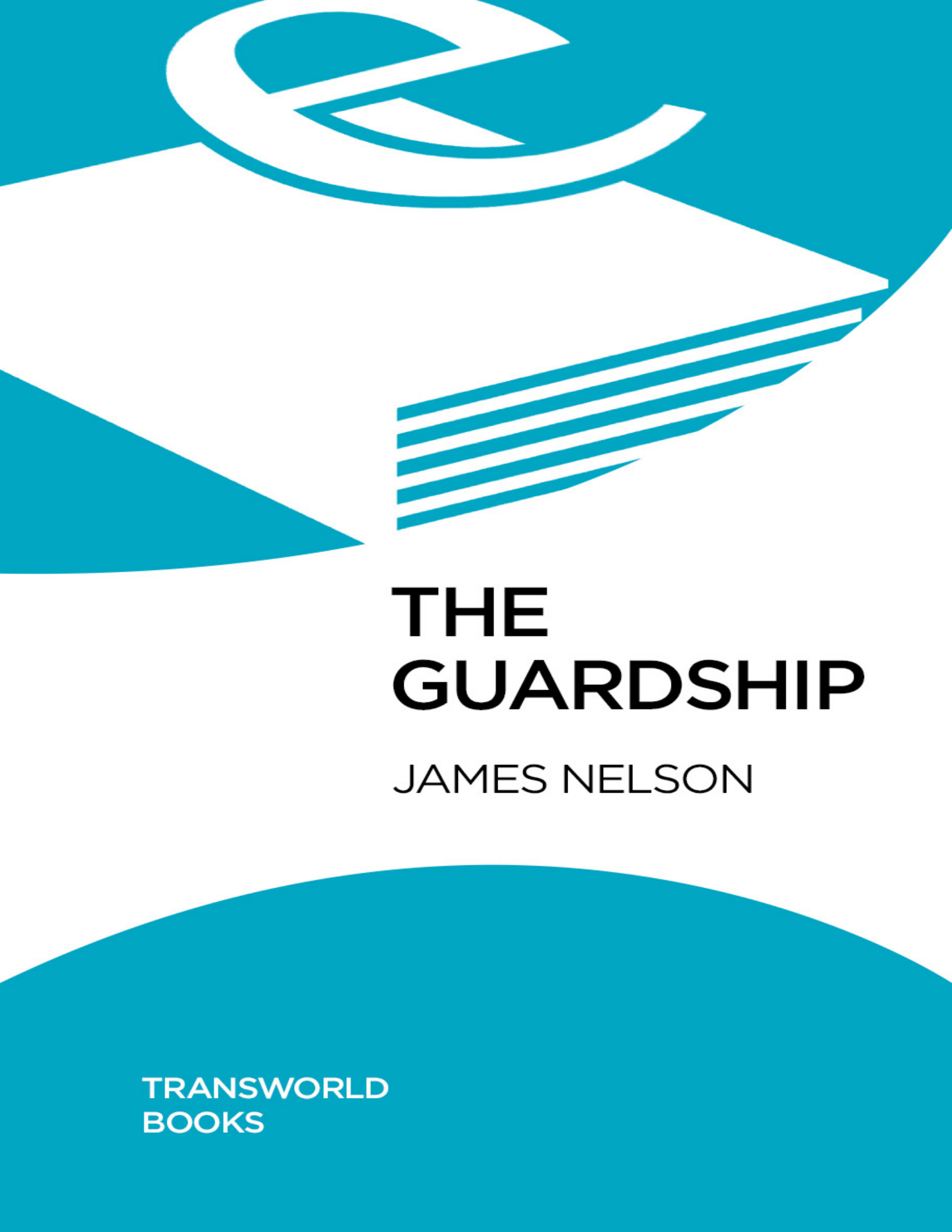




THE GUARDSHIP

JAMES NELSON

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

ABOUT THE BOOK

With the bounty from his years as a pirate – a life he intends to renounce and keep forever secret – Thomas Marlowe purchases a fine Virginia plantation from a beautiful young widow, Elizabeth Tinling. Soon afterwards, while defending her honour, he kills the favourite son of one of the colony's most powerful families in a duel. But in a clever piece of manoeuvring he manages to win command of the Plymouth Prize, the colony's decrepit guardship, and is charged with leading the King's sailors in bloody pitched battle against the cutthroats who infest the waters off Virginia's shores.

A threat from his illicit past appears, however, as an old pirate enemy plots to seize the colony's wealth, forcing Marlowe to choose between losing all – or facing the one man he fears.

Book One of *The Brethren of the Coast* trilogy, featuring Thomas Marlowe.

