

A sepia-toned historical photograph of a dirt road. On the left, a large, leafy tree stands prominently. A wooden fence runs across the middle ground, with a light-colored hat resting on one of its posts. In the background, a small wooden building is visible under a cloudy sky. The overall scene is rural and historical.

IN THE SOUTH OF  
1860, HAMILTON AND  
SARAH THOUGHT THAT  
ONLY PLEASANT TIMES  
LAY AHEAD. . .

# MOCCASIN TRACE

HAWK  
MACKINNEY

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A Novel by

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# DEDICATION

to my blood-kin  
who taught me the treasures  
of growing up Southron

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Thank you, Lygia

**OTHER BOOKS BY  
HAWK MACKINNEY**

White Sodom

Poison at the Pinnacle

**MOCASIN  
TRACE**



1865

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**T**hinning white hair and slumped shoulders hung poorly on the tall, haggard frame of once dignified, stalwart Rundell deWorthe Ingram, IV. Like lots around and about, the past was a mingle of blurred fog-and-mist memories. Rain or shine, day after dreary day, before sunup, a wheezing Rundell labored out of bed. After an early breakfast, he shuffled along a porch that stretched across the front of the house that was Moccasin Hollows—home to him, his grandparents, parents and Hamilton, Rundell's lanky, broad-shouldered son born in this dogtrot, ancestral land of the Nordmadhr Norman-Scottes Ingrams.

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Rundell slouched into his worn, cane-back rocker, staying there 'til late night, sometime all night except for a call of nature. Now and then, he'd slap at the pesky whine of a mosquito, most times paying them no mind. He no longer greeted the rare passer-by, and made even fewer visits into town. Like Rundell, Queensborough Towne seemed to have pulled in on itself, as though chastened at having become unseemly to the point of being unneighborly.

Any time Hamilton tried to cajole his papa to go for a buggy ride into town, Rundell would shake his head and mutter, "Town's full of undone folks and beady-eyed outsiders in store-bought show-off clothes. Maybe tomorrow—the day after."

At spartan mealtimes, Rundell might nibble. He seldom bothered. His mind wandered desultory and aimless in a past more pleasant than this disquieted, downside-up world he could do nothing about.

On one particularly balmy afternoon, sandy-haired Hamilton and his young wife, Sarah, came out of a shabby-curtained parlor with its missing window panes, boarded with scorched roof shingles salvaged from the blackened skeletons of the outbuildings. Faint lines creased the young woman's once exuberant face, crinkling deeper at the corner of sky blue eyes. As they continued down the wide front steps, she tucked and pushed tawny gold braids up under one of her worn bonnets. Its frayed pink and blue ribbons were faded to a drab sameness, matching the lackluster color in her cheeks.

Seldom breaking his self-imposed solitude, puffy-

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faced Rundell's raspy voice boomed through the still afternoon, "Where you two off to?"

He sounded more crotchety than he was. The whole parish never doubted how he doted on his daughter-in-law.

"Sarah'n me thought we'd go for a walk." Hamilton's calloused hand gripped the cane pole with its frazzled line. "Mayhaps fish a bit. Anything you need?"

As though he hadn't heard, Rundell shook his head, continued slowly rocking.

"I patched most of the leaks in the kitchen roof," Hamilton said. "With the sawmill tore up I'll split new shingles for the smokehouse when we get back. Chicken house will have to wait."

"Chicken house don't need a roof. Don't need no chicken house. Got no chickens."

As they headed across the yard, Hamilton called back, "We'll be back in a while."

Short walks with Sarah, a little fishing, checking his rabbit snares, being any distance from the house left Hamilton uneasy. Hadn't been safe for some time. Doubly so if Mother Greer was away and Sarah and Papa were there alone. Not sure what he'd do if he came face to face with a pack of ghost-eyed raiders. As lawlessness and *incidents* increased, Hamilton knew if there was to be a fight, the farther it stayed from the house, the more warning those at the Hollows might have. By any measure it was a reedy-slim plan, but the only one he could muster. If he saw he was going down he'd take as many with him as he could. His greatest fear being something happening he might've prevented by being close by. But,

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for the time being, everything was as alright as he could make it.

“Fish not gonna bite,” Rundell yelled. “Sun’s too bright, too warm. There’s blackberries. Berries and muskydines ought to be sweet for pickin’.” Rocking steady, his fixed look off to nowhere. “Get 'em 'fore the deer strips 'em clean.”

For as long as Hamilton could remember he and Papa had always liked the plump, sweet blackberries served with thick cow’s cream. Hadn’t told Papa most of the wild vines not trampled by Sherman’s bumblers were long ago picked bare. The last time he and Papa had gone pickin’ had been some of the last good days—for lots of folks.

“Me’n Sarah might sit a spell.”

He took special care to have quiet times for Sarah, 'specially since night before last. He got real excited when she told him she might be with child again. She hadn’t been sleeping well, often wanted him to rub her aching back. Now he knew why.

Threadbare clothes and unshorn hair gave Hamilton Bothington Graeme Ingram the look of a run-down, unkempt derelict instead of heir to one of the largest non-slave plantations in Saint George Parish. He ducked under what was left of the split-rail fence with its crooked corner post. Rails and most posts had long gone up in the smoke of hoards of campfires.

“Step wide.” He reached back to help her through. “I don’t want the mother of our children to step on a cane-brake rattler catchin’ sun on this fine day.”

“Lord have mercy.” Sarah clutched her bonnet in

her hand so as not to get it snagged in the coiled tangle of wire. "I suppose it's up to me to get used to your hoverin' over me again."

"Yep," he grinned. "Reckon my favorite sweetheart will have to do just that."

"Your favorite sweetheart?" She giggled, wrinkled her nose at him. "Just listen to you and your Ingram fiddle-faddled talk."

He grinned as she brushed back strands of the golden hair Hamilton loved to run his fingers through. She gathered her mended skirt, slipped her hand into his, and quickly stepped wide over the fallen post.

"C'mon..." her voice lilted soft, and she squeezed her grip on his hand. "Let's hurry."

Her singular tenderness refused to let the devastation around them blight their few alone-times. In the spoliation around them, such times when they managed to make it just the two of them held a more-than-special meaning.

"Don't you get too tired now." He gave a chuckle low in his throat.

"Hamilton Ingram, I don't know why I bother, but why in the world must you treat me like I'm about to break?" She gave him her reassuring but exasperated look.

His hand tightened on hers, he pulled them to a stop, his hazel eyes looked dead into the pale blue of hers. "If anything happened to you..."

He let his words fade, remembering another sunshine mirage of a day that seemed to be only whispers of another life. Times he and his papa walked this same

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field, checking the stalks of corn in these sections to see if they were beginning to tassel-out. He'd peel off one young ear of sugar corn, its glossy smooth silks barely poking out from green husks.

"Looks to be the makin's of a good crop this year," Rundell had said as he shucked the ear, took a bite. "Ought to make enough to put up winter feed for that new team you were looking at the last week."

Those days now seemed unreal. Hamilton and Sarah continued across the unplowed furrows, his worn boots puffed up dusty little dirt devils between tufts of weeds. They skirted the flattened thickets, through fields of corn stubble, and angled around the stand of thick canebrake and scrub between Moccasin Trace and the river. The talk of blackberries made Hamilton think of once-upon-a-time bowls of chilled berries swimming in thick cream that had been skimmed from yesterday's milk, and his stomach growled loud enough for Sarah to hear.

Sarah giggled. "Me too."

He wasn't the only one hungry in these parts, not by a long shot. A whisper of a coquette smile shadowed across her face. To him she looked young again, out for an evening's walk with her beau—halcyon days become fond memories.

"Maybe we'll catch a big bluegill," she said.

"Not likely. Last week I walked two of the cut-acrosses. Water's still runnin' muddy and churned. Banks're tore up by the plank bridges they threw across for wagons and artillery caissons. Lots of suteler's junk in the water, odds and ends, old saddles, burnt, rusted pans, broken wagon wheels. Brim beds churned and

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trashed, even mud-lovin' catfish don't like water that messy. Bluegills and red-bellies might bed again late this fall. I doubt it, though. Most anything left has been pretty much fished out."

He thought of past Thanksgivings, him and Papa, Sarah's family, the Greers, and the best eatin' in the parish...bar none. Last week he'd killed their last Rhode Island Red hen. She'd quit laying the daily egg and lost most of her neck feathers. Bessie tried to help him with storing eggs in what little lime water they had. It worked 'til the salt ran out. It was either eat the eggs or let 'em spoil. Old bird was stringy and tough chewin', hardly filled the stew pot. Stew needed fatback, which they hadn't had since the hogs were taken. Their last cure of venison jerky tasted wild, like it'd turned bad. It needed salt, too. Besides salt costin' money they didn't have, it wasn't readily available. Just as well they didn't have hogs. No way to age or cure the hams without salt. Hamilton'd had a few middling-meat johnnycakes soaked with chicken broth. He left most for Sarah and Papa.

Rundell liked munching raw potatoes. He favored the smaller, fresh-dug ones he called *new potatoes*. He'd use the bent kitchen knife that'd lost its handle on the withered moldy ones that hadn't been taken by foragers. Sometimes he didn't peel them, just rubbed off the dirt and gnawed away.

The Hollows had been spared, but damn little else had.

