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# Chapter 1

Virginia, 1846

God sends meat; the devil brings cookies.” Emily O’Brien injected a light-hearted tone into her voice, even though she truly wished she could afford an occasional treat for her six-year-old brother. She turned away so he couldn’t see her sadness, grabbed the nearly empty bottle, and poured a cup of watered-down milk for him.

“Emily,” Duncan asked plaintively, “do you suppose it would be terrible bad if we invited the devil in just long enough to get a few cookies?”

“Ach! Now what kind of talk is that?” She turned back around in the cramped space between the food shelf and the table, set the tin mug down before him, and ruffled his red curls. “You’re a good lad, Duncan. You’d never want to do business with that pitchfork-carryin’ demon.”

“Aye, right you are.”

A tiny bleat of sound distracted Duncan’s attention. He glanced over at the bed where their sister and her newborn lay, then lowered his voice to a bare whisper. “Our Em, what are you going to do?”

His innocent question nearly broke her heart. His childlike belief that she could handle this made her breath hitch. Emily forced a smile. “I’ll go check on things today.”

Emily pulled the thin curtains over the window, then smoothed the skirt of her mud brown serge dress and tugged her shawl tighter. “You know what to do, Duncan—mine. I’ll be back quick as I can.”

Emily left the one-room shack and waited until she heard the latch slide home before she started toward the docks. Hopefully, when she returned, she’d not be alone. They’d been faithful to pray for Anna’s husband each and every day of his voyage. Mayhap the *Cormorant* had docked while Anna labored, and news just hadn’t come yet. As the captain, Edward would be busy when he docked his fine vessel.

*He has to be home. What am I to do if he’s not? Duncan and Anna are starving, and the babe won’t stay healthy if we’ve no coal. The midwife’s still wanting her money, and rent is due. If he’s not here yet, maybe I can at least get word on when the ship is due in.*

Another blast of cold air swept by, causing Emily to cease her musing. Huddled beneath her shawl, she scurried to get out of the harsh wind. "Dear Lord in heaven," she prayed under her breath, "if You could see clear to helpin' Edward be home with enough jingling in his pocket to keep us from being so cold and hungry, I'd count it as a real blessing."



"I'm looking for Edward Newcomb." Emily shivered as much from fear as cold while she stood at the bay side and made her inquiries. A more dangerous place didn't exist. Rough sailors passed by and treated her like a brazen hussy for asking about a man. No woman of decency came down here, but she had no choice. Desperation drove her. The men leered at her. One made comments saltier than the ocean air and grabbed for her. She hastily stepped backward, tripped, and fell over a coil of thick hemp ropes. A small cry curled in her throat as a haze of red engulfed her.

"Hey! Enough of that!" A tall, beautifully dressed gentleman strode up a narrow gangplank, along the sea-splashed dock, and crossed over toward her. The riffraff scuttled away like bilge rats in a storm. "Here now, miss. This isn't a safe place. You'd best get along home."

"Thank you," Emily said as he lifted her from the damp ground. The moment he set her back on her feet, she compressed her lips against the fiery pain that shot up from her left ankle.

He made no move to leave. Since he stood with his back to the sun, she couldn't see his shadowed face, but a kind tone urged, "You'd best go now, miss. This is no place for you."

For the first time since she'd set foot here, she felt safe. This man radiated authority and strength. Of all people, he could probably give her the best information. "Sir, I need help. I'm looking for someone."

He stared at her for a long moment, assessing her. Gulls cried, sails luffed, and the ropes mooring ships to the dock creaked. All around them, the bustle of dock life continued; but everything seemed motionless right here, and Emily fought not to squirm under this strange man's silent scrutiny. The fact that she couldn't clearly see his features made the whole situation feel even more awkward. She blurted out, "My sister's husband has been at sea for almost eight months, and I need news of his ship."

