

INDS GUSTING ACROSS THE frozen lake whipped the man's coattails, staggering him with each icy blast. Caleb Cunard stared nervously at the imposing manse on the hill, waiting for the signal from the upstairs window. Behind him, three shivering forms huddled in the shadow of the boathouse.

Onyx, the estate's oversized, short-haired mutt, gave a low growl, pressing tighter against the man's pant leg. "Good boy, Onyx, good boy," Caleb whispered, patting the dog's head. "It's all right."

But all wasn't right. Yellow light streamed from the first-floor windows silhouetting the two horses tied to the hitching post while the upstairs windows remained dark. Even at such a distance, Caleb recognized the mounts of Sheriff Broderick and his deputy, Will Johnsby.

Caleb blew on his hands and tucked them inside his brown suede jacket. Another gust jerked impatiently at the man's pant legs and fluttered the brim of his battered felt hat. A whimper came out of the shadows. The dog snorted softly and shifted his back to the wind whipping off the lake.

"Sh-sh, easy boy," Caleb coaxed. The dog vented a sigh as if in reply. Exhausted after a harrowing game of hide-and-seek with the law, Caleb hunched into his jacket, grateful for the warmth it afforded him. He shivered when he remembered the loose, ragged garments worn by his charges hiding in the boat. Is this trip number twelve or thirteen? he wondered as he

drew his hands out of his coat and blew hot air into the hollow of his palms. He'd lost count. It could just as well have been trip number twenty-five.

In the biting cold of the night, waiting for the all-clear signal, he felt the same surge of excitement he'd experienced on his first trek north from the Pennsylvania line to Assemblyman Pownell's lavish estate along the eastern shore of Lake Cayuga. From here, his charges would be transported north to Canada and freedom. The satisfaction of his work made the struggles and discomfort worthwhile.

Suddenly the mansion's double doors swung open and light bathed the broad porch and front steps. Sheriff Broderick stepped out onto the porch. Caleb watched Deputy Johnsby round the far end of the house. Abe, the estate's overseer, appeared in the doorway, his hands stuffed into his pants pockets. Abe Potter owed his life to New York State Assemblyman Samuel Pownell. Bought by the politician and set free, the former slave now ran the assemblyman's estate with the aplomb of a well-trained English butler.

"It's easy," he once told Caleb, "compared to operating an African head chief's household. That takes the wisdom of Solomon and the wit of Saint Paul." Abe had been the number one man to a regional chief until an ambitious coworker framed him for theft and Abe was sold to English slavers heading for America. Auctioned off to the owner of a New Orleans gambling establishment, Abe quickly learned to do figures. Evangeline, a saloon girl and fellow slave kidnapped from a mission compound in West Africa, taught him to read and write. She also taught him about a God who loved him, a God-man who died on a cross so all people could be free. When the owner learned of their clandestine meetings, he sold Evangeline to a local bordello and returned Abe to the auction block.

It was the matter-of-fact look of pride in Abe's soft brown eyes that caught the attention of Assemblyman and Mrs. Pownell. An hour later, the papers were signed and sealed. Abe was a free man. His heart spilled over with gratitude to the stranger and his comely wife. When they bade him goodbye, Abe begged to go with them. "I'll do anything for you, sir. Please take me with you." Since then his loyalty to the assemblyman had

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been unswerving. Even now, facing down the local lawmen, Abe would not waver in that loyalty, Caleb knew. In a few minutes, the lawmen mounted their horses and headed toward the lake. Caleb crouched behind a gnarled oak tree stump and held his breath as the horsemen rode past. Onyx pressed his cold nose against the man's cheek. Even the wind seemed to hold its breath until the clopping of the horses faded into the night.

Caleb rose to his full height of six feet. He glanced toward the sky. A corner of the moon peeked from behind the bank of heavy clouds moving eastward, then disappeared. A light appeared in the second-story window. It went out, then on again. Caleb sighed with relief and waved to the people huddled in the shadows. "Quickly now! Run around to the back of the house and you'll be let in. Stay low. Go, before the moon reappears!"

Caleb watched as the three figures dashed across the lawn and disappeared into the shadows of the house. Onyx leaped to his feet, his tail wagging. "All right, boy. Let's go."

They jogged across the lawn and up the steps of the front porch. Caleb banged the door knocker three times. The door opened to Dory's smiling face. "Why Master Caleb, what a surprise to see you tonight. I suppose you're here to see Abe. He's out, but be back soon." Her dark eyes gleamed as the moonlight shone in the open doorway. "I just made a batch of shortbread cookies and a fresh pot of tea. Go on into the library."

When Onyx tried to follow Caleb, the butternut brown-skinned woman barred his way. "Onyx, get your bones out of here before I chase you with my broom!" The dog circled, his head bowed in submission but his tail wagging.