Growing up a gangly towhead on the sprawling acres of Moccasin Hollows, Hamilton never gave much

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notice to outside goings-on. On his seventeenth birthday, near four years ago, he had gotten his first notion of the world beyond.

Rundell usually kept his feelings close to home, seldom using strong language, but that day his disgusted papa'd remarked, "Damn few prudent heads among the lot of them," as he flung down the Augusta newspaper. "*Constitutionalist* editors and those pigheaded politicians. They couldn't get off a water moccasin if it was chewin' on their big toe. Fools got no idea what they're stirrin'. Most likely don't care neither."

"What happened?" Hamilton had never seen a turmoil fret his papa so.

"I suppose it's gettin' to me more'n I thought. Benson Crouder stopped by, that's what. All gussied up in his top hat and new attire like some up-town Beau Brummell, that fancy rig of his hitched with his matched bays, their mane and tails all curried. Cain't figure some folks. Let them get money in their pockets, they act like their sweat don't stink. All fired up, heading into Queensborough for the big meet, asked if I was going. I told him I didn't see no point to another meetin'. Far as I could tell too many done decided they were finished with talk."

Not many days went by before Rundell swallowed his distaste for politics, and got knee-deep in the middle of the commotion at the capital in Milledgeville. Hamilton harnessed and hitched the buggy for his Papa.

Rundell climbed into the buggy, took the reins. "Don't see my bein' there'll make much difference in that brew of catfish stew." Looked at this strapping son,

he added, "Suppose it cain't do no harm neither."

Hamilton remembered that day, watching Papa drive off, and how at the time the day hadn't seemed different. Now, when he thought back, he could think of no one thing which seemed to've change, except he recalled the yellowish-orange morning light seemed sharper with a change to the air.

Now, for way too many folks, stench and fear rode the breezes, carrying the smell of char and ashes. Each day had become a hunt for food and shelter. Tending the meager gardens at the Hollows barely managed enough food, but it was food. The lawless churning mayhem, moving far and near, sometimes too close to the Hollows for Hamilton's liking—his wife and their unborn son, Papa, Mother Greer and Sarah's brother, Benjamin. Gaunt chimneys haunted the ashes of Wisteria Bends, Hamilton's second home, the grand plantation manor where Sarah and Ben had grown up. Without money there was no point going into town. Except for land speculators, gold jingling in their pockets, there wadn't that much food to be had in Queensborough nohow.

A blizzard of thunder and hell-hot hate had smashed most homes in the countryside around Queensborough Towne. With Sherman and his army gone, worse than carpetbaggers and a lot more dangerous were the lawless bands of white trash infesting the countryside. No questions asked, easier to kill anyone that happened in their way, and get on with the stealin'. Human locust pillaging what they could get their hands on, torching homes, farms, what was left of the Queensborough courthouse. With parish land records in ashes a fair number of low-

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lives claimed land which was never theirs.

Sarah broke Hamilton's quiet reverie. "A bungtown copper for your thoughts."

"Guess I'm not very good company." He slid his arm around her, hugged her. "Word from Milledgeville is bad. Seems no end to the ruin."

"I saw smoke off in the direction of the river this morning." She snuggled to him. "Seems that's all we smell now'days."

"I feel so helpless." His hand gentled across her belly where their new baby was. "...Afraid for you."

"Sometimes me, too, but," she laid her head on his shoulder, "there's no point frettin', working yourself up when you can't do nothing about it."

This woman was his whole being. Usually no matter the problem, her comfort was there for him. But lately nothing had been soothing.

With her usual impetuous excitement, Sarah sat up straight and burst out, "Let's go wadin'." She jumped up, kicked off her sandals, most of their soles worn-gone, gathered up her skirt, and splashed into the murky sandy waters that flowed between Ingram land, Brier Creek and the Ogeechee river. "Come on," she squealed, kicking her feet, wading out deeper. "Oooo...it's so cold! Feels so good." She wiggled her toes in the Georgia red clay sandy bottom. Then, pulling her skirt higher, she hopped up on a fallen log. "Water seems to've cleared a bit."

Hamilton knelt, fingered the mud and sand. "Silt seems to've settled some." Studying this enchanting wonder of a wife dangling her feet from the log, he let

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the sand dribble through his rough fingers.

“You are amazing.”

Sarah caught his look and stopped kicking her feet, her hand resting across her belly. “What?”

“How lucky I am to have you.”

“You sweet silly man...you’ll always have me.”

He pushed up his worn shirtsleeves and sighed, “Always is full of tomorrows where anything can happen.”

With the hogs gone, they had no rendered hot fat for making lye soap, and scrubblings with the red clayish muddied water had stained his hands and arms.

Just the other day Sarah had said, “Your skin looks so coppery. That Cherokee blood of yours is showing through.”

His skin was chafed by the coarse hoe handles, weeding their small garden patches or straightening used fence wire or nails he dug from the ashes. Just as well the mules were gone. Early rains had come up short. Meager corn hadn’t tasseled good enough to feed them. Each day seemed to bring something else to do without.

Sarah slid off the log and sidled down next to him. He laid his hand on her belly. “You felt him move yet?” Ever since they’d lost that first baby, he’d enjoyed the thought of having children, of being a father.

Sarah beguiled with a coquette tease, pressed her hand atop his. “And tell me, Mister Know-it-all Daddy Ingram. Just what makes you think it’s another boy?”

Hamilton turned quick mock-serious. “Have to be a boy to come into a world like this.”

“Mmm—now you are being truly silly. You’re always telling me how strong I am. Our daughters will be

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strong.” She gave a toss of her tawny unbraided wave of hair and wrinkled her pert nose at him in a sassy smile. “Just like their father.”

“And their mother.” He kissed her cheek.

Sarah slumped back against him, closed her eyes, and murmured, “It’s so peaceful here.”

Hamilton laid his hand in her lap. He wanted to stay right here with her, here where a bit of serenity had managed to linger. He pined to laze away afternoons like this in the shade of the bayou beneath the leafy branches, and let the peace of this moment hang into forever.

“This is about the only place that’s not changed.”

“Our special place,” she sighed, “that no one else knows about.”

Half-listening, he went on, “Everything’s topsyturvy. They’re makin’ sure to keep it nice and legal while they steal an’ grab all they can.”

Sarah sat up. “You’re not talking about the Hollows?”

“Don’t matter whose land. Using their kind of bandit laws to make it legal. Gives me a whole understanding why Papa never liked politicians and lawyers. Taxes howling through the roof, and gold about the only payment they accept. Paper money won’t do it. Like us, nobody has any gold. Typhoid and dysentery and gangrene, and having little to eat are a world difference from that Charlestown cotillion.”

“Glistening sabers and beautiful gowns, all those uniforms with their gold braid...” Sarah’s eyes grew misty. “When I think about those days, it somehow feels

like it happened to someone else.”

Hamilton dabbled the tip of his still-green cane pole in the water, its hook still stuck in the bobber. Hadn't dug any worms, didn't feel like fishin', just smackin' the water. He wondered who were the luckiest...the dead people or the ones struggling to stay alive. “Lots of things different, and would never be the same. Quicker folks get used to it, the better.”

He slouched back against the trunk of the water oak. Its mossy rotting bark soaked a cool feeling against his back. His eyes drifted toward the purple wisteria twisted in the dogwoods and tulip poplars above them. Like idle ghosts braided among the limbs, lazy Spanish moss swayed in a green cathedral. In the serene stillness his eyelids grew heavy, the gurgle of water reminding him of Sarah's gay laughter that last time they went wading.

A soul-deep sorrow caught at him, for her, for their young son and yet-to-be children. The smell of her hair stung his nose, the yearning as strong, even stronger. Other good memories crowded in, the all-night hunting parties with friends from plantations around Queensborough Towne. Being a hometown boy, he was forgiven just about anything.

“Young bucks just feeling their oats,” the sheriff once said after one wild drinking melee.

Lives sundered spirit from body. Such rememberings left him with an aching hankerin' for Bessie's strong corn whisky. Ingram men had a weakness for good whisky, some couldn't stop. It made for a seductive escape until he had to face another empty dawn. Hamilton fought the uncertainties in uncertain tomorrows. Others

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had run. Pulled up stakes, and *git*. He'd never run from nothing his whole life. Ingrams hadn't been run off their land by the British. He wadn't being run off now neither.

The reedy slim figure of Alexander Stephens had admonished, "Secesh means ruination." By the time the blind began to see his words, the choice was pitifully clear, "Either quit or keep fighting." Like most, Ingrams and Greers stuck with Georgia, keeping crops and live-stock growin' to feed Johnny Rebs far and near.

Andrew Greer, Sarah's father, hoarded cotton. "Let Yankee merchants get hungry for Dixie's white. They'll back off, an' leave us be once England lets it be know she means to have the cotton."

Hadn't happened. Lots that was supposed to happen didn't. Lincoln's armies kept comin'. Blood flowed, casualties rose, a growing list of Hamilton's friends buried in unmarked graves if they'd been buried at all. Lamentable few came back in pine boxes. Lots of those that did make it back were broken husks of the starry-eyed happy-go-luckies gone off for glory and adventure. Hamilton sometimes felt guilty not totin' bayonet and rifle. No amount of sweat, hard work and sunburned shoulders took that from him.

Sarah unfolded her bundle, slipped into a pair of Ben's throw-off britches, breaking into his thoughts with her soft Georgia drawl. "You hungry?" she asked as she tightened up a makeshift belt.