His voice softened with sympathy. "Well, then, let's get you some answers. Franklin!" The gentleman must have noticed her squinting into the rising sun. He stepped to the side so she could pivot. Finally she saw more of him than a mere silhouette. Dark brown, waving hair, heavy brows over deep-set, tea-colored eyes, and a strong, square chin. For a moment Emily almost gasped at how familiar he looked—but, no, that was merely a trick of the morning light. He was taller,

broader, and far more handsome than Edward. She chided herself for being so fanciful when she needed to locate her sister's husband at once.

A portly man bustled up. "Aye, sir?"

"Franklin, this lady needs our assistance," the gentleman said. "Her brother-in-law's ship, the—" He turned and looked at her.

"The *Cormorant*," she supplied.

The men exchanged a telling look. Emily's heart skipped a beat. The gentleman discreetly leaned a little closer and lowered his voice confidentially. "Miss, the *Cormorant* came home and set voyage the last week in May." Pity stole over his face as he added, "And she just set sail again yesterday."

Emily felt the blood drain from her face. She stared at him and shook her head. "No." She swallowed hard and tried to mind her manners while grasping for one last hope. "Mayhap that was another *Cormorant*, sir. He wed my sister. Right and tight he did. Anna had the babe two nights ago. She's ailing bad."

The gentleman shifted his weight so the sun now struck features that carried a reassuring mixture of compassion and concern. "I'll see to it the sailor meets his obligations," he promised in a voice as reliable as iron. "What is his name?"

"His name is Edward, sir. Edward Newcomb."

The gentleman's eyes narrowed, and his face grew unrelenting and harsh as a blizzard. "Begone, wench. I'll not be taken in by such a tale."

" 'Tis the honest truth!"

"You wouldn't know the truth if it were served to you on a china supper plate." His voice went cold as sleet. "Edward Newcomb is my brother. I, of all people, would know if he were married. Now leave."

Emily stared at him in disbelief.

"Away with you. I'll not stand by and allow anyone to slander my brother's reputation or dishonor our family name with such an outrageous fabrication."

A wave of anger overtook her horror. "Fabrication? He's married, he is! He's a father now, too. You tell him Anna gave him a son." Pride aching, she straightened her shoulders. "You tell your brother that while he's been larking around, his wife's dinner plate was empty. That, Mr. Newcomb, is the truth—and you can just choke on your fancy china and lies!"

Back straight as a rod, Emily turned to walk off. She bit her lower lip against the throbbing in her ankle and hobbled faster. Each step hurt worse than the last. She wasn't going to show it, though. She managed to get clear past the docks and to the street before she couldn't bear to go farther. There she leaned against the trunk of a wind-twisted tree and closed her eyes in anguish.

*What am I going to tell Anna?*



John Newcomb watched the dignified woman limp off. Even dressed in what

looked like a prim nanny's ragged castoffs, she'd stood regal as a queen. Now, straight-backed as could be, she walked away as if she were picking her way past rotted jetsam instead of a wealth of imports. He shook his head and heaved a deep sigh. "Where do they come from?"

"That was quite some yarn she spun," Franklin said.

"The woman's probably desperate to attempt such a ploy. Lame, thin, and wan as can be, she probably can't find either a job or a husband." John took a gold piece from his pocket and absently ran his thumb across the surface. 'Twas more money than she'd likely seen in several months, but he'd not even feel its loss. She didn't deserve anything for her scam, yet she must be in dire straits to have conjured up such a plan—unless there really was a hungry babe. Christ taught compassion instead of judgment. "Go give this to her."



Later, when Franklin returned, he trundled over and shoved his hands in his pockets. "The woman gave me a message for you. She promises to pay back every last cent."

John scoffed. "That promise is about as honest as her woeful tale."

Franklin rubbed the furrows in his forehead. "I almost believed her. She clutched your coin tight in her fist and said, 'The O'Briens hold honor dear. They don't take charity.'"