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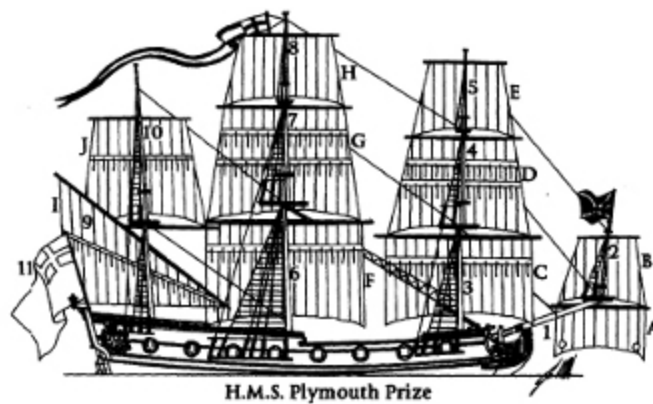
Book One of
The Brethren of the Coast

James Nelson

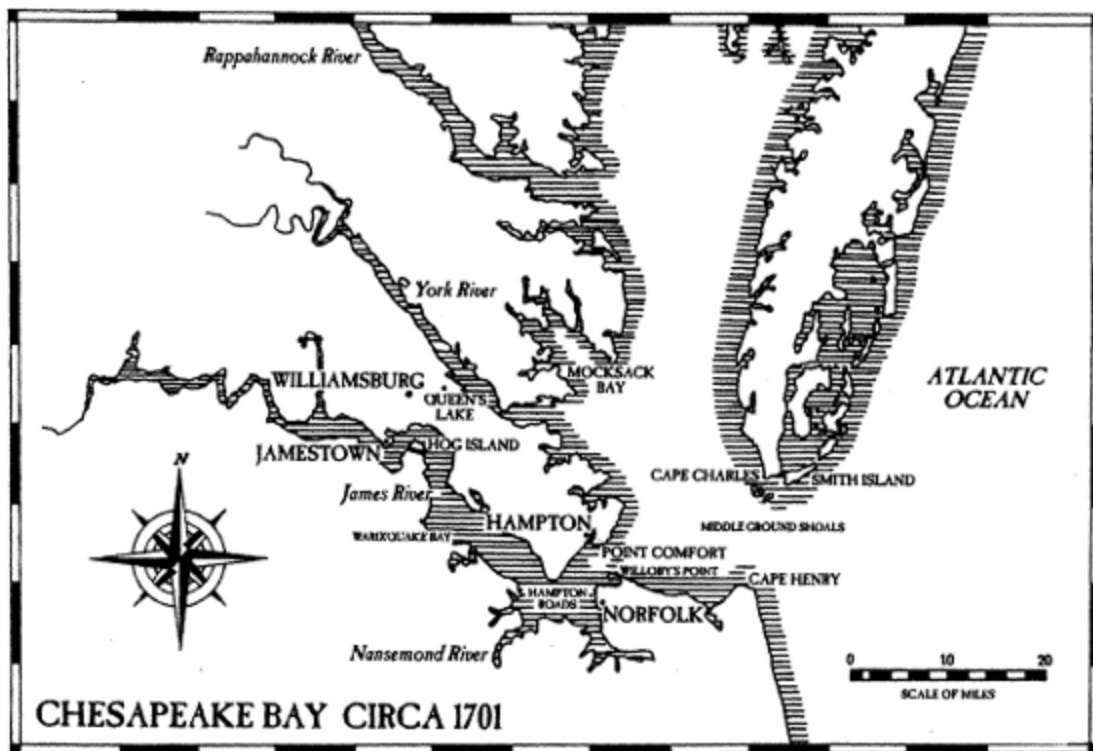
To Lisa,
my beloved wife

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|----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| A. Spritsail | F. Mainsail or Main Course | 1. Bowsprit | 7. Main Topmast |
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CHAPTER 1

PUBLICK TIMES IN Williamsburg. April the fifth, the Year of Our Lord 1701. The night before Marlowe killed young Wilkenson. The night Marlowe was asked to command the guardship.

The colony of Virginia was a wild place then, a wilderness of great rivers and creeks and islands and mile after mile of woodland that had never seen a white man's face. Otter and beaver in vast numbers. Enough fish in the water that a man could fill a canoe in half a day. A place where a man could disappear forever, and many did, and not always by their own design.

There were few towns of any note in the tidewater regions. Travel in Virginia and Maryland was made easy by the great Chesapeake Bay. Rather than struggling over decrepit roads the people there used the rivers as their highways, and there was little need for them to bunch up in settlements.

So, they lived in far-flung plantations where, with ax and torch, they beat back the thick forest to make room for tobacco, more and more tobacco, that unfailing cash crop.