"Why you change into those? You'll be all hot an' sweaty by the time we walk home."

"My dress was wet. I hate that feelin'."

Even her brother's rumpled riding pants hanging

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oversized and baggy on her didn't dim the wonders of this woman Hamilton loved with all his heart. Both enjoyed riding the vast acres, Hamilton about raised in the saddle. Roads being sparse, horseback was the only way to reach some of the backland gullies and sweet water springs of their family lands. Her hair flying free, Sarah scandalized the whole county riding like a man, not sidesaddle like a proper lady should. Even worse she wore britches with her blouse stuffed inside. Riding prim and proper in a buggy with starched crinoline hooped over yards of linen did not fit to her liking of a saddle. She reveled in knowing Hamilton liked her willful behavior. It distressed Bessie, the house maid of Sarah's mother, Corinthia Gresham Greer. Like any daughter of opulent landed gentry, being one of the parish's own Sarah enjoyed position with status. Corinthia kept a watchful eye on her daughter's share of Greer contrariness. The young'uns, Ben, Sarah, Hamilton, and Samuel, Bessie's son, played together. Bessie had midwived 'em all. Took off a whole day for her Samuel's birthin', then swaddled him and propped him beside her in the big kitchen back of the Bends.

Wisteria Bends, the Greer Plantation, thousands of acres of cake-icing cotton rolling over the gentle foothills of east Georgia that bordered the somewhat lesser acreage of Moccasin Hollows. The Hollows and its vested lands weren't extensive by cotton standards. Hard worked by Rundell and Hamilton, and jealously guarded with the usual Southroner passion for land. Ingrams and Greers were bred, borne and nurtured on old family crown grant lands. Money was vulgar. All that

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had mattered was the land.

On the walk back home they cut across the pasture. Hamilton's favorite sorrel chestnut stallion came trotting toward them with Sarah's bay gelding not far behind. The two horses were just about all they'd managed to hide and salvage.

Sarah said, "At least our picnic spot isn't torn up."

"It's about the only place left with any peace and quiet," Hamilton mumbled. "It tears at Papa all the time."

1860

2

Andrew paused, Caribbean cigar in hand. “Rundell...if I didn’t know you better, I’d think you was scared of that bunch of citified gasbag dandies the North has way too many of.”

It was a heady, hot July, trigger-ripe with ready politics. At Wisteria Bends, salt-and-pepper haired Andrew Greer was hosting his lavish annual July 4<sup>th</sup> dinner on the ground for several landowners from East Georgia and parts of Alabama. Even the imported Seychelle *cocode-mer* leaf porch fans along the shaded veranda didn’t do much more than stir the sultry Deep South humidity.

“North don’t have a corner on blowhards,” Rundell

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chortled. "We got a fair crop of our own homegrown ones."

"You truly believe the odds be against us if we go for independence?"

Rundell was quiet for the longest, then softly said, "Favored way against us, but the main weight is economic." He swirled his glass of amber liquid, clinked the icehouse lumps of block ice against his drippy tumbler, and took a long swallow. "You know as well as I, that I'm not the only one thinkin' so. North and South both stirring the pot. No one's takin' a hard look at how things are. It's not just the South. Feelings are way harsh. Each camp makin' demands with no considerin' of consequences that cain't stand side by side." Another swirl, another guzzle.

"Rundell's put his finger right to the tender spots," Alex Stephens said. "Hotheads could cost us the very things we're trying to preserve." He'd buggied down from Crawfordville for the shindig, not only for the politics; he wadn't about to miss the renowned spread of food as well as the gracious and charming Corinthia Greer. "Slaves is only part of it and not a big part, but the chattel issue makes for an easy thorn. Jab us in front of the rest of the world. Not that I care what the rest of the world thinks, but Lincoln's election makes a good lightning rod for coddlin' up to the abolitionists. That Massachusetts bunch won't leave it be 'til the whole mess is a logjam with no guarantee those doing the jammin' will be around at the unjammin'. Crowin' fight is one thing, and startin' one is even easier, but keepin' that sort of scuffle to where you want it don't always

shake out in the doing.”

“That’s the main reason we ought to get out now,” Andrew contended. “Washington is a southern city squeezed between Virginia and Maryland. Northerners can leave.” His words spit out like they were some kind of blasphemy. “Go their own way.”

“Most of the talk is about the other fellah doin’ the gittin’,” Rundell said. “We don’t take to being told what we’re gonna do, and I avouch a goodly number of Northerners feel the same.”

“Don’t matter,” Andrew snorted. “Federal capital cain’t sit inside another country.” He took a gulp of his drink and swallowed it down hard. “Virginia won’t set still for Federals marching across her borders. Georgia neither.”

“Andrew, if this separation is goin’ to be so peaceable, where you coming up with this *marchin’ across Virginia borders?*” Rundell contended.

“Might take a couple of weekend frays, but Maryland’ll go along. Georgia won’t stand alone. South has thoroughbred men and pure-blooded horses. North cain’t match us.”

“There’s lots they got we can’t match,” Hamilton added.

“Let ‘em yell,” Andrew said. “There’s not a damn thing they can do about it once we pull out.”

“There’s blockade talk out of some Ohio and New York conclaves about what they’ll do if the South engages in what they’re callin’ renegade actions.”

“That’s poppycock scare talk,” Andrew grunted. “Our coasts and shores are way too long with too many

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harbors. It'd take more ships than the whole United States Navy has just to plug up Charlestown or Savannah."

"They got shipyards," Hamilton said. "Big enough to build what they need."

"Then we build shipyards, build ships. Any ports or harbors they try to shut, we keep open," Andrew said. "No one can plug the whole damn Southern whisky jug."

"Funny thing about jugs..." Hamilton looked into his half-empty glass. "Ram the cork in tight enough, you bust the jug."

Alex Stephens said, "Could come to that."

Rundell said, "They won't turn loose just 'cause we tell 'em to let go."

"Georgia's militia can hold its own, hold open Savannah," Andrew glared at Stephens. "Docks, warehouses wharves at Augusta can hold the cotton 'til we're ready to ship. Same for Wilmington, New Orleans and Florida. Make the mills up north and in England hungry for it."

"Don't matter where a squabble starts," Rundell said. "Once it does it'll likely domino in lots of places. With trade as widespread as it is, it'll touch everyone."

"It's done started!" Andrew roared. "Look at Kansas. Union buttin' in where they got no right."

"Missouri's in it just as bad as Kansas," Rundell pointed out. "There's all manner of high soundin' words about what should or shouldn't be, or who ought to do the tellin'. Mark my word, livelihoods are bein' threatened, and that could take us where none of us have

looked.”

“The yards at Norfolk and Mobile and Pensacola are state properties,” Andrew said firmly. “Central government has no right holding them if a state asks for 'em back.”

“And if they don't give for the asking?” Hamilton threw in.

“Take 'em!” Andrew slapped his knee. “That's why states keep a militia. No cause for Washington City to say different.” His neck pulsed blood-red.

“It's not only ships,” Hamilton said. “Where's the...”

“All we want is for them to leave us be,” Andrew interrupted. “The constitution leaves states with the final say-so. Powers not given to the federal government remain with the states. Too much control in the hands of the royal governors was the same problem.”

“You sayin' words about leaving peacefully is just for show?” Hamilton asked. “We talk about poking guns in their face if they don't give. Where we gonna get the guns to take the forts they won't give up?”

Andrew was incensed. “I'm not eating crow 'cause of Yankee meddling! Georgia is *our* state, *our* land. Any man here will fight to defend ourselves.”

“We're not ready, neither is the North.” Hamilton had listened to other parleys with the same fever and disliked its drift. “Both sides're bent on arguing without looking where it's going.”

“Andrew...” Rundell swirled his drink. “No one's trying to make the South eat crow. No one can force us to do what we don't want. South's too big. There's noth-

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ing to be lost by sittin' down an' trying to resolve it."

"Forcing it down our throats is exactly what those high and mighty falsifiers riding Lincoln's coattail are trying to do!" Andrew blustered. "Give 'em a couple of good set-to whuppings, they'll change their tune. We don't need rifferaff factories and the likes messin' up what we got. Puttin' in a rail spur between here and Millen Junction is bad enough, ruinin' good farm land."

"North won't let go." Alex refilled his glass. "It's a little about jealousy and a lot about money. They want to enlarge the government, use the power to line their pockets."

"And pilfer a proper way of livin' they no longer got in their dirty cities," Andrew said. "If new territories come in as free states, we'll be outnumbered in congress. Once they got the majority it won't be long before they'll start passin' laws against us."

"We take ourselves out, we got to go peaceable," Stephens maintained. "If it comes to a contest of arms, which is exactly where it looks to be headed, we best make double sure Federals do the startin'. Otherwise they'll make that we're the ones going against the flag."

"Damn Union's no longer like it was settled upon," Andrew muttered.

"True...sad, but true," Stephens nodded. "But that fact has little to do in the bluster and twist of words."

"Ever'day is more like King George squeezing the colonies," Andrew said. "Time we was rid of the whole lot."

Stephens gave Andrew a firm look. "Majority of people in the South, 'specially the upper South and bor-

der states, are against breaking up the Union. To lots of them the stars and stripes is a symbol.”

