat as if transfixed, her mouth gaping, her eyes wide, her expression projecting utter disbelief. When shortly afterwards the riders galloped back the way they had come, led as before by a heavily framed, florid-faced man, confirming for her that her eyes had not deceived her earlier, her mind reeled in the grip of tumbling confusion. For a time and repeatedly during the remainder of the day, she was gripped by prolonged and violent shudders that troubled her husband and frightened her children.

Some eight years before these events, a meeting that would have a direct bearing on them occurred near the village of Lowfoley nestling against the southernmost extremity of a broad spur that reached out towards the coast from the low rolling undulations of Hampshire's South Downs. The farmland beneath the village swept away to the sea in a series of flat expanses, divided one from the other by shallow indentations that marked the courses of narrow reed-choked marshes and back-waterways that drained into tidal flats bordering Southampton Water and the Solent.

On the outskirts of the village, a young couple in an uncharacteristically sombre mood were approaching two men displaying equally uncharacteristic joviality. It was a fairish day in May, with the lift of spring and the heady scent of the blossoms tempered by irregular chill bursts of wind from the west. The young couple were on foot. The men were in a four-wheeled chaise-cart. They were approaching each other from opposite directions along a lane lined on both sides by hawthorn hedgerows. A low rise kept them from seeing each other and, at the speed they were travelling, they would probably meet at the crest.

The hedges were spattered with bursts of white blooms and the sides and middle of the lane were strewn with a carpet of colour. Brushing the base of the hedges, dandelions and knapweed sprouted in yellow and purple clumps over irregular beds of wild violets; and in the centre of the lane, primroses and woundwort pushed through the mix of grasses that formed a broad green strip between the wheel tracks. The undulating drum of the bees at times caused the travellers to raise their voices.

For Will Noling and Jessica Glider, their low spirits were a result of Will having broached his intention of seeking work at Southampton.

For Sir Rory Fitzparsons who was driving the two horses that were pulling the carriage, and his cousin Garth Barlester seated beside him, their ebullience was very much related to the amount of brandy they had drained from the leather-encased flask Barlester was nursing on his lap.

It was fitting that this day's more pleasant ambience was interlaced with the hint of bitter weather.

Jessica's eyes were on the ground, the despondency that had earlier crept into her voice assuming an even more hollow ring; what might have been an echo bouncing off iron-grey images from a darker day "How long will you be gone?"

“Three days. Maybe four.”

“And what if they do offer you a job? What if they want you to start immediately?”

“I doubt they’ll not let me take a couple of days to collect my things.”

“And then what?” A spark of her more normal zest flared momentarily somewhere within her. She bit her lip. “Off you’ll go never to return. What about us?”

“I’m doin’ it for us, Jessie. Do you think I want to leave you? Even for a moment? I have to earn some money of my own.”

They remained silent until they had passed an area of the hedge that was crammed with unseen birds and a level of noise rising from the prickly refuge that would have defied any attempt to compete.

“Jim will pay you.”

“He can’t pay me.”

“He owes you, Will.”

“The farm’s fed me. It’s been a roof.”

“You deserve more than food and a roof.” She turned away. “It’s not right. You’ve worked all these years for naught, and now your dad’s passed on, Jim gets everythin’. It’s not fair.”

“It’s fair enough. Jim left school early so I could stay longer.”

“And what would have been the good of him stayin’, may I ask?”

“He’s a good fellow and you know it. And you like him well enough.” He cast her a glance. “If I weren’t around you’d be chasin’ after him for sure and certain.”

She lifted her chin. “If you take off for Southampton and decide you’ll stay there, I might still do that. Him and anyone else around here I might take a fancy to.”

She was a head shorter than Will, but that head was crowned with the same golden-red thatch. Hers was long, and plumed in tight springing ringlets about her ears, and cascaded well down her back; whereas his was short, and on this day, as usual, sprang in all directions above his ears, as if he had dipped it in a tub of water and allowed the wind to dry it. Even so, the hue, the curl, and the texture suggested a common ancestor.

He clamped down on a smile. “You’re a fallen woman Jessica Glider. Nobody around here would have you.”

She kept her chin in the air and her eyes away from him. “No one knows but you. You bein’ the reason. And you might be surprised who’d be keen to have me. Judgin’ by the heads that turn when I walk by.”

“Well, I suppose you could land someone like Gaunty Farlie or one of the other half blind scrumpy guzzlers he hangs about with down at the Drake.”

Despite her mood, she could not prevent her face from being briefly illuminated by the beam of a smile that escaped before she could check the lift in her cheeks.

“But I doubt your chances of landin’ a man of some standin’ in the community.” He lifted his chin. “Someone such as myself.”

“And what standin’ have you got?”

“I’m a highly respected personage. Last Saturday at the market, Malachi Butcher himself asked me what I thought of the bull he’d just bought. And Malachi isn’t a man who’d waste questions on someone whose reply he wouldn’t respect. And who is it old man Pillington asks to help out at the school each time he comes down too heavily with the pleurisy?”

“The only reason that old man Pillington asks you to help out at the school is because he knows you won’t ask for any payment. And the only reason Malachi Butcher would ask you what you think of his prize bull is because he’s probably heard all about you and is hopin’ that his bull has similar inclinations to your own.”

He released an enthusiastic howl of delight followed by infectious peals of laughter that had Jessica again fighting vainly to stifle her own beams of amusement.

When they had both recovered they walked on in silence until he turned to her. “Come on Jessie, give me some support. I have to get a job. I don’t have any alternative.”

She did not reply immediately and when she did she turned away from him slightly so that he could not see her face.

“You don’t have to go to Southampton.”

When she turned to face him, he was so taken by the attractiveness of her earnest expression, and in particular by the swollen curve of her bottom lip, that he toyed with the idea of grabbing hold of her and kissing her. Prudently, he curbed this impulse. “What else can I do?”

“You should call in some of what is owing to you. From your brother. From old man Pillington, or whoever he gets his funding from – the mayor, the shire, the parish – and from all of the Malachi Butchers you’ve ever helped out in a crisis, or who think you might be worth askin’ a question of. Surely someone around here would offer you payin’ work if they knew you were lookin’ for it.”

“I love you Jessie Glider.” He placed an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her in an exaggerated gesture of reassurance.

She tried to shrug him off. “I’ve seen the work they’re doin’ on that pier at Southampton. Back-breakin’ work that nobody in their right mind would want.” She raised a hand to her face and with a finger pushed away a tear that was threatening to spill from one eye. “If you don’t die of ague, you’ll be crushed to death.”

“I need the money Jess. I need it for us.”

“You don’t need to go to Southampton. Where nobody knows you. Where nobody owes you. Where you might as well be Gaunty Farlie or any one his mates from the Francis bloody Drake.”

They walked on again in silence until he turned to look at her. “So you don’t believe I have anything to show for my time around here?”

She met his gaze. Now that they were nearing the crest of the rise, behind his shoulder the sweep of the land towards the coast was visible above the hedges. And beyond the land, close to the horizon, there was a sudden tiny flash of white against the slate-grey of the sea. It caught her attention and her gaze shifted.

He looked back. “What is it?”

From that point they were looking far out past the eastern edge of the Solent.

“Something white on the sea. But now it’s gone.”

“Probably a ship turning.”

Not that it had a direct bearing on the events occurring near Lowfoley that day, what she had glimpsed was a first-rate 100-gun ship of the line as it turned into the wind; a thirty-eight-year-old veteran of the American Revolutionary War that was testing its new fittings and rigging after extensive refit at Chatham. She was HMS *Victory*, presently on route to Portsmouth, and preparing for war.

“What were you saying?”

“I was goin’ to say that I do have somethin’ to show for my time around here.”

“What do you have?”

He pressed his teeth down on his bottom lip trying to bite off a smile, and then suddenly reaching out before she could step away, scooped her into his arms. “I have Jessica Glider. That’s what I have.”

“What are you doing?” she lurched and squealed as his fingers dug into her ribs.

He turned and began to run towards the crest. “I have Jessica Glider,” he called out loudly. “And I’m going to keep her.” A flock of blackbirds erupted from the hedge ahead of them and scattered across the fields.

Jessica repeatedly cried out for him to put her down, punctuating her demands with a mix of shrill squeals and shrieks of laughter. His strength gave out before he had travelled fifty yards. Just below the crest he slowed suddenly and staggered to the side of the lane. He then sank to his knees on the grassy verge and released his burden. They were both lying where they had fallen gasping for breath with their limbs entangled when Sir Rory Fitzparsons and Garth Barlester topped the rise.

Fitzparsons drew rein. “What in the bright blue blazes have we got here? Fornication or ambushment?”

Will and Jessica quickly came to their feet and brushed themselves down as they eyed the newcomers, Jessica with embarrassment, and Will with any sense of unease he felt when the men first appeared snuffed out by Fitzparsons’ words.

“No we haven’t, Garth. We’ve got the fiery-haired twins of Lowfoley. William Noling for sure and certain. And the lovely Jessica Glider, if I’m not mistaken. What happened to you, you sweet young things? Were you knocked over by some careless fool in a runaway cart?”

He drove his horses closer. The mare on the offside was reluctant to approach the two humans that had risen mysteriously from the earth in front of her. So, Fitzparsons struck her on the rump with his whip. When this had no effect, he placed the fall high up between her rear legs and switched it backwards and forwards cruelly. She jumped a couple of times and then with eyes flashing frightened-white, stepped out tentatively with her head slewed to one side watching the newcomers warily.

Fitzparsons brought the horses to a halt. “You’re still covered in dust there, young Will’m. You look like a poacher that’s been stuck down a badger’s hole wrestlin’ the tenant.” Jessica began to sweep dried leaves and assorted small debris from the back of Will’s shirt using the flat of her hand. “There, that’s right Jessie, give him a good paddlin’. Slap him hard as you like, girl. No doubt he’s earned it.”

Sir Rory Fitzparsons, when standing, was below average height, legacy of a pair of shorter than average legs, but when seated on a horse, or in this instance when perched and leaning forward from the driver’s seat of a two-horse carriage, he had the appearance of a much bigger man. The width of his shoulders, the length of his torso and the spread of his girth were contributing factors, as were the size and shape of his head. But the main cause of the deception was his neck, a swollen expanse of white flesh that extended over and beyond his collar with an uncanny resemblance to the crown of a loaf of bread ballooning from a pan that has been overfilled with dough.

“I suppose you two have come way out here to escape our good Reverend Smith-Whistle’s Sunday morning diatribe. Can’t say I blame you. I’d rather take my chances with old Nick himself than face one more sheer, awful, mind-dissolvin’, soul-destroyin’ sermon from that little prickle.” The smooth white dough ballooning from the pan-rim of his collar quivered in sympathy with the tremble of his lips.

As he was speaking, first the quieter horse on the near side, a gelding with the same glistening black coat as the mare, and then the mare herself, stretched out their necks and, pressing their soft muzzles through a lush bed of crimson valerian buds, began to pick on the sweet grasses growing close to the base of the hedge.

Will glanced at Fitzparsons. “His name’s Smith-Wilson.”

“What?”

“The vicar. His name’s Smith-Wilson. Reverend Smith-Wilson. You called him Smith-Whistle.”

Fitzparsons glared down at Will for a moment and then chuckled and turned to look at the man beside him again. “What did he say?”

