

KEYS  
—OF—  
PROMISE  
3



# FREEDOM'S PRICE



A NOVEL

Christine Johnson



**Revell**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Christine Johnson, *Freedom's Price*  
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Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Johnson, Christine (Christine Elizabeth), author.

Title: Freedom's price : a novel / Christine Johnson.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,  
[2017] | Series: Keys of promise ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2016056145 | ISBN 9780800723521 (softcover) | ISBN  
9780800728854 (print on demand)

Subjects: LCSH: Man-woman relationships—Fiction. | Family secrets—Fiction. |  
GSAFD: Historical fiction. | Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3610.O32395 F74 2017 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016056145>

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

17 18 19 20 21 22 23      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For the mothers and fathers who sacrifice  
so much for their children.  
I love you, Mom and Dad!



# Prologue

## Staffordshire, England

Catherine Haynes pressed her ear to the study door. A girl of thirteen knew better than to eavesdrop, but how could she not? She had never seen the stranger before. He appeared Arabian or East Indian. Exotic. A tiny scar beneath one of his black eyes. His gaze had swept over her as he passed her in the hallway. In that instant, he'd claimed her imagination.

She must know why he had come to Deerford.

She listened to the conversation as best she could. Alas, Papa's voice did not carry through the thick oak door, and the stranger's was muffled.

"Get away now." Mrs. McCready, the housekeeper, tugged her from the door. "Your father's business is his alone and not for young lady's ears."

Catherine obliged her by going to the library and then returned to the hallway the moment the stranger burst from the study. Again, his gaze raked her. She could not breathe, could

not move. He smiled, nodded, and then strode past, carrying a small strongbox.

Papa followed, his smile dimming when he saw her. "Go to the drawing room, child."

She bristled, ready to object that she was not a child, but he and the man hurried past. She raced to the library window and followed their progress from the house. Papa shook the man's hand. Then the stranger stowed the strongbox in a saddlebag, climbed onto his black steed, and raced away without a backward glance.



Early June 1856

"Miss Haynes!"

A rude masculine voice pulled Catherine from that long-ago memory. For months she'd dreamed of the stranger's return and had romanticized him as a conquering knight. Ten years later, all such fantasies had come to a halt. Dreams were for children. She must deal with reality.

She set her jaw and returned her cousin's glare. By very subtly lifting her gaze above his piercing gray eyes and fixing it on the portrait of her mother hanging behind Papa's desk, she could maintain the illusion of control.

"Well?" Ugly red suffused Mr. Roger Haynes's neck. "I am waiting for an answer."

In the months since he and his family first arrived at Deerford, she had learned one important trait about her cousin. He expected compliance. This time she would not bow. Nor could she find words of refusal.

The mantel clock ticked off the seconds.

Cousin Roger braced his hands on the desktop, leaning forward like a snarling lion eager to capture its prey. "Your reply."

Not a question.

Catherine drew an imperceptible breath and imitated Maman's calm. "I cannot."

"You cannot?" The sentence exploded with unspoken threat. He would force her into this marriage.

Again the ticking of the clock filled the silence.

What would Maman do? Faced with similar prospects upon her return from the grand tour all those years ago, Catherine's mother had abandoned her chaperones in the dead of night and eloped. Catherine had no such escape available.

Cousin Roger's smile menaced. "If you continue in this stubborn refusal, you will lose what is left of your family."

Meaning him. She had no one else. Not here. Maman's family was in faraway Louisiana, and the decision to elope had cost her all contact with them. No letters. No word of any kind. How the separation must have hurt, for Maman often regaled her with stories of plantation life, of balls and soirees and golden days running between the tall rows of sugarcane. Catherine had begged her mother to take her there, but Maman said it was not possible. Then she'd died.

Only the portrait remained. Maman's rose-colored gown flowed from her waist like that of an empress. At her throat rested the ruby brooch Catherine had often run her finger across when she was very young. She had not found it with Maman's jewels. Papa must have buried it with her.

Dear Papa. Catherine tugged at her heavy black sleeves to hide the welling of tears.

"I suggest a different answer," cousin Roger said.

Catherine brushed away the past. It could not solve this dilemma. She chose her words with care. "Mr. Kirby does not suit me."

"Does not suit? You act as if you would bring an heiress's

fortune to your marriage. May I remind you that the terms of your father's estate leave you but five hundred pounds?"

"And fifty pounds per year." Eight months had not changed that fact. The passing of time had only increased her cousin's urgency to be rid of her.

"Until you wed."

That was the crux of it. Once she married, the annual payments would cease.

Her cousin settled into Papa's chair.

She clenched her jaw against a wave of revulsion. He might have gained the estate through settlement, but he did not belong in her father's place.

"I do not intend to wed. Allow me to manage the estate—"

He snorted derisively. "Is that what you call your playing around in the accounts?" He filled a pipe from Papa's tobacco jar.

