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*Spinning Out of Control* © 2006 by Vickie McDonough  
*Weaving a Future* © 2006 by Susan Page Davis

ISBN 978-1-59789-985-7

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Cover Image: Altrendo Images/Altrendo/Getty

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,  
[www.barbourbooks.com](http://www.barbourbooks.com)

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Printed in the United States of America.

# Chapter 1

Virginia, 1750

Frost silvered the grass of Fredrick Town's common, making it sparkle in the first light of morn. Samuel Walsh stood at the door of the inn and glanced out, knowing he needed to be on his way soon. His breath condensed on the crisp morning air. Pulling his thick wool cloak tighter against the biting chill, he scanned the area. A small movement caught his attention, and he sucked in a surprised breath. There, chained to the hitching post, huddled a woman.

Seeing her set him in motion. No one ought to be treated so cruelly—and especially not a woman. Concern quickened his pulse and lengthened his stride.

The woman formed a tiny ball in a futile attempt to conserve what little warmth she created. She'd tucked her legs under the ragged homespun dress and rested her head betwixt her imprisoned arms. The wind blew, and she failed to even shiver. *Is she alive?*

Samuel pressed his fingers to the side of her cold, cold neck and detected a thready pulse. "God bless you, woman! You're nearly frozen." He whipped off his heavy cape and enveloped her in its warmth. A short chain looped over and around the hitching post, manacled her to the center. As a result, the woman didn't even have enough length to permit her to draw in her arms to conserve her own heat. Sam squatted to serve as a windbreak for her as he reached up to chafe her icy hands.

It took a full minute before the woman dully opened her eyes. They matched the pale gray of an early spring morning mist, and her dazed expression told him she couldn't comprehend why such degradation and suffering were visited upon her.

"There, now," he crooned as he cupped her frigid face between his hands. "You'll be warm soon."

A piteous moan curled in her throat.

Sam looked around. No one else stirred on the common. Metal items cost dearly, but a paltry half-dozen links held her fast. Fresh scrape marks on the wood bespoke her attempts to reach the edge so the chain would fall onto the support piece and allow her to draw in her arms. His hands roared with heat in comparison to hers as he chafed them.

She'd not been here last eve when he arrived. 'Twas already gloaming then, and he'd made haste to see his horse stabled ere he wearily signed the inn's register, partaken of a hot meal, and filled space in the bed he'd hired in the upstairs. Frost on her eyelashes, hair, and shoulders told him she'd suffered out here during the time he'd burrowed under thick blankets.

Resolving to put a stop to this travesty, he squeezed her hands to gain her attention. "Where is your master?"

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Her head sagged between her arms again.

Samuel briskly rubbed her arms, then cupped her pale cheeks. "I mean to help you."

She stared at him. Tears silvered her eyes, formed rivulets down her grimy cheeks, and disappeared between his fingers. Hopelessness radiated from her.

"I'll be back." Sam rose. "Right back." He stalked toward the smithy. Surely he'd find an ax there. He'd chop through the hitching post and free the woman in a trice.

"What's this?" A deep voice growled from a distance.

Samuel wheeled around to see a stocky man snatch the cloak from the girl. "Replace that at once!" Samuel ran back.

The pock-faced man booted the woman in the thigh. Even though the action scooted her a good nine inches to the side and stretched her arms to the point that the chain pulled, she barely winced.

"Cease that! There's no cause—"

"She belongs to me." The stranger spat at her feet. "I hold no particular affinity for her, though."

"That's plain enough to see!" Sam reached them and yanked his cloak from the stranger's hands. As he engulfed the girl within the woolen folds again, Sam felt the awful thinness of her shoulders. "Even a beast shouldn't be mistreated so." Samuel gently slid the woman back into place. His glare dared the owner to object. After he'd repositioned her in such a manner that her arms wouldn't be twisted so painfully, Samuel demanded, "Free her and explain yourself."

The man's jaw jutted forward, and he folded his arms across his chest.

"Free her," Samuel snarled. "Now."

