

THE  
PROVIDENCE  
RIDER



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ROBERT McCAMMON



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To kc dyer.

Thanks for the help, the encouragement,  
and for showing me the silver swan.







# ONE

THE GRAY KINGDOM





# ONE



**T**HE crab that scuttled amid rocks in the liquid dark knew nothing beyond its shell. Born from what? Struggling toward where? It knew not. It tasted the cold currents, and within them the essence of flesh to be consumed, and so it changed its course to the direction of that call and labored slowly through the muck toward its prey.

Over more rocks again, into crevices and cracks, sliding down and clambering up in its sideways gait, its claws thrusting here and there as was the nature of the crustacean. On its passage over an oyster bed the crab's presence sent a tremor across the field of plate-sized shells, as if in their moist senseless dreaming the mollusks felt the shadow of nightmare where no shadow could be. The crab went on, and whatever small panic had roused the oysters beyond their state of somnolence died in an instant, and life between the shells continued as before.

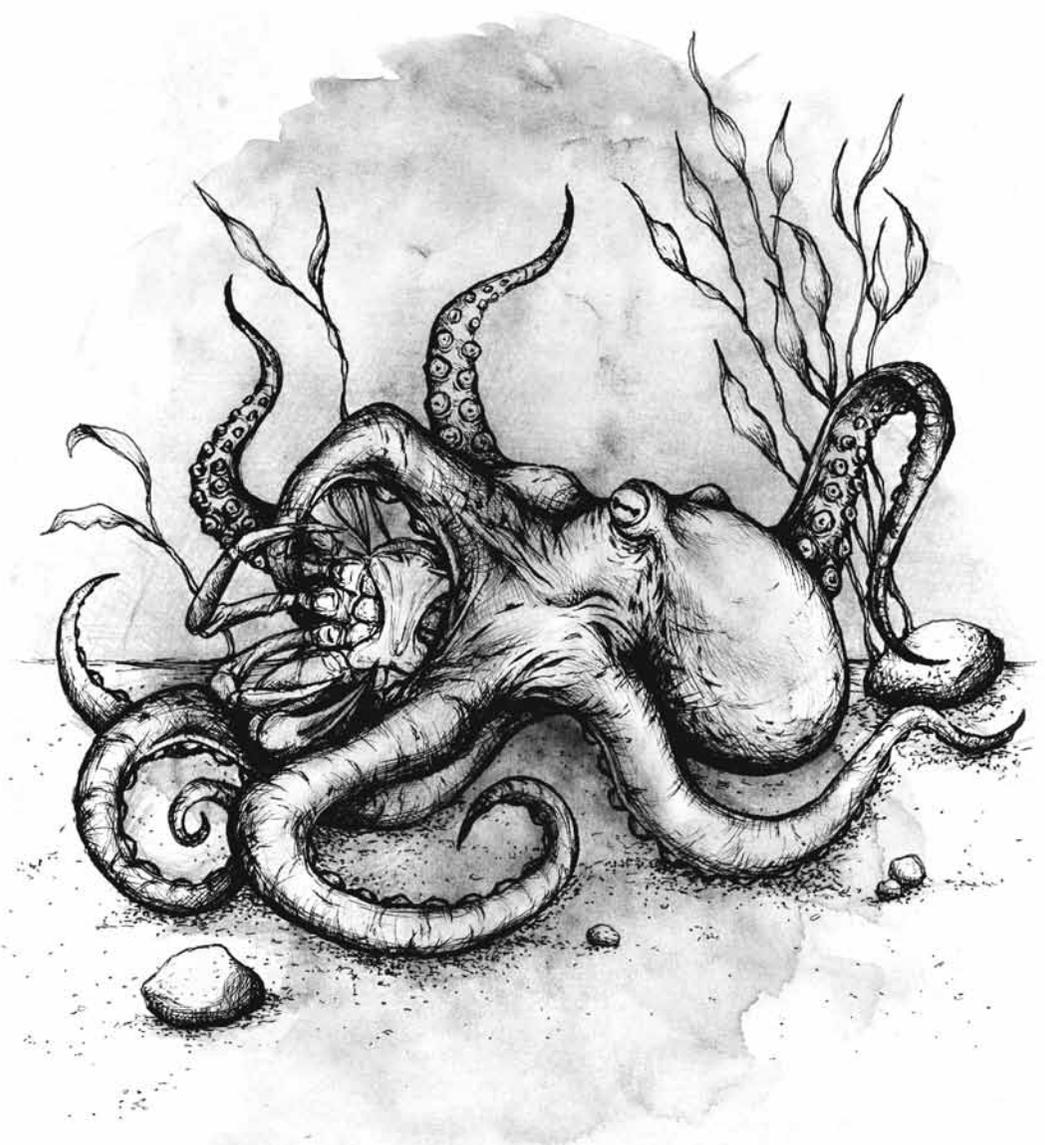
Whither it travelled, the crab stirred whorls of mud beneath its claws. The hard-backed and determined dweller did not know the full moon painted silver light upon the surface of New York's

harbor, or that the month was February and the year 1703, or that lamps glowed in the windows of the sturdy houses and well-seasoned taverns of Manhattan on a Saturday night, or that a cold wind from the northwest ruffled its roof. It knew only that it smelled something good to eat in this nightblack and muddy morass spread out before it, and so it went on hungrily and one might say clumsily, without forethought or plan.

Therefore when the mud beneath it opened up and tentacles sprouted forth and what appeared to be mud shuddered with voracious delight, who was to blame but itself? When the tentacles wrapped around the crab and flipped it over and the beak of the octopus began to gnaw into the underbelly, what thought flashed like a scent of dead herring through the crustacean's nerves? For truly the crab struggled to escape, but of chance for this there was none. In bits and pieces the crab began to come apart, to lose itself to biting beak and impartial sea, and as the smaller fish darted in to seize these little floating shreds of meat the octopus pulled its prey closer like a jealous lover and squeezed itself down into a hole where two rocks kissed. Thus very soon the last of the crab was down in an even darker place than before, and so farewell to the solitary traveller.

Having completed its meal, the octopus sat in its hole. It was old and slow, and in its own way it seethed and fumed against the indignities that time had laid upon it. But it had been lucky, to feast so well. Very soon, though, the feelings of hunger began gripping its innards again. So it pulled itself from its crusty den tentacle by tentacle and ventured forth upon the battlefield once more, and drifting hither and yon like a speckled cloud it searched for a nice plain of mud and weeds to sink itself into. There it would wait for the next hapless denizen of the deep to cross its path, and woe to the crabs and small fish of the night.

The octopus, dedicated to its own progress and appetite, floated past a cluster of rocks upon which was jammed the rusted remains of an anchor torn from a Dutch ship in a storm many years before. The creature whose home and refuge these rocks and anchor had become immediately woke from its stupor and, sensing the presence of food in a tingle of its inner ear, thrust its tail from side to side and propelled itself outward. Thus the grouper's mouth seized the bulbous head of its prey. As the alarm of black ink jetted



forth—far too late—the octopus was pulled into the grouper’s maw and crushed by the heavy tooth plates within. The flailing tentacles were ingested in a gulp. It was such a clean dinner that not a shred was left for the little beggars. The grouper swam in a kind of victorious trance, its belly grazing the bottom and its tail sluggishly moving water.

Presently a new smell of food beckoned the grouper, which changed course like a barnacle-blotched frigate. Searching high and low, it came upon an oily piece of meat suspended in the water, there for the taking.

It took.

When the mighty maw closed over the meat, there was a sudden jerk upon the line that rose up forty feet to the surface. The fish-hook set. The grouper, mildly annoyed, pulled back and intended to return to its den, yet was stopped at this attempt by an admirable resistance from the upper regions beyond which the grouper had no knowledge. Hook, line and grouper began a test of wills, and if anything the grouper was strong and stubborn. Still, the grouper was pulled toward the surface little by little over the following few minutes, and try as it might the fish could not shake the hard spiny thorn that set tight in its throat. On its way up from depths to heights its eyes caught sight of strange shapes in the world beyond. A round light shone down in a most beautiful silver glow that nearly transfixed the grouper. The fish shivered in its attempt to escape this nuisance of being pulled where it did not wish to go, and its gills swelled with the flush of anger.

In another few seconds it would be up through the surface. It would be in the clutches of another realm, for better or for worse. It would know, in its own way, a secret. And yet it resisted this knowing, and it thrashed and thrashed yet the line still pulled and it yet rose upward. The surface was about to be broken, and the grouper’s eyes would see a world foreign and alien and wholly fantastic in its being, just before it perished.

But before that could happen the blue shark that had been observing this situation and circling the picture darted in and tore most of the lower portion of the grouper away in its teeth, so that only the grouper’s head emerged on the end of the line. The fisherman in his little rowboat, who had been reeling in his catch for the

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better part of six minutes, saw the grouper's dripping head and the white wake of the shark's fin. He threw his rod down in an expression of rage and in his raspy wind-weathered voice gave a shout likely to roll across the waters and waken the sleepers in the graveyard of Trinity church.

"For sakes of Almighty Jazus!" hollered old wild-haired Hooper Gillespie. "T'ain't fair, you hard-hearted robber! You wicked piece a' God's spite! T'ain't *fair!*"

But fair or not, that was life both above and below the surface.

After a few more choice morsels of twisted lingo had been flung at the since-departed shark, Hooper Gillespie gave a heavy sigh and pulled his tattered coat tighter about himself. His thick white hair stood out from his head in bursts of cowlicks and circular whorls, an untameable field that had once broken his mother's best brush. But his mother was dead now, long dead, and never would anyone know that he kept a small ink drawing of her face in a pewter frame in his cabin, done from memory. It was perhaps the only thing he valued in life, besides his fishing rod.

He reeled in the mangled head. He removed the hook. Just before he threw the mess over the side, he caught the gleam of the moon in the sightless eyes and wondered what fish knew of the world of men. But it was a passing thought, like a shadow without substance. He turned in his boat to regard the bucket of the night's catch, three small mackerel and a nice-sized striper. The wind was getting colder. His arms were tired from his recent efforts. It was time to head for shore.

The sound of fiddle music drifted to him across the bay. It was joyous and lively, and it made a hot surge of fresh anger rise up within old Hooper. "Good for *you!*" he growled in the direction of people and dances and candlelight and life in general. "Yessir, go on about y'selves and see what I care!" He stored his rod away and began rowing toward the dark shape of Oyster Island. "I *don't* care!" he said toward the world. "I'm my own self, is what I am! Thinkin' they can get away with it, and me down in a puddle. No sir, that ain't the half of it!"

He realized as he rowed that he'd begun talking to himself quite a lot lately. "Never no mind to that!" he said. "Done is done and is *is!*" He paused to spit bitter phlegm over the side. "So *there!*" he said.

Back in the summer, Hooper had been running the ferry between Manhattan and Breuckelen. But the river ruffians, the ‘bullywhelp boys’ in his opinion, who kept waylaying the ferry and robbing its passengers had put paid to that effort, at least for Hooper. He had no wish to be the bearer of a cut throat. In fact he’d complained about the situation at Governor Lord Cornbury’s first meeting with the citizens at City Hall and insisted that High Constable Gardner Lillehorne should be doing something to clean up the river trash.

“And look where that got me!” he hollered to the stars. “A-rowin’ out here in the cold like to catch a death and what’s it all the better for?”

The truth was, in November Lillehorne had found the robbers’ hidden cove and broken up that merry little band of nasties, and yet the job of ferry master had gone to a younger man. The closing of many doors in Hooper’s face had made him think complaining about the high constable in front of the gown-wearing Cornbury—the queen’s cousin and, it was fair to say, a little queenly himself—was not something a sane man ought to do.

“But I ain’t crazy!” Hooper muttered as he rowed. “I am as fit in the head as a new nail!”

Circumstance found him now nearing Oyster Island’s rocky beach. Circumstance and, of course, the cold hard fact that no one else wanted this task. The island was mostly a tangle of woods and boulders, but for the small log cabin built to house the watchman. That was Hooper’s job, and had been for three weeks. Watchman, climbing the watch tower on the southern end of the island and mostly watching the tide roll in and out, but also alert to masts on the horizon. If his spyglass picked out an armada of ships flying Dutch flags, he knew it would be Holland’s oak-walled men of war coming to take back New York, and he was to scurry down to where the cannon faced the harbor and fire off a warning blast before the invaders made landfall.

“Hell if I know ’bout firin’ a damned cannon,” Hooper said quietly as he thought about it, his oars moving water. Then he heard the drift of fiddle music again, and he turned his face toward the lamp-lights of the town and hollered, “I ought to blast ye all, right out a’ your dancin’ shoes! Go on with ya!”

But, as always, no one bothered to answer.

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Something caught his squinty eye.

He saw a red light flash.

It was up in the darkness, up maybe a half-mile or so from the town proper. Up at the edge of the woods that still held the criss-crossing of Indian trails. It was a red light, blinking on and off. On and off. On and off.

“That there’s a signal lamp, I’m be thinkin’,” Hooper told himself. It was likely a flame behind red glass, and somebody’s hand or hat moving down to obscure the glow. “Now that’s the question,” Hooper said. Then he realized he hadn’t asked the question yet, so he did: “Who’s it signallin’ to?”

He looked out to sea, out beyond the rough rocks and wild forest of Oyster Island.

Far out there. Out in the dark.

A red lamp blinked on and off. On and off. On and off and... gone.

He turned his head again toward Manhattan and the dark edge of the untamed woods. That red signal lamp had also been extinguished.

It came to Hooper Gillespie that whatever the message was, it had been delivered.

The bottom of his rowboat scraped oyster shells and stones. His heart had jumped and stuttered and was now beating wildly, for one thought had invaded his unbrushed noggin.

For Hooper, thoughts were to be spoken as loudly as possible. “No they *ain’t!*” he shouted. “Comin’ over sea swell and mercy knows to bleed us to pieces, no they ain’t!” He leaped from the boat, stubbed his right boot on a rock and went for a face-first splash. Then, spitting and cursing in a language not fully English nor fully understood by any other human being but his own self, Hooper struggled up and ran through the little wavelets that washed upon the gritty earth. He ran past the cannon along a trail that led to the watch tower, and at the base of the tower he paused to flame a torch from the tinderbox there. With torch alight, he climbed the rickety wooden steps to the top. On the upper platform he leaned forward as far as he dared against a worm-eaten railing with the torch held high. “Liberty’s blessin’ ain’t to be took!” he shouted toward the unknown and unseen ship that sat out there in the dark. Of course the torch showed him nothing, but at least the Dutchmen would know they’d been seen. “Come on in

here, ya blue-hinded rascals!” he hollered. “Let’s see the shine a’ your greedy eyeballs!”

His voice pierced the night but the night swallowed it up and gave nothing back.

The red lamp at sea was gone, and did not return. Hooper looked toward Manhattan’s woods. That lamp, also, was a goner. Whatever had been said, it was not to be repeated. Hooper chewed his bottom lip and waved the torch about, throwing sparks. “Seen ya good, ya traitorous bag a’ crooked bones!” he yelled. He didn’t expect to be heard at this distance, but it felt good to unload. Then the idea of *loading* came to him. If what he thought was about to happen, and all the Dutchmen in their ships were about to sail right into the harbor with cannons and cutlasses ready to crash and carve, then he had to do his duty and warn the citizens. He scurried down the tower’s steps again, torch gripped in hand, and near the bottom almost tripped and put paid to not only his heroic plan but to the way his head sat atop his neck.

Hooper stopped at his cabin to hurriedly open a wooden box for a small bag of gunpowder—about two thimbles full, enough to make a sizeable noise—and a six-inch piece of fuse. He took a knife to slit the bag. Then he went on to the cannon and, hands shaking, placed the torch in a metal holder put there specifically for the purpose. Muttering and fretting to himself about the future of New York if the Dutch got hold of it and threw every British citizen man woman and child into the brigs of their boats, Hooper put the fuse into the cannon’s vent hole. How much had he been told to leave showing to carry the fire? he asked himself. He couldn’t remember. He just had the memory of a mouth moving in a pallid face under a tricorner hat, and himself thinking about getting some fishing done while he was out here.

There was no ball to be loaded; this was for noise only. Hooper looked back over his shoulder at the nocturnal sea. Did he sense the motion of a hundred ships closing upon the bay? Did he hear the flap of flags and rattle of chains as guns were readied? But there were no lights visible, not a single one. Oh, those Dutchmen! Hooper thought. They were devils of the dark!

He turned to his task once more with frantic purpose. He had to pee but had no time, so let it run in his breeches. It was the least

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a hero could do. He knifed open the bag of gunpowder, poured the powder into the cannon's barrel and then remembered to use the ramrod like the moving mouth under the tricorn had told him. He packed the powder with a hard shove and then stood for a moment trying to recall if he was supposed to flame a match to fire the fuse or use the torch. He pushed the fuse down good and short so the wind couldn't whip it out. One more backward glance to make sure the Dutch armada wasn't gliding past Oyster Island, and then Hooper put the torch's flame to the cannon's fuse.

It sparked, hissed, and the fire began to travel. Hooper stepped back a few paces, as he'd been told. The fuse burned down. When it disappeared into the vent hole there was a sizzling sound like bacon in a frypan, followed by a weak little *pop* and a puff of smoke that floated away as delicately as a lady's lace handkerchief.

"Well, that ain't *right!*" Hooper moaned. "Jazus save me, I've pulled a boner!"

He peered into the vent hole. There was no spark visible. Either the fuse had gone out or the powder was bad. He went to the cannon's business end and put his face to the muzzle. He could smell a smouldering, but where was the flame? "Damn me!" he hollered, as the thought of his heroism at this time of New York's need turned to ashes around his soggy boots.

A scant three seconds after Hooper pulled his face away from the cannon, there was a gout of fire from the vent hole and the gun went off.

The blast of smoke itself almost knocked him crazy. The noise slapped his ears deaf. He staggered back, gasping like a hooked grouper, and fell on his butt. Dazed, he saw blue fire and sparks whirling up from the cannon toward heaven, and then he saw something else that nearly made every sprout of wild hair jump from his head.

Something exploded across the bay in town. A building, looked to be down toward Dock Street. Hooper couldn't hear the noise, but he saw the red fire leap up. Whatever it was, it was burning hot with a white center. Pieces of roof came down. Parts of the building were still flying upward like fiery bats.

"Oh no," Hooper whispered, though he couldn't hear it. "Oh no, oh no!" His first thought was that he'd forgotten and put a ball in the cannon and blown something up himself, but then he remembered

there was no ball in the cannon, and how in the name of bleedin' Jazus could somebody forget about *that*?

No, it had to be the Dutch. They had just fired on New York, and the war had begun.

He scrambled up. It was time to vacate these premises. Still there was no sign of the warships, no battle lamps or cannon flame. He didn't care. He ran to his rowboat, which was still up on the rocks. As he pushed it off and got in he realized something else very strange.

The three small mackerel and the nice-sized striper in the bucket?

They were gone.

It was the ghost, Hooper thought. The phantom that walked out here. It was why he'd been given this job, because nobody else wanted it. The last watchman had left the island the night his overcoat had been stolen from a post next to the outhouse. Whoever had the watchman's job, they weren't alone. Hooper had never seen evidence of the phantom before, but here it was.

"Christian of ye to leave the damn bucket!" he shouted toward any listening ears, though his own were still fried and sizzling.

He was quits with this Godforsaken place. He took the oars and put his wiry muscles to the labor, and with hammering heart and fearful soul and wild smoke-scorched hair old Hooper Gillespie rowed for Manhattan, with red flames before him and the dark sea at his back.

# Two



**A**s a crab scuttled amid rocks in the liquid dark, so Matthew Corbett danced across the plank floor of Sally Almond's tavern by golden candlelight. Perhaps he was not as ungainly as the crab, and perhaps he did comport a certain amount of grace and style, yet there was definitely room for improvement in his technique. In its largest room the tavern's tables and chairs had been pushed back and space arranged for a right fair gathering. A fire crackled in the brick hearth to warm the air, though the heat of energy filled the place. Two fiddlers played, a squeezeboxer squeezed, and a drummer rattled his bones at a merry pace. The stately gray-haired figure of Sally Almond herself had joined the festivity, clapping her hands to the bounding beat.

Round and round went the swirl of dancers, among them the blacksmithing apprentice and Matthew's friend John Five and his bride Constance, the potter Hiram Stokely and his wife Patience, the Munthunk brothers Darwin and Davy and their corpulent but surprisingly light-footed Mother Munthunk, Dr. Artemis Vanderbrocken who at seventy-six was content to mostly sip the

spiced punch and enjoy the music, Felix Sudbury the owner of the Trot Then Gallop tavern, the printmaster Marmaduke Grigsby, Madam Kenneday the baker, another of Matthew's good friends Effrem Owles the tailor's son, and Jonathan Paradine the undertaker who was thin and pale and seemed to slink from place to place on the floor rather than actually dance. His ladyfriend, a newly-arrived widow by the name of Dorcas Rochester, was equally thin and pale and slinked just the same as her beau, so the couple seemed to all to be well-matched.

Matthew Corbett had been in some demanding predicaments in his twenty-three years on earth. He had weathered the attack of a bear whose claw had left a crescent scar from just above the right eyebrow into the hairline. He had outrun a triad of hawks determined to remove his eyeballs in the most ungracious fashion. And he had literally managed to keep his face situated on his skull in a millhouse fight with the brutal killer Tyranthus Slaughter, among many other moments of dramatic danger. But at *this* moment, in the golden candlelight of Sally Almond's tavern with the music playing and the dancers stepping through their paces, Matthew thought his own feet were perhaps the most dangerous enemies he'd yet faced, for the crossover mirror reels were treacherous in their complexity and the elaborately bewigged dance master Gilliam Vincent—who also served as the prissy proprietor of the Dock House Inn—wielded a leather glove on the end of a hickory stick to slap the heads of imperfect offenders.

And, as Matthew made a slight stumble, here came the stick and glove. *Smack* upon the back of his skull. When Matthew turned his head to give Gilliam Vincent a glowering stare, the dance master had lightly moved away and so was Matthew moving away as well, caught up in the procession. Yet Mr. Vincent bore a smirk beneath his bony snoot that said he enjoyed the correcting perhaps a bit more than he ought to.

"Pay no mind to him!" said Berry Grigsby as she came up alongside Matthew on their right-shoulder pass. "You're doing fine!"

"A relative term," he answered.

"Better than fine," she corrected as she moved past. "*Wonderful.*"

Now that, he thought as he continued along the path this particular reel required, was skinning the onion and calling it a potato.

Then he turned to find himself face-to-face with the two-hundred-and-forty pound shock of woman called Mother Munthunk, and she gave him a black-toothed grin under her hatchet nose and a whiff of breath a goat could not suffer.

What a joy this evening was, Matthew thought when his eyes had ceased their watering. He regretted accepting this invitation from Berry, though he had twice before declined her note. *Matthew*, she'd said at his door last week, *I'm only going to ask you once more, and if you say no I'll never—never—ask again.*

And what could he do then but accept? Not only was Berry breaking what seemed like the law of God by inviting a male to a social gathering, but also implicit in the tone of her request and the low fire in her dark blue eyes was the suggestion that not only would she never ask him again, she would never *speak* to him again. Which would be a problem for him, since he lived in a converted dairy-house just behind the Grigsbys' abode and he took supper there on occasion with Berry and her moon-faced and usually ink-stained grandfather Marmaduke. So in respect with keeping the peace and the more selfish ambition of keeping his place at a very hospitable supper table, what else could he do but accept?

"Half reels of three!" Gilliam Vincent announced, with an expression that verged on a sneer. "Then we shall turn to the left, give both hands, make a complete clockwise circle and assume our places for the Mad Robin!"

This was *supposed* to be enjoyable, Matthew thought grimly. Berry had taught him the positions and steps last week, but with the fiddling and the drumming and Gilliam Vincent's stick poised to strike a blow for artful perfection it was torment for a young problem-solver who would much rather be studying the pieces on a chessboard or, for that matter, be out on a task somewhere for his employer, the London-based Herral Agency.

*Onward!* he told himself. His feet were more or less where they needed to be. He mused upon cocking a fist at Gilliam Vincent if that stick came near his skull again, but he had had enough of violence lately to last him a lifetime.

He still had nightmares of Mister Slaughter. In some of them, he was being chased across a black bog by the killer, his feet and legs were sinking into the muck, he couldn't get himself free to

move fast enough, and when he looked back through the red-tinged nightmare gloom he saw the approaching figure and the glint of a knife gripped in the right hand. And then from the opposite side another figure was coming toward him: a leonine woman with an axe in one hand and under her other arm a burlap bag marked in crimson paint *Mrs. Sutch's Sausages, Sutch A Pleasure*.

"Places for the Mad Robin!" Gilliam Vincent called out. "Find your places!" *You idiot children*, he might have added.