Angry words rose to the tip of her tongue and stopped there. Very few men considered a woman intelligent enough to manage accounts, least of all an estate. Cousin Roger was not one of them.

"If you examine my entries—"

"I have." He slammed shut the ledger before him. "Some might consider them adequate, considering your gender, but I found them entirely insufficient."

"Insufficient! Compare my skills to any man—"

"Use those skills to benefit your husband."

She choked. "I am in mourning and cannot consider marriage."

"You have worn black long enough. It's time to move on. I suggest you change into something more cheerful." His cold gray gaze, fixed above fashionably long sideburns, bored into her. "That would be welcomed by our guests."

Mr. Kirby and Mrs. Durning, whose husband had just left

for Liverpool to provision his ship for the crossing to the West Indies, were expected. Neither cared about her attire, but at least it gave her an excuse to leave this unbearable interview.

“If you will excuse me, then.” She reached for the doorknob.

“Not quite yet.” He drew a breath on the pipe and exhaled a cloud of rich smoke.

If she closed her eyes, she could imagine Papa sitting there, his spectacles resting on the tip of his nose, where they would slide after his hours of agonizing over the accounts. Papa had been a kind and generous man, often excusing debts and allowing rents to remain in arrears far too long. Of course, she hadn’t known that until he fell ill and she had to take on the accounts.

Her cousin cleared his throat. “At three and twenty you will soon slip from a marriageable age.”

“Apparently not, if Mr. Kirby is still calling.”

His jaw tightened. “His long association with the family places him in a rather fortunate position.”

“Fortunate? That is a matter of perspective, is it not? As you just stated, I bring a pittance into any marriage.”

“Precisely. Few would consider a wife who brings only five hundred.”

She could not resist poking at his unstated desire. “You might continue the fifty pounds per year. We are cousins, after all.”

“Let me spell out what you could never have gleaned from your pitiable scribbling in the ledgers. Your father’s estate is in ruin.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he lifted a finger to silence her.

“Even if I manage to collect the arrears, which I fully intend to do, it will not offset the losses.”

Catherine would not be set down so easily. “Then how do you intend to pay the dowry?”

His lips twitched, signaling triumph. "I will sell the estate."  
"Sell Deerford?" The words barely escaped her constricted throat. "You can't!"

"As you well know, I can. In fact, a buyer is at hand."

"A buyer?" She clawed at hope. "Mr. Kirby?" Perhaps she would agree to marry him if it meant saving Deerford.

He laughed. "Certainly not."

"Then who? Will he continue the tenants' leases? Will he keep planting the land as always?"

"This clay soil was never suited to farming, dear cousin. It will fare much better in the hands of the pottery manufacturer that is buying it."

"A factory?" Her head spun. "But . . . the house."

"It would have been too costly to maintain."

"What will happen to the tenants? You must take care of them. They have worked Deerford land for generations."

He leaned back and blew out a plume of smoke. "They can apply for employment at the factory."

"But they're farmers." Each face flashed through her mind, from old widow Evans to the two-year-old Herring twins. "They don't know anything else."

"Then they can move elsewhere."

His cold statement sent shivers down her spine. She must help them, but how? The few guineas in her possession wouldn't feed them long. They needed lands to tend.

"You must find them new homes," she pleaded.

"Sometimes progress demands change. For them and for you." He paused. "Deerford is extinct. You have nowhere to go. Perhaps a husband—especially one as charitably minded as Mr. Kirby—would find a place for your tenants on his father's or future patrons' lands."

Her throat closed. How carefully he had crafted the snare.

If she hoped to help the displaced tenants, she must marry Eustace Kirby.

Cousin Roger seized his advantage. "I suggest you give full consideration to Mr. Kirby's suit."

She sank into the closest chair. "But he's a clergyman."

His brow quirked. "Do you harbor resentment against that noble profession?"

Her cousin would not think so highly of the ministry if he had been forced into it as Mr. Kirby had been.

"I wouldn't make a good minister's wife."

"Let us hope Mr. Kirby doesn't see that fault before the blessed event. I shall give him my blessing."

"But I did not agree to marry him."

"You would destroy your father's hopes for you and leave your beloved tenants without a future rather than commit to a life of serving the Lord?"

Put that way, it did sound rather selfish, but she could not marry Mr. Kirby. The mere thought of kissing him made her stomach turn. Having children? Settling into a country parish? Impossible.

"There must be another answer." Yet she could not see it.

Cousin Roger leaned back with a contented smirk and puffed his pipe. "Make no mistake, dear cousin, fifty pounds will not go far. Once you have no home . . ." He let her imagine the result.

