

## *Chapter 1 - Lumberton, NC 1805*

“Mary Polly! Oh my, you are incorrigible.”

“Don’t be such a fuddy duddy, Elizabeth. It’s not like you haven’t had such thoughts.

The two siblings stood intimately close in the middle of the dusty street as the business of the day streamed by. The younger of the two stared with puzzlement at her older sister.

“I do declare, Mary! You have the richest man in the county swooning over your every move and all you can think about is that sheriff fellow.”

“His name is Alexander, thank you... and no, that is not all I think about. When you’re twenty, I believe you just might think differently.”

With a quick and final glance at the sheriff’s large and brawny frame, Mary turned to reclaim her initial direction.

“Wait!” Elizabeth said. “Mr. Leggett made me promise not to let you out of my sight.” Struggling with her confining skirt, she scampered to catch up with her older sister without looking too awkward. “A girl of sixteen should have more grace,” she scolded herself and then shouted, “Mary, please wait!”

Downtown Lumberton was extremely busy at this time of day, and it was at such times that Mary Polly and her younger sister found it the most engaging. Miss Mary Polly Council had

found fancy in the eyes of the wealthiest man in Lumberton, Jacob Rhodes, and the Town Square was the perfect place to flaunt her newfound fame.

Jacob was one of the founders of Lumberton, North Carolina, the largest landowner and the surveyor who laid out the original plat for the wilderness town. He owned eight taverns, a lumber mill, a turpentine distillery and a host of other businesses throughout the county. He was considered by many to be the towns leading citizen<sup>i</sup>.

Jacob's wife, Mrs. Rachel Clinton Rhodes, had recently died and now the newly widowed Mr. Rhodes was back on the prowl. The forty-three year old aristocrat and plantation owner was no stranger to getting whatever he desired and the lovely Miss Council was high on his list.

“Sheriff Rowland!” The refined gentleman called from the storehouse porch.

“Yes sir, Mr. Rhodes,” Alexander said.

“If you could have your deputies secure the route, we best be moving this liquor before nightfall.”<sup>ii</sup>

“The men are in place, Mr. Rhodes. We'll have no problems this evening, you have my word on that,” Alexander assured.

Lumberton had quickly emerged as a bustling town of economic growth, and with that growth, came the unseemly characters that most often find their way towards easy and sinister opportunities.

“Excellent! I'll join you momentarily, Sheriff. There is something I must check on at the General Store, and then I'll catch up with you and your men shortly.”

Jacob had ordered the finest dress from England and had fantasized about seeing his young Miss. Council dressed in Europe's latest fashion and strolling on his arm to the envy of all

the townsfolk. He had not told Mary about the gift. With their last encounter, she had left him in such a huff that he was unsure that even this dress would make amends for his thoughtless jest.

Mary Polly, as her family lovingly knew her, was an orphan along with her four siblings. Their father, Capt. Robert Council of the North Carolina Dragoons and Colonial war veteran, had passed away leaving guardianship of his children to his friend and business partner, Mr. David Leggett. After paying off all the Captain's debts, the children had inherited 910 acres on Little Marsh Swamp including the cotton plantation that Mr. Leggett presently worked.

Jacob had unmaliciously teased young Mary by saying that a man of his position could not be seen in public with the likes of orphans and commoners. Miss Council was not up for the joust. Mary Polly was a direct descendant of John Council, the first Council from England to arrive in the Isle of Wright, Virginia. John had been married to Elizabeth Drake, the great grand niece to Sir Francis Drake. Mary Polly was anything but a commoner.<sup>iii</sup>

Powering his way through the crowded streets, Jacob stepped up onto the wooden walkway and darted between two large overweight women, bantering over sacks of wheat. He made no effort to excuse himself over his obvious interruption of the duo and the women held their tongues at the recognition of their trespasser. Jacob entered the General Store with one wide stride and could see in an instant by the storekeeper's expression that it wouldn't be the news that he had desired.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Rhodes," said the storekeeper, "it appears it could still be some time before your package arrives. As I am sure you are aware, sir, the Separatists have made it thoroughly difficult to trade with England, well, with all the non-importation talk and all. We have every intention of contacting you at first notice."

“It’s been too long, Mr. Jones,” said Jacob. “This gift is much needed, and I paid to hasten the shipment. Please see to it that your commitments are met. I’ll check back with you at mid-day tomorrow. Good day, Mr. Jones.”

“Good day, sir.” the storekeeper replied sheepishly.

*Elizabeth was the first to notice*, but she had little doubt that Mary had also noticed the playful approach of the lawman creeping around the blacksmith’s workshop towards the two women. She giggled to herself as her older sister gave a fabulous performance as the unsuspecting victim of his surprise. The sheriff lurched from the side street and grabbed Mary by the arm, pulling her from the crowded street into the isolated ally.

Sheriff Alexander Rowland was the essence of a perfect male specimen. Standing six foot two inches tall with dark wavy hair and mammoth wide shoulders, he dwarfed most the townsfolk. His chiseled facial features resembled that of an ancient Greek god more than a lowly southerner. He held firm to his grip and gaped down at the startled woman.

“Why, Mr. Rowland,” said Mary, “unhand me this instance or I shall be forced to call for the sheriff.”

He paused only a moment before he athletically spun her inward and snapped her body close to his, securing her waist with his free arm.

“I know the sheriff personally,” he whispered with a mischievous smile. “He has asked that I look into the assault and report back to him with haste. Would you like to file a report, miss?”

“Alexander Rowland!” she protested, “I shall have a bruise on my arm for a week. When will you learn how to treat a lady?” She pushed back against his large torso with little success. “Don’t hold me so close, people will talk.”

“You mean the esteemed gentleman, Mr. Rhodes, may receive word that the stunningly beautiful Miss Council has been seen with the likes of one seedy lawman instead of socializing in her stuffy circle of wealth and privilege.” He spontaneously flung one arm under her legs and lifted her into his massive arms. “How shameless of you,” he said.