“Stripes on that rag is gettin’ to look more like prison bars. No longer something I’m proud to claim. Founding fathers wouldn’t like it neither,” Andrew said.

Stephens said, “Go against it for what appears to be no reason, it’ll rile a good many who’re straddlin’ the fence, leave ‘em little to no wiggle room.”

“While they screw down tight,” Andrew added.

“Don’t fool yourself. Push come to shove, one battle won’t settle it,” Stephens said, “specially if we win, and at first we likely will. In the long run it’s up in the air. North thinks we’re bluffing. That’s a blinder both sides are wearin’, a goodly bit of it our own doing. We snorted about seceding before, then never carried through. Another thing you best chew over. I’m not so certain leaving the union is a good pick, but whether it is or it ain’t, it sure looks to be on its way. If so, there’s a heap to be got ready. States cain’t do it by themselves. If things were all nice and perfect, states could stand independent, but that’s not the way it’s shapin’. A southern government will be forced on us out of the need to have one. An’ we better make up our minds from the start to have one that’ll stand for what we want, or we’ll face the same problem we got with Washington—states’ rights. States got to have the last say, otherwise we end up headin’ for unlimited executive power, same our forefathers had with royal governors. That’s the barb bustin’ the bubble. A state’s first purpose is to guard its citizens against such a government.” He gulped a full swallow of ice tea. “We don’t handle this exceedin’ly judicious, Bob

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Toombs is of the mind it could draw out long an' nasty."

Hamilton drifted out onto the porch, away from the fried chicken and heated words. He gave out a slow sigh, ran fingers through his windblown hair, crossed his arms, and leaned on the porch railing. His gaze roamed out over the surrounding roll of fields that made up the rural plantations and farms around Queensborough Towne. From beneath great, sprawled-limb live oaks, lush green fields spread far beyond the squabbles of committees and presidents and politics—or so it once seemed. He and Papa were busy with the running of the Hollows, he and Sarah and Ben no longer carefree kids playing kids' games. He'd never given politics much thought, but even his inexperience in the debating arenas could see conditions were crowding levelheaded thinking out the door.

His thoughts returned to a childhood playmate grown voluptuously enticing. A seductive tawny-haired lover who ate his nights and entangled his feelings. For Hamilton the Hollows, and Queensborough Towne, was his whole world. Yet, he couldn't shake Papa's fateful words of ugly clouds blowing around Georgia and the heart of Ingram and Greer hard-won land.

•

Warm weeks slipped into a stifling summer. One Sunday afternoon short, spry Bessie had a twosome picnic basket all wrapped and ready for Sarah and Hamilton.

"Missy Sarah, they be a stoppered bottle of lamp an'

camphor oil against them redbug chiggers. Stirred fresh early this morn, wrapped it tight, stuck in the side corner of the basket." Bessie cautioned, "Ain't havin' you two come home, scratchin' in the night 'til you bleed."

"Thank you, Bessie," Hamilton said as he grabbed the basket.

She watched Hamilton help Sarah up, snug the basket under the seat, and climb up next to her. Bessie'd been around Hamilton almost as much as her Greer chirren. From the porch she continued watching Hamilton, his long, hurried strides toward the waiting carryall. "Somethin' sure be eatin' at you," she muttered to herself, and then waved as they drove off.

The buggy ride to their favorite shady spot on the creek bank took hardly no time. As Hamilton unloaded, Sarah pulled off her flared coal-scuttle cabriolet bonnet and shook loose her long, wavy hair. Humming a sprite ditty, she smoothed the picnic blankets, picked off stray pine needles, and laid out Bessie's fixin's. A spirited smile danced about the corners of her mouth, her sparkling, translucent blue eyes tinted with devilment a kelly green.

Hamilton slouched down on their pallet, nibbled a piece of Bessie's homemade cheese, and put it down. "Bessie packed us enough food for six people."

"Hamilton Ingram, if you don't beat all. Bessie fixes us this nice basket, and ever since you came over this morning you've had a case of mope-around. What's the matter?"

"Just me, I suppose." He nibbled the cheese again.

"If it's so unimportant why the sourpuss face?" She

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flounced as she put out the fresh baked bread. "I simply refuse to sit here and let your grumpiness ruin a perfectly glorious day. You just make your mind up right now to get over it. I won't hear of it, even if I have to tug you in the creek." She fixed her gaze on his lean body, liking the thought of skinny-dipping with him, seeing his body, touching him. "Every time you get around political talk you come away feeling truly awful. I believe you men like eggin' on all that talk, and I won't have it ruinin' our picnic. So stop it this very minute. You hear me?"

"I'm not very hungry." He rolled over and lazed on his back.

"You usually eat like a horse. You want some of Bessie's mince pie, or a sandwich?" she asked, slicing the homemade bread. "Bessie made your favorite." She set out a bottle of last year's wine.

Sarah then smeared camphor oil on her ankles, just in case there were any harvest-mites. She knew Bessie would put the picnic quilt through a boiling wash pot before it went back into the main house.

•

The year before, the Thanksgiving feast had been spread out on the broad grounds of Wisteria Bends with its majestic white columns and formal gardens. This year was the Hollows' turn to hold their annual sportive feed. The weather dipped just above a light frost the night before and left a refreshing coolness in the sunny air.

The Greers arrived with Ben driving his papa's pair

of matched grays hitched to one of their shiny, black phaetons. Behind him in the second carriage, Sam was in the front driver's dickey seat of the double Brougham-Clarence.

After everyone was seated, at the head of the outdoor table Rundell Ingram finished the prayer with a solemn, "...And for what we are about to receive. Amen."

"I do hope there's enough," Corinthia murmured.

Bessie looked around at all the food, the decanters of homemade wines and corn squeezin's, and said, "Mistress Corinth'a, they be 'nough food here for us'uns an' ever hands at the Bends."

Hamilton's mother, Victoria Bothington Graeme Ingram, had died three days after Hamilton's birthing. Whether at the Hollows or Wisteria Bends, Corinthia was hostess for these family get-togethers. Weeks before each gathering, she always made sure they'd fattened up a nice, plump, roasting goose, maybe two. Have them ready and dressed out to stuff with sweets and relishes, and candied yams.

The cornucopia of eats never failed to assume sumptuous, unrestrained proportions. Food a rooted tradition, frugality a vice when it came to hearth and hospitality. Foodstuffs overflowed onto the great round table with its checkered cloth. More stacked inside on the parlor sideboards and in the dogtrot hallway—sweet meats, candied and baked sweet yams, spiced peaches with thick, sugary syrup, apple butter and fatback bannock cakes, beef dodger corncakes filled with minced beef, baked hams and roasted pork sides. If hunting was

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good, a fat turkey was shot just for the occasion. If not, then a big, roasting goose. This year their luck held. The turkey looked big enough to be more suckling pig than bird. Pickled cucumbers, baked pumpkins, muscadine jams, blackberry jellies, basted asparagus, and more deserts than any two congregations could eat.

With its gabled roof and three chimneys Moccasin Hollows had been built above a huge cellar of deep, wide divided bins, the dryness of the bins protecting Rundell's two favorite vegetables, stored potatoes and onions, against mildew and rot. Graceful steps led up to wrap-around, deep-shaded summer porches. It gave the impression of exactly what it was, a peaceful countryside home with more than enough room for widower Rundell and his only son.

With Hamilton's mother passed on, Bessie made certain to come over from the Bends with Corinthia's family. Sometimes come over by herse'f. Bessie was protective, pretty much had the say-so of both places. No one took care of her famblies 'cepting her, an' she saw to it they was took care of proper. Greers and Ingrams were as much blood to Bessie as the flesh of her own body. Anytime she dropped in on the Hollows, Bessie made sure her poultice satchel was in the buggy with her.

Bessie'd knowed for some time Mister Rundell had weak lungs, more'n once she'd stewed, "Mister Rundell, what I gonna do with you? You don't take care of yo'self one smidgen like you ought to. Cain't have you feelin' poorly." Checked the weather anytime she knowed he was gonna be outside for any length of time.

“Knew when I spotted that shimmery circle 'round the moon last night it was gonna git muggier an' come up a thundery summer shower. No need a body riskin' a chill, come down with the achy banes an' lumbago ague. Hollows got no suitable house help, nothin' 'cept bargained hands for he'pin' with plantin'.”

Young Hamilton was as special to Bessie as eighteen-year-old sassy Sam, her blood son. Didn't take but a few butt-whallopin's from Rundell for youngster Hamilton to learn mouthy back—talk to any grownup, including Bessie brought swift retribution.

When Samuel come into the world, Corinthia gave Bessie a pledge Sam would never be sold away from her. Came down to as simple as Bessie and Sam were family. No fancy reasons or ugly mixed-blood skeletons. Corinthia loved Bessie, and it flowed both ways. Bessie would've gotten consider'bly riled if anyone say she was part of what needed changing. The Bends was her home, too.

Sarah passed Hamilton the silver-legged chafing dish. “Have some more mincemeat shortbread stuffing. Bessie showed me how to roll the crust so it baked out light 'n flaky.”

“I ate too much,” Hamilton patted his stomach. “I'm stuffed.”

“Wouldn't hurt to git some meat on your skinny bones,” Bessie said. “Wouldn't hurt Mister Rundell, neither.”

By late afternoon the cool of the evening was settin' in, the outdoor tables were cleared, and everyone retired to the roomy parlor, logs ablaze in the great fireplace.