Barlester said nothing. His mouth remained drawn in a tight straight line beneath the long aquiline curl of his nose. The image that remained with Will later was of his eyebrows, dark mirrored wings of a hawk or an owl thrown wide to arrest its plummet from the heavens to seize a victim.

Fitzparsons turned back. “If any man on God’s earth knows our vicar’s name that man’s me, Will’m. I went to school with the little prickle. I’ve tried to twist his ears off so often it’s one of the wonders of this world that they’re still stuck to the side of his head. And what does he do? He becomes a plaguey minister of religion and gets himself assigned to my plaguey parish. He might be Smith-Wilson to you, sweet William. But I know him for who he is. And he’s a boring little farter who’ll be Smith-Whistle to me till the day he dies. What do you say Garth? You were there.”

Barlester still said nothing. He made no sign that he had even heard. His eyes, for what could be seen of them beneath his low, drooping lids, appeared to be on Jessica.

There may have been some discrepancy between Sir Rory Fitzparsons’ apparent and actual size, but there was no doubt about the true size of the man sitting beside him. Garth Barlester was a big man, whether standing or seated or perched as he was now, seemingly uncomfortably, beside Fitzparsons, with inadequate room for any of him, but in particular his legs. His left one was stretched out clear of the carriage so that most of his massive boot sat

dangerously close to the spokes of the near-side front wheel. The knee of the other was bent at an acute angle and swiveled across his body to keep it clear of his companion.

“These are two of my favourite people from lack-lustre Lowfoley, Garth. They give the place a much needed lift. A burst of warmth. Look at them. Look at that hair. They’re a couple of beacons in the mist.” He chuckled and rippling waves passed backwards and forwards through the dough. “Soon as young William Noling here manages to scratch up enough Georgies to put down a payment on his own patch of land, I’ll daresay we’ll be hearing wedding bells drifting across the downs.”

Will placed a hand behind Jessica and began to usher her past the buggy “Well, we mustn’t keep you from wherever it is you’re headin’.”

“Before you go, young Will, when are you likely to be ready to make that first payment?”

Will paused and smiled. “You’ve got a plot you’re interested in selling, have you, Sir Rory?”

Fitzparsons smiled back. “You know better than that, young William. You know I’m a land buyer not a land seller. Never was. Never will be. It’s just that I heard that you’ve been makin’ enquiries about a job.” He lifted his hand, and with the palm uppermost and his fingers curled back against his thumb, shook it a number of times. “So I’m assuming you might still be a few Georgies short of what you’ll need.”

“Just a few.”

“I also heard that you were considerin’ goin’ across to Southampton to work on the pier.”

“I was considerin’ it.”

“That’d be a bad mistake, boy.”

Jessica drew Will’s attention away from Fitzparsons with, “That’s what I’ve been tellin’ him.”

“Then you’ve been tellin’ him right, lass. This lad here Garth is a fair shake at figurin’, and pretty handy with grammar. When the school master is feelin’ poorly, he gets young Will’m to take over tryin’ to cram some learnin’ into the heads of the local brats.” He shook his head. “But he can’t afford to pay you, can he, Will’m my lad? Not so much as a bent French sou. The parish pays him barely enough to feed himself. Which is fair enough. There’s no value in what he does. What’s the point of teachin’ the kids around here any arith-matick, or how to read and write? You don’t need figurin’ or grammar to muck out a barn or pull a cow from a bog, or even to dig a plaguey ditch.”

He leant forward and for a moment it appeared he might topple from his seat, but then settled back with his gaze locked on Will. “Figurin’ and labourin’ don’t mix, William. Which is why it would be a mistake to be workin’ on that pier. Up to your eyeballs in freezin’ mud from dawn to dusk. If you didn’t get yourself crushed to death, you’d end up dyin’ of p-
monia. Lord Jesus, boy! You should be headin’ for Portsmouth not Southampton. And at Portsmouth for the navy. And at the navy for their pay office. With your ways you’d have no trouble landin’ yourself a decent clerical job.”

“No! Jessica snapped. “No, that would be worse. Portsmouth’s worse than Southampton. Much worse!”

“It’s not the end of the world, lass. Nor that far away. And the job’s a safe one.” He cupped one hand and shook it. “And it pays well.”

He straightened and turning his gaze squarely on Jessica clamped a hand to the back of his head and with bunched fingers scratched vigorously at the nape of his neck. “I mightn’t be in the market for a figurin’ man myself, but I could be in the market for an extra kitchen maid.”

“Will’s mother still needs me at home.”

Fitzparsons did not shift his gaze from her. “Is your mother still ailin’, Will? I heard she was pickin’ up. How long is it since your dad passed on?”

“It’s been a while.”

“Big Jim’s managin’ the farmin’ all right, I expect?”

“Ay, he’s managin’ well enough.” He again began to usher Jessica past the carriage.

“Before you go,” Fitzparsons raised his hand, “I’m sendin’ Rubin Mactaggart to Portsmouth with three dray-loads of turnips on Wednesday. For the price of helping him unload, you could go with him and call in on the navy pay office while you’re there.”

“I’ll give it some thought.”

Fitzparsons twisted in the seat as they moved past. “If you’ve got any sense, you’ll give it more than some thought, young fellah.” As he turned, he inadvertently pulled on the reins and the skittish mare threw her head in the air and jumped forward jerking the buggy a few feet. “Steady! Steady! You black bitch!” As the mare settled, he swung back around and called out, “And you know you could do with the money. You’d have that down-payment in no time.”

His gaze stayed with Jessica’s retreating form as he added quietly, “And I’d be willin’ to give a sizable down-payment to get my hands on some of that, begad!”

Barlester twisted his huge frame around in the seat so that he too could observe their departure. Eventually, he growled, “I didn’t like the look of the whelp. Did you see his eyes when he came off the ground?” His voice was unnaturally low, the sound of rocks scraping along the bed of a river, and, as he spoke, the wings that were his eyebrows beat slowly in time with his words.

“He probably wasn’t too keen on my greeting. He’d be one of the few round these parts who knows what fornication means.” He smiled. “Around here they call it different.”

“No respect!” Barlester growled. “Can’t stand that in a yob. The whelp needs a lesson.” He took off his wide-brimmed hat revealing an unnaturally high forehead and a thick turban of shock-white hair which he ran his fingers through several times. The contrast with his eyebrows was remarkable, giving him the appearance of a portrait artist’s charcoal sketch.

“He’s no forelock knuckler, I’ll grant you that.”

“She livin’ with him or what?”

“She’s living with his family. Has been since her own parents died when she was a kid. The whelp’s mother saved her from the orphanage.”

“The whelp’s swivin’ the slattern, or I’m a Dutchman.”

“Oh, he’s swivin’ her all right, Garth. But she’s no slattern. Jessica Glider’s a sweet and lovely young woman. The sweetest in these parts.”

“They’re all slatterns, Rory. If livin’ among them at the end of the earth has taught me anything, it’s taught me that. We have them as young as that one, and as pretty, lined up for the choosin’ every time a boat comes into Sydney town. Slatterns all!”

“Whatever you say, cousin.”

“Not that I wouldn’t swive the livin’ daylights out of her if I got myself half a chance. Just havin’ her movin’ around so close in front of me got me all randified. And I reckon the sluttish little mott knew it and was tryin’ to raise my interest. But she’s a bit too thin for my likin’.”

“You’re jestin’, Garth. You couldn’t be that spoilt. In Botany Bay or anywhere else.”

“On my place in Sydney Town I can do anything I want, and I can have anything I want.”

“It’s not so different for me around here, old son. There’s not much around here I can’t have for the askin’.”

“There’s one thing around here you want that’ll take more than your askin’.” Barlester nodded down the lane. “Yonder slattern with the red hair and the big green eyes.”

“Early days, Garth. I hear the navy’s recruitin’ for the Mediterranean with rare vigour. And woe betide any stray country lad caught out of his ground from Dover to Plymouth during the next few days.”

“So, you think he is off to Portsmouth?”

“I’d wager a fair amount on it.”

Barlester turned and gripped Fitzparsons in a steady gaze. Fitzparsons did not respond for some time, but when he finally turned to face the other man, his mouth twisted into an ugly smirk.

“I don’t want you workin’ for him, Jessie. I don’t like him, and I don’t trust him. I never did.”

“He’d be harmless enough. But that other one! Did you see his eyes? And the way he looked at me?” She shuddered. “My flesh still creeps at the thought.” After they had walked a little further, she turned to him. “Are you goin’ to go to Portsmouth?”

“It mightn’t hurt to find out if there are any jobs, and what they’re payin’.”

“It won’t do you much good findin’ out, if you’re not seriously considerin’ workin’ there.”

“If the pay’s all right it mightn’t have to be for very long.”

“Then you are goin’?”

“I’m thinkin’ about it.”

“Seriously?”

“Pretty seriously.”

A hawk swooped over the hedge in front of them and shrieked as it skimmed low overhead before wheeling abruptly and disappearing behind a small copse bordering the opposite field.

They walked on in silence, the echo of the bird’s harsh cry ringing as a gradually diminishing echo in the reaches of their memory until they were well out of sight of the two men who remained watching them from the rise.

Three

The three drays came down through a shimmering knee-high mist that cloaked the southern skirts of the Ports Down. From a distance, with the body of the mist concealing the exact definition of the teams of horses and the vehicles in their tow, and the surface picking up distorted reflections around the entire convoy, they could have been barges drifting down a river. This impression was strengthened by the tall reeds and marsh grasses that poked through the soft white blanket at the border of the road, by the relays of gulls that swooped in to investigate, and by the maritime accompaniment from the harbour ahead of them: the irregular chiming of bells atop buoys, the urgent flap of luffing sails on the fishing skiffs manoeuvring in the shallows, and the deep-throated shouts and banter of the men on board.

They passed through the crossroads at Cosham and rolled straight on to Portsbridge. By the time they crossed over to Portsea Island and moved on to the village of Hilsea the mist had pulled back to the west. Remnants of it were caught in low bushes on Horsea Island.

They were into the second day of their journey, having camped outside of Wickham the previous evening. Since leaving the Fitzparsons' estate Will had travelled with Rubin Mactaggart on the lead dray, sitting beside him on the solid oak plank that served as the driver's seat.

The open road at times was as bumpy as many a private road would get in the vicinity of a barnyard, and for the same reason; too much traffic after prolonged spates of heavy rain followed by ground-baking dries. Will had trouble resisting the temptation to use his duffle bag and its soft contents as a pillow.

The contents of the bag, which he had presently stowed beneath the seat, were a clean shirt, a plain grey neckerchief once owned by his father, his brother Jim's Sunday-best coat and trousers, and a new smokey-grey floppy cap that had a stiffened band and brim. He had been coerced by threat of personal injury at the hands of Jessica to wear this apparel to any appointment he could secure and decided that it would not be wise to destroy the effect of her careful ironing.

His own best coat and trousers had either shrunk in the arms and legs about three inches apiece since he had last worn them – which did not seem all that long ago – or his limbs had suddenly sprung out by the same amount. When he donned them and paraded for the family,

the spectacle caused even the dispirited Jessica to release one of her more startled squeals of delight.

Jim stepped in and offered his own Sunday best clothes, and they fitted well enough. Jessica volunteered to iron them; she wanted him to look his best, despite misgivings that it would enhance his prospects; but she could not bear the thought of his appearance causing him to be disadvantaged in the eyes of some disdainful civil servant. The cap was at his mother's insistence in the hope that before doffing it at any meeting and keeping it secured firmly beneath his arm – a manoeuvre he practiced several times to the further amusement of Jessica – it would perhaps keep his wayward hair in check.

