

PROLOGUE

1864—The Wilderness, near Fredericksburg, Virginia—

A forest once stood here, but in the spring of 1864 only a tangle of rotted stumps, scrub trees, and underbrush remained—a virtually impenetrable wasteland called the Wilderness. This fallow land was worthless for any practical use; yet, by coincidence of time and circumstance, it brought together two great armies.

It was May 5, 1864 when tens of thousands soldiers clashed in a fever of war mentality. Tragically they were of one nation, divided, as was their nation, in what they fervently believed to be a fight for the rights of man and country.

After two days of fighting the sounds of musket and cannon dwindled—the Wilderness was quiet again except for the anguished cries of the wounded and dying. During the lonely darkness of night even their cries diminished as one by one the dying gave pitiful moans and drifted into eternal peace. On the third day, despair shrouded the battlefield as the mortal remains of brave soldiers, of both armies, were buried in shallow graves.

Brothers again—in eternity.

For many wounded soldiers the war was over. They limped homeward to find their families and to rebuild their shattered lives. Two such men were Virginians: Clay Bickford III, heir to Bickford Plantation on the Rappahannock River, and Judson

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Kent from Sarah's Creek on the York River. Clay Bickford had been born to aristocracy. Jud Kent had not. Yet a common thread, unknown to either, forged their destiny—for the same blood ran in the veins of both men.

Wounded at the Wilderness and taken prisoner by the Federals, they escaped and made their way down the Rappahannock River to the land and people they loved, to the woman whose love they shared, to the secret that bound them inexorably together.

Chapter 1

Coming Home—

A small sailboat appeared in the distance. She came from upriver where the water had been calm and protected, but upon rounding the point at Grey's Crossing she ran into the full force of a storm that had pounded the mouth of the Rappahannock River for three days. Her sail was wet and heavy, making her list dangerously as whitecaps lapped over her bow. The tiny vessel could not last in these seas; yet she pushed onward, as if sensing the urgency of her journey.

Two wretched men huddled below the gunnel trying to escape the cold wind and drenching spray. They cursed as saltwater seeped into raw wounds, setting them on fire. Sprawled in the bow, a gaunt man lay gravely wounded and in excruciating pain. His uniform, once handsome with its gold braid, was now rain-soaked and stained with blood from a wound in his chest. "Damn Yankee musket ball," he had growled.

The young man at the tiller still had a rifle ball in his left thigh. Infection had set in and even the slightest movement caused agonizing pain. A huge wave crashed into the skiff and slammed him against the gunnel. He lost his grip on the tiller

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causing the skiff to fall off the wind, nearly capsizing. Grimacing, he lunged desperately for the tiller and brought the tiny craft back on its course. Consciousness was fleeting as he searched for a creek the colonel had described. His eyes closed for a moment. He jerked awake and splashed his face with cold water. Shivering, he cursed the pain that ripped through him. He dozed again and jerked awake. In the distance, he saw an opening in the shoreline. Must be the creek, he thought. *Just a little longer. Please, Lord, just a little longer.*

"We're gonna make it, Colonel." He had to shout above the wind. Now broadside to the heavy seas, the small boat nearly swamped before she entered the quiet waters of a wide creek.

"We're there, sir." His voice faltered. "Thanks to the Lord, we've made it. We're home."

The colonel grabbed the gunnel and tried to sit up, but weakened by the futile effort he fell back, gasping for breath, grimacing from the pain.

"See anyone?" His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper.

"Nary a soul." The youth scanned the shoreline. "Wait . . . yes, sir. Over yonder in that cove. Two slaves."

"Tell them to get help." The man groaned and fell silent again.

"You all right, Colonel?"

The colonel's eyes were closed, his face ashen, flaccid. He had been in fair condition when they escaped from the Yankees, but with each passing hour, the pain had grown worse. Now it was nearly unbearable. Still he did not complain, although he surely knew he was failing fast. "I'll make it," he said.

The youth steered for the cove and shouted to the slaves who dropped their tools and came hesitantly to the water's edge.

"This place called Bickford?"

One of the slaves nodded. "Yes, suh."

Nudging the skiff to the bank, the youth pointed to the colonel and said, "You know this man?"

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The slave edged closer to the skiff and looked in.

“Mist' Clay! Oh, Lawdy . . . it be Mist' Clay!” The slave moaned, shaking his head, his mouth hanging slack. “He sho do look bad.”

“Get help. Fast! Colonel Bickford needs help.”

The youth slumped to the bottom of the skiff, closed his eyes, and felt no more pain.

Chapter 2

The summons—

Soon after dawn the next day, a small sloop sailed down the York River on the ebb tide. The tall oaks at the eastern tip of land rose out of the morning mist then fell astern as the familiar shores of Chadwyck Plantation faded from view. Entering choppy seas near the river's mouth, the sloop felt the bite of a stronger wind. She tacked across Mobjack Bay and headed north, plowing into the turbulent waters of the Chesapeake Bay. It was a cold day following three days of miserable rain driven by a northeast gale that had ripped across the Chesapeake.

Sarah stood in the bow, resolute, staring spellbound into the distance, oblivious to the cold wind that burned her face. She thought only of where she was going and how much she dreaded going there. Swaying with the heaving vessel, she clung to the mast for support. Even bundled in heavy clothes her extraordinary beauty was evident. At thirty-eight, there was still a fresh glow of youth in her face. Delicate features masked her emotions as she scanned the horizon.

It won't be long now. The thought frightened Sarah. Twenty years ago, she had been banished from Bickford Plantation. She shuddered as she remembered that awful day when Prudence Bickford announced her sentence.

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"You are never to return to Bickford. Do you understand, Sarah?"

Angry and humiliated, Sarah glared in contempt, turned her back on Prudence Bickford, and climbed onto the wagon that took her to the wharf on the Piankatank River, and to the boat that took her away from the only home she had ever known.

Sarah had vowed never to return to Bickford, but that changed when the Bickford sloop arrived last evening bringing an urgent appeal from Prudence Bickford: "Sarah, please return with all haste. You are sorely needed." That's all it said. The message did not say that Clay came home yesterday. Nor did it say that Sarah's son, Jud, was with Clay.

The seas were higher now and the sloop was taking on water. Not even the frantic bailing of the other young man aboard, a skinny black youth not yet twenty, seemed adequate.

"Are we all right?" Sarah asked the sandy-haired youth who steered the boat.

"We gonna be fine."

"How much longer?"

"Mostly thar now. Thar's a cut up ahead behind Gwynn's Island. We'll sneak around the lee side then head straight across the Piankatank—bout a mile to Bickford Landing."

Sarah marveled at how easily the young man distinguished landmarks on the wooded shoreline. To her, it all appeared the same.

"Thar tis, up ahead. Once we get beyond that shoal, we gonna slip inside where it's quiet."

The young man pulled the centerboard up a notch. "Gettin kinda shallow," he explained.

Sarah was relieved when they passed behind the south end of the island and into calm water. They went a little slower now, for the wind that had driven the sloop so mightily was now buffered by the long narrow island that sheltered them.

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"About two, maybe three miles long," the young man said of the island. "Water smells like rotten eggs. Tastes awful. Nary a soul lives thar ceptin old man Gwynn, and he ain't regular. They say he don't need water. Don't drink it. Don't even wash in it. Don't seem right, but people say that."

He pointed to the shoreline off the port bow. "That's Milford Plantation over yonder on the left. Tobacco. Most as big as Bickford." He swept his hand toward an opening in the shoreline. "Up thar ahead is where we're goin. Through that cut."

As they came closer, Sarah trembled with mixed feelings, and when she could see through the cut to the opposite shore, tears welled in her eyes. It was Bickford Plantation. The home of her childhood. This was where, as the daughter of its overseer, she'd grown up with and loved Clay Bickford. All of these years, she'd been denied this home.

They sailed through the cut and across the Piankatank River toward a narrow spit of land which jutted far out into the river—Bickford Landing. Beyond the landing, extending all the way to the Rappahannock River was Bickford Plantation, the exciting land of her childhood.

Sarah felt no excitement this day. Twenty years had passed since Prudence Bickford sent her away. She could still feel the anguish of that terrible day . . . sitting in the stern of the boat that took her south to Chadwyck Plantation, weeping raw tears as even the tall pines at the end of the spit faded from view.