She clawed at the pit that was swallowing her. Above her cousin, Maman's portrait smiled placidly at the terrible scene unfolding below. She would never have agreed to this manipulation. *You have my wits*, Maman had often told her, *and your papa's compassion*. What to do?

She tried to breathe, but the strictures of both garments and circumstance made it difficult to draw in enough air. Papa's

halting words on his deathbed echoed in her mind. *Forgive me for losing what was yours.* Now she knew what he meant.

“So you can see,” her cousin was saying, “Mr. Kirby has presented a most opportune offer. I suggest you accept.”

He had left her no escape. Her head spun, and spots danced before her eyes.

“Are you unwell?” He rose.

She shook her head rather than admit weakness. Several short breaths restored her vision, though her stomach still quaked.

He moved toward her, a glint in his eye, and brought to mind again the shadowy memory of the stranger, dark as tea. He had cast her the same look when he passed her in the hallway outside Papa’s study. The dark stranger’s victorious smile, like that of a king, had claimed her imagination. She’d peppered her father with questions, but he would tell her nothing, only that it did not concern her.

But perhaps it did. What if this dark stranger had come from Maman’s glorious plantation? What if contact had not been cut off forever? His glance toward her had not borne malice. No, it seemed to say that she belonged elsewhere.

The study door opened.

“Excuse me, Miss Haynes, Mr. Haynes.” The housekeeper dipped into a slight curtsy. “Mrs. Durning has arrived, and she says that Mr. Kirby will be here shortly.”

“Good,” cousin Roger said. “Tell Mr. Kirby to join me in the study. We have business to discuss while Miss Haynes entertains Mrs. Durning.”

The housekeeper bustled off.

Cousin Roger drew again on the pipe. The set of his jaw meant the decision had been made. With or without her permission, he would give his consent to Eustace Kirby’s suit. He believed he had trapped her.

Well, he could give all the blessings he wished. He was not her only family, and Mrs. Durning could very well give her the escape she desperately needed.

She stood, reinvigorated. "I request the annual sum due me."

He set down the pipe with a thud. "What?"

"The fifty pounds specified in Papa's will."

"You will waste it on the tenants?" he sneered.

She could no longer help them. Unless . . . "And an additional ten pounds per tenant family."

He guffawed. Then paused, surprised that she didn't waver before him. "You are jesting."

"I am not."

"It's not in the terms of the will."

"I propose new terms. In exchange for the ten pounds per tenant, I will waive all future annual payments."

"You will anyway, once you marry." The smirk was back.

She drew in a deep breath, never more certain. "I do not intend to marry. I am rejoining my mother's family in America."

He stared, struck silent for the moment, but soon she saw the gleam of self-interest as he calculated the benefits of her plan. This would spare him not only the continued fifty pounds per year but also the five hundred upon her marriage, for she would have difficulty claiming it from America.

She assumed all the risk, leaving intolerable security for the unknown. Surely her mother's family would welcome her, if not with open arms, then at least with sympathy for her predicament. Surely they would not hold Maman's sin against the next generation.



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# 1

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**August 27, 1856**  
**Off the Bahama Banks**

Catherine shot to her feet at the loud crack that shivered through the *Justinian*. The sound, earsplitting as cannon fire, overpowered the winds that screamed around the ship. The vessel, heeled hard to larboard, shuddered and righted for a moment. Then the roof of their cabin shook under a sudden barrage of something very hard and weighty.

Mrs. Durning held on to the frame of the bunk so tightly that her knuckles turned white. “Are we under attack?”

“Who would attack us?” Though Catherine had never traveled by sea before, she suspected a source other than cannon fire, one that could prove much more dangerous in this tempest. Since the vessel had begun to pitch and roll wildly, she sat heavily on her bunk.

“The Spaniards might have declared war in the time it’s taken to cross the Atlantic,” Mrs. Durning suggested.

“Unlikely.”

“They might take advantage of our focus on the Crimea.”

Though anything was possible, Catherine knew better than to speculate on the unknown. At present her chief problem was a roiling stomach. Judging from Mrs. Durning's pale countenance, she too was suffering a recurrence of the malady that had plagued them the first two weeks of the long voyage. On their fifty-ninth day, she had not expected to revisit it. These were exceptional conditions. Captain Durning had suggested his wife spend the night with Catherine in order to "see her through the rough seas," rather than wait alone in his cabin.

"I will be busy," he had said with great affection. He then kissed his wife of thirty years on the hand as if they were still courting.

Mrs. Durning had warbled her delight at the time. Now she clung to Catherine.

"My George is a fine master." The woman's voice trembled. "He will keep us safe."

As if the crew had heard her words of confidence, the wild motion of the ship ceased, and Catherine could try to settle her stomach with a sip of mint tea.

Then footsteps scurried across the roof of the cabin. Catherine looked up. She had grown accustomed to the occasional footfall, but this sounded like an army of men.