Matthew moved, but he sometimes felt dazed and unsure of his direction. Sometimes he felt as if he belonged to another world that the people in this room knew nothing about. Sometimes he felt that even though both Mister Slaughter and Mrs. Sutch were dead, part of them kept clawing at him deep inside as if he were the entrance to their crypt and they desperately wished to open him up so they might rejoin the living. For in a way he was their brother now.

He was a killer.

Of course Tyranthus Slaughter had died due to the combined efforts of Matthew, the vengeful boy Tom Bond and the Iroquois tracker Walker In Two Worlds, but Matthew had cleaved an important portion of Lyra Sutch's head from her shoulders with an axe, and he would never forget the expression of hatred on her bloodied face and the way the scarlet rivers had flowed. That hideous cellar was a memory bad enough to drive any man to madness. Since it had happened Matthew could never again sleep in the dark. A candle—or better, two—had to be burning all through the night beside his bed.

"Step lively!" commanded Vincent. The curls of his wig were as big as cotton balls. "Corbett, wake up!"

He was awake, yet was he? When he got this horrible business on his mind reality became fogged, like a dirty glass. He recalled speaking to Sally Almond about how the great fans of Mrs. Sutch's sausages were reacting now that there were be no more of the spicy things laid out on the dark red—Indian blood, they were called—platters Hiram Stokely supplied to Madam Almond. *Most are faring well*, the lady had told him. *But a few who seemed to crave those sausages beyond all reason tell me they sweat at night and do not sleep very soundly.*

"They'll get themselves in order," Matthew had answered, but he was thinking he should get the names of those particular

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sausage-lovers so he might studiously avoid them in the streets and alleyways of New York.

*A pity that Mrs. Sutch left the country so suddenly,* said Sally Almond.

“Yes, and most likely it was a one-way destination,” Matthew had replied, leaving Madam Almond to frown with puzzlement for a few seconds before she gave a shrug of finality and returned to her kitchen.

“Step! Step! Step! *Pause!*” shouted the bewigged tyrant, who was doing his best to make a pleasant pasttime into an onerous odyssey.

Matthew Corbett wore tonight a plain dark blue suit with a white shirt and white stockings, his shoes buffed to a polite shine. He was no longer interested in presenting himself as a cock-of-the-walk, as had been the case back in the flush of autumn. He was absolutely fine with his current position in life, which was as a problem-solver tasked to do many various things for the Herral Agency, some as mundane as carrying land deed papers to a particular personage and others as interesting as had been the incident of the Four Lamplighters just this past December. Problems such as Lord Mortimer, the wealthy man who’d hired Matthew to help him cheat death, and the tricky—yet sadly comic—situation faced by Lady Pink Manjoy had helped Matthew put some distance between himself and the Slaughter tribulation, yet he still felt he had many miles to go.

He moved within the flow of dancers yet felt himself drifting apart. Even when Berry passed him once more and gave him a lingering appraisal, he saw only the fact that he had taken a human life. And perhaps it had been his life or the wretched life of Mrs. Sutch in the balance, but still...he remembered asking his friend Walker In Two Worlds the question *How are you insane?*

And the Indian’s answer, which seemed more appropriate now to Matthew’s state of mind: *I know too much.*

Matthew was tall and slim, yet with the toughness of a river reed about him. Surely, he knew by now the virtues of bending with the flow of events. He had a lean, long-jawed face and a thatch of fine black hair that was now brushed and tamed for the civilities of the evening. His pale candlelit countenance attested to his interest in books and nighttime games of chess at the Trot Then Gallop. His cool gray eyes with their hints of twilight blue were on this night

thoughtful upon matters more of flesh-and-blood than music and dance. Yet he was here, in a way, on a mission.

When he and his problem-solving associate Hudson Greathouse had been assaulted by Tyranthus Slaughter and had wound up at the bottom of a well in the ruins of a Dutch fort, Matthew in his efforts to escape death and save his friend's life had been fortified by the image of the lovely, intelligent, artistic and quite willful young woman who had just passed by his right shoulder. In fact, he had fixed upon her as he had attempted time and again a precarious spider-like climb to the top of the well, which had seemed at the moment as far away as Philadelphia. During that struggle to survive he had made the vow to invite her to a dance if indeed he lived through the episode. And he had vowed to dance the floor to woodshavings in appreciation of a life returned to him. Mayhaps it had been Berry doing the inviting, and the dancing was more regimented than he would have liked, but nevertheless he felt he was alive because of her, and so he was here—dancing with her, every few turns of the reel—and he was in his own way ecstatic to still be a citizen of this earth.

So when Berry passed next to him the following round—she of the curly coppery-red tresses, blue-eyed and fresh-faced and all of nineteen years old with a scattering of freckles across her nose and a gap between her front teeth that Matthew found not only endearing but exciting—he raised his face to her and smiled, and she smiled back at him, and he thought she looked radiant in her sea-green gown adorned with purple ribbons on the front, and perhaps an errant thought of what her lips would taste like when they were kissed crept in and surprised him, and caused him to lose the pace, for he stumbled against Effrem Owles and suddenly Gilliam Vincent was there glowering his disapproval and the stick was coming down to swat Matthew's noggin with the leather glove.

But before the glove could smack home, the length of hard hickory met with resistance in the form of a gnarled black walking-stick that got in its way. There was a little *crack* of wood against wood, more like the horns of two rams clashing.

"Mr. Vincent?" Hudson Greathouse had stepped forth from the throng of perhaps twenty or so onlookers to this slow death called a 'dance.' He spoke quietly, so that only Matthew and the dancemaster could hear. "Have you ever had a glove up your ass?"

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Vincent sputtered. His cheeks reddened. Maybe the answer was *yes*. It was hard to tell.

In any case, the hickory stick went down.

“Time, everyone!” Vincent announced. “Time, please!” And then, to no one in particular, “I’m going out to get some *air!*”

“Don’t rush back on our accounts,” Greathouse said as Vincent departed with a wobble in his wig.

The little commotion caused a hiccup in the music and, the pacing lost, the company of reelers banged and bumped into each other like a caravan of carriages that had thrown their wheels. Instead of the kind of indignation that Vincent might have shown at this lack of dancely decorum, the collisions brought forth laughter both brassy and silvery and thus revealed was the true metal of friendship among the Mad Robins of New York.

The musicians decided to rest their fiddles, drums and squeeze-box. The dancers dispersed to get their share of apple cider and sugar cakes from the table in the other room. Berry came up alongside Greathouse and Matthew and said with appreciable generosity to the young man, “You’re doing very well. Better than you did at the house.”

“Thank you. My feet don’t believe you, but thank you anyway.”

She gave a quick glance at Greathouse and then focused her attention again on her object. “Cider?” she asked.

“In a minute.” Matthew was aware he was not the most genial of company this night; perhaps it was the fact that he’d just seen the Mallorys—the devilishly-handsome, gentlemanly Doctor Jason and his beautiful black-haired wife Rebecca—standing across the room pretending to be talking but actually keeping their eyes on him. Those two had been haunting him seemingly wherever he went ever since he’d returned from the Slaughter incident.

*We have a mutual acquaintance*, Rebecca Mallory had said to Matthew one day on a quiet waterfront street while her husband silently stood watch. *We believe he’d like to meet you.*

*When you’re ready*, the woman had said, *in a week or two, we’d like you to come visit us. Will you do that?*

*And what if I don’t?* Matthew had asked, because he knew full well to what acquaintance Rebecca Mallory must be referring.

*Oh, let’s don’t be unfriendly, Matthew. In a week or two. We’ll set a table, and we’ll be expecting you.*

"I'll certainly be glad to have cider with you, Berry!" said Effrem Owles, pushing past Matthew in his eagerness to inhale the girl's essence. His eyes were large and round behind his spectacles. The tailor's son was dressed simply but elegantly in a black suit, white shirt and white stockings. His teeth gleamed at the center of his giddy smile. Though Effrem was only twenty years old, premature gray streaked his brown hair. He was tall and thin. Gangly would be the proper word. An excellent chess player, but the only game he was playing tonight had to do with Cupid. Tonight he was obviously hanging onto the hope that Berry would grace him with the opportunity to watch her drink cider and eat sugar cakes. Effrem was in love. No, more than love, Matthew thought. Effrem was obsessed with Berry. He talked about her incessantly and wanted to know everything of her comings and goings, and did Matthew ever put in a good word for him and say how much money an able tailor could command and all such nonsense. Between Effrem and the town's eccentric but highly-efficient coroner Ashton McCaggers, Berry had her choice of ardent pursuers.

"Well..." Berry made it sound like not only a deep subject but also one that greatly perplexed her. "Matthew, I thought—"

"Go ahead," Matthew told her, if only because he feared getting saliva on his sleeve from Effrem's tongue. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Grand!" said Effrem as he positioned himself beside Berry for the stroll into the other room. She went along, because she did like Effrem. Not in that way he wished to be liked, but because Matthew counted him a good friend and she saw in Effrem the loyalty of friendship she considered among the highest blessings in the world.

In the departure of Berry and Effrem, Hudson Greathouse leaned lightly on his stick, cocked his head to one side and gave Matthew a grin that was also half-cocked. "Brighten your candle," he advised. "What's wrong with you?"

Matthew shrugged. "I suppose I'm not in a festive mood."

"Well, *get* in one. My God, boy! *I'm* the one who can't dance anymore! And I'll tell you, I could shake my shillelagh in my younger days. So use it while you have it!"

Matthew stared at the floor between them. Sometimes it was hard for him to look Hudson in the face. Because of greed and a bad

decision, Matthew had allowed Slaughter to get the drop on them. Greathouse got along fine on his walking-stick, for sure, and sometimes he could get along just fine without it if he was feeling more like a stallion than a gelding, but being stabbed four times in the back and then three-quarters drowned had a way of aging a man, of slowing him down, of thrusting the bitter truth of mortality in his face. Greathouse of course had always been a man of action, and thus knew the pitfalls of putting himself in harm's way, but Matthew still blamed his mendacity for the darkness that sometimes passed across Greathouse's face like a shadow, and made the man's deep-set black eyes seem yet more ebony and the lines around them more numerous. To be certain, a diminished Hudson Greathouse was still a force to be reckoned with, if anyone dared try. Not many would. He had a ruggedly handsome, craggy face and wore his thick iron-gray hair in a queue tied with a black ribbon. He stood three inches over six feet, broad of shoulders and chest and also broad of expression; he knew how to conquer a room, and at age forty-eight—having turned so on the eighth of January—he possessed the canny experience of a survivor. And well to be so, for the wounds and the stick had neither made him put quit to his work with the Herral Agency nor made him any less desirable to any number of New York females. His tastes were simple, as attested to by his gray suit, white shirt and white stockings above unpolished black boots that knew how to kick a tail or two, if need be. Matthew mused that Mr. Vincent should consider himself lucky to have gotten out of the room with just an insult, because since Matthew had saved his life Greathouse was the finest of friends and the fiercest of protectors.

Yet, still, there was the nit to be picked.

"Are you that much of an idiot?" Greathouse asked.

"Pardon?"

"Don't play dumb. I'm talking about the girl."

"The girl," Matthew repeated, dumbly. He glanced to see if he was still the center of attention from Doctor Jason and the beautiful Rebecca, but the Mallorys had moved to a different position and were conversing with the ruddy-faced sugar merchant Solomon Tully, he of the Swiss-gearred false choppers.

"The *girl*," said Greathouse with some force behind it. "Can't you tell she's got it set for you?"

“What’s set for me?”

“*It!*” Greathouse’s scowl was a frightening thing. “Now I *know* you’ve been working too much! I’ve told you, haven’t I? Make time for *life*.”

“My work is my life.”

“Hm,” said the great one. “I can see that carved on your gravestone. Honestly, Matthew! You’re *young*! Don’t you realize how young you are?”

“I haven’t thought.” Ah, yes! There was the quick glance from Rebecca Mallory again. Whatever she was thinking, Matthew knew he was never far from it. Of course, owing to events revealed to Matthew after the deaths of Slaughter and Sutch, it was clear to him that the Mallorys were somehow involved with the personage who seemed to be becoming a dark star on the horizon of Matthew’s world. That personage being Professor Fell, emperor of crime both in Europe, England and now desirous of a place of control in the New World, the better to spread his clutching tentacles like his symbol the octopus.

*We have a mutual acquaintance*, Rebecca Mallory had said.

Matthew had no doubt the Mallorys knew Professor Fell much better than he. All he knew of the man was that he had a slew of nefarious plans—some of which Matthew had already upset—and that at one time Professor Fell had laid a ‘blood card’ down upon the young problem-solver’s life: a bloody fingerprint on a white card that meant Matthew was marked for certain death. Whether that threat still held true or not, he didn’t know. Perhaps he should stroll across the room and ask the Mallorys?

“You’re wandering off from what I’m saying.” Greathouse shifted his position so that he stood between Matthew and the handsome couple who hid their secrets. Matthew had said nothing of any of this to his friend; there was no need, as yet, to pull him into this intrigue. Particularly now that the great one was somewhat less great and much more human in his vulnerable flesh. “And if you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, *stop* thinking it.”

Matthew looked Greathouse in the eyes. “What might that be?”

“You know. That you still carry a burden, and you blame yourself and all that. It happened, it’s done and it’s over. I told you before, I might have done the same thing in your shoes. Hell,” he growled,

"I'm *sure* I would've. I'm all right, believe me. Now let that go and come back to life. I don't mean just halfway. I mean *all* the way. Hear me?"

Matthew did. Greathouse was right; it was time to let those things of the past go, because they were corrupting both his present and future. Maybe it would still be awhile before he could come back all the way, but he forced himself to say, "Yes."

"Good boy. Good *man*, I mean." Greathouse leaned in a little closer. His eyes caught candlelight and glinted with devilish humor. "Listen," he said quietly, "that girl favors you. You know she does. She's a mighty comely girl, and she could make a man excitable if you know what I mean. And I'll tell you, she hides more than she shows in that area."

"What area?" In spite of himself, Matthew felt a smile pushing at the corners of his mouth.

"*Love*." It had been nearly a whisper. "You know what they say: Gap between the teeth, hot between the sheets."

"Oh, they say that, do they?"

"Yes. *Definitely* yes."

"Hudson? *There* you are!" The person who'd just spoken was a woman, and she came forward with a rustle of lemon-colored skirts and an expression of bemusement. She was tall and willowy and had a lush garden of blonde hair that in defiance of the proper ladylike fashion fell unconfined about her bare shoulders, which of itself spoke volumes of both her nature and the future of modern women. Upon seeing a small heart-shaped birthmark in the hollow of her throat Matthew thought they would have seized on this rather brazen female as a witch in the since-departed town of Fount Royal. He doubted she would've gone nicely to the gaol. She got up alongside Greathouse and actually put her arm around his shoulders. Then she stared at Matthew with her warm and inviting brown eyes and said, "This is the young man." No question, just statement.

"Matthew Corbett, meet the widow Donovan," said Greathouse.

She offered an ungloved hand. "Abby Donovan," she told him. "I arrived last week from London. Hudson has been so helpful."

"He's a helpful sort," Matthew said. His hand would remember the woman's remarkably firm squeeze.

“Yes, but he does get away from you. Particularly when he says for you to get cider and that he’ll return in a moment. I don’t think ‘a moment’ is the same for Hudson as it is for other men.” All this was said with the slyest hint of a smile and the brown eyes fixed on the man of the moment.

“Never was,” he admitted. “Never will be.”

“I admit, he’s one of a kind,” said Matthew.

“Don’t I know it!” answered the lady, who when her smile broadened into nearly a laugh displayed a gap between her front teeth that made Berry’s appear a crevice compared to a canyon. It shocked Matthew that his first thought was wondering what might fit in there, and then he got redfaced and had to swab his temples with his handkerchief.

“It *is* warm, this close to the fire,” observed the widow Donovan, who Matthew figured might have burned her dearly departed to cinders under the sheets. But anyway, it was up to Greathouse now to brave the flames, for the woman stood close against him and stared desirously at the side of his face, so much so that Matthew wondered how a week might pass so intensely heated for some and yet so frozen with blue ice for others.

“Excuse us,” Greathouse said at length. He shifted his balance, perhaps because he had to reposition his stick. “We’ll be going now.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” Matthew said.

“Oh,” said the woman with a lift of her blonde brows, “when Hudson gets going, there’s no stopping him.”

One week! Matthew thought. And here he was, brooding over the great one’s disabilities! Perhaps it was true, Greathouse could no longer dance. Standing up, that is. But otherwise...

“Goodnight,” said Greathouse, and he and his new kitten—cat, really, for she was likely in her late thirties but very well assembled for her age—went out of the room as close-stepped as two people could be who were not in a military parade. Then Matthew got upon his mind the matter of salutes of a certain kind, and so he was redfaced again when a female voice beside him quietly said, “Matthew?” and he turned to set eyes upon a person whose presence he would not have predicted from now until the impossibly distant twenty-first century.

# THREE



**T**HE girl had her hands clenched before her, either revealing she was nervous or that she'd taken a posture of supplication. "Hello, Matthew," she said, with a trembly smile. "I did what you said. I come here to find that Number Seven Stone Street." She swallowed hard. Her blue gaze, which he recalled to be nearly crackling with energy, now seemed timid and fearful, as if she was sure he must have forgotten. "Don't you remember? I'm—"

"Opal Delilah Blackerby," Matthew said. Of course he remembered. She was one of the girls on the staff at Paradise, the 'velvet prison'—as she'd called it—for the elderly operated by Lyra Sutch in her incarnation of Gemini Lovejoy. If it were not for Opal, the black heart of Lyra Sutch's operation would not have been revealed, and Tyranthus Slaughter would now not be in his grave. So, Matthew thought, all praise to this brave young girl who'd really risked her life to help him.

He reached out and took her hands, at the same time offering her his warmest smile. "How long have you been here? In New York, I mean."

“Just one day,” she answered. “Well, not a *whole* day yet. I got here this mornin’. I know you told me ’bout comin’ to that Number Seven placey, but I was kinda fretful of just showin’ up there. So I been askin’ around ’bout whose place that is and all, and a fella told me your name. Then I seen the broadsheet ’bout this dance, and I thought maybe...” She shrugged, hopeless in her explanation of why she was here.

“I understand.” Matthew remembered she was the girl who’d longed for warmth in Paradise, and perhaps a dance was the place she could find it on a cold winter’s night in New York. As thanks for her help, he had given her a gold ring with a small red stone that may or may not have been a ruby; whatever it was, it had been part of Slaughter’s hidden treasure that had led Matthew and Greathouse nearly to their deaths.

“It’s so good to see you,” Matthew said, and he meant it. He took quick stock of her and saw that she’d decided to alter her appearance somewhat, by removing the small metal rings that had ornamented her lower lip and right nostril. She was a small girl, slim and wiry, and when Matthew had met her she’d been nearly quivering out of her shoes with what might be termed indecent energy. Now her jet-black hair had been brushed back and was decorated with a modest tortoise-shell comb. Her blue eyes, so eager to get Matthew behind Paradise’s church for a tryst in the woods, were diminished by lingering doubt that, he surmised, she had no place either here or at Number Seven Stone Street. She wore a gray dress with a white collar, not very different from her uniform at Paradise, which made Matthew wonder if she’d made use of the gold ring and red stone.

He was about to ask her that question when Hell broke loose.

Or, at least, a small portion of Hell confined to the other room, for in the next instant there was a tremendous crash, the sound of breaking glass, and a chorus of startled cries both male and female. Matthew’s first thought was that the floor had given way, or that a cannonball had smashed through the ceiling.

He rushed past Opal to see what had happened, and she followed right at his heels.

The floor was still firm and no cannonball had come sizzling from the night, yet certainly disaster had struck. The table that had been holding the fine glass bowl of cider, the clay cups and the

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Indian-blood platters of sugar cakes had, plain and simply, pitched over like a horse with a broken leg. Apple cider spread in a small flood across the planks. The sugar cakes were being crushed under the feet of dames and dandies alike. Glass and broken crockery was everywhere and it was truly a mess.

"I swear!" came the agonized voice of Effrem Owles. "I hardly leaned on the table! Hardly at all!"

And Matthew saw Berry standing there beside him, blushing to the roots of her hair, her eyes darkened by the events of the moment. He knew what she was thinking: her bad luck, which had knocked the stuffing out of so many of her suitors and otherwise complicated her life in a series of misfortunes, had reached out and—like Mr. Vincent's glove—given poor innocent Effrem a smack on the noggin. And what a smack! For someone who was for the most part very shy and wished to be anywhere but at the center of attention, this was truly Effrem's nightmare. And him trying to impress Berry so much! It hurt Matthew's heart to even think of it, much less witness it.

"It's all right! We'll get it cleaned up!" said Sally Almond, who was already summoning a serving girl to bring a towel.

But Matthew saw the tears of shame jump behind Effrem's glasses. He started to go forward and put a hand of comfort on his friend's shoulder but he was nearly shouldered aside by Opal Delilah Blackerby, who waded into the cider, knelt down to the floor and started gathering up pieces of broken glass into the apron of her dress.

"Opal!" Matthew said, pushing his way to her. "What are you *doing*?"

She looked up at him, and then at Sally Almond who was also staring dumbfounded at her. Opal stood up, clutching glass fragments in her dress. She had a hazy expression in her eyes, as if for a moment she'd forgotten where she was. "Oh!" she said to Matthew. "I'm sorry! I just...I mean to say...I'm so used to cleanin' up messes...I just...that's what I do, *y'see*?"

"You're a *guest* here," said Sally. "Not a servant."

"Yes'm." Opal frowned, perplexed. "I'm sorry, but...I don't think I know how to be a guest." She was still holding the front of her dress with the pieces of glass in it, and as the regular serving-girl came to

sop up the spilled cider with a bundle of towels Opal reached out to take one of the cloths and, startled, the girl pulled away.

“Opal!” Matthew said, grasping her elbow. “You’re not expected to clean up anyone’s mess. Come on now, let’s get out of the way.”

“But...Matthew,” she said. “That’s what I *do*. That’s what I was doin’ just yesterday, at a tavern on the pike. I mean...that’s all I’ve *ever* done. *Oh*,” she said, and she looked at the fingers of her right hand. They were leaking blood. “I suppose I’ve cut myself a little bit.”

Matthew was quick to pull out his handkerchief.

But he was not quick enough.

“Here, miss! Let me see!”

And Matthew witnessed something he had no idea would ever take place. When the blue eyes of Opal Delilah Blackerby and the brown eyes of Effrem Owles met, you could almost hear a distinct *pop*, as if a pinecone had burst in the overheated hearth. Matthew was certain Effrem was only being his gentlemanly self, and perhaps thinking he was to blame for this girl cutting herself, but in that instant there was something more. In that instant there was an exchange of something, maybe a recognition, something...a powerful instant, and Matthew saw the girl who knew only how to clean up messes and had been searching so long for a little bit of warmth flutter her eyelashes, and the shy young tailor’s son who liked to play chess and wished desperately to mean something to someone’s heart reddened a little on the cheeks and had to look away from her, but she had offered her hand and he took it, and as he pressed his own handkerchief against the injury he brought his eyes back upon hers and Matthew saw him smile—just a small, shy smile—and Effrem said, “We’ll get this fixed.”

“Ain’t nothin’,” Opal replied, but she didn’t pull her hand away.

Matthew glanced at Berry, who also had taken note of this exchange. She nodded almost imperceptibly, as if to say, *Yes, but it may yet be something after all.*

And in that instant Matthew felt the world tremble.

Or, to be more precise, it was the floor that trembled. He was not the only one who felt it, for conversations halted and Berry blinked in surprise because she’d also felt it. In its aftermath the floor’s planks growled like old brown lions stirred from sleep. Then the front door crashed open and from the bundle of his black coat

and beneath the tilt of his yellowed wig the white face of Gilliam Vincent painfully shouted, "The Dock House Inn has blown up!"

Decorum was lost and dancing forgotten in the rush upon Nassau Street. Matthew was out the door amid the throng, finding himself behind John Five and John's bride Constance. Berry bumped into Matthew's side as they all looked toward the dock-front at smokeclouds and bursts of flame roiling up into the night.

"Oh my Jesus!" Gilliam Vincent cried out. He began to run southward along Nassau Street toward the point of conflagration perhaps nine blocks distant. Matthew saw Vincent's wig fall off, exposing a pallid scalp where a few sprigs of gray hair stood upright like shocked soldiers on a barren battlefield. For all his vanity, Vincent cared not for the wig so much as he cared for the fate of his beloved Dock House Inn, where he was the narrow-eyed and supremely arrogant king of his domain, and so he put wings to his heels and was off hollering "Fire! Fire! Fire!" all the way.

