

*The Sugar Baron's Daughters* • TWO

A decorative, ornate frame with intricate scrollwork and flourishes. Inside the frame, the word "VERITY" is written in a large, elegant, serif typeface.

VERITY

LISA T. BERGREN



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*For Emma,  
Learning to follow where God leads,  
and trust him as you wait.*

*I love you.  
—Mama*



## CHAPTER ONE

**SPRING, 1775**

**NEVIS, WEST INDIES**

There was nothing for it. Verity had to set aside her misgivings and do what she felt she ought. She dug her booted heels into Fiona's flanks, and the big chestnut mare resumed their climb up the steep, rocky path. She wished her resolve could be as steady and sure as her mount's gait. Because what was to come . . . well, the mere thought of it left her feeling quite ill.

Verity found her sister where she knew she would, this time in the morn, on the promontory high above the top field of what once had been called Tabletop, but now, combined with Teller's Landing, was called the Double T. The view was marvelous up here, where one could see all of the Covingtons' land and out across the blue-green waters of the Caribbean and Atlantic, stretching toward St. Kitts and Saba. It was Ket's favorite place to think and pray.

Keturah glanced over her shoulder and smiled as her sister came into view. Ket's mare's ears twitched, and she tossed her mane and whinnied a greeting to Fiona. Ver's horse snorted a dismissive response. "Do not be rude," she chided her.

Ket giggled. "So uppity, your Fiona!" She leaned forward to pat the mare's neck as if to soothe any hurt feelings.

Primus sat on a svelte brown gelding beyond Ket, keeping silent watch. He gave Verity a nod in greeting, smiling along with them over their horses' antics. Her own guardian, Gideon, reached the clearing and sidled up beside Primus to wait. This was Gray Covington's only requirement of the Banning women: They could go where they wished, when they wished, but never alone.

High above them, Brutus circled and screeched. Ket gestured upward. "I knew you must be somewhere about."

"I should send him with you each morn," Verity said, shielding her eyes to watch the falcon ride the trade winds. "He loves it up here." She pulled Fiona in a tight circle so she could come alongside Ket and look out. Down below, acres of sugarcane waved in the wind. "It appears as if it shall be another winning crop for the Double T."

"If God smiles on us again, we shall be harvesting come late summer or early fall."

"He did last time. What should make Him frown now?"

Ket took a long, deep breath. Her hand traced her round belly. "I do not know. 'Tis only that now—with a babe on the way—I find myself wanting security more than ever."

Verity reached out and took her hand. "All of this—" she paused to look outward—"is lovely, tempting in her abundance. But you've been on-island long enough, Ket, and heard enough stories to know that what can be given can also be easily taken away. We have to trust that God will see us through the years of plenty as well as the years of lean. You've done all you could; you must trust in God to see it through."

"'Tis a good reminder," Ket said, giving her hand a squeeze and casting her a grateful look. "I do not know what I would do without you, Ver."

Verity swallowed hard and gently pulled her hand away. Of all the things to say right at this moment . . .

Keturah frowned. "Ver?"

She sighed, inwardly reminding herself of her decision. "You always were a planter at heart, Ket, just as Father was. But my

blood flows fastest when I am with the horses. Or at market. I love it here on the Double T, but . . . of late I have been thinking of other options—other places I might be called to live and work.”

“Other places?” Ket said, blinking slowly. “Such as?”

“Other islands. Or even America,” she said, grinning with excitement.

Keturah’s frown deepened, and she sat more erect in her saddle. “So ’tis it, then?” she said stiffly. “You intend to leave us?”

“Do not say it that way,” Verity said, slowly shaking her head and reaching out to rest a hand on her sister’s knee. “You know I shall never leave you. Not for long, anyway. I am thinking of visiting other places but building something of my own in Charlestown.”

“Charlestown,” Ket repeated, as if it were a foreign city and not the town only half an hour distant.

“Come now, Ket. You have Gray and a babe on the way now. Selah. The plantation, our people. I must . . . I must be free to find my own way too. Please do not treat me as a prodigal asking for her inheritance in advance. I merely want what you did—a chance to prove myself, to follow a path that God seems to be pointing out to me.”

Keturah considered that for a long moment. “How much has Captain McKintrick’s silence influenced this decision?”

“Not at all,” Verity said. Then, “Or some. Oh, I do not know.” She glanced over at Gideon and Primus and then waved them down the path, wanting more space, more privacy for her and Ket. Even here, here on this blessed mountain, she was feeling trapped. Confined. As if she could not breathe freely. Again came the urge from deep within. The pull to leave. The desire to find out what had become of Duncan McKintrick. To discover something new.

“I ran across Mr. Jobel in town. He informed me that the funds from the sale of Hartwick have arrived. I intend to take my portion and set sail for the American colonies,” Verity said, forcing herself to level a gaze at Keturah. “At my first opportunity.”

“You might not like what you find there, Verity,” Ket warned. “Perhaps there the captain has found . . . other distractions. Perhaps that is the reason for his silence.”

Verity shifted in her saddle, refusing to rise to the bait. “If the captain simply suffered a change in his affections, I have no doubt that he would have written to me and explained. ’Tis not like him to simply be silent. Not after . . .”