"Cut the lines," one of the crew shouted directly overhead, his voice carrying to them despite the tempest.

Mrs. Durning stared upward, her eyes round. "Lines? Are we at anchor?"

"I don't know." Catherine rose, more sure of her footing now that the pitching had leveled off. "I will check."

"No you won't. It's too dangerous. You heard our captain."

Indeed Catherine had. They were to stay in the cabin until told otherwise. Some hours ago, a steward had brought a light supper of oily sardines and biscuits with tea. She had barely

been able to stomach a biscuit and none of the sardines before he whisked them away. After that, no one visited the cabin. To distract herself from the dreadful howling winds and groaning of the ship, Catherine had plied Mrs. Durning for anything her husband might have told her of their destination, Jamaica.

“Mr. Durning fears it will be too hot for me,” she had told Catherine. “He would have discouraged my joining him if not for you. He will secure a safe passage for you from Kingston to New Orleans,” she’d added with a squeeze of Catherine’s hand. “He knows the ships that call there and will know which one has a good Christian master and crew.”

Catherine doubted the religious affiliation of the ship’s master guaranteed her safety, but it was better than finding herself at the mercy of an unscrupulous man. It had not taken long aboard the *Justinian* to learn that some of the crew viewed her with interest if the captain was not within earshot. From then on, she’d taken great care to have Mrs. Durning at her side whenever she took the air and to lock the cabin door when alone.

Tonight, the shrieking winds and the scraping overhead did nothing to calm the fears that kept creeping to mind. Unwanted attention was not the worst they would have to contend with.

A sharp thump was followed by another and another. Then the ship lurched again, throwing Mrs. Durning backward and Catherine onto the cabin floor.

She tried unsuccessfully to stand and then resorted to crawling onto the bunk.

“Are you all right, dear?”

“Yes. Fine.” Catherine tried to calm her spinning head and shaky voice. “Clumsy of me.”

Yet they both knew the fall was none of her doing. The ship was foundering in a terrible sea. Now Catherine clung to the frame of the bunk as tightly as her companion did.

In the light cast by the gimballed lamp, Mrs. Durning's kindly brown eyes brimmed with tears. "I always feared my George would come to such an end but never imagined I would."

"We won't. We saw land yesterday. Remember? We have reached the Caribbean Sea. Your husband will find safe harbor." Speaking the hope made it somewhat more real.

"I wanted to share in this life he's led for so many years. I wanted to see my George captain a fine ship."

"And so he has." Catherine seized the change of topic. Anything to ignore the pounding overhead. "Thirty years, has it been?"

"Thirty-five, since before we met. He loves me true, he does. I've never known a finer man."

"That's how I remember my father." Yet he hadn't been able to prevent the land settling upon her cousin Roger, who had destroyed the work of generations of Haynes men.

"Aye. A good man. Pity he couldn't leave you a decent living."

Papa's dying words came back to mind. *Forgive me for losing what was yours*. But Papa hadn't lost Deerford. He'd been bound by terms of a settlement formed generations before. Perhaps he had tried to change the settlement but failed. Such generational documents could be impossible to derail. Unfortunately, her cousin had found a way.

"What's done is done. My future rests with Maman's family."

"I hope they will welcome you."

"Why wouldn't they?" Catherine spoke with more vigor now that the tromping overhead had ceased. "My letter explains everything. When I show them my baptismal record, all doubts will be erased."

"I hope you are correct, but one can't know how those Americans might react. They are different, you know, especially those . . . not of English blood."

“French.” Catherine didn’t mind stating it. Though enmity between the countries was currently at an ebb, attitudes didn’t change. “You’re referring to Maman’s family name, Lafreniere.”

“It doesn’t matter now, I suppose,” Mrs. Durning grumbled. “They’re all Americans.”

Catherine managed a bit of a smile. “I suppose you’re right.” But Maman had often spoken French to her when she was a child. Alas, Catherine recalled very little. Would Maman’s family still speak French? The thought had occurred to her, as well as the trepidation that she would not fully understand them if they did. If they were anything like Maman, filled with gentle grace and a bold spirit, language would not prove a barrier. “I’m looking forward to meeting them.”

“Goodness, you’re a brave girl, heading across the ocean to throw yourself on the mercy of kin you’ve never met.”

The thought unsettled her almost as much as the rolling seas. “If I’m fortunate, I’ll meet someone like your husband.”

That turned Mrs. Durning’s attention in a positive direction. “I’ll pray you do. Your relations will introduce you to many gentlemen. There’s bound to be one or two of quality. I suppose they have some sort of entertainment too, though certainly nothing as grand as our Season.”

Catherine recalled her mother’s descriptions. “They hold balls and soirees. New Orleans is bound to have theaters and operas and symphonies.”