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From now through the end of the season the fireplace would be kept stoked hot with Yule logs.

As Andrew and Rundell settled around the fire, Rundell handed Andrew several Virginia tobacc cigars. "Here, picked these up when I took my last cotton load to Augusta. Got to admit, they've a right good taste."

"You know those are one of my favorites."

"Yeh..." Rundell grinned. "Reckon I do."

Hamilton and Benjamin fired up stogies as well. Ben coughed and sputtered and his cigar went out. He took a swig of bourbon, re-lit and puffed away.

Rundell snipped off one end of his cigar. "Andrew, you putting in more tobacco next year?"

He reached to the fireside, took out a short piece of smoking lightwood. Blew on the end 'til it was red, and pressed it to his cigar. He drew several hard puffs, 'til his cigar glowed, then tossed the kindlin' back into the fire.

"Think I'll keep it about the same," Andrew said. "Maybe a few acres less. Prices come down some. I'm thinking it's too hot around these parts for tobacco. Besides, the last tobacc fields took the life out of the soil. Had to let them go fallow and pasture out for a couple of years, and they still weren't good for much but thistles and Egyptian millet."

"You might want to try some clover on those fields," Rundell said. "Bees have a real likin' for it, and it makes for tasty honey. Seems to pick up the soil right well. I'm thinkin' on increasing my sorghum acreage. Tried some last year. Made good forage and fodder."

"I don't know about grain." Andrew pulled a couple of puffs. "But you were right about it cuttin' down on

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feed I had to buy. Still, the savings don't make up for the cotton yields I lost. I'm looking at buying those upper sections on the east side of the Bends."

"I heard they were up for sale."

"Got good water, good drainage."

"Land prices are high." Rundell blew smoke. "Too high for small farms. Several are selling out, moving to Texas. East Texas has prime land almost for the taking."

"Wish I had those fresh water springs you have."

"Hamilton an' me've been looking at puttin' in some dams, irrigate a good bit of our crops with the flow. Good drinking water, too. Doctors at that medical school in Augusta tested the water, said it was clean. Lots of iron—good for the blood. Comes out of the ground cold enough to raise goose flesh."

"Glad that squabble about Texas statehood is over."

"That fracas isn't over." Rundell spit into the fire. "Not by a long shot, not with the smell of Kansas in everyone's nose."

Andrew stabbed the air with his cigar. "I tell you, Rundell," his salt and pepper chin whiskers bobbed, "if that abolitionist, Lincoln, is elected, there's talk among several states about bein' shed of that bunch of instigators. South Carolina's hot. Governor Pickens already signed the call for a convention."

"I'm not so sure Lincoln's as bad as they say."

"Maybe not. But them cantankerous Republicans behind him sure enough are. They keep squeezin' and pushin', it leaves us little choice."

"There's always choices," Rundell reflected. "Spec'ly before things narrow down serious and get

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where they don't need to go. I tell you for a sure certainty." He sucked his cigar 'til it glowed. "North's got no corner on lamebrains lunatics like John Browns."

Andrew was adamant, "That rump session of democrats in Baltimore last April didn't do nothing except hand the republicans the election."

"We brought a lot of this on ourselves, things that are a bunch more important issues than slavery. Andrew, you're a good business man. You make every penny count, but you spend more money on keeping up slave hands than you do on buyin' land. With land prices climbin' higher ever year, investing in field hands idn't the best profit for your money. Cotton prices wiggle up and down. More farms are puttin' in more cotton, prices got nowhere to go but tumble. The money you pour into bond servants could be used for other things. I pinch corners myself. Cotton's like tobacc, it bleeds the land. We got to broaden our crops." He chewed off a butt and spit it out. "You an' me know lots of owners here 'bouts in debt up to their ears to northern banks. That's the worm stirrin' the pot. Agitators down here are doin' and saying things to stir trouble, but they don't say nothing about the real reasons. Politics follows the money. This secesh nonsense is as much about sidlin' out of debts owed as it is about slaves, and in the long haul it could end up eatin' more money than anyone's lookin' at."

Andrew squinched shut his eyes. "Secesh ain't nonsense." He stubbed out his butt, knocked it against the brass spittoon, reached for another stick, and fired up again.

Rundell said, "Lincoln admitted he's got no authority to touch slavery."

"Makes no difference," Andrew cut his eyes toward Rundell. "We take our leave, Lincoln can go to glory."

"It makes a whale of a difference," Rundell fired back. "Suppose a fight gets stirred, and we don't make it stick."

"Cain't trust politicians."

Hamilton and Benjamin quietly listened, with dark-haired Benjamin trying to master the strong cigar. Scarcely a year younger than Hamilton, more brother than brother-in-law to-be, Ben mirrored his father. Bluster-eager peppery to show Georgia boys could take care of themselves. Have done with it, get on with running things.

He looked at Hamilton. "What you think'll happen?"

Bluish smoke made slow corkscrews around Hamilton's head as he replied, "North won't leave us alone whether we secede or not." He blew another puff. "*Augusta Constitutionalist* said Virginia sent a delegation to meet with Lincoln, try to cool things off before the slide got too steep. An independent South has to have Virginia, Tennessee, Missouri, Maryland. Texas. For sure Georgia'll get plenty attention. Even then, it'll be an uphill struggle."

"Georgia can go it alone," Andrew butted in. "We got the land, raise our own food."

"You're right farm-wise. But maybe we ought to look at history's lessons. In past contests between agricultural and industrial societies, the more developed side

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carried the bigger punch. What we got to stop them?”

“We fought George the Third and won,” Andrew said. “British had industry. We had farmer soldiers, same as Georgia today.”

“Colonies weren’t all of the pieces. Without the French it might’ve turned out different.”

“North try to stop us, we give 'em a good whup. That’ll put an end to their buttin’ in.”

Ben took another long puff. “Y’all ready for the Christmas Cotillion in Charlestown?” asked Hamilton, weekend war talk put away. Hamilton stretched. “Your mama’s been planning for Charlestown for the last six months.” He rubbed his stomach. “Sarah mentioned it, too. Never know what your sister and Mama will cook up.”

“That’s for sure,” Ben said grinning.

## 3

The last days of November lazed into December. Shorter Indian-summer warm days teemed with indolent blusters of multi-russet golden leaves. After a couple of hard frosts, chilly ev'nings became chillier. It made perfect weather for Rundell and Andrew's annual hog-killing week with plenty for the coming holidays—hams, rump roasts, middling meat, ribs and salted pork bellies.

After they'd finished up the last harvests Hamilton kept busy with things he'd put off, fences needing fixin', new tongues for the wagons and buggy, shingles for the barns and house. Sarah felt neglected. Pouty she was

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being taken for granted, she decided to remedy that, her snatches of being peevishly fractious failed to see exactly what her willful girlishness would do.

Never accustomed to being at anyone's beck and call, her petulance baffled Hamilton—and put him off. Which was exactly what spoiled Sarah wanted. The thought of getting his attention and being the center of his attention delighted her. Instead, in the weeks following Thanksgiving, she got a different taste of the Ingram's Welsh stubbornness as he kept more to himself, out in the fields, shodding and trimming the mules and horses, clearing new fields—wherever needed doin'.

At supper one evening at the Bends, Corinthia said, “Sarah, we haven't seen Hamilton lately.”

Sarah gave her mother a silent I-don't-wish-to-talk-about-it look. Sarah felt if Hamilton truly was interested in her, he was staying way too busy.

Andrew reached for another thick slice of sugared ham. “Rundell and Hamilton been haying right heavy these weeks. Same as us. Wet season could set in any day.” He dished another helping of mashed potatoes and cream sauce gravy onto his plate. “Dangerous putting too much wet hay in silage.”

All during supper Sarah toyed more'n more with thoughts she'd been having. Of course she made sure Corinthia didn't catch her half-poutiness. Decided making Hamilton jealous was just exactly what she needed to do to bring him around. The next afternoon on their sashay stroll in Queensborough Towne, she made sure he caught her flirting with a casual familiarity. Unlike most of her other young acourting squires, his aloof

stare at her was thunderingly silent. For the next few weeks Hamilton kept himself even busier around the Hollows. It wasn't at all what Sarah expected, and she never forgot her miscalculation. Some days later when she rode over to the Hollows, she received another eye-opener.

Rundell in the garden, saw Sarah riding up, leaned the rake on the fence rail, and greeted her with, "And how're you this fine mornin'?" He pushed up his hat and wiped his forehead. "Reckon you're looking for Hamilton?"

She slid out of the saddle and dropped the reins for the sorrel to graze. "I haven't seen him in weeks." Then with her sweetest face, added, "I positively hope he's not feeling poorly."

"I hope not either, since he's been off in Alabama for a month looking to buy some mules. How's your folks?"

Somewhat taken aback, she murmured, "They're fine."

"You like a glass of ice tea? Made fresh this mornin' with plenty sugar."

"That sounds perfectly wonderful, I'm terrible thirsty." She fanned herself nervously. "By the way, Mama reminded me to be sure and tell you that she asked about y'all," she smiled obligingly to hide her surprise. "Hamilton didn't mention he was going to Alabama."

They chatted a while, then gathering the reins, she said, "I must be getting back."

"Soon as Hamilton gets back, I'll tell him you paid a visit."