“I didn’t mean it that way you brute. Now stop teasing me and let me know when you’ll be out to the plantation again to see me.”

She knew her comments were audacious and unladylike, but it had been too long since the man she had been fallen in love with had held her. She missed his unrefined masculinity and rugged virility. She craved his attention and the small moments they afforded her from her other world that was filled with so much restraint and properness.

“I have duties here in Lumberton,” Alexander said, “and will be unavailable until later in the week. May I call on you; shall we say, Thursday evening, Miss Council?” A smile was ever so transparent as he failed to withhold his delight to be in her presences.

“Stop it! You know I can’t wait that long. I demand you see me tomorrow. I shall have Willis prepare you something special to eat, and then you shall entertain me until such time as I tire of you. We shall put you up for the night in the guest quarters, and then you can leave the following morning. Do you hear me Sheriff Rowland? I demand it!”

He couldn’t help but laugh at her forcefulness. He too would love to spend every waking moment with her, and he already had plans to call on her as soon as he could wrap up his most pressing duties.

“Well, if Mr. Willis will be fixing me up some of his famous fried okra, how can I refuse?”

“Then tomorrow it is, whether you are coming for the okra or for me means little, just as long as you are coming. Shall we say brunch?”

“You know,” he pushed on, “we’ve got to talk about this attraction and attention that Mr. Rhodes is showing for you. A man like me needs to know where he stands. I have little patience for games.”

“Games?” Mary shot back. “Jacob is old enough to be my father. He is just helping me with introductions into valuable circles. He is more of a mentor to me than anything else.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that, but we can talk of it again tomorrow. Will Mr. Leggett and your brothers be around?” he questioned with devilish intent.

“He is no longer my legal guardian and neither are my brothers, thank you. I am of age to make my own choices. Unless of course you may be more interested in my younger sister, Elizabeth, then, of course, you will need to ask Mr. Leggett for his permission to see her.”

He abruptly dropped his one arm and returned her to her original standing position. “Your sister is quite lovely, if you choose Mr. Rhodes over me, I am not counting out the possibility of seeing the other Miss Council on a social basis.”

“You Fiend!” she reached up and slapped his face ever so gently and turned quickly towards her carriage, walking haughtily as she retreated. Her sister was waiting with a broad smile and filled with delight from the mischief afoot.

*The Councils had lived and worked together* on an old cotton plantation since the death of their father. Arthur, Hardy, Mary Polly, Elizabeth and youngest son Thomas lived with their slaves and their father's business partner, David Leggett,<sup>iv</sup> near the Lumber Bridge, 21 miles outside of Lumberton.

One Levi Glass built the plantation and bridge in the 1700s. Glass was known for charging a toll to travel over the bridge from Lumberton to Fayetteville. His Plantation was notorious for being the "Ancient Place of Residence". Levi was one of the early major landholders in the area and known as a great Indian fighter. It was said that he had single handedly killed seven Indians in retaliation for an Indian uprising of his time.<sup>v</sup>

The nine hundred and ten acre plantation was an irregular shaped piece of property that held the beauty of the south in all its splendor. Aside from the large and stately mansion house, it had a partially finished watermill, a stable, a separate cooking house and the largest assortment of maple trees in the county.

Sauntering down the ornate stairwell, with flowers in hand, Mary called down without even having her head servant in her sight. She had come to know in these short, few months that Willis would always be within the sound of her voice.

"Willis, Sheriff Rowland shall be arriving sometime this afternoon, please have the sitting room ready when he arrives."

"Of course, Miss Mary," Willis' voice magically replied from a nearby room.

Mary had little patience for the lack of order and respect within her household. The negro house servants were usually more trouble than they were worth. Her brothers were all lazy pigs, offering little to no help around the estate and Mr. Leggett was more often drunk than out supervising the plantation. If it weren't for the excellent house slave, Willis, on loan from Jacob,

she would most assuredly be frustrated beyond measure at her inability to organize the home for the evening festivities. Willis' recent tutoring of the slaves and his unmatched expertise in the kitchen were all a young girl needed to align a perfect evening of entertainment.

Willis was like no other slave that Mary had ever known. He was so refined and knowledgeable that it was hard for Mary to see him as an inferior. His English was one to be envied. Mr. Rhodes had this particular slave educated by some of Lumberton's finest. He took great pride in Willis' loyalty and rewarded him in kind.

Jacob was appalled when he first visited the Council plantation; it was all but in ruins. He had found Mary's brother, Hardy, passed out under a tree, drunk from an extreme overuse of rum and the field slaves playing on the plantation lawn. He quickly petitioned her to allow him to lend his best servant to her until such time as the estate was back in order. How could she refuse when she tasted the delightful and heavenly provisions that Willis cooked up for her?

"I shall see to it immediately," Willis said, joining her in the main foyer. "The staff shall be at their best this afternoon madam. I trust you will be pleased."

"How did I ever get along without you, Willis," Mary sighed. "If Mr. Rhodes ever comes to retrieve you, I will most assuredly kill myself on the spot."

"Oh please, madam, don't speak of such things. The master would have my head if the least thing were to happen to you." His smile was most assuring.

Mary placed the flowers on the table of the large main room and approached her servant with apprehension. She lowered her voice.

"I trust today's guest will be between you and me, Mr. Willis. We wouldn't want Mr. Rhodes to suspect evil of me now, would we?" She smiled politely and winked. "It's all in good fun."

“Yes, madam, all in good fun,” he politely mimicked.

“Willis?” she said.

“Yes miss.”

“Do you think the kind gentleman, Mr. Rhodes, likes me...? I mean I know he likes me, but does he really like me.”

“Oh, most assuredly, miss. I shan’t be talking about such things but I must confess to the affirmative.”

“You know he has been so kind to me and my family,” Mary continued, “I guess I am just so confused on how one might pay back such favors. No man, or woman, for that matter, ought to look a gift horse in the mouth, so they say. Even so, I am without words at his kindness. What is it you may suggest?”