To relieve his suffering rump during the journey, at regular intervals when the drays were moving slowly, he would get down and walk beside them, and when the horses were rested he would sometimes go on ahead and wait for them to catch up. So it was, when Mactaggart and the other drivers seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time in Hilsea resting the horses and resetting the harnesses, that he walked ahead and was past the village of Kingston before they caught up with him.

While he waited, resting on a low stone fence a short distance from the roadway, the low thump of a cannon sounded in the distance followed by a volley of musket fire. He stood up on the fence and looked about him. But his view was blocked by thin strips of mist that swathed distant high points – farm buildings, copses and windbreaks – in soft white ribbons.

It was impossible for him to tell if what he was hearing was the navy practicing gunnery on the harbour, or perhaps further south somewhere out on the Solent. The cannon sounded again followed by another burst of musket fire, and he turned and looked behind him to the east, unsure now if the sounds were not coming from that direction. Perhaps what he was hearing was the accompaniment to a breakout from one of the prison hulks anchored in the shallows of Langston Harbour.

The rattle of musket fire gradually subsided and, given no further indication of what was the cause, he finally jumped down from the fence and moved into the shade of a large elm tree that overlooked a nearby crossroad. There he picked himself out a comfortable seat, formed by a tangled swirl of the tree's exposed roots, and placed his back against the trunk.

From where he was sitting, partly concealed by overhanging branches, he had a clear view of other signs that the navy was nearby, and in strength. A continuous stream of sailors, many accompanied by wives and family, were moving past him. Although many wore blue vests and pale duck trousers, none was dressed in what could be described as a standard uniform. Their headgear ranged from soft, short-brimmed black hats perched jauntily on the

back of their heads, to wide-brimmed straw boaters and, in between, an assortment of high hats, low hats, peaked hats, multicoloured bandannas and woollen skullcaps. Those who were bareheaded revealed what the headgear on the others partly concealed: sometimes one, often two, and occasionally more, jaunty pigtails, some tied with bows and coloured ribbons.

Most of the men were carrying duffle-bags and a few cradled a chicken on the crock of an arm; not game hens as might have been expected, but an assortment of plump red, spotted, black, and speckled egg producers. Food, not sport, seemed to be the aspiration, as was evident by the sight of an occasional suckling pig suspended in a net or a sling slung over a shoulder.

Most were older men with faces masked by an indifferent expression he had noticed before on veteran regulars at the Sir Francis Drake, and he surmised that these were the ones who had been trusted with shore leave so close to the departure of the fleet: seasoned able seamen and petty officers, some on foot, some travelling in carriages, and an occasional one or two on horseback. Mainly they were heading in the same direction as himself.

Occasionally a two-horse chaise-cart passed by, carrying senior officers dressed in cocked hats and frock coats. At one stage, three troops of marines marched past in close succession. All had muskets on their shoulders, and their fixed bayonets and the buttons on their scarlet jackets caught the sunlight, causing the eyes of shaded observers to squint.

The flow of people was regularly interrupted by conveyances laden with fruit and vegetables; and by small flocks of sheep and herds of cattle, each usually controlled by a single adult aided by either a small pack of dogs or a similar group of bare-foot children. Whether dogs or children, they shuttled backwards and forwards along the periphery of their charges at a constant trot.

The parade was accompanied by an undulating cacophony that drifted across the fields, releasing startled hares from clumps of hogweed and hawkweed, and scattering flocks of starlings and sparrows from the hedgerows. Men exchanged greetings, bells clanged, harnesses jingled, hooves clip-clopped, babies cried, children laughed, dogs barked, sheep bleated, cattle bellowed, and somewhere out past the marshes and the sandbanks, unseen beyond the ribbons of mist, more cannons thundered. And in keeping with the excitement of the times, young horses shied, whinnied and kicked up their heels, and a number of cattle of both sexes climbed onto the backs of others.

When Mactaggart finally caught up, he seemed unnecessarily vexed that Will should have left them so far behind. Because Will was unsure of where his job enquiries would lead, he had made no arrangements either to return with the others, or even to remain with them

until they departed. Other than a loose agreement to help them unload their turnips, he had made no commitments. So, he found it curious that Mactaggart should be so concerned that he stay so close at hand.

Mactaggart directed his team to the side of the road and eased his heavy frame down from the dray. Then, after checking the lead horse's collar, he looked somewhere past Will's shoulder and growled, "If you knows what's good for you, and even if you don't, you should think twice before you go paradin' too far out of the way in these parts, young fellah." His stubble-shadowed, John Bull neck and jowls bounced as he spoke. "I haven't the time to worry about your flamin' whereabouts. I have enough to worry me already." With this, he hoisted his trousers higher up his chest by gripping the waistband with both hands and screwing it backwards and forwards enthusiastically beneath his wide belt.

He then hauled himself back into his seat. At no stage did he meet Will's eye. Will contemplated making a conciliatory reply, but unable to think of something appropriate, he decided to remain silent.

Because of the traffic it was mid-afternoon before they eventually passed on down through Portsmouth Common to the dockyard. Outside the main gate Mactaggart dismounted, and after showing some papers to a sentry was escorted inside. He emerged some time later accompanied by a tall, thin man that Will surmised was a purchasing officer. The turnips were the final delivery from the Fitzparsons' estate of an eighteen dray-load consignment of fruit and vegetables and, probably because of this, Mactaggart was given preferential treatment in being led past a line of other waiting drays to a battery of unloading docks. However, it still took some time to locate an appropriate unloading bay, and most of the remainder of the day to empty the drays. When they finally completed the operation the supply officer, whose name was Jenkers, drew Will aside.

"Mr Mactaggart tells me that you be interested in applyin' for a job at the pay office." He was taper-thin and taller than Will; and he stooped – perhaps through the habit of talking to shorter men, Will surmised – and he swayed from one leg to the other as he talked. Will wondered, somewhat facetiously, if perhaps his balance might have been affected by spending too much of his time on wharfs with his field of vision taken up by the sides of berthed ships that were continually in motion.

"Do you think there's time to see someone today?"

"That's what I just be tellin' Mactaggart. You be way too late to see anyone who'll take any notice of you. They work regular hours at the pay office, them little men do. And on any day of the week, in the last one or two of them regular hours I doubt they even listen to one

another, leastways to any stranger who might come callin' lookin' for a job. All their attention would be taken up by how long it is to go before they can go home to their little wivies and childers."

He moved closer to Will and conspiratorially motioned with an extended arm curled in the air behind the other man's shoulders for him to turn and move away with him from where Mactaggart's men were securing the sides of the drays and preparing the horses for departure.

"Which means that if you still wish to try your luck you'll have to stay overnight. Which means findin' a place to sleep. Which means makin' sure that place be not a place where the bully boys will find you. For if they do, it won't be a clerk in the navy pay office you'll be; it will be an ordinary seaman in the wavy navy bloody proper you'll be.

"Nelson's off to fight the French. He arrived this mornin' all decked out for war and achin' to get at them. My guess is he'll sail Friday, and the fleet be still short of hands." He glanced back at the others before moving closer and lowing his voice. "If I be you, I'd stay well clear of them lot. They be too countrified. They stick out worse than the balls on a coursing hound that has its head stuck in a rabbit burrah. And they're plannin' to spend the night close to the old Mill Pond. For sure and certain they'll be hauntin' the likes of White's Row, n' Battery Row n' Blossom Alley. That area will be crawlin' with the press an hour after dark. I'll be surprised if all but Mactaggart himself, and maybe him as well, don't find themselves on the high seas by the weekend."

"Where do you suggest I stay?"

"A long, long way away from the dockside." He again glanced back at the others. "There be an inn near where I live outside of Kingston. I'll drive you there directly. Get your things and take your leave of them others while I close my office and collect Betsy."

Betsy was the frail mare that pulled his chaise-cart, a shoddy equipage with most of the original green paint either missing or peeling away from the woodwork in tightly curled slivers.

As they passed up through the common, Jenkers glanced at him. "Have you ever had anythin' to do with His Majesty's Navy before, Mr Noling?"

"No. Nothing."

"They be a law unto themselves around here you know. They can do near on what they like to you. Them and any of their friends in high places. And there's nothin' you can do

about it. In fact, not only can you do nothing, they can make it very dangerous for you to try. Very dangerous.”

Will turned and looked at him. “How do you mean?”

Jenkers met his gaze for a moment and watched him silently for longer than seemed appropriate, before turning back to the road. “See them houses there.” He flicked his whip to one side. “Dock workers. When they first built on the common to be close to the yard, the Portsmouth military garrison in cahoots with the navy turned their cannons on them houses and threatened to blow them all to kingdom come if them that owned them didn’t tear them down. If Queen Anne hadn’t stepped in and stopped them, they’d ’ave done it too.” He nodded to himself a few times as if contemplating this. “Anyways,” he continued, flipping his whip from side to side. “that’s why they call this road Queen Anne Street, or Queen Street. ’Cos she saved them houses from bein’ blown to smithereens with the consent of the Royal fuckin’ Navy, who can do anythin’ they like to ye, any time they fuckin’ like.”

Will was sufficiently subdued by the man’s outburst that he remained silent until they were back on the Kingston Road and travelling north.

“How long have you worked at the dockyard?”

“A good few years. All my life if you count the fact my father were a sailmaker here. As a boy I saw them hang Jack the Painter just inside the main gate. They strung him up on the mizzen mast taken off the old *Arethusa*. Hauled him right to the very top so he could be seen above the walls.”

“You saw that?” Will’s interest was genuine. “The arsonist?”

Jenkers grimaced and shook his head. “I don’t know nothin’ about his personal fancies. But I knows he liked lightin’ fires.” He waved his whip back over his shoulder. “After they pulled him down they hung his body in chains over at Fort Blockhouse as a reminder to all and sundry not to get too friendly with no damned Yankees.”

They reached the inn at dusk, turning westward off the road not far from where Will had earlier watched the passing parade. It was called the Admiral Anson and sat among a ramshackle collection of fishermen’s huts opposite a wide beach of coarse gravelly sand. The building was distinguishable from the huts that surrounded it only by its size.

Jenkers pointed into the harbour as Will stepped down from the cart. “You can walk across to that island when the tide’s out.”

“What?” Will’s attention was on the inn, and his mind on how such a place could be considered a safe haven from anything. Not only did he doubt that it would provide adequate protection from the elements should the weather take a turn for the worse, it had all of the

appearance of the type of place that a press gang would call on as a matter of course. After dark, it would surely be crammed with a ready haul of the human flotsam and jetsam they would be seeking.

Even now there were a number of characters of suspicious appearance present, some lounging against the side of the building, and others either sitting or lying on the grassy bank that flanked the beach. Seamen or fishermen? Or perhaps pirates or smugglers. Experienced looking types. A good proportion of broad hats, earrings, and pigtails. Some were obviously the worse for drink. Or at least recovering from its effects.

He returned his attention to the building. The core, consisting of little more than the single-storey area defined by two narrow windows that stood on either side of the front door, and the room immediately behind was fashioned from local stone, the same stone used in the fence that he had used as a seat earlier in the day. But the bulk of the structure, including the upper storey, consisted of an assortment of irregularly shaped timber additions, their size and appearance seemingly determined by the original size and appearance of the structure from which the timber had been obtained. The high tapered contours of the upper storey suggested the remains of a weather-worn windmill; the large battened-down door that formed most of the front wall on the left-hand side had obviously once belonged to a barn; and the clinker-built and rotting paneling on the right-hand side, part of a shattered hulk.

