

The Sugar Baron's Daughters ~ THREE



SELAH

LISA T. BERGREN

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CHAPTER ONE

FALL, 1776

It was the falcon's piercing cry that first alerted Selah. She shielded her eyes against the bright, tropical morning sun and followed the broad wingspan of the beautiful bird circling above.

"Abraham!" she cried, lifting her skirts and scurrying down the front stairs of the house and toward the stables. "*Abraham!*"

The child appeared in the doorway, eyes wide with alarm.

"Quickly!" she said, shooing him back inward. "Grab your leather gauntlet! 'Tis Brutus above our heads!"

"Brutus?" he said as if not quite understanding. They hadn't seen the bird for months, given that his mistress—Verity—had been away to the American colonies.

"Yes, yes," she hissed, turning his slim shoulders to head deeper into the stables while glancing around to make certain no one else had heard them. "Where is your gauntlet?" she whispered.

"Right here, miss," he said, finally moving to the side wall, where many reins, halters, and other stable tools hung on pegs. He grabbed the glove and then turned to a small barrel of salted fish and took one in his other hand.

"Come quickly!" she said, pulling him outward, half panicked

they had taken too long. She knew that Verity had trained Brutus to come to Abraham. Was he still hovering overhead?

With relief, she caught sight of the bird, still circling above them. In the center of the clearing before the house, Abe lifted his arm upward and called to him.

“Selah?” Keturah called from the porch, hoisting her cherubic toddler, Madeleine, to her hip. “What is it?”

“I think ’tis *Brutus!*” she hissed, gesticulating to indicate they needed to keep quiet. She knew her own excited cries for Abraham must have alarmed her sister. Even now, Mitilda followed her mistress out, concerned as well.

The bird, seeming to sense his reward was in hand, swiftly came nearer, his head darting back and forth as he perused the landing field. Seemingly assured, he took one final loop before dropping to Abe’s arm, his great wings fluttering until he settled on his human perch.

“It *is* Brutus,” Keturah breathed, drawing closer. “From where did he come?” she asked, seeking the waters, probably for signs of her brother-in-law’s ship, the *Inverness*. But there were only a couple of ketches—small vessels heading to St. Kitts.

Selah felt her silent disappointment as well as her relief. After so many months apart, both sisters were keen to see Verity but knew if Angus Shubert got wind that Ian McKintrick lingered in nearby waters, Shubert would rouse the British troops to pursue him. Ian’s attack on him—justified or not—had resulted in a warrant for his arrest. Only his flight to America had saved him . . . and he had taken Verity with him as his bride.

“Look, Miss Selah,” Abe said, gesturing to a scrap of parchment strapped to the falcon’s leg with a leather band. Brutus had already swallowed the salt fish whole and nosed about as if hoping Abraham carried another. The boy placated the bird by stroking his chest and cooing lowly to him, much like Verity had often done.

Selah untied the strap and slipped the tiny scroll from his leg. Keturah turned Madeleine in her arms so she could see the falcon,

and the pretty, round-faced babe stared in wide-eyed fascination. “What is it? What does it say?”

“Patience, Sissy,” Selah said, feeling none of it herself. With trembling fingers, she unwound the band of parchment and whispered the words written in her sister’s hand. “We linger in the harbor we discovered a summer past,” she read. “Come to us this afternoon if you can. Bring sugar. We have supplies.”

Keturah’s face became beatific. Not only their sister but supplies as well? With the war in the American colonies gaining momentum, Nevis’s supply chain had come to a near halt. Across the island, many plantation owners had significantly cut rations for the slaves. Few slaves had much to lose; already the sisters had seen far too many in Charlestown who had become alarmingly thin. Even the Double T struggled to feed her own.

“You must not tell a soul,” Selah said to Abraham and Mitilda. “Take Brutus quickly into the stables, Abe,” she said. “Ket and I shall compose a message for him to take back to Verity.”

“Yes’m.” Abraham immediately turned to do as she bid.

Selah reached out to his mother and squeezed her hand. “She’s nearby, Mitilda. We shall see her before the day is out.”

“God be praised, Miss Selah!” Mitilda shook her head in wonderment. “God be praised.”

Together they hurried into the house to prepare. “Do you think that Gray could take us on the ketch this afternoon?” she asked Ket. “Or would it be best for us to go alone?”

“I think he would be most cross if we went alone. Best to inform him, as well as Philip. We need them to obtain the sugar too.”