“Indeed.” Her tone made it clear she didn’t approve of some of those entertainments. “Just take care to follow your family’s guidance. Perhaps your grandmother is still living. Or another female relation. An aunt or even an older cousin.”

“Maman’s brother must have had children. He was much older than her. There could be many in the family by now.” The

idea of having cousins both excited and terrified Catherine. As an only child, she had not known the trials and joys of siblings.

Regardless, it was better that Mrs. Durning focus on match-making or even her prejudices against France and Spain than the battering the ship was taking in this storm.

“My mother described the plantation as having endless fields of sugarcane stretching from the river as far as one can see.”

“Oh my. Then your relations must be very rich.” Mrs. Durning absently touched the yellowed lace collar of her muslin dress.

“Perhaps. Or perhaps that is only the impression of a young woman. She left when she was but seventeen.”

“And met your father.” Mrs. Durning knew the details of the story by now. Such a long voyage made for familiarity.

“And met my father.”

Footsteps raced overhead again. Catherine instinctively looked up. Seeing nothing, she returned her attention to Mrs. Durning and spotted a droplet upon the woman's shoulder. The ceiling was leaking. She supposed that was to be expected, given the savagery of the storm. At least she hoped it was.

“I'm sure it's nothing out of the ordinary,” she murmured.

“What is?”

“Nothing of import.”

The door to their cabin burst open, and the steward popped his head into the opening. “Stay in your cabin until someone fetches you.”

Catherine rose. “What's happening?”

He slammed the door without answering her question. Catherine strode across the room, holding herself steady against the wall. “I'm going to find out what that was all about.”

“It's exactly what Mr. Durning told us.”

Not exactly. Captain Durning had said nothing about being fetched.

Catherine flung open the door and poked her head into the narrow hallway. The first officer, Mr. Lightwater, stood just inside the door that opened to the deck. The steward, holding a lantern, had joined him. Through the open doorway, she saw the lashing rain, blown sideways, in the light of his lantern.

Neither man noticed her.

“Get the passengers ready,” Mr. Lightwater charged. “The captain is launching the ship’s boat.”

Ice flowed through Catherine’s veins. A boat in such weather? She’d seen it lashed to the deck. It might hold everyone but nothing else. No belongings. What would happen to her three trunks, the family Bible, Maman’s portrait, and the daguerreotype of her family taken shortly before Maman’s death? A small boat allowed nothing but oars and necessities like food and water. She must at least bring the Bible and the daguerreotype. The fancy gowns and childhood mementos could sink to the bottom. Even Maman’s portrait must go, but she could not sacrifice everything.

“Aye,” the steward said, eyeing the howling winds. “But if you don’t mind my saying so, we’ll need help from above to pull this off.”

Catherine pressed against the wall, overcome. The steward was right. In such winds, how could a tiny boat prevail?

“You have your orders,” Mr. Lightwater said brusquely before returning to the maelstrom on deck.

Catherine ducked back into the room and closed the door before the steward spotted her. Her knees threatened to give way at the thought of what faced them. Winds and horizontal rain were just the start. The waves could swallow such a small boat. She collapsed against the closed door and squeezed her eyes shut against a flood of images.

Surely there was some hope if the captain had ordered the

boat launched. Perhaps they were near the land she'd spotted earlier that day.

"What is it?" Mrs. Durning didn't attempt to hide her alarm. "What did you see?"

Catherine had never considered the possibility of shipwreck or becoming marooned, least of all drowning. Even if they somehow managed to reach land, many of these islands were savage. Some fell under unfriendly control. An Englishwoman might befall precisely the sort of indignities that Mrs. Durning had hinted at during her cautions.

Her heart pounded. Pirates still lurked in the dark corners of this part of the world. What would such men do to Mrs. Durning and her? Romantic tales would not measure well against cruel reality.

The ship lurched, and she bounced against the cabin wall.

"Are you hurt?" Mrs. Durning had somehow managed to reach her in spite of the heaving decks.

Catherine rubbed her shoulder. "I'm fine." But the ship wasn't. "I believe it is time to pray in earnest."



Tom Worthington crushed the letter in his right hand. How could she? This was not the sort of information he needed to receive the morning after a big storm.

"Is everything all right?" asked Jules Ledbetter, the bringer of the bad news.

Tom weighed his words as the jeweler on the other side of the shop counter slipped back to the worktable and resumed tinkering on a watch. Tinker! He let out a cynical snort. How could his mother remarry so soon?

"Barely in the grave," he muttered.

"Someone died?"

Tom shook away the cobwebs of regret. “My pa.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know.” Jules cast him an appropriately sorrowful expression though he’d never known any of Tom’s family. “I wouldn’t have brought the letter ’cept Captain said it might be important. Tough luck.”

“What?” Tom stared at the lad until the bits and pieces fit together. Oh, Jules thought the letter announced Pa’s death. “He died seven years ago.”