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She nodded and spurred the horse into a canter. As she rode, Sarah wasn't sure which she felt, slighted or angry or a good bit of both.

The following afternoon as she sat with her mother in the sewing room, Sarah confided, "Hamilton ran off over to Alabama and didn't even bother tellin' me he was goin'."

"I'm sure there's a great many things Hamilton hasn't told you." Corinthia smiled and kept stitching the lace on the petticoat. "And being as intelligent as he is, he likely never will."

"Mother!" Sarah pretended to sulk. "If he loved me he'd've told me."

"My darling daughter, you just cut out actin' the little girl pouty act right the very minute. You're not foolin' anyone but yourself. You're not very good at it, except where your father's concerned, and he doesn't count. You're his sweet daughter. Which is a very good reason for Hamilton not telling you everything." Corinthia rested her sewing in her lap and looked at the eager-eyed daughter, who was so much like her father. "You have your heart set on Hamilton Ingram, and your father and I wholeheartedly approve. We couldn't be more proud. He's like another son to us, and most importantly, comes from a fine family. You couldn't find a better man, except perhaps your father." A knowing flash of fire swept Corinthia's eyes with her smile. "You know I love you, but you certainly have yet to understand a few things about men, 'specially one as complicated as Hamilton."

"Mama, whatever in the world do you mean?"

“You most certainly have seen that all those run-of-the-mill dandies who cluster about you at church socials are very unlike Hamilton. Of course you were drawn to him. Any woman in her right mind would be. When a man’s upset he pulls inward. If he wishes to discuss it with anyone, he will, otherwise it’s a closed matter. Such contemplation can last quite some time. Much longer than with a woman. If they’re pushed, they can pull away entirely, and never reveal why. I find it quite charming. Your father’s not at all like that, but Rundell most definitely is, and along those lines Hamilton takes after his father. Hamilton has a big heart, and takes things much more serious than he lets on. Men, and Ingrams in particular, keep their feelings to themselves. He gets that from Rundell and their French deWorthe blood. Ingram pride is monumentally infamous,” she chuckled. “They can be relentlessly stubborn. Hamilton’s mother, Victoria, knew it only too well. She loved Rundell, and made sure no one ever had to deal with that part of him. I’ve seen it in both Ingram men, Hamilton a bit more than Rundell. However, like you, Hamilton is young. It will come to no good for you to continue to play with him.”

“I’ve never—”

“Sarah...” Corinthia’s voice was sharp. “Just you stop it this very instant. My sweet, I’ve seen you enjoy the doin’ of it. Which accounts for a great deal of the misunderstanding between you and Hamilton. He likely picked this time to go to Alabama because he didn’t want to be around you. He’s told you he loves you. For him it seems pointless in repeating it every day. That

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may not strike your fancy or your daydream idea of romance, but Hamilton and his father are truly one of the very few romantics. He respects you, and equally important, he respects your position. You'd best learn to appreciate what a true gentleman he is. Unlike a lot of lesser young men, he doesn't run around behind your back and has never been seen with those loose women in Queensborough."

Sarah was shocked her mother knew about those kind of men or the kinds of women she and Ben whispered and giggled about.

"And get that silly look off your face," Corinthia gave a nod. "You think your mother wouldn't know about such things? Any mother who cares about her family makes a point of knowing such things. You may tease other young parish rakes all you wish, but if you don't wish to drive Hamilton away, you will stop behaving as the spoiled daughter of Andrew Greer. And you are spoiled—which I must take considerable responsibility for." Her face showed the slight warm genteel smile that was distinctively Corinthia Greer. "I love the endearing, willful child that is my daughter, but this very day, I wish you to put away this foolishness with Hamilton that I've seen when you flirt with other young gentlemen."

Sarah gaped. Her mother had never spoken to her like this, not ever.

Corinthia put down her crochet needle, leaned over, quickly kissed Sarah softly on the forehead, and picked up her hooked needles. "I trust we shan't have need to speak of this again."



As the day to pack and leave for Charlestown and the Christmas Cotillion drew nearer, the Bends was in a hustle-an'-bustle flurry to get ready. Corinthia was in an utter flutter, until the bolts of linen cloth she'd ordered from Savannah finally arrived. Bessie had all three bolts unfolded, sized in vinegar wine and hot water, bleached, soaked and rinsed twice, set overnight, stretched to fluff dry, readied to be cut to pattern, then sewn and stitched into frilled pantaloons and petticoats. Smaller bolts of gossamer satin were made ready to be encrusted with hand-sewn seed pearls for the dazzling fringes.

"Thank heavens the Balmoral shoes arrived. I'm so relieved they fit," Corinthia said. "But we've still to do the linings for the capot evening hoods, and we simply must do something about the lace for the gowns. It won't do, it doesn't match the bonnets. For the life of me I don't see how we can possibly have everything ready with all that's left to be done. These bonnets will simply have to be sent back." She held up the silver trimmed Trafalgar white satin evening gown.

Bessie said, "Mistress Corinth'a, that be the grandest gown I ever did see, an' they no need troublin' to send them off. Restitchin' that lace won't take half the time it'd take to traipse into Queensborough Towne and mess around with mailin' it. 'Sides, you might never see it agin. You know how the mails be."

"Mother, these bustles are so frumpy, they make me look simply dreadful." Sarah tossed them back in the

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box. "And surely you don't expect me to wear one of those outlandish *Apollo knot* hair styles." Then she quickly asked, "We taking two carriages?"

"Three. Hamilton and Rundell will take theirs." Corinthia stretched another length of the material, while Bessie held it straight.

"Oh, goody!" Sarah exclaimed. "Hamilton and I can ride in one, Papa and Mister Rundell in one, and Ben can drive you."

"Sarah Greer..." Corinthia stopped smoothing the cloth. "There are times you behave like a brazen, citified hussy from Mobile."

"Mistress Corinth'a!" Bessie went goggle-eyed at the language.

Corinthia turned an austere eye to the unbending line between proper and unacceptable. "You'll ride with your father, like a proper young lady from one of the oldest families of Queensborough Towne should." Propriety simply was not to be infringed. "Young ladies have often amused themselves making eyes at young men. However, as your mother, it most definitely is my place to remind you of your obligations to your father and to this family. We may have been born to this position. Nevertheless, one has one's duty, and it behoves each of us to take care to see those duties are properly attended to."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "Being *proper* is what you always say when you can't find any other reason for me to do what you want."

"And I shall keep saying it until you behave accordingly." Corinthia looked at Bessie. "Bessie, what am I to

do with this child? She has a mind like a piece of Georgia granite.”

“Sam be the same. Headstrong as any Georgia mule that ever plowed. Here them silk hair nets you was lookin’ for.”

As she brushed her hair, Sarah asked, “How long we taking for the trip?” They’d be going through Augusta, and she’d make her own plans. What Mama didn’t know wouldn’t hurt nobody.

“Depends on the weather. Your Father is thinking six, perhaps seven days. Longer if we stay a spell with the MacLennans at their town home in Augusta.”

“Weather won’t matter,” Sarah said excited, thinking, having all the time with Hamilton, he couldn’t ignore her.

“Weather too so matter—git wet an’ ketch a death,” Bessie muttered. “Pray the good Lord see fit it don’t rain, an’ best makes sure my remedy bag be packed with ’nough poultices. Never know when a body need doctorin’.”

“Bessie, by all means let’s not forget that,” Corinthia mumbled through her mouthful of pins. “Mercy me, I’m glad you remembered. However in the world would I get along without you?”

Bessie knotted the last stitch. Then smoothed the hand-starched, white collar of her new polka-dot dress she’d sewn from cloth Corinthia had seen her eyeing one day during a sojourn into Queensborough Towne. She snipped the short thread, and as she rethreaded her needle, Bessie said, “Sam be proud bein’ head of the livery hands to South Carolina an’ back.”

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“Sam’s a good son.” Corinthia checked her double-stitching along the seams. “Sarah, your father and I are considering stopping for a bit at the Clayborne place at Windsor Springs. I haven’t seen Annie Clayborne in far too long.”

Corinthia Greer was an exception to the social pretentiousness that plantation wives never worked. Red satin libertines of Savannah or Memphis bought ready-made, but Queensborough country folk made do. Buxom Corinthia used every trick of the latest fashions to keep her dumpy, hard-to-fit high-waisted figure from being too obvious. She religiously copied styles from pictures she’d seen from Paris and London or Richmond, always to compliment the curves of her ample bosom and hide what she most decidedly did not wish to draw attention to.

Corinthia hung the gown on its frame, taking extra care with the loose basted seams and ruffles pinned along the sleeve edges.

She stepped back. “Bessie, don’t you think that ought to be enough gathering at the waist?” She fluffed the sides and the pointed bodice.

“Maybe a tad more tuck here,” Bessie pulled a pin out of her mouth and added a pleat. “Not much though.”

“Overnight in Augusta,” Sarah murmured.

She laid her brush on the dressing table and walked out through the French doors of the sewing room onto the upper balcony. The thick, gnarled limbs of the huge trees speckled her with a breezy afternoon leafy shade. She thought of being with Hamilton the whole way to

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Charlestown, and thought of the time she'd spied on Ben skinny-dippin' in the creek. Her sassy thoughts replaced Ben with a shimmering vision of a wet Hamilton.

She turned back into the sewing room, and with a singsongy lilt to her words she said, "Charlestown will be such fun."