Her owner's beady eyes took on a wary cast, and he produced a key. Samuel knew the woman's shoulder and arm muscles would cramp once the heartless owner freed her from the chain. He wasn't sure she could even comprehend much, but he knelt. "I mean no disrespect," he murmured as his hands delved past the sides of her bosom and turned beneath her arms to support the stick-thin limbs as they fell free from the shackles.

Her scrawny muscles twitched and spasmed, yet she compressed her lips and made no sound. Moisture in her eyes tattled on the pain she felt, but she

stayed silent. Could it be she was alert enough to realize he'd championed her? *Aye.* A spark of something in her glistening eyes told him 'twas so.

"You'll ne'er be chained again. I vow it." He pulled the cloak tight around her, then rose. Keeping one hand on her shoulder, Samuel glowered. "Explain yourself."

"A ship's captain sold her to me as she slept." The stranger cast a loathsome look at the pitiful woman. "Only five of the dozen brides survived the voyage."

"Twice in the last five years, the store's imported brides. After six weeks at sea, the women could barely walk, let alone wed and work. Couldn't you show her mercy?"

"She deserves none."

"I know not whence you've come," Sam gritted, "but here, slaves and indentured servants normally sleep in the stable, if not on a pallet in the inn."

The stranger merely shrugged.

"Women deserve to be protected and appreciated. If you cannot care gently for her, turn her over to someone who will."

"She's defiant." A sneer twisted the man's features. "I've had her a full fortnight, and she refuses to speak a word. I cannot wed her without her consent, so I've had to take to punishing her until her tongue loosens."

"Poor woman is likely mute!"

"Nay." The man shook his head. "Silence in a woman can be a good thing and in a slave a very good thing, but her silence is not from birth, for she mutters in her sleep. Best she stop this nonsense and learn who's her master."

"So you would leave her to the elements simply because she's been stubborn? This isn't discipline—'tis cruelty!"

"The widow was sold to pay off her husband's debts. I paid good coin for her and won't be cheated."

Sam went back on his knees beside the woman and tightened his cloak about her. "Have you never read the scriptures about caring for the widows and orphans?"

Hands on his hips, the man glowered. "Do you make me an offer?"

Samuel thought of the leather britches he needed. He also recalled how desperately his son Christopher required a shirt. *My family's needs must come first, and someone else will buy the woman. Whoever does, she'll not be much of a bargain. Small, thin, filthy, and mute, she'd make for a pitiful servant. No man would pay a bride price for her—clearly she is far too frail to bear children.*

He looked at the heap of humanity before him and tried to force himself to refuse to part with what little money he had.

She hung her head in a move of abject misery.

*She needs my compassion more than she needs my cloak. I promised her my assistance.* "I've not much. What do you ask?"

Sam knew full well the scarcity of women. Though neither pretty nor prizes in any other way, the brides in previous shipments didn't step foot inside the store ere men bought them. Indeed, the community gave grieving widows only two or three months of mourning. After that passage of time, the parson approached them about the natural order of living under a man's domination. A marriage usually followed on the very next Sabbath.

Avarice glinted in the stranger's eyes. "Twenty-eight pounds. With only two women for every three men here in the New World, I can get my price. You know I can."

Samuel let out a disbelieving snort. "This one's almost starved and mute!"

"Twenty, then."

Shaking his head, Sam heaved a sigh.

"Eighteen and not a single pence less."

*Lord, You know I haven't anywhere near that much. Watch over her and give her to a man who'll treat her with kindness.* Regret swamped Samuel as he turned loose of the cloak. The woman slumped sideways. He caught her ere she landed on her side.

The stranger cleared his throat. "Fifteen."

*Father of Light, You know I have just over six. What would You have me do?* Samuel couldn't let go of her.

"Fifteen pounds," the man repeated.

"A third of that, and you've done better than you ought. She's so weak, no man will offer you more."

"Now see here! Passage alone cost nearly six pounds."

Sam scoffed. "Do you take me for a fool? Six pounds would fund a private cabin. You said there were a dozen brides. Passage for the whole lot of them barely cost six."

Muttering curses, the man tugged the cloak from the girl and yanked her to her feet.

No woman ought ever be subjected to such base language and rough treatment. Samuel made one last attempt to redeem her. "'Tis abundantly clear her state isn't merely from a difficult voyage. She can't weigh so much as six stone."