"Oh, all right. You go 'round to the back door, and I'll give you some supper scraps."

The animal bounded off the porch and disappeared into the shadows.



OD GRANTS SERENITY TO the one who possesses a pure heart.' Can you believe that's what Matron Crookshank instructed me to repeat for an entire hour?" The seventeen-year-old daughter of New York State's Assemblyman Samuel Pownell hopped onto the center of her bed, her skirts spread around her. She brushed a stray ebony ringlet from her cheek. "I'll wager she wouldn't make Evangeline Buchanan repeat such a silly sentence."

"I should hope not, since her name isn't Serenity." Eulilia Northrup, Serenity's best friend and roommate, chuckled. "Be thankful your parents named you Serenity and not Chastity or Charity."

Serenity's crystal blue eyes deepened to thunderstorm gray. "My mother's name is Charity."

"O-o-h, sorry." The girl covered her mouth with one delicate hand.

"It's all my Grandma Mendoit's fault. She was a Quaker before she married my Huguenot grandfather. Mama says the only time she paid any mind to her childhood religion was when she birthed a child. She had six sons, all named after the disciples of Jesus, and seven daughters, including my mother, all named for Christian virtues."

Eulilia's eyes widened in genuine surprise. "I didn't know there were that many virtues."

"*Tsk!* Well, there are! But that's not the point. The point is my mother named me after her favorite sister, Aunt Serenity...." Serenity rolled her

eyes. "'A saint of a woman who never raises her voice or rushes about in an unladylike frenzy,' "Serenity chanted in a sing-song manner that mocked her mother. "How many times have I heard that?"

Eulilia giggled. Eulilia always giggled. Serenity averted her gaze toward the window to hide her tears of frustration. *She doesn't understand. How can she with a delicate name like Eulilia?*

The dormitory window faced the rugged Berkshire Mountains of Massachusetts and the gatekeeper's stone cottage. Beyond the massive iron gates Serenity could see the dusty roadway that led toward Boston, then home to western New York State. A twinge of loneliness stabbed at her stomach. Eight months at Martha Van Horne's Finishing Academy for Young Ladies and she longed for home on the shores of New York's Lake Cayuga. *Only a month to go . . .* she sighed. *Then Papa will come for me.*

"I don't know why they sent me here. A modern woman of 1850 doesn't need 'finishing,' " Serenity said, rolling her eyes toward the ceiling. "I can only imagine what Lucritia Mott would say about Matron Crookshank and her little protégés. Besides, I can act as feminine as any other student here at the academy, when I want to, that is."

"Oh, ta-ta!" Eulilia hopped from her bed and sashayed across the faded blue Persian rug. "Ah, yes, as charming and witty as Evangeline Buchanan of the Baltimore Buchanans and her dearest friend, Annabelle Longworthy of Savannah. You have heard of the Savannah Longworthys, of course." The girl straightened an imaginary wrinkle from the gathered skirt of her navy lindsey-woolsey uniform, with its regulation-starched, white blouse and pinafore.

Serenity lifted one eyebrow and smirked. "And you are the epitome of refinement, I presume?"

Eulilia waved one hand in the air, aping Matron Crookshank's mannerisms. "But of course, my deah."

"Indubitably!" Serenity responded in kind. "Especially the night we sneaked down to the pond so you could spark with the stable hand, while I twiddled my thumbs standing guard! Remember how you got stuck between the gate spikes on the way home and old Herman had to come to your rescue?"

"Seri! What a venomous tongue!"

"Oh, Eulia, stop complaining! I'd die to have a waistline like yours. You're the one the boys swarm around when we go to town." A movement outside the window caught both girls' attention.

"Speaking of Herman," Eulilia interrupted, signaling toward the window, "it's wash day." Her eyes sparkled with deviltry as she pointed at the caretaker's cottage. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"No, we can't." Serenity shook her head, but her grin belied her. "I'm already in trouble with Matron Crookshank because of you."

Eulilia's pink bow mouth bloomed into a pout. "Not fair! You enjoyed the ginger cookies just as much as I. It's not my fault you got caught and I didn't."

A growl rumbled in Serenity's throat. "I wouldn't have gotten caught if Herman hadn't seen me running from the milkhouse. Everyone knows you can't have fresh-baked ginger cookies without a glass of cold milk."

Eulilia's golden ringlets danced about her shoulders. "Which, I might add, is all the more reason we should. . . ." She rolled her eyes toward the window. "Sweet revenge."

"And if he catches us?"

"How can he? I'll wager he's wearing that silly robe of his by now!"