Not after all they had shared. Not after his sweet, fervent declarations to her. Not after he’d promised her that he would return in all haste. No, a man did not look at a woman like Duncan McKintrick had her and then simply never return to the Indies. It was not in his making. Verity was certain of it.

“You should never have given a sea captain your heart, Ver,” Keturah said, shaking her head in both sorrow and reproof. “Did I not warn you of the danger of it?”

Verity laughed under her breath. “And who are you, Sissy, to lecture me about how others might disappoint you? Of how it is dangerous to follow your heart? Was it not you who led us to this wild, wonderful isle? Are we not continually in danger here? From disease? From uprisings? From drought? Can you not feel it, Ket? The winds of change? Anywhere might be considered dangerous.”

Keturah looked out and surveyed their land, the sea, and closed her eyes as the trade winds wafted her hair. When she opened them, she turned to Verity and said, “’Tis true. There are no promises in tomorrow, only the hope in today.”

“Indeed. And my hope, today, leads me to this. I want my share of what remains of our Hartwick fortune because I want to build something new. For me. Perhaps for all of us.”

Ket’s mare, sensing her tension, pranced and shifted a bit, but her sister resolutely stared outward, jaw clenched. After a long moment she said, “What would you build?”

“A mercantile, in town. I want to sail to the colonies and bring back horses and more to trade, Ket. If I become a merchant, perhaps it shall prove a boon to you too. My trade might benefit the

Double T, allow me to discover new import and export options for you and Gray. Ways to maneuver around those who would rather see you give up and move home to England.”

She let that settle a bit with her sister. She could see Ket was working through the concept of it, as well as the idea of letting her go.

“I need the truth, Ket. Of what has become of Duncan. And to find out if I could be a successful merchant at all. Right now, there are only two islands regularly importing horses—Hispaniola and Jamaica. The Leewards need a source too. I have gained word about some good potential breeders, both in North Carolina as well as New York.”

Keturah’s eyes rounded and Verity laughed under her breath. “Come now, Ket. I am not a silly twit with a dream, giving no thought as to how I might accomplish it. Tell me, how do you spend your time at every soiree on-island when your handsome husband is not insisting you join him for a dance?”

Ket’s brow wrinkled as she considered the question. “Learning more of what might benefit our plantation and her people.”

Verity nodded once. “As do I, though from a different direction. Over the year past, I have made inroads with men who do significant trade in the colonies. You taught me well, Sister. The Double T—seeing it come to this—has taught me well.”

Together they stared down at the verdant fields, at the long lines of men and women entering the western side to work along the trenches, Gray and Matthew and Philip among them. Inspired by their relationship with their emancipated overseer, Matthew, Ket and Gray were gradually employing freed men and women rather than purchasing new slaves. With the proceeds of Hartwick’s sale, they had offered the rest the chance to earn their freedom too, but it would take years to transition to a fully paid staff. Word of their plans had made them even more the pariahs among the other planters, who wished to brook no conversation on the matter. The Covingtons’ decision was widely considered a direct threat to the planters’ traditional way of life. They had received few social

invitations of late, and just last week Gray had been refused supplies at two of the four importers of goods.

Keturah took a deep breath, then reached out to take her sister's hand again. "You know I do not wish to hold you back, Verity. Never would I wish that." She shot her a glance, her amber eyes full of tears. "But the idea of you going from me . . . from us . . . never to return . . ." She shook her head fiercely and rubbed a gloved hand under her nose, sniffed, straightened her shoulders. "Well, I could never countenance that."

"Nor could I," Verity replied. "So I shall see to it that it does not transpire."

"Promise?" Keturah asked. And in that moment, Ket did not seem the older sister, a grown woman, a wife and mother-to-be, the lady of this plantation. She seemed more a small girl. Verity remembered being children on Oak Hill, running barefoot through the bramble and grass, hunkering down beneath the roots of a giant tree in a makeshift cave. And the three of them—Keturah, Verity, and Selah—making solemn pledges to forever be together. To never part.

It had been a girl's naïve promise, not a woman's. Before they'd faced potential financial calamity, the depravity of men, or known the world outside of England.

"I can only promise to return to Nevis as fast as I might," Verity said, squeezing her hand. "You know I would miss you and Selah far too much to do anything else."

"I know," Keturah said, her mouth twisting in concern.

She tried to pull her hand from Verity's then, but Ver held on. "Ket. Please do not send me away without your blessing."

"Oh, my dear sister, do you not see? I cannot bless our separation. 'Tis not within me. You yourself insisted you come with me to Nevis. Do you not remember how it felt to be the one who might be left behind?" They shared a long glance, her heart, her pain in her eyes. Ket squeezed her hand and then pulled away; this time, Verity allowed it.

It was enough, that. More than she expected, really. "I shall return, Ket."

But Keturah only nodded sadly, lifted her reins and turned her mare down the path, her usually straight, proud shoulders slightly hunched and shaking. And Verity knew she wept.

Her breath caught. They had seen many people depart the island, never to return. Some lost to a storm, others to illness. Had not Duncan himself promised to return to her, then disappeared? What made her think that she was any less vulnerable to fail at fulfilling her own promise?