“Oh.” Jules squinted at him. “Then why’re ye upset now?”

“Because she’s remarrying.”

“She?”

“My mother. Doesn’t she have any respect for Pa? Marrying his sworn enemy, no less. That man didn’t have one kind word to say about Pa when he was living. Now she says he’s all sympathetic about their situation and wants to take care of them.” That put a bitter taste in Tom’s mouth.

“Sorry.” Jules shuffled his feet again, appearing chagrined but certainly not sympathetic.

“It gets worse. My brothers and sisters are taking that man’s name. Tinker.” He smacked his fist into his other hand. “How could they?”

Jules shrugged. “He’s gonna be their new pa.”

“He’ll never be their father. Not really.” He stared down the lad. “Don’t you have something better to do?”

Jules backed away, eyes wide. “I’m s’posed to give you a message. Captain said we’re ta set sail within the hour. Ship’s aground inside Washerwoman Shoal, and everyone’s headin’ out ta help in the salvage. Didn’t you hear the bell?” He scooted toward the door.

Whenever a wreck was spotted, the bells would ring from the lookout towers. Tom hadn’t heard. He’d been too intent on questioning the jeweler. Jules’s news sent a thrill through

his veins. A wreck would take his mind off trouble at home. A wreck could bring him enough wealth to avenge his father and prove that a Worthington was better than a Tinker any day. The pitying sneers would be replaced by respect.

“Tell Captain O’Malley that I’ll board the *Windsprite* as soon as I finish here,” Tom called out.

Jules paused in the doorway. “Captain says you’re ta take the *James Patrick* out with Rander and pilot in a barque that lost her mainmast.”

“Do what?” Piloting brought in a pittance compared to a wreck, where salvage could make a man’s fortune. Rourke O’Malley knew how desperately Tom wanted to salvage a big wreck. He would never deny him the opportunity. “You must have misunderstood.”

Jules shook his head. “That’s what he said.”

“I see. Rander is going to follow me back to port in the *James Patrick*, and then we’ll head out to the wreck.”

Jules hopped from foot to foot. “Nope. He’s ta head straight ta the wreck after droppin’ ye off.”

“What?” Tom couldn’t believe his ears. If he didn’t participate in the salvage, he earned none of the reward. “He can’t leave me grounded.”

“That’s what the captain said. You can ask him yerself.” Jules took off at a run.

Tom raced to the door, but the youngster was already halfway down the street.

“Change your mind?” the jeweler asked behind him.

Tom stuffed the crumpled letter into his jacket pocket and returned to the counter, where the jeweler had laid out a golden brooch.

“Your special lady will treasure it,” the jeweler said.

Tom wasn’t going to admit he had no special lady. No one

lived up to his criteria. She must be beautiful, compassionate, and elegant like the captain's wife. And honest. Tom couldn't abide the slightest hint of dishonesty. The woman he loved would be exquisite, a jewel.

"All I'm asking is who sold it to you," he prodded. "Was it a Spaniard or Cuban named Mornez?"

"Can't say. It was a long time ago."

Tom laid on the countertop a gold doubloon that he'd found while diving the reef. "Try to remember."

The jeweler reached for the coin, but Tom covered it with his right hand. "Information first."

"Don't know any names, but the gentleman who brought it here claimed it's from nobility and has a great secret behind it."

"Not good enough. What did he look like?"

"He didn't say, but I'd venture he was a Spaniard."

Tom's mouth went dry. He had to control himself so he didn't leap across the counter and shake the rest of the story from the man. "From Spain or Havana?"

"One would suppose the latter."

Tom's skin prickled. "This man. Was he shorter than me with dark complexion and black eyes?"

The jeweler wrapped the brooch and put it into a small mahogany box. "That describes many Cubans."

"Then he *was* from Havana."

The jeweler began to walk away.

Tom stopped him with a single sentence. "The doubloon is yours if you can tell me the man's name."

"He never gave it." The jeweler tucked the box into a safe.

Tom must know if it had once belonged to the man who'd betrayed his father. "Then tell me this man's single most distinguishing feature."

The jeweler eyed him. "Would you be referring to that scar in the shape of a question mark just below his left eye?"

"Mornez." The prickles turned to a wash of ice water. Ten years ago the man had hired Pa to take him to Louisiana. En route, he had incited the crew to mutiny, cast Pa off in the ship's boat, and stole the ship. Three weeks adrift had ruined Pa's health. The loss of the ship and the resulting charges of neglect had cast the family into poverty. "Luis Mornez."

"Like I said, I never knew his name."

Tom pushed the doubloon toward the jeweler, who bit the edge to be certain of its authenticity.

The jeweler smiled. "A fair trade, considering you're heading out for a wreck."

A chill shivered through Tom at the reference to a local fear that a sailor giving up gold would soon meet his end.