“What shall be our rationale to be about?” Even though they had built a new pier on the southeast edge of the plantation, there were neighbors who would be sure to see them sail—and not to St. Kitts, which was where they generally voyaged.

“A picnic luncheon, I believe,” she said with a sly smile. “As well as a brisk hike to stimulate the blood. Mitilda, would you be so kind as to pack us a basket?”

“Right away, Lady Ket,” she said, turning to go, clearly as

excited as they were. The prospect of the sisters' reunion, as well as new supplies, gave them all a resurgence of hope in the midst of a month that had slowly chipped away at any sense of optimism. Two weeks ago, Gray had managed to obtain six barrels of cornmeal and two barrels of salted fish at outlandish prices, and they were perilously close to running out again. Given the Covingtons' poor reputation in town, they were oft the last to be given the opportunity to purchase.

Matthew—their freed black overseer and Mitilda's brother—had persuaded the Covingtons to operate the Double T with a progressively emancipated work force, maintaining that the field workers would toil twice as hard if they labored to better their own futures. Jedediah Reed, the young Methodist preacher who had arrived last summer, had concurred. Within a month, their predictions had proven true. Few of the slaves had ever been truly lazy. But with a measure of promise and hope, every man, woman, and child were working at least 10 percent harder than before, and Gray felt the least they could do was provide a decent food supply . . . which was growing more and more difficult.

To date, Gray and Ket employed twenty-nine freed men and women, and had granted permission to nearly seventy others to work toward their emancipation over the next few years. At that point, they would be given the choice either to work the Double T or go elsewhere. Word spread quickly. Nearly every week, one or two freed people arrived at the Double T, having traveled there from other islands after hearing there was honest work and a living wage—as well as kind bosses—for those who could get to Nevis. Given that America was at war, few wished to leave the West Indies, nor could they afford to return to Africa. For many, the Double T seemed a sanctuary. While Gray had a hard time turning anyone away, Selah found it impossible. Over and over she talked her brother-in-law into “just one more.”

Their choices had gradually made the Covingtons and Selah pariahs on-island. Not that they had been popular before—hiring a freed black overseer had already cast them under suspicion. Their

latest choices made many plantation owners despise them. Not only were they outproducing every other plantation on-island but they did so with a work force like none had ever seen. And the planters did not abide well by change. They feared it—feared that black men or women, finding new power in their freedom, might attempt to take the island by force. Had not Hispaniola and Jamaica already seen attempts at the same?

But Selah felt more secure among her black friends—and increasingly alongside the lanky young preacher, Jedediah—than she had ever felt as she mingled among the planters at their soirees or in town. It had come as some relief to see the invitations to parties and gatherings slowly dwindle, whether due to a lack of hosting supplies or their dwindling popularity.

In the end, she decided brevity was the best choice for her note, in case Brutus was somehow intercepted. “Watch for our impending arrival,” she wrote. Then she scurried out of the house and down to the stables. She strapped the note to the falcon’s leg. “Now hurry, Abe,” she said. “Send him off before anyone else might spot him.”

Angus Shubert was often on the neighboring plantation to their south, Cold Spring, having purchased Chandler’s Point as part of his vast holdings and merging it with another plantation farther inland. If he glimpsed Brutus, he would know the falcon was Verity’s and come nosing about. “Please, Lord,” Selah whispered as she walked with Abe to the center of the clearing, “let him be in Charlestown or at home today.” His home was in Gingerland, on the other end of the island. But he delighted in provoking the Covingtons and her anytime he had the opportunity. By marrying the widow of the richest planter on-island, Angus had become wealthy overnight, as well as earned a temporary position on council. Few liked the man, but fewer had the courage to stand against him. It was he who had blackballed Gray in town, ensuring that almost all incoming supplies from England were allocated to other planters before him. Only one lone merchant—the kindly Mr. Kirk—had shown mercy and allowed Gray to purchase those last supplies,

and the barrels had to be transported to the Double T under cover of darkness.

Together they walked out into the yard. “Back to Miss Verity, Brutus,” Abe whispered to the falcon, lifting his arm. “Back to Miss Verity!” he hissed again as the bird began to climb higher in the sky. They watched as the falcon circled twice—almost as if reluctant to go—then headed toward Saba.

Gideon and Primus entered the yard just as Abraham pulled the long leather glove from his arm. “Was that . . . ?” Primus began, looking to the bird, now small in the distance, then to Selah.