Again her owner spat into the dust at her feet. "She's not worth feeding. She rendered no service to me."

Samuel stepped between them to protect her from the other man's crudity. Anger vibrated in his voice. "If she dies—and from the looks of her, that could well happen—those men you said would pay so dearly for her will convict you of murder."

Sam sensed her collapsing behind him, but he didn't move.

Fear flashed in the stranger's eyes. "Five pounds—in coin only. No paper money."

Elation filled him, but Sam kept his expression chilly. "The only papers will be hers, and you'll yield them to me at once."

"They're inside."

Samuel grabbed his cloak from the ground and shook it. "Go fetch the papers." He knelt in the dirt by the woman and tucked his cloak about her yet again. "Just a little while longer. I'll have you away from him. Just awhile longer." Sure the owner was out of sight, Samuel yanked off a boot. Two toes poked out of a hole in his stocking. Perhaps the woman would be able to darn it, but from the looks of her, not for a moon or longer. Coins spilled into his hand, and Sam counted out five pounds, then hastily dumped the remainder into his boot and tugged it back on.

No more had he gotten to his feet when the man returned. "Her papers. Give me the money."

Samuel inspected the papers. Finding all in order, he yielded the hard-earned money and turned back to the woman. He softly called her by the name on her papers. "Garnet Wheelock?"

Her eyes opened.

Samuel gave her what he hoped was a reassuring smile and brought the woman to her feet. Her legs threatened to buckle, but she caught the hitching post and stayed upright. No doubt, sheer dint of will was all that kept her on her feet. He wound an arm about her waist to lend her support and warmth, then bade, "Come."

Her head wobbled in what he took as nod of agreement, and she put one foot in front of the other. Her gait seemed oddly stilted. Sam quickly deduced she locked her knees with each step so her legs wouldn't give out. He felt the iron resolve beneath the shivering of her reedlike body. "I'll lift you. Your limbs cannot serve to step o'er the doorsill."

It took nothing at all to sweep her into his arms, and Samuel knew a moment's remorse for having given over such valuable coin for her. She would be too small and weak to serve at hard tasks. She must have sensed his hesitance, because the girl slid a hand out of the cloak and clenched his doublet in desperation.

"Rest your fear. I'd not give you back to such a fiend." He strode back to the inn and headed straight for the hearth. Once there, he settled her into a rough-hewn pine chair. "Stay here to gather warmth, and I'll fetch food for you."

"Eh!" The serving wench flapped her arms like a farmwife trying to shoo a pesky murder of crows from her newly sown field. "Get that baggage out!"

Placing a hand on his "baggage's" thin shoulder, Samuel steadied her ere she tumbled over. "The woman will partake of the meal intended for me. Have mercy on her."

"Mercy? Only the Almighty can do that! This is a proper place. We allow none of her ilk."

“The poor woman is near frozen and in need of sustenance. I’ll not permit any to gainsay me.” He gave the wench a piercing stare. “I’ve not asked more than my share. Since I’ve allotted my portion to her, you’ve no cause to object. Bring the food.”

The serving wench’s nose assumed a defiant tilt.

Samuel drew up a three-legged stool directly in front of the frail woman, eased his weight onto it, and gently tucked a tangle of hair behind her shoulder. He’d never seen such a filthy woman; but ’twas not her doing, and he couldn’t fault her. On the other hand, he did hold the serving wench to blame for her cold manner. He turned and gave her the same stern look he used for his children when they balked at doing a chore.

Lips pursed as though she’d tasted something sour, the wench flounced to a scarred pine sideboard and ladled a modest portion of the barley-and-oat gruel into a chipped pottery bowl. She cast a sly look at him.

Unwilling to let her goad him, he pasted on a smile. “You have my thanks, mistress, for adding both butter and cream to that.”

Once he accepted the bowl, Samuel stirred it. He took a small bite to test the temperature. Satisfied, he lifted a generous spoonful of gruel to his charge’s mouth and quietly urged her to eat. She obediently swallowed, but she wasn’t able to take in much. When it became apparent she’d eat no more, Samuel finished off the bowl and set it aside.