Now, as the sloop approached the Landing, Sarah's heart beat heavily again, burdened by unpleasant memories. Strong hands helped her to the wharf where she stood wet and chilled to the bone, sorely tempted to get back into the sloop and flee to the safety of Chadwyck Plantation.

But she was no quitter. Once she'd made up her mind to do something, nothing could hold her back. Now she cursed her own tenacity. *What do I owe Prudence Bickford? Nothing . . .*

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except scorn. Now she needs me and I'm foolish enough to return without even a question.

“Miss Sarah, that you?”

She turned and studied the wrinkled face of the aged slave who suddenly appeared. Her face brightened as she remembered a dear childhood friend.

“Jasper? Oh Jasper, it *is* you. Oh, my, how wonderful to see you again.” Sweet memories came in a flood. She wasn't cold anymore, nor was she alone. Jasper was here.

He had been a lot younger then and worked in the livery stable taking care of the leather gear, polishing the carriages and grooming the horses. He had appointed himself to look out for Sarah and Clay and to keep them out of mischief.

“You lookin mighty good, Miss Sarah. We sho hab miss you.” He grinned and wiped something from his eyes. “I come to pick you up.”

When she saw the shiny carriage with leather seats and two sleek black mares standing by, Sarah recalled the draft wagon that had brought her to the wharf so long ago. It had been rough and dirty, already loaded with freight for the Landing, leaving her no place to sit except on a cask of drinking water. *Well, this is an improvement.*

“We been mighty sorry bout Mist Adam. He were good to us when he were here.”

“Thank you, Jasper. He would be proud to hear such nice words from you.”

She had not loved Adam Kent when they wed but that was not his fault. Marrying Adam was part of the deal she'd made with Prudence Bickford when she left Bickford Plantation.

The Landing had not changed much in twenty years, Sarah thought. Several new warehouses and a new section of dock, still, it was pretty much the same. Men scurried about unloading a huge ship from England, its Union Jack flapping in the wind. Slaves, dusty and sweaty, rolled hogsheads of tobacco from a warehouse to the loading dock for the ship's return trip to

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England. A foreman shouted and cursed a slave who moved too slowly—little had changed.

Sarah remembered when she and Clay played here as children. Despite its dust and dreariness, the landing had been a fun place for them. They sat on the wharf and caught sunfish and perch and watched hard crabs clinging to the piles, their blue tipped claws grabbing tidbits of food and stuffing it into their curious mouths. One day Clay poked at one with a stick, lost his footing, and fell overboard. He spluttered and splashed until Sarah threw him a rope and helped him climb onto the dock. Fortunately, the weather was warm so all that Clay suffered was a little lost dignity. Sarah could still see him spitting, swearing “wharf” words. She promised never to tell on him, and she had not.

It was always an especially exciting day when a ship arrived from England with a cargo of goods: nails, axes, saws, hammers, guns and gun powder, also bolts of cloth and dresses and hats for the ladies. News of a great ship's arrival spread like a fever. People came for miles to see it and to gawk at the wares brought ashore. Sarah and Clay would run out on the wharf to get a close look at the wondrous ship. They would speculate on how long it took to cross the Atlantic and inquire if there were any kids their age among the passengers.

It was just before her eighteenth birthday that Clay told Sarah he was going to college at Lexington, a small town many miles west of Richmond. “That's where the Virginia Military Institute is,” he said, trying to keep his composure.

“B-But why so far, Clay? You've always talked about going to William and Mary. You said it was a good school, and Williamsburg was close, and you could come home often, and I could go to see you on the packet.” She tried not to cry, but she did.

“It was Mother's idea. She hasn't been well since Father had his stroke. Since he died last spring, it-it's . . . she's just not the

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same . . . almost as if she's not there at times. She said we were no longer kids, and—”

“Oh, dear. I thought she knew that someday we would wed.”

“That's what I've always felt and that's the way it'll be, Sarah, just wait and see. Time will fly and we'll be together every summer. Maybe even at Christmas.”

They walked down to the wharf in the early evening, then out to the tip of the long neck where the tall pines sighed in the summer breeze.

Sarah recalled another day soon after her twelfth birthday. She had been an impish tomboy, gangly, almost as tall as Clay—although he was two years older. They used to wrestle in the tall grass. She could never get the best of him but she always put up a good fight, leaving them both out of breath and happy. However, on that particular day, something had been different. Clay had been different. She felt the difference when they wrestled. She had just turned twelve and she knew that she, too, had changed.

She never wrestled with him after that. He was hurt and confused and became angry when she pushed him away. It was different after that, but somehow their friendship endured and blossomed into young love. They stole kisses, held hands, and talked about their love for each other.

On the eve of Clay's departure, they sat under the tall pines and talked with sadness. They had never been separated before, except when he went with his mother to Chadwyck, her family's plantation near the mouth of the York River across from Yorktown.

“Oh, Clay, what shall we do?”

“Time will fly, Sarah. When I return, I'll be my own man. Then no one can tell me what to do.”

Impulsively he kissed her; she drew close, caught up in the passion of the moment. She knew what was happening, and when Clay's hand stole inside her blouse; she wasn't convincing when she asked him to stop. How could she be

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convincing? Later they lay side by side in the grass, enraptured by the wonder and innocence of their first love.

Chapter 3

Deception—

“I’ll write as soon as I get to VMI,” Clay promised.

“I can’t wait to hear from you, Clay. I’ll write every day until we’re together again.” Sarah cried when he kissed her goodnight.

The next morning she went to the Landing with him. Arm in arm, they walked out to where the tall pines stood—where they’d made love the night before. “I’ll always love this spot, Clay. I’ll come here every day and sit here under the pines. I’ll dream of being with you.”

They walked back to the wharf. Clay kissed her and climbed aboard the packet. When the boat pulled away, she ran out to the point under the tall pines and waved. She watched until the packet disappeared over the horizon, then fighting back the tears, she ran home and threw herself upon her bed.

Mail from Bickford, collected at the manor house, was sent to Yorktown on the weekly packet. From there it went on to Richmond and other destinations. Every day Sarah wrote to Clay. She took her letter to the big house, and when the mail arrived in the packet, she waited outside the manor house while

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Prudence opened the "Bickford" mail pouch. Every time it was the same: "Nothing for you, Sarah." Sarah wiped tears from her eyes, unable to understand why Clay had not written.

Prudence Bickford had been like a mother to Sarah, but that changed when her husband suffered a massive stroke; Prudence took on the full burden of caring for her husband and running Bickford Plantation. Claiborne had been a strong and stately man, but as days turned into months, he became a frail shadow, a whisper of the man he had been. The strain had been too much for Prudence. The love she had for her husband gradually turned to pity. No longer able to care for him she turned that task over to others. Her own beauty withered, and she became cruel and waspish, even to the man she had loved.

Ravaged by the crippling stroke, Claiborne could not speak or even raise a hand, but he could still hear and understand; and he could feel. When his heart, broken by her indifference, failed, he was laid to rest beside the graves of his parents and grandparents on a shady knoll overlooking the Piankatank River. At her husband's funeral, Prudence was dressed in black with her dark hair pulled back severely and tied in a bun. She stood rigidly by his grave; if she grieved, one could not tell.

As time passed, she became hateful and conniving. Resenting the affection Sarah shared with her son, she decided to find him a suitable wife. Someone of stature.

It wasn't until after that night under the pines; the night before Clay went away to school, that Sarah learned she was not deemed good enough to be his wife. He was the heir to Bickford Plantation and she was only the daughter of its overseer. Had she known how Prudence Bickford felt, Sarah might have been prepared for what was to follow.

It was easy for Prudence to come between the young lovers. Because the packet ship picked up and delivered the mail at the big house, she had only to intercept their letters. It was all right to do that, she told herself. How else could she protect her son?

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One day she intercepted Sarah's letter to Clay, telling him of the blessedness of that evening under the pines, and that she was with child.

Prudence was at a loss but not for long. She devised a plan. She wrote to Clay and said that Sarah was being flirtatious with all the young men and that rumors suggested even more. "You are better off without the wench," she wrote.