John dismissed her words and set to work. Newcomb Shipping demanded his full attention. Fine Virginia cotton, wool, and hemp awaited loading into the hulls of the *Peregrine*. The *Allegiant*, now full of wheat, Indian corn, tobacco, and oats, required one last inspection ere she set sail. In a nearby berth, dockhands scurried to offload the coffee the *Gallant* had imported from Rio. The stench of tar and turpentine wafted past as the wind shifted—a reminder that he needed an update on the *Osprey's* repairs. John strode down the dock and set out his priorities for the day.



The very next morning, Franklin handed John a note. "A lad brought this for you."

Intrigued, John unfolded the smudged paper and caught a penny as it slid out.

*Dear Mr. Newcomb,*

*I'll be faithful to pay you back.*

*O'Briens don't take charity.*

The brave little woman's words echoed in John's mind. She hadn't behaved as he'd expected her to. He'd thought she'd taken him for a soft touch, but she'd sent back this penny—a mere pittance. Was she hoping to reel him in for more?

As the day crawled on, her words kept haunting him. *Anna gave him a*

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*son. . . married. . . while he's been larking around, his wife's dinner plate was empty. . . .* What if he'd misjudged the poor girl? Maybe she hadn't been trying to make fraudulent accusations in hopes of getting money. Was it possible one of the *Cormorant's* crewmen actually misrepresented his identity and she believed her cause to be just? The sincerity in her tone and the look in her expressive green eyes certainly rang true.

The *Cormorant* had set sail on a prolonged voyage, so John couldn't even pose questions of Edward for several months. If the woman's plight was as dire as she'd implied, she couldn't wait for assistance. John determined to gather some facts. He sent for a discreet fellow he'd used to investigate sensitive matters in the past and engaged his services.



Though he normally didn't personally oversee ships' departures, two days later John stood at the dock and watched the *Resolute* leave her moorings. He'd brought down a small case of heirloom jewelry. The bequest was to reach a young woman, and he'd not wanted any chance of its disappearing, so he'd specifically handed the treasures to the captain. The 4:00 a.m. turn of the tide made for an all-too-early awakening, but John shrugged it off. 'Twas part of his responsibility, and if ever he had a daughter, he'd want others to handle her cherished possessions with as much care.

Rather than going back home, he went into the shipping office. The register containing the contents of his warehouse lay open on his desk, but the figures of cotton bales, bushels of Indian corn, and bags of coffee beans could wait. Instead, John dragged his chair over by the stove. He'd barely started to nod off when the door opened.

"Sir, I found her—that woman you were looking for." The agent handed him a scrap of paper and slipped out the door as soon as John paid him.

*Anna O'Brien, No. 6, Larkspur.* Larkspur lay on the very outskirts of town, along the farthest edges of the docks—shantytown. John quickly drew on his warm greatcoat and set out. Instead of riding his horse, he took a wagon and ordered the driver to let him off about a half mile away from the address. This way he'd not have to worry his mount would be stolen. He hadn't been to shantytown since he was a callow youth. Back then it had looked dreary and sordid; time had only worsened its condition. A silvery half-moon illuminated the frost that sparkled on everything—reminding him of an iced deck. He'd rather be on such a deck than here—'twas less chancy than wandering this district.

"Wretched" described Larkspur perfectly. The dwellings were nothing more than shanties knocked together out of salvaged scraps of wood. Bitterly cold, tangy ocean air whistled between them; and ramshackle as they looked, John marveled, as he did every time he saw them, that they didn't blow over. One stood like a polished pebble amidst the rubble. Number Six. He stared at the gray, weathered

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boards. Not a weed grew around them. In fact, a few flowers and tangled squash vines struggled to endure against the late autumn wind. He made a fist, then reconsidered. The wooden door was rough. No use getting splinters in his knuckles. Instead he used his boot to kick lightly on the widest plank.

## Chapter 2

Just a minute,” a sleepy voice bade.