Cries of alarm were quickly echoing across the town. From Manhattan's previous experience, flame was a disastrous enemy. Matthew surmised that if indeed it was the Dock House Inn that had somehow 'blown up,' as Vincent had put it, there might not be very much left of the guests who'd been sleeping there. The fire shot yellow and orange tendrils a hundred feet into the air. If clouds had not already slid in to mask the moon, the dark plumes rising from New York would have blackened Selene's lunar face. "Come on, men!" someone shouted, a call to fetch buckets and get to the wells that stood here and there on the cobbled streets. Some went back into Sally Almond's tavern to get their coats, scarves, gloves, caps, tricorn hats before they started off. Matthew took his black fernaught from a hook on the wall, donned his gray gloves and woolen cap and with a quick glance at Berry that said *I think dancing must wait* he was away among the men fast striding or outright running for the scene of fiery destruction.

The houses were emptying their people onto the streets. Many folk wore their flannel robes and were bare-legged against the cold. Lanterns swung back and forth, a midwinter congregation of summer's fireflies. Night watchmen scurried around rather helplessly, showing their green lamps of authority for whatever they were worth. At the corner of Broad and Princes Streets Matthew

nearly collided with elderly Benedict Hamrick, an ex-soldier of the realm with a white beard that hung to his spit-polished belt-buckle. Hamrick marched around blowing into an ear-piercing tin whistle and shouting incomprehensible orders to anyone who would listen, which meant he had utterly no troops to command in his fantasy of the Coldstream Guards.

For all its everyday chaos, nattering of merchants, horse manure in the streets and slaves in the attics, New York at a moment of crisis became a purposeful juggernaut. Much as ants will boil over from a heel-kicked nest and begin feverish defenses, so were the Manhattanites. Buckets materialized from houses and barns. A horse wagon hauling buckets came clattering down Broad Street. Teams of men gathered, took hold of buckets and set off at a run to station themselves at wells. Somehow, the chains of the bucket brigades solidified within minutes of Gilliam Vincent's first cry. Water began moving, faster and faster along the line. Then the line split into two and three and thus multiple dowings of water were thrown upon the fire, which turned out not to be consuming the Dock House Inn but to be eating a Dock Street warehouse where nautical ropes were made and stored.

And it was surely a hot fire. A fire with a white center, and a power to scorch the eyebrows and puff the faces of those at its edge. Even Matthew, working with the other feverish ants a block north of the scene, could feel the waves of heat rolling past him in dusty swells. The labor continued on, the buckets moving as fast as muscle would allow, but very soon it was apparent that the warehouse was a goner, and all liquid must be used to wet the surrounding structures thus to prevent a disaster of the worst kind. At one point old Hooper Gillespie appeared, ranting about an attack by the Dutch, but no one paid him any attention and so he slinked away scowling and spitting toward the harbor.

Hollers and shouts went up when the last wall of the warehouse collapsed. The sparks that flew up were stomped under boots when they landed. More water was thrown upon the soggy, steaming wood walls of the buildings to left and right, and finally as the hours passed and the muscles weakened, the southernmost portion of the town was saved but the rope merchant Johannis Feeg wept bitter tears over his pile of smouldering ashes.

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The work was at last finished. The tavern owners brought out kegs of ale and opened them in the street; one never knew when one might need a bucket brigade, and it was safer to be on the good side of the citizenry rather than pinch ale pennies at a time like this. Matthew scooped up a drink in a wooden cup he'd been given, and along with other bedraggled fire fighters he walked toward the smoking remains.

There was very little left but smoke. Matthew saw other men walking through the ashes, kicking embers between the eyes and then crushing them for good measure. The smell of acrid smoke, dust and heat was like coarse flannel in the lungs. Men who had been closest to the fire staggered around blackened and nearly cooked, and they nodded wearily as others put cups of ale into their hands.

"Now *this* was a merry moment, wasn't it?"

Matthew turned to see who'd spoken, but he'd already recognized the voice of Gardner Lillehorne, which tonight was the hum of a wasp seeking a place to sting.

The spindly-framed high constable was in less than his usual perfection, for ashes marred his overcoat of bright holly green, trimmed at the collar and cuffs with bands of scarlet. Alas, the cuffs were filthy and his white shirt the color of dirty teeth. His holly green tricorne was dark with ash and its small red feather burned to a wisp. Ashes streaked his long, pallid face with its narrow black eyes, small and pointed nose, precisely-trimmed black-goatee and black mustache. Even the silver lion's head that topped his ebony cane seemed to be scorched and dirty. Lillehorne's eyes left Matthew's and scanned the wandering crowd. "A merry moment," he repeated. "For Mr. Feeg's competitors, that is."

Matthew felt someone coming up behind him. He turned his head and saw Berry, her hair wild in the smoky breeze and ashes on her freckled cheeks. She was bundled in a brown coat. She stopped when he saw her, as if understanding a statement not to get too close.

At nearly the same time, Matthew noted the presence of the nasty little watchman and general troublemaker Dippen Nack coming up like a small creeping predator beside the high constable, who seemed to be his idol in all things either arrogant or assinine. Matthew considered the barrel-chested, red-faced Nack a brutal

bully and, worse, a coward who used his black billyclub to wallop only those who could not return the blow.

“What’s the tale?” Lillehorne asked Nack, indicating that the high constable had recently sent his devilish devotee out on a misson.

“Number a’ people heard it, sir,” Nack answered, in the manner of slump-shouldered subjugation, be it ever so false. “Yessir! A cannon blast is what they all said it was!” And he added, just to polish the worm-holed apple: “*Sir!*”

“A cannon blast?” Instantly Matthew’s curiosity had spun toward this information like an arrow on a weather vane. “From where?”

“I don’t have that information yet, thank you for asking.” Lillehorne’s nostrils wrinkled, and he gently patted them with a green handkerchief. Over the reek of smoke Matthew caught the reek of a too-sweet perfume water.

“Some folk say they thought it come from out thataway.” Nack motioned with his club toward the south. “Then this thing blew up.”

“Blew up?” Matthew asked. Nearly the same choice of words that Gilliam Vincent had made. “Why do you put it that way?”

“Just *look* at it,” Nack answered, the anger never far from his curdled surface. “Ain’t no regular fire! Pieces layin’ all up and down the street!” He gave a mocking grin for Lillehorne’s benefit. “I thought you was supposed to be such a *brain!*”

Matthew kept his attention directed to Lillehorne, even though the gypsies had arrived at the scene and stood nearby scratching their squalling fiddles while their dark-haired girls danced for coins amid the ale-drinkers. “You’re saying a cannonball did this?”

“I am saying that a cannon was *heard* to be fired. Corbett, restrain your interest. I’ve already sent some men to watch the harbor, if indeed it was the signal from Oyster Island. The town is not paying for your abilities tonight. *Keep that noise down!*” Lillehorne shouted at the gypsy fiddlers, but the volume altered not an ear-spike.

Matthew gazed out over the ashen plain. There were cannons on the walls at what had been Fort William Henry, now called Fort Anne, at New York’s southernmost point; they were manned day and night and aimed at the sea. The single cannon on Oyster Island was used as an early signal of invasion by the Dutch fleet, even though commerce and profits had made steady companions of London and Amsterdam. No one ever truly expected a Dutch

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armada to try to retake their once-possession, but...why had the cannon fired?

"I have no earthly idea," said Lillehorne, and only then did Matthew realize he'd asked the question aloud. "But I'll get to the bottom of this without your so-called *professional* assistance, sir."

Matthew then saw another element of interest in this cold night's play. Off beyond Lillehorne, lit by the lamps they carried, were the handsome Doctor Jason Mallory and the beautiful Rebecca. They were talking quietly and surveying the ruins, but did both of them now glance in his direction? Did they speak again, and then glance again before they turned their backs and moved away?

A whistle blew, loud enough to be heard over the caterwauling of gypsy fiddles.

Then blew once more, stronger, with a demanding note. And a third time, equally demanding.

"What the *devi!*?" Lillehorne's gaze was searching for the annoying source, as well as did Matthew, Nack and Berry. A group of onlookers was coming around, intrigued by the noise. Matthew saw Marmaduke Grigsby, the old inkslinger and editor of the *Earwig* broadsheet, step up beside his granddaughter, his eyes large and questioning behind his spectacles in the moon-round face. The whistle continued to blow, stridently now.

"Over *there*, sir!" It was Nack who pointed toward the other side of Dock Street and just east of the destroyed warehouse.

Matthew saw Benedict Hamrick standing next to a wall of brown bricks, which was part of a storehouse for tarbarrels, anchors, chains and other nautical goods. Hamrick's beard and crusty coat blew in the rising wind. He was manning his whistle as if commanding an attack of grenadiers. And furthermore, he was pointing to something written on the bricks.

At once Matthew was following Lillehorne toward the whistle-blower, with Nack almost stepping on his heels. "Matthew!" Berry called out, but he didn't stop though he thought that, oddly, she was telling him not to go.

A group of people congregated around Hamrick, who abruptly ceased his tin-whistling and pointed with a thin, gnarled finger at the two words written about head-high on the wall. The white paint had trickled down, making the words look like crawling spiders.

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The first word was *Matthew*.

The second was *Corbett*.

Matthew felt his heart stutter as Hamrick's hand moved, and the finger pointed at him.

Lillehorne took a lantern from the nearest citizen and lifted it to shine a direct light upon Matthew's face. He stepped forward, his eyes further narrowed, as if to examine something he'd never seen before.

Matthew could do nothing, nor could he speak.

"Yes," said the high constable. He nodded. "You can be sure I'll get to the bottom of this."

# FOUR



**I** WOULD sincerely love to hear an explanation,” said the man in the lilac-colored gown with blue lace trimming the neckline. To the silence that followed, his painted lips smiled faintly. Under his elaborately-curled and coiffed wig, his blue-shaded eyes ticked from person to person in the room. “Please,” he said, with a lift of his white silk gloves, “everyone should not speak at *once*.”

Gardner Lillehorne cleared his throat, perhaps a bit too explosively. He held his pumpkin-colored tricorn in his hands, that color being his hue of the day. “Lord Cornbury,” he said, “the facts are as I’ve told.” Matthew thought he sounded a bit nervous, and in truth when one looked into the face of Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury, Governor of the colony of New York and cousin to Queen Anne herself, one did feel one’s breakfast tumble in the gut.

“Told,” said the well-dressed man behind his desk, “but not made *sense* of.” The white silk fingers steepled together. The horsey face might have broken any mirror in town. “That mumble-mouthed fool made no sense, either. What’s all this about red lamps and a Dutch invasion and fish being stolen from a boat?”

Hooper Gillespie had just given his statement a few moments ago, before his nervous agitation had caused him to stagger and fall upon the floor. He'd had to be taken out of Lord Cornbury's office on a canvas stretcher. And his statement? That too seemed to Matthew to be in need of a stretcher, or perhaps it was already stretched.

The fourth man in the room pursed his lips and let out a sound like a wet fart.

"You wish to speak, Mr. Greathouse?" the governor asked.

"I wish to *complain*," the great one answered. He wasn't leaning on his stick this morning; it was crossed over his right shoulder. Matthew had noted the dark hollows beneath his tarpit eyes. It appeared to him that Hudson had fought his own fire last night, after being roused out of Abby Donovan's cottage by the conflagration and noise, and the more intimate flames had fairly scorched him. "As a character witness for Matthew, I—"

"Why exactly are you *here*, sir?" came the interruption, which Matthew knew dared violence, even against a lord in a dress.

"I'm *here*," came back the response, which was dangerously close to a sneer, "because I was in our office when the high-and-mighty constable barged in there and all but arrested my associate. Then dragged him over here for what he called a 'hearing.' Well, I came along of my own free will."

"Couldn't stop him, I fear," said Lillehorne.

"Couldn't *be* stopped," said Greathouse, his grim gaze directed to the gowned governor. "I don't know what happened last night and neither does Matthew. Yes, his name was painted on a wall across from the fire. But he had nothing to do with that! With any of it! How could he, when he was at Sally Almond's tavern *dancing* when that building...blew up, or whatever happened to it."

"There was a *dance* last night?" Lord Cornbury asked Lillehorne, with a plaintive note in his voice. "My wife and I love to dance."

"The common folk's dance, my lord. Not to your liking, I'm sure."

Matthew had to sigh at this exchange. True, he'd been brought here by Lillehorne from the Herral Agency's office at Number Seven Stone Street about thirty minutes ago. To avoid having to look at this scene of foolishness, he gazed out the window to his right, which gave a view of the town along

the Broad Way. A light snow had begun falling before dawn, and now in the gray glow of nine o'clock the roofs were white. A few wagons trundled up and down the Broad Way. Citizens wrapped up in their coats were going about their business. The steeple of Trinity Church was outlined in white, and white robes covered the sleepers in Trinity's graveyard. At Wall Street, City Hall was getting a white frosting upon its yellow-cake paint, and Matthew wondered if up in his attic wonderworld of skeletons and grotesqueries the eccentric coroner Ashton McCaggers was firing his pistol at one of his dress dummies in order to measure the bullet hole.

"Why do you two always seem to be..." Cornbury paused, tapping his chin with a finger in order to urge the proper word loose. "*Afflicted? With trouble,*" he quickly added, seeing the storm brewing in Greathouse's face. "I mean to say, why are you always followed by trouble?"

"It's our business," Greathouse answered. "Just as yours is sitting here trying to blame Matthew Corbett for something he had no part in."

"Mind your mouth, please!" Lillehorne warned, though it came out more as a shaky request.

"I'm not blaming anyone, sir." When he needed to, Cornbury could display ample composure. His bosom seemed somewhat ample today as well, but Matthew chose not to linger a gaze or thought on that subject very long. "I'm simply trying to understand *why* his name was there. As in: *who* painted it upon the bricks? And also: for what reason? You must admit, this is a very peculiar situation. First that...that Gillespie person nearly faints dead away telling me he has seen a red signal lamp drawing a Dutch armada in to the attack, that he'd...how did he put it?... 'pulled a boner' on his cannon, and that the phantom of Oyster Island stole his codfish."

"Three mackerel and a striper," Greathouse corrected.

"All right, whatever they were. Then this warehouse burns to the ground and the young man's name is there on the opposite wall. And I will tell you, sir, that Johannis Feeg was first in my office this morning, with his lawyer, and the talk of monetary restitution reached a rather high volume."

“Monetary restitution?” Greathouse’s scowl was a fearsome sight. “From whom? Matthew? Feeg and his lawhound will have to bore a hole through my body to get past me!”

“Let me hear,” said Cornbury in a quiet voice, “the silent one speak. Mr. Corbett, do you have anything to say?”

Matthew was still staring out the window, watching the snowflakes fall. He wished he were a thousand miles away from this ridiculous room. Again, since becoming a killer everything seemed so small and unimportant. Ludicrous, really. He mused on the fact that Professor Fell had not only controlled Lyra Sutch and Tyranthus Slaughter, but now also had a hand in his own destiny. Matthew was not who he had been, and he wondered if he would ever find his way back.

“Mr. Corbett?” Cornbury urged.

“Yes?” Then Matthew realized what was being asked of him. His mental wheels were clogged today. Three hours of fitful sleep would muddy up the best brain. He rubbed his forehead, where the crescent scar of a bear’s claw would forever remind him of the price of being someone’s champion. “Oh. All right,” he said hazily. “I was dancing at Sally Almond’s. No,” he corrected, “I was standing at the table that had gone over. Everything spilled. Effrem was there. The girl. Opal. And she cut one of her fingers on the glass.”

There was a short pause.

“Oh dear,” said the governor to Lillehorne. “Is he related to that Gillespie creature?”

By an effort of will and concentration, Matthew righted his foundering ship. “I had nothing to do with that fire,” he said, with some heat behind it. “Yes, my name was painted on the wall. By someone.” Or more than one, he thought. But the Mallorys had been at the dance when the warehouse had gone up. How could they have been responsible, and what would be the point? “Someone wished to...implicate me, I suppose? Or something else? Because I had dozens of witnesses and, besides, why would I be fool enough to sign my name to a warehouse-burning? Why would I want to set fire to a storehouse of ropes?” He waited for a reply. When there was none, he shot the question at them again: “*Why?*”

“Listen to him,” said Greathouse, the loyal friend.

The moment hung.

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With a rustle of stiffened muslin, Lord Cornbury rose to his high-heeled feet. He went to the window and aimed his shadowed stare at the dance of white flakes that swooped and swirled from the gray ceiling of clouds.

After a measure of reflection, the governor said in a low voice not suiting his suit, "Damn this. I understand none of it."

*Welcome to my world*, Matthew thought.

After a spell of what seemed like deliberation but may have only been hapless and aimless thought of what color sash went with what color gown, Lord Cornbury turned toward the high constable. "Can you handle this, Lillehorne?"

For once, the high constable sought his rightful level of truth. "I'm not certain, sir."

"Hm," came the reply; a decision had been made. The rather unsettling gaze ticked between Matthew and Greathouse. "You two are the problem-solvers. Solve the problem."

"We'd like to do that," Greathouse replied without hesitation, "but our business requires a fee."

"Your usual fee, then. Nothing too exorbitant for the town's coffers, I trust." A gloved finger was lifted. "Now both of you listen to me before I dismiss you. If I discover that you have worked this situation in order to wrench money from my pockets, I shall have your stones boiled in oil before they're cut off with a dull knife. Do you understand me?"

Greathouse shrugged, his way of saying he did. Matthew was still wondering where Cornbury's pockets were.

"Get out," said the Lord Governor, to all three of them.

"Good fortune to you gentlemen," said Lillehorne as he stood at the top of the stairs and the two problem-solvers descended. He tapped the silver lion's head against the palm of his hand. "I shall be watching you to make sure all is right in your investigation."

"You should be watching the Princess," Greathouse answered, speaking of Lillehorne's rather shrewish wife. "I have it on good authority that she is still on intimate terms with Dr. Mallory, and not for medical reasons this time." He gave a brief catlike smile to Lillehorne's stone face, his statement referring to a case in October wherein Maude Lillehorne was secretly visiting the handsome Dr. Jason for a 'women's health' cure that involved an unhealthy dose of coca leaves.

Outside, with their coats wrapped around them against the cold and whirling snowflakes, they walked away from the governor's mansion toward the Broad Way.

"Is she really?" Matthew asked, his gray woolen cap pulled down over his ears. "Maude Lillehorne," he reminded Greathouse. "Involved with the doctor?"

Greathouse frowned, the brim of his black tricorne catching snow. "What do *you* think? If you were Jason Mallory, would you give the Princess one look? Especially if you had that wife of his to warm your cockle every night?"

"I suppose not."

"I *know* not. I just said that to give Lillehorne something to think about. Stretch his mind a little. He needs it."

Speaking of warming a cockle, Matthew thought, how goes the merry widow? But he decided there was valor in silence. Plus, on his mind he had this warehouse blaze and levity was not welcome there today.

"Walk with me a ways," said Greathouse, though they already were. Matthew knew this was the great one's method of saying there were serious things to be contemplated and talked about, and so they would walk a crooked route through the town's streets in search of a straighter path.

Though the snow flew and flitted and did its work of whitening the bricks, stones, timbers and dirt, Matthew thought that today New York seemed to be gray upon gray. A gray fog seemed to lie close to the earth, with gray clouds above and gray buildings between. Windows blurred the candles behind them. From the multitude of chimneys rose the morning smoke, drifting with the wind toward the winter-sheared woodland across the river in New Jersey. Wagons on the streets moved back and forth in near silence, their horses snorting steam and their drivers hunched forward, shapeless in heavy coats and weather-beaten hats. The boots Matthew and Greathouse wore crunched snow. The great one's stick probed ahead for treacherous footing.

They turned to the right along Beaver Street, Matthew following his friend's lead, and headed toward the East River. A bright red parasol coming in their direction startled the eye and for an instant Matthew thought it had to be Berry underneath it, but

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then came clear the tall and handsome figure of Polly Blossom, the owner of the rose-colored house of ladies of the evening on Petticoat Lane. Actually, truth to be told, also ladies of the morning and the afternoon.

“Hello, Matthew,” said Polly, with a polite smile and a nod. Matthew had done a favor for her in the summer, regarding a member of her flock, and thus had what she called a ‘season’s pass’ to her establishment, though he had not yet ventured so deeply into that territory. Then, for Hudson, her smile became a little wicked and her eyelashes fluttered. “Good morning to *you*,” she said, and as she passed she gave him a little hip-bump that made Matthew think he ought to get himself a walking stick and pretend to be in need of tea and sympathy.

“Don’t say it,” said Greathouse as they walked on, and so Matthew did not. But it occurred to him that some afternoons when the great one was supposed to be uncovering an investigation he must instead be investigating an uncovering.

They found themselves walking in the snow along Queen Street, heading southward toward Dock Street and the Great Dock where the masted ships rested, groaning softly in their cradles of ropes. Yet even in this wintry weather the work of a maritime colony continued, for several new vessels that had recently arrived were still being unloaded by the dock crews and several scheduled to leave on the next favorable tide were being loaded. There was, as always every day of the year, much activity and shouting of orders. Someone had built a fire from broken pieces of lumber and a few men stood around it warming themselves until they were shouted back to work. Ropes that ended in iron hooks moved cargo from place to place. Wagons stood ready to accept the freight or give it up. And as always, the higglers and their fiddles and tambourines were present to urge coins from the seafaring music-lovers, yet today their music was gray and not a little sad, as befitting God’s picture this morning of New York.

Matthew and Greathouse came to a place where could be seen through the masts and between the hulls the foggy outline of Oyster Island. Greathouse stopped, staring toward that unlovely isle, and Matthew also paused.

“Curious,” said Greathouse.

“A general statement?” Matthew asked when no more was offered. “I’d say more than curious. I’d say my name written on a wall before a burning building is downright mysteri—”

“The phantom of Oyster Island,” Greathouse interrupted. “You know the stories, yes?”

“What there are.”

“And you of course have figured out that this phantom has only come to be noticed in the past two months. Cold weather set in. He needed a coat, and he needed food. Though he, I’m sure, is an able hunter and fisherman. But perhaps the game out there has become more wary, and the shoreline’s fish have moved because of the cold? And now one would need a boat to catch fish from deeper water?”

Matthew didn’t speak. He knew exactly who Greathouse was referring to; it had already crossed his mind. It had already, as a matter of fact, been ninety percent settled in his mind.

“He was a strong swimmer,” said the great one. “Maybe no one else could get there from here, but Zed did. I have no doubt he’s our phantom.”

Again, Matthew held his silence. He too stared out toward the island, abandoned by its watchman. Zed owned the place now, if just for a short while. A freed slave in possession of part of a crown colony! It tickled the pink.

Back in the autumn, Matthew had watched as the massive, mute and scar-faced Zed had—upon realizing from Berry’s language of artful drawings that he was free—run to the bitter end of one of these wharves and leaped with joyful abandon into the water. Zed had been at one time the slave to Ashton McCaggers, until Greathouse had paid for his freedom and secured the writ of manumission from Lord Cornbury. Greathouse’s interest in Zed had not been entirely altruistic, for Greathouse had realized due to the tribal scarring that Zed was a member of the West African Ga tribe, some of the fiercest warriors on earth, and it had been the great one’s desire to train Zed as a bodyguard for Matthew. But such was not to be, for the hulking warrior was obviously determined to get back to Africa or die by drowning. It seemed now, though, that Zed’s journey had been interrupted for a time, as he sat out there in the wilderness of Oyster Island, most likely in some shelter he’d created for himself, and pondered how a huge, black-skinned, mute, scarred

and absolutely fearsome son of the Dark Continent might follow the star that beckoned him home.

Even though Zed might not know much about the world, Matthew figured he knew he was very far distant from where he longed to be, and so Zed stole himself a coat and ate fish and, hungering down in his shelter, waited for his own favorable tide.

That was Matthew's theory, at least, and though they'd never discussed it he was pleased that Greathouse had come to the same conclusion.

"Strange business, your name upon that wall," said Greathouse, at last coming around to the problem at hand. It wasn't the first time they'd discussed it, but now they were problem-solvers under warranty to the governor and, of course, the townspeople who would be paying their fee. "Let's walk," Greathouse suggested—more of a command, really—and again they were off under the bowsprits of the nested vessels.

After a few strides measured by Greathouse's stick, the question came: "Do you have any ideas?"

*Yes I do, Matthew thought at once. I have an idea a snake disguised as a doctor and his equally-reptilious wife have something to do with this, yet I have no proof and I have no sense of what their motive might be. Minus either of those, I am as far from solving this problem as Zed is from walking on the shore of Africa.*

Therefore he answered, "No, I don't."

"Someone," said Greathouse, "doesn't like you."

Yes, Matthew again thought, his jaw set and grim, his face whipped by a cold wind. *And that club seems to be getting larger by the day.*

They came upon a new ship that had evidently just arrived in the past hour or so, for the gangplank was lashed down and the crew was staggering off one after the other in search of their landlegs. A pair of empty wagons stood at the ready, but no cargo was being served to them. On the wagons were painted in red the slogan *The Tully Company*. Referring, as the problem-solvers knew, to Solomon Tully, the sugar merchant, he of the false choppers and a grand and glorious windbag to boot. Yet he was not such a bad sort when reciting his tales of visits to the Caribbean sugarcane plantations, for he could bring forth a heartening description of

the tropical sun and the azure water and thus was welcome in any tavern on a winter's day. And there stood on the wharf the stout and ruddy-cheeked man himself, wearing a brown tricorne and over what was assuredly an expensive suit a beautifully-made tan-colored overcoat of the finest weave from the Owleses' tailor shop on Crown Street. Solomon Tully was very wealthy, very gregarious and usually very happy. This morn, however, he was sorely lacking that third attribute.