Sarah was frantic when a month went by without a letter from Clay. Each week she waited for the packet to arrive. When it did, she ran to the big house, only to hide her tears as she ran back to her father's cottage.

Prudence smiled. Her scheme was progressing nicely. When the time was right, she called Sarah into the library.

"I have received a letter from Clay," she lied. "He asked me to tell you that he bears no responsibility for your condition and that you must seek comfort elsewhere. He says—"

"Clay would not say that! Show me the letter that says such awful things! Show it to me!"

"I cannot do that. It's my personal letter. You cannot read my personal mail."

"I don't believe you," Sarah cried. Blinded by tears, she couldn't breathe. For a moment, she thought she would faint.

"Tears won't help you now, Sarah. You should have thought of this before you started laying around. Clay needs a wife of his own station, not the wayward daughter of a common overseer. You'll have to settle your own problem. You have disgraced your family and Bickford. You are no longer welcome here. I will not have your bastard child running around this plantation." She glared haughtily at the heartbroken girl, and when she thought the time right, she spoke.

"I have a plan."

"A plan?" Sarah stared blankly at the Mistress of Bickford.

"You surely know that Adam Kent has his eyes on you."

"I don't think about Adam Kent that way. He's like an uncle to me. I love Clay."

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"Listen carefully, Sarah Sutton. I could make a public announcement that you carry a bastard child, but I have compassion." She ignored the contemptuous glare of the girl she threatened to destroy. "Adam Kent is a good man."

Her face took on a cunning look. "You know, he could take your father's place as overseer of Bickford . . . if I chose to let your father go." She smiled when Sarah recoiled. "Your father is a fine overseer, but he can be replaced. On the other hand, since my parents passed and left me Chadwyck Plantation, I have not been satisfied with the man who had been my father's overseer for many years. He cannot work without close supervision. I need someone to manage Chadwyck Plantation for me."

With a cold stare, she toyed with the weeping girl, as a cat would play with a mouse before devouring it. "Adam Kent could be that man. I could send him to Chadwyck. If I choose. That way your father's job would be secure."

"Adam Kent is a fine man," Sarah said.

"You would like it at Chadwyck?"

"Chadwyck? Me at Chadwyck?"

"As Adam Kent's wife, of course."

Speechless, Sarah stormed out of the mansion and ran to the sanctuary of her father's bungalow. She'd grown up there, a happy child loved by everyone. Suddenly, it seemed that everyone hated her. Disgraced.

She sobbed into the afternoon. The thought of life without Clay was unbearable. What would become of her? She would be an outcast. They would brand her a harlot. Her son—she wished for a son—would be a bastard. Even her own father would be dishonored. She did not have many options and so far, going with Adam Kent seemed the best.

Sarah made herself presentable so when her father came home he wouldn't know she'd been crying. John Sutton knew something was wrong. He gave her a hug.

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“What’s wrong, Kitten?” He called her kitten because of the way she imitated the one he’d given to her on her fourth birthday.

“It’s nothing, Papa.”

“Come now, don’t you think I know when my little girl isn’t happy?”

“Oh, it’s nothing important . . . just that I miss Clay so much. I wish he hadn’t gone away.”

“So that’s it. Well, Kitten, anything I could tell you about being lonely wouldn’t help much, although no one could ever know more about loneliness than I do.”

She saw his pain and her heart went out to him. It had been years since he’d talked about her mother. It seemed that the pain had gotten worse for him. He had never married again.

“You only find one real love,” he told her. “Mine was your mother. I miss her more each day.”

She gave him a hug. “It’s all right Papa. It’s all right. It’s all right.”

Chapter 4

Adam—

Adam Kent was a tall lanky man, physically strong, but not particularly handsome. His facial features, although individually well formed, didn't seem quite comfortable with each other. Even his hair, a shock of dark brown impudence, seemed estranged. But his face was friendly, and his smile, for he always smiled, was said to have stopped many arguments before they became fights. There was about him a tone of decency and honesty, a sturdy character, remarkable in its simplicity.

Not often summoned to the mansion, Adam was uneasy when Mrs. Bickford sent for him. He was not worried for he worked hard and had never been rebuked for a single thing. Yet he was aware of the change in Mrs. Bickford since the death of her husband. She had become disagreeable and vindictive, with never a kind word for anyone. Lately, she seemed to be even more erratic, so it was only natural that he was a little apprehensive.

Adam came to Virginia from England nearly fourteen years before. He landed at Yorktown and stumbled down the

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gangplank of the great sailing ship, VICTORIA. Alone in a strange world, scared and confused, with no idea of where to go or what to do, he struggled along the wharf with fellow passengers.

Everyone was shouting it seemed. A burly man shouted orders to a group of slaves, cracking his long whip at them, sometimes nipping them with it and drawing blood in the process. Other men circulated through the crowd looking for various passengers, calling their names.

A tall, rawboned man shouted, "Kent. Robert Kent."

Adam timidly approached the man. "My name is Kent, sir. Adam Kent."

"Well, I'm looking for Robert Kent. He related to you?"

"He was my father, sir."

"Was?"

"He died, sir. My mother, too. Just t-two weeks ago—"

Until a year before, Adam's father had worked on the shipping docks at Southampton, England. A dock foreman, he supervised the loading and unloading of the big ships that crossed the Atlantic to America. It was a hard living but it provided a comfortable living for his wife, Angela, and their son, Adam.

Robert Kent was an intelligent man, but he lacked the refinement of education which would have given him a higher station in life. He vowed that his son would have the chance he'd never had. He sent Adam to school, starting in his sixth year.

The lad excelled in writing and in speaking the King's English, as was the custom of that day. Incongruously, he found the study of mathematics to be boring despite his teacher's efforts to the contrary. Perhaps that was because he was unchallenged for he got excellent grades in that subject. His parents were proud when he graduated with honors. Then surprisingly, for his father had no important station in life,

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Adam was accepted at Winchester College, about fifteen miles from home.

However, sadness fell upon Robert Kent's family. He was injured one day while supervising the unloading of tobacco, a simple procedure and not usually dangerous. A large boom lifted the barrel-like containers from the ship's hold and placed them upon the wharf. Dock men rolled them down a ramp to waiting wagons. On this day a hogshead broke loose and before Kent could get out of the way, it struck him from behind and broke his left leg in three places.

For six weeks, Robert Kent was unable to work. Without income, the family's savings were quickly exhausted. Creditors came after him for satisfaction and Robert Kent was thrown into debtors' prison.

He would have remained in prison but for the need of good men in America. As was the law, the payment of a prisoner's debt terminated his sentence. So when a representative of Bickford Plantation in Virginia offered to pay his debt, Kent thanked the Lord for his deliverance and signed on as an indentured servant to Claibourne Bickford of Virginia. He agreed to serve thus for seven years.

At Bickford Plantation, he would have quarters for his wife and son. Also, he would receive a modest stipend to allow him a modicum of pride. After all, he would be the master of docks at Bickford, a man of some importance. Robert Kent was a proud man. He intended to make himself a valuable asset to Bickford and hoped to stay on after serving his indenture.

Adam still remembered the terrible day when his father had been hauled away to prison. He tried to console his mother as she cried long into the night. Hard times followed as they struggled to make ends meet. It was a happy day when his father came home. His mother cried with joy, and young Adam was jubilant to see his parents together again. His imagination soared to new heights when his father said they were going to

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America. "To a new life," he had said, "where there are no debtor's prisons."

Adam would never forget the terrible days aboard the ship. Tossed about in a storm, almost everyone was seasick. Most of all, he remembered the dreaded sickness called dysentery. His mother was the first passenger to be sick, and the first to die. Father and son watched in horror as the angry sea claimed her.

His father wept, lamenting that had he been more careful he would not have been injured, and none of this would have happened. He did not intentionally abandon his son, but in his sorrow, he retreated into isolation, staring into space, castigating himself for failing his family. It was inevitable that Robert Kent would weaken. He did, and when the sickness ravaged him, he did not fight it.

Adam was numb with grief as his father's body, as had his mother's, was sewn into sail cloth, weighted with ballast rocks, and delivered to the ocean. He stood by the gunwale and stared into the same angry seas which had claimed his mother a few days earlier, and now, his father. Alone in his anguish, he withdrew into himself.