Seconds passed while John impatiently flicked his gloves against his thigh. Each of his exhalations fogged on the cold, cold air. Even wrapped in the folds of his thick greatcoat, the air’s icy bite penetrated to the skin. Across the way, the eyes of rats gleamed red like ingots fresh from Hades. Steps sounded, and a high-pitched voice asked, “Who is it?”

“John Newcomb.”

“’Tis John Newcomb, Anna. Do I let him in?”

Lamplight shone through small cracks in the house, so it came as no surprise that each word could be heard through the rattletrap boards. Thin wails of a babe wavered in the air. Anna must have nodded, because a latch slid free moments later, and a lanky boy with a sleep-tousled, red mop of hair peered out from behind a mere crack in the door.

“Thank you.” John pushed his way in. As soon as he determined no danger existed inside the abode, he shut and secured the door. Slowly he looked about and took measure of the tiny, one-room shack. Shock rippled through him before he disciplined his features.

Such meager contents: a bed, two rickety chairs, a battered table, and a pathetic excuse for a stove. In the corner, behind a tattered bit of sailcloth that had been pushed back, a rumpled pallet lay directly on the sand-gritted flooring planks. He focused back on the bed and wondered how old the tiny woman in it might be. How could she, the lame woman, and this little lad—let alone a babe—possibly survive in circumstances this grave?

“John Newcomb,” a faint voice said from the bed. “I didn’t know Edward had a brother. How kind you are to come see your nephew!”

It took but three steps to reach the bedstead. The woman in it looked pitifully thin and weary, but even with those marks against her, John immediately recognized her similarity to the woman he’d met at the shipyard. Red hair and big green eyes attested that they were sisters, but her ashen skin warned that she’d been ill a long while. Just above the edge of a time-battered blanket, he spied a downy head.

The sickly woman smiled at John, then followed his gaze to look back down at her infant. “I’ve not named him yet. I hoped Edward would be here to help me decide on what his son is to be called.” She painstakingly drew the covers

back a tad. Her fourth finger, John noticed, bore no wedding band.

Was she fighting modesty or just too weak to do the minuscule task? He leaned forward and looked intently at the tiny, swaddled bundle. In no way did the babe resemble Edward. In point of fact, the babe didn't take after anyone John knew. He looked like a wizened old man as he screwed up his face and let out a tiny bleat.

"Oh, now," Anna crooned softly.

John tried not to show his surprise when a shred of paper drifted out of the pillow slip. Knowing poverty existed was one thing, but seeing this timid little woman eke by with a paper-stuffed pillow defied belief. She reminded him of a tiny mouse, nesting in shreds of paper.

"Duncan, come be a dear and check his nappy for me. The puir, wee man-child is likely wet and hungry again."

For being on the young side, little Duncan handled the task with fair grace. The lad's arms were bony, and the baby's limbs looked like nothing more than matchsticks. From what he saw, John knew no one in this household had benefited from a decent meal in a long while.

Since they were occupied, John made no apologies for snooping about. A strip of salt-flecked, discarded sail gathered on a bit of string served as a curtain on the narrow window, but discarded newspapers covered the pane in a vain attempt to insulate the shack. Two shelves hung on one side of the window. A sparse collection of mismatched dishes perched on one. The other held nothing more than a pair of bruised apples, two pint jars filled with dried leaves, and a small glass bottle with barely an inch of milk. John's brows knit as he searched in vain for evidence of any other food.

*His wife's dinner plate was empty.* The words echoed again in his mind. They'd not been a melodramatic exaggeration. If anything, they'd been an understatement. John's heart ached with pity, and he no longer wondered why the spirited woman had concocted her scheme to blame Edward for the paternity of the babe. She had come to his shipyard desperately needing to feed her family—but where could she be? And why had she paid back a penny when she should have bought food with it? What else had she done with the money?

He opened the stove and stirred the embers. The coal bucket next to the stove held one last small clump—certainly not enough to keep them warm for even half an hour more. He tossed it in, did his best to fasten the tiny grated door that hung askew, and asked in a deceptively casual tone, "Where is your sister?"