No attempt seemed to have been made to alter or otherwise compensate for the original shaping of the timbers. Within all of the assorted structures there were numerous gaps between the various sized planks, and large jagged holes within the planks themselves; as if the building at some time had played host to a swarm of giant wood-crunching rats.

Jenkers' gaze remained on the harbour. "That's Whale Island just off the point. You can walk out to it when the tide's right. But you have to be extra careful with the tide, it can come in twos around here."

Will turned and looked to where he meant. The breeze had dropped, and the water was a slowly vibrating sheet of silver. The shadow that was the island stood to one side of a long, narrow and dilapidated jetty that reached across the beach and stretched far out onto the harbour; a slim wavering line that the shimmering surface of the water rendered indeterminate in both length and continuity.

Will found himself wondering if the few boats that were moored alongside it were settled on the sand or were beginning to rise clear of it. Was the tide coming in or going out? He then checked himself. *Why in Hades do I care anyway? I haven't the slightest intention of walkin' out to that damned island at high, low or in between the first, second or umpteenth*

tide. He turned his back on the harbour in dismissal. But what was difficult to dismiss was the waft of rotting fish carried on what remained of the breeze.

Jenkers climbed down from the cart. “I’ll come with you while you get yourself a room. Then I’ll leave you for half an hour or so and come back and have supper with you if you’d rather be not doin’ somethin’ else. We may even have a couple of jars of ale and a pipe or two if that’s to your likin’.” Deducing the cause of Will’s expression, he added, “The next tide will clear that smell later tonight. The stream that you can see emptyin’ into the harbour over there runs past the back of the fishermen’s huts. They cleans their catch into it.”

Will’s hand felt for the two gold guineas tied in the corner of the handkerchief in his trouser pocket, and then his fingers moved on to close over an assortment of loose change. “How much do they charge for a night’s lodgin’?”

“A shillin’. Maybe one n’ six, if you want a room with a window.”

Will selected a room with a window but chose to keep it shut until he could determine that Jenkers was right about the smell. The sole furnishings in the room were the bed, a washstand, and a large wooden chest. He opened his duffle bag and carefully laid out Jim’s clothes and his own clean shirt, neckerchief and cap on the broad lid of the chest and placed his towel and shaving gear on the side of the washbasin.

After he had washed, he elected not to change into his good clothes that evening, deciding that the setting was not appropriate. But he did elect to shave, even though the fuzz that collected along the periphery of his jawline usually only warranted attention once a week, and his face was still tender from having last shaved the morning he left home. Consequently, when he joined Jenkers at a table in a corner of the barroom, his face was a network of scratches and spots of dried blood.

Jenkerd leaned forward to examine him more closely, waving his head from side to side in his customary manner. “What happened to you, Mister Noling? They only declared war on Boney yesterday, yet you look like you’ve been over in France havin’ it out with him already.”

A young woman walked from the kitchen and stood beside their table. “What do you think, Pol?” Jenkers bobbed his head towards Will’s face.

She leant forward and looked at him closely, exposing a breathtaking expanse of cleavage that had him wondering how the unseen portions of her breasts were prevented from bursting from her bodice. “What happened to you, m’ lovely? Did you have soap in your eyes and grabbed hold of an angry tomcat instead of a towel?”

Will smiled. “I think I might have.”

“Can I feel?” She raised a hand towards him.

“If you feel gently.”

“If you feel gently,” she mimicked, and glanced at Jenkers. “Maybe this one be not as green as he looks, eh Mr Jenkers?”

She brushed his cheek with the tips of her fingers. “How long have you been shavin’?”

“Long enough,” he replied defensively.

“You shouldn’t have scraped skin like this with no razor, my lovely. You should have rubbed cream on it and let that tomcat you dried yourself with lick it off.” She glanced at Jenkers. “I’ll wager he has more fluff on his bum than he’s ever managed to grow on his chin.”

Will blushed, and taking hold of her fingers lifted them away from his face, throwing her a smile in case she was offended.

“Are you familiar with the local brew, Mister Noling?”

“I don’t believe I am.”

“Then we should remedy that, eh Pol? Two jars of ale if you please.”

Will tried to gauge how long it had been since he had finished the last of the bread and cheese that his mother had packed for him. “I’d like to eat soon.”

“And you will, and so will I.” Jenkers looked up at Pol. “What are the rough offerin’s from the kitchen tonight, lass?”

“We have salted pork or salted beef, both with onion gravy.”

“Would the joints be fresh, lass?”

“You be jokin’. Fresh!”

“Eatable then?”

“Not the pork. The pork ’d kill a black dog.”

“The beef?”

“Providin’ you don’t spare the gravy.”

“Vegetables? Do you have any vegetables?”

“You might find a scrap or two of turnips in the gravy. If you be lucky.”

“What kind of gravy did you say it is?”

“Onion gravy.”

“With bits of turnips in it?”

“Like I said, if you be lucky.”

“The onions would be fresh then, wouldn’t they?”

“You won’t find any onions in it, you silly bugger. This be the Anson, not the ruddy George O’tel.”

So, they both consumed some salted beef with gravy, and they also consumed several jars of Jenkers’ local ale. At least Jenkers did. What Will consumed, unbeknown to him, was a combination of an ale of sorts mixed in each jar with a healthy portion of French brandy essence.

After the first two he stopped commenting on the peculiar sharpness of taste that Jenkers explained was caused by the flavour of the local hops. After the fourth, he could not sit squarely on his chair, and after the fifth he was leaning so far forward, his face at times brushed the surface of the table.

Pol refused to serve him a sixth despite Jenkers’ animated urgings above Will’s shoulder. It was at this point that Will came slowly to his feet, knocking over his chair. He stood for a few moments swaying backwards and forwards and then in a sudden stumbling rush staggered across the room and burst through the back doorway into the open air.

Outside he moved quickly across a broad strip of cobblestones onto a grassy waste that flanked the fishermen’s huts. And then vomited with such force the first rush from his stomach speared way out ahead of him like the discharge from a broken down-pipe. He then sank to his knees and continued to vomit and retch with such ferocity that when the spasms subsided, he was left trembling from the effort.

He felt someone place a hand on his shoulder. His head had cleared a little. “Just give me a moment, Mr Jenkers. I’ll be all right in a moment.” His tongue was leaden, and he felt detached from the sound of his words, as if someone else had uttered them.

“No you won’t, my lovely.” The voice a deep growl.

There were two of them. One large, one small. Broad hats and earrings. Smugglers or cut-throats. Probably both. Will vaguely remembered seeing them among others at the end of the room. The bigger one hauled him to his feet and stood behind him. The sudden movement caused his vision to tumble, and he fought to overcome more waves of nausea.

“Can he walk?” This was the smaller one. The light from the open door was on his face and Will saw that he had something wrong with one eye. The pupil was only slightly darker than its surrounds and it seemed to wander about independent of its neighbour.

“Don’t matter,” growled the man behind him. “We won’t be takin’ him far tonight.”

“Where’s Jenkers?” Will again was swept with a sense of detachment from his own words. *Takin’ him?* What do they mean, *takin’ him?* A fine slither of concern stroked him between the shoulder blades, and he shuddered. “Where’s Jenkers?” He tried to gauge the distance to the back door.

The tall man spoke so close to his ear, Will could feel the heat of his breath. “Do you feel somethin’ sharp stickin’ into your back, sonny?” “If you don’t do hexactly as you’re told, you’ll feel that same somthin’ stickin’ out through your belly button with a piece of your liver stuck on it. Do you understand what I’m sayin’?”

The area of cobblestones behind the inn served as a broad walkway to other structures. Probably the kitchen and toilet. And further back in the gloom, past where illuminated insects speared out from, and back into, the darkness, were the stables. Bordering one side of the paved area was a crumbling trellis over which the gnarled roping of an ancient flowering vine was entangled.

Despite his head beginning to pound with extra ferocity, Will’s attention was caught by an object that was resting against one of the uprights of the trellis. It was a boathook, a curl of metal topped by a blunt spearhead mounted on a seven-foot pole.

When he first looked back at the inn, his intent had been to gauge his chances of escape. But he found the door surprisingly distant, a good eight or nine strides away, even for an able man. The boathook, he judged, was no more than four strides away, even for an impaired strider. And it looked as if it could be a formidable weapon in the hands of anyone who was determined to defend himself, whether he be able or impaired.

Perhaps prompted by fear that a blow from behind could already be underway, he found himself in motion almost before he had made up his mind to act. He careered into the small man with his shoulder, striking him a glancing blow to the head that knocked him to the ground. A moment later he had reached the trellis and was snatching up the boathook.

He spun around with the pole in both hands, his left high, his right low, and the metal hook describing an arc in front of his face. The tall man was closing on him quickly, the size of the knife he held out ahead of him indicating his warning had probably not been an idle threat. Will instinctively swung up the lower end of the pole in a sweeping arc. The man tried to duck beneath it but was caught high on the side of his head. He dropped as if his legs had been cut from beneath him.

Will was almost as surprised as his victim and wondered fleetingly if perhaps pole-fighting was a natural instinct of man. With both his adversaries down, it looked for a moment as if it would be his day. But then the full fury of the effect of the alcohol descended

on him again and he staggered beneath its weight. His head began to spin, and a swarm of fiery bees spiralled before his eyes.

Someone called out from the door of the inn and was answered by the short man, who was coming to his feet. Will then saw that three others of rough appearance were converging on him, one from the open doorway and two from the shadows at the side of the building. Two seemed to be armed with long clubs. The third was carrying a knife of similar size to the one that was lying at his feet. It caught the light as the man used it to probe the air ahead of him.

Where in Hades was Jenkers? He tried to call out, but his throat refused to operate.

He backed away trying to keep all his opponents in view, while at the same time fighting to keep his balance and stay on his feet. He held the pole high in front of his chest, as if he could and would strike out with either end if they came too close. At the edge of the cobblestones, he stumbled and then recovered his footing and backed haltingly onto the grassy waste. The others began to spread out as if to encircle him. He saw that the man he had felled was now sitting up.

Will's head began to sag once more as if a garland of chains had been slung around his neck, and his shoulders protested as he fought against the bias. He felt his boots crunch through a thin crust of sand. A few steps further and he was back on turf, and then a moment later on more sand. Something small struck his face. He had a fleeting impression of a rapid beating of wings. Perhaps a bat.

The smell of rotting fish pressed in on him. He could taste it. Feel it. His stomach lurched. The men were closer. The tall one was on his feet and advancing again. A dog suddenly barked angrily somewhere behind him. Perhaps he could find sanctuary in one of the fishermen's huts.

He felt more sand beneath his boots. Softer. Deeper. And then suddenly he had stepped into empty space. His gasp at the shock of tumbling backwards became a gasp at the shock of plunging into icy water, became a gasp at the shock of landing heavily on the sandbank beneath the water.

As he came to his feet, spluttering and choking, they were leaping at him from the bank of the stream.

Four

“Jasus Christ, what have you in the sack? A load of mackerel guts?” The voice came at Will from somewhere behind and above him.