Bessie threw a glance at this rascal, tomboy daughter, which had become a fine-figured young woman. She brushed at the hairs straying from her pulled-back bun an' kept stitchin'. Missy wadn't foolin' her one dinky bit.

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As soon as it arrived from Savannah, Hamilton tried on his new cotillion attire. Before his first fitting, he'd decided against wearing a hat. He liked the darker green velvet of the jacket with its satin lapels, pocket panels and stripe down the trousers, which matched the darker green of his pants. The maroon and matching green Welsh Gwyddelic designs in the brocade of the vest made it even sharper. He turned in front of the full length cheval mirror, the tailored cut of the britches, the dashing snug fit across his butt that showed off the muscled promise of his broad shoulders, fitting like a second skin. The smoothness of the velvet to his stout thighs interrupted by the swell across his belly was way more than some folk would call decent, leaving little imagining to the promise of this stalwart, robust scion of Clan Ingram.

His was a patrician, unbearded, rugged face, not necessarily handsome, but, like the rest of him, put to-

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gether well. He liked the look. His pale hazel eyes, sandy bush of hair, even teeth, arched brows and the Ingram square jaw—the total package dressed for the kill. A smile to his face, his groin tightened. He and Sarah would be the finest twosome there. His fingers played through the ruffles on the shirt.

Hamilton preened. “*Mmm*, big boy—” and grinned at his animal leer from the mirror. “Spect I just might ought to show up in church. Give 'em a good look and something to talk about.”

He patted the swell of chest, his flat stomach, thrust his hips forward. The velvet pants pulled tighter.

“Well, well...” A beaming Rundell stood in the doorway of his son’s room, pride shining his face. “Looks as though I’ve sired the finest looking young buck in the whole parish. How’s it fit?”

“Fits good.” Hamilton brushed his hands along his thighs as he turned in the mirror. “Specially since that last fitting.” The hang of the coat swung straight from his sides and over his hips. “Yours get here yet?”

“Picked it up yesterday while I was in town waiting for the smithery to finish the new rims for the carriage. Glad we re-rimmed. Found a couple of spokes dry-rotted near clean to the hub. One good bumpy rut on those chug hole Brier Creek roads might’ve busted the axle. Wadn’t riskin’ wheel trouble. Changing wheels on a loaded buggy can be the very dickens, dangerous if the buggy slips, and it always seems to be raining when something like that happens. Sort’a surprised me how long it took to get the iron for the straps. Smithery said he had cotton lorries lined up waitin’ for parts, said he

had to get them out'a New Orleans. Foundries in Richmond way too busy."

"Lose a wheel, we'd likely have to borrow a Victoria or leave someone behind," Hamilton said. "You give any thought about taking the train to Charlestown? We could board in Hamburg across the river from Augusta."

"Rather be in a buggy with a face full of dust than all those cinders," Rundell said. "And that brings up another thing I intended mentioning if we were short a buggy. No one's staying behind. For a sure certainty not you and Sarah." He gave his son that look. "Whether you believe it or not, I was your age once. Andrew Greer has been a good friend for many years, and that's not gonna suffer 'cause you and Sarah want to get each other's clothes off."

"Papa—" Hamilton started.

Rundell held up his hand. "Don't interrupt, this needed sayin' for some time. Sarah's got a wild streak in her as wide as yours, and both of you come by it honest. I've enough of my own—still got plenty. Got no quibble about the heat in a man's blood. Because your mother's dead don't mean I am. Makes for an interestin' life between a man and a woman, bonds you together against the bad times. I know you and Sarah done shared each other, and that's a good thing when two people love each other. But I'll not shame Corinne and Andrew by having it flaunted for the whole parish to take note of."

"Papa, I never—"

"Let me finish," Rundell said with firmness. "I'm not talkin' Sarah down. She's the making of a fine woman, an' I'll be genuinely proud to have her as a

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daughter. She's enough fire to keep the likes of you tuckered out. A man needs that, but I mean to keep Andrew as my friend in the doin'. Guard your times when you and her are together. Respect her and yourself enough to make sure it stays private." As he started out of the room, Rundell stopped, and said, "And be good to each other. Love each other, like your mother and me, like Corinne an' Andrew. It's nobody's business. See you keep it that way."

Hamilton was more than a little embarrassed that his papa knew. He unbuttoned and shucked off his fancy duds, then yanked up on his underdrawers and into his work clothes and boots, and hurried out the back door. In the kitchen, as Rundell finished his chicory he watched his strong-minded son head toward the barns.

As Hamilton carried the toolbox up the ladder to fix the hayloft door, he wondered how in the world Papa found out about his and Sarah bein' together. The 20<sup>th</sup> was not much more'n two weeks away. One Sunday left before they'd be starting for Charlestown. He couldn't wait.

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"Right this minute you husht sech talk," Bessie's anger flared. Feet planted, fists on broad hips, dishtowel in one hand. "Don't let me hear you talk 'bout Marse Andrew like that. Never 'spected hearin' such talk from you. You been suckin' on Jamestown Weed, an' gone addled in the head? You hearin' me, Samuel?"

"He ain't my master," Sam spoke defiantly.

“Don’t give me no sass mouth.” His manner riled Bessie. “You not the onliest one around I hear talkin’ that trash. ‘Cause a body tell you a thing, don’t make it so. Words comin’ out’a you’ mouth like you some blue-black what had no proper raisin’, runnin’ your mouth ‘fore you kick your brain to start. You ain’t dumb—quit talkin’ dumb.”

“Mama,” Sam pleaded, “...the Greers be way better than most owners, but that don’t make the leash no less tight.”

“Ain’t no leash, an’ if’n it was, it ain’t tight. You talkin’ it tight like tellin’ lies. Samuel, what got in you? You top coachman here,” Bessie chided. “Drive Marse Andrew’s, Mistress Corinth’a’s carriage. ‘Stead of field work, you dress up nice when they goes ‘bout, work in the main house. Have say-so for which teams be use. You keep mouthin’ off, other hands ‘bout the Bends’ll use your word to git you put down.”

Sam’s green eyes were turbulent, stormy. “That just be it, Mama.” His handsome high-yellow features fixed with a haughty pride. “No matter we don’t smell like field hands, we slaves, no better off than street trash, what ain’t—”

Before she thought, Bessie slapped his words shushed. As quick, her fingers grabbed her mouth in shock, tears wellin’ up. She had never laid a hand in anger to none’a her chirren. Not Sam, not Missy, Mister Hamilton, or feisty Benjamin.

“Ain’t havin’ you raise your voice to me, ain’t hearin’ you call fambly *street trash*. Mistress Corinth’a learn you writin’. You been raised to have a mind, I is

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proud of you, an' you nigh to bein' full-growed, but you ain't puttin' sass to me less you want lumps. You don't respect me, you got no respect for yourse'f." Her anger softenin', she continued, "Marse Andrew never hurt you, an' he don't keep no overseer. Marse Andrew never mistreated nary one of his hands. Seen him buy mistreated hands to git 'em from those what does whup."

"We be owned like mules be owned."

"That better'n shiftless trash in town what belong no place with nothin' to put in their stomach. You, Benjamin an' Hamilton growed up together, I loves Ben, Missy an' Hamilton much as I loves you. Love be one thing, the more you gives, the more you gits. Powerful lot've folks done forgit that, an' look at the ugly it be causin'."

"Benjamin own me," Sam brooded.

"Benjamin don't own nobody. Marse Andrew didn't buy us neither. I come with Mistress Corinth'a at her marriage to Marse Andrew. 'Sides, Marse Andrew an' Mistress Corinth'a been talkin' 'bout givin' some hands their own plots to grow their own crops, raise their own meat."

"I hearen lots'a talk, but that all it ever be."

"Marse Andrew don't hold strong to slavin'."

"But we still slaves," Sam snapped. "Least up North they talkin' 'bout endin' it."

"White folk in a bad pinch. Marse Andrew go agin the law it come down on him, an' git you sold God know where away from me."

"What be worse than bein' owned?"

"They's lots worse. Greers and folk what don't hold

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slaves, like Mister Rundell, in the same pinch with no easy out and not much say how it be.”

“Seems simple 'nough...quit slavin’.”

“All this shoutin’ make it no better. Some words be the same as what you mouthin’.”

Sam smeared away a tear and turned toward his mother with his curly head drooped. “Mama, I ain’t stayin’ chained.”

“Ain’t no chains I see.”

“They’s the worse kind. Tears me up you willin’ to stay so.” His face was ashen. “Folks here’bouts talkin’ fight.”

Bessie was dismayed by what come from her flesh and blood. “You call *free* livin’ like a night-crawlin’ city rat scurryin’ for the next mouthful anywhere it can sniff? Free got more to it than highfalutin’ blab. We gots lots to be thankful for, a roof when it rains, four walls when it cold, food so we ain’t hungry.”

The look in Sam’s eyes give Bessie fear; she didn’t know how spite got so planted in this willful son. Her words was blowin’ in one ear an’ out the other like leaves in a windstorm. Pullin’ Sam to places dirty and wrong, places her Lord say don’t go, learn him godless things to hurt others.

“Bends be your home, you birthed an’ growed here. Home be what make us what we be. If’n you cain’t be free in your home, no matter what nobody say, sure as Jesus be watchin’, no conjurin’ gonna make you free in no sin-hole cities.” She continued with a firm jut of her chin, “Loose women wearin’ frilly next to nothin’, flouncy pantaloons with lace garters, peddlin’ their

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wares for whatever gold come janglin' along."