"Damn it, Jameson! Damn it all to Hell!" Tully was raging at an unfortunate, thin and ragged individual whose beard appeared to be formed from different colors of mold. "I pay you a fine sum for *this* sort of thing?"

"Sorry, sir...sorry, sir...sorry," the unfortunate Jameson replied, eyes downcast and demeanor wretched.

"Go on and get cleaned up, then! File a report in the office! Go on, before I change my mind and send you packing!" As Jameson trudged away, Tully looked toward Matthew and Greathouse. "Ho, there! You two! Wait a moment!"

Tully was on them before they could decide whether to stand still or pretend they hadn't heard. Tully's face was flaming with the last of his anger. "Damn this day!" he raged. "Do you know how much money I've lost this morning?" His false teeth with their Swiss-made gears might appear perfect, Matthew thought, but they made strange little metallic whining noises as Tully spoke. Matthew wondered if the springs were too tight, and if they broke would Tully's teeth fly from his head and snap through the air until they bit hold of something.

"How much?" Greathouse asked, against his better judgement.

"*Too* much, sir!" came the heated reply. Steam was wafting around Tully's head. Suddenly Tully leaned toward them in a conspiratorial pose. "Listen," he said more quietly, with an expression of pleading, "you two are the problem-solvers—"

*Who seem to be much in demand today*, Matthew thought.

"—so do me the favor of thinking something over, will you?"

Greathouse cleared his throat, a warning rumble. "Mr. Tully, we do charge a fee for such efforts."

"All right, hang the damned fee! Whatever you feel is proper! Just hear me out, will you?" Tully looked as if he might stomp his

feet on the dock timbers like a child deprived of a sweet. "I'm a man in distress, can't you see?"

"Very well," said Greathouse, the picture of calm solidity. "How can we help you?"

"You can tell me," Tully replied, either tears or snowflakes melting on his cheeks, "what kind of pirate it is that steals a cargo of sugar but leaves everything else untouched?"

"Pardon?"

"Pirate," Tully repeated. "Who steals sugar. *My* sugar. The third shipment in as many months. But left behind are items you'd think any brigand of the sea would throw into his bottomless pot of greed! Like the captain's silverware, or the pistols and ammunition, and anything else of value not nailed to the deck! No, this ocean wolf just takes my *sugar*! Barrels of it! And I'm not the only one affected by this either! It's happened to Micah Bergman in Philadelphia and the brothers Pallister in Charles Town! So think on this for me, gentlemen...why does a rat of the waves wish to steal my sugar between Barbados and New York? And *only* sugar?"

Greathouse had no answer but a shrug. Therefore Matthew stepped into the breach. "Possibly to resell it? Or to..." Now Matthew had to shrug. "Bake a huge birthday cake for the Pirate King?" As soon as he spoke it, he knew he had not done a very good thing.

Greathouse suffered a sudden fit of coughing and had to turn away, while Solomon Tully looked as if his most-trusted dog had just peed on his boots.

"Matthew, this is no laughing matter," said the sugar merchant, every word spaced out like cold earth between graves. "This is my *life*!" The force with which that word was spoken caused a spronging noise from within Tully's mouth. "My God, I'm losing fistfuls of money! I have a family to support! I have obligations! Which, as I understand, you gentlemen do not share. But I'll tell you...something's very strange about this situation, and you can laugh all you please, Matthew, and *you* can cover up a laugh with a cough, Mr. Greathouse, but there's something wicked afoot with this constant stealing of sugar! I don't know where it's going, or why, and it troubles me no end! Haven't you two ever faced something you *had* to know, and it was just grinding your guts to find out?"

“Never,” said Greathouse, which immediately collided with Matthew’s “Often.”

“A two-headed answer from a one-headed beast,” was Tully’s observation. “Well, I’m telling you, it’s a problem to be solved. Now I don’t expect you to ship yourselves to the sugar islands, but can’t you put some thought to this and tell me the *why* of it? Also, what I might do to prevent this from happening next month?”

“It’s a bit out of our realm,” Greathouse offered. “But I’d suggest the crew taking those pistols and ammunition that are likely locked up in a chest and using them to blast the shit from between a pirate’s ears. That ought to do the trick.”

“Very good advice, sir,” said Tully with a solemn expression and a curt nod. “And surely they would appreciate that advice from their watery graves, since the damned sea roaches have already made it clear that cannons win over pistols any day, even on the Sabbath.” He touched the brim of his tricorn with a forefinger. “I’m going home now to have a drink of hot rum. And if one drink becomes two and two become three and on and on, I’ll see you sometime next week.” So saying, he turned himself about and began to trudge off toward his fine house on Golden Hill Street. In another moment he was a vague figure in the flurries, and a moment after that it was just flurries and no figure.

“I share the need for some hot rum,” said Greathouse. “How about a stop at the Gallop?”

“Fine with me,” Matthew answered. He might peg a game of chess there, to get his brain working as it should be.

“Good man,” said Greathouse. And he added, as they started off side-by-side toward Crown Street: “You’re buying.”

# FIVE



**A**T what was figured to be nearly half-past one in the morning of the twenty-third of February, four days after Hooper Gillespie had hooked a grouper, a well-known building on the corner of Crown and Smith streets was ripped apart by an explosion.

Its power was fierce enough to blast the roof into flaming pieces and crash them down again in the middle of the street. Shutters and door blew out. The glass of the display window was later found imbedded across the way in the wooden walls of the Red Barrel Inn, which itself took a buckling that made the last drunks within think that God's fist had come knocking for their sins. The building on the corner of Crown Street did not so much burn as it ignited with a flash, like a torch wrapped with rinds of hog's fat. The noise of the explosion threw everyone out of their beds from Golden Hill to Wall Street, and even the late-night entertainment at Polly Blossom's on Petticoat Lane was interrupted by the echoing boom that chased itself across the town.

"What *now!*" shouted Gardner Lillehorne, sitting up in bed beside his Princess, whose face was smeared with green cream known to restore beauty to the ugliest woman in Paris.

“Damn what a noise!” shouted Hudson Greathouse, sitting up in bed beside a certain big-boned blonde widow who had long ago forgotten what the word *no* meant.

“Dear Lord, what was *that?*” asked Madam Cornbury, sitting up in bed beside the bulk of her husband, who was curled beneath the quilt with cork plugs in his ears for his own snoring sometimes woke him up.

And Matthew Corbett sat up in silence in his small but neatly-kept dairyhouse, and he lit a third candle to go along with the two that he kept burning at night to ward off the demons of Slaughter and Sutch. Emboldened by the light, he got out of bed and dressed himself and prepared for the worst, for he had the sure sensation that this blast had claimed something more vital than a warehouse full of ropes.

The flames burned with tremendous heat. The night was filled with sparks and smoke, and lit as orange as an August morn. The bucket brigades worked feverishly. They did their best, but then they had to turn their attention to the surrounding structures to keep the fire from travelling.

And so died the tailor shop run by Benjamin Owles and his son, Effrem.

In its last moments it coughed fire and gasped ash, and standing alongside Effrem in the crowd Matthew watched one black-scorched brick wall collapse and then another, until the rubble covered everything that had meant success in the lives of the Owles family.

“It’s over,” Matthew heard his friend say, in a very quiet voice. Matthew put his hand on Effrem’s shoulder, but it was a small gesture for such a huge tragedy. Nearby, Benjamin Owles stared into the flaring embers; he had been stoic until now, but the end had come and so the tears began to trickle down his face.

A ripple suddenly passed through the gathered throng. Matthew felt it like the passage of a knife’s blade down his spine. Someone shouted something, across Crown Street, but it was unintelligible. A murmur seemed to surround Matthew, like the whispering of a secret with himself at the center. “What is it?” he asked the silversmith Israel Brandier, standing to his right, but Brandier just stared at him through his horn-rimmed spectacles and said nothing. Beside Brandier, the laundress Jane Neville also aimed

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at him an expression of what could only be called uneasy doubt. Matthew had the sensation of being in a dream painted in shades of gray smoke and red embers. The figures around him were less human and more blurred. Someone spoke his name: "Corbett?" but he couldn't see who it was through the murk. Then a man in a purple suit and purple tricorne bearing a white feather came through the gathering and caught his arm, and Matthew recognized Gardner Lillehorne.

"Come with me," said the black-goateed high constable, who held a lantern in his other hand and clasped his lion's-head cane beneath his arm.

Matthew allowed himself to be guided. At his heels nipped Dikken Nack, who made smacking sounds as if feasting on the meat and bones of an earnest young man. "What's this about?" asked Hudson Greathouse, coming forth from the crowd. Lillehorne did not bother to answer. "Stop!" Greathouse commanded, but the high constable was in charge and he listened to no one.

Matthew was aware of others following him; he was creating a small wake, like a ship crossing the icy harbor. He caught sight of Berry and her grandfather, whose nose for news for the *Earwig* must be twitching aplenty. He saw Hudson, of course, close beside him and still mouthing questions at Lillehorne that were not going to be answered. He saw Effrem Owles, who moved like a smoke-stained sleepwalker. He saw the rotund and gray-bearded Felix Sudbury, owner of the Trot Then Gallop. He saw the constable Uriah Blount and the stable owner Tobias Winekoop. And there on his right, keeping pace with this strange procession, were the Mallorys: Doctor Jason and the beautiful Rebecca. They had linked their arms together, Matthew noted. They stared straight ahead, looking to all the world as if they were out on the most relaxed stroll of a midsummer eve. Yet the air was biting and cruel, and so too Matthew saw cruelty in their faces.

The high constable led Matthew to the nearest well, which stood about forty paces east on Crown Street. He released Matthew's arm, leaned forward under the wooden roof that shielded the well from the elements, and he shone his lantern upward.

"Mr. Problem-Solver?" said Lillehorne, in a voice tight enough to squeeze sap from a stone. "Would you care to solve this problem?"

Matthew got beside Lillehorne and, with an inward shudder of what might have been precognition, he looked up along the candlelight.

And there.

*There.*

Painted in white on the underside of the roof.

*Matthew Corbett*, for all to see.

“It wasn’t noticed at first.” Lillehorne’s voice was not so tight now as it was simply matter-of-fact. “Not noticed until the fire was almost done. I think, Mr. Problem-Solver, that you most certainly *have* a problem.”

“What the *hell* is this?” Hudson Greathouse had thrust himself under the roof to peer upward, and Matthew had to wonder if the man’s guts didn’t clench just a bit, being so close to what had almost killed him in October. Greathouse at once answered his own question. “This is a bagful of *shit*, is what it is!”

“I seen it first!” said a man who stepped forward from the onlookers. Matthew recognized the twisted-lip face of Ebenezer Grooder, a notorious pickpocket. Grooder’s mouth was full of broken teeth, and he sprayed spittle when he spoke. “Does I earn meself a reward?”

“You surely do,” said Greathouse, who then hit the man so hard in the mouth that the remaining stubs of Grooder’s teeth flew from his head and he went out of one of his stolen boots on his way to an unconscious landing.

“Hold! Hold!” Lillehorne shrieked, like the high register of a little pipe-organ. He had no hope of holding Hudson Greathouse and neither did any other man present. But several men did take the opportunity of picking up Grooder’s limp carcass and tossing him aside, but not before one of them got a few coins and an engraved silver ring out of the unfortunate’s pocket. “Greathouse, mind you don’t end up behind bars tonight!” Lillehorne warned, because his position demanded it. He then quickly returned his attention to the roof’s underside. Matthew was still staring up at his own name, trying to figure out why the Mallorys had done it. Because Matthew had refused—and still refused—their invitation to dinner?

“It makes no sense,” said Matthew.

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“No sense, agreed,” said Lillehorne, “yet there it is. What’s the message here, I wonder?”

“I don’t know.” Yet Matthew was beginning to get an idea of it. *Come to us or we will turn this town to ashes.*

He looked around for the doctor and his wife, but they had slunk away. Probably in triumph, Matthew thought. He was aware of others coming forward to see what was to be seen: Effrem did, and left without a word; Marmaduke Grigsby did, and made a sound that reminded Matthew of an inkstamp hitting paper; Berry did, and she bit her lower lip for a moment and gazed at him with sorrowful eyes before she withdrew; and then others came and went, until it seemed to Matthew that the whole town had peered under the roof of this well, and at last Gilliam Vincent thrust his bewigged head forward to take a gander and then regarded Matthew as one would look smelling a piece of spoiled cheese. Matthew came very near playing out the role of Hudson Greathouse and knocking Vincent wig over tailbone, but he restrained himself.

“I didn’t do anything!” Matthew said; he was speaking to Lillehorne, yet pleading his innocence to the whole of New York.

“Of course you didn’t!” said Greathouse. And then to the high constable: “Damned if you believe he did! What do you think, he’s causing these fires and *signing* his work?”

“I think,” replied Lillehorne, in a weary tone, “that I will soon be summoned before Lord Cornbury again. Dear me.” He aimed his lantern at Matthew’s face. “All right, then. I know you didn’t do this. Why would you, unless...your recent adventures with a madman scrambled your brains?” He let that hang in the air for a few seconds before he continued. “Tell me: do you know any *reason* this is being done? Do you know any *person* who might be doing this? Speak up, Corbett! Obviously these buildings are being destroyed in your name. Do you have anything to say?”

“He’s not on trial!” Greathouse fired back, with rising heat.

“Hold,” said Lillehorne, “your temper and your fists. Please.” His small black eyes found Matthew once more. “I asked you three questions. Do you have at least *one* answer?”

Matthew thought, *Not one answer, but two suspects.* He frowned in the candlelight. There was no way to link the Mallorys with this. Not yet, at least. And to reveal what he felt true about the connection

between Jason and Rebecca Mallory and Professor Fell...no, he wasn't ready for that yet either. Therefore he looked the high constable square in the goateed and sharp-nosed face and said calmly, "I do not."

"No opinion? *Nothing?*"

"Nothing," said Matthew, and he made it sound very believable.

Lillehorne pulled the lantern's light away. "Damn me," he said. "Corbett, you must be ill. Perhaps you really did scramble your brains out there in the wilderness? Well, you can wager that if Cornbury summons me again, I'm summoning you again. I shall not look upon that countenance alone. Do you hear me?"

"We hear you," Greathouse answered, in a gravelly voice.

"That's all I have with you, then." Lillehorne gave the name one more appraisal. "Someone find me some whitewash!" he shouted toward the commonfolk. "I'll paint this out myself, if I must!"

Matthew and Greathouse took the moment to get away. They slid through the crowd. On the other side they walked east the rest of the way along Crown to the waterfront, where they turned south on Queen Street with the cold salt breeze in their faces.

"You're keeping something back," said Greathouse after they'd gotten clear of all listening ears. "You might throw a frog into Lillehorne's pocket, but you can't frog *me*. Let's have what you know."

Matthew was close to telling. He thought that with the next stride he would tell his friend everything, but...he did not. To pull Hudson into this, when there was no proof? To rouse the man up to action against...what? Shadows? Or against a perceived smirk on the faces of Jason and Rebecca Mallory? No, he couldn't do it. This was a personal duel, himself versus them, and he would have to fight this particular battle quietly and alone.

"I don't know anything," he replied.

Greathouse stopped. In the faint light from the lanterns of New York, his expression was impassive and yet the intelligent coal-black eyes knew. "You're lying," he said. "I don't take kindly to lies."

Matthew said nothing. How could he? There was no use flinging another lie at the truth.

"I'm going home," Greathouse announced after another moment. Home being the boarding-house on Nassau Street operated by the kindly but rather nosy Madam Belovaire. Matthew had already

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wondered if Greathouse was sneaking the widow Donovan into his abode, or if she was sneaking him into hers. Whichever, there was likely a lot of sneaking going on. “*Home,*” Greathouse repeated for emphasis. He drew the collar of his coat up around his neck. “When you decide to stop lying, let me know. Will you?” He took a stride in the direction of Nassau Street before he turned toward Matthew again, and Matthew was amazed to see on the great one’s face a mixture of anger and hurt. “Remember,” Greathouse said, “I’m always on your side.” And then he walked away with stiff-backed dignity, following the stick that tapped lightly on the earth.

Matthew stood as a solitary figure against the wind.

His thoughts were jumbled. They were as confused as he felt his life to be in the present. He began walking home, north on Queen Street. He passed by the masted ships and the slave market. The wind, stronger and colder, came at him from different angles as if to upset his balance on the world. Passing the last of the docked ships, his shoulders hunched forward and his chin tucked in, he cast his gaze toward the darkness of the sea. So much darkness, he thought. It was an immense dark, and he felt it pulling at his soul. He felt it grasping at him, taunting him, making a mockery of his name and a falsehood of his desire for truth.

And that darkness also had a name, he mused.

That name was: Professor Fell.

He stopped abruptly, and peered out into the black.

What had that been? Just that quick flash of red? Far, far out, it had been. If it had really been, at all. Was he seeing red signal lamps in his mind? Was he going the path of Hooper Gillespie, and the next step would be muttering to himself in the aloneness of his mind? He waited, watching, but the red lamp—whatever it had been, *if so*—did not reappear.

He recalled what Hudson Greathouse had told him about Professor Fell. *It may be that by now Fell is on the cusp of creating what we think he desires: a criminal empire that spans the continents. All the smaller sharks—deadly enough in their own oceans—have gathered around the big shark, and so they have swum even here...*

This big shark, Matthew thought, had big teeth and big eyes. It saw everything, and it wanted to eat everything. Even—perhaps most especially—the heart of a young man who had begun life born

to a Massachusetts plowman and his wife, both dead early, and then sent to the pig farm of an aunt and uncle on Manhattan island. Escaping that prison of pigshit and drunken abuse on a haywagon, he had fallen in with a group of urchins on the waterfront, later to be caught literally in the net of the law and bound over to the town's orphanage. There he had been educated by an intelligent and kindly headmaster, yet there was more misery to come. Of course, more misery...such was the essence of life. It either built or broke a character. And then finding himself clerk for two magistrates, and at last being offered the position of problem-solver for the Herral Agency by none other than Katherine Herral herself. *At last?* No, Matthew was certain the story of his life was far from being finished, yet at the moment he felt himself lost in a kind of limbo, a gray kingdom that demanded the right choice and proper action for his release yet he knew not what that was to be.

And swimming out there in the dark sea, the big shark. Circling and circling, getting ever closer.

A hand touched his shoulder. He almost shot out of his boots.

"I'm sorry!" said Berry, drawing back. She was wearing a black coat with a hood, and nearly was one with the night. "Were you thinking?"

"I *was*," he managed to answer, when he was certain he could speak intelligibly. His heart was still a snare drum being whacked by a madman's fist. "Don't you know better than to sneak up on a person?"

"Sorry," she said, and added with a touch of hot pepper, "*again*."

Matthew nodded. It was best to retreat a bit rather than risk the wrath of a redhead. "All right, then. It's done." He shrugged; his heartbeat was settling down, more of a trot now than a gallop, which made him think he could use a good drink of ale from that so-named tavern on Crown Street if Felix Sudbury had opened up for business from the bucket brigaders and fire-watchers. New York was truly becoming a town that seemingly never slept. Very soundly, at least.

"Matthew?"

"Yes?" He'd been looking at the ground, and now he raised his eyes to hers.

"Do you have any ideas? I mean...*really*. Do you?"

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“None,” he answered, a little too quickly.

She came a step closer. Her gaze was intense and no-nonsense and she would not take *none* for an answer. “That’s not like you,” she told him. “You always have ideas. Some perhaps better than others...” She paused. He knew she was thinking of a certain trick involving horse manure they’d used to avoid having their faces ripped off by hawks in a rather frightening experience last summer. “Some *much* better than others,” she went on. “But you always have ideas. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t be...” She paused again, thinking. “Who you are,” she decided to say. “So if you do. Have any ideas, I mean. I would care to hear them, if you would care to tell.”

He stared at her, from a distance that seemed both terribly long and at the moment uncomfortably close. She was asking him to trust her, he realized. Because she could look into his eyes and see that he had something hidden there, in that brain of his, and she was wanting to be part of it.

For a few seconds many things went through Matthew’s mind. What he might say. The right choice of words, the proper tone of voice. A complicated sentence that skirted the truth, to hold her curiosity at bay and certainly keep her out of danger. But what he came up with was as simple as two words.

“I can’t.”

Then he turned away from her and walked toward Crown Street and the Trot in search of a late-night drink.

Berry remained where she was. The wind seemed colder; she drew her coat tighter around herself. *Oh Matthew, she thought. Where are you going?*

It seemed he was always going somewhere. Always on the move. Always away from where she stood, it seemed. She would never tell him that sometimes in the morning she watched through the kitchen window to see him come out his door. That she marked always how fresh-scrubbed he was, and clean-shaven, and ready for the world. Except since coming back from the wilderness, he did not seem so ready for the world. He was different, and he would not talk about it but she could tell his step was slowed and his back always slightly hunched as if expecting a blow. Perhaps not talking about it was killing him, very slowly, inside. Perhaps, she thought,

if he could trust her enough to tell her...then he could truly come back from the wilderness, for some sweet and innocent part of him had been left there, and she greatly missed it.

She wished very much that she might tell him her theory of her bad luck. She'd had several suitors, of course, who'd fallen under the spell of her bad luck. And poor Effrem, always stepping into a gopher hole or a mud puddle when walking beside her. Poor Ashton, trying to be so collected and worldly when he first came calling for her, and then breaking the heel of his shoe within the next few minutes. It had become a little joke between them, how many heels he'd broken at her side.

But Berry remembered a day in the summer when she'd been sketching at the end of a long pier. The pier she'd chosen had been a horror of worm-eaten boards and gaps and damage caused by the progress of the elements and boats with unproficient captains. She'd chosen that place because she'd wished not to be bothered.

Then *he'd* come along.

*May I come out?* he'd asked.

And she'd said, *As you wish*, and thought he was asking for a certain swim in the drink.

She'd kept drawing on her sketchpad and waiting to hear him holler as he fell. Because surely her bad luck would be the bedlam queen of this rotten wharf, and he wouldn't make it halfway to her before he went down.

Waiting...waiting...

And then, quite suddenly, he was standing at her side. She'd heard him breathe a sigh of relief, and she might have released her own sigh of relief from under her straw hat, and she'd said with a mischievous smile, *Nice morning for a walk, isn't it, Mr. Corbett?*

His answer, somewhat shaky, had been: *Invigorating.*

And turning back to her work, which was to capture the colorful essence of a Breuckelen pasture, she'd thought *Any other man would have fallen. Why didn't he?*

That was still her question.

Because her theory of her so-called bad luck, at least as regards young men, was that it steered her in the right direction as much as a compass steered any adventurous ship. Yet Matthew's destination was unknown to her. Surely it seemed he often looked right

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through her, as if she existed only as a mist he might brush away like silken cobwebs.

*I want to mean something to you,* she said silently to him, wherever he was on his journey into the dark. *Please...will you let me?*

But on this night there was no answer. There was the just the winter wind, touching with cold fingers the face of a hopeful young girl.

He was not coming back this way anytime soon, she decided. Therefore she left her position of watchful waiting, and she went back home to go to bed.



# SIX



**W**HEN a knock came at his door Matthew was in the midst of shaving. He looked away from his mirror, which displayed the rather pale visage of a tired young man, and called to the door, "Who is it?" The door being only six feet away from where he presently stood.

No one answered. Except here came another knock, strong and insistent.

"Yes?" Matthew asked heatedly; he was in no mood for games this early in the morning. Was it Berry, making merry? No, she'd not been in such a mood last night and wouldn't be this morning, either. It was just after seven by the candle clock on the wall, which was a candle in a metal holder marked with bars to indicate the hours. "Can I help you?" Matthew inquired, his razor ready for another stroke along his chin.

"I am here," said the voice of a man beyond the door, "to speak to Mr. Matthew Corbett."

It was not a voice Matthew recognized. Muffled by the door, yes, but still...it was an odd accent. He put his razor down on the tabletop, next to the dish of soapcream and the bowl of water. "Who are you?"

“A visitor,” said the voice, “of great importance to you.”

Matthew had never heard an accent like that before. English, yes, but with a definite...what would it be termed? A lilt? A strange softness? It held a slight rolling of the ‘r’ but it was certainly not Scottish. His curiosity took hold. He pulled a gray cloak around his bedclothes, quickly washed the rest of the soap from his face, and then he unlocked and opened the door.

He found himself staring at a white sash that crossed the white blouse covering a massive chest. On this sash was centered an ornament studded with pearls and turquoise stones. The man wore baggy white pantaloons and black boots. A multicolored cloak edged with lamb’s wool was draped loosely over his shoulders, which appeared to be as wide as the doorway. The man, who must have been at least six and a half feet tall, leaned down to show his face. He was wearing a white turban, its wrapping also secured by a pearl-and-turquoise ornament.