And when they did congregate for Publick Times in the capital city of Williamsburg, after their long and unnatural solitude, it was a raucous time indeed. The streets overflowed with people. Men and women, freemen, indentured servants, and slaves moved in throngs from one revelry to the next. Beautiful coaches with matching teams and footmen in fine livery pushed down sandy Duke of Gloucester Street.

As the warm day gave way to the cool of evening, a spirit of good humor prevailed throughout the tightly packed taverns, boyling houses, publick houses, and ordinaries. All men, gentlemen and commoners, were fellows on that day, and planters, tradesmen, farmers, laborers, mechanics, sailors, thieves, and picaroons reveled together in the streets.

Thomas Marlowe stood to one side of the ballroom, the grand ballroom in the governor's house, watching the brilliant silks and velvets, the long white wigs of the gentlemen, and the great piles of hair atop the ladies' heads as they moved across the floor in their elaborate cotillions and minuettes.

He could feel the sweat running down his face under his own wig. The weight of his red silk coat with its gold embroidery, the snug-fitting waistcoat, seemed to grow more unbearable with each moment. His shoes pinched intolerably.

The air outside was cool, sweet, and pleasant, but inside the hall, with its great chandeliers and their hundreds of burning candles and the crowd of people all whirling and curtsying across the floor, the atmosphere was thick and all but unbearable.

From a nearby open window Marlowe caught a welcome breath of air, and with it came the muted sounds of gunfire and singing and shouting and laughter. The common people had taken their celebrations to the public square, carrying on in the country manner. It was a very different kind of celebration than the governor's highly civilized affair, and, Marlowe imagined, considerably more fun.

But despite his discomfort he managed to do a tolerable job of appearing to enjoy himself. There was no one there, excepting Francis Bickerstaff, who stood beside him, who might have guessed at how miserable he was.

'I quite fail to understand, Marlowe, why we must subject ourselves to this torment,' Bickerstaff said. 'I am certain that

we are witnessing one of the circles of hell. I should think we will see enough of damnation in the next life that we might forgo it now.'

Bickerstaff was the most plainly dressed man in the crowd. This is not to say that his clothing was poor, far from it. He wore a blue silk coat, adorned with only a bit of embroidery, and that blue as well, a simple white waistcoat, and breeches, all of the finest silk, unadorned, a plain cut, subtle and of the highest order.

'Now, Bickerstaff,' said Marlowe, 'we could hardly decline an invitation to the Governor's Ball. One does not advance in Virginia society by staying at home and ignoring such affairs.'

'Why you should be so obsessed with rising in Virginia society is yet another mystery to me.'

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Francis Bickerstaff.'" Marlow turned to his friend and smiled. 'Is that not what your William Shakespeare said?'

Bickerstaff sniffed. 'Something to that effect, though he is hardly "my" William Shakespeare.'

Marlowe was Bickerstaff's junior by about ten years, or so he guessed, but that was only a guess. Bickerstaff would not reveal his age, and Marlowe did not know his own for certainty, but he imagined Bickerstaff was around forty-five. He had a thin frame and the perpetually dour countenance of the serious pedagogue, which indeed he had once been. He was a learned man, skilled in Latin and Greek, mathematics, natural science, and all of those subjects befitting a gentleman.

Marlowe opened his mouth to reply, when his eye caught a parting in the crowd as the dancers drew apart with the precision of soldiers on a parade ground. He turned, and for an instant he could see clear to the far end of the room.

And there he saw her, for the first time that night.

Her hair was the color of fresh straw and made up in a great pile, held in place by a gold comb, which in turn was covered with jewels that glinted in the light from the chandeliers.

Her skin was white and perfect and smooth from her forehead to the tops of her lovely round breasts, pushed up by her bodice. Her waist was tapered down perfectly to the point where her farthingale held silk skirts far out from her sides. She was beautiful, and though Marlowe had made no overtures in her direction, thinking it improper given her circumstance, and indeed had spoken to her but a few times, he was her slave.

Her name was Elizabeth. Elizabeth Tinling. She was twenty-three years of age and already a widow. Her late husband, Joseph, was one of the wealthiest planters in the tidewater. He had died two years before, of heart failure, or so it was generally presumed. There had not been much talk of his passing.

Marlowe had purchased the Tinling plantation from Elizabeth soon after his arrival in the colony. That afternoon when they had closed the deal, and perhaps half a dozen other chance encounters, was all of the intercourse that he had had with her.

From the moment he first saw her he had wanted more, but then, for all his wealth, he had held no place in colonial society, being newly arrived, enigmatic.

Much had changed in the intervening two years, and while he might not be the first man of Virginia, still his star was on the rise. He had seen to that.