"She'll be home soon," Duncan answered. He tucked the baby in the bed. "There, then, our Anna. You were right about your wee little fellow wanting his supper. He's chewing on his fist. Put your arm about my shoulder. I'll help you turn a bit."

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John watched the lad take his sister's frail, linen-covered arm and hook it about his own scrawny neck. Together they looked like a small heap of snowed-upon kindling. The lad didn't look half big enough to move her.

Propriety dictated John should turn his back. Anna O'Brien was a stranger, dressed in her nightgown, and lay in bed no less. A man of decency would never call upon a woman still in her childbed unless she were close family. Though circumstances rated as far less than fully proper, John couldn't stand by and allow this poor woman and her kid brother to struggle. "I'll help."

A smile brightened the lad's somber face. "Thank you, sir."

After Duncan stepped out of the way, John learned firsthand that Anna's profound weakness kept her from raising her own arms. Even after he stooped and gently lifted her arm, she could scarcely cup her hand about his neck. When he turned her, thin shoulder blades jutted out like bird wings beneath her gown. She shivered, not from his touch, but from the drafts coming through the walls. He gingerly tucked the babe close to the bodice of her gown and hastily situated the blanket around them. She rewarded his aid with a smile that glowed with gratitude. "Oh, you made that so easy for me. I thank you."

John tried not to show his horror at her thinness, but when the babe's wail echoed the wind whining between the walls, he asked quietly, "Do you have enough milk for the baby?"

"Not yet—but we're in the first days." A faint pink washed into her cheeks. "According to the midwife, three or four days usually pass before milk flows well."

John nodded. It wasn't that he truly agreed; he knew nothing about such matters. He did so because of the desperate hope and worry mingling in the new mother's voice. She needed privacy, so he excused himself. "The morning is cold, and your stove is near empty. I'll be back in a while with some coal."

"Oh! You'd do that for us? You're a generous man, John Newcomb."

He ordered Duncan to latch the door behind him and waited until he heard the slat slide into the warped bracket before he strode away. This neighborhood carried a hopeless mix of the poor, the drunken, and the unsavory. His hand went naturally to the reassuring knife he wore sheathed on his belt. Years on a ship had taught him how to wield it for any necessary task. Down here, protection was essential—yet Duncan and Anna lived helpless as lambs among this rabble.

The gold coin he'd given should have paid for warmth and food. Desperate as their needs were, why hadn't the other O'Brien woman used it sensibly? Her foolishness kept them hungry and cold. He shook his head in disbelief. What lunacy drove her?

John wisely came here without much jangling in his pocket. Providing such temptation would invite attack. Dawn hadn't yet broken, but the dingy thoroughfare lined with a smattering of shops sluggishly stirred to life. Lamps started to

light windows and illuminate expansive boasts that the small businesses failed to fulfill. Even the bakery's fragrant aroma seemed to promise far more than simple loaves and buns.

First he purchased a basket and hooked it awkwardly over his left arm. By spending most of the paltry coins he'd brought, John determinedly filled it to overflowing. He'd done his share of bartering and marketing in dozens of ports and used that experience to make sure he got fair value for his coin. Badly as that lad and the new mother needed to eat, he'd not settle until he knew their bellies would be full.

"You there." He pointed at a stoop-backed man. "I need two full scuttles of coal taken to shanty number six, Larkspur Lane, right away."

"Aye, sir. I'll be right on yer heels!"

John arrived back at the shack and bumped the door once before young Duncan opened it. "Bless me, Anna—he came back!" He danced an excited jig as he said in astonished wonderment, "And he brought food!"

John set the basket on the table. He'd carefully set a handful of cookies atop everything else in hopes they wouldn't get broken. The lad spied them and did the inexplicable—he backed away. "Are y—you the d-d-devil?"