She gave a conspiratorial nod. “Keep it to yourselves, my friends,” she whispered. “But Ver is near!”

Both of the black men—servants to the sisters their whole lives—grinned. It was good news that Verity was alive, and even better news that the sisters might soon be reunited. But their guardians well understood the danger. “Take close care, Miss Selah, Lady Ket,” Gideon intoned.

“We shall,” Keturah promised. She turned to Abe. “Go to the fields, Abraham. Fetch Master Gray and Philip. Tell them they are invited to a luncheon aboard the *Hartwick*.”



Selah looked up to the two small sails of the ketch they’d named after their childhood manor, urging the trade winds to propel them faster. She and Keturah held hands, each terribly anxious to get to Verity after so long apart. Gray stood at the wheel while Philip manned the ropes. Given the currents and winds on this side of the island, they had to tack back and forth to get to Saba, but they managed to near the tiny harbor an hour after they had embarked.

“There,” Keturah breathed, pointing at the *Inverness*, at anchor in the tiny bay. They could see a couple at her starboard edge, surrounded by sailors. “There she is,” she said, tears slipping down her cheeks. Selah and Ket embraced as Philip grinned over at them.

“Oh, do hurry, Gray,” Selah said, wringing her hands and looking back to her brother-in-law. Settled around him were twenty

small casks of sugar. Primus and Gideon had transferred giant hogsheads into the smaller barrels in order to make it less conspicuous as they carried them to the *Inverness*. Fortunately, the path to the pier, as well as the tiny harbor itself, was largely surrounded by a strip of jungle that delineated the Double T from Cold Spring. And once the diminutive casks were settled into the boat, they were not visible over the edge; therefore any neighbor observing them sail off would only see the luncheon basket sitting on the raised area near the mast—the rest of the boat appearing empty.

While they did not head to St. Kitts, neither did they go to Statia, an island frequented by the British's hated French enemies. There were some plantations on-island, but the Dutch-held Saba was largely uninhabited, the perfect cover for an innocent excursion off-island. Ian McKintrick's men cheered when they came alongside, clearly aware of Verity's excitement over a reunion with her family. Philip brought down the ketch's remaining sail as Gray tossed a rope to Ian, bringing them to a swift stop alongside the big ship. A small boatswain's chair was lowered from a pulley, and Keturah was settled into it first, then hauled upward. Selah could hear the excited squeals of her sisters and could barely wait for the seat to return for her. In minutes that seemed to drag, it soon arrived. "Up you go," Philip said with a grin.

Even as she rose, Gray and Philip took to the rope net on the broad side of the ship, climbing up after the women. Soon enough, they were all embracing, the men gladly shaking hands and gripping shoulders.

"Of all the luncheon guests I might have imagined," Keturah said, "I confess I never thought it would be my dear sister and her husband." She pulled far enough away to examine Verity from top to bottom. "You are well, Sissy? You *look* fine as sunshine."

Verity smiled and nodded. Her brown hair had become bleached in the shipboard sun, taking on golden and rust highlights that Selah thought quite fetching. "And you, Selah," Verity said, hugging her tightly again, "you're even more beautiful than when I

left you. You've become quite a lady! Is there a man on-island not in pursuit of you?"

Selah giggled. She was well into her courting years, but there was not a man on-island who would dare to approach her now, given the Double T's reputation. Not that she longed for such attentions. No, she was far too busy tending to the workers on the plantation, as well as their children. And lately she'd done much of it beside the curious young preacher, Jedediah Reed. "Clearly there is much to tell you, Verity. And much for you to tell us!"

"Indeed," Verity said. "Come, let us sit in Ian's cabin. I do so wish you had brought Madeleine. She is well?"

"She is. Fat as a little monkey gorging on mangoes," Keturah said proudly.

"And with the most precious brown curls," Selah put in.

"But we never take her with us when we sail," Ket continued. "Given that we wanted all to appear as normal, we had to leave her behind with Mitilda."

Verity sighed mournfully. "'Tis wise. But I do so hope that Shubert shall drop his claim and this wretched war will end soon. I loathe that it keeps us apart at all!"

Selah took her arm in hers and gestured toward the Union Jack. "You appear to be more in line with the British than you sound."

"Ian flies the flag he needs to pilot any waters we wish, but we are committed to liberty's cause. 'Tis only because of potential British patrols about that we fly Her Majesty's flag." They entered Ian's cabin and settled around a small table. Only the men remained standing.

"So you now work as a rebel privateer?" Gray asked.