He considered those things in the few seconds that he had Elizabeth in sight. Then, like the Red Sea closing on Pharaoh's legions, the crowd came together again and she was lost to his view.

The dance that was now under way was one of the Scotch reels, a dance well within Marlowe's limited ability to perform, and that bolstered his courage.

‘Bickerstaff, I do believe I shall ask Mrs Tinling for the next dance.’

‘Bravely said, Marlowe, but I think you will be frustrated in that endeavor. Here comes the governor.’ Bickerstaff nodded to another corner of the room. ‘And he seems to be making a rhumb line for you.’ In the past few years Bickerstaff had taken to using nautical jargon.

Marlowe looked in the direction that Bickerstaff had indicated. Governor Nicholson was indeed working his way toward them through the crowd. The long, curly white hair of his wig swished around his collar like a horse’s tail as he nodded greetings to his many guests. He was agitated, Marlowe could tell, despite his attempts at gaiety as he pushed his way across the room.

He had reason to be agitated. Marlowe had seen to that as well.

‘Marlowe, Marlowe, how the devil are you?’ Nicholson asked, plowing through the last of his guests and extending a hand.

‘I find I am well, Governor, thank you. And yourself?’

‘Fine, fine. As well as can be expected, with what I must endure. Bickerstaff, how are you, sir?’

‘Very well, Governor, thank you,’ said Bickerstaff, giving the governor a shallow bow.

‘Listen, Marlowe, I know you did not come here to conduct business, and I must beg your forgiveness for making this request of you, but might we have a word in private?’

Marlowe had quite expected this, but still it was annoying, just at the moment when he was intent on approaching Mrs Tinling. He looked across the room, but the dancers filled the floor and he could no longer see her. ‘I would be delighted, Governor.’

It took the two men another ten minutes to extract themselves from the ballroom. No one had come to the ball to conduct business, but still it seemed no one could resist

the opportunity for a private word with the governor, even if it meant speaking into his ear over the sound of the music.

At last they came to the governor's office, just down the hall from the chief entrance to the building. It was a beautiful room with shelves full of leather-bound books, an enormous desk, and racks of firelocks and pistols. The ceiling was twelve feet high, and one wall was composed almost entirely of windows, which, mercifully, were flung open. The cool air wafted in, as refreshing as a rain shower. Marlowe wanted desperately to shed his wig and coat and enjoy the night air to its fullest, but that would never do in front of the governor.

'Sit, please,' Nicholson said, indicating a chair in front of his desk. He sat, and the governor called for his servant to bring a sneaker of punch, which he did, and pipes as well, and soon the governor and Marlowe were enjoying a private glass and a smoke.

'I suspect you know why I wish to speak with you,' the governor began.

'If it is about the silver, I pray you put it out of your mind. The fault is entirely my own. I should have expressed more curiously as to its origins . . .'

'Nonsense. It was in no way your fault, and your returning it thus was a noble gesture,' said Nicholson. 'A noble gesture.'

A noble gesture, thought Marlowe. Indeed.

He had purchased an extensive set of silver tableware from Captain John Allair, captain of His Majesty's Ship *Plymouth Prize*. The *Plymouth Prize* was the Royal Navy guardship on the Virginia Station, sent to enforce the customs laws and protect the colony against pirates. Virginia was the most valuable colony in all of America, but for all that the admiralty still considered the Chesapeake to be something of a backwater, a place to send their most rotten ships and failed captains. In Allair and the *Plymouth Prize* they had quite outdone themselves.

Like most in the long line of inept guardship captains, Allair had a number of businesses on the side, most of them illegal. One such business consisted of confiscating 'contraband' goods off of arriving vessels and then selling them himself.

His luck in that venture came to an end on the day that he confiscated what was, unbeknownst to him, Governor Nicholson's personal silver.

Less than a week after he sold the silver to Marlowe, Marlowe invited Governor Nicholson to dine with him. The governor had instantly recognized the tableware that he had ordered from London half a year before. For Nicholson, that was Allair's final, intolerable act.

'I have suffered that rascal quite long enough,' the governor said, reaching across his desk for a pile of paper stacked near the edge. 'The fact that he holds a commission as captain in the Royal Navy does not impress me. A thief's a thief, no matter what his rank.'

Through the open windows Marlowe could hear the unrestrained revelry of the crowd in the square, the sound of which nearly overwhelmed the delicate music drifting in from the ballroom away down the hall.

The wide sleeve of Nicholson's coat floated over the various things on the desktop - ink pots and quills and his glass of punch - as he reached for the papers. Marlowe tensed, waiting for him to knock something over, but he did not.

'See here, Marlowe,' Nicholson said, locating the paper he wanted in the stack. 'This is a copy of the invoice for my silver.'