When they docked in Yorktown and everyone began to leave the ship, confusion added to his grief. He struggled to the ship's crowded deck and looked down on the jumble of strange scenes on the wharf below. He was scared. Even more than during the great storm that had turned the Atlantic into a wild creature.

On the wharf at Yorktown, he told John Sutton about himself. Overcome with sadness, he was able to give only a brief account. "We lost three men and five women. Four children. It was the salt pork, everyone said." The lad vowed he would not cry but tears again flooded his eyes and his voice choked as he told about the sickness and suffering.

As he listened to Adam's story, John Sutton's own torment surfaced. "Sorry, son. I lost my parents, too. Not aboard a ship mind you, but it's no difference where they die, when you lose

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your mother and father, you've lost the dearest part of your life. I hope the Lord was kinder to your parents than to mine." He didn't mention the loss of his wife during childbirth. That was four years ago and the pain was still fresh.

"Are you alone, Adam? Is there anyone with you? Any other family or friends?"

"No, sir."

"Well, my name is John Sutton, overseer of Bickford Plantation. Your father was going to work for—"

Adam interrupted. "I shall go with you and work in my father's place to pay his debt. That was the last thing my father told me."

"Your father told you that?"

"Yes, sir. It is a matter of trust and honor."

"Well, I don't think the Squire would agree to you working out your father's indenture. Squire Bickford is a tough man, but he is fair."

"But I have no choice, sir. It is my father's wish. I promised."

So, on July 16, 1830, Adam Kent, at fourteen, began to serve his father's indenture. The Squire, a man of principle, admired the fierce determination of young Adam and took note of his education and intelligence. Unknown to Adam, the Squire contrived to pay him a fair wage to be held in trust until the end of the indentured period.

At first, Adam was assigned odd jobs that required little specific knowledge. Everyone liked him, especially the slaves, with whom he had unusual rapport. When he observed a field hand too ill to work, he reported it to John Sutton and offered to work in his place. When he saw an expecting slave so large she could hardly work, he went to John Sutton.

"I saw a pregnant woman in the field this morning. Looked like she was about to keel over."

"Well? Women are like that. They get over it."

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"But it just isn't . . . wouldn't they recover quicker if they had an easier job near the end? It wouldn't seem as hard on them that way."

"Next, I guess you'll say that afterward they should take a week off."

"Two, sir. They'd recover sooner. Even animals laze around before and after."

"You test my patience, Adam Kent. We've been doing it this way for a hundred years."

"Then maybe it's bloody near time to try something new. Also, the father should be with her when it happens. I'm sure he'd be grateful and work harder afterward."

Adam kept whittling away at conditions that others took for granted. Sometimes, he caused a change. Never had there been such harmony at Bickford Plantation.

Adam asked questions, watched, and read everything he could get his hands on. It wasn't long before he had a surprising understanding of how a tobacco plantation worked. He studied the ledgers and suggested ways to improve the keeping of production records. He identified the fields in which the best tobacco was grown and which fields consistently produced the highest yield per acre. He suggested assigning highest priority to clearing the adjoining woodland that had the same high-yield soil characteristics. The result was a significant increase in production. It wasn't long before John Sutton realized the potential of this young Englishman.

By local standards, Adam had acquired an enviable education. He had an excellent command of mathematics and English; he also had a remarkable ability to identify the origin of a man by his speech.

He had become interested in the language of the slaves. While he knew little about their African languages, he noted strange differences in their use of English words. Most of them said Mist Bickford, when speaking of the Squire. But some said Massa Bickford or Masta Bickford. Some said he wuz or he

Sarah's Creek

were, instead of he was; and, I be, rather than I am. He found many such variations.

When he asked about this oddity, the Squire gave him a questioning look. "Never thought about it, Adam. Just took it for granted. I suppose it has to do with where they came from."

"Do you mean because of different tribal languages in Africa?"

"I'm not sure. What do you think?"

"I don't know."

Adam was perplexed. He got several slaves together and said, "James, you call the Squire Mist Bickford. Jacob, you call him Massa Bickford, and your wife calls him Masta Bickford. How is that?"

The slaves listened politely then shook their heads.

"James, who taught you to say, Mist Bickford?"

"Robert . . . Robert teach me."

Adam knew that Robert was a wise old Bickford slave that the other slaves respected.

"What about you, Jacob, who taught you to say Massa?"

"Jupiter. He teach me."

"Who is Jupiter? There's no one here by that name."

"No suh. Gawga. Jupiter were in Gawga."

"You mean you came to Bickford Plantation from Georgia?"

"Yassuh."

"And your wife. Was she with you in Georgia?"

"No suh. She fom Noth Carlina."

So that was it, Adam mused. Language and customs were passed down by generations. They learned from other slaves who had learned from slaves before them. I guess that's the reason why slaves at one plantation talk differently from those at other plantations.

Adam had noted that Chester, the butler at the mansion, used better English than the field slaves. He asked a field slave about this.

Sarah's Creek

"James. Why is it that Chester does not teach you some of the words he learned at the mansion?"

"Chester? He ain't one of us. He too big. He white man nigger."

"He wouldn't teach you his big words?"

"Robert say Chester too big. He uppity house nigger. Robert say, 'I teach.'"

So there it was. The field slaves didn't mix with butlers and other house workers who used the white man's words, considering them too uppity. They preferred, instead, their own incestuous dialect that had changed little over several generations.

The realization was appalling to Adam. How would slaves ever learn English?

Adam discussed his thoughts with John Sutton. The overseer scratched his head. "Seems to me you've spent a lot of time trying to figure this out. What'll you do now?"

"I'm not sure. Do you think we should mention it to the Squire?"

"Wouldn't hurt any."

Adam explained his idea to the Squire who thought for several minutes. "That's a very interesting idea, Adam. But is it something we should be concerned about?"

"Why, yes. I think so. Some of the slaves have difficulty speaking. I've heard some of them grunting words I never heard before, probably came from the same African tribe. They should be taught how to speak English."

"Why?"

"So we can talk with them."

"Seems to me you place too much importance on it, Adam. I don't mind you correcting a slave with the right word, but beyond that we should do nothing. You know that Robert is the slave who influences them; maybe you could correct him from time to time. But maybe he'll think your words are too uppity."

Sarah's Creek

Adam went to see Robert who was not pleased with Adam's attempt to change their language.

"Slaves talk slave talk. Slaves unnerstand slave talk."

"It would be easier to talk with your people if they knew more English words. Like Chester. He understands exactly what we tell him."

"Chester! Humph! He white man nigger."

Adam realized too late that he should not have mentioned Chester. The conversation ended. After that, Adam tried subtle ways to influence Robert's speech, with only marginal success.

Frustrated in his desire to teach the slaves, he concentrated on teaching little Sarah Sutton. She attended classes three days a week at the plantation school. At first, he helped her with homework and when she was ready, he encouraged her to read books from the Squire's library. He taught her English and corrected her speech until she spoke flawlessly. Soon her writing and arithmetic skills went far beyond the instruction of the visiting teacher. Sarah was like a sponge and thirsted for knowledge, and Adam, a strict taskmaster, was intensely proud of his student. He was pleased that she didn't try to flaunt her knowledge, except when she debated a point with him, besting him as often as not. Then he would appear annoyed and turn away to hide a grin.

One day soon after his twentieth birthday, Adam was called to the mansion and shown into the Squire's office. John Sutton was there, too. Adam was baffled, as both men seemed to be restraining smiles.

"Adam," the Squire began.

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Sutton tells me that you're smart and learn fast, and that you work hard."

"I try my best, sir."

Sarah's Creek

“So Mr. Sutton tells me. He also tells me you would be a fine assistant overseer.” The Squire smiled and put out his hand. “I agree.”

John Sutton clapped him on the back. “You’ve been a great help to me, Adam. We’ll make a fine team.”

Speechless, Adam grinned.

“Something else, Adam,” the Squire said. “When you came here, you insisted on serving your father’s indenture. He must have been a fine man to raise a son of such integrity. You made your mark on me that day, Adam.”

“I have tried to be like him, sir.”