“Oh my, Miss Council, I am but a modest servant and could not venture to expound on such matters of importance. Being one of my standing, I can only assume that the good gentleman has the highest and the most honorable intention in the matter and would expect nothing in payment. To do so would only diminish the value of his charity. I shudder to think anything less of the master, miss.” He bowed slowly. “I shall be about my duties. If you will but need anything, I shall be within the call of your voice. May I be excused madam?”

“Yes, but of course, Willis, my apologies for placing you in such a position, please continue with your duties. We shall speak again soon.”

“Thank you, miss.” Willis replied.

*It was well past three in the afternoon* when the door knocks pulsated throughout the main foyer of the house. There was a feeling of anger within her due to his late arrival and lack of urgency, but it faded quickly with her anticipation at seeing him again.

She called down from her room; “Tom, will you get the door and show Mr. Rowland to the sitting room, I shall be joining him shortly.” Her smile was as uncontrollable as that of a puppy’s tail and seemed to have a mind of its own. This would never do, she thought. A lady cannot show such open favoritism and expect to work her womanly charms to her every advantage.

The houseboy approached the door with the skill and manners of a seasoned doorman. He had been well trained over these past few months. Ever so stately, he opened the door with eyes down, smiling cautiously and then gradually making eye contact with her guest.

“Good afternoon, sir, the lady of the house has asked that I show you to the sitting room. She shall be with you shortly. May I take your hat, sir?” His dialogue was perfectly practiced and delivered.

“Thank you. Will you tell Willis that I have arrived and would love to have him fix me a cup of tea? Tell him I would love it with a touch of cinnamon if he wouldn’t mind. I do so miss it.”

Mary was torn between her excitement and her need to remain in control. She wanted to rush the room and fly into Alexander’s arms, showering him with kisses and hugs like a silly schoolgirl. Only time would provide her the freedom to allow her beating heart to slow and her wits to return to normal. She gathered the thoughts and feelings from moments ago and forced them back into her mind. The anger and disappointment at his late arrival, she was sure if she could hold these thoughts long enough, she would be less readable in her excitement.

Mary collected her unbound emotions, pinched her cheeks between her thumb and forefinger and stood to appraise the presentation in the mirror. She hadn't always had the strikingly beautiful figure that stood before her. As a young girl, she had been teased by her brothers and the other school boys for being so thin and scrawny. Somehow, the past few years had brought on the curves and lines that made men jump to her every request. She managed successfully a gorgeous mane of black hair pulled back into a proper bun but allowed it to muss often as a hint to her intimate, undomesticated side. Her eyes were telling and some men felt the wanting they saw there was nearer to the surface than most.

Exiting her room, she glided softly and stately down the grand stairway and presented herself at the sitting room entrance.

“Good afternoon, sir, or should I say Good evening,” turning into the room as she finished her sentence.

“Mary, if I didn't know better, I would swear you were expecting me.”

“Jacob?” Well, Jacob, good afternoon. Expecting you? Well, no, of course not. Why should I be?” She wanted to grab her mouth and hold it fast to shut the mindless blabber that was spilling from her lips.

“Mary, it's all right, really. It's just as if you were expecting maybe someone else?”

“Of course not, we rarely receive visitors this far from town, and I was rude. I am sorry, Jacob. Please sit and I shall have Willis bring us some tea.”

*There would just be no time* to make it out to the Council's plantation today, Alexander thought. As sheriff, he shouldn't have to deal with such crazy thoughts and complaints. His job was keeping the peace, making sure the law was upheld, collecting taxes, but not this insane talk.

The majority of the poorer classes of Robeson County were obsessed with witchcraft and superstition. His time was too often spent with crazy stories of charms and spells by neighbor toward a neighbor and how one's cow was in the mire because of so and so's spell. If a cow were to get bogged down, Alexander would have to wade into the mud and try with a host of others to get the animal to dry land, which was said to have been such a feat, that it would have driven Hercules to near madness. Many misfortunes of the times were attributed to witches. There was always something to wear to keep off the evil eye.<sup>vi</sup>

"I'm telling ya, Sheriff, it was those no good neighbors of mine."

The cow was snorting in pain as the men pulled and tugged on the poor beast. They had most likely broken one of the cow's legs early in the struggle.

"They put the hex on my cows just like the last time." The farmer looked on with horror as he came to the realization that even if they were to get the cow out now; it was damaged to the point that it would most assuredly need to be put down.

"Robert!" Alexander yelled. "Get over here and help us or I am going to get my gun out and put this poor animal out of his misery."

"But what about those crones next door, you can't just let this happen to us again without doing something to stop the evil from the likes of those people."

The next sound that was heard was the sound of Alexander's revolver. The animal looked almost unfazed at first. Everyone vaulted from the mud, startled by the shot with their chests heaving from exhaustion. The heifer stood exactly where it had stood only moments before,

buried four feet in mud but now with an ever so slow motion, its head tilted slightly to the left and the animal expired.

“There you are, Robert. Get the saw and knives out and let’s salvage what we can of this mess.”

“You son of a bitch,” the farmer said with disbelief. “You shot her?”

“No Robert, didn’t you see what happened, it was the curse that got her.”

*“Thank You, Willis.* The tea is just the way I like it.” Jacob slipped off his boots and kicked back in the over-sized chair he had purchased for Mary Polly from Savannah just months earlier. He was still trying to put his mind around the way she was acting. Could she still be so upset about his orphan quip?

“Mary, I know I must try and understand that you are still very young, but you mustn’t behave in such a childish manner. The comment was made in jest and we both know I meant no harm by it. Let’s put that behind us. I have a matter of great importance to speak to you about.”

“Childish? I do declare, Mr. Rhodes.” She whipped her head away from him and towards the sitting room window in stubborn response. Her hands remained folded on her lap as she tried to maintain her dignity. In truth, his comment about her being an orphan was the farthestmost thing from her mind, but she could use his misinterpretation to embed her strange behavior.

“Mary, please. What is it I must do to get past this?” he pleaded.