Ian turned to him with a pensive but resolute look. "I do," he replied.

"And a smuggler?" Gray pressed.

"When it serves," Ian returned.

"Thank God," Gray said, breaking out into a grin and reaching out to clasp his shoulder. "Brother, Sister," he said, glancing toward Verity, "I must beg your forgiveness. I acted rashly in sending you

away when you asked to court Verity, Ian. There have been many a night that I wished I could relive that moment and do things differently.”

“Oh, dear Gray. I know you acted on my behalf, attempting to protect me,” Verity said. She rose and took his hand in hers.

“A decision I could not argue against in good conscience,” Ian said.

“Then I am forgiven?” he asked the two of them.

“Long ago,” Verity said.

“Of course,” Ian added. “But why the change of heart?”

Together they all sat down, and over the course of an hour, Selah, Gray, and Keturah informed them of all that had transpired at the Double T and on Nevis, as well as learned what had brought the McKintricks to be rebel privateers. They spoke quickly, well aware they could not linger long. The *Inverness* risked much tarrying in these waters.

“You tread on perilous ground yourselves,” Verity said, her delicate brow knit in concern as she looked from Keturah to Selah. “There are those on Nevis who would gladly be rid of you.”

“We could say the same of you. But what can we do?” Ket asked gently. She turned toward Selah. “To aid the Negroes in this way seems to be the path that God has laid before us. It allows us to operate the plantation but also employ freed men and women.”

“If you could only see the hope among them now, Ver,” Selah put in. “It has changed the entire feel of the Double T.”

“Which is why the majority of our neighbors despise us,” Gray said gravely.

“It seems we are on parallel paths, then,” Verity said. “Each of us endeavoring to see life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all.”

Selah blinked in wonder. “Might you say that again?”

Verity smiled. “‘Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’ ’Tis a phrase from the Continental Congress’s Declaration of Independence. I have a copy for you. They refer to them as ‘unalienable

rights,' something that all might assume they have, whether black or white."

"So the rebels intend to set their slaves free?" Selah asked.

"Ah, no," Verity said, sobering. "Many in the north favor abolition, as do an increasing number in Britain, as I understand it. But the demands of the plantations, as well as those who profit upon their labors from across the Atlantic, rally to keep things as they are."

"'Tis a vicious cycle," Gray said. "These plantations require thousands of workers. Those workers produce a high-profit crop, allowing us to purchase more slaves. Islanders purchase more slaves because they want to produce more sugar."

"And yet you are finding a way around that," Ian said. "What with your freed force, as well as those earning their way toward freedom."

"If we are not burned out before that can occur," Gray said, wearily rubbing his face. "I do not know how long I can keep fear at bay with a wife, child, and sister to protect in the midst of it."

"Perhaps you are a forerunner of what is to come," Verity said. "If you can only endure. In ten years, twenty, perhaps much will change."

"Perhaps," Gray said doubtfully. "And what of you and your safety? Now with a rebel captain as your husband?"

Verity cast a stormy look toward Ian. "He intends to establish me on Statia. He says 'tis far too dangerous to continue to sail with him."

"With the war heating up, I cannot blame him. And Statia!" Keturah said, smiling in delight. "That is close enough that we might steal away to you here and there!"

"I do not know if that shall be possible, Ket . . ." Gray began.

"I do," she said resolutely, taking Verity's hand. "If my sister is within a half-day's sail, there shall be nothing to keep us apart."

"It might be best for Verity to come to you," Ian said, lifting a hand to stay Gray's alarm. "After all, there is a warrant for my arrest, but not Verity's. And I intend to keep her in supply with

trade goods. Any time you can get her to Nevis, or you there, you shall find supplies like those that fill *Hartwick's* hold even now.”

Gray tapped his lips with a finger. His eyes shifted back and forth as he thought it through. “Perhaps under cover of darkness,” he began.

Keturah clapped her hands in glee. “Yes, Gray! We can conjure up a plan. Think of it! Food enough for all on the Double T, as well as a means to sell more of our sugar.” Even that had become an issue of late, with many planters rushing to block them from securing space on the limited number of export ships bound for Britain.

“And a way to see our beloved sister,” Selah said.

“And perhaps a way for an auntie to someday see her precious Madeleine,” Verity said.

Gray peered helplessly over at Ian and Philip. Both men shook their heads and laughed under their breath.

“Once again I am forced to admit that there is no force mightier than the Banning women united,” Gray said with mock resignation.