"Duncan!" his sister gasped.

Eyes big as saucers, Duncan whispered, "Em says, 'God sends meat; the devil brings cookies.' Anna, he brought cookies!"

John chuckled and pulled a small ham from the basket. "There, now. Meat. Does that put your mind at ease?"

Duncan still didn't look certain. He patted his sister's leg. "What are you thinking we ought to be doing?"

"All's well, boy-o." Anna gave John a winsome smile. "Please forgive him."

"There's nothing to forgive. Duncan is trying to protect his family." A knock sounded. John opened the door and accepted the coal.

Duncan spied the fuel. "Oh, sir! God bless you! Anna, this'll keep the baby warm all year!"

John chortled softly at the boy's innocence and enthusiasm. He didn't have the heart to deny the claim. Indeed, he'd arrange for coal to be delivered so Anna, her wee babe, and little Duncan would be warm for as long as they needed. He quickly added coal to the stove, wishing it wouldn't need time before the fire would catch and radiate more heat.

John pulled a slightly bent knife from the shelf. After the first cut, he traded it for his belt knife and sliced the loaf of bread and cheese. Ham had never been hacked into sorrier slabs, but he felt sure neither Anna nor Duncan would notice. He handed the lad some bread.

"Get water so I can put the eggs on to boil." While Duncan took a bucket

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and scampered outside to a communal pump, John carried the bread and cheese over to the bedside. As he gently lifted Anna's shoulders and head, he realized Duncan had taken his own blanket and spread it atop her.

Before Anna accepted a bite, she paused and dipped her head. Her pale lips moved silently in what he presumed to be a prayer. Though he knew she was half-starved, she took dainty bites from his hand. Her eyes shone with gratitude.

Duncan returned and filled a small pot, then set the eggs to boil. The remainder of the water went into a chipped porcelain pitcher. He gobbled up another slice of bread. "Soon as the eggs are done, I'll make you some tea. I'll cool the rest of the water a bit, and we can wash up the babe, too."

"You're a fine uncle, Duncan," Anna praised. She looked up at John and whispered, "As are you, John Newcomb. I've prayed for Edward to come home, but the Lord surely sent you in the meantime. You're an unexpected answer to my supplications."

John gave no reply. He'd made no claim to the babe and promised nothing, yet he felt guilty as a thief. After setting foot here, he could easily see why they sought a male connection. He never should have come. He wasn't a man to indulge in deception, yet his very presence hinted at a relationship that didn't exist.

He knew his brother well. Edward appreciated quality things, cultured women, and monied society far too much to consort with an impoverished, skinny Irish lass. Clearly, someone had hornswoggled this poor girl, but he knew it wasn't Edward's doing. Relief sifted through him that his brother wouldn't do such a contemptible thing. Despite his compassion and pity for the occupants of this shack, John refused to pretend any connection.

He finished feeding her slivers of ham, a small hunk of cheese, and the bread, then laid her back down. In his younger years, he'd seen a ship that had been caught in the Doldrums and the sailors had nearly starved. They gorged on food and became violently ill. As a result of that memory, he hesitated to offer her more. She'd barely eaten enough for a small child, yet she seemed quite satisfied.

"Oh, I thank you. That was wondrous good."

"There's more. You need to eat tiny meals several times a day to build up your strength."

"I've had gracious plenty. We'll save the rest for Emily."

*Oh, so her name is Emily.*

"There's lots for Em," Duncan said as he stood on tiptoe to peer into the kettle and check on the eggs. John clasped the boy's thin frame and lifted him away. He was far too short—couldn't they see he'd likely scald himself? *But what choice do they have? Where is Emily, and why isn't she here, tending these two?*

Duncan traipsed over to the bed. "Emily could eat all day and night. The whole basket is brimming. Mr. Newcomb brought us a feast, our Anna."

Anna's thin face lit with delight. "God be praised! We'll have a bit to eat on the morrow. Mr. Newcomb, you're too kind!"