"This ain't my home, an' it ain't yours. Nothin' here be ours, we ain't even our own." Bein' property had been diggin' at Sam worsen each day.

"You cuts loose from where you growed, away from those what loves you, a body git lost quick. That what blood-kin be," a fearful dread fillin' her like never before.

Afeared Sam's grindin' determination could make him a flown-the-coop fugitive. If he run, she know there be no he'p. Most hands here'bouts wouldn't tell, but worsen, a few would. Sam might would listen to Hamilton, but that'd put Hamilton in a terr'ble fix. Seemed ever'one was locked tight to how it was. Politics was white folks doin', but they was truly makin' a mess of it. Bessie was scared. She'd seen posses and their dogs.

That long, cloistered night she wore out her knees prayin', "Sweet Jesus, Bessie got a true burden. You bless me with a lovin' son. But Lord, that sweet son of mine, he sure 'nough done growed into one mulish, thickeheaded man. You never give Bessie what I cain't tote, but this heart be terr'ble heavy full of dread an' sure need consolin'."

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Andrew Greer had the older of their Victoria four-wheeler carriages modified for four passengers, adding heavier suspension and leather upholstered seats. With its polished, black leather top raised against the sun, it rode easier as it crunched along on the graveled road

toward Queensborough Towne. Dressed in his finest, the reins loose between his fingers, Sam kept the paired black geldings to a matched, steady slow clop. As they rolled into town, gentlemen along the streets lifted their hats to Corinthia and Sarah. Bessie, all the while, kept an eye on the back of Sam's head as he sat ramrod straight on his raised up-front driver's dickey seat.

"Mother..." Sarah piqued. "I don't see why we had to get all gussied up, just because you feel it necessary to put on fancy airs?"

"Proper manners doesn't cost a British ferthing." With ever the slightest of nods to passersby, the Mistress of Wisteria Bend gave slight smiles and quietly said to Sarah, "We have a position to maintain, as well as setting proper examples."

The creaking, glistening carriage turned onto the crowded Saturday-go-to-town main street. With stern looks, Bessie made sure no insolent stragglers gave up-pity looks their way. Near the market, they saw the pushed-and-shoved huddled bodies, dull-dispirited faces etched with bewilderment, bold pride in a few, waiting for the bidding to start. Rumors had spread of a slave ship having docked in Wilmington four days ago—bargain prices up for the highest bidder. Owners from Queensborough Towne and as far away as Marthasville, Savannah, and Selma were present. The faces looking back at Bessie made her pity their plundered homes. She'd heard of the raids in faraway Africa, didn't see how one soul could treat another sech a way. Bessie fixed her eyes straight ahead and mouthed a silent plea Sam would behave.

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Early that morning, a fidgety Bessie had warned him, “Mistress Corinth’a an’ Missy be callin’ on the Whiteheads an’ McClendons. This be auction day. I don’t want no show-off mouth from you in front’a town trash.”

“Mama, I ain’t never shamed you, ain’t shamed none at the Bends or Hollows. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Maybe, but sometime you makes me think that head a yours need a good purgative, when you talk like you a slobberin’ fox gone crazy with the rabies.”

From his carriage seat, Sam cut his eyes toward her. Bessie glared back, clutched her umbrella tighter as their carriage moved on.

“Bessie,” Corinthia asked, “whatever is the matter?”

“Crowds git the horses 'citable. Glad when we be back home.”

Corinthia leaned forward. “Sam, take that next street. These crowds are upsetting your mother, and I can’t say I care much for them either.”

“Yas’um...”

Sam fixed on the slack faces to be sold, noticed a few eyein’ his fine clothes. Mama was wrong.

As Sam turned the carriage up the curving drive, and brought it to a slow creaking stop at the front of the Whitehead’s town mansion, Sarah said, “Mother, must we do this?”

“Yes, we must. Your father is a business associate of Jonhathan Blynhest Whitehead. As your father’s wife, much as it is to my distaste, I will support your father, and you would do well to learn such behavior. It makes things so much simpler.”

“I think it’s perfectly ridiculous.”

“As well you might.”

As the buggy creaked to a halt, in a high-flown commotion of crinoline and taffeta, Abigail Bothwell Whitehead flurried down the wide steps to greet them with her gushy, drawn-out fluffy insincerity, “Lands sakes, I do de-clare...”

With years of practice, Corinthia remained thoroughly imperturbable, saying, “Abigail, you must forgive me,” not about to allow the likes of a Whitehead having the social upper hand. In her lithe Virginia blur of vowels, she smoothed, “I’m so utterly mortified.”

“Corinthia, whatever in the world do you mean?” Abigail bubbled. “Y’all come right on in. I’ve just put a fresh pot of tea to brewin’.”

*What an barefaced falsifier, she’s never boiled her own water,* Corinthia thought to herself, as she said, “We’ve been so dreadful busy, I should’ve called on you weeks ago. Time gets by so—a body hardly notices.”

Like the proper young lady, a bored Sarah quietly sat in the drawing room, daintily sipped her tea. Thinking how they’d be here for hours with this chitchat folderal, and wishing she was out riding.

Bessie stood to one side, tryin’ not to think of Sam. She remembered Mistress Corinth’a calling these uppity folks with no manners *merchants*..

“It’s understandable you’re being so busy,” Abigail sighed. “There’s simply no time to do all the things a body must do to get ready for the Saint Catherine’s Christmas Ball.” She placed her Wedgwood cup and saucer just so on the marble-top tea table.

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“Of course,” Corinthia fastened on a charming smile. “Charlestown is all the talk.”

Abigail leaned close, intimate. “I spoke with Jonathan. He wouldn’t hear of taking time off, spending the season in Charlestown. Heaven knows it would’ve done him a world of good. I told him if the Greers and Ingrams are going, the very least we could certainly do is be in Charlestown to welcome our Queensborough friends.” Her immaculate French maid hurried in with more tea and an array of sweets.

Corinthia sipped with her smile fixed in place...*Showy hanger-on*. Being invited to Charlestown’s Saint Catherine’s Ball the week of Christmas was all the talk, not only Georgia and South Carolina, but considerably beyond. Invitations had come through Andrew’s cotton and tobacco friends. Corinthia wasn’t about to countenance having anyone think the Whiteheads were more than business.

“I surely understand why you’re so very excited,” Corinthia said.

“I was so relieved the invitations arrived yesterday.” Abigail Whitehead fairly beamed. “When your man dropped off your note telling me you would call, it put me all in a twitter. Our invitations hadn’t arrived. I immediately sent Jonathan straight to the post office.” She rolled her eyes in mock insipid pinched smile, and gloated, “I was so reassured when he came back with them.” She could hardly contain herself—the perfect dig at uppity Corinthia Greer. “It will be so grand. Anyone who’s anybody will be there.”

Sarah’s expression matched her mother’s composure.

Corinthia's attention never left Abigail. Sarah knew how venomous this artless woman could be.

Corinthia gathered her gloves, and rose. "I do have other calls to make, and with the roads being so crowded with drays and freight wagons, Andrew insists we be home before nightfall."

"Of course." Abigail stood as the doorman retrieved their capes.

"You must pay the Bends a visit during the holidays." Corinthia pulled on one glove. "We're planning a New Year's masque festive."

Corinthia's cordial invite belied its command summons. She'd been bested, and it did not set well. She knew full-well an invite demanded another gown, and Abigail was widely known for spending more money than her husband could afford. She certainly was not about to stretch Southern hospitality by having any Whitehead drop in whenever they pleased.

"Gracious sakes!" Abigail's favorite expression. "Another ball—we'll be de-lighted." This was a royal convocation not to be turned down, if she ever wanted to receive another. "The season is getting simply so crowded."

As their carriage pulled away, Corinthia gave an ever so slight nod, and sighed a relieved, "Mercy me—"

Sarah needled, "Mother, how could you invite them?"

"Abigail Bothwell is insufferable," Corinthia's words were smooth as whipped chocolate. "She has never known her place since the day she married Jonathan. To think she calls that claptrap house a *mansion*."

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Sarah spluttered, “She’ll tell everyone you invited her.”

Corinthia’s eyebrows arched. “Are you quite sure you’re not concerned with more than invitations?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean.”

Bessie hee-heed. “You gots lots’a learnin’ ahead of you if’n you think you foolin’ your mother. You got the *don’t-likes* for Betsy Lou Whitehead ‘cause she wants to get Mister Hamilton in the hayloft.”

Sarah glared at Bessie, and huffed, “Papa says they’re cut from same cloth as lawyers and politicians—just a different kind of goat.”

“Why Sarah Cornelia Gresham Greer—how vulgar, like something off the wharves at Savannah.” Corinthia brushed at her dress and smoothed her cape. “I get so provoked with myself, behaving so wretchedly shoddy. Abigail is so unsuitable. Nevertheless, one must uphold one’s position. Let’s all settle down. I’ve been looking forward to visiting with the McClendons for weeks.”

The McClendons were old money, bankers, lawyers, land owners from Virginia with a modicum of gentility.

Corinthia said, “Even if the Whiteheads go to Charlestown, we don’t have to be seen with them. We’ll simply handle it.”

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