"I'm not superstitious." He stopped in the doorway. "I put my faith in God."



The morning after the height of the storm dawned with an unusually refreshing breeze and brilliant blue skies. The seas that had tossed Catherine and her shipmates so terribly yesterday had calmed to even swells. They'd never had to abandon ship.

She arose late that morning to find the *Justinian* limping along with crew and passengers intact. To the west, a sliver of darker color hinted at land, certainly no closer than yesterday morning. The remaining sails caught the breeze, but they were too few and ragged to pull the laden ship at any speed.

After a sleepless night and a painfully small breakfast of stale biscuit and salted pork, Catherine and Mrs. Durning surveyed the damage from just outside the main cabin. The sun's

brilliant light cast everything in cheer, as if the storm had not occurred. The wreckage above deck told a different story. The ship's boat sat on deck, tangled in its moorings, never having reached the ocean below.

"Oh my," Mrs. Durning exclaimed. "Look at that mast."

The tallest mast—the mainmast, Catherine believed—had snapped off a few feet above the deck. The rigging had been cut away, and the crew was busy salvaging what they could.

"What will we do now?" Mrs. Durning's brow pinched with concern.

The second mate, whose name eluded Catherine, stepped toward them. "Put into port, ma'am. Miss." He dipped his head slightly to recognize them. "The mast must be replaced."

"Are we near Jamaica?" Mrs. Durning asked.

"No, ma'am. The storm blew us off course."

"Then where will we stop?" Catherine interjected. "And how long will repairs take?"

"Perhaps Nassau, but the captain will make that decision. If you'll excuse me, I have duties to attend to."

A cry of "ship ahoy" drew everyone's attention to the forward lookout.

The mate's brow furrowed as he clambered up the ladder to the quarterdeck, where he withdrew his spyglass.

Catherine looked again in that direction and spotted a triangular blot of black on the horizon. Black sails? Or was it a trick of the morning light? Unaccountably a shiver raced down her spine. They'd seen many a vessel during the voyage, especially since reaching the Caribbean Sea, yet this one was different. The nervous tension of mate and crew betrayed that this ship signaled trouble.

Mrs. Durning grasped her hand in a fierce grip. "It's pirates. I know it is. They can say what they want, but I've read the

stories. There are still pirates in these waters.” She trembled. “What would they do to us?”

Catherine had no answer, for she had read the same tales but presumed them pure fancy. What if the stories were true? “I will speak to the mate. He will reassure us.”

Since the officer had not yet finished directing his men, she waited at the base of the stairs. When he made no move to acknowledge her, even after he finished giving instructions, she called up to him, “Sir!”

He glanced down. “I have duties to perform, Miss Haynes.” He then called out instructions to the sailors on deck.

A few climbed the ratlines, but most manned winches. Over the course of many tedious minutes, the *Justinian* slowly changed course. By then, the sailing vessel had grown much closer. Its sails weren’t black, as Catherine had first surmised, but its hull was. From this distance she could see no flag flying from its rigging. Again she shivered. The Spaniards still plied these waters, as did slavers from Africa. She could think of no reason for them to intercept the *Justinian* unless a war had begun or mischief was planned.

Regardless, the dark ship was heading straight toward them, and they could not outrun it.

“Wake the captain,” the second mate barked to one of his men, who instantly scurried down the stairs and into the cabin.

Mrs. Durning squeezed Catherine’s hand. “My George will take care of everything.”

Catherine had once held that sort of faith in her father. Papa had always taken care of her. He’d ensured she had the finest gowns and attended the best balls for her Season. When she’d refused every suitor, he’d understood why she would not marry a man who could not inspire a love like the one Papa had for her mother.

“Oh, Papa,” she whispered. Would today be her last?

Mrs. Durning patted her hand. “You still miss him terribly, but it will grow less with time.”

Catherine supposed it would. After all, Maman had retreated into the fringes of her memory, though she could still recall every agonizing moment of her mother’s last night. She had been sent to her room to sleep, but the black mood in the house had kept her awake. She paced the room and finally slipped out to tiptoe to Maman’s bedchamber. The door was closed, and the doctor murmured words she would never forget: “It won’t be long now.”

She had run down the stairs and hidden in the library, as if all those books could somehow shield her from what was to come. When Papa found her later, he didn’t attempt to extract her from beneath Maman’s writing desk. Instead, he settled in his wing chair and picked up his Bible. Minutes passed in silence save for the turning of the page. Unable to bear it, she came out of hiding and climbed onto the chair beside him. He’d simply held her. Though he’d never said the words, she knew. Maman was gone.

Mrs. Durning let go of her hand as the captain came on deck. “What is it?”

The captain’s worried expression softened. “Nothing to be concerned about, but why don’t you take Miss Haynes into the cabin. She looks a bit pale.”