"Rest," John bade gruffly. It pained him to see a woman so starved that she thought to ration such a modest offering. He'd filled the basket with whatever could be found, but this fare rated as exceedingly plain. The total of its contents was far less than the waste from his own table each day.

Cold seeped through the walls. He felt awkward covering Anna, but she'd weakly slumped onto her back again and needed warmth in the worst way. Her linen gown looked threadbare. He'd never given any thought to the bedding in his home, but one of his blankets measured thicker than both on her bed combined. As he tugged the blankets up higher and tucked them beneath her shoulders so they'd capture whatever meager heat she had, she shivered. From the appreciative, trusting look on her face, he knew it wasn't a shiver of apprehension but one of pure, cold misery. "More coal," he muttered to himself. "We need to warm up this place."

He strongly considered smashing a chair and adding it to the stove. The dry wood would catch and blaze quickly until the coal finally burned well. A single glance at the furniture in the place established the fact that not a single piece was worth salvaging. He'd use one of the chairs first. From the looks of them, one solid whack, and they'd shatter.

Before he could rise and carry out that plan, the door rattled. Having knelt to tend the coals, John needed to crane his neck to see past the table. The woman from the dock limped in. Worry creased her face, and he strongly suspected the redness of her nose and eyes wasn't just from the cold. She forced a smile that didn't begin to hide the worry in her big, green eyes. "What are my two loves doing up so very early?"

"Em! He came!"

She perked up and avidly scanned the tiny shanty. "Edward? Where?"

From the bed Anna said, "Tisn't my Edward, but it's the next best, Emily. My Edward has a brother! His name is John, and he came."

"He brought food and coal!"

Emily bristled. She stared at the basket, then said, "O'Briens don't take charity!"

John stood. "One could scarcely call it a charity, Miss O'Brien."

Her gaze bore right through him. "Oh, so you've decided we might be family now, have you?" She pulled a scarf from her head and shook out a fire fall of breathtakingly beautiful, thick, auburn hair.

*Brazen*, he thought. He stared straight back and felt a wave of disgust. What other work did a woman do at night but to be a harlot? His voice took on a sharp edge. "I've decided nothing."

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A sharp gasp sounded from the bed off to his side. Anna's reaction accused him of hideous cruelty, for he'd just served her a terrible—if unintentional—insult. Too weak even to care for herself, the poor girl-woman now suffered from his temper, too. He'd just slurred her character in the worst way imaginable simply because he'd tried to take the starch out of her sister. Shame flooded him.

Emily opened the door. Her glower could set a bonfire. "Please leave."

He'd go, though first he owed Anna his apology. John looked over at her, but Duncan slipped between them. His little face puckered with confusion, but he took his sister's cue and tried to protect Anna.

"Emily," the little boy said, "I don't understand."

Anna began to weep.

"He started out by being so nice." Duncan's voice carried a plaintive tone. "He's Edward's brother, and he brought us food!"

Emily cast a glance at the basket on the table, then back at John. Weariness mingled with bitterness in her tone. "Duncan, he isn't here because he thinks we're family. He intended it as charity."

"Stop this nonsense and shut the door," John snapped. The woman had no more sense than a brick to be letting what little heat they had in the shack escape. Didn't she notice every breath any of them took condensed into a fog?

She adamantly shook her head. "Not until you're on the other side."

"Now see here!"

"No, you see here," Emily said in an unrelenting tone. "Edward Newcomb married Anna. I'll not let you insult my sister or besmirch her name."

"You have proof of this marriage?"

Contrary to her earlier assertion, Emily shut the door. The whole wall shook. "Aye, we do." She hastily tied her scarf back over her remarkable hair in a belated move of modesty, limped over to the far side of the bed, and produced a small fabric bag he'd spied earlier. From it she drew out a black book. Most of the gold from the lettering had long since rubbed off. For a second she reverently passed her chapped hand over the battered-looking leather cover, then laid the Bible on the bed and opened it. "We recorded Anna's nuptials here, and—"

"I'm not about to accept that as proof." John marveled at her gumption. Did she think him so gullible that he'd stupidly accept such a poorly executed sham? "Anyone can write whatever they jolly well please!"