He handed the paper over, and Marlowe ran his eyes down the list. 'One sugar bowl, silver, with king's arms, one punch bowl, ditto,' he read. He nodded his head. It was not the first time he had seen that invoice, though Nicholson did not know that. 'There is no question, sir, but that this

invoice describes the silver I purchased from Captain Allair. By God, I do apologize.'

'No apology needed from you, Marlowe.' It was an awkward situation, awkward for both men. 'As I said, it's none of your fault. It's all on that thief, Allair.'

'I am loath to think the worst of a King's officer,' Marlowe said, 'but I can't imagine how he came to have your silver.'

But of course that was not true, not true at all. Marlowe knew perfectly well how Captain John Allair had come by the governor's silver.

He had asked him for it.

CHAPTER 2

THE DANCERS CAME together, meshing like the gears of a clock, and blocked Elizabeth Tinling's view of Thomas Marlowe at the far end of the room.

Or, more to the point, they blocked Marlowe's view of her. For Marlowe had been looking, had been bracing himself to ask her for a dance. She recognized the look, the posture, and she would have welcomed the overture.

On the one hand, it would have saved her from having to further endure the vapid young Jamestown fop in the brocade coat who was trying to engage her in conversation.

On the other, it would have saved her from Matthew Wilkenson, who was also eyeing her and was ever so casually approaching, a wolf circling toward an animal too wounded to escape.

Of lesser consideration was the thought that she might do well to become better acquainted with Mr Thomas Marlowe, might even enjoy his company. But now the open space was filled with dancers and she feared the moment was lost.

'I swear,' she replied to whatever the fool from Jamestown had said, 'this heat will be the undoing of me. I feel positively faint.'

She flashed him a quick smile, cast her eyes over the room. Governor Nicholson was making his way over toward Marlowe, which would end any chance of Marlowe's rescuing her, but it was an interesting development nonetheless.

' . . . and so I said to him, ha, ha, "Well, sir, if this is the finest horse you have to offer—" ' the idiot in the brocade coat was saying.

‘Oh, I beg, sir,’ she interrupted, ‘but at the banquet table they have an everlasting syllabub for which I absolutely perish. Might I trouble you to fetch me one?’

‘But of course. Your servant, ma’am.’ The young gentleman bowed and grinned, delighted to have some service to perform. He pushed his way through the crowd toward a table that to Elizabeth’s certain knowledge contained no syllabub at all, everlasting or otherwise.

She smiled at his back, wondering how long he would search for it. Quite a while, she imagined. He would not wish to come back empty-handed. She felt just the tiniest glimmer of guilt at using him thus, but she could not bear to listen to him for one moment more, and such practical jokes were her secret delight.

And men could be such fools.

She turned back to the endlessly fascinating crowd, social interplays, the feints and attacks and flanking movements of the colony’s ruling class. A good deal of surreptitious attention was being paid to the governor, who was leading Marlowe out of the ballroom, a development that piqued her curiosity as well.

Marlowe had been only two years in the colony, but in that short time he had managed to insinuate himself into Virginian society in a way that could only be accomplished through good looks, an affable nature, and a great deal of money, all of which he possessed. He was well liked and well respected.

Elizabeth kept her distance, ignored his obvious interest in her. Elizabeth understood people, had observed the species in all its plumage, understood there was something not quite right about Thomas Marlowe.

She stole a glance to her left. Matthew Wilkenson was making his way toward her, boldly now, his generally haughty and disdainful expression exaggerated by drink, his gait unsteady. If Thomas Marlowe was climbing the colony’s social precipice, then the Wilkenson clan stood on its

summit, looking down. Matthew Wilkenson was the younger of the two Wilkenson boys, but the one who had inherited the old man's force of personality, the heir apparent to the Wilkenson fortune.

That, along with the Wilkensons' close ties to the Tinlings, and Matthew's insufferable arrogance, had apparently given him the idea that Elizabeth should, by rights, be his. He was becoming less subtle on that point.

She turned and looked at the place where Marlowe had been standing, still hoping for some respite from Matthew Wilkenson, but Marlowe and the governor had disappeared through the far door.

Thomas Marlowe. She had met him almost two years ago, just after his arrival in the colony. A very bad time in her life. Joseph Tinling had died just a few months before, and she was trying to weather all of the rumors that swirled around about that event.

The house and its contents were not hers, of course. They became the property of William Tinling, Joseph's eldest son, a son by his first marriage, who lived back home in England.

For long months she had fretted over the decision he would make concerning her future.

William had lived in Virginia for some time and was a particular friend of Matthew Wilkenson's. He might have decided to return and take over the plantation. He could have left her penniless if he so chose.