“My name is Sirki,” said the thin-lipped mouth under the hooked nose in the broad brown face. “May I enter?”

Matthew felt what could only be termed a tremor of terror. It tingled across the back of his neck and along his arms. It travelled down his legs and rooted his feet to the floor. This was because he knew the name. *Sirki*. He remembered it well, and for good reason.

After he had killed Mrs. Sutch, he’d found in her possession a letter written in a flowing script that had been cited and dated *Boston, the fifteenth of August*, and that had read: *Dear Mrs. Sutch, Please carry out the usual preparations regarding one Matthew Corbett, of New York town in the New York colony. Be advised that Mr. Corbett resides on Queen Street, in—and I fear this is no jest—a dairyhouse behind the residence of one Mr. Grigsby, the local printmaster. Also be advised that the professor has been here lately in the aftermath of the unfortunate Chapel project, and will be returning to the island toward mid-September.*

*The professor requires resolution of this matter by the final week of November, as Mr. Corbett has been deemed a potentially-dangerous distraction. As always, we bow before your experience in these matters of honor.*

And the letter had been signed, *Sirki*.

Rebecca Mallory had stolen this letter from Number Seven Stone Street, and may have destroyed it. Matthew had known that

the letter concerned the whys and hows and whens of murder: his own. And now here stood in his doorway the man who'd composed that letter, and who had sent it to the murderous Mrs. Sutch on behalf of Professor Fell.

"Don't be afraid," said Sirki. His dark brown eyes under thick, arched black brows were calm and untroubled by any idea of violence. Unless the man was a very good actor or under supreme self-control, Matthew thought. He glanced quickly toward the razor. Six feet had never seemed so far.

"Oh," said Sirki, his voice soft and serene for a man of his gargantuan size, "I could kill you long before you might reach *that*, young sir."

Matthew had no doubt of it. He let go all thoughts of heroics with a razor.

The question was calmly repeated: "May I enter?"

Matthew was at a loss for words. He wished he could conjure up something wicked and cutting, but all he could find was, "Do I have a choice?" Even then, his voice trembled. This man was of a monstrous construction.

"Certainly you do." Sirki offered a pleasant-enough smile. He had what appeared to be two small diamonds fitted into his front teeth. "You always have a choice, young sir. I trust you will make the right one now."

Matthew decided, in the presence of this obvious killer, that it was good to be trusted. He stepped back, and as Sirki bent over and entered the dairyhouse Matthew saw the man's eyes mark both the whereabouts of the razor and the position of Matthew's hands.

"May I close the door?" Sirki asked. He waited politely for a response. When Matthew nodded, Sirki closed the door. He did not lock it. "Cold outside today," Sirki said. "A bitter wind is blowing in from the sea. I don't care for cold weather. Do you?"

"The weather doesn't care for my opinion," Matthew said.

"Ah. Yes. Correctly so." Again there was a restrained smile and the flash of diamonds in the teeth. Matthew had taken note of three small gold rings in each of Sirki's earlobes. He was a well-ornamented East Indian, for Matthew knew this man had to have come from a country where turbans were as common as tricorns. The manner of dress, the accent—though Matthew had never heard such an accent before—originated from the land of Akbar

The Great. Also an indicator was the cloyingly-sweet aroma of sandalwood incense that had arrived in the man's clothing.

"I may sit?" Sirki motioned to a chair. Matthew nodded again, though he was concerned about the chair's survival. Sirki eased himself into it and stretched out his long legs. "Ah. Now, I'm in... how would you say?...pig's paradise?"

"Hog heaven," Matthew suggested.

"Exactly. Let me show you I have no weapons." Sirki lifted his arms, shrugged off his cloak and patted around his midsection.

"Do you need any?"

This time a grin burst forth. "No, I do not."

Matthew reasoned it was time to keep his mouth shut. He backed away until he met a wall, which still put him within a dangerous arm's length of Sirki.

"I mean you no harm," came the quiet voice. "Neither does the individual I represent."

"Who might that be?"

Sirki's smile now became a bit chilly. "Young sir, let's be adults here. I've come a long way to speak to you. And I speak to you in the voice of the individual I represent."

Matthew said nothing; he waited, though he was thinking that the last time he heard from Professor Fell it was in the form of the "death card," a vow that whoever received the bloody fingerprint would be—as Sirki's letter to Sutch had said—a matter requiring resolution.

"He wishes to meet you," said Sirki.

Matthew didn't know how to respond. Should he be terrified? Or flattered?

"He wishes you to come to him," said Sirki. "Or, rather...be brought to him."

It was doubly difficult now for Matthew to speak, but he forced the obvious question: "Where is he?"

"A short sea voyage away." Sirki placed his elbows upon the arm rests and steepled his brown fingers. "A journey of—weather permitting—three weeks."

Matthew had to laugh. It sounded harsh. Whether it was the release of tension or not, he didn't know. But this entire scene was ridiculous, a comedy farce. "Three weeks by sea to meet *him*?"

And my return voyage, I assume, would be in a casket? Or...more likely...a basket?"

"Neither, young sir. You would be returned promptly and safely." Sirki paused for a moment, gazing around the neatly-kept but cramped confines of Matthew's home. "I should think you'd enjoy a sea voyage, after living here." Another two inches and Sirki's boots would be scraping the opposite wall. He frowned. "Can't you afford anymore space?"

"My space is fine as it is."

"Ah, but you're incorrect there. Your space—and I mean by that the distance you've chosen to keep between yourself and the two persons who approached you in the autumn regarding a dinner invitation—is *not* fine. It is not fine with them, with me, or with *him*. In fact, it is offensive to him that you won't have dinner with such noble citizens."

"Noble citizens?" Matthew would have laughed again, if he hadn't thought it might be his last laugh. "I imagine they're criminals. Part of Fell's pool of sharks? And I'm guessing those are not their true names, either. Is he really a *doctor*?"

"Yes, he's a doctor," came the tranquil reply. "Quite a good one, in London some years ago. His speciality is a knowledge of poisons. But when he is required to don the guise of a practising physician again, he does."

"A question for you," Matthew ventured. "What is Fell a professor of?"

A slight smile worked across the thin lips and then vanished. "Life," said Sirki, "in all its many forms."

Matthew couldn't let this chance go past. He said, "You mean... *taking* life in all its many forms?"

"No, I mean what I said. The professor is a sterling disciple of life, young sir. When you meet him, ask him to explain his interest. He'll be happy to educate you."

"I don't think I could stand such education."

"But the truth," said Sirki, his gaze fixed on Matthew, "is that sometimes the education we do not want is precisely the education we need, and that will benefit us the most." He shifted his position in the chair and again glanced left and right, at the walls, and then up toward the ceiling. Matthew saw a hint of disturbance

ripple across his features. "This is almost like a *cave* in here, isn't it? I wouldn't be able to live in a place like this. I would value my sanity too much."

"I'm perfectly sane," said Matthew.

"That remains to be seen. Twice now you've been offered an invitation." Sirki slowly pulled his legs in, like an animal about to leap upon its prey. Matthew tensed and wished he could get to the door but the East Indian giant was in the way. "You will note there have been some incidents in your town just lately. Involving fire? The destruction of property? And your name being prominently displayed? Those are *reminders*, young sir, that time is growing short. The professor's patience is also growing short. If I were you, I wouldn't wish to dawdle very much longer."

"Who's burning those buildings and painting my name there? *You?*"

Sirki smiled like a cat and touched a finger to his lips.

"Why does Fell want to see me, if he doesn't want to *kill* me?"

"You," said Sirki, "are needed."

"Needed? How?"

"I will leave that for your dinner hosts to explain. They also will explain the arrangements for transportation. Now, listen to me carefully. As I said, I speak in the voice of the individual I represent. You are to go to the Mallorys' house tonight, at seven o'clock. Mark it: *tonight*. You will enjoy a very fine dinner—for Aria is an excellent cook—and you will be told the particulars. But not *everything*, you understand." The front teeth diamonds sparkled with candlelight. "Some things are best left unknown, until you need to know. I will tell you that no harm will come to you. He vows this. Unless, of course, an act of God sinks the ship and then his vow would not be valid. But we have an able captain and crew standing by. The ship is..." He waved a hand in the direction of the sea, "out there. It comes closer to shore by night."

*Aria*, Matthew was thinking. Rebecca Mallory's real Christian name. And what might the surname be? "You haven't told me why he wants me. Until I hear that, I'll give no thought to going anywhere. Certainly not to have dinner with those snakes."

Sirki was silent, staring at Matthew. Obviously, he was thinking it over. His face was as expressionless as a burnished mask.

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“Professor Fell,” Sirki said at last, “has a problem. He is in need of a problem-solver. What did he tell me, *exactly*? He said... he wishes for the service of a providence rider. A scout, he said. Someone to forge ahead and mark a trail. That would be an apt description of you and your work, would it not?”

Matthew was dazed. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. “Fell wants to *hire* me?”

“It's somewhat more complicated than that. Your dinner hosts will explain further.” The huge man suddenly got up from his chair and seemingly filled half the room. Really, he literally *did* fill half the room. He had to bend a little at the waist to keep his turban from brushing the ceiling. “Pardon my intrusion,” he said, “but I did want to keep you on the right progression, young sir.” As Sirki moved toward the door, Matthew pressed himself against the wall to stay out of his way.

Matthew considered himself courageous enough, but not foolhardy. He let Sirki get to the door and open it before he spoke again. “What if I choose not to go? Another building will burn and my name will be on prominent display?”

“What you don't grasp,” came the smooth reply, “is that the professor can do wonderful things *for* you...and terrible things *to* you. I would not push his patience, young—” He stopped himself. “May I call you *Matthew*? It seems we should be on more friendly terms, if we're to work together.”

“You can call me the young sir who follows you to wherever you're going and then proceeds to the high constable's office. After which I expect there'll be a visit to Lord Cornbury. You won't be very difficult to find, I'm sure.”

“No, not difficult at all,” Sirki agreed with a quick and completely insincere smile. “I'm at the Dock House Inn. Room number four. And I've already met both those gentlemen. I introduced myself several days ago, as a businessman from Delhi interested in furthering friendship and direct trade between my country and the town of New York. I believe I impressed them. And *no*, Matthew, I'm neither starting the fires nor writing your name. That's being handled by persons of less status than myself. It wouldn't do to dirty my robes with powder and paint, would it?”

“Gunpowder, you mean? That's what causes the explosions?”

“The *professor* causes the explosions,” Sirki said, with a slight lifting of the thick black eyebrows. “Even as far away as he is, he is entirely capable of destroying your world, Matthew. He wants a providence rider. He wants especially *you*.” Sirki paused to let that take deep root. “I should give the professor what he wants, my friend. Otherwise...” He clasped his huge hands together and then abruptly drew them apart.

“*Boom*,” Sirki said, and with a sweep of his multicolored cloak he left the dairyhouse and closed the door firmly behind him.

Matthew didn’t know if that last gesture was supposed to convey another explosion of a building or his own destruction, but its point was well met. He saw no need to follow Sirki; he had no doubt the giant had lodgings at the Dock House Inn and that he’d made the acquaintances of both Lillehorne and Cornbury. Both of those individuals would listen to him for perhaps ten seconds before he was thrown out of the office. Actually, they wouldn’t even deign to hear him. *What possible reason might there be for a businessman from Delhi to be involved in this?* Lillehorne would ask. And for that, Matthew would have no answer. Without the letter bearing Sirki’s name, he had nothing.

Which put him back at the beginning.

He ran a hand over his face. He had to get to Number Seven Stone Street. There was nothing pressing at the moment, but there was some correspondence to attend to. He went to the water basin to reapply shaving soap and finish the job. He wasn’t aware that his hand was shaking until the first stroke along his chin produced crimson. He stared into his own dark-shadowed eyes in the mirror. How to get proper rest these nights was the question. He dabbed at the cut on his chin with a handkerchief. He was getting used to the sight of his own blood, which further disturbed him.

Another disturbance had happened at the Trot Then Gallop last night, when Matthew had gone in to have a cup of ale along with some of the other regulars and men who’d manned the bucket brigades. He’d found himself the focus of several curious stares and passing whispers, even from those he knew well. Felix Sudbury was kind enough, but even the Trot’s owner seemed to want to draw away from him, to keep him at arm’s length. Perhaps, Matthew wondered, did Sudbury fear an explosion and burning of the Trot,

simply because Matthew had marked the place with his presence? Israel Brandier was the same, and also Tobias Winekoop the stable owner. Did Winekoop fear that by speaking to Matthew too cordially, his horses might go up in flames? Therefore Winekoop too kept his distance, and over in the corner the Dock Ward alderman Josiah Whittaker and the North Ward alderman Peter Conradt sat talking quietly and now and then spearing Matthew with a glance that said *Whatever you're doing or causing to be done...cease it.*

Matthew had taken his ale and sat down before the chessboard. It was still set up from the last game he'd played with Effrem several nights before, but of course on this cold black morning Effrem had other concerns on his mind rather than pawns and knights. So Matthew had not touched the pieces, but rather played the game out in his mind, taking up both sides and being fair about it. No one had approached him in his hour there. No one had spoken to him, though it was apparent in the strained quiet that some were speaking *about* him. And when he'd finished his ale and the mental game was done to his satisfaction he'd returned the cup to the bar, said good morning to Felix—who was cleaning out cups and did not answer—and then he left the Trot for home.

It had seemed a very long walk, the air he breathed still stained with smoke and smelling of burned dreams and collapsed industry.

And now this. Sirki.

And behind Sirki, the professor.

Matthew finished his shaving. He washed his face and dressed in a dark suit, befitting his mood. Actually, he only had two suits and both were dark, one black and one brown. So much for the young dandy who'd strutted through the town in the autumn. No matter; there was this thing to deal with now.

But *how*?

They were expecting him tonight at seven o'clock. A wonderful dinner, prepared by a woman named Aria. *Your dinner hosts will explain further.*

Matthew thought of Hudson Greathouse, and what the great one might say to this. There was no need in getting him involved; Matthew had nearly gotten his friend killed once before. This time might finish him off. Professor Fell needed one problem-solver—or

providence rider, as he termed it—and there would be no room for Hudson on this journey, unless it was into a grave.

What to do? Matthew asked the image in the glass. What to *do*?

He recalled on the back of the letter from Sirki that the rubbing of a pencil lead had brought up the imprint of a wax stamp: the many-tentacled octopus symbol of Fell's desire for criminal domination. The letter, written and signed by Sirki.

Where might that letter be now, months after the falsely-named Rebecca Mallory had stolen it from Matthew's office? Destroyed? Burned in a fireplace? Or might it still be in the house that sheltered them? Tucked in a drawer somewhere, or put into a box that might be locked yet a key could be found if one searched diligently enough?

Matthew thought if he could get hold of that letter, he could take it to both Greathouse and Lillehorne as hard evidence. Sirki and the false Mallorys would find themselves behind the same bars where the young assassin-in-training Ripley had sat in eerie and unbroken silence before he was sentenced to London's Newgate prison by Lord Cornbury and sent off aboard ship in December. *If* the letter had survived, and *if* it could be found.

Was it worth the try?

Matthew put on his woolen cap, his gloves and his black fear-naught coat. It was time to leave his cave. He blew out the candles, and with much on his mind he strode purposefully out the door into a snow-dusted scene of winter.

# SEVEN



W

ITH a gust of icy wind, seven o'clock had arrived. Matthew Corbett stood outside a small whitewashed house on Nassau Street, between Golden Hill and Maiden Lane. He could see candlelight through the windows. Many candles were lighted in there, it appeared. The false Mallorys obviously saw no need to limit their illumination for the sake of their pocketbooks. He pressed his side against the darkness of a wall in a short alley between two houses across the way, lest someone peer out the candle-bloomed windows and see him trying to decide just what in the name of God he ought to do.

God, unfortunately, was silent on the issue. Matthew pulled his coat tighter about himself, as if more warmth might help his mental processes; it did not, nor was it in truth much warmer. He rubbed his gloved hands together, and still he paused and pondered the situation. To enter that house, where they waited for him...or not? A constable walked past, following his green-glassed lantern, and never looked right nor left.

Matthew knew of the professor's penchant for poisons. It would be simple for a debilitating drug to be put into the food or

drink, and then where would Matthew find himself at first light? He saw a figure pull aside a gauzy window curtain and look out upon the street, but whether it was the man or woman he didn't know. He remained perfectly still until the curtain was dropped and the figure gone, and then he released in a white mist the breath he'd been holding.

By his reckoning it was now ten minutes or so past seven. They would be wondering if he was coming or not. All those candles, burning in expectation of a visitor. He had to go, he decided. How else to possibly learn where the letter might be, if indeed it still survived? No, he couldn't do it, he decided in the next moment. It was too dangerous. But if he didn't go...what would be the next tragedy inflicted upon New York—and his friends—in his name?

He had to go.

No...wait...think it out a little more. Once inside that house, he was at their mercy.

Damn it, he thought. They've got me in a trap.

He had to go.

He started to leave his position of relative safety. He saw a figure come to that window again, peer between the curtains and then withdraw. He took a step forward, toward whatever fate awaited him.

"What are you *doing* out here, Matthew?"

He nearly cried out in alarm, and spinning around he found a dark-garbed figure standing a few feet behind him. But he knew the voice, and once past the shock he realized Berry Grigsby must've come through the alley from the opposite end. She was wrapped in her black coat and hood but the red tresses flowed free and he could make out her face by the reflected candlelight of the house across the way.

"Oh my *God!*" he was able to croak. That wasn't enough. "Oh *Jesus!*" he said, his face still contorted with pure fear. "Are you *insane?* What are you doing here?"

"I'm following *you,*" she said, with a defiant note. She lifted her chin like a weapon. "I know...it was wrong. Possibly. But I saw you leave your house and I saw you turn to the left when you usually turn to the right. So I knew you weren't going to the Trot. Or to Sally Almond's. Or to anywhere you usually go. I know it was wrong. Possibly," she repeated, as if asking for his understanding.

“Matthew, I’m worried about you. I mean...I’m *concerned*. As a friend. You see?”

“I see you shouldn’t be here!” He glanced quickly over his shoulder at the house. Oh, they were starting to grit their teeth in there by now. They were starting to sharpen their knives and pour out their gunpowder. He couldn’t believe how stupid he was getting. His lack of attention could have been his finish, if she’d been one of Fell’s killers. “Step back,” he told her. “Step *back!*” She obeyed, and he stepped toward her to make up for the pace he’d taken to break his cover. “Are you spying on me? Is that it? Berry, I have a dangerous job to do! You can’t be coming up behind me like this!”

“*Dangerous?*” Her voice tightened, and instantly he knew he should not have said that. “Dangerous how?” She looked past him, across Nassau Street. “That’s Dr. Mallory’s house. What’s the danger here?”

“I can’t explain it.”

“Yes,” she said. “You can.”

“Go home,” he told her.

“I wouldn’t leave now if...if...” She mentally searched for a fearsome image and found it. “If Brutus the bull came charging down this alley. No! You can’t tell me something is—”

“Keep your voice down,” he cautioned.

“Is dangerous and then tell me to go home, like a child,” she finished, adjusting her volume to nearly a whisper. She saw a movement in the Mallory house. Someone was looking out the window. Then whoever it was retreated. She aimed her gaze at Matthew. “What’s going on?”

“My business. I told you to—”

Berry took a step forward and suddenly they were standing face-to-face. Matthew smelled her: an aroma like cinammon and roses, even on a frigid night like this. Her eyes never left his. “You,” she said quietly but firmly, “are not my keeper. Sometimes I wonder if you are even my friend. Well...I’m *your* friend, whether you want me or not. I care about you, and if that causes you discomfort, sir, you will have to be comforted. Do I make myself—”

The word *clear* never was uttered.

For Matthew Corbett felt a wall within him crack and give way, just a little, and the sliver of warm light that came through that

crack caused him to put his hand to the back of Berry's neck and kiss her full upon the lips.

It was a scandalous moment. Such things were just not done, in this sudden uncomplicated way. But Berry did not retreat, and her lips softened beneath Matthew's, and perhaps her mouth responded and urged the kiss to be longer and deeper than Matthew had first intended. However it happened, the kiss went on. Matthew felt a thrill of excitement. His heart was pounding, and he wondered if she felt the same. When his lips at last left hers she made a soft whisper that might have been either a breathy exhalation of surprise or an entreaty for continuation of this intimate discussion. He looked into her eyes and saw the sparkle of diamonds. She wore a sleepy expression, as if she suddenly was in need of the bed.

It hit him what he'd just done. He removed his hand from the back of Berry's neck, but she didn't move away. He was appalled at his adventurous conduct; it was terribly wrong, and terribly ungentlemanly of him. He had the sensation, however, that Berry did not share his inexactitudes, for she gazed upon him as if he had just stepped down from a star.

He did it to silence her, he decided. Yes. She was getting a little too loud, and her voice might have carried to the house across the way. Yes. That's why he'd done it. No other reason. And now he was shamed by it, but it had served his purpose.

"Be *quiet*," he said, though he didn't know why he said that since Berry wasn't speaking and it seemed she couldn't find her voice anyway.

A latch was thrown. Matthew looked over his shoulder and saw the door opening. Instinctively, he put an arm across Berry to shield her from injury. Someone was leaving the house. It was the woman. Aria To-Be-Named-Later. She wore a full-skirted gown under a purple cloak, and on her head was a matching purple hat with mink earmuffs. She turned to the right and walked briskly away from the house, following Nassau Street toward town. Her boots crunched on the hammered bits of oyster shells that covered the street, for Lord Cornbury had not yet seen fit to release public money for the laying of cobblestones in this area.

Over oyster shells, cobblestones or horse figs, Aria Whomever was walking as if she had somewhere very important to go. Matthew

reasoned her destination was likely the Dock House Inn, where she might give a message to Gilliam Vincent for the East Indian giant in room number four. However it was coded, the message would be: *Matthew Corbett did not obey.*

Good for Matthew Corbett, he thought. But possibly bad for the building owners of New York?

Berry grasped his hand. "What *is* it?" She was whispering, for she'd also caught the scent of danger. "Are the Mallorys involved?"

"Involved in what?" His own whisper equalled hers.

"I don't know, that's what I'm asking. What are they involved in?"

Matthew watched the door. It didn't open again. The doctor was staying inside on such a wintry night. Best to let the female snake slither along Nassau Steet to do this job.

"The Mallorys," Berry insisted. "Are you listening to me?"

"No," he said, and caught himself. "Yes. I mean..." He looked into her eyes once more. The diamonds had diminished; an excitement not for him but for the intrigue of the evening had for the moment pushed everything else aside. It was, however, equally as intense. "I can't tell you why," he said, "but I know the Mallorys have something to do with those fires. And with my name being painted around, to cause me trouble."

"But *why*, Matthew? It makes no sense!"

"Not to you, no. Nor to anyone else. But to me, it makes perfect sense." He regarded the house again. Fine if the letter was in there, but if so...how was he going to get it? Of course, there were two major problems: he had to get into the house when the snakes weren't coiled up in there and he had to find the letter. If it had not been destroyed. If, if and if. This plan, he thought, might have been hatched from the inmates at Bedlam.

"That way," Matthew said, motioning toward the other end of the alley. He followed Berry, hoping in this darkness he didn't complete his current stay in the Gray Kingdom by twisting a foot on a loose stone. But they made it through the alley onto Smith Street without incident, and there they turned to the right onto Fair Street and then onward toward Queen and the Grigsby property.

"I think," said Berry as they neared the house, "that you owe me an explanation. I can make you a pot of tea. Will you tell me?"

“Your grandfather has the biggest ears in town,” he reminded her. “And even when he pretends to be sleeping, he’s listening. So... no, I will not.”

She stopped walking, turned toward him and actually grasped a handful of his coat. “Listen to me, Matthew Corbett!” she said, and she cast off some heat which was fine for Matthew because he was near freezing. “When are you going to trust me?”

When I don’t have to fear for your life, he thought. But he kept his expression stolid and his voice as cold as he felt when he said, “My business is *my* business. That’s how it has to be.”

“No,” she answered without hesitation, “that’s how you want it to be.”

“Yes,” he said.

“You just kissed me. Or did I imagine that?”

And then he said the thing that he had to say, but that cut him like a knife across the throat: “I was confused.”

The statement lingered in the air. The words, once released, came back upon the one who’d uttered them and added a stab to the heart to the already-cut throat. For Matthew saw in Berry’s face how much she was hurt, and she blinked quickly before any tears could rise up and so they did not, and by force of will she kept her face composed and her eyes clear. And she said, in a voice that seemed already distant, “I see.”

They were two words that Matthew would never forget, for they meant that Berry saw nothing, and that he could not correct her vision.