At that moment, Elizabeth bolted into the room half out of breath. She had heard their voices and was just as surprised to see Jacob Rhodes in the room as was her sister. Unfortunately, she was even more obvious about her surprise.

“I... uh, oh, I am sorry, I thought that you were somebody else. Uh, I mean, I was expecting someone else. No, not me, but the family, I mean we were hoping, ah. Not hoping but waiting.”

“Elizabeth! Mary snapped. “Say hello to Mr. Rhodes before he mistakes you for a total lunatic.”

“Good day, Mr. Rhodes.” She curtsied ever so slightly.

“Good day, Elizabeth. It’s good to see you again. You look quite stunning today. Is that a new bonnet?”

“Why, yes, Mr. Rhodes, me and Mary...”

“Mary and I,” Mary interrupted, correcting her little sister’s grammar.

“Mary and I,” Elizabeth shot back. “We just purchased it the other day while we were in Lumberton. Do you like it?” she said with a playful smile.

“Elizabeth,” Jacob replied, “I must admit that I have not seen its equal on a prettier face.”

Elizabeth giggled and then shot a quick glance at her sister. Mary was shaking her head in desperation at the odd nature of the situation. Jacob followed Elizabeth’s eyes toward her sister but Mary beat his eyes back in time to regain her upset window glare.

“Elizabeth,” Jacob said, “will you excuse both me and your sister for a moment? I do have a pressing issue to discuss with Mary, and then I am most interested in your trip to town. Can we talk later?”

“Yes, but of course. I am so sorry for the intrusion.” Elizabeth retreated as quickly as she had arrived.

“Now, where were we? Oh yes, you were holding your attention hostage until such time as I offer up some kind of penance. Please tell me, Mary, so that I may continue with more important matters, please!”

“Well then, my answer is Willis.”

“Willis?” he questioned.

“Yes,” said Mary, “I am to have him back to you by the end of the month and I need a small extension on his services. Shall we say two or three more months?” She held her lips in a thin firm line without faltering. She had expected him to get angry by her demand, but he seemed to lighten and take on a more adoring gaze. He quickly relocated to the seat beside her and grabbed her hand in his.

“Mary, if you agree to my arrangement, you can have him every day for as long as you would like.” Mary was confused.

“You see,” said Jacob, “I was going to wait a few more months so that we could have more time to get to know each other, but I have become very lonely. It has been a year since my wife’s death and being a man of great means and considerable wealth, I think it is time to move on with my life. Well, with all my business holdings and duties, I need help with the children, Richard and Sarah. I have grown very fond of you, and I hope the feeling is mutual. We have enjoyed each other’s company, and I am trusting you might consider my offer to be your... husband, if you will have me.”

Mary couldn’t take a breath. Her heart had moved from her chest into her ears. The pounding was overpowering. No meaningful thoughts were being processed coherently. There was a moment where she felt like she might faint. Mary had never fainted before yet the room began to spin, and she felt a slight sickening of her stomach.

“Mary, are you all right? I know this must come as a shock to you, but you must know my feelings after all I have done for you.” Jacob paused and pondered her reaction. “Mary, you’re looking a might pale.”

“I... I...” Those were the last words she remembered speaking as the room darkened and blackness took over her reality.

*“Damn,” he thought.* Yea, it was going to be a late evening but Alexander just wasn’t going to settle for not seeing her. If he took his prize range horse, he could be out to the Council plantation before nightfall and the way things had been going; they might just spend the night in each other’s arms. He barked out the evening orders, mounted his horse and bolted from the stables. His deputies scratched their heads in bewilderment. They all agreed he had been acting very strange lately.

Alexander truly hated these rides through the county. The land wasn’t friendly to travelers, and he couldn’t quite see why anyone had first staked their claim in such a god-forsaken land. The main growth of the county was the long straw pitch pine which was used to make turpentine. This was followed by innumerable brush and cypress ponds. The most peculiar feature of the landscape was the cypress knees, which sprang from the roots of the cypress tree in wooden projectiles, making speedy travel by horseback even more difficult.

The land in general was very level and flat and therefore, retained nearly all the water that fell upon it. He had heard many times that half the state was covered in ponds and swamplands, and even though he had never seen it, he believed every word. <sup>vii</sup>

The uplands, as some called it, were not much elevated above the beds of the swamps and ponds. The ridges were covered with pitch pine interspersed with black jack oak. There were a few hickories and post-oak as well as a low brushy growth known as white oak. These small white oak trees had been known to live over five hundred years.

When the weather was less than favorable, Alexander would rarely venture outside of Lumberton, just too much water to deal with. Today was one of those days. All day, knee deep in the mud and muck on the McClean property and now a steady rain to torment his travels.

“I must really love her to put myself through this,” he said to himself.

*Willis was pressing a cold damp compress* against her forehead as she made her first leap back to consciousness. At first, she stumbled to deduce just where she was and what had just happened to her. It was seeing Jacob’s face that brought it all back.

“Come now,” Willis pleaded, “have a sip of this water, and you will be fine, miss, in no time.”

The two men gently helped Mary into an upright position against the love seat. Jacob nudged Willis just far enough away so that he could see Mary’s expressions as he spoke.

“Mary, are you all right? May I be so bold as to assume that your reaction is one of joy? Please tell me that the thought of marrying me is not so unpleasant as to have you lose all mindfulness.”

Mary was struggling for the right dialog as she opened and closed her mouth without saying a word. She wasn’t sure if maybe in some way she was attracted by the thought that her life could be one of ease and affluence with Jacob. She had truly enjoyed his attentiveness, and

even though he was much older than she, he was indeed a very attractive middle aged man. The real problem lies in the fact that she was in love with someone else.

“Jacob,” she finally whispered, “I think I am going to need some time. I can’t tell you how surprised I am that you would consider this so soon. I...,” he mercifully interrupted her.