He felt himself being hauled upright. Whatever it was that covered his head, it was not sufficient to prevent sunlight from entering the coarse weave and firing jagged barbs deep into his brain. His stomach lurched dryly. There was nothing left within it that could further soil the mix of fish refuse and vomit that clung to his clothes, nor worsen the smell that enveloped him like a second skin.

As the previous night had been the worst of his life, it was fortuitous that he had only vague recollections of it; usually moments when he regained consciousness coughing and vomiting and fighting for breath, gripped with real fear in the knowledge that he was in the process of drowning. At one point, the motion, the creak of oarlocks, the slap of oars, and the shock of being partly immersed in a freezing bath told him he was lying trussed up like a pig on its way to market in the bottom of a boat.

Later he awoke to hear voices again, among them the growl of the tall man. At one stage the voices were raised in anger, and when they had quietened, he heard the clink of coins. Shortly afterwards he was hauled roughly out of what he later deduced was a small craft into a larger vessel. Every time he came to his senses he was racked by waves of nausea that forced him to retch and try to vomit, activity that usually attracted blows and kicks from out of the darkness.

It was shortly after he awoke to realise that the sun had risen that he felt himself suddenly being lifted high into the air. His thoughts went to Jenkers’ story of Jack the Painter. He felt as if he were being hauled to the top of a mast of some description, and braced himself in case the intent was to drop him and allow him to be killed by the fall. But he doubted this would be the case. Whatever it was that was happening to him, it seemed too elaborate simply to be a way of disposing of him after robbing him. And although what was happening also seemed far too elaborate to be simply the navy’s way of impressing him into its service, this was what he guessed was the more likely explanation.

He did not have to wait long to find out. He was lowered onto a firm surface, the sack that was bound around his upper body was removed, and the bindings were released from his hands and feet. Then he was grasped by the arms and hauled upright.

When the fluttering of his eyelids slowed enough for him to focus properly on his surrounds and determine his whereabouts, he saw that he was on the upper deck of a large warship, and that he and those standing beside him – some who appeared to be in as frail a state of health as himself – were being watched closely by a number of marines armed with muskets with bayonets attached. A small man in a flat black hat, a blue vest and pale duck trousers, and armed with what Will was soon to learn was a belaying pin, was addressing them while striding backwards and forwards in front of them. Whatever the man was saying was lost on Will. From the moment he was aware of his circumstance, his attention was on the water, gauging the distance to the battlements at the harbour entrance.

“You there with the red hair, pay attention when I’m talkin’ to you.” The man walked across to confront Will.

Will met his gaze. “I shouldn’t be here. I have to ...”

“Silence!”

Will was undeterred. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“I said Silence!” The man stepped forward and struck Will a sharp blow on the side of his face with the belaying pin.

Will was so surprised he stood for a moment staring down at the man in disbelief before saying quietly. “This is a mistake.”

The man raised the pin and slashed at him again. But this time Will was prepared. He grabbed hold of the pin and, in one swift motion, wrenched it away from him. Caught off balance, the man stumbled backwards cowering behind raised forearms.

The marines who were standing guard were caught by surprise by such a blatant display of impertinence. But they recovered almost immediately and, as one, stepped towards the miscreant, lowering their muskets to direct their bayonets at him.

“Avast there!” a thickset man cried out in a voice that commanded attention. He strode towards Will pushing aside those who stood in his way.

“Give me the pin, son,” he demanded as he reached him, holding out his hand, palm uppermost.

Will’s eyes narrowed and he lowered his head slightly to one side, transmitting an obvious query.

“The pin. The belayin’ pin.”

Will looked at the column of wood in his hand as if he had seen it for the first time. After a moment's hesitation, during which he matched the man's gaze, he complied. "I shouldn't be here. This is a mistake."

"It's a mistake that you'll be defendin' your country from invasion. Is that what you're sayin'?" The man was dressed in a similar manner to the small man, but he was much older and had a neatly trimmed set of grey whiskers bordering the periphery of his jaw.

"I'm not a sailor. I'm a farmer."

"Well how come you aren't on your farm?"

"I came to Portsmouth lookin' for a job."

"Well, I'd say you've found one."

The men around him laughed, including some of those Will assumed were in the same predicament as himself.

"What's your name?"

"Will Noling."

"Well for better or worse you're in His Majesty's Navy now, Will Noling. So best you get used to it." He began to turn away.

"I have people at home expecting me. My mother. My ... my ..."

"Your wife?"

"No."

"Many of us have mothers waitin' for us, son. Mothers, wives and sweethearts. That's one of the reasons we're off to fight the French. To protect our dear women."

"I can't leave now. Not like this."

"You can and you will. And if I was you, son, I'd accept it."

A slightly built man wearing a cocked hat and a blue frockcoat looked down from the poop deck and spoke to the man beside him, "Mister Scott, who are those men the bo'sun is talking to?"

"They're new recruits, my Lord. They came on board this morning."

"Pressed?"

"Ay, my Lord. I believe so."

"Good God! Sutton's left it a bit late, hasn't he? I warned him that come hell or high water we're sailing to-morrow. What good will any of that motley lot be when we're crossing the Bay?"

“I don’t believe he had any option, my Lord. I hear he’s lost forty over the side in the last week.”

“Has he now? Well, I’ll tell you something, he’s just lost another one. That red headed youngster the bo’sun was addressing has just leapt into the harbour.”

A short time later, he walked to the ship’s side so that he could watch the events that then ensued causing him to chuckle. “Whoever that fellow is, he’s leading them a merry chase.”

Will was a good two hundred yards away when the ship’s pinnace drew alongside him. As the rowers on the side of the boat closest to him shipped their oars and a battery of outstretched arms reached for him, he ducked beneath the water, and in a splashing flurry of strokes, veered away at right-angles to his original course.

The pinnace was forced to come about. Again, when it drew alongside him, he ducked beneath the water and swung away, this time gaining momentum by pushing off from the hull with both feet. The coxswain then brought his craft around in a wide circle to approach him from ahead.

This time, as the bow bore down on him, the rowers on both sides shipped their oars, so that grappling hands would be available on both sides of the boat should he move to the left or to the right. He did not move either way. With the whistling slap of the bow-wave less than half a boat’s length away, he dived deeply and swam beneath the keel. And as he resurfaced in the pinnace’s wake, the cries of complaint from those in the boat were accompanied by resounding cries of encouragement from those watching from nearby ships.

But these sudden and repeated bursts of activity had taken their toll on him. The charge of adrenalin that had surged through him as he leapt overboard was all but spent. And the bone-crushing exhaustion he had experienced on waking returned with a vengeance. Suddenly he found it difficult to keep his head above water.

So it was that when he sensed that the boat was close, he could hardly summon the strength to look behind. When he did it was to see the bow wallowing in the swell only a few feet away from him, with the solidly built man from the ship leaning out and stretching an open hand towards him.

He immediately ducked beneath the water but managed to swim only a few strokes. As he surfaced, he felt the hand that had been reaching for him grasp the top of his head. And before he could take a breath his face was driven back beneath the surface. He ducked away

and shot for the surface again. But again, the hand was waiting, and again his face was driven back mercilessly beneath the surface. *My God, he's goin' to drown me*, his mind screamed. In desperation he kicked out violently and thrashed his arms about to get further away from his tormentor. And this time as he surfaced, he did manage to get some air into his lungs. But it was air charged with water. And as he coughed and spluttered, he again felt the firm grip of the hand, and again it forced his head below the surface.

Back on the ship the man who had earlier taken an interest in the proceedings turned to the person beside him. "Give me the glass, Mr Scott. I wouldn't be surprised if the bo'sun's trying to drown the blighter."

"I doubt it, my Lord. It's not in the nature of the man." He handed a telescope he was carrying to the slightly built man, who took it with his left hand and placed it to his left eye; not that he had many sensible options in this regard, for his right arm was missing, and his right eye was blind.

"Well, they've finally managed to drag him on board, and if he's not drowned, he's not far from it." He chuckled. "He's as limp as a wet stocking. There's certainly no fight left in him."

"That was probably the bo'sun's intention, my Lord."

"Is he a good man, the bo'sun? A fair man?"

"Yes, I've heard he's a good man. And fair."

"Good. I wouldn't like to lose that redheaded son-of-a-gun. I like the way of him."

"How are you feelin' son?"

Will was lying on a bunk of sorts in a confined space he guessed was somewhere within the ship. His wrists and ankles were again bound tightly.

"I'll tell you one thing, you smell a hell of a lot better than when we first met."

"You tried to drown me."

"What I've done son is come out of my way to give you some advice. And if you have any sense at all, you'll take it on board and keep it close by you."

"You tried to kill me. Why should I listen to you?"

"I didn't try to kill you, sonny boy, I probably saved your life. If we'd hauled you on board when you still had any spirit left in you, and you had so much 's thrown a sideways

glance at any of them flat-footed marines who knew they were in trouble for lettin' you go in the first place, they'd have run a spike through you before you could blink an eye."

"Where am I? Where is this?"

"You're in the good ship *Victory*, presently under the command of Captain Samuel Sutton, and as of yesterday flyin' the flag of the greatest man you're ever likely to clap your eyes on in a dozen lifetimes, Vice Admiral Horatio Viscount Nelson himself. You're a lucky man, son, to have been dumped where you have. You could've been dumped anywhere in the fleet."

"You have no right to keep me here. I demand to be let go."

"Son, I'm goin' to tell you how it is, and then I'm goin' to leave you to think about it. What you do with what I say is up to you."

"I demand ..."

"Shut up and listen, son! I won't warn you again."

Something in the man's tone told Will not to press further at this stage.

"Not only have we every right to keep you, son, but if we wanted to do it, we could hang you. We're at war with Johnny Crapaud, and what you did this mornin' we could call desertion. We'd have every right to string you up as an example to others to think twice about leavin' the fleet in a hurry durin' these dangerous times. As it is, you're goin' to be let off lightly. All you're goin' to get is a taste of the cat. A dozen lashes. A slap on the wrist. And before you protest again, I'll give you the best advice you've probably ever had in your short life. There are some things in this life you can alter, and there are others that you can't do nothin' about. And you bein' in the navy right now is one of those. There's not a damned thing on this earth you can do to alter that fact. But how you choose to spend your time in the navy is somethin' you can do somethin' about. You can fight it. Or you can accept it and make the most of it.

"And I can tell you this, sonny. Them that's chosen the bumpy road often don't even see out their time. And if they do, they're often so crippled they'd probably wish they hadn't. Whereas them that have chosen the easier road, have walked out of the navy with their heads held high. Proud men. Respected by others. The choice is yours."

"How long will that be? When I can walk out?"

"When we've won this war. A month. A year. Two years. Whenever."

Will closed his eyes and shook his head. "You say I'm goin' to be flogged?"

"A dozen lashes. And to prove I harbour no grudges over your behaviour to me this mornin', I'm goin' to give them to you myself."

“You’re what?”

The man chuckled. “I’m goin’ to wield the cat, sonny. Which is about the best news you’ve heard today.”

“What are you sayin’, that you’re goin’ to flog me gently?”

“No way. I’m goin’ to cut a fine swathe across your back that’ll have you thinkin’ you’re bein’ flayed alive. The last thing I want you to do is to forget it. I want you to remember it as long as you live.”

“So why am I so lucky?”

“Because I won’t be hurtin’ you permanent. I won’t be damagin’ your kidneys, or strippin’ the flesh off your shoulder blades down to the bare bone. In a fortnight you’ll be healed. Long as you takes my advice and don’t get yourself a taste of the same treatment again before then.”