It was a warm day in early spring, the last year of the last century, when the Tinlings' factor, who served as their agent in the colony, arrived with a curt letter from the elder Tinling. The note instructed him to sell the plantation and give Elizabeth one quarter of the proceeds and inform her that doing so would dissolve all ties between herself and the family. The Tinlings wanted no more to do with Virginia, and no more to do with Elizabeth.

And along with the note, the factor brought a potential buyer.

‘My name is Thomas Marlowe,’ he said, giving a practiced bow, ‘and my associate is Francis Bickerstaff. We give you condolences on your grief, ma’am, and shall respect your privacy.’

‘You are new to the colony, sir?’ He had a look about him that she had not seen in a long time. He was handsome, to be sure, and cultured and genteel, but he was not a fop. There was something wild behind that facade, like a tiger that has been trained to the house but remains nonetheless a dangerous animal.

‘We are new to the colony, yes, ma’am. Mr Bickerstaff and myself have spent these past four years or so in travel and are looking now to establish ourselves.’

‘Well, sir, if it is your wont to respect privacy, and to have your own respected, I would suggest that you have come to the wrong land. But forgive me, I am still in some shock over my husband’s death and I do not wish to dissuade you from purchasing this fine plantation. Do look around, and perhaps you and Mr Bickerstaff will join us for dinner?’

Elizabeth spent the next two hours supervising the packing of her clothes and personal belongings. The rest of it – the furniture, the horses, the slaves, even the portraits on the wall – she would sell with the house and never think on them again.

At last Marlowe and Bickerstaff and the factor returned from their tour of the plantation, talking, excited, their fine shoes covered in mud. As Elizabeth seated them around the dinner table she asked, ‘Tell me, sir, what did you think of this place?’

‘Magnificent, ma’am, just what we had hoped for,’ said Marlowe.

‘These Virginia plantations are much lauded in England,’ Bickerstaff said, ‘and I find the land is all that it is said to be, though to be sure the houses do not in any way compare with those great homes in England.’

‘They do not, sir,’ said Elizabeth, and it was true. The most palatial dwelling in Virginia would be considered but a modest country home in England. ‘This is still a wild land, for all of the pretensions you will find.’

They passed the time agreeably, Marlowe animated and amusing, Bickerstaff quiet, pedantic. An odd pair. With gentle prodding Elizabeth was able to establish that Marlowe was from Kent, though he was circumspect about his family, which further engaged her curiosity. Said he had commanded a privateer for many years during the last war, had spent a good deal of his time abroad.

That might explain why his accent was not quite right, she thought. And perhaps why the man himself was so . . . curious. Not in any objectionable sense. There was nothing about him – his looks, his manners – that was objectionable. There was just something out of line. A man to be approached with caution, or not at all.

When the last of the dishes were cleared away, Marlowe clasped his hands in a self-conscious manner, the first such gesture Elizabeth had seen from him, and said, ‘I do not wish to be rude, but perhaps we should talk about the sale of the plantation.’

‘You are not rude at all, sir, it is a subject dear to me,’ said Elizabeth.

‘Then perhaps I can make an offer to you, ma’am. Sir?’ Marlowe nodded to the factor. ‘Would, perhaps, five thousand pounds be a fair price?’

Five thousand pounds of tobacco, the coin of the realm in the tidewater. Elizabeth considered that offer. It was fair. Not exorbitant, not even generous, but fair, and she wished to be rid of the place quickly. But, like most people in Virginia, she had little specie, little hard money, and it was money that she needed now, not tobacco that would take this Marlowe half a year to grow.

‘Well . . .’ said the factor, not overly impressed with the offer. ‘We are opening ourselves up to some risk, sir. Crop

failure, a drop in the price of tobacco on the market. With that in mind, perhaps it would be better—'

'Perhaps you would consider this, sir,' Elizabeth jumped in. Her interests were different from the factor's, quite different. The factor would hold out for the best price, however long it took, while she wished to get at least some hard money and get it quickly. 'Might it be possible to make up a part of that in specie, and the rest when the crop is in? I know that that is a great deal to ask, but our circumstances force this condition on me.'

The factor scowled at her, but she ignored him, tried to ignore the confusion on Marlowe's face. He glanced over at Bickerstaff, but the older man looked equally confused.

'I am at a loss, ma'am,' he said at last. 'I have no land now, no crop . . .'

'Of course not,' Elizabeth said, growing irritated. 'I assumed that the five thousand pounds of tobacco you offer would come from your first crop after purchasing this plantation. I have no objection to that, but for my immediate concerns—'

'Tobacco?' Marlowe interrupted. 'Did you think my offer was five thousand pounds of tobacco?'