“Then he would have been proud of you, Adam, as we are.” The Squire opened an envelope and extracted a letter. “The day you came to Bickford I knew that you were special. I decided that day to pay you a fair wage and to increase your wage as you became more proficient. This letter is a statement of an account in your name at the Bank of Williamsburg. It was started when you came here six years ago.”

Adam scanned the letter in disbelief. “But I was to serve my father’s indenture. I am not entitled to this—”

John Sutton grinned with pride as the Squire said, “To the contrary, Adam. I think this has been one of my best investments.”

“But, I . . . uh, I don’t know how to thank you, sir. You too, Mr. Sutton. I—”

He fled the mansion, too moved to express the depth of his gratitude.

Adam found solitude at the wharf where he often went to be alone. As gentle waves lapped the shore, he gazed across the water toward the mouth of the Piankatank River, and the mighty Chesapeake in the distance. Far beyond that, he saw in his mind the great Atlantic he had crossed so long ago. His thoughts drifted to the first happy days aboard the VICTORIA. His beautiful, fragile mother had smiled with pleasure as he and his

Sarah's Creek

father danced a playful jig in anticipation of life in a new world. In his mind, he relived the day his mother died. Tears came to his eyes as he recalled the dark days that followed, for his father had withdrawn in grief, unwittingly leaving Adam alone with no hand to hold. Adam could still hear his father lamenting that he left no fortune, only debt. Adam remembered the turbulent ocean where, wrapped in sailcloth, his mother and father had disappeared into its cold depths.

Now raw tears stung his eyes. *If only I could tell you, Father, that what you entrusted to me was dearer than any earthly fortune. You left a legacy of trust and decency: values that will stand as a monument, a legacy that will pass on to my own sons and to their sons.*

Adam stayed on the wharf until the moon rose high in the sky . . . until the turbulent waves of the great ocean became calm.

John Sutton thought of the youth as the son he had dreamed of having. He regarded young Adam as an exceptional young man and often invited him to his cottage which he shared with his daughter, Sarah.

Sarah was only four when Adam came to Bickford. When her daddy brought him home to dinner one evening, she eyed him with suspicion but when Adam smiled, she took to him.

"You talk funny," she giggled.

"That's because I came from England."

"Where's that?"

"Way across the ocean. A long way off."

"Did you swim?"

"No, of course not, silly."

She giggled. "I know. You came on a great big ship."

"Just like the ones that come to the landing."

"Where is your mommy and daddy?"

"They . . . they died. On the boat."

"Oh. My mommy died, too. I miss her."

Sarah's Creek

"I miss my mommy and daddy, too, Sarah."

She crawled into his lap and put her arms around him. "I'm sorry about your mommy and daddy. But you still have me and Papa."

"I like that, Sarah"

"I know what! You can be my very own uncle. How's that?"

"I think that would be just peachy."

"Peachy?" Sarah giggled. "You're funny."

So Adam assumed the role of uncle to the shy child. His pride and love for her grew as she became a precocious little girl, then a gawky tomboy, then a pretty girl in her teens, and when suddenly she flowered into a beautiful young woman, she took his breath away. He was painfully aware of her love for Clay Bickford and resigned himself to the role of uncle and protector.

John Sutton was aware of Adam's feelings for his daughter. He secretly wished for a union of these two whom he loved above all others, but he feared that Adam would be hurt, for even as a little girl, Sarah had dreamed of marrying Clay Bickford.

After the death of Squire Bickford, John Sutton had tried diligently to keep the plantation on an even keel. Of late, however, the awkward interference of Prudence Bickford had caused many problems. This morning when she demanded Adam's presence, John Sutton felt a twinge of apprehension.

"What's this all about, Mr. Sutton? Why does Mrs. Bickford want to see me?"

"I don't know, Adam. When I went to the big house this morning she said to send you up."

"Did she seem angry?"

"It's hard to tell these days. Hard to tell."

Chapter 5

Set up—

Something was in the air. Adam felt it as he was shown into the library at the mansion. He had been here many times before, yet he never ceased to be awed by this magnificent cherry-paneled room with rows and rows of books he ached to read. The Squire had learned of Adam's love for books and had invited the young man to use the library. But after Claibourne Bickford's stroke, Adam stayed away out of respect for the family. He hadn't felt invited since Mr. Bickford's death. As he waited, his hands caressed the leather-bound tomes. He turned as he heard steps behind him.

"You love books, don't you, Adam?" Mrs. Bickford had arrived sooner than expected and, for the first time in ages, she was smiling.

"Yes, Ma'am, I do. You have a wonderful library."

Prudence Bickford smiled again. "There is also a fine library at Chadwyck."

"Chadwyck?"

"Yes. Chadwyck, my parent's home on the York River."

"Yes, Ma'am. I know about it. I just wondered why you mentioned Chadwyck."

Sarah's Creek

"My parents died recently . . ."

"I heard. I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Adam. That's why I wish to talk to you about Chadwyck."

Prudence stood behind the Squire's leather-bound chair with her hand resting on its crown. "I am not satisfied that my overseer is capable of working on his own. My father used to say that Walter Phillips was a good and dependable man, but I've discovered that his skills do not extend beyond that of being an overseer. I can't tend to both plantations. I must be here. I need someone to relieve me of the burden of Chadwyck."

She smiled again. "That's where you come in, Adam. Before Mr. Bickford died, he often spoke highly of you. He expected that when John Sutton retired, you would take his place as overseer of Bickford. I think you have even more potential than that. I want you to go to Chadwyck, as manager . . . in my place."

"I-I'm overwhelmed, Mrs. Bickford. I don't know what to say, except I know I can do the job. I went there once on the packet with Mr. Sutton. I greatly admire Chadwyck."

"You also admire Sarah, do you not?"

"Oh, yes. Sarah is like family to me. I've watched her grow from a little tyke to a young lady of grace."

"I gathered as much. She is also perfect for Chadwyck."

"I don't follow your meaning, Mrs. Bickford."

"It's simple, Adam. Sarah wishes to go with you."

"Sarah? . . . Sarah wishes to go with me?"

"To be your wife, of course."

"But Sarah thinks of me as her uncle."

"Sarah has grown up in the past year. Women do change, you know."

"She is in love with Clay. She always has been. She talks about him constantly. No!" He shook his head. "She could never love me that way."

Sarah's Creek

"You sell yourself short, Adam Kent. Go to Sarah. Let her tell you herself."

"But—"

"Go ask her if it isn't true."

His head was in a whirl as he left the mansion. Could Sarah love me that way? I hadn't thought so, but why would Mrs. Bickford say so if it wasn't true? I'm sure Sarah loves me, but not that way. Or have I been blind? She is very mature. Maybe she loves me because I am older. Mature. Yes, of course. That must be it. He was nearly running when he reached her house.

Sarah was preparing dinner when she heard a knock on the front door.

"Oh, it's you, Adam, come in."

"Mrs. Bickford told me," he beamed. "It's wonderful."

"What's wonderful?" She stiffened in dreadful anticipation.

"I will go to Chadwyck as manager," he smiled.

"That's . . . uh . . . that's wonderful, Adam."

"Mrs. Bickford also said you wanted to go with me. Oh, Sarah, I'm so happy."

His smile disappeared as Sarah stared at him in obvious dismay. His head bowed in silence.

"Mrs. Bickford lied to you, Adam. That is her plan, not mine. My home is here at Bickford."

"But, she said—"

"That I would go to Chadwyck as your wife? Is that what she told you? Did she also tell you that I am carrying Clay's child and that she is trying to get rid of me?" Sarah's voice became shrill. "Did she tell you that she threatened to take my father's job if I didn't agree to her plan?" She glared at him as if expecting an answer.

"My God, Sarah, I didn't know." He rubbed the scar on his left wrist, hardly daring to look at her. He had never been in love with another woman and his heart ached with love for Sarah.

Sarah's Creek

"No, she didn't tell me about you and Clay," he said. "I'm sad to hear of your trouble, Sarah. Is there anything I can do for you?"

His voice was soft and caring and Sarah regretted her sharp words. This morning, she had nearly resolved to go with Adam, but now she rebelled at the lies and manipulations of Prudence Bickford. In doing so, she unwittingly hurt Adam with her recriminations. "There's nothing anyone can do. It's my problem, Adam, but I thank you for caring."