“Can I send a message to my family.”

“Can you write?”

“Ay.”

The man stood up and spoke to someone on the other side of a heavy wooden grating. Will thought he caught a glimpse of a red jacket.

The man turned back. “I can’t promise, but I may be able to get a letter ashore before we sail.”

“When do you sail?”

“Tomorrow.” He twirled one hand in a circular motion. “Turn around and I’ll untie your hands. Another word of advice’. You’ve won a few points from the crew already. If you can keep yourself from yellin’ when you get your dozen, you’ll earn a few more. It don’t hurt your survival chances in this man’s navy to earn yourself a few points from time to time.”

“Jesus Christ!”

“You’re a religious man are you son? That’s good. To keep you quiet when you’re lashed to that grating, you’ll need all the help you can get.”

Five

It was a five-mile walk from the Noling farm to the Fitzparsons' estate. The Fitzparsons had dithered in their allegiances during the Rebellion of 1642, and the fortified manor house had suffered in consequence. The east wing had been destroyed by fire and had never been rebuilt. It stood as a reminder of the folly of the attempts of the then incumbent, Sir Hugh Fitzparsons to appease whoever was the conflict's ascendant of the moment. No one seemed very sure then, nor was any wiser now, whether the arsonist had been a Royalist or a Roundhead.

The charred remains of the high vaulted roofing had long since disintegrated and blown away. But the crumbling walls remained. And the cold sweeps and contours of grey stone, punctured irregularly by the empty sockets of the windows, could project as stark an impression to an unsuspecting stranger approaching from the east on a bleak day as would a stack of giant skulls.

So it was for Jessica Glider. She had never been to the Fitzparsons' estate before, and the day she chose to go was windy and overcast. It was not as dark as the day before, the day Reverend Smith-Wilson braved the worst turn in the weather since the demise of winter to deliver Will's hastily prepared message. But anyone attempting to lift Jessica's spirits afterwards would have had trouble convincing her that this was not the darkest day of her life.

Her decision to seek Sir Rory Fitzparsons' help had been her own. She told neither Will's mother nor his brother Jim of her plans, for fear that Jim would either persuade her to try a different course or insist on accompanying her, perhaps to the detriment of her chances of success; a proposition that at this point she avoided examining too closely.

Will's message had struck the Noling Household like a thunderbolt. When Smith-Wilson arrived the wind was howling and the rain was beating in broad horizontal sweeps across the fields. Jessica was returning from the barn with a bucket of milk, and vainly attempting with her free hand to control Will's oversized oilskin coat as it billowed and flapped about her

body with a force that at times almost lifted her into the air. She first caught sight of Smith-Wilson as he was dismounting at the front door.

It was not unusual for him to call in on the Nolings when he was in the area. But this was hardly call-in weather. She froze and stood as if paralyzed while he eased his small, stooped frame with difficulty to the ground from the gaunt wild-eyed mount that the church had saved for him from the knackery.

Beneath the weather-proof cape that flapped about his head he could have been the grim reaper himself, so effectively did the sight of him arrest her progress, and so sharp was the stab of concern that buried itself deep within her. *Please, God, let him be safe*, she cried out silently into the teeth of the wind.

By the time she reached the house the letter was lying where Will's mother had dropped it on the sitting-room floor, and Smith-Wilson was assisting her to sit on the sofa.

"He's not dead?" Jessica cried out from the doorway.

"No. He's not dead. Nor injured."

She scooped up the letter from where it lay beside one of the pools of water that tracked his progress across the room.

Not dead. Not injured. Thank God! Thank God! Relief surged through her and her head began to swim. She moved quickly to the closest chair, and sinking onto it unfolded the letter with trembling fingers.

"The navy's taken him." Smith-Wilson was far less threatening up close. A small man with pince-nez glasses, which he was now taking the opportunity to clean with a torn, lace-trimmed handkerchief.

What? The navy? She tried to read all of the words in one glance. And then forced herself to scan them a line at a time. *The navy!*

"Dearest Family,

I am safe and well in His Majesty's Ship Victory. The navy has demanded my services for the duration of the war. I cannot tell you more at this time. Jessica, I love you and I am so sorry. I love you Mother. Look after them, Jim.

Affectionately,

Will"

"He's at sea. The fleet sailed yesterday." Although Smith-Wilson had the pinched elfin features of some small men, his voice was surprisingly low and resonant. "Perhaps someone

had once told him he had a good preaching voice, and that was why he became a vicar”, Will had once suggested; adding, “I’ll wager many people have ended up where they are for less reason.”

Smith-Wilson clipped his glasses back on his nose and, leaning towards Jessica, peered at her as if testing them. At another time she may have toyed with the idea that he wore pince-nez because he distrusted the security of his ears. Although the proposition was unlikely that these protuberances had suffered permanent damage as a result of Rory Fitzparsons’ bullying, it was difficult to ignore the fact that they did droop somewhat precariously, as if their mountings were unstable.

Jessica eventually recovered her voice. “The fleet’s sailed. Sailed where? Where is he?”

“He’s with Nelson. He’s headed for the Mediterranean.”

“It doesn’t say that here.”

“The *Victory* is Nelson’s flag, and that’s where he’s going. And I pray that God goes with him.”

The access road from the eastern side of the Fitzparsons’ estate passed through a belt of dense forest that clung to the parallel humps of two low ridges. In places the trees on either side were interlocked overhead, and the understory was so dense that the road resembled a long winding cave. Jessica passed through the leafy cavern gripped by an increasing sense of unease, her gaze more often sweeping the sides of the road and behind her than the way ahead. Although the forest canopy remained well above her head, an observer may have noted that she seemed to be stooping slightly, as if she was avoiding colliding with it.

When she finally emerged from the forest her sense of relief at escaping its claustrophobic confines was stifled by her first sight of the manor house. The wind returned to tug at her clothes as she moved away from the trees. Had she taken the wrong road, she wondered, as she stood with her hair whipping about her face and looked down on the shallow valley before her. She seemed to have stumbled upon a war and weather-ravaged ruin, with its stepped skull-like countenances as grim and uninviting as any ancient structure she had ever seen.

Her reaction was mixed. If this was not the Fitzparsons’ estate, she could postpone her plans and return home; an option that invited immediate relief, albeit temporary. But if it was the place she sought, the damage to her resolve caused by its projected malevolence was

probably irreparable. Her shoulders shook in the grip of an involuntarily tremble. *God help me!*

Had the building not been surrounded by an untidy but extensive network of fields containing either grazing livestock, or an assortment of crops in various stages of maturity, she may have turned away. But she was obviously observing a farming enterprise of some magnitude. And when she noticed that from behind the ruined building a number of spirals of smoke were rising briefly before being caught and dispelled by the wind, indicating that at least one, and possible more, habitable buildings were being shielded from sight by the ruin, she decided to press on.

As she drew closer and the other structures came into view, she believed it was probable that she was approaching the place she sought, despite the absence of the trappings she had been expecting: a grand manor, expansive gardens, neatly trimmed lawns and hedges, and possibly a lake flanked by a Grecian summer house.

These expectations were based on other gardens she had observed from a distance, and on illustrations of the works of Inigo Jones and his contemporaries that she had seen at a fair in Southampton.

When the care of the estate had been in the hands of Rory Fitzparsons' mother, some of what Jessica had been expecting had been evident; the rose gardens, the neatly trimmed lawns, the hedges and the lake – actually more of a chain of duck-ponds than a lake – but attractive none-the-less, particularly when the willows that surrounded it were budding. There had been no Grecian summer house, but Greek-like heroes and maidens had stood watch at most twists and turns of the landscaping.

But Rory's tastes leaned more towards the functional than the decorative. Gardens and lawns took up space that could be used for livestock and crops. So, one of his first acts when he became lord of the manor had been to dismiss the gardeners and tear out the roses. The Greek heroes and maidens he broke into coarse rubble to fill the channels he used to drain the duck ponds.

Not that his instincts were exclusively commercial. He did have an interest in sports, for instance. Particularly those that involved the letting of blood, or the terrorising of the local fauna. Hence a preoccupation with hunting, fowling, coursing, and baiting; activities that stripped the surrounding countryside of most of its foxes, hares, wildfowl and otters and kept the few survivors in a state of almost perpetual terror. In support of his pursuits he kept a fine kennel of hounds.

It was the agitated barking of these hounds that brought Rory's housekeeper to the door before Jessica had time to knock.

She was a big woman. Jessica had seen her a few times in the village, and each time had been struck by her mannish appearance. Her greying hair was cut so short that the top of her head resembled an upturned hairbrush. Her face was angular, and her jaw protruded in every direction. A blacksmith would have been well served by the breadth of her shoulders, which were accentuated by arched cascading ruffles attached to the top of her sleeves. Her dress was high necked and black, and swept to the floor in one smooth plunge from beneath the formidable bulwarks of her bust.

Jessica fleetingly speculated that if there was a female warden on any of the prison hulks on Langston Harbour, she probably wore such a dress. It had much about it that reminded her of a constable's great-coat.

"Would you be expected?" the woman demanded loudly, possibly because of the hounds. Or more probably to convey annoyance at being interrupted from some activity in which she had been engaged in the deep gloom behind her, Jessica decided. *The flogging of a subordinate, perhaps*, Jessica mused flippantly in a failed attempt to lift her mood.

"No. But he ..."

"Then you can't see him today. He's busy."

"He told me to come. Any time."

"When?"

"Any time." He didn't actually say any time, she admitted silently; but he implied as much.

"Not when you could come. When did he tell you?"

"Last Sunday."

"Why do you want to see him?"

"That's business between myself and Sir Rory." Jessica had had enough. To reach this point she had to overcome a succession of obstacles – the forlorn hope of success, the weather, the gloom of the forest, the broken building, the damaged landscape, the dogs. *If this perhaps-female thinks she's goin' to prevent me from seein' him, she can think on the other side of her square head.*

"Business is it?" The woman had a pair of small spectacles perched on the tip of her nose. She threw back her head and used them now to observe the young upstart more closely.

"Yes business." There was no waver in Jessica's determination.

"Well, he's not here. So, you can't see him."

“Where is he?”

“He’s out riding.”

“Then I’ll wait.” She glanced past the woman trying to pierce the gloom of the passageway behind her. *There’s no way on earth that I’ll risk entering that abyss*, she decided.

“He could be ages.”

“I’ll wait at the stables.” She turned abruptly away from the door and walked back down the path, heading towards the row of buildings where she had seen a groom at work.

“If you must wait, you should wait in here,” the woman called after her.

As was the intent of her hasty retreat, Jessica pretended not to hear, and kept going. *If you think you can trap me into entering your dudgeon so that you can lock me in chains, you can think again.*

As she approached the stables, the hounds, who seemed to be housed not far from the entrance, gave voice to their excitement with renewed enthusiasm.

Six

“When did you get his letter?” Fitzparsons strode around the room as he talked, his boots clumping heavily on the loose flooring. Although some time had passed since he had dismounted from the big, lather-swathed, bay charger that his groom was presently rubbing down, it was obvious to Jessica that much of him was still working as if he were travelling at a steady gallop. His face was flushed, he was breathing heavily, rolling oscillations were passing through his ballooning neck, his chest and shoulders were rising and falling with each stride, and he was punctuating his words by slapping the side of his boot with his riding crop. She, on the other hand, was sitting bolt upright, watching him warily, with her hands clasped on her lap and her knees pressed tightly together.