Every Monday evening, at the end of Mademoiselle DuChey's French class, the girls of the academy would watch as Herman Gustaffan, the gatekeeper, dragged a large tin washtub from his shed and into the stone cottage. An hour later, from the dormitory's second-story window, they would see the old man, wrapped in a yellow satin robe printed with garish red poppies, drape two pairs of britches and two shirts to dry on the hedge growing between his cottage and the campus.

Suddenly the girls jumped up and ran to one of the west-facing rooms to catch a glimpse of the patched and baggy britches and the gatekeeper in his yellow satin robe. Looking down they saw him, right on schedule. As Serenity and Eulilia watched, the man carefully arranged the britches on the boxwood with the precision of a skilled quilter. The heavy canvas trousers looked defenseless and forlorn spread out on the hedge to dry.

"So?" Serenity shot a glance at Eulilia. "I dare you."

Eulilia's eyes widened with excitement. "I double dare you."

A slow smile spread across Serenity's freckled face. "We'll have to wait until after dinner and vespers."

"My, my!" Eulilia rubbed her stomach and giggled. "I do believe it is almost time for our evening repast." As if on cue, the dinner bell gonged. Instantly the sound of doors slamming and the clatter of black, button-topped, leather shoes clicking on the marble hallway filled the dormitory. "Shall we, Miss Pownell?"

"In a moment." Serenity tugged at a stray ringlet coursing the side of her left cheek as she straddled up to a mirror standing in the corner of the room, then spit-curled a shorter ringlet above her right eyebrow. "This hair of mine! Another curse!"

"Oh yes, naturally curly hair can be such a burden!" Eulilia said, nudging her way to the mirror. "You should have to roll your hair in rags every single night of your life!"

Serenity's stomach growled. She straightened her skirt over the many layers of embroidered petticoats and swished toward the door. "Are you coming, or are you going to primp all evening?"

Throughout dinner, the two girls eyed one another across the long, white linen-clad dinner table, barely suppressing their laughter. Constance Bidwell sighed impatiently. "Miss Northrup, would you please share with us the reason for yours and Miss Pownell's high spirits this evening?" As senior hostess at the table, it was her job to stimulate conversation.

"Sorry, Miss Bidwell." Eulilia blushed and averted her eyes to the plum cobbler in the berry dish before her. "It's a lovely evening, isn't it?"

"It's been threatening to rain all day long!" The older girl glared. "Perhaps you, Miss Pownell, would care to explain to the ladies present the reason for your breach of proper etiquette?"

"I'm afraid, there isn't much to tell. I . . . I I—"

"Save your explanations for the cook. She and the kitchen staff will appreciate your humor much more than we, as you assist in cleaning up."

Serenity groaned. Beneath the table, her toe started tapping out her irritation. The noise grew louder. Suddenly someone kicked her. She yelped in pain and glared at Eulilia smiling sweetly at her.

"Did I detect a murmur of complaint, Miss Pownell?" Constance's gaze hovered over Serenity like a hawk over a field mouse.

"Oh no, ma'am."

A satisfied smile coursed the older girl's face. With deliberation, she poured a stream of heavy cream from the small silver pitcher onto her plum cobbler. "Perhaps tomorrow morning you both will regale us with humorous tidbits of kitchen trivia."

The vesper bell had rung by the time Eulilia and Serenity finished their assigned kitchen tasks. The two girls ducked out the kitchen delivery door without being seen and darted around the corner of the building where they stopped to catch their breath.

"So far, so good," Eulilia gasped. "For once Constance's ill humor worked in our favor. No one will look for us until after vespers."

"You didn't have to kick me so hard, you know." Serenity rubbed her shin through her heavy skirts. "I am sure to be bruised by morning."

Eulilia cast a quick glance around the corner. "No one's in sight. Come on!" She scooped up her skirts and darted across the moonlit lawn and into the shadow of a large elm tree. Serenity followed, certain someone would shout for her to stop at any moment. Not noticing Eulilia had stooped, Serenity charged into her, toppling them both to the ground. Eulilia scrambled to her feet. "Can't you watch where you're going?"

Serenity sat up, her button-topped shoes protruding from beneath the petticoats. "Why'd you stop?"

"Sh!"

"You sh!" Serenity stood up and straightened her dress.

"You don't need to get ugly!" Eulilia snapped, struggling to her feet.

"One more unpleasant word from you and I'm heading straight for the dormitory, Eulilia Northrup." Serenity laced her arms across her chest. Her toe started tapping.

"All right, let's not quarrel." Eulilia sighed and pointed toward the five-foot hedge surrounding the caretaker's house. "You wait here until I'm out of sight, then follow, all right?"

"That's better," Serenity snarled as Eulilia sprang from the shadows and broke into a run. Serenity watched, nervously glancing back at the dormitory, then toward her friend. The girl disappeared around the northwest corner of the hedge. *Oh, dear Father in heaven, what have I gotten myself into this time?*