He started to leave. At the doorway, he stopped and turned. "Hear me out, Sarah," his voice was soft with emotion. "She is a wicked woman who takes advantage of her position to manipulate innocent people. Now, she holds the fate of the four of us."

"The four of us?"

"Yes, the four of us. You, your father, me, and your child, who could be hurt more than all of us." Shyly, he took her hand.

"Look at me, Sarah. I'm a simple man. Not of high birth, not young and handsome, but I truly love you. I have never dared dream that you would be my wife, Sarah, but, if you gave me that honor, I would be the happiest and luckiest man alive. And I would love your child as my own and be a good father."

Too stunned to speak, she just stood there, her eyes brimming with tears.

Taking her silence as a rejection, Adam slowly walked from the house with his head down. He seemed not quite as tall as when he arrived.

The next day, Sarah went to see Mrs. Bickford who sat in a velvet wingback chair and offered Sarah a lower chair, one facing into the bright afternoon sun.

"Well, I do hope you've come to your senses," Prudence said.

Sarah did not sit. Instead, she stood where Prudence would have to turn and look into the sun.

Sarah's Creek

"You can change many things, Mrs. Bickford, but you cannot change the fact that Clay is the father of my child."

"Huh. He has already disowned your bastard."

"I won't believe he said that until he tells me so; however, even should he disclaim credit for our child, his features will show. If it is a son, which I have prayed for, he will look like Clay and I will give my son the name of Bickford. Yes. I'll call him Claibourne Ashley Bickford, IV. Then everyone will know that he is the son of Clay Bickford. Your grandson."

"But . . . you can't do that!" Her voice rose to a shrill.

"Oh, but I can. And I shall."

"I-I . . . I'll have you—"

"Unless . . ." Sarah baited her.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you agree to *my* plan."

"Your plan?"

"I will go to Chadwyck with Mr. Kent—"

"Oh, good! I knew you were a sensible girl. I'll—"

"After you have presented me with a signed legal document prepared by a lawyer which meets these conditions." She handed several carefully penned sheets of notes to the astonished Mistress of Bickford. "Then I'll go to Chadwyck."

The haughty face of Prudence Bickford turned red then white as she read Sarah's notes. Her hands shook as she tried to speak. "You want me to . . . to do this?"

"Yes." Sarah walked to the door. "Then," she smiled, "I'll make my arrangement with Mr. Kent."

Several days passed before Prudence called Sarah to the mansion and gave her the draft of a long document. Sarah carefully read every word.

"This is not what I asked." She pointed to a paragraph that went around the subject without touching it.

Sarah's Creek

“That’s legal talk, Sarah. Lawyers have their own language.” She looked down her nose at the trembling girl. “I understand it.”

“Oh, I understand the words, Mrs. Bickford. I also understand that this particular passage is intentionally vague. I can think of at least three conclusions that can be drawn from it, none of which is correct. Please instruct your attorney to rewrite it, according to my notes and with only one meaning. While you’re at it, there are several other passages I’d like cleared up.”

“Lawyers write this way for lawyers and other intelligent people. I can’t tell Mr. Colton how to write.”

“Just tell him to write so that the daughter of an uneducated overseer can understand it. That idea shouldn’t be too hard to convey, Mrs. Bickford.”

On the third try Sarah was satisfied with the wording of the document. She smiled sweetly. “Thank you, Mrs. Bickford. As long as you honor this commitment, I will honor mine.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Very simple. If you do not, I will not. Then everyone will know the truth. And, you are afraid of the truth, aren’t you?”

“Who would believe the word of a common harlot over mine?”

Sarah looked deep into the hateful eyes of her persecutor. “You can’t hide from the truth, Mrs. Bickford,” she said quietly. “You can sweep it under the rug and pretend it didn’t happen, but someday the truth will stare back at you from the mirror of your conscience and you’ll see yourself as everyone else sees you.”

“Is that all?” Her voice quavered.

“Oh, I wish it were, Mrs. Bickford, but it would be of little use to dwell any longer on that question except to say that by denying his own child, Clay has inflicted grave harm upon both himself and our child. Our child will never know his father, and

Sarah's Creek

his father will forever be diminished in the greatness he could have achieved . . . by this truth and by his own conscience.”

Prudence glared venomously. Her whole body shook with rage at being lectured by this impudent child. “Get out! Get out of my house this instant, you-you . . . get out!”

If only for an instant, Sarah felt as if she'd won. Perhaps she had, but the price was devastating.

Chapter 6

The legal document—

Sarah's arrangement with Adam Kent, while a bit high handed, was with respect for the honesty and compassion of this man she grew up loving as an uncle, and with deep gratitude that he would have her under these conditions, that he would accept her child as his own.

After she left the mansion, she went to see him.

"It is time we talked, Adam."

"I hoped we would, Sarah."

"First, I'd like you to read this." She placed the legal paper on the kitchen table and watched his face.

He read the first paragraph then flipped to the last page, stunned by the scrawl of Prudence Bickford's signature that seemed to jump out at him as if screaming her anger.

"My God, Sarah. You got her to sign this!"

"That's the only way I could protect my father and you from Mrs. Bickford. This document guarantees that Papa will be the overseer of Bickford until he becomes fifty-five; then he has the option of retiring at two-thirds of his highest salary. Also, he will be given immediate title to five acres of tillable land of his choice fronting on Broad Creek. Upon this site, Bickford

Sarah's Creek

Plantation will begin construction of a two-bedroom house—of the same design as the overseer's house at Bickford—and will insure its completion in no more than one year. Yesterday, I went with Papa to pick out his land. Of course, he had no idea the lot was for him. Even when he finds out, he'll have no idea how it all came about. He must never know."

"That is as it should be."

"It also protects you in case she changes her mind. Without this document I'd have no hold over her, and you could be out of a job."

"But my salary, it's . . . it's too much."

"Aren't you worth that much?"

"I-I will be . . . yes! I will make Chadwyck better than ever."

"Each year, your salary will increase at the rate of five percent of the accumulated gross increase in revenues."

Adam was incredulous. "This document gives you fifty acres of tillable Chadwyck land of your choice and a home of your own design to be built immediately."

"Do you think I should have asked for more land?" Sarah asked with feigned innocence.

"You are a genius, Sarah."

"No, Adam. Determined."

He read on, stopping occasionally to give her an admiring glance. ". . . An annual stipend equal to the value of twenty hogsheads of choice tobacco, which I will invest in my son's future. Also, the best education available, beginning on the day he is able to take instruction, through the best university."

Sarah's fiery eyes bored into the placid ones of her future husband. "Prudence Bickford has deprived my son of his father and the Bickford name. By God, I'll see to it that he rises above the petty social status of the Bickford class. He'll be someone to reckon with."

Adam looked with awe at the little girl he'd known since she wore pigtails. He had noted her continual reference to the child she was carrying as a son. He chuckled to himself, wondering if

Sarah's Creek

she had arranged that too. He went back to reading the remainder of the document. When finished, he regarded her with wonder.

“My, God! Sarah, I-I don't know what to say.”

“Just say that you'll never disclose the contents of this paper. My son will be our son. He will never know about Clay Bickford. He will know you as his father.”

“And I'll be a good father.” He took her hand in his. “And a good husband to you, Sarah. The best I know how to be.”

“And I'll be a good wife to you, Adam Kent. I must tell you that I do not love you that way. Not yet, but I will try.”

John Sutton was beside himself with joy. Of course, he didn't know about Sarah's condition, but he couldn't help feeling that something was amiss. Only several weeks ago she'd been unhappy because Clay was away at school. She was not one to change her mind so quickly. When he asked her about it, she seemed evasive.

“I'm changing, Papa. Clay and I have always been together as children, but now we're growing up, and we see things differently. He's away at college and will meet other people; he probably has already . . . he hasn't written once.”

She hadn't intended to admit that, but it was too late. “Adam is a fine man, Papa. I thought you'd be happy for us.”

“I am, Kitten. I just don't want you to get hurt. If you love Adam, you're doing the right thing.”

“You don't think I do?”