When she had arrived at the stables, his groom had escorted her to the far end of the largest building where a right-angled extension containing two horse stalls had been converted from their original purpose. The wall between the stalls had been removed to form a combined storage and living area.

Sheaves of straw and bags of chaff were stacked on either side of a small wooden hatchway in the far wall of what was originally the end stall. The contents of some of the bags had spilled onto the earthen floor through holes at floor-level that suggested mice had been at work. By design or default, the neat piles of finely chopped straw would undoubtedly replenish each time the tiny thieves took their fill.

The side walls contained an assortment of horse and harness paraphernalia, including branding irons, pincers, halters, bridles, bits, chinstraps, nosebands, breastplates, cruppers, girths and surcingles, stirrup irons and leathers, and a family of complete saddles mounted on short support poles that jutted from every upright beam. The air was charged with pleasant aromas of beeswax and oiled leather.

Loose planks had been lain as flooring in what had been the adjoining stall to serve as sleeping quarters for a stable attendant. The furnishings consisted of a small table, two straight-backed wooden chairs, a narrow bed covered by a dilapidated woollen blanket, and a brazier crammed with glowing coals mounted above a heavy metal dish partly filled with ash. Smoke from the coals streamed into the flared horn of a metal flue that passed up through the vaulted roof of the building. The room was lit by pale light streaming through a window

mounted high on the outside wall, and from a metal-based lantern sitting in the middle of the table.

“Reverend Smith-Wilson brought it yesterday.”

“The *Victory*, you say? Nelson’s ship?”

“Ay.”

“I’ll be roasted! Pressed, y’ say? The lad’s been pressed? Well I never! Who’d have believed it? Nelson’s ship, begad! Heading for the Mediterranean?” He propped and threw her a searching look. “Who told you that?”

“Reverend Smith-Wilson.”

“Idle talk. Rumour. The man should know better. I’ll wager Nelson won’t sail any further than the western reaches of the channel and join up with Cornwallis blockadin’ Brest. The ships will then take turns in returnin’ to their home bases to replenish supplies.”

“Do you mean there’s a chance he’ll be home soon?” Her voice was little more than a whisper.

“No.”

Her face fell. “Why not, if the ships return regularly?”

“The ships will turn around too fast. And pressed men aren’t allowed ashore when they’re in a home port anyway. Not when there’s a war on. Here, you’re shiverin’. Move closer to the fire.” He helped her move her chair.

He walked to the door, opened it slightly, and called out something that Jessica could not quite catch above the skirl of the wind.

The weather seemed to have worsened since she heard him arrive and had ventured to the door to watch him dismount. It was obvious then that he was in a state of good-humoured excitement. Between gulps for air, he related something to the groom as the man took hold of the head of his heaving charger. And as soon as his feet touched the ground he turned to the man and, prancing around him in a parody of a prize fight, pretended to pummel him about the arms and shoulders.

Despite this, the groom apparently managed to inform him of her presence, for he straightened as if struck from behind, and swung around to face her. Then immediately abandoned both horse and attendant to stride towards her and usher her back inside.

“It’s his mother I’m worried about. She’s had a relapse.”

“A relapse?”

“Another terrible attack of melancholy. Worse than after his father died.”

“Is that so? The poor dear lady.” He threw his riding crop on the table and sat down for the first time since arriving. He then leaned towards her with his face a mask of concern.

“It was all Jim and I could do to get her out of bed this mornin’. And she hasn’t spoken a single word or eaten a scrap of food since we got the letter.”

“Is that right, lass? Dear, dear me! it’s a sad thing. For sure ’n’ certain it is that.”

“That’s why I came to see you.”

They were interrupted by a knock at the door.

Fitzparsons strode to the door, where his groom handed him a leather flask and two metal cups. Fitzparsons then closed the door in the man’s face and returned to his chair.

“He’s a hard man to read, that one. I venture it’s his looks, stops him from showin’ anythin’? His skin’s so tight about his jaws he has trouble either frownin’ or smilin’.” He spread his hand beneath the ballooning flesh of his own chin, and Jessica’s attention was momentarily distracted by the remarkable colour and texture of that part of his anatomy. Where he protruded from the loose wrapping of his neckerchief, his flesh now resembled the rump of a roasting pig, pink and crinkled with a sparse coating of fine white bristles poking through it.

He poured an ample helping of the contents of the flask into each of the metal cups and held out one of them out to Jessica. “Here, drink this before you catch your death.”

“No. I’m fine. Thank you. No.”

“Drink up, lass. It’s medicinal. Heaven knows what you might come down with otherwise.” He thrust the cup into her hands. “Drink.”

She sipped and gagged.

“Not like that. It’ll burn you. Down the hatch. Like this.” He drained the other cup in a gulp and leant forward to lean over her. “Now you. Go on. Tip it up.”

He loomed around her. She was seized by a moment of claustrophobic panic and found herself doing as he demanded while she was still in the throes of refusing. The liquid took her breath. She sat for a moment with her eyes smarting, wondering if she would ever again be able to breathe. After what seemed like an age, and besieged by continuing panic, her chest rose and fell heavily.

“Now isn’t that better? Surely that warmed the cockles of your heart. Now, what is it exactly that you want me to do? How can I help you?”

She waited until she was sure her breathing had returned. “I want you to use your influence to have Will released from the navy. His mother’s life depends on it. I’m sure of that.”

“My influence? You think I might have that influence?”

“I believe you’d have more influence than anyone else in the area. Havin’ once been in the navy, and havin’ regular dealin’s with Portsmouth. I’ve heard that men who have been pressed have been released after representation by someone such as yourself. When there was good reason. Farmers or men in business whose family’s depended on them for their survival for instance. And men with other family problems.”

She waited, watching him. He had moved back slightly but was still too close. She had trouble looking at him without a sense of unease. As if she was leaning at an uncomfortable angle or was standing too close to a precipice.

“Who told you these things?”

“Reverend Smith-Wilson.”

He shook his head sadly. “That man again. Won’t I ever be rid of him?” He turned away and picking up the flask refilled his cup. Then, before she realised what he was doing, he reached out and refilled hers.

“He said that he would write to the navy himself.” Her eyes were on the cup, as if she had missed seeing what he had just done and was wondering how the liquid had arrived there. “But ... but he doubted his chances of success. Bein’ only a village vicar.”

“That little prickle would have no more chance of success if he was the Archbishop of ruddy Canterbury. He’d still be as useless as a flute to a pig.”

“So I thought you might be able to help us?”

“Us?”

“Will’s mother. Mainly.”

“And you?”

“Yes. And me.”

“Tell me what reason to have him released you think might work?”

“I’m not sure. I thought you’d know how?” She watched him, waiting, concerned by his question, a possible change in his mood. “Perhaps his mother’s illness?” A question. Tentative.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so. Not alone. You’d need more. Most pressed men have mothers. And many of those mothers would be in bad health. Bad.” He leant even closer, swamping her vision. His head, neck and chest seemed to expand as she watched.

“We need him at home?” She could taste the return of her panic. Her throat began to tighten.

“You’re shiverin’ again. Drink some more brandy. It’ll do you good.”

She shook her head.

“Drink up, lass. I’ll be wastin’ my time tryin’ to get him out for someone who’ll be dead next week of plaguey p-monia.”

“You’ll try then? You think there’s a chance?”

“Drink.”

She drank and winced, but more from the expectation of hurt than the reality. The fluid still bit her, but less severely. The bite was almost comforting.

Above them the shingles rattled, caught in a stronger than normal burst of wind. Despite her unease, the contrast between their cozy surrounds and the weather outside was inducing within her a curious sense of comfort. Her fingers tingled. Warmer than before. “You’ll try.”

“If I think it’s worth the risk.”

“Risk? What risk?”

“Risk to me. Not to you. But more of that later. First tell me if you were lovers.”

“What?”

“A sick mother ain’t enough. Not by a long shot. But a sick mother, plus a wife endangered by hellfire, and maybe we’re startin’ to build an argument.”

“What are you talkin’ about? Wife? Hellfire? We’re not married. Not yet?”

“No. But silly little Smith-Whistle would swear on his good book that you were just about to be. And if you were to say that you were already livin’ as man and wife ...” He opened both hands and spread his arms as if he were about to clap them together. “Man and wife in a house that you now have to share with a very sick mother-in-law to be, and a very healthy big brother-in-law to be ...”. He fluttered his hands. “Maybe we’d have the start of an argument the navy would listen to.”

“What are you sayin’?” Her head was swimming.

“Jim the giant. He’s a danger to your moral well-bein’, lass. Specially with poor Mrs Noling unable to protect you.”

“But that’s absurd. Jim’s not a danger to anyone.”

“The navy don’t know that. And who knows what danger he might become if Will doesn’t get home for years.”

“Years?”

“As long as the war lasts. Years for sure.”

Years! Her gaze was locked on the rim of her cup as he refilled it. She made no attempt to stop him. *Years!*

“Were you livin’ as man and wife in that house?”

“No. Never.”

“Sailors don’t often have legal wives. So, as long as you shared his bed on a regular basis, they’d probably recognise you as his wife. Particularly if Smith-Whistle gives his blessing and endorses the dangers of a healthy live-in brother-in-law.”

“We never shared a bed.”

“A hay loft?”

He tried to hold her gaze but she turned away.

“How many times?”

“What?”

“If the navy question us to determine if we’re tellin’ the truth, I’ll have to know as much as you do about these matters. So how many times? Ten, twenty, thirty?”

“No.”

“How many.”

“Not often.”

“Ten?”

“I don’t know.”

“We’ll say ten.”

Now her eyes sought his. “Do you think they’ll let him go.”

“If I’m willin’ to take the risk of representin’ you they might.”

“What would be the risk?”

“For you. None. For me, maybe all the trade I do with the plaguey navy.”

Her heart sank. “Why would you be riskin’ that?”

“Why indeed?”

“I mean. How would you be riskin’ that?”

“By makin’ waves. Strange as it may seem the navy don’t like someone makin’ waves. Do you know what a contract is?”

“An agreement.”

“Ay,” He watched her intently. “An agreement.” Ripples began to surge through the gradually strengthening ache of concern that was forming in the pit of her stomach. He continued, “An agreement. Usually between two parties where both of them will gain by it. Otherwise there’s no reason to enter into a contract. I guarantee to supply the navy with good quality produce at an agreed price. They guarantee to buy my produce at that price. I have a

guaranteed income regardless of what's happenin' with the produce markets, and they have guaranteed supply. We both gain."

Although she did not perceive that he had moved, he suddenly seemed to be sitting even closer to her. Her throat continued to tighten. Panic. Swirling within her.

"You're shivering again. Drink up."

"No."

"The moment I write to the navy, I'll risk losin' that contract."

"How?"

"Like I said, waves. I'll write to Porky Jamieson, deputy director of manning. Porky 'll be all right. Porky's an old friend. He shoots here. But others who see my request may object to my interferin'. Seein' it's war, Porky's decision might need endorsement. Who knows what jealous prickle at Admiralty might take exception. If Jackie Jervis was to hear about it, for instance, or whatever he calls himself these days – Saint Vincent – I'd be chopped off cold from so much as thinkin' about doin' business with the fleet. They'd tear up my contract. I'd lose a lot of income."

She could not even look at him now. He was far too close. The sense of panic was creeping into every part of her body, every limb, every blood vessel.