“Mary, you don’t have to answer me this very minute. I understand that I may be moving quickly in my proposal, but you must see that I am a man who knows what he wants and what needs to be done to give those people in his life a chance at all he can offer them. You exert so many efforts in keeping up this plantation with little to no help from your brothers. You live so far from town, I can’t help you the way I would like. You’re trying to raise your younger siblings while managing the slaves, the household and the family. I can make this so much easier for you if you would let me.”

“Jacob, oh my Jacob,” she touched her hand against his cheek and felt him go flush. He gently grabbed her hand with both of his and kissed it lovingly. For a moment she thought she could see a tear in the corner of his eye.

Willis could see that this was not a moment for a modest servant to be in the room.

“If you will pardon me, Mr. Rhodes and Miss Mary, I do have some chores that I must attend to. Is there anything I can get for either of you?”

“No thank you, Willis,” said Mary.

Jacob duplicated. “That will be all, Willis. Thank you.”

They both watched as Willis exited the room, closing the door behind him. For a moment there was an awkward silence that lingered.

“Mary, you know there is something else we need to discuss. It is no secret in town that I share your attentions with another.”

Mary tried to interrupt him, but he quickly put a finger against her lips.

“Yes, there has been some embarrassment for me over this little matter, and I am not sure just how serious it has become. I do have my reputation to be concerned with, but I am an understanding man. Sheriff Rowland is much closer to your age, and you are not alone in finding him, shall we say, appealing. I believe most the women in town would envy your position. I ask only that you look at the whole picture before giving me your answer. The choice you make will affect not just you, but your family for now and in generations to come. Will you think about it?”

“Oh Jacob, I am so sorry. I never meant to cause you embarrassment. I will give you my answer very soon. I ask only for your patience while I think this through.”

Their voices had fallen low during the discussion, and they found themselves very close to each other. Jacob could see that the moment was right and for the first time delicately kissed her on the lips. At first she did not return his kiss but then slowly began to press her lips into his. She placed her gloved hand softly on the back of his neck and pulled him inward.

Neither Jacob nor Mary noticed the movement of the sitting room door as it cautiously began to open. The kiss was longer and more passionate than either of them had anticipated and just long enough for the unannounced intruder to see them in their most compromising moment. Mary was the first to pull away in shock. Jacob followed, standing from the confusion and magnitude of seeing the sheriff in the sitting room doorway.

“Alexander!” Mary said. “It’s not what you think.” Her heart went out to him as he cocked his head ever so slightly as if baffled by the scene. His chest was still panting from his sudden dismount and his rush into the house from the pouring rain. Water puddled at his feet, and she could see the moment of recognition in his eyes. She felt the hopelessness of the situation and didn’t try to speak again.

Jacob gained his composure and finally spoke. “Can we help you, Sheriff Rowland?”

Mary couldn’t remember bolting from the room after Alexander. Time was moving in some unreal overture of sound and color that was totally unfamiliar to her. She felt her body moving down the lane and watching Alexander riding off at an unbelievable pace. Her legs were carrying her ever so slowly towards his retreat, but still she couldn’t speak nor call out to him. She had no idea just what she would say to him if he had stopped.

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<sup>i</sup> University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Mary Livermore Library. Jacob Rhodes was one of the founders of Robeson County and the City of Lumberton. He was a prominent merchant and at one time he was the largest landowner in Robeson County.

<sup>ii</sup> The Robesonian: Tavern Keepers/2006/11/07/news/lifestyles/lifestyles03.txt

<sup>iii</sup> Hodges Council of Virginia and Descendants by Judson Council/Baltimore, MD. 1941

<sup>iv</sup> July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1797 guardianship court papers for Robeson County

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.usacitiesonline.com/nccounty/lumberbridge.htm#history>

<sup>vi</sup> From the notes of Michael Council written by his son Thomas W Council, Columbus, Indiana, February 12 1868

<sup>vii</sup> Notes of Michael Council

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## *Chapter 2-Lumber Bridge 1805*

The previous evening had been one of the worst of young Mary Polly's life. Not only had Alexander left the plantation in a rage but Jacob had stormed off in a very discourteous fashion. She had tried to stop him, offering him a room and food for the evening but to no avail. He acted as if he had not heard her pleadings. She followed him out to his carriage as he spoke just one simple phrase under his breath. "It's not what it looks like?" and then he too was gone.

Mary was up early the next morning, directing Willis to have Old Joe hitch up her buggy for an emergency drive into town. After hours of rehearsing late into the night, Mary thought she just might be ready to explain this whole problem away to everyone's satisfaction.

Willis would not just be her buggy driver for this excursion, but would be forced to listen to Mary work out her best apologies and explanations on their long trip into Lumberton.

She glanced out the window and saw the two slaves in deep conversation while Willis helped Old Joe hook up the horses. Mary couldn't help but wonder to herself at what these two slaves from such different worlds and education could possibly have in common, to have become such good friends in such a short few months. On those rare occasions when Willis left the house, he could always be found in the stable astride a wooden chair, listening and laughing away his free time with crazy tales told by his new found friend.

“We best be going now, Willis. We have a long ride ahead of us,” she said, as she closed the front door behind her.

He helped her into the buggy and then returned to his side to hoist himself up into the driver’s seat.

Willis wasn’t the largest or strongest of the many slaves that Mary had known in her life, but somehow she felt safe with him. There was little doubt the five-foot nine-inch black man could handle himself in most any situation. His skin was darker than most, but she didn’t seem to notice. She had begun to feel more comfortable with him than even her own family members. Willis was well into his mid-thirties and carried quite a paunch around his middle. Mary couldn’t help from noticing his hands as he grabbed the reins. They were strangely like those of a blacksmith. She had never seen such powerful hands, especially on a house servant.

To Willis’s surprise, the two drove on for the first mile in near silence. It appeared to him that young Miss Mary was still mulling over some un-thought-out options. Then she broke the silence.

“Oh, Willis, I know your master is Mr. Rhodes, and he is very wonderful to us both but you wouldn’t refuse a girl a chance to be in love, would you?”