“It's not what I think, Kitten. You don't have to convince me, as long as you're sure.”

“Well, I am. And Adam loves me.”

John Sutton thought she had answered too quickly. “Yes, I know Adam loves you, Kitten. He's a fine man. I'm happy for you. Adam, too. I just wish you weren't going so far away. I'll miss you both.”

“It's all right, Papa. You'll see.”

Sarah's Creek

It was early on a Sunday afternoon when Sarah and Adam said their vows in the tiny church at Deltaville. A few friends were there. She forced a happy face, but her heart broke as she realized the finality of this act. Her dreams of being with Clay were gone forever. Adam, still in a daze, wore a grin from ear to ear.

John Sutton wore a smile too, but when he hugged the new bride, his eyes brimmed.

“What is it, Papa? Aren't you happy?”

“Oh, yes, Kitten. Very happy.”

“Then why do you look sad?” She took her handkerchief and dried his eyes. “Brides are supposed to cry, not fathers.”

John Sutton smiled. “I was thinking how beautiful you are. Just like your mother was on the day we wed. It-It's so sad that she can't be here today to see what a lovely young lady you've become.”

Sarah hugged her father fiercely. “It's all right, Papa. It's all right.”

Adam left that afternoon for Chadwyck. Sarah would follow in a week.

Chapter 7

The challenge—

With trepidation, Adam called on Walter Phillips, expecting the overseer of Chadwyck Plantation to be angry because of Mrs. Bickford's decision to appoint Adam as manager; but the older man put him at ease.

"I'm glad to see you, Mr. Kent."

"Adam. That's what I like to be called, sir."

"All right, if you will call me Walter."

"Walter it is, then."

"It's been hard since the Chadwycks died," Walter said. "Mrs. Chadwyck died from pneumonia two years ago, then Mr. Chadwyck last year. His horse threw him and busted him up pretty bad. Bled a lot on the inside, they said. He was a fine man and we were a good team. I was the overseer and he ran the plantation. After he died, it was too much for me. I claim to be a pretty good overseer, but beyond that, I'm lost."

"Mrs. Bickford said you were a good overseer, but that she needed someone to run the plantation without her being here. I intend to do that, Walter, but I would be pleased if you would consider staying on with me. Be my overseer."

Sarah's Creek

"That's good of you, Adam. Let me think on it. I'm told you just got married, so I figure you'll need the cottage. It's too big for me since my wife, Evelyn, died last winter. I'll move out tomorrow if that's all right with you. There's a spare bedroom for you in the meantime."

"I'm sorry about Mrs. Phillips. I didn't know. It distresses me to learn of your sadness."

"Thank you, Adam. It hasn't been easy, but we learn to live with our grief."

"I hope you'll stay on, Walter. As overseer, you'll need a place to stay. We'll build one for you."

"Thank you. I've been paid to the end of the year, and for now, I've made arrangements to stay with Buck Colby."

"Buck Colby?"

"My slave driver. You'll like him. He's smart. With a little more experience he could of done my job."

"I'll be pleased to meet him. I'll need all the help I can get."

The next day, the three of them rode out to inspect the tobacco fields. Adam was pleased. He dug his hand into the soil, squeezed a handful, let it run through his fingers—dark, friable, equal to the fine soil at Bickford. He saw great potential in Chadwyck, and when he saw the vast expanses of uncleared land, most of which had comparable soil, he knew that this plantation could grow to match any around.

Chadwyck consisted of forty-five hundred acres and had nearly six miles of river frontage which began just south of the creek where Chadwyck landing was situated. From there, it ran northward to Timber Neck Creek and included the best highland on the north shore of the river.

"How many acres do we have in tobacco, Buck?"

"Just shy of two thousand."

"That leaves a little more than two thousand acres for new fields?"

Sarah's Creek

"Just about. We have fifty acres in garden crops and orchards and that much again in pasture, some swampland, and some rough upland you might consider clearing way down the road. But yes, we got near two thousand good acres left, mostly grown up with pine and oak and a scattering of walnut and other hardwoods."

"I saw some handsome curing sheds. Are they adequate for current cropping?"

"Pretty much, with a little left over. Have to build more if you intend to clear more land."

"That's what I intend to do, Buck. You see anything wrong with that?"

"Not hardly. We'll need more hands though."

"Yes, in time, but I'm reluctant to put it off. What if we start clearing during the slow season, say between planting and picking, couldn't we free up some men to begin sooner?"

"We could do that."

When they inspected the slave area, Adam was not pleased with what he found. The slave cabins had dirt floors, leaking roofs, sagging walls, and poorly drafted fireplaces. They were miserable shacks, hardly fit for animals.

"Some of these quarters must be original. Crude . . . in bad shape."

Walter looked at Buck, his brow furrowed. "No worse than at any other plantation."

"Have you been to Bickford?"

"No, I guess not."

"My ideas may seem a little strange to you older hands, but we've found that you get a lot more work from slaves when you understand their problems. When I went to Bickford as a boy, my first impression was not how grand a place it was, but how unhappy the slaves appeared to be. I asked myself what they had to be happy about . . . a life of drudgery, toiling from dawn to dark with no let up until the life was drained out of them. They resented being slaves and did only what they had to do,

Sarah's Creek

just enough to keep from getting whipped. They were belligerent, as if they hated all white men.”

“I guess we'd be that way too,” Buck conceded.

“If we could trade places with them for just one day, we'd probably think the way they do. I was only fourteen at the time and could talk with them. I listened to what they said. I believed that down deep, despite their anger, they had a sense of loyalty to Bickford and even to the Squire. I believed that with a little understanding of what made them sad and angry we could give them hope and purpose, cut down on disciplinary problems, and increase their value to the plantation.”

“Sounds like pissin in the wind,” Walter growled.

“That's about what John Sutton said. He's the overseer at Bickford. He was a driving man, but was willing to give it a try. The first thing he did was to get the slaves together. He told them that the Squire was concerned with their problems and would listen.

“They brightened up when Mr. Sutton told them that during slack times—other than planting, topping, and harvest seasons when time was short—they would be given time off to be with their families or to go fishing or just take it easy. But only after they got their work done.”

Walter grunted. “I guess all their problems disappeared over night?”

“No, of course not. But it gave them hope, and their attitudes improved. In time, other changes were brought about and conditions continued to improve.”

“What about the trouble makers?”

“That was the toughest problem to deal with, Walter. Many of the slaves improved, but some had such a deep-set anger about them that we couldn't work with them. They continued to make trouble and even tried to shame the other slaves into going back to their old ways.

John Sutton got the slaves together and told them that of all the plantations, Bickford was the best place for a slave to be,

Sarah's Creek

and that he intended to keep it that way. He told them that the troublemakers made it bad for everyone, and since they wouldn't change, he'd have to get rid of them. He traded the bad ones, but he was fair about it and would not break up a family."

"Makes sense," Buck said.

"Yeah, I guess it does," the old man said reluctantly.

"What's most important is that it worked."

"How do we go about it here?"

"First, we need to commit to making it work. I can't do it alone. I need you. Both of you."

"I'm with you."

"Thanks Buck. What about you, Walter?"

"I'm not sure. It sounds too simple to be true."

"It's not simple, Walter. It's easy to talk about, but making it work is not that easy. That's why I need your help."

"I still think it's pissin in the wind."

"It will be unless we're committed." He looked the old man in the eye. "Walter, I regret having to put you on the spot, but I must. Either you're with me or against me. There's no in between. I hope you'll be with me."

"You really think it'll work here at Chadwyck?"

"I know it will, but only if we make it happen."

Walter stubbed his toe into the ground then looked up. "Where do we start?" He grinned.

"Thank you, Walter. I'd say we do about the same that John Sutton did. We'll set priorities and goals, get the slaves involved. The most important thing is to make reasonable promises and to keep them. Let the slaves know where we stand and what we expect from them. Then prove we mean what we say."

"Have you thought out how to do it?" Walter asked with growing enthusiasm.

"We'll start by building new slave quarters."

"We can't do much in winter time, Adam."