She released her hold upon his coat. She drew herself tall; taller than he, it seemed. She said, “Goodnight, Matthew,” and she left him. He watched her walk with great dignity toward her grandfather’s house, where a lantern showed in a window. She entered the house without a backwards glance, and Matthew drew a long, deep breath of freezing air and continued on to his own abode, which had never felt smaller nor more common.

# EIGHT



**M**ATTHEW again stood in the cold. It seemed that everywhere now was cold to him. It was a chilly world these days, and not just by the weather. He was again in the alley opposite the house occupied by the false Mallorys. Three nights had passed since his encounter there with Berry. He'd not set eyes upon her since. All to the best, he thought. This business was indeed dangerous, for tonight he was determined to get inside there and find that letter, if indeed it still existed.

The house was dark. Not a candle showed. Matthew had been standing here as last night, about the same hour after midnight, but tonight there was a major difference. Nearly forty minutes ago, he'd seen a coach drawn by four horses pull up before the house. Lashed atop the coach had been a black-painted wooden box about five feet in length, three feet wide and the same deep. A sea chest, Matthew had thought it might be. The kind that might be found in a captain's cabin. Two burly men serving the coach had struggled to get the chest down, and both the false Mallorys had emerged from the house to help them. In time the chest was lugged into the

house, and the door closed. Lanterns had moved about inside. Then Matthew had waited to see what developed, his senses keen on the fact that whatever was going on, the false Mallorys wished no one to be witness.

On the gray morning after his brusque dismissal of Berry, Matthew had gone to work at Number Seven Stone Street with a mission in mind. He had climbed the steep and narrow stairs to the loft that housed the office of the two New York problem-solvers and also—if one believed such stories—the ghosts of two coffee merchants who had killed each other on this side of the darkened glass and now on the other side continued their eternal feud. If one believed such stories. And in truth Matthew had heard numerous bumps and thumps and the occasional echo of muffled curses floating through the air, but it was all in a day's work at Number Seven. Besides, Matthew had gotten used to the spirits, if indeed they still lingered and fought here over the respective sizes of their coffee beans, and all one had to do to stop the noises was say, "*Silence!*" good and loud, and order was restored for a while.

On this morning Matthew had not been interested in any spirit but the live one of oversized build and sometimes bullying nature sitting behind his desk writing a letter to a certain Mr. Sedgeworth Prisskitt of Charles Town who—

“—is asking for a courier to escort his daughter Pandora to the annual Cicero Society Ball at the end of March,” Hudson explained. “She must be—shall we say—not so much in the area of looks, if her father has to pay for an escort.” He frowned. “I wonder what the Cicero Society is. Ever heard of it?”

“No, I haven't.” Matthew busied himself hanging his fear-naught up on a hook.

“Want to take this one on? The money's good.”

“No.”

“Not at all curious?”

Of course he was, but he was on a mission. “Not at all,” he lied.

“Liar!” Greathouse put his quill into its rest. “All right then, what's on *your* mind?”

“Nothing in particular. Other than buildings being burned and my name being painted around.”

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Greathouse grunted and grinned. "At least they got the spelling right! So pull your face off the floor and smile sometime, won't you?"

Matthew walked past the polite fire that crackled in the small hearth of rough gray and tan stones. He went to the pair of windows that afforded a view of New York to the northwest, the wide river and the brown cliffs and gray hills of New Jersey. A boat loaded with crates of cargo on its deck was moving north along the river, the wind spreading its brown sails wide. Another smaller boat held two fishermen, sitting back-to-back. Like Hudson and myself, he thought as he surveyed the scene. Our hooks in the water, and we have no idea what's down there waiting to bite.

"This is becoming a habit," Greathouse observed.

"What is?"

"Your lack of joy. Why don't you go to Charles Town? Take the packet boat. Escort Pandora Prisskitt to the ball. Eh? Go have some fun for a change."

Matthew heard a murmur, but no words. He was watching the fishermen, and he was deciding how to begin what he had planned to say to his friend. He decided it was to be: *The Mallorys are behind the burnings. I know this to be true. And I didn't want to drag you into this, but—*

"Matthew!" said Greathouse emphatically, and the younger man redirected his attention. "Let me ask you. What do you think of Abby Donovan?"

The question was so unexpected that Matthew could think of no possible response.

"Go ahead," Greathouse urged. "Tell me what you honestly think." He nodded when Matthew yet hesitated. "Go ahead!"

"Well...I think she's—"

"Yes, and you would be correct!" If possible, Greathouse's grin broadened. He leaned back, precariously so, in his chair. "She is one *hell* of a woman!" Matthew thought the great one might be in danger of breaking his jaw if he grinned much broader. "Yes, she is! And *kind*, Matthew. Really she is. An angel. But...she's a devil when she needs to be, I'll tell you."

"I don't think I want to hear this."

"Oh, don't be such a prude! Are you twenty-three or fifty-three? Sometimes I can't tell. But listen...about Abby. She and I are

getting along very well, Matthew. *Very* well. I'm saying, sometimes when I'm with her I'm not quite sure where she stops and I begin. Do you know what I mean?"

Looking into Hudson Greathouse's grinning face, with its left charcoal-gray eyebrow sliced by a jagged scar, Matthew knew all too well what his companion in problem-solving meant. Though Greathouse had already had his share of women, and perhaps many other men's shares too, he was falling in love with Abby Donovan. Not to be bothered that the scar through his left eyebrow had been made by a broken teacup thrown by his third wife. Not to be bothered that there were likely scars on his heart made by several women, and more scars on their hearts than his. Not to be bothered by any of that, because Hudson was falling in love.

"I do know," said Matthew, and with that short sentence he put aside what he was going to tell the great one, for this was not Hudson's business. No, today—and perhaps tomorrow too, and the day after that—the man's business was *love*.

"Things may happen," was the next comment, made by an excitable boy where a rough-assed man had been sitting a moment before. "Really, Matthew. I mean it. Things may happen."

"You mean...*marriage*?"

The sound of that word in the room seemed to knock a little of the wind from his sails, and he blinked as if he'd just been slapped with a wet rag but quickly he recovered from whatever thought of reality had intruded. "She is one *hell* of a woman," he repeated, as if Matthew needed to hear that again.

But the hellish woman and her equally hellish male partner down at the end of Nassau Street still had to be dealt with. Perhaps a cloud passed over Matthew's face, because Greathouse's mood changed just as quickly and he asked with true concern, "Is there anything else you wanted to talk about?"

Matthew shook his head.

"This thing will clear up, don't worry yourself." Greathouse picked up his quill and started to continue with his letter of regret to Mr. Sedgeworth Prisskitt. "It's a lunatic, I think. Or someone with an axe to grind against you. Now...I don't know how they're blowing those buildings to pieces, but don't let it burden you because that's exactly what they want."

“Agreed,” said Matthew, in a quiet voice.

“I doubt there’ll be any more of that. The point’s been made, I suppose. Some lunatic doesn’t like you. Maybe because of all that hero-worship the *Earwig* gave you last summer. *Oh.*” A thought hit him like a musket ball from the blue. The lines across his forehead deepened. “You don’t think it could be one of Fell’s people, do you?”

The moment of truth, Matthew thought. It stretched, as he wondered if the truth was worth putting at risk the life of a man who was so enamored of one hell of a woman. *Marriage*, indeed!

“I think it’s a lunatic,” spoke Matthew, “just as you say.”

“Right. Probably one of your friends escaped from the asylum down there.” Greathouse blew a breath of relief, now that Matthew had turned the discussion away from Professor Fell. “Don’t fret, the constables are on watch.”

“Now I *will* fret,” Matthew said.

“Absolutely positive you don’t wish to meet Pandora Prisskitt?”

“Absolutely,” he said, “and pardon me, but I’m going to go to Sally Almond’s for breakfast.”

“But you just got here!”

“True, but my correspondence can wait and besides, I’m hungry.”

“I’ll go with you, then.”

“No,” said Matthew, as gently as he could. “I have some things to think about. I believe this morning I should secure a table for one.”

Greathouse shrugged. “Suit yourself. And don’t be running up a bill over there, hear me?”

“Yes, father,” Matthew replied dryly, and when Greathouse gave him a startled look the younger problem-solver took his black coat from its hook, threw it over his shoulders like the wings of a raven and left the office for the street below.

Matthew shivered a little, in the cold alley across from the darkened house. After the sea chest had been lugged in, the two burly men had emerged from the house followed by the so-called Mallorys. Doctor Jason was carrying a leather case and a fabric bag, and Aria a larger fabric bag. Their belongings? Matthew wondered. Were they leaving for good? They had talked for a few minutes, and one of the men had motioned in the direction of the sea. Matthew could hear no words, only the hushed current of conversation. He couldn’t see everything because the coach and horses were in the

way. But then the two men had gotten back up on the driver's bench of the coach, the false Mallorys had climbed into the more comfortable seats, and the coach had been driven off. His teeth near chattering, Matthew longed for the mercies of a warm blanket, yet if the snakes had departed—even for a short time—this was the night to search for a letter.

Matthew found it hard to believe that they weren't coming back at some point. Though possibly not tonight? He had the sensation of emptiness about the house. Of desolation. And...something else, as well?

Tonight, as last night, he'd brought a shielded lantern, its candleglow guarded by metal ribs that could be folded down or pushed open over the glass. He picked it up from the alley's ground and pressed a spring-driven lever that made the ribs open like the petals of a flower. Illumination spread. The lantern was held by a polished walnut pistol-grip at its base. In fact, it *was* a flintlock pistol, and could fire a ball through a barrel secured underneath the candle. It was currently loaded and powdered, ready for firing. A very nice invention, purchased from Oliver Quisenhunt of Philadelphia, among other items of interest to problem-solvers who might need to extricate themselves from problems of a particularly dangerous nature.

His heartbeat had quickened. He knew what his next move must be. He would have to leave his place of relative safety, cross Nassau Street and go to the door of that darkened house. He looked along the street, in search of the coach returning, but there was no sign of it. Time was not to be wasted. As he approached the door he was thinking how he might get inside. He could break a window on the other side of the house, he decided. But first he must try the door. He hadn't been able to see if the Mallorys had used a key or not. Because life in New York was not a idyllic paradise all locks were used quite regularly, unlike the situation that had existed in that paragon of community virtue called Fount Royal. But still, the door must be tried.

It was, as he'd expected, locked tight. Matthew walked around the house and behind a shoulder-high white picket fence. He was searching for a window to break with the pistol grip of his lantern. Have to be careful with that, as the sound of breaking glass would

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carry. Already a dog was barking stridently a few houses away. He managed a grim smile against the cold that pressed at his face; he was about to add *house-breaker* to his list of accomplishments.

On the other side of the house was a short flight of wooden stairs leading to a narrow back door. A window was set on either side of the door. One of those appeared a likely candidate for breakage. Matthew went up the stairs and chose the window on his right. He hesitated, listening. Did he hear the sound of horse hooves on oyster shells? No, it was his imagination. His heartbeat pounded in his ears, enough to make him hear horse hooves that were not there.

A quick pop with the grip and it would be done. Careful not to shoot oneself with this device, though the hammer was not cocked. Before Matthew took aim at the glass he reached out with his other hand to try the door...

...and the knob easily turned. The door opened, and it seemed to Matthew that darkness rolled out to meet him.

He held the lantern before him and entered the house, closing the door at his back. Now his heart was a true runaway. Steady, he told himself. *Steady*. He breathed in and out a few times. He smelled pipe smoke and perfume. Smelled things that had a medicinal odor, as this dwelling also held the doctor's treatment room. Matthew crossed the planked floor of a nicely-ordered kitchen. Yes, Aria would be an orderly cook, would she not? Ashes in the kitchen hearth still smelled of a fire not long past. A hallway beckoned on the left. Matthew eased into it, and the lantern's glow showed a trio of doors, one on the right and two on the left. The doctor's office was what Matthew sought. Anywhere there might be papers. Of course, the letter he was looking for might have been ashes in that kitchen hearth months ago, but still he had to seek. It was his nature.

He opened the first door on the left. Candlelight fell upon a bedroom. A woman's frills and finery. A little writing desk and a broad chest of drawers, upon which were several bottles of what Matthew assumed was fragrance. The bedspread of woven pink and lavender. Aria sleeps alone? Matthew wondered, noting the bed for one. He went to the writing desk and found the solitary top drawer was empty. The chest of drawers likewise held nothing but some woolen lint. Matthew opened a closet and found three very lovely and intricately-fashioned gowns hanging there on pegs. Also two

pairs of Aria's shoes remained on the floor. So...were the snakes slithering back tonight, or not?

He crossed the hall to the door on the right. The treatment room with a trio of beds. No windows in here. Matthew recalled this room; he'd been in here in the autumn, laid low from a poison dart. He had sweated rivers in the third bed, having consumed a thick coca-based concoction Doctor Jason had given him to defeat South American frog venom. A long story, that had been, with a happy ending: he had survived. Various vials of medicines and what-not stood on shelves, along with several important-looking leatherbound tomes. Matthew turned his attention toward the doctor's desk that stood across the room. As he walked toward it, following his candle, the toe of his right boot hit something that nearly tripped him. He aimed the light downward. A small red throwrug was crumpled up around an object of some kind. Matthew pushed the rug aside with his boot and stood staring down at an iron ring. It lifted, he saw, a wooden trapdoor set in the floor, which in this room was made of brown bricks. He grasped the ring and pulled up; the trapdoor opened with a creak of hinges, and there yawned a square of more darkness. A ladder led down. How far down, and what was down there? His light couldn't tell. But that was best saved for later. He left the trapdoor open and continued on to the desk.

Again, hands had not been idle in this house. The desk was nearly empty but for a few squares of paper. Upon examination, they appeared to be bills for treatments signed by various personages. Nothing unusual about them, save for the one signed by Edward Hyde, Lord Cornbury for the administration of medicine for... did that scribbling say *anal warts*?

Matthew returned the bills to the desk and wiped his fingers on his coat. Then he took stock of the trapdoor once again. What was down there, and why? Old files, perhaps? A bundle of letters? Perhaps the letter he sought?

Possibly. And possibly he had best check the next room on the left first, before he started descending ladders into dark holes. He had a sense of urgency now, and he was listening intently for the sound of horse hooves and coach wheels. He left the trapdoor open and went to the next chamber.

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One step in, and a shiver of fear paralyzed him.

This obviously was Doctor Jason's bedroom. It held a black chest of drawers, an oval full-length mirror on small wheels, a black leather chair and a canopied bed.

And on that bed lay, pressed together side-by-side, two naked bodies.

It suddenly occurred to Matthew what had been inside the sea chest.

He caught his breath and stepped forward. His light revealed gray flesh. The bodies were of a man and a woman. The woman's sagging breasts and dark-haired vagina were pitiful. It was a skinny corpse, each rib showing. The man's body was also ill-fed, and had the tattoo of an eagle just below the collarbone. Two toes were missing from the left foot. The hands were stiffened into claws, which seemed to be reaching in agony toward the canopy above.

But the thing that made Matthew recoil in true horror was that neither corpse had a head.

The heads had been cut off. The neckstumps were all ragged flesh and old brown crust. Matthew smelled the dried blood and the dusty sweet reek of flesh on the edge of decay, yet it was obvious these souls were not very long-departed from this earthly realm. He wanted to lower the lantern, yet lowering the lantern meant he would be giving the corpses over to the dark and if he imagined that one of them gave a sudden jerk of arm or leg he would puddle himself quite soggly.

He backed away, keeping the lantern up and the flintlock's barrel aimed at the dead as if he might have to kill them again. Where were the heads? he wondered. In the leather case carried out by Doctor Jason? And what in the name of God were two headless bodies doing lying in the man's *bed*?

"...pay for this dirty business," someone said.

Matthew's hair might have stood up under his cap. He froze at the doorway, a heart-pounding, vein-throbbing, near-puddling wreck of nerves.

Two men were speaking in the kitchen. "Should've got more, I say. Dirty and dangerous, too. You saw them shorts on there!"

"Aw, shut your hole! Bullett knows his trade."

Matthew heard footsteps. Rough men wearing rough-heeled boots. They were coming back along the hallway. He peered through the door's crack and there they were, each carrying a lantern. One man was lugging a burlap sack over his shoulder.

"Damnable job, this is," said the complainer with the burden, who was met with a snort either of derision or accord.

Matthew realized with a fresh start of alarm that they were coming to this room. He saw only one place to retreat to: the other side of the bed, where he might lie flat on the floor. He quickly got into position and pressed the lever that dropped the lantern's ribs and closed off all illumination.

"You hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Somethin' made a noise."

They pushed through the door. "It's the echo inside your fuckin' head," came the retort. Then: "Ewww, ain't they pretty all laid out like lovers? Kinda tugs at your heart-strings, don't it?"

"It *don't*. Help me with these and let's get out."

Matthew heard the *thump* as the sack was laid down on the floor perhaps five feet from his hiding-place. Something was dumped out, and made its own noise. He heard one of the men say, "Come on, hurry it up!" after which there was a hissing sound. A second hissing followed. Truly, this was a den of snakes. Acrid smoke stung Matthew's nostrils. *You saw them shorts on there*, the complainer had said.

*Shorts?* It dawned on him that the meaning must be *short fuses*.

The men were lighting fuses with their candle flames, and whatever they were preparing was about to blow the house to pieces.

He swallowed hard and stood up. As he came off the floor, he cocked the pistol and opened his lantern. Light streamed out, catching one of the jackdaws lighting the last of four fuses that went into the same number of black cylindrical objects about a foot in length.

"Stop that," Matthew said. The men fairly leapt from the floor. One gave his own explosion in the form of a fart. Matthew aimed his flintlock between them. The four fuses hissed and smoked, throwing blue sparks in their progress. "Stomp those out!" Matthew commanded.

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

“Who the *hell* are you?” the farther asked.

“Stomp those out!” Matthew repeated. The fuses were burning dangerously near their entrance holes into the cylinders, which appeared to be wrapped in oily black leather. “*Now!*”

“Sure, sure,” said one man, lifting his hand to show Matthew his palm. Then, as if they’d practiced this cue for just such a predicament, the second man threw his lantern at Matthew’s head. It hit Matthew’s shoulder as he twisted aside, and the flintlock pistol went off from a convulsive twitch of the trigger finger. Smoke bloomed, the bullet smacked into the opposite wall, and the concussion made the ribs of Oliver Quisenhunt’s device snap shut, cutting off Matthew’s light. It occurred to him, as the men rushed from the room and smoke whirled around him, that the apparatus needed more testing.

It then occurred to him, quite sharply, that the fuses were burning into their bombs, and though he was able to crush out two with his boot the other two snaked away and flared brightly as they entered the cylinders.

Matthew ran.

Through the door into the hallway, and just as he got out the Devil shouted in his ears and a fierce hot wave of Hell picked him up off his feet and flung him like a ragdoll through the doorway into the doctor’s treatment room.



# NINE



**S**OMETIME in the next few seconds, as Matthew lay crumpled on the brick floor and the whirlwinds of flame gnawed at his coat, he realized that if he was going to live he would have to get out of this house.

He thought the roof might have blown off already, or at least a goodly portion of it. Pieces of fiery wood were falling about him. His ears made a roaring sound, but hollow as if he were in an underwater cavern. Everything hurt: shoulders, knees, backbone, neck, jaw, teeth. He felt as if his muscles and sinews had been stretched long and then jammed tight. There was a red haze before his eyes; he thought they might be swollen with blood. He swallowed blood and felt it streaming from his nose, which might have been broken in his collision with the bricks. Already the fire was surrounding him. It was a hydra-headed beast, growing bright orange horns, talons and teeth and tearing through the house. A piece of flaming timber crashed down on the floor about three feet from his right thigh. Cinders stung his face. He was at the center of a world full of red-hot hornets. Then he was aware

that his fearnaught was on fire, and his own coat was going to eat him alive.

He gritted his teeth and with the effort of the damned began to roll to get the fire out. Whether he was successful or not, he didn't know, but for the moment he was alive. Was his cap aflame too? He snatched it off. It glowed with a dozen red cinders but it was not yet burning.

He began to crawl. To where?

To anywhere but here.

And now the real Matthew Corbett emerged. It took hold of the young man who had found himself in a gray kingdom of indecision and regret, whose mind had become a sluggish set of gears that did not mesh, whose spirit had been pummelled and thrashed by the memory of murder in the wilderness. The real Matthew Corbett peered out from desperate red eyes in a bloodied face. The real Matthew Corbett, who had survived so much pain and hardship and dangers that might have put any other man on his knees or in his grave, recognized that he was in the burning wreckage of Doctor Jason's treatment room. He saw the ceiling, riddled with tentacles of fire like Professor Fell's octopus, beginning to collapse. He saw the open trapdoor on the floor.

He saw a way out.

Mindless of all sensation but the need to survive, he began to pull himself toward the open square in the bricks.

Once there, he did not hesitate. He turned himself to descend the ladder into the pool of darkness below, and reaching up he got hold of the trapdoor's inner ring and slammed it shut over his head just as a new rain of cinders fell from above.

Then he lost both grip and balance, and he tumbled downward into what might have been a hundred-foot hole.

But more like ten feet. He recalled the breath whooshing from his lungs, though by this point any more pain was simply a proof of life. He was on his back in the dark. No, not quite dark; he could see the glow of flames through small cracks in the trapdoor. Would the fire eat through it? He didn't know. Would it steal his air? He didn't know. Was he burned and smoking? Didn't know that, either. He was in, as Hudson Greathouse might have said, one shit of a pickle.

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

He faded in and out. Fire sounds, burning away. The smell of smoke, scorched cloth and blood. He began to laugh at something, though he wasn't sure what it was. Maybe he was weeping; again, he didn't know. But at the center of his mind the real Matthew Corbett held rule, and that calm personage said *Hold on*.

Definitely he was laughing, he decided. Chuckling, really. The way those two bastards had jumped off the floor. And then he thought of Berry and his cold voice saying *I was confused* and the bitter tears watered his face.

No, he realized. Not bitter tears.

It was actually water, and it was streaming down through the cracks in the trapdoor.

The bucket brigade at work, he realized. Fighting to save the Mallorys' house. And perhaps they could save what was left of it, for this time not all the firebombs had ignited. Did he call out *Help me?* Or was it just *Me?* For he *was* himself, found once more in fire and blood, and he thought *My name is Matthew Corbett, and by God I am going to live*.

He thought the worst of the explosion had gone upward or been absorbed by the walls of Doctor Jason's bedroom. The thing was, he had not resisted the blast. He had not had time to resist, and though he was in pain he didn't think he had suffered any broken bones.

There was a lesson to be had there, he decided. He vowed to decipher its meaning later, if he survived to do so. At the moment he had more important and more strenuous work to do. And it was going to hurt, but it had to be done.

He turned himself over on the cellar's dirt, found his way to the bottom of the ladder, and began to pull himself up.

At last—somehow, with a will to live that rivalled his episode in the well at Fort Laurens—Matthew reached the top. He placed a hand against the trapdoor. It was not hot, but it was going to be an effort. He was stewing in sweat, he had very little strength and what remained was departing on a fast horse. He pushed. And pushed. And pushed some more. "Help me!" he shouted, but could he be heard? He had to keep pushing.

The trapdoor opened a crack. Matthew got the fingers of his left hand into it and kept the pressure—a dubious term, in this instance—up with his right hand. He put the back of his head

against the trapdoor and shoved upward with everything he had, and suddenly the trapdoor came open with a crisp *crackle* and *slam*.

*Climb up*, he told himself. *And stand up*.

He entered a smoking, still-burning ruin where a house had been. The flames were low, however, having been for the most part bested by the bucket brigade. Matthew climbed out and sat on his knees, his head lowered; he was trying to make sense of what he should do next. *Ah, yes!* he recalled. *Stand up!*

He got to his feet by the shakiest of efforts. Instantly he threw up what tasted like a sick man's portion of smoke. Then he began to stumble through the wreckage, his fernaught hanging in burned tatters from his shoulders and his face freighted with blood. He became aware of shadows in the smoke, moving hither and yon with their lanterns through this new world of burned and broken timbers, smoking piles of rubble and things that had melted and reformed into objects unrecognizable as being of the earth and possessions of man. Matthew staggered toward one of the shadows and said—or thought he said, because of the shrill ringing in his ears—“Do you have some water?” He had no idea why he said that, other than he was terribly thirsty.

The shadow came forward and became a shape that became a man that became Marco Ross, the blacksmith. Ash-blackened and filthy, he was...but then again Marco Ross was usually ash-blackened and filthy, so it was all the same.

The blacksmith, a big enough man for his job, stopped in his tracks and gave a gasp like a weakling woman who is in need of air lest she faint dead away.

“*Corbett?*” he whispered.

*It is I*, Matthew thought, before his knees collapsed and he went down like a brain-hammered bull.



“News,” said Hudson Greathouse, pulling the visitor's chair closer to Matthew's bedside. He went on without waiting for an invitation from the grape-colored lips in a face mottled with black bruises. “McCaggers has found the corpses. At least...some of what could be found. He's got two blankets over there with the...uh...remains laid out. It's not pretty.”