“Please, Miss Mary, I assure you that I have every confidence in your decision. Mr. Rowland, if that is who you choose, will make a great husband. He is a fine man from what I have heard. And of course, Mr. Rhodes would be an exceptional choice as well.”

Mary pondered his answer for only a second before she shot back at him with outrage. “Willis!”

He leaped upwards from his seat beside her with alarm. Even though his attention was needed to manage the team at their galloping pace, he turned to face her with trepidation. She had never spoken so harshly to him in all the time he had been at her plantation.

“That is not what I want to hear,” she howled. “I might as well be talking to myself then to have you answer me back with such a fence sitting disposition. Can you talk to me as my friend and not as my servant? I need a friend now, Willis, please,” her tone softened. “With all the experience and knowledge that your many years have afforded you, you must be able to advise me on matters such as these. Don’t you know anything of love?”

Willis again snapped his attention back to the team and with the expertise of a master driver, brought the bounding pair to a gradual stop along the roadside.

At first, Mary was somewhat apprehensive that a horse may have thrown a shoe or that there was some other problem with the buggy. She slid to the farthest edge of the seat and addressed him again.

“Willis, is everything all right?”

The humble but stately subordinate paused to gather his emotions. Thoughts ran through his head, and he restrained himself just long enough to plot his next words carefully. He kept his gaze focused on the horses and began to speak every so calmly.

“Miss Council, I have mentioned before that it is not my place to speak so freely in matters that are best left to the likes of men in possession of greater intellect and understanding than I. And that is speaking nothing of the disloyalty you are asking of me in speaking of the good gentleman without his consent.”

Mary pressed to interrupt his thoughts. “Oh, Willis, I am not asking...”

“Please, Miss Mary, allow me to finish. This needs to be said once and for all if I am to stay in your employ for any length of time, for you see these matters must end here. Mr. Rhodes is not just my master and owner. It is not fear that restrains my speech, but loyalty and devotion to a man unlike any I have ever known. The gentleman is the sole reason I am who I am after so many hardships in my youth. If you will but permit me a moment, I trust a story from my past may put an end to your request upon me. For you see, I am a man of a particular standing in life; one that does not afford me the luxury to love or the choice to show you the empathy you require.” He readjusted in his seat to face her and continued.

“I thought I knew love once. As a plantation slave for Mr. Rhodes many years ago, we would often hire out to the Pittman plantation down the road during the harvesting season and the Pittman’s would return the favor as often as possible. It was there I met the most beautiful woman that these eyes would ever be graced to see.”

Mary squirmed in her seat and altered her position to show him her utmost attention. Willis continued.

“We worked weeks beside each other, and it wasn’t long before our masters allowed us the right to be joined together as man and wife. I can still feel them,” a smile began to engulf his face as he seemed to step back in time to a Utopia of a past life, “both my wife and son lying in my arms as I fell asleep to the gentle panting of their slumbering breaths.” The look of heavenly bliss faded from his face almost inhumanly fast as he regained his previous complexion.

“Yet, that was not to be my lot in life. For you see, they were sold off to a plantation in Virginia before I was even allowed to say goodbye.”

Mary gasped with horror, “Oh, Willis, no!”

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“The good gentleman was as outraged as I myself was,” he continued. “Master Rhodes stormed out to the Pittman plantation in demand of an answer for such an inhumane act of thoughtlessness. At first, I saw it as just a slave owner protecting the interest in his property. His legal share in the value of his slave’s offspring must be jointly considered, and he appeared to have been swindled. But I was wrong, there was little doubt when he returned that he had done all he could do and that the matter weighed heavily upon him.”

“He spent that night in the slave’s quarters. All night he tried to comfort me and reassure me that he wasn’t about to let the matter lie. He tried to convince me that a man of his power and standing in the community could do something to get my family back and reunite us. I could see that he truly cared and at one point, he actually embraced me as I cried like a small child in his arms. He begged me to be patient, warning me that this was not a matter I could take into my own hands. There were laws about runaway slaves and that my impatience might cost us both any chance at redemption.”

“Nonetheless, I was foolish. I could not imagine the master paying the price necessary to undo this wrong. He was of course one of the town’s most respected business men and the cost and time for him to travel to Virginia, repurchase my wife and son, and then travel home again, for just a farming slave and his family was beyond my hopes.”

“I ran away anyway, knowing that if I were to get caught, I would be punished severely. I had been beaten many times as a very young slave before I came into the good gentleman’s services. I was quite rebellious as a child and the stripes on my back were there to remind me. Yet, none of that seemed to matter at the time. If I were unsuccessful in my efforts to have them back, I would at least take Master Pittman’s life by squeezing the last remaining air from his undersized body.”

“I was wrong on all counts. I was caught two days later by Mr. Rhodes and the sheriff’s posse and brought back to the plantation in shackles. As they paraded me in front of all the farming slaves, there was little doubt of my fate. Master Rhodes could not allow the loss of discipline among the slaves and would be forced to render judgment in the harshest of manners.”

“The good gentleman was second to none in his mastery of the whip. I have personally seen him flick a fly off a horse’s ear without the slightest sign of injury to the animal. Many a slave has died under their master’s whip but none from the likes of Master Rhodes. I was marched out to the barn and forced to close the barn doors. Then, I was instructed to remove my shirt and kneel upon the freshly strawed floor.”

“Oh please, Willis, don’t go on. I mustn’t hear this, I cannot bear it,” Mary pleaded.

Willis continued as if she had not spoken. He was in another place now, a time far removed but somehow once again real.

“I felt the first strike as the pain shot up my spine like none I had ever experienced. I wondered if I would survive many more like it. I heard the second blow slam down with a snap upon raw flesh but did not feel its sting. What I heard did not register with me at first because it was the vilest of shrill, and I was unsure if the master had somehow missed his target. I kept my eyes closed tight in anticipation of the third blow being even more violent than the first. Again I was spared the strike and this time heard the poor beast cry out in agony.