Sarah's Creek

“You’re right, Walter. It’s too late to do much now. Cold weather is already here. To get them through the winter, we’ll patch up the holes and fix the leaks in the old cabins. This winter, we’ll start cutting trees, shaping logs and stacking them to season. We’ll dig a sawing pit and teach several crews how to saw beams and planks, and we’ll split cedar logs for roof shakes, and until the ground freezes, we can dig marl to make chimney bricks.”

“You know how to do all of these things?”

“Most of them, Buck. What we don’t know, we’ll learn.”

Buck grinned. “I sort of thought that.”

Adam added, “We’ll start building right after spring planting. That and clearing new land for planting.”

Walter and Buck looked at each other for a moment then grinned.

Adam was flushed with excitement. He could hardly wait for Sarah’s arrival. He had so much to tell her.

Chapter 8

Cici—

As the sloop left Bickford Landing and sailed southward toward the York River, Sarah stood at the mast and looked sadly toward the Landing. She wept when her childhood home vanished from view. Soon, only the tall pines remained, then they too disappeared. Tears streamed down her face as her world dipped below the horizon. How could Clay deny his own child?

The sloop lazed along in the quiet seas for it was a mild autumn day and a light breeze pushed them along. Sarah sat in the stern, sustained by the tiny life growing within her and the legal papers in the package she clung to.

It was late in the afternoon when the sloop made its final tack into a small creek. Sarah was weary, yet she dreaded the end of her journey. When Chadwyck Landing finally loomed into view, Sarah couldn't help but notice that there were no tall pines standing at the end of a long point. There was no long point.

But there was Adam Kent standing tall and proud, waiting for his bride. When the sloop came close, he jumped

Sarah's Creek

aboard and took her hand. Then, shyly he backed off, waiting for her to show her feelings.

Sarah just stood there, not knowing what to do. She knew she shouldn't act cold or indifferent to him in front of the men whose respect he needed. Nor could she appear as the loving bride. She stepped close and put her arms around him. "It's good to see you, Adam." Her voice was low and private so the others couldn't hear. "I hope you've found things to your liking here."

His face broke into a huge grin. "Oh, Sarah, it's like a dream. I know you'll love it. The land is fertile and dark, just right for tobacco. Only half the acreage is cleared and planted, leaving thousands of acres in beautiful forests which will produce fine lumber. When it's cleared, we'll have more land for tobacco. Over yonder," he pointed across the river, "is Yorktown. There are some nice shops with clothes and yard goods and all sorts of things for the house."

She had never seen Adam so pleased. He looked younger as several strands of dark brown hair fell across his face, softening the lines that came with hard work. He was almost boyish in his enthusiasm. She smiled and suddenly knew she would learn to love this strong, compassionate man.

"My father took me to Yorktown, Adam. I loved it." She smiled. "Don't you remember?"

"Yes, but have you been to Williamsburg?" He grinned. "Now, that's a town for you, and it's just a short distance from Yorktown. The Capital used to be there, but I guess you know that, too."

"I've never been to Williamsburg, Adam. We must go there soon." She noticed his pleasure. Clutching her package, she accepted Adam's hand and climbed to the wharf.

It wasn't quite as large as the wharf at Bickford Landing, but it was sturdy and more sheltered from storms. As she glanced around her, she knew she would be happy here.

Sarah's Creek

"We'll stay at the overseer's house, if that's all right. Mrs. Bickford offered the use of the manor house until our house is built, but I think that would be uncomfortable."

"Yes, it would be. The overseer's house will do just fine."

It's a nice house, Sarah thought as it came into view through a clearing. A one and a half story dwelling of frame clapboard construction. Its high-peaked roof had two front dormers and was finished with wood shakes.

"It's a nice house, Adam but I can't wait until we have our own."

"I share your thoughts, Sarah."

When Adam showed her around the dwelling, she noted with pleasure the spacious rooms and comfortable furniture, but without intending to, she recoiled when they walked into the master bedroom and saw the conjugal bed. Perhaps he only pretended not to notice.

She opened the wardrobe, surprised to find it empty. She turned to Adam, a quizzical look in her eyes.

His face turned red. "I-I thought you'd like to be alone, until you got used to the idea."

She breathed a sigh of relief, then, was overcome by her own guilt. On the sloop and in the carriage that brought her here, the thought had weighed heavily upon her.

"That is very thoughtful of you, Adam. I can't tell you how much it means to me . . . your offering, that is."

"Sarah, I love you more than anything in this whole world. I can't tell you how proud I am to be your husband and how happy I am that you're here. I hope you'll come to me soon, and then I can truly be your husband."

Tears came to her eyes. "Thank you for your patience and understanding, Adam. It will be time invested wisely."

Adam gazed down upon her "We have a long life ahead of us, Sarah. We must start it right."

After dinner, she retired to her room and he went to his. Long into the night, he heard her sobbing but was too shy to go to her.

Sarah's Creek

The next morning just after daybreak, Sarah heard movement in the kitchen. That's when she found out about Cici.

"Good morning, Missus Kent," said a cheerful voice that belonged to a plump slave girl whose grin spread from one ear to the other, showing an array of white teeth. Her face shined as if polished.

"Mist Kent's gone to the field. He say, 'don't wake Missus Kent; she done had a hard trip. Needs rest.' That's what he say."

"That was nice of him. But I didn't expect you or anyone else to be here."

"Yes'm. He say, 'Cici,' dat's my name, 'Cici,' he say, 'you look out for Missus Kent. We make her like Chadwyck.'"

"Oh, you're going to help me with the house work?"

"No, Ma'am. I ain't gonna hep cause you ain't gonna do nothin. Cici's gonna do it all." The animated black woman shook her head just to make sure her new mistress understood.

Sarah was pleased to have help, but this was too much and too soon. She figured it would be several months before she would need help. How could she be a good wife to Adam if she couldn't even keep his house?

"This won't work, Cici. I've always kept house for my father. I won't know what to do with myself if you do all of the work."

"Please, Missus Kent," Cici gushed, comically wringing her hands and rolling her eyes. "If I don't work here I hasta go to the fields. I don't like the fields. Dey be hot and dirty an-an I neber hab a good job like this befo an if you don't want me I won't have it no mo an I have to go back to the fields an—"

"All right!" Sarah laughed, "I'll certainly not let that happen. We'll just let them think you do all the work; that way no one will take you back to the fields."

"Oh, thank you, Missus Kent. Cici be—"

"It'll be our secret. No one else must know about this."

"Yes'm."

Sarah's Creek

When Adam came home for the noonday meal the house was shining, and both Sarah and Cici seemed pleased with themselves. His "What are you two up to?" brought a contagious grin to Cici's face which Sarah picked up, as if conspiring some great plot.

"It's nice to see you smile, Sarah. I'm pleased that you like Cici."

"We get along fine." Sarah looked at Cici and smiled. "She's determined that I become lazy. I don't know what to say about that. But I thank you, Adam, for your concern about me."

Basking in the warmth of her words, he said, "Did Cici tell you how she got her name?"

"No." Sarah looked askance at her housekeeper. "Tell me, Cici."

Pleased to be the center of attention, Cici's face brightened into a huge smile.

"My mama say that when I were a baby and before I knew words, I were a trouble to her. Always gettin where I shouldn't. Like when I got in the wood box with the puppies and she grabbed me out, I cried 'see, see.' It were always like that, always 'see, see.' I guess I pointed, too. Then they calls me See See. Now, they just calls me Cici." She looked at Sarah for approval, a wide smile spreading across her face. "That why they calls me Cici."

"Why, that's a delightful story, Cici, thank you for telling me."

"Yes'm."

The days passed pleasantly for Sarah, marred only by the guilt she felt for Adam. He never mentioned their separation at night, but she saw the pain in his eyes. His sadness festered in her bosom and preyed upon her conscience. How long could she continue like this? It was selfish of her and terribly unfair to Adam. None of this was his fault, but he was punished along with her.

Sarah's Creek

Adam had always been like an uncle to her, older and wiser, someone with whom she could share her problems. Now he was the problem.

No! That's not fair. Clay Bickford is the problem, not Adam. Sarah was beginning to accept the notion that Clay had abandoned her. What else could she think? It was now late November. Clay had been gone for nearly three months and he still hadn't written, not even once. She thought of him as a pampered boy who had not yet become a man. A man would not abandon his own child.

Sarah's Creek