'Well, certainly,' said the factor. 'Tobacco is the unit of currency in this colony. What else is there?'

'My offer was five thousand pounds sterling, sir. Gold and silver, if that is acceptable.'

It was only with the greatest effort that the factor did not spit his tea all over the table, and even Elizabeth had difficulty in controlling her reaction. Five thousand pounds in gold and silver? It was unheard of in the cash-strapped colony. It was an exorbitant price for the plantation.

'Yes, that would be acceptable,' said the factor, recovering quickly. 'Will you send to your bank in England?'

'There is no need, sir. I have the funds here.'

She stared at Marlowe. He had with him five thousand pounds in gold and silver? She would not consider asking

how he happened to have five thousand pounds in specie. And she would treat him cautiously. Very cautiously indeed.

But perhaps, she thought, staring at the door through which he and the governor had disappeared, it is time to relax that caution a bit.

The rumors about Marlowe's past ran through the colony: he was the third son of the Duke of Northumberland, he was a former naval captain drummed out of the service, he was a former pirate, he was the bastard son of the old king. She did not believe any of it.

But Marlowe was wealthy and growing in power, and while he made an obvious effort to ingratiate himself with the powerful families of the tidewater, still he did not seem in the least intimidated by them, or anyone, for that matter. He had the governor's ear. Perhaps he was an ally she should cultivate.

But now he was gone, and nothing could save her from the unwanted attention of Matthew Wilkenson.

'Allair has been relieved of his command,' Governor Nicholson said, taking the invoice and replacing it on the pile of papers. 'I believe as vice admiral it is within my authority to do so, and if not, too damned bad, I say. I'll not suffer a thief to run amok in the guise of an officer of His Majesty's Navy. We have endured fewer insults from the pirates and picaroons than we have from him.'

'Well, sir, I am very sorry to have been the instrument of Allair's downfall,' Marlowe began, but the governor cut him off.

'Nonsense. It was none of your fault, and frankly I'm glad this has come to light. But look, here's what I wished to speak to you about. The colony cannot be without a guardship. The pirates are swarming about the Capes, and once word of Allair's arrest is spread abroad they'll be amongst us with nothing to fear. Now you, sir, are a former naval officer yourself—'

‘Please, Governor,’ he interrupted, holding up his hand, ‘I was captain of a privateer, not a naval vessel. I have not held a naval commission, though to be certain I participated in many actions with the navy during the last war.’

‘Yes, of course, a privateer. But still you have the experience of many a sea fight. And as you are a gentleman of some breeding there can be no question as to your suitability for a naval officer. What I am asking, sir, is will you take command of the *Plymouth Prize*? At least until we have communicated with the admiralty and an official replacement for Allair has been sent?’

Marlowe smiled. ‘If it would be helpful to my king and my adoptive home, Governor, then I should be delighted to accept.’

And delighted he was.

Marlowe had watched Allair’s conduct aboard the *Plymouth Prize*, his petty thieving and his robbing honest merchants of trifles, and he found it intolerable. He could not stand to see the guardship used thus, to make pennies. Not when he knew that in his own hands the ship could be made to yield a fortune and at the same time raise in colonial society the name of Marlowe to the heights of Rolfe or Randolph or Wilkenson.

‘Perhaps we should return to the ball?’ Marlowe suggested, for fear that the governor, once begun on the subject of the guardship, would not be easily stopped. He was still thinking of the lovely Mrs Tinling, had not lost his resolve to approach her.

‘Yes, of course, but, pray, let us make certain we are of one mind on this. You will take command of the *Plymouth Prize* at your earliest convenience?’

‘I will.’

‘Excellent, excellent. If you would like to send a man by tomorrow, I shall have your official orders drawn up, and your commission, and you can then go aboard as soon as ever you are ready.’

‘Then all is settled, sir,’ Marlowe said, standing as if to leave.

‘Yes, quite, but for one small thing . . .’ said the governor, half standing and then sitting again.

‘That being?’ Marlowe sat as well.

‘The fact is, it seems Allair has a mind to keep possession of the ship. I have ordered him to relinquish command and report to me, but he has so far refused and remains on board . . .’

They sat in silence for a moment, both thinking the same thing: the *Plymouth Prize* would have to be taken by force from her legal commander. What more was there to say? Nothing, or so the governor apparently felt. He stood at last, smiled, and held out his hand, which Marlowe shook.

‘Well, we should return to the ball,’ he said. ‘I have no doubt that you’ll find some means to extract that rogue from the ship. Your king and country are much indebted to you for this.’

Indeed, thought Marlowe. But in fact he shared Nicholson’s confidence that he could pluck Allair from his ship like a splinter from a thumb, and the thought worried him not in the least.