I jumped to my feet to see the master drawing back for another blow. Tied to a barn rail, was an old mule that had long since seen its last working day. The master’s fourth blow dropped the crossbreed to its knees. I couldn’t gather the meaning of the scene before me and remained motionless with the utmost terror. As the animal leaned to and fro, the Master grabbed a small hand axe and planted it most violently between the animal’s eyes.”

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“It was over faster than I could imagine. The poor beast was lying dead at his feet and the master was splattered with blood from head to foot. His chest was heaving from the exertion in putting the animal down so swiftly. I saw him turn ever so slowly towards me and for a moment felt like the animal was only a prelude to the final act. I stepped back a few feet before noticing the master was weeping. I had never seen the master cry and was unsure what it was I as his slave should do. He then spoke airily.”

“Willis, I want you to listen to me carefully.” The master stooped down to pick up my shirt and placed it firmly upon the mule’s dead body. The shirt quickly absorbed the crimson stripes. “You have until morning. I want you to load this animal up into that cart and take it out into the west field. There, I want you to bury it. Bury it deep enough that there will be no worries that the plow might uncover this act someday. If you must work through the night then do so.”

Master Rhodes once again retrieved my shirt. “Place this on; I want you to wear it. Tomorrow you will work in the fields until such time as I instruct one of the house servants to fetch you. You are by no means to talk to any of the other servants or allow them to help you tend to your wounds. Once inside the house, I will then allow the servants to tend to you and clean you up. Feel free to sleep and regain your strength. I shall be in Virginia for some time and will expect you to learn as much as possible about being a house servant before I return. Hopefully, I shall be successful.”

“I watched as he exited the barn with his blood-splashed clothes. He walked openly in front of all the field servants and gathered them close. He spoke in his most sturdy voice.”

“I cannot allow this disobedience to continue in my household. There are laws to protect a man from this kind of rebelliousness. You all know me to be fair. I have left him alive for now.

No one is allowed to tend to him, do I make myself clear? If he pulls through, I trust we will have seen the last of his defiance.”

“He then turned and walked away. From my advantage point, I could see him wiping his eyes as he turned the corner towards the house.

He would return from Virginia three weeks later, alone. We never spoke on what had happened. I trusted that he had done all he could do.

“He began almost immediately my schooling. He hired the best teachers. Most refused to teach a black slave. Others demanded a top dollar for his insult and yet no price was too high. I have been the masters most trusted attendant since that day. He has turned over all affairs of the estate to me, and I have never disappointed him nor will I.

“So, Miss Mary, you ask if I might share my knowledge of love with you, to somehow ease your burden with my profound wisdom of life. You now see I have no knowledge of such things. The only love I know is that of a man who provided an alternative life for me because he knew I could never have the life I truly desired. You see, people of privilege like you do not allow it. Therefore, I see you as a silly young girl, spoiled by the immunity and advantages of your class and squandering the opportunity of having one of Gods greatest citizens’ slip through your fingers. Does that answer your question?”

He then turned his attention to the road and signaled the horses to resume their course. As they rode for a while without saying a word, Mary slid beside him and hugged his arm tightly within hers. She placed her head on his shoulders and spoke only two words, “I’m sorry”. She felt his body quake from his hushed sobs as they rode silently towards their destination.<sup>vii</sup>

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### *Chapter 3-Lumberton 1805*

As the buggy pulled alongside the small log cabin, Mary began the effort of regaining her composure. Her discussion with Willis had left her melancholy and distant and this would never do. She needed all of her womanly skills and patience for the confrontation ahead.

“Willis, can you wait here just a short while? I trust that this will not take too long, and we still need to complete the trip to Mr. Rhodes estate before our return home.”

“Yes, Miss.” He swiftly exited the buggy and was around to her side in an instant, offering his hand to help her down from the step. She was amazed at how well he had regained his subservient role. He was anything but the lowly servant he professed to be.

“Would you like me to escort you to the door, Miss Mary?”

“Thank you, Willis, but this will have to be something I attend to alone.”

“As you wish, Miss,” Willis resigned.

Mary walked cautiously towards the cabin door as she mentally reviewed her strategy from the previous night. She was ever so surprised to hear laughter from within the walls of the small abode. She subdued a flash of anger from this revelation that somehow last night had not left him lying broke and sobbing on the cabin floor. This gave her the last boost of courage she needed as she knocked forcefully on the cabin’s front door. For a moment the laughter stopped, and she could hear the large heavy footsteps of someone approaching. Mary was surprised to

hear Alexander's voice from within shout, "shut up!" The door opened quickly to a bare torsoed Sheriff Rowland, apparently still half drunk from the previous evening's merriment.

"Well, well," Alexander bellowed, "if it's not the grand Miss Mary Polly Council." His voice still had a trace of a slur from his over indulgence. "Why would the likes of someone like you be honoring the likes of someone like me with her presence?"

"Stop this foolishness and invite me in," Mary snapped back with as little emotion as possible.

"Well, uh... I guess if you insist," he said standing to one side and bowing overzealously to exaggerate the action. His snicker as she walked by made her want to slap him, but she refrained.

"Mr. Rowland, may I sit down."

"Oh surreee," he slurred as he almost stumbled to clear off the chair from clothes that appeared not to be of his gender. A female voice from the back room stabbed at her heart.

"Sheriff Rowland," the voice called out. "Come show me how to use these things." Suddenly the half-naked women appeared in the doorway dressed in little more than the sheriff's holster and revolvers.

"Damn it woman, I told you to shut your mouth and stay back there. You want me to beat you senseless. Now get the hell back in there," pointing to the back room. The giggling woman withdrew.

Mary recognized the woman instantly. The Johnson family was considered by many to be the town's trashiest folk. Of course, Mary Ann, the town floozy and oldest daughter of the Johnson clan were the perfect choice for a fun filled evening of frolicking. Mary needed to be

strong now. This was not what she had intended to find, and she was not about to let him see her disconcertment.

“Alexander,” she said calmly, “I understand you are upset and if now is not the time to discuss it, well...”