*Please, Lord*, she prayed, looking back to the northern waters, as if she could see all the way to the American colonies. *Please keep me safe, and those dear to my heart safe here on-island too.*

She waited a moment, paused to see if her heavenly Father might direct her differently, but this path seemed to only swiftly solidify before her. 'Twas what He desired for her.

She was certain of it.



Captain Ian McKintrick strode down Broadway in New York, coat flapping behind him. He was reasonably aware that his grim face and demeanor made the tide of people he faced part for him but found himself unable to care. He was here for one reason and one reason alone—to settle his brother's affairs. See to his belongings. Empty his small apartment. Close his accounts.

He refused to weep again. Not only was he out in public, but he had wept more for his older brother in the weeks past than he had ever wept for his parents and grandparents. Perhaps it drew down to the fact that he had never imagined anything could kill his beloved brother. From the time he was but a wee lad, he'd seen Duncan—three years his elder—as invincible.

A glimpse of red brought his head up, slowed his step, but it was only a lady of ill repute on the corner, not one of the redcoats who so easily drew his ire these days. He turned around, remembering his sister Marjorie begging him not to pick any fights with the English. "It shall do you no good, Ian, nor Duncan," she had enjoined, urgently grabbing his lapels to make him stand still and

meet her gaze. “What’s done is done. Duncan would not want ye in prison on his account. Agreed?”

“Aye, agreed, lass,” he’d slowly replied. But his agreement had not taken away the hate-filled fire that burned in his belly. It was the cursed English who had pressed Duncan into service, forcing him to accept a shipment bound for the Barbary Coast. It was the cursed English who had oppressed his kin for generations. The cursed English who had stolen their lands. The cursed English who had forced his grandfather to pledge his fealty after Culloden.

He and Duncan had spent many a night discussing it. Was his Jacobite grandfather’s pledge one that he must honor? It was a Scotsman’s way to hold to such things, yet there was talk in every tavern he visited here in the colonies, some whispered, some shouted. Even in New York, where the Loyalists still clung to power. Talk about taxation without representation, separation, independence, freedom . . . and by the heavens, that talk only seemed to fan the flames of rage that burned in his belly.

Duncan was gone. Stolen from the clan forever. Pressed to fetch a shipment of spices that the king’s cook had insisted he must have straight from the Dark Continent. It had been a stroke of ill luck that Duncan had arrived in the Liverpool magistrate’s office directly after the man had received the orders from London. He’d been there solely to file his plans with the harbormaster to set sail in two weeks. Marjorie did not know why he had been in such a rush. “Why, he’d been home but two days when he set to establishing his next cargo for a return trip.”

“To where?”

“New York, o’ course,” she said. “But I think he had plans to go by way of the Indies again.” She’d given Ian a sad smile, wringing her hands. “Something about him made me think he had an eye on a lass there. I’d never seen him in such a state.”

She hadn’t known the girl’s name, nor where she lived exactly. ’Twas odd, that. Duncan was—had been, he corrected himself with an inward wince—as open with his mind and heart as Ian

was cautious. The man had rarely encountered a secret he could keep; it had been a family joke since they were but lads. It had been with Ian that Marjorie shared any of her true secrets; she only told Duncan when she had not a care who knew.

*Oh, my brother,* he thought, feeling a familiar lump form in his throat at the thought of the man sharing one of his many stories. Had he not told of outrunning—or outgunning—several pirates in years past? He had not even made it to the coast of Africa, this time waylaid by a Spaniard privateer named Santiago. Why had the Spaniard not imprisoned and ransomed his brother, rather than kill him? Ian looked up to the slate gray skies. *Where were you, Lord? Why did you not intervene on his behalf?*

He shook his head in disgust and turned the corner, dodging a lad selling dried mackerel and a woman selling jugs of grog. The harbor edged nearer again, the smell of brine and tar briefly overcoming the foul stench of the city—spoiled food, human waste, and unwashed bodies. Ian disliked spending much time within the confines of stone and mortar. Like his brother and their father before them, he'd been born for the sea. He loved the water whether it was raging, tall and fearsome, or dancing with tidy whitecaps or even resting in glistening, flat doldrums. He loved reading what was ahead by studying the horizon, feeling the moisture on his skin, in his nostrils.

From the start, he'd been a better sailor than Duncan. He'd made first mate and captained his own ship a year before Duncan had managed to do so. He'd purchased his first vessel a year before him too.

That made him smile, the first in a while. But then he'd reached the old boardinghouse in which Duncan had rented a room. And thinking of seeing his belongings, the last things he'd touched before leaving American soil . . .

Soberly, Ian removed his tricorn, brought it to his chest and banged the iron knocker against the huge mahogany door, waiting for the building's mistress or master to come to him. *Oh, Duncan, lad,* he thought again, swallowing hard. *How could*

*ye have up and died? How is it that I shall not find ye here waiting on me?*

It seemed impossible that Duncan was gone—even now, eight weeks after learning the truth of it. He was gone, gone forever.

And it was all the fault of the cursed English.