Catherine was not about to faint, not over some unknown ship. This was clearly an attempt to get them off deck. Why? She turned back to the approaching ship. She could now see the silhouette of men on its decks. Still no flag. At this rate the unknown ship would soon overtake them. She looked up to see that the *Justinian* was not flying the ensign either. Had Captain Durning taken it down, or had it been lost during the storm?

“Was the ensign flying this morning?” she asked Mrs. Durning, who tugged at her elbow in a vain attempt to draw her into the cabin.

“Goodness, I don’t know. I suppose it was. Why?”

That might explain the unknown ship’s reluctance to reveal its country of origin. She leaned over the rail, squinting at the approaching vessel. It had sleek lines, beautiful really, and did not display the usual ravages that the sea took upon those ships bold enough to sail her. Surely it had endured the same storm, yet it looked as fresh and clean as if it had just come out of the shipyard.

Did Captain Durning suspect treachery? Was that why he’d suggested they retire to the cabin? Catherine hesitated. She preferred to face an enemy in open air, not cower belowdecks, but Mrs. Durning had paled so much that she might well swoon.

Catherine took the woman’s hand. “Let’s go inside. I would like to rest. Perhaps the cook would serve tea in the officers’ dining saloon?” From that room Catherine could position herself to see the vessel’s approach and ascertain whether they ought to bolt themselves in their quarters or not.

The cook grumbled at her untimely request for tea but obliged with a pot and two cups. Mrs. Durning located sugar in her husband’s stores, but milk had vanished from the tea service weeks ago. Catherine relished the idea of sipping proper tea—with milk—once she reached *Chêne Noir*, the Lafreniere plantation in Louisiana.

Catherine positioned herself so she could keep the approaching ship within view. Mrs. Durning sat opposite her and dropped a nip from the sugarloaf into her teacup.

“That’s better.” Catherine sipped the tepid tea. “The sun is rather hot in these climes. I wonder how long it will take to

repair the mast.” She hoped the change of topic would distract Mrs. Durning from the idea of pirates.

“Mr. Durning will take care of that.” Mrs. Durning dropped another chunk of sugar into her cup. “I suppose if a new mast is available, then it will not take all that long.”

“I hope so.” The bulk of Catherine’s fifty pounds had gone toward passage and the provisions she would need while traveling. Naturally her cousin Roger had held her to the letter of their agreement, without a pence more.

“On the other hand, we should be prepared for a long stay. Mr. Durning will provide for me, of course. Do you have means, dear?”

Had her concerns been that obvious? “That will depend on how long the delay is. Did your husband ever encounter this before?”

“Once. They were dismayed off the Cape.” Mrs. Durning stared into space, a plump finger tapping her chin. “Three months’ delay, I believe.”

“Three months!” Catherine’s funds could not last three months. “I must get to New Orleans.” From the city, it was a short distance to Chêne Noir, according to Maman.

“You could always seek passage on another ship. After all, you would have taken a second ship from Jamaica to New Orleans.”

“The fares might be much higher from Nassau.” Perhaps all she had left.

A jolt drew her attention to the window. The black-hulled ship had come alongside. She flew to the window, Mrs. Durning in her wake.

The sailing ship was much smaller than the *Justinian*, perhaps half its size or less. The sails were a somewhat dingy color, not the black that they had appeared to be on the horizon. The

dark hull, however, gleamed. At the wheel stood an older man in rather ragged clothes. A pirate?

She scanned the rest of the small crew. The men ranged from a lad of perhaps fourteen to a weathered old salt, but the man who captured Catherine's attention looked to be in command. Tall and smartly dressed, he stood in direct contrast to his crew.

Mrs. Durning pressed close. "That one's too handsome to be a pirate."

Catherine couldn't rip her gaze from the dark-haired gentleman in fine trousers, leather boots, and a navy blue frock coat. Though he issued orders with precision, proving he was in command, he was far younger than she had first presumed. He looked around her age, perhaps a couple years older. His skin had been bronzed by the sun, yet he carried himself with the confidence of a nobleman. If he was indeed a pirate, she would not mind at all being taken aboard his ship.

"He doesn't look evil," she murmured.

Just then the man's gaze caught hers, and an impish grin curved his lips, as if he was accusing her of snooping on him. Not one to look away, Catherine stared back imperiously. He held her gaze a long minute before answering the *Justinian's* hail.

His confidence took her breath away. She spun from the window and headed for the dining saloon doorway.

Mrs. Durning trailed after her. "Where are you going?"

"To find out precisely who he is."

The woman's eyes widened. "What if he isn't . . . respectable?"

"Then I shall discover that fact at once."

"But you might fall into harm. Aren't you afraid?"

Catherine mirrored the confident captain's grin. "No, but if he makes one wrong move, he will regret it."