"Drink up, Jessica. Medicinal. Down the hatch."

Panic. She was unsure if the words were real or remembered. She drank. No bight. Soothing. The panic began to subside. The glow from her fingers seemed to have spread along her arms and into her chest. She was being consumed by a curious mix of apprehension and comfort. Her head swam.

"So, I ask myself if I were to agree to help you, how should I hedge against that possible loss of income? Loss of contract? Do you have any ideas, Jessica?"

She shook her head.

"I believe that you and I should enter into a contract. That way if I lose my contract with the navy, I'll still have my contract with you to salve my wounds."

"How do you mean. I don't ... don't have any money."

"Contracts don't have to involve the exchange of money, sweet girl. This one would cover the exchange of services. My services for yours. On my part, my services will be representin' you in tryin' to get Will out of the navy."

He waited, watching her.

She waited, watching him.

He ventured a tight smile and spread his hands. “On your part, you’ll come here to see me on a regular basis. What’s today? Monday. Let’s say every Monday mornin’.”

“Why?”

“You’re a big girl, Jessie. Why do you think?”

Her mouth fell open. Suddenly she needed room. She gripped the sides of her chair with both hands and taking all of her weight on her feet for a moment, she manoeuvred the chair away from him. “You don’t for a moment believe I’d be willin’ to enter into such an arrangement with you?”

“You will if you want to see young Will’m before the shine’s gone off him. Or maybe ever, if he gets into a decent battle with Johnny Crapaud. And with him sailin’ around with Nelson that’s more than likely.”

“I don’t believe this. What kind of person do you think I am? Do you think I’m a whore?”

“Jessica, Jessica. Sweet little innocent Jessica.” He shook his head.

“Tellin’ me that Will could be killed if I don’t agree, is nothin’ less than cruel blackmail. What you’re demandin’ makes me sick to the pit of my stomach. If I knew that by killin’ myself Will would be released, then I’d gladly kill myself rather than accept your offer.”

“Jessica, Jessica!” He chuckled and shook his head. “You’re so young. Only someone so young could make a statement like that. Kill yourself indeed! There might be some fate’s worse than death, lass, but I can assure you that what I’m askin’ of you isn’t one of them. It’s not even as if you’re a virgin. You’ve admitted to me you’ve been lettin young Will’m swive you. You won’t lose anythin’ by this experience. You’ll gain. I promise you, you will. You can look upon it as an extension to your education. This ’ain’t some earth-shattering matter. There’s a war on, girl. Nations are collidin’, for Lord Jesus’ sake!” He pointed behind him. “Bonaparte’s flotilla might arrive on our doorstep next month. England could fall. Against that, this is an ant’s breakfast. A nothing! A simple exchanging of needs. Yours for mine.”

She shuddered.

“Look at it from my side, lass. I no longer have the youth, the time, or the patience to woo you beautiful young creatures by normal road. I’d rather I did. I’d rather it different. But it ain’t different. It’s the way it is, and there’s nothing I can do about it. For the companionship I need, I’m forced to make arrangements like this. Exchange what I can offer for what the likes of you can provide. I’m not a bad man, lass. I’m just a lonely man. Terrible

gut-wrenchin' lonely since my poor lovely young Kate passed on." He beckoned with a curled hand. "Come closer to the fire, girl."

She lowered her head and closed her eyes. "How do I know you'll do as you say and try to get Will released?"

He smiled triumphantly. "You don't. You must trust me. As I must trust you to come when I say and do as I ask. Contracts of this type depend on trust. For instance, I'm not even goin' to demand that we consummate our relationship before I send off my letter to Porky Jamieson. I'll write the letter tonight and send it off to him tomorrow."

She shuddered. "Consummate?"

He smiled and watched her for a moment before replying. "I'll wager young Will'm never referred to what you two got up to in the hay loft as consummatin' your relationship. What I should have said was, that as a mark of my trust I won't even demand that you let me roger you before I send the letter."

Again, her mouth fell open.

He showed her his teeth in an exaggerated smile. "And as it'll be a full week before I see you again, you can appreciate the level of my trust that you'll honour our agreement."

"I haven't ..." Her voice wavered and failed. With an effort she continued, "I haven't agreed to anythin'."

"Oh yes you have, my lass. Perhaps not in so many words. But you couldn't be more definite in your intentions if you'd had what you've decided to do drawn up by a lawyer."

"I didn't say I'd do it?" She knew her words sounded hollow. The repeat of a revealed and acknowledged lie.

"Seein' you place so much importance on the words, just to be on the safe side, best I spell out what we're exchanging, and receive your verbal agreement. On my part I agree to use all the influence I can bring to bear on havin' young Will'm released from the navy, startin' by sendin' a letter to Porky Jamieson tomorrow, and further letters and affidavits if required to senior officers later. On your part you must agree to any demands I make of you of a personal nature, and to that end you must agree to come here every Monday mornin' until I release you of that obligation."

"Every Monday?"

"Every Monday."

"What about when Will returns?"

"The same. Every Monday. And when you have him back, you'll be under a stronger obligation to honour our agreement won't you?"

“I couldn’t do that to him. I couldn’t.”

“Oh yes you could. If you want him released.”

“But what excuse could I use for comin’?”

“The same one you can use before we get him out. You can say that you’re havin’ violoncello lessons from my secretary. She’s a fine musician.”

“My god!” She lowered her head.

“Do you agree to the conditions, Jessica?”

She did not move for some time, and then she nodded. Once. Firmly.

“Say it then. Seein’ you place so much importance on the words. Say, ‘I agree’.”

“I agree.” A whisper.

He leant forward. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

She lifted her head and faced him squarely. “I agree. I agree. And may you rot in hell!”

His face broke into a beaming smile. “Now that’s more like it. That’s the spirit I like to see.”

She stood up. “I’m going now. But I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to come tomorrow, lass. Next Monday is when I’ll expect you. About ten o’clock.”

“I’ll be here tomorrow. I want to collect the letter you say you’ll write to-night. I’ll give it to Reverend Smith-Wilson. He’s travellin’ to London on Wednesday. He can deliver it to the Admiralty personally.”

He continued to smile. “Jessica, I’m not sure that you trust me. If you come I’ll show you the letter, but there’s no way on this earth that I’ll let you pass it on to Smith-Whistle to deliver. That incompetent prick will have his work cut out findin’ London, let alone the Admiralty Building. I’ll post it myself. With my seal on it and directed to the right quarters it’ll have a much better chance of arrivin’ where it’s meant to go.”

“I’d prefer you gave me the letter.”

“I know what’s best, Jessica. Trust me.”

She made as if to reply but was as someone caught in a churning current. The events that swirled about her were transporting her towards some elusive destination at bewildering speed. She lost the thread of the reply that had been forming on her lips and muttered instead. “I’ll be here at ten.” For a long moment she could not remember why she would be. Panic seized her and she trembled. Her eyes sought the doorway. And escape.

“I’ll be expectin’ you. At ten, next Monday. But before you go ...” Picking up his riding crop he reversed it and placed the end of the thickened grip against her waist. The grip had a

large silver knob attached to the end, a stylised leopard's head, mouth agape, snarling. The prow of a Viking ship in miniature.

He twisted the crop slightly so that the jaws of the leopard for a moment were caught in folds of material where her dress was bunched above the broad scarf she was using as a belt.

“As a gesture of good faith ... or at least as an indication of your sincerity ... would you disrobe for me, lass?”

“What?”

“Would you take your clothes off? I want to see you naked.”

“Here? Now?”

“I need a memory of you that'll last me a week.”

“But.” She looked about her. Trapped!

“Please Jessica. No buts. We have an agreement.”

“But you said ... you wouldn't. Not for a week.”

“I said I wouldn't roger you. And I won't. But I do want to see you. Here ...” He stood up. “I'll give you room.” He lifted his chair away from her and sat down again. Then with his free elbow resting on the table and the other one tucked into his waist, he aimed the doubled thong of the riding crop at her and waved it up and down. “Stand closer to the fire so you don't catch cold. And put your things over the back of the chair.”

She matched his gaze for a time, and then her shoulders rose and fell, and she turned away.

She did not look at him again until she was naked, and then only to cast him a contemptuous glare before picking out a spot over his head just below the window and gazing at it steadily. Her mind was still juggling with their discussion about the letter. Something was not right. It worried her. A deep-seated itch her fingers could not quite reach.

“Turn this way, lass. A little more. Now take your hands away. Both of them.” He made a sound that may have been a chuckle, but when she glanced at him for a moment his expression seemed more strained than amused. “You'll fall over if you try and stand like that, girl. Spread your feet. Further. Further still. Do as I say lass. That's better. That's much better. My goodness, Jessica. Pardon me if I stay quiet for a while. I am a lover of beauty, lass. Whether you believe that or not. And what I'm lookin' at now leaves me speechless.”

She returned her attention to the spot below the window, with part of her mind still grinding away at the concern that eluded her. *What is it? What on earth could be more troubling than this? My god! What's happened to me that I can endure such indignity without fainting completely away. It must be the Brandy.* Her fingers were still tingling. *But how is it*

that I can be less troubled by what I'm doing now, and what he'll be doing to me next week, than by some worry that I'm not even sure exists. Something I can't even identify? With an effort she shook off her reverie. "I've done what you said. Now I'm goin' to get dressed."

"Before you do, lass, would you turn around slowly. Yes. Now stop. Stay like that for a moment."

Her back was to him. She waited. Suddenly she was aware that he was close. She began to turn, but his hands clasped her shoulders tightly. He pressed against her. She could smell the brandy on his breath. Feel its heat.

"What are you doin'?"

He turned her towards the bed and began to edge her forward.

"No," she whispered. "You promised." You promised, she repeated somewhere deep inside her. And then again, *you promised!*

Suddenly her head cleared as if she had been struck by a blast of cold air. The letter! Of course! That's why he won't let anyone else take it, post it. He has no intention of delivering it. He never did. He's a liar! This is a trap!

"The sight of you has overwhelmed me, girl. I can't wait a week. I can't wait a moment."

"No," she whispered. He was almost lifting her now. Her mind began to race. "No. Not here. Someone might come."

"No one will come."

She looked about her frantically. "What's that? What's in there?" She pointed to the hatch on the end wall.

"The chaff store."

"We can go in there?" she whispered.

"The chaff store? It's half full of chaff."

"We'll be out of sight."

"We're out of sight here."

"Not if someone comes."

He chuckled. "I think you've had too many tumbles in the hay, lass. But if that's your choice, and it'll make you feel better, the chaff store it is. Providin' of course that I can fit through that hatchway."

He could. Remarkably easily as it turned out, holding Jessica's hand for balance as he climbed through. And he went through first at her insistence to show her that there were no rats waiting in ambush.

It wasn't until he was completely inside that he realised his mistake. But he was able to react a moment before she tried to wrench her hand from his. His anticipation caught her by surprise. His grip crushed down on her hand.

So, she bit him, deeply, sinking her teeth into the back of his hand with all of the force she could muster into her jaws. He gasped and released her and fell back into the chaff. Before he could recover she slammed the hatch cover closed and drove home the bolt.

"You lied to me," she cried, leaning against the wall, her chest heaving. "You lied to me about the letter, as you lied you would not touch me today. You're an evil man."

He flung himself against the inside of the hatch as she turned away and snatched up her clothes. She dragged them on, whimpering fearfully as resounding thumps and muffled cries sounded from the locker.