Matthew thought it must be terribly ugly. And horrible for Ashton McCaggers, whose gorge rose at the sight of a bloodied finger. Piecing together two charred bodies would be a scene plucked from McCaggers' worst nightmares. For the eccentric and soft-stomached coroner, it would be at least a four bucket day. And without Zed to help him, the more the worse!

"I'll say it again." Greathouse stared out the window at the late-afternoon sunlight. "Everyone has a time. This wasn't yours...but it was a damned close call." His deepset black eyes left the window and found Matthew's red-shot swollen eyes. "When are you going to tell me what you were doing in there?"

Two days of soup for every meal had left Matthew in a less-than-cheerful mood. Add to that the plaster-covered gash that had taken eight horse-gut stitches under his left eye, sundry other cuts and scrapes on forehead and chin, a nose that had nearly been broken but was so sore now even the flutter of a nostril was pure agony, and enough bruises on face, arms, legs, chest and back to make him appear a spotted beast from the heart of Zed's homeland, and he was a bedful of joy. But he was greatly thankful for a certain trapdoor and cellar, which had held at its dirt-floored bottom some items of broken furniture and a few shelves holding bottles of murky liquid probably used by the doctor in his treatments.

"Tell McCaggers he won't find the heads," said Matthew, in a voice that still sounded smoke-choked.

"I'll tell him," Greathouse said after a short pause.

"The Mallorys," Matthew went on, "wanted to appear to be dead. They got the corpses from somewhere. God only knows."

"I believe you," Greathouse said after a longer pause.

Matthew nodded, but gingerly because any movement yet pained his multitude of strained muscles. He knew exactly what his friend meant. He could still see Gardner Lillehorne standing over his bed, yesterday morning here at the Publick Hospital on King Street. The high constable in his cardinal-red suit and red tricorne, with the same crimson glare at the center of his small ebony eyes and his teeth on edge.

"You have secured your place in infamy now, Mr. Corbett," said the offended redbird. "Staggering out of that burning ruin? With your name painted on the alley wall across the street? And

here you're telling me there were two naked and headless corpses in the bed of Dr. Jason Mallory? My Christ, boy! I thought I was talking nonsense when I said you were addle-brained after that misadventure in Pennsylvania, but I'm thinking now you *must* be half-crazy." He let that linger for a few seconds before he darted in again with, "And the other half *insane*. Do you wish to tell me how you were to be in that house, or shall we hear that in Cornbury's office?"

Matthew had not answered. It seemed to be too much effort, and anyway even the muscles of his jaws were hurting.

"You are in a *situation*." Lillehorne had leaned over the bed like a threatening bonfire, ready to catch sheets and bedclothes burning. "You are going to have to explain yourself, sir. If not to me and to Lord Cornbury, then before a court of law."

"I'm being arrested?" Matthew had managed to ask.

"Consider yourself so. I'll think up some appropriate charges. Breaking and entering would be the first."

"The back door was open," Matthew reminded him.

"Unlawful *entrance*, then. Mark it. Criminal mischief. Unwillingness to aid an official investigation. Mark those as well. Do I make myself clear?"

"In a muddy way," Matthew said, his tone as dry as October's leaves. His face, too, was a study in mottled stone. He left it at that, and after another moment the high constable made a low noise in his throat, gave a pinched expression that conveyed volumes of both frustration and disgust, and strode out of the hospital's wardroom with the lion's-head ornament of his cane slapping against his red-gloved palm.

*And good riddance, you bastard*, Matthew had thought.

"McCaggers," said Hudson Greathouse, as he stretched his legs out before him, "believes the corpses to be those of a man and a woman. Just as you've said. Only he's of the belief that they're the Mallorys, caught in the blast and fire."

"What they wished him to believe," was Matthew's terse reply.

"McCaggers has found fragments of women's clothing and the heel of a shoe. His question is: if the Mallorys were leaving for good—sneaking away in the middle of the night, as you've put it—why wouldn't Rebecca have taken her gowns?"

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

“What they wished him to question,” said Matthew.

Greathouse tapped a finger against the musketball-sized cleft in his chin. “Yes,” he said. “All right, then. But...” And here Greathouse’s brow knit, and Matthew knew his friend was struggling to make sense of what could not possibly make sense. “But *why*, Matthew?” came the most urgent question. “Tell me. *Why?*”

“I can tell you why the corpses have no heads,” Matthew ventured. “Because if the heads were found, McCaggers might determine the bodies were not those of the doctor and the damsel. By some remnant of hair or the facial bones, I would think. Possibly one or both of the murder victims had rotten teeth. They wanted to be careful, lest McCaggers find something that would throw their plot off its course.”

Greathouse did not speak for a time. He seemed to be watching the crawl of sunlight across a green-painted wall. “Murder victims,” he repeated, tonelessly. “Their plot.”

“Correct. Two people were murdered and decapitated to serve as stand-ins.” Matthew thought better of that last term. “*Lie-ins*,” he amended, with a small, tight and painful smile. “I imagine the victims were plucked off the street in some nearby town. Probably a beggar and a prostitute, who would not be easily missed.”

“A beggar and a prostitute.” Greathouse sounded as if he were standing in a church reciting a particularly uncomfortable Bible passage.

“Look at me,” Matthew directed.

Greathouse did.

But in his eyes Matthew saw the blankness of the green-painted wall, and with that came the realization that even such a friend as Greathouse had his limits of belief. Or perhaps it was just that, to save the situation, Greathouse had simply ceased thinking.

“They put the corpses in the house,” Matthew said, a little unsteadily, “to make it appear that they are dead.”

“They *were*, you said.”

“What?”

“The corpses. They were already dead. I would think so, if they were headless.”

“The *Mallorys*,” said Matthew. “Or whoever they are.”

“A beggar and a prostitute, you said.”

“No! The Mallorys. They put the corpses in the bed knowing they would be blown to pieces and burned to crisps. Then they could make it look as if I had something to do with it, by painting my name on the alley wall.”

“And why would you have something to do with it?” The eyes narrowed, just a dangerous fraction. “You didn’t, did you? I mean... I *believe* you.”

“It’s a plot,” said Matthew, who felt himself spinning away from the world, “to draw me in.”

“Draw you into *what*?”

“The plan. The...summons. I can’t...” Matthew leaned his head against the pillow. He had to close his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them again, nothing had changed. Or had Greathouse quietly moved his chair back a few inches from the bedside?

“I’ll go fetch the doctor,” Greathouse offered, in as sympathetic a voice as Matthew had ever heard.

“*No*,” Matthew said, and the power of his declaration stopped Greathouse from leaving his chair.

Then the great one—the man of action, the lover of wild widows, the swordsman scarred by battles and life—looked at Matthew with something like pity in eyes gone sad.

He reached out to grasp his friend’s shoulder, and he said quietly, “I know you went through tribulations in that Slaughter incident. I know...they must have been terrible. And even about those, you won’t tell me. But I know, Matthew. Because I see how you’ve been...” Here he paused to agonizingly search for the proper word, neither too hard nor too soft. “*Affected*,” he went on. “By what happened. So who could blame you, for...suffering. For—”

“Imagining murders and plots?” Matthew interrupted, in a tone *decrescendo*.

“I don’t understand any of this,” Greathouse continued, as if the question had never been spoken, “but I do believe someone is trying to...further affect you. For whatever reason, I don’t know. I believe *you* know, but you’re not going to tell me, are you?”

Matthew said nothing; he, too, had begun to watch sunlight crawl across the wall, and with it the waning afternoon.

“I can help,” said Greathouse. “I *will* help. I swear it.”

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

It was close. So very close. Matthew felt it behind his clenched teeth, wanting to get out. Therefore he clenched his teeth just the harder, which further pained the bruises on his face.

After a while, Greathouse removed his hand from Matthew's shoulder.

He stood up from his chair. "I'd better be getting along. Having dinner tonight with Abby. I've never known a woman who enjoys meat so much." He took his coat and tricorn from their wallpegs. Slowly, he shrugged into the coat and positioned the tricorn just so upon his head, as if to give Matthew more time. He grasped his walking-stick and put its tip on the planks before him in preparation of his first troubled step. "I'll be back first thing in the morning. Agreeable?"

"Not necessary," Matthew said, "but appreciated." He offered Hudson as much of a genuine smile as he could muster. "Thank you. And I hope you also enjoy your banquet. But do tell McCaggers he won't find the heads."

Greathouse nodded. He strode a few paces away and then stopped once more. In the row of five narrow beds across from Matthew lay the elderly Edde van Evers, a onetime Dutch frigate captain now frail and dying of perhaps too much landsickness. To Matthew's left, in the last bed in the room, was Gideon Bloomensord, a farmer laid low when he had fallen down a rocky embankment and broken both legs. This morning the body of Martin Brinker had been removed from the bed directly to Matthew's right and bound in shroud wrappings for deposit in the cemetery, the patient having not responded well to Dr. Quail Polliver's leech treatment. Of the three remaining patients Matthew was certainly the most alert, as the first was heading silently for his last voyage and the other was raving in fevered pain that the opium had not yet diminished.

"I'll be back first thing," Greathouse repeated, as possibly a draught of medicine to himself at leaving Matthew between creeping death and inescapable agony. Then he pulled his coat collar up around his neck and went through the hallway toward the front door and—most likely—the warm and welcoming embrace of womanflesh.

Matthew rested his head against the pillow and closed his eyes. He was very tired. The two attendants, the two-hundred-pound Mrs. Sifford and the ninety-pound Mr. Dupee, would be coming

around soon to offer up some kind of soup, for better or for worse. The sunlight moved, and moved some more. The afternoon dimmed and darkened into blue evening, and in the glow of lanterns hanging from their pegs Edde van Evers breathed heavily as if inhaling the salt air of seven seas, Gideon Bloomensord gasped in his opium-induced slumber, and Matthew Corbett slept uneasily with the taste of lukewarm codfish soup still in his mouth.

He tossed and turned a bit, expecting to be roused by Hudson Greathouse first thing in the morning, or—before that—by Gardner Lillehorne with more questions.

Therefore when he was shaken awake by the pain of his bruises and sore muscles he was quite surprised to see night still hard black against the windows. One might further say he was *shocked* to see standing over his bed, washed in the golden lamplight, a giant from East India.

The diamonds in the front teeth sparkled. “Matthew?” said Sirki in his soft and easy lilt. “It’s time now, please.”

“*Time?*” Matthew sat up, which caused him further pain but there was no avoiding it. The hospital was silent. Either Van Evers had passed onto the leeward side of this world or he was sleeping like a newborn, and Bloomensord had also sunken into perfect peace. “Time for *what?*”

“Your decision,” said Sirki, his brown face pleasantly composed. “Which will be destroyed next? Tobias Winekoop’s stable, with all those beautiful and noble horses? Or the boarding house run by Madam Belovaire, with its boarders now fast asleep? Most of them, that is.” He gave a small, polite smile. “Your decision, please. And don’t concern yourself about me. I am content to wait.”

# TEN



**G**ET out of here,” Matthew answered. His heart had seemingly tied itself into a Gordian Knot. “I’ll call for help.”

“You might,” Sirki answered back, with a brief nod of his turbaned head. “But you will find that no help arrives. And yet...I *do* have help.”

As if emerging from the giant’s body, two men came forward from behind him to stand at the foot of Matthew’s bed. Matthew instantly recognized the pair of scoundrels who’d lighted the fuses in the house of the so-called Mallorys. One of them carried a rolled-up item with wooden rods protruding from it. A stretcher, Matthew realized.

“We have come to carry you in comfort to your appointed destination,” said Sirki. “Unless you had rather witness another example of our new gunpowder?”

“With me unable to walk, my name written on a wall will make no sense.”

“Ah!” Sirki aimed a long forefinger toward the ceiling. “But did it ever make sense, young sir? I believe by now that your compatriots

in this town—even your closest friends, perhaps—have begun to doubt your word and your sanity. It may make sense to no one, yet either a stable or a boarding house will burn to the ground this night...if you refuse this hospitable invitation.” Whether he’d intended the near-pun or not was unknown, since his face remained expressionless. But the dark eyes beneath the thick, arched black brows were intense and watchful, and they were aimed upon Matthew like musket barrels.

Matthew may have shivered. He wasn’t sure, but it was cold in here and the blanket was thin. “How did you get in?”

One of the men, the very same who’d thrown his lantern at Matthew’s head, gave a little chuckle. Proudful, Matthew thought. “Lockpicking is Croydon’s claim to art,” Sirki said. “A low claim, but there it is anyway. As for the two unfortunates who spend the night here watching over their charges, the fat woman and the thin man are both sleeping soundly.”

“You’ve killed them?”

“Not at all! Unless a gift of tea from India could be considered deathly. I had occasion to speak to Dr. Polliver this afternoon. I offered up this gift as a token of friendship. Also the tea has healing powers I thought he might care to try. Possibly he’s sleeping very soundly in his bed at home.”

Drugged tea, Matthew thought. Of course. Fell’s people relied on drugs to move their mountains.

“The professor,” said Sirki, “wants *you*. He needs you, really. Because you seem to...um...get results, shall we say. And you’ve impressed him, Matthew. So now I shall tell you that it is time for your choice. One of three. Yourself, the stable or the boarding house. And *yourself* shall be returned here after this business is completed, whereas the others...sadly beyond the point of return. We have the key to your house, taken from Dr. Polliver’s safebox. Croydon will go to your miniature abode and remove whatever clothing you might need. You will be taken to a waiting boat, to be rowed out to meet the larger vessel. All we require you to do at the moment is roll onto this stretcher.”

At that pronouncement, Croydon and the other jackal unrolled the brown cloth and held the stretcher between them. Sirki moved aside so Matthew could do as instructed.

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

Matthew hesitated. He swallowed hard. His bruises pulsed, and his pulse felt bruised. For all the fear that danced its Mad Robin within him, he couldn't suppress a grim smile. How many times had he felt alone at midnight, with the hard dark pressing in and no sign of morning? Many times before, and with luck he would survive this one as he had survived the others.

No, he decided. With more than luck.

With every skill of reasoning and power of concentration he had.

That, plus some good old fashioned lowdown strength of will.

He glared into Sirki's eyes. "Get out of the way," he told the giant. "I'll walk."

Sirki obeyed at once. "I thought you would, young sir. That is why I placed your boots and clothing on the floor before I woke you." The dark eyes darted toward Croydon's fart-partner. "Squibbs, find Matthew a cloak or a blanket worth its weight in wool. A heavy coat might do, which you'll find hanging in the room where the sleepers doze. Move, please. It disturbs me to think my voice goes unheard."

The way the East Indian killer said that, Squibbs might well have let loose another buttock-blast. However, Squibbs moved forthwith at the speed of terror.

Matthew eased himself to a sitting position on the side of the bed. The pain came up his sides like metal clamps snapping shut rib-by-rib. A red haze whirled before his eyes. Damned if he'd let himself pass out. He bit his lower lip until the blood nearly oozed.

"Croydon," said Sirki. "Help the young gentleman put his boots on, and then hand him his clothes."

Croydon wasted no time in following the command, and Matthew realized a Corbett had suddenly become royalty, of a strange kind.

The boots were struggled into, the smoke-pungent clothing put on, and then it was time to stand up. Matthew took a long, deep breath. He slid off the bed and took the weight on his legs and his knees ached and his thigh muscles tightened and shrieked for a few agonizing seconds but then he was up and, after wavering ever so slightly, had secured his balance in an insane world.

"Very good," was the killer's comment.

Squibbs returned with a brown coat and, in addition, a gray blanket. He helped Matthew get the coat on and then wrapped the

blanket around him with the care of a man who suddenly wanted to seem excellently careful. Sirki tucked the stretcher up under one long and dangerous arm. He spoke Croydon's name, and Croydon was off with a lantern in hand, obviously heading for Matthew's dairyhouse to fetch more clothes for the young sir's journey.

"Where are we going?" Matthew asked as he hobbled out onto the bracing cold of King Street, with Squibbs holding a lantern on one side and Sirki on the other.

"To a ship that will deliver you to an island," Sirki answered. "You will find the weather much more pleasant there. Step lightly, young sir. We don't wish you to sprain anything."

Between them, they steered Matthew's path toward the waterfront, and soon they were only two gleams of yellow lamplight in the dark and sleeping town.



Because she was still angry at Matthew Corbett, she had not gone to visit him today. Because she had not gone to visit him today, she missed seeing him and was in turn angry at herself for missing him. Because she was angry in so many areas at once, she could not sleep very soundly. And so because she could not sleep very soundly and had gotten out of bed to have a cup of water and eat a corn muffin, Berry Grigsby saw through the kitchen window the glimmer of light as someone carrying a lantern came out of Matthew's house.

Her first thought, unladylike as it might have been, was: *Damn! What's this about?* She blew out her own candle to avoid being seen. Her heartbeat had quickened and she felt the breath rasp in her lungs. She watched as the figure strode away, carrying what might have been a bundle of some kind.

Carrying it to where? she wondered. And to whom? To *Matthew*? At this time of night? It must have been Hudson Greathouse, she reasoned. Yes. Of course. Hudson Greathouse. *Go back to bed*, she told herself.

She could still see the swing of the man's lantern as he walked south along Queen Street. Heading toward the King Street Publick Hospital, of course.

But...at *this* time of night?

Was someone *robbing* Matthew's house?

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

She only had a few seconds to decide what to do. Her decision was rapidly made, and though she thought it might be the wrong one in the light of day it was perfectly right by the dark of night.

She rushed into her bedroom, where she knocked her knee on a table in her haste to get dressed. In her hurry, she pulled on a shift, then a petticoat and an old blue dress trimmed with yellow that she often wore when she was painting. Her stockings and shoes went on, also in a hurry, and then a dark blue woolen cloak and cap of the same color and material. Mittens for her hands, and she was ready. Her intent was to catch up with the thief, if at all possible, and then start calling for a constable. She lit a lantern from the steadily-burning candle in her bedroom and on the way to the front door had a thought to awaken Marmaduke, but her grandfather's snoring buzzed behind his own bedroom door and she decided enough time had been lost. This was her...*adventure*, perhaps? Yes, she thought. And never let it be said that the high-and-mighty Matthew Corbett would not appreciate her coming to the rescue of his stolen items.

So there.

Berry left the house, and stepped into bitter cold.

She followed her lantern's glow along Queen Street, heading south in the same direction as the thief. It crossed her mind that she was foolish out here in the wintry dark, chasing what was most likely Hudson Greathouse fetching some item of clothing for Matthew, but still...if one could not be foolish sometimes, what was the point of life? And...if it wasn't Greathouse, then...who? Well, she would see what she would see, and furthermore she was determined to show Matthew she could be a help to him and not a hindrance.

For not so very far ahead, closer toward the masted ships that sat moored to the harbor, three lantern lights were showing. She slowed her pace as she approached. If she were an animal, she would be sniffing the wind for the smells of thievery, but she could only trust what she could see. At each street corner she passed she looked in vain for the green lantern of a constable; no, they were all warming themselves before fires somewhere, so in essence Berry Grigsby was her own constable this frigid midnight.

She got close enough to make out four figures at the wharf-side, and one of them a giant wearing a multi-colored coat or robe

of some fashion and a turban. The figures all had their backs to her. They were walking out along a pier. And...in the middle there, the third figure...yes, it *was*. She would know his walk anywhere. He was walking stiffly, still in pain, and he was bundled up in what appeared to be a gray blanket. He was following the giant, and behind him was a man holding a bundle of clothes under one arm and in the opposite hand a lantern. They were going toward a small skiff tied to the pier.

She didn't like the looks of this.

A wind had picked up, bringing a touch of ice. Or she felt an icy touch at her heart, for she had the sure feeling Matthew was being taken where he did not wish to go. She looked desperately for any sign of a constable's lantern, but there was no green glow to be seen. No, this night she was on her own.

As was Matthew. Or so he might think. He was being guided into the skiff, which was big enough for five or six men unless one of them was a turbaned giant. Matthew had his head down. In concentration or defeat? she wondered. Whichever...she wasn't going to let him be taken away like this, in the dead of night by villains unknown. For they had to be villains, to be stealing away from her the man she loved.

She started forward. One step at first—a cautious step—and then the others came faster, for she saw her time was running out, and Matthew was being put into the boat and in another moment one of the men was going to cast off the lines and then the oars would be put into their locks and...

"Matthew!" she called to him, before this terrible journey could begin. And louder still: "*Matthew!*"

The giant, still on the dock's planks, whirled toward her. Matthew stood up, his face ashen beneath the bruises. The other two men lifted their lanterns to catch her with their dirty light.

"Go back!" Matthew shouted. He nearly choked on the two words. "*Go back!*"

"Ah!" Sirki's voice was soft and smooth. He smiled; he was already moving to cross the forty paces between them. "Miss Beryl Grigsby, isn't it?"

"Berry!" Matthew couldn't communicate his fear for her loudly enough: "*Run!*"

“No need for that,” said Sirki, as he came forward upon her with the sleek swiftness of a cobra. She backed away a few steps, but she realized as soon as she turned to run the giant would be at her back. “No need,” he repeated. “We’re friends here, you see.”

“Matthew! What’s going on?”

Sirki kept himself between them, a huge obstacle. “Matthew,” he answered as he steadily advanced, “is about to take a sea voyage. It is his own decision.” He came up within arm’s length. His smile broadened, but in it there was no joy. “I think you might *also* enjoy a sea voyage, miss. Is that correct?”

“I’ll scream,” she said, for it seemed the thing to say with the blood beating in her cheeks.

“Croydon?” Sirki spoke over his shoulder, but kept his eyes on Berry. “If this young woman screams, I want you to strike Matthew as hard as you can across the face. Do you understand?”

“Gladly!” Croydon said, and he meant it.

“He’s bluffing!” Matthew called out. He heard the weariness in his voice; his strength was departing him once more, and he knew that in his present state of disrepair there was nothing he could do to help her.

“I understand,” said Sirki, close now upon Berry. She could smell the sandalwood incense from his clothing. The lantern light gleamed off the pearl-and-turquoise ornament that secured his turban. His voice was a soft murmur, as if heard through the veil of sleep. “You wish no harm to come to your friend. And he *is* your friend, yes?”

“Berry! Get away!” Matthew urged her, with the last of his strength. Croydon clamped a hand on his shoulder that said *Shut your mouth*.

“Your friend,” Sirki repeated. “You know, I have the gift of seeing to the heart of matters. The *heart*,” he said, for emphasis. “You wouldn’t be here unless you were concerned for him, would you? And such concern should not be taken lightly. I would like for you to join us on our journey, miss. Walk before me to the boat, would you please?”

“I’m going for a constable,” she told him.

But she did not move, and neither did the giant.

He stared into her eyes, his mouth wearing a little amused half-smile.

“Walk before me to the boat,” he repeated. “I would appreciate your compliance.”

Berry caught a movement to her right. She looked to the west along Wall Street, and saw at the intersection of Wall and Smith streets the green-glassed lantern of a passing constable.

“I promise,” said Sirki in a cool, even tone, “to return you and Matthew safely here after his job is done. But if you cry for help or run, I will kill you before the cry leaves your lips and before you take two steps. I will deposit your corpse in the sea, where it shall never be found.” He waited, silently, for her to make her decision.

Matthew was listening also. He couldn’t help her, and he damned himself for it.

Berry watched the lantern’s green glimmer pass away. The cry was so near to bursting free...yet she knew this man standing before her would do exactly as he said, and there was no point in meeting her death this night. She turned her gaze back upon him. “What job does Matthew have to do?” Her voice was shaky, yet she was holding herself together with all the willpower she could muster.

“What he *does*,” Sirki answered. “Solving a problem. Will you walk before me to the boat, please? This cold can be doing you no good.”

She had an instant of thinking she might smash him in the face with the lantern. But he reached out and grasped her wrist, as if reading her thought as soon as it was born, and with a strangely gentle touch he led her out along the pier to the skiff where Matthew was pushed back down to a sitting position by Croydon’s rough hand.

“Squibbs,” said Sirki when Berry had been gotten aboard and situated, “cast off our lines, please.” It was done, and Squibbs stepped back onto the boat. Lanterns were placed on hooks at bow and stern. Two sets of oars went into their locks. Croydon and Squibbs went to work, rowing out into the dark, while Sirki took a seat between Matthew and Berry.

“Where are you taking us?” she asked the giant, and now her willpower was showing cracks and her voice did indeed tremble.

“First, the place you call Oyster Island. We’ll give a signal from there to the ship. Then...outward bound.” When he smiled, the diamonds in his front teeth glittered.

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

“Why?” Matthew whispered huskily. The question was directed at Berry, who did not answer. Therefore he asked again, from the bruised lips in his battered face. “*Why?*”

She couldn’t answer, for she knew he didn’t really wish to hear why a woman—any woman—would leave her safe abode in the cold midnight and undertake a journey at the side of a man she desired more than anything in the world. If she might be able to keep him safe...or keep him *alive*...then that was her own job, worth doing. Hang New York, she thought. Hang the world of safe abodes and warm beds. Hang the past, and what used to be. The future lay ahead for both of them, and though it was for now a forbidding place of dark water and uncertain destiny, Berry Grigsby felt more vital and more *needed* in this moment than ever before in her life.