“Do you thirst, little one?” The small flicker of her smile was answer enough. Choosing not to trouble the serving wench again, Samuel rose and paced to the sideboard. Pewter pitchers of milk and ale rested there. He poured a tankard of the former and carried it back to the little scrap of a woman he’d purchased. She remained huddled within the thick folds of his cloak. She needed to warm up, and as he’d deemed her too weak to hold the beverage, Samuel resumed his seat on the stool and tilted the tankard to her cracked lips. Sip after sip she took—small ones, but they added up until she managed to drink half of the milk. She then looked at him, lifted her chin, and seemed to silently urge him to finish the rest.

“You may have it all. There’s plenty.”

She shook her head. It was more a weak wobble than anything, but since she communicated her refusal clearly, he drained the remainder of the creamy milk, then twisted to the side and set the tankard on a sticky tabletop.

He turned back to her and gently rested his palm on her thigh. She cringed at his touch, and her face twisted in embarrassed dismay. “Calm your heart, woman,” Samuel rumbled softly as he gently rubbed his thumb back and forth a discreet inch. “I merely wish to inquire whether his kick did you any damage.”

She shook her head.

“Very well.” Samuel rose. He had no goods with him, so he simply lifted her into his arms. “Because I’ve matters to attend, you’ll need to pass a bit of time.”

Her lips parted slightly as her brows knit.

“Don’t be troubled. I vow I’ll come back for you.” The way she shivered cut him to the core. Was it from fear or from cold? Most likely both, and that vexed him. She deserved every shred of reassurance and comfort he could give. He stepped over the threshold and murmured, “Since the woman here displays neither mercy nor charity, I’ll bear you off to the stable. It can shelter you until I return.”

The woman blinked.

“I count it a pity that wench showed you no understanding. Forgive her, if you can. ’Tis a small heart she must have, and that will make for a miserable life.”

He snuggled the mute closer and injected a bit of merriment in his voice to ease the dread in her eyes. “As for you—I suppose you could ponder upon the fact that sleeping in a stable is a blessed thing to do. Our Lord spent His very first nights in one.”

She let out a sigh and rested her temple lightly in the crook of his neck.

The stable lay a stone’s throw away from the inn. The stalls boasted generous heaps of fresh straw. Any of the servants or slaves who slept here last night had arisen and started their duties. Satisfied she’d be alone and safe, Samuel easily carried his burden to the farthest stall. Once he reached it, he shook his head. His horse had been watered, well fed, and warm for the night; the woman in his arms hadn’t received even a fraction of that basic attention.

He nudged his mare to the side. The stall still held a fair layer of straw, which Sam kicked into a small heap. He knelt before it. For a moment, the position brought to mind all the times he had knelt at the fireside and gathered his sons for a bedtime prayer. Odd that such a thought should flash through his mind, yet he felt the presence of the Lord in that warm, quiet moment.

“Rest here.” He laid the woman in the straw. “I must get supplies, and then I’ll take you home with me. I fear I left my blanket in the wagon over at the miller’s. The straw may itch, but it’ll keep you warmer. Pray, forgive me.” He tucked his cloak around her more closely before he took an armful of straw from the adjacent stall and piled it over her thin body. He made sure her face stayed clear, but the achingly sad beauty of her eyes took him aback. He gave her a tender smile and whispered roughly, “Rest.”

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At first, Garnet Wheelock thought this was a tall, broadly built man who possessed an exceedingly kind heart; but now, she knew different. With the morning sun shining through the open stable doors far behind him, a strange, golden nimbus radiated around the edge of his dark brown hair. Golden shards brightened the centers of his deep brown eyes.

He must be an angel—the angel of death. *I never knew death would wrap me*

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## VIRGINIA BRIDES

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*in warmth and whisper kind words. Lord, I'm ready. I come not on my own merit, but because the Lamb's blood covered my sins.*

"Rest," the angel bade her.

This moment of security was probably the euphoria of a dying mind, but she sank into that comfort and thanked heaven for the mercy of being given a peaceful dream in her final moments. Heaven was but a breath away.

"I'll soon take you away from here."

Everything rippled as if a pool of blissfully warm water were closing around her. As she started to drift off, her last sight was of the angel's compassionate smile. Soon the terrible memories would be purged from her mind.