"Not in the Holy Scriptures," Duncan protested, his voice full of shock.

"If that isn't good enough, then the license will speak for itself!" Emily took a folded sheet of paper out and smoothed it open. "Seeing as you're hostile, I'll thank you to step away from the fire ere I hand this over."

John made an impatient noise and reached her side. Stiff and straight as she stood, she barely cleared his shoulder. John resisted the urge to swipe the paper

from her. Matters in this pitiable household were already strained enough without his acting like a brute—though he rather felt like one for having upset sickly little Anna. Try as he might, he couldn't block out the muffled sounds of her weeping. Nevertheless, he had to focus on the principal matter at hand. He stared at the page Emily laid on the bed and scowled. "This is nonsense!"

"Nay, 'tis Latin." Emily's tone carried a rich tang of sarcasm. Her hand shook as it hovered over the flower-embellished parchment. She pointed at several places but didn't actually touch the document. "Here. The vicar's signature. Here. Anna's. Mine. Edward's and our neighbor Leticia's. There were witnesses, so the marriage is legal as can be."

"My brother's middle name is Timothy, not Percival." He ignored the impatient flash in her eyes that accused him of concocting a falsehood and looked back at the signatures. The application of their tutor's ruler to the back of Edward's hand had taught him superb penmanship. John scowled. "Whoever signed this wasn't my brother. The scrawl on this is scarcely legible. Furthermore, if this is a marriage certificate, I'm a chamber pot. The Latin on here is a collection of words that mean nothing at all. 'Tis sheer gibberish."

The jut of Emily's chin made it clear she didn't believe him. Her hand dove back into the bag once again. Out it came. Between her calloused thumb and blistered forefinger, she held a ring. "And this? You cannot deny a family ring!"

John's breath caught. He took the ring from her. The thin band of gold held nothing more than a little ruby chip in the center. As jewelry went, the piece was cheap as could be, but John had given a similar ring to his governess when he was younger than Duncan. He recalled his mother taking him to a jeweler's, where there had been dozens of such rings with either rubies or sapphires. He'd thought the pinkish red stone fitting for a woman, so he'd chosen one of the ruby ones.

"Where did you get this?" He fought the ridiculously strong urge to curl his fingers and keep the sentimental little piece, even though there was no proof it was the one he'd once given. Undoubtedly hundreds of women owned such rings.

"It's Anna's wedding band, it is. Edward Newcomb himself put it on her finger. He said it had belonged in his family for generations. Anna grew afraid her pretty wedding band would slip off because she'd gotten so thin, so we kept it here for safety." Emily snatched it back. She meticulously put everything back into the bag.

"You've given me no real proof, Emily. Newcomb isn't an uncommon name. I could ride just one day's direction either way and find a good half dozen Newcombs. A man with a name similar to my brother's duped your sister. That is a pity, to be sure, but those facts and your so-called evidence aren't nearly enough to convince me a true and holy marriage exists between my brother, Edward Timothy Newcomb, and Anna."

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## PRECIOUS BURDENS

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Emily's jaw hardened. "Sir, take yourself out of here."

John tore his gaze from hers. He glanced over at the pillows. Beneath the covers, Anna's much-too-thin shoulders continued to jerk with every muffled sob she took. The babe began to cry.

"Now see what you've done?" Emily whispered hotly. "Begone!"

"And take this with you!" Duncan swept the basket from the table and shoved it at him. John's hands automatically closed around the handle. The little boy hadn't let go of the basket. He put all of his puny weight behind it to force John out. The effort didn't actually work, but John saw no point in tarrying where he wasn't wanted. He no more than stepped outside, and the door slammed shut.