And as to the debt that the country owed him, he was equally confident that the *Plymouth Prize* could be made to pay that debt many times over.

CHAPTER 3

'ELIZABETH.' MATTHEW WILKENSON, grinning with the cocky air of the confident. 'Might I have this dance?'

'Mrs Tinling.'

'Beg your pardon?'

'Address me as "Mrs Tinling." You take great liberties, sir.'

'Oh, Mrs Tinling, is it?' Elizabeth felt her anger and disgust rise in proportion to Wilkenson's widening grin. 'Your husband has been gone nearly two years, and you, ma'am, do not look to be in mourning any longer.'

'Whether I am in mourning or not, sir, is no cause for you to be discourteous.'

'Forgive me, Mrs Tinling.' Wilkenson bowed deep at the waist. 'Might I have this dance, Mrs Tinling?'

'I am faint with the heat, Mr Wilkenson, and I do not believe I shall dance this next.'

Wilkenson straightened, looked her in the eye. His expression was something altogether different from his former arrogant, self-satisfied look. 'There is no call for you to continue with this game. I am growing weary of it.'

'I do not know what game you refer to, sir. I do not wish to dance.'

'And I do, and I think it is in your best interest to cooperate with me.'

'Oh, indeed? And do you think because the Tinklins and Wilkensons were such friends that I am beholden to you? Do you think it my duty that I yield to your base whims?'

Wilkenson glared at her for a long moment. 'Duty? No, it is not your duty to me. But perhaps to yourself. Your position in this colony is tenuous. You know that. And there is

nowhere for you to go. I have had much correspondence with William Tinling since his father's death, you know. He has told me much. So I suggest that you consider . . . accommodating me.'

'Or what?'

'Or you might find your position entirely untenable. I should hate to hear tales being spread abroad, and I think perhaps that might be best prevented through an alliance between you and me.'

Elizabeth held his hateful gaze. Matthew Wilkenson had started this advance six months before. Back then he had just wanted to bed her, nothing more. She had seen animal desire in all its forms and recognized its countenance.

It was different now. Now it was base urge mixed with thwarted pride and a need to possess that which was denied him. Wilkensons, like Tinlings, were not used to being denied. It drove them to distraction.

And in the end he would win. They both knew it. He could make life unbearable for her in the colony. She could not return to London, and even with the money she had received from the sale of the plantation there was not enough to set up in some other city, as if a single woman, even a widow, could travel on her own. She could fight him, but in the end he would have her, and the longer she held out the more he would make her pay.

'Very well, sir. This one dance,' she said through clenched teeth. She held up her arm for him to take.

'Are you enjoying yourself?' Marlowe asked Bickerstaff once he and the governor had returned to the ballroom.

'No.'

'Oh, but I think you are.'

Bickerstaff sniffed by way of reply. 'Your meeting with the governor? It went well?' he asked. He sounded as if he could not care less, but Marlowe knew that he was consumed with curiosity.

‘Very well. He has – Is that Matthew Wilkenson with whom Mrs Tinling is dancing?’

‘Yes, I believe it is. Now, what has the governor done?’

‘He has relieved Allair of his command and asked me to take charge of the *Plymouth Prize*. I had always supposed there was some kind of animosity between Mrs Tinling and that young Wilkenson git. Sure she cannot be taken with him?’

‘The governor has given you command of the guardship?’ Bickerstaff said. His voice incredulous, more so than Marlowe had ever heard. ‘Relieved a king’s officer? Is this over the affair with the silver?’

‘That and other things,’ said Marlowe, his eyes never leaving the dancers. ‘You’ll own that Allair is hardly fit for command of a king’s ship. Is this the first dance they’ve danced?’

‘Yes. Nor did Mrs Tinling seem overly anxious to dance this one, you will no doubt be relieved to know. So are you to have a commission as an officer? A naval captain?’

‘Insofar as it is within the governor’s power to issue one, yes. It will be temporary, perhaps, but yes, I shall be a commissioned officer.’

At this Bickerstaff actually smiled. ‘Now, this is something of an irony, is it not?’

‘I quite fail to see why.’

‘But tell me, it seems a great coincidence that Nicholson’s silver should end up on your table, and a week later the governor is invited to dine. Are you entirely certain it was an accident?’

Marlowe pulled his gaze from the dance floor, met Bickerstaff’s eye. Bickerstaff could at times be quite irritating, with his exaggerated sense of nobility. ‘It was an accident, be assured,’ he said, leaving it to Bickerstaff to believe that or not. He turned back to the dance floor. Elizabeth was smiling, though the expression did not look entirely genuine. ‘Son of a bitch.’