The oars shifted water. The skiff moved steadily toward the black shape of Oyster Island, and Matthew Corbett the problem-solver could not for the life of him solve the problem of how to get Berry out of this.



# ELEVEN



**T**HE skiff's bottom scraped rocks. "Out," said Sirki, and at this command Croydon and Squibbs—two obedient seadogs—fairly leapt from the boat into the icy knee-deep water and dragged the skiff onto shore.

"Gentleman and lady?" Sirki made an expansive gesture with one arm and gave a bow, whether in mockery or with serious intent Matthew couldn't tell. "We'll be here only a short while," the giant explained as he lifted his lantern to shine upon their faces. "I regret the cold and the circumstances. Step out, please, and do mind your footing on the stones."

So land was reached with a stumble from Berry and a muttered curse from Matthew that would have gained approval at the roughest tavern in New York. Matthew caught her elbow and guided her onward over rocks, loose gravel and the ubiquitous pieces of oyster shells that crunched underfoot.

Standing amid the dead weeds and wild grass of shore, Sirki busied himself opening a leather pouch, from which he removed squares of red-tinted glass. He deftly removed the clear glass insets

of his lantern and, shielding the candle's guttering wick with his formidable body, he then slid the red glass squares into place. "Watch them," he told the two mongrels, and then he strode off in the direction of the watchtower, which perhaps was only a hundred yards or so distant through the woods.

A signal was about to be given and the ship alerted that this scheme was underway, Matthew thought. He felt Berry shiver beside him, and he put his arm and part of the gray blanket around her.

Lights from the two lanterns held by Croydon and Squibbs wandered over Berry's body. A bad sign, Matthew thought. "Where are we going?" he asked them, if just to divert their minds from their present—and highly disturbing—destination.

"Somewhere warmer than *this*," said Croydon. "Thank Christ."

"A three weeks voyage? To a warmer clime?" Matthew considered the geography; he put a map of the Atlantic in his mind and sought a harbor. "Not the Florida territory, I'm betting. Not into Spanish country. So..." *Outward bound*, Sirki had said. "The Bermuda islands," Matthew announced. "Is that right?"

"You are a pretty thing," said Squibbs, putting his light on Berry's face. "Take off that cap and let your hair loose."

"No," Matthew answered. "She *won't*."

"Here, now!" Croydon stepped forward and fairly sizzled Matthew's eyebrows by putting the lamp's hot glass right up in his face. "No one's talkin' to you, are they? Squibbs is just askin' her to be *friendly*, is all. A cold night and such...what's the harm of being a little friendly?" He turned the light upon Berry, who couldn't help but shrink back a step, for she realized these two were not so well-controlled without the East Indian giant giving them orders.

"Let your hair loose," Squibbs repeated. His mouth sounded thick and wet.

"Sirki will be back any minute," said Matthew. His body was a tense mass of bruised pain; in his present state he could neither deliver a blow nor take one.

"Any minute ain't *now*," was Squibbs' reply. He reached out, grasped Berry's cap and pulled it off, and her coppery-red tresses flowed free down her shoulders. "Pretty hair," Squibbs said after a moment of deliberation. "Bet it *smells* nice."

"Long time," said Croydon, "since I smelled me a woman's hair."

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

Matthew took a position between the two men and Berry. He thrust his chin forward, daring a strike. "Sirki won't like this. We're supposed to be *guests*." He spoke the word with dripping sarcasm.

"Ain't doin' nothin' wrong," Squibbs answered, his eyes narrowed and his gaze focused beyond Matthew on the true object of his attention. "Just wantin' to *smell*. Step aside."

Matthew balled up his fists, for all the good that would do. His arms were leaden lengths of ache. "I'll call him," he promised. "He won't—"

"Hear you," said Croydon. "Be a good little shit and step aside."

"I'm not moving."

"Oh yes, you are," said Squibbs, and with a quick powerful motion he grasped the front of Matthew's coat and flung him aside. Matthew stumbled over his own legs and went down amid the weeds and brush, and once out of the way and out of the light he was a forgotten man.

Squibbs and Croydon pushed forward, and though Berry retreated another step she realized there was nowhere else to go, and perhaps she ought to stand perfectly still and get this over with for surely the giant would be back at any minute. But, as the one man had said, one minute wasn't now.

They got on either side of her. Matthew said, "Stop it!" and tried to struggle out of what felt like a cluster of thorns. His legs would not obey. The two men got their faces up against Berry's hair, and as they drew in draughts of woman-perfume she smelled their unwashed odor of dried sweat, salt and old fish.

"Nice," Croydon breathed, and his free hand came up to stroke Berry's cheek. "Real fuckin' nice."

Matthew tried to get up. His legs betrayed him yet again. "Stop it!" he repeated, but he might have been speaking to the hard stones on the ground beneath him. Squibbs was starting to draw his unshaven face slowly down along Berry's throat. She made a noise of disgust with a frantic edge in it, and she pushed against Squibbs' shoulder but he was going nowhere, and now Croydon's gray-coated tongue flicked out and darted here and there amid the freckles on Berry's left cheek.

Matthew could bear no more of this. He desperately searched about in the dark for a small rock, a stick, whatever he could get his

hands on to throw at the two ruffians. He struggled to stand, and in further desperation he opened his mouth to shout for help from the East Indian giant.

Before he could deliver that shout, Matthew was yanked backward through the brush by a hand that closed on his coat's collar.

At the same time, another hand that felt as rough as treebark clamped over his mouth, sealing shut all proposed shouts. He was dragged back and further back, the weeds and sawgrass and thorns tearing at his clothes, and then he was tossed unceremoniously aside, more like a beatup sack that needed to be gotten out of the way. A finger pressed hard to his mouth. The message was: *Silence*.

And Matthew knew, even in his state of brain-blasted befuddlement.

Here was the phantom of Oyster Island.

"What in bleedin' hell was that noise?" Squibbs directed his light into the underbrush. "Hey now! Where'd that boy go to?"

"Shit!" Croydon had almost hollered it. His attention had left Berry's freckles and was fixed on the empty place where Matthew Corbett had been a few seconds before. "He's fuckin' gone!"

"I know he's fuckin' gone!" Squibbs sounded near crying. "You don't have to tell me he's fuckin' gone!"

"Run off! God blast it! That ape'll have your head for this!"

"My head? You was supposed to be watchin' him!"

"I *was* watchin' him, 'til you started this shit with the girl!" Croydon backed away from Berry, sensing a terrible streak of bad luck coming his way. "Get in there and find that damned boy! He couldn't have gone far!"

Squibbs surveyed the dark and forbidding expanse of forest. "In *there*?"

"Go on, man! You owe me for that last mess in London!"

Berry saw Squibbs give a little shrug of resignation, as if that last mess in London had forever enslaved him to his partner. Then the hideous man whose breath smelled like spoiled onions and horse dung—and she would *always* unfortunately remember that odor—followed his lantern's light into the woods.

A few seconds of silence followed. "You got him, Squibbs?" Croydon called.

There was a *smack*.

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

A quick but brutal sound. Berry thought it sounded like a fist plowing into a bucket of mud. Maybe there was the *crunch* of a bone breaking in there, as well. She winced and tears burned her eyes, for she knew that Matthew could hardly survive a blow like that.

A body came flying out of the woods like dirty laundry being thrown from a hamper.

It landed nearly at Croydon's slime-crusting boots. "Jesus!" Croydon yelled, for his light fell upon Squibbs' face and the knot that was already turning purple at the center of the forehead. Squibbs' eyes had rolled back and showed the whites; he was not dead, for his chest heaved in ragged inhalations of troubled air, but his life-candle had nearly been knocked cold.

And then the phantom of Oyster Island, followed closely by Matthew Corbett, stepped out of the darkness into the quivering orbit of Croydon's lamp.

The massive freed slave Zed wore a ragged black coat over the same baggy brown breeches he'd worn when he'd leaped off a pier into the water back in November, and had last been seen swimming in the direction of Africa. He wore no shoes. A slice of bare chest showed between the straining buttons of his too-small coat. In the light from Croydon's lantern, Zed was even more fearsome a figure than three months before. Though he had lost some muscle in his hulking shoulders, he had gained a wild black beard. His skull was still perfectly bald, having been scraped clean with perhaps a sharpened shell, and across his broad ebony face—imprinted upon cheeks, forehead and chin—were tribal scars that lay upraised on the flesh, and in these were the stylized Z, E, and D by which Ashton McCaggers had named him.

Now, however, Zed's master was no longer Ashton McCaggers. A writ of manumission from Lord Cornbury had secured Zed's freedom. This stony and wooded patch of earth might well have been the ex-slave's kingdom, if he could not yet reach the golden shore of Africa. In any case, the scowling expression on Zed's face spoke to Croydon, and it said in no uncertain terms: *Get off my land or pay in blood.*

Croydon understood that message, for he turned tail and fled for the skiff. Unfortunately for Croydon, the king of Oyster Island was not in a mood to treat a trespasser with a welcome hand. Even as Croydon reached the skiff and clambered into it, Zed was upon

him. The flat of a hand against the back of Croydon's head sent a spray of saliva from the man's mouth and perhaps caused the teeth to snap shut on the tongue because there was a plume also of scarlet liquid. Then Zed followed that with a fist to the middle of the forehead, same as had been delivered to Squibbs. As Croydon slithered down like a gutted fish, Zed picked him up bodily from the boat and swung him onto the shoreline's rocks, where the body made a hideous series of crunching sounds and began to twitch as if Croydon were dancing to Gilliam Vincent's abusive direction.

"Ah!" came a voice with a quiet lilt. "What is *this*?"

Matthew and Berry saw that Sirki had returned from his task. Bloody light from his red-glassed lantern had fallen upon Zed, whose fathomless black eyes took in this new intruder and seemed to glow with centers of fire.

"A *Ga*," said Sirki, with a note of true admiration. Obviously he knew the origin of the tattoos and the reputation of the *Ga* as supreme warriors. "I am pleased," he went on, "to make your acquaintance. I see you have taken up for my guests. And now," he said with a red-sparkly smile, "I suppose I shall have to kill you." He hooked the lantern's wire handle over a low-hanging tree branch, which would have been out of the reach of normal-sized men. Then he reached into his cloak and brought out a curved dagger whose grip gleamed with various precious stones. Its outer slashing edge was formed of vicious sawteeth. Matthew wondered if Sirki would have used it on Mrs. Sifford and Mr. Dupee if the tea had failed to put them under. Still smiling with murderous intention and delight, Sirki advanced upon Zed, who plucked up an oar, thrust out his chest and stood his ground.

There was nothing either Matthew or Berry could do. Sirki kept striding forward, now through the ankle-deep water, as if on a simple mission to cut open an extra-large grouper.

By the red light, the two forces neared conflict. Zed waited with the oar ready to strike, and Sirki's blade made circles in the air.

Suddenly they were upon each other, with the same swiftness in the same second; whoever had made the first move was impossible to tell. Sirki dodged a swing of the oar and came up underneath it, his knife's point going for Zed's belly. But Zed retreated through the shallow water and turned aside, and the knife did no more damage than popping a button from his coat. When the energy of the thrust had



been expended, Zed brought the oar's handle up to slam against Sirki's shoulder. The East Indian giant gave a hiss of pain, but no more than that, and as he staggered back to get out of range he was already swinging the blade at Zed's face to imprint another initial upon the flesh.

Zed was faster still. The sawteeth missed his nose by an African whisker. The oar was in action again, coming at Sirki's head. The giant threw up an arm and the oar's shaft cracked and shattered across it, bringing from Sirki a small grunt as one might make stubbing a toe on a garden stone. The knife's angle changed direction in midair and what had begun as a strike to the shoulder now became a quest for throat's flesh. Zed's free hand caught the wrist. A fist slammed into Zed's jaw and made his knees wobbly but he stayed on his feet and thrust into Sirki's midsection with the oar's jagged end.

A sudden twist of the body and the oar tore through cloth underneath Sirki's right arm. Sirki's fist shot out again, catching Zed square in the mouth and rocking his head back. Still the massive black warrior did not fall, and now he squeezed Sirki's wrist with a desire to burst bones and Sirki fought back by hammering at Zed's skull with his fist. Zed's concentration was complete; the blows to his head may have been painful but he shook them off like beats to a tribal drum, and letting go of the oar's splintered shaft he grasped Sirki's knifehand and began to squeeze those bones with the tenacity and power of a python.

Sirki resisted as long as he could, and then with a muffled gasp his fingers opened and the fearsome knife fell into the water. He was no longer smiling. He jabbed the fingers of his other hand into Zed's eyes. Zed gave out a tongueless roar of pain and swung Sirki around in preparation to throw him sprawling into the rocky drink, but Sirki held tight to him and both the giants staggered and fell together into the water. They struck and splashed and kicked and grappled, rolling over stones layered with oyster shells. Zed got hold of Sirki's turban and it came undone, revealing a brown scalp bald except for a thick strip of black hair down the middle. Then Sirki chopped the edge of a hand into Zed's throat and Zed gurgled and fell back, and as Matthew and Berry watched in horror the East Indian killer got on top of the Ga warrior and, grasping the throat with both hands, forced the bearded face underwater. Zed thrashed to escape. Sirki's arms quivered with the effort of holding him under.

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

Matthew saw the other oars in the skiff. He roused himself to action and started out over the rocks to get an oar and beat Sirki upon the head with it, but suddenly there was an upheaval of water and Zed came up with his teeth gritted and his eyes full of Hell. He took hold of Sirki's throat with both hands and with a single powerful thrust he was suddenly on top of Sirki, whose face was sinking beneath the foam.

Now it was Sirki's time to wildly thrash. The muscles of Zed's shoulders and back bunched and twisted under the sopping-wet coat. Sirki's hands came up, the fingers clawing at Zed's tattoos. Zed's body shook with the effort; Sirki was fighting for his life, and his strength was yet undiminished by the process of drowning.

In all this violence, the rowboat that slid onto the shore with a lantern at its prow hardly caused a ripple. Matthew saw it contained five men. And one woman. The woman being Rebecca Mallory, real name Aria Something. One of the men being Doctor Jason Mallory, real name unknown. But both certainly alive and well and unburnt to crisps as had been their unfortunate lie-ins.

"Stop that!" Doctor Jason shouted. Two of the men, having realized their stately champion was being defeated by this black misfit in drenched rags, were already clambering from the boat. They grabbed hold of Zed from either side and tried to pin his arms. That lasted only a few seconds before a Herculean shrug sent them flying, one to land in the water and one in the weeds.

"Mister Grimmer!" Doctor Jason was directing his shout to another man in the boat. "Run him through!"

A thin man in a brown tricorne and a dirty brown suit with ruffles of grimy lace at the sleeves and throat stood up, drew a rapier from its sheath and stepped into the water. He approached Zed with no hesitation, and raised the sword to drive it into the black warrior's back.

"No!" Berry cried out. "*Please! No!*" She ran into the water to get between Grimmer and Zed, and the sallow swordsman looked for further instructions from the false Doctor Jason. Berry didn't wait. She knew the next word would be her friend's death. "Zed!" she said, with raw force in her voice. "Zed, listen to me! Let him go! Do you hear?"

His head turned. The bloodshot eyes found her, and read her fear for him. Still holding the flailing giant down, he turned his

head to the other side and saw the swordsman standing there, ready to put the rapier to use.

Berry put her hand on Zed's shoulder. "No," she said, shaking her head. "*No.*"

Zed hesitated only a few seconds longer. He brought his right hand up and with it made a flattening motion. *All right*, he had answered. He released Sirki, stood up and stepped back, and Sirki burst from the briny coughing and gasping and then turning over and throwing up his last New York dinner into the sea to be consumed by the small fishes of the night.

"Shall I kill him anyway, sir?" asked Grimmer, in a low sad voice that seemed to suit his name.

"I'll kill him!" Sirki had found his curved dagger. He and his clothing were a mess. He was trying to wind his sodden turban back onto his head. The furious expression on his face made him appear to be not so much a giant as a big infant angry at being deprived of a sweet. "I'll kill him this *minute!*" he nearly shrieked, and he lifted the sawtoothed blade and sloshed toward Zed, who stood immobile at the rapier's point.

"You will not *touch* him!" This announcement had not come from Doctor Jason, but from the raven-haired, blue-eyed and fiercely beautiful Aria. She stood up in the boat; over a black gown she was wearing a dark purple cloak and on her head was a woolen cap the same color. "Sirki, put your knife down!" Her voice carried the promise of dire consequences if he did not obey; he did obey, almost immediately. Matthew watched this with great interest, getting the order of masters and followers in its proper perspective. "I see you have the *girl*," Aria went on, with the slightest edge of irritation. "That may be for the best, despite all appearances. You see, the black crow means something to the girl, and the girl means something to Matthew. So no one is going to be stabbed or otherwise harmed this night, Sirki. We can use what we can use. Do you understand?"

"He's nearly killed Croydon and Squibbs! And these other two! *And* he's a Ga! A danger to *everyone!*"

"Danger," said Aria, with a faint smile in the lamplight, "can be easily controlled, if one knows the right throat to pressure. Grimmer, put the tip of your sword against Miss Grigsby's neck, please."

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

Grimmer did so. Zed gave a warning rumble deep in his chest.

Matthew own throat had tightened. “There’s no need for that. I said I’m coming along.”

“Miss Grigsby,” said Aria, “inform your black prince—however you can—that your life depends on his good behavior. That we wish him to be meek and mild and for that he shall have a good dinner and a warm blanket in a ship’s brig tonight.”

“A ship’s brig?”

“Just inform him, however you are able. And you might tell him you will be in the next cell, so he won’t feel so lonely.”

Now came Berry’s challenge to communicate to Zed without benefit of the drawings they used to do together, which had served as a bridge between them. Zed was watching her intently, knowing that some message had been delivered to her from the black-haired woman and now was poised in his direction. Berry understood that he did know some of the English language, but how much she couldn’t tell since silence had been thrust upon him with the cutting out of his tongue, and silence also was his armor.

But it was true that Berry and Zed had spent much time together, at the behest of Ashton McCaggers, for whether Zed goeth so went his master at that time and McCaggers did enjoy Berry’s company, broken shoe heel or not. And in that time Berry had begun to “hear” Zed, in a fashion. It was a hearing of the senses and the mind. She could “hear” his voice in a gesture of the hand, a shrug of the shoulder, a fleeting expression. If it had been a spoken voice, it would have sounded a little low and guttural, a little snarly as suited Zed’s view of the world that held him captive.

Now Berry stared into Zed’s eyes and held her hand out before him, palm outward. She spoke two words: “Do nothing.”

He looked at her hand, then at her face. Then at her hand again. He turned his head to take in the scene where unconscious men were coming back to their senses. He took in the woman on the boat and then the giant he’d just nearly drowned. He took in the sight of Matthew Corbett wrapped in a blanket, the young man’s face bruised by some incident beyond his understanding. He looked again at Berry Grigsby, his friend, and his lifting of the eyebrows and the slight twist of his mouth said, *I will do nothing... for the moment.*

“Good,” she answered, with the rapier’s tip nearly nicking her throat. She aimed her angry eyes at Grimmer. “You can put that down now.”

Grimmer waited for Aria to nod, and the rapier was lowered.

But not yet lowered was the heat of rage that steamed from Sirki, who pressed forward with his knife in hand. “I’ll kill you yet,” he promised Zed. The ex-slave understood the meaning quite well, and he gave a square-toothed grin that almost drove Sirki into a maddened fit.

“We have a tide to catch,” Aria announced. “Anyone who cannot walk will be staying here. Gentlemen, board your boats. Matthew, would you please come get into this one? I’ve saved you a place.” She sat down and patted the plank seat at her side.

The woman’s directions continued. Berry and Zed were put into the other boat, with Grimmer holding the sword ready and Sirki anxious with his knife. Everyone, it seemed, who had been knocked woozy could at least walk, and they returned to the boats. Squibbs seemed only to be able to walk in circles, however, and Croydon winced and grasped at his back with every step.

Matthew took his place beside Aria Whomever, and Doctor Jason sat facing him. The two boats were pushed off and the oarsmen went to work.

“You have made the right decision,” said Doctor Jason, when they were out on the choppy water away from Oyster Island.

Matthew watched the lamps of the second boat following. “I presume no harm will come to either Berry or Zed?” He stared into Aria’s intense sapphire-blue eyes, for she was the captain of this craft. “In fact, I insist on it.”

The woman gave a small laugh that might have been edged with cruelty. “Oh, you’re too cute,” she said.

“I imagine I’m going also into a cell in the ship’s brig?”

“Not at all. They will be, yes, because they are uninvited guests. But you, dear Matthew, will have a cabin of honor aboard the *Nightflyer*.” She motioned out into the dark. “We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

He had to ask the next question, if just to salve his curiosity. “What’s your real name? And *his* real name?”

“I am Aria Chillany,” she answered. “He is Jonathan Gentry.”

## THE PROVIDENCE RIDER

“At your service,” said Gentry, with a nod and a devilish smile.

Matthew grunted. Even the grunting hurt. He recalled something Hudson had told him, back in the summer, concerning Professor Fell’s criminal network: *We know the names of the most vile elements. Gentleman Jackie Blue. The Thacker Brothers. Augustus Pons. Madam Chillany. They’re in the business of counterfeiting, forgery, theft of both state and private papers, blackmail, kidnapping, arson, murder for hire, and whatever else offers them a profit.*

He felt Madam Chillany’s fingers at the back of his neck.

“You’re thinking of something important?” she inquired.

*How to survive, madam, he thought. And how to keep Berry and Zed alive, too.*

“We’re going to become very good friends, Matthew,” she said. “Poor boy.” She pursed her lips in a pout and now her fingers travelled over the tender terrain of his cheek. “All those bruises and scrapes. But you enjoy close scrapes, don’t you?”

“Not the scraping,” Matthew said. “The escaping.”

A ship’s bell rang, out in the distance. Suddenly a wet wall of black timbers was standing before them. Lanterns moved above. Men shouted back and forth. A rope ladder was lowered, and Aria Chillany said to Matthew, “You up first, darling. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Watch her, Matthew,” Gentry cautioned. His smile had gone a bit crooked. “When she gets behind you, you might find something thrust into your—”

“But don’t listen to him,” she interrupted. “He’s all talk, and precious little action.”

Matthew was beginning to think these two had so tired of their roles of loving husband and doting wife that they could’ve broken each others’ necks. Or, at least, stabbed each other below the waist. In any case, no wonder the false lovebirds had separate beds. The only fire in that house had been made by the bombs going off.

Now, though, as Matthew forced himself up the ladder—and no one else was going to help him up, for certainty—he felt Aria Chillany’s hand slide across his rump, and he thought that some wells in this vicinity were in desperate need of being pumped.

The sun was beginning to turn the eastern sky pale gray as Berry and Zed came aboard. They were quickly taken away belowdecks,

without a chance for Matthew to speak or be spoken to. Sirki slinked along behind them, his turban still in disarray and his clothing dirtied by shore rocks and oyster shit. The two rowboats were hoisted up by men who looked as hard as New York cobblestones. Though Matthew was not overly familiar with the many types of ships and seacraft, he thought the *Nightflyer* might be considered a brigantine, having two masts with square sails on the foremast and fore-and-aft sails on the mainmast. It looked to be a low-slung, fast vessel, and its crew appeared highly efficient at their tasks. Orders were given, the *Nightflyer* turned to catch the wind, the sails filled and the spray began to hiss along the hull. A hand touched his arm as he stood at the starboard railing in the strengthening light. Madam Chillany regarded him with narrowed eyes. "I'm to show you to your cabin now. You'll meet Captain Falco later. You'll be served breakfast presently, and a large glass of wine to help you sleep."

"Drugged wine?" Matthew asked.

"Would you prefer?"

He almost said *yes*. Maybe he *would* say yes, if he thought about it long enough. He was almost too tired to sleep of his own will, and who could sleep when they were summoned across the Atlantic to be Professor Fell's personal providence rider?

Matthew saw the town of New York fading away behind them. It did appear gray, at this distance and in this light.

Farewell to the gray kingdom, he thought. For whatever he used to be and whoever he once was, he could no longer be. He had thought himself having to grow solid stones to meet the threat and violence of Tyranthus Slaughter. But now he realized that grisly adventure might have been a garden walk compared to this journey.

So farewell to the gray kingdom, for his mind must be clear and his vision sharp. He must be more Matthew Corbett than ever before. And, he thought grimly, God help Matthew Corbett.

The *Nightflyer* turned to secure its course. A dolphin leaped before the bow. Rays of sunlight streamed through the clouds to brighten the sea, and Matthew hobbled behind Madam Chillany in search of a good breakfast and a glass of sleep.