“Time! I’ve got all the time in the world,” he roared. “If we have something to discuss then let’s hear it, but I can’t imagine that we have anything to say to each other.”

“Alexanderrrrrr,” the woman from the back cooed. “I’m getting cold; can I put my clothes back on now?”

“Hell!” Alexander yelled. “I’ll tan your backside if you don’t shut your damn mouth, you accursed woman.”

“Maybe I had better come back later,” Mary said with impatience. “You seem to be a might busy.” She stood to leave and felt Alexander’s strong hands force her back down into the chair.

“You’re not going anywhere.” His eyes shot back at her with fury. He bolted into the back room and sprang out again with the stunned Miss. Johnson. His right hand was holding firmly to the back of her neck and his left hand was clutching her clothes to her chest.

“Get the hell home, girl, I’m done with ya.” She all but flew as he vaulted her from the cabin and slammed the door behind her. Willis, seeing the woman hurled from the dwelling was first to her side, but she pushed him away and spat in his face.

“Get away from me, blacky, or I shall have you arrested”. She tried to regain what dignity she had left and lifted her head arrogantly, then marched unruffled down the street still half-naked.

Mary had never seen this side of her man before, and it scared her to see him so ill mannered and forceful. There were rumors throughout the town of how violent Alexander could get when he was drunk but Mary never believed a word of them. She only knew him to be the most loving man she had ever known.

“All right, she’s gone now. Speak your mind if you so have an inkling. Go ahead, I’m waiting.”

Alexander bent down to address her from only a foot away from her face and she could smell the whiskey on his breath. “I’m waiting!” he thundered.

Mary couldn’t speak. His intensity was more than she could bear, and she was suddenly afraid that he might hurt her in his present inebriated condition. She cowered back into the chair.

“All right then, I’ll speak and you listen. I’m not used to being played like a fiddle. If you were a man, I’d be taking you in the back streets and putting an end to your meaningless life. But since you’re a lady, if I may be so bold to say, I’m just going to ask you to leave my house. Now you can go like a lady without saying a word, or you can follow in the footsteps of Mary Ann. How’s it going to be?”

“I guess I’ll leave now if that’s how you want it,” she nervously replied.

“Oh, that’s how I want it. Now get out!”

He slammed the door of the cabin behind her, and it was done. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry from her loss, or if she was just glad to be out of there.

*Going from one man to the next* in hopes of salvaging one of them was totally beneath her. Yet, that was exactly what she found herself doing. She glanced back at the buggy to inquiry

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if Willis' expressions were still pressing her forward. His urging gave her little courage. She had lost Alexander and would most likely be losing Jacob now as well.

The Rhodes estate was just off Front Street, the main street of Lumberton and well within view of most the traveling town folks. The front lawn was perfectly manicured and the path leading to the house was lined with beautiful large cypress trees. The house was to say the least, impressive.

It was square in shape, with all four-corners of the home framed by large white columns. The front porch was encased in decorative rod iron with the balcony just peeking through the trees above. He couldn't have chosen the colors more to her liking if he had asked her for her preferences. It was trimmed in a high gloss white with a cream base and reddish-brown shutters.

Jacob owned many houses. He had the plantation at Saddletree that he called Elysium, a Greek word for heavenly place that lay just northwest of town<sup>vii</sup>, a small house behind one of his eight taverns and a large home in Raleigh that he used when he was involved in matters of state. However, this home had always been her favorite.

As she stood at the front of the extended trail leading to the house, she could feel it all slipping away. Yes, as of this morning, she wasn't really sure if this was what she had wanted. Even now, she longed for the man she truly loved but this had always been an option for her if ever things had not gone as expected with Alexander. Now this too was a fading alternative.

She lingered for a moment, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Maybe tomorrow would be more appropriate, she thought. She hadn't in fact given him much time. Once again, she turned to silently beg for strength from the buggy driver. His expression still had not changed.

Mary plotted forward a few steps and found herself in less than a cultured gait. She paused momentarily to evaluate the reason for her sudden awkward sensation. Could she really be this nervous, she thought? Or maybe she was just so self-conscious. How did she look? Was her dress appropriate?

She had dressed in an enchanting five-piece ensemble that she had spent the early morning pondering over, a skirt and bodice of black silk. The outfit was embellished with velvet ribbons, silk buttons and a petite lace fringe. A fan-fronted bodice, epaulets, bell sleeves and peplum to accent her small waist, finished off the final presentation. Perfect, she thought to herself.

“Now don’t go all lumpish on me, Mary,” she said under her breath. “This isn’t the time to carry yourself so. Just put one foot in front of the other, and we’ll make it through this.”

As she approached the front porch, the door opened suddenly to find the master of the house attending to his own door duties. His eyes were red and bloodshot, and it was obvious that he had little sleep or rest from the night before. His initial gaze was one of anticipation as he stepped from the doorway onto the deck. Mary stopped in her tracks just shy of the porch.

“Good morning, Jacob,” she said hesitantly. His ogling was less than gratifying. After taking a moment to look her up and down, he spoke.

“Is it?” His words were so soft that she was unsure she had heard them correctly. He looked as if he was studying a strange but unanswerable problem.

“Excuse me?” Mary questioned.

“I said, is it,” he remarked now with more volume.

“Why, yes, Jacob, it is. May I come in?”

Jacob did not answer her question. Instead he slowly turned and walked back into the house, swinging a whiskey bottle carelessly at his side. She watched as he disappeared from her view into the dark foyer behind him.

How rude, she thought, but then again, his actions were nothing in comparison to her imprudent behavior.

The door remained open and she took it as her cue to enter. Gradually, she stepped up on the porch and proceeded cautiously into the house. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust from what had become a bright, sunny, Lumberton day. At first she wasn't sure just what it was that blocked her advance but as her eyes adjusted, she gasped with delight at the exhibit before her.

Just inside the foyer, draped over a tailor's mannequin, was the most beautiful dress she had ever laid her eyes on. It was the very same dress she had seen in the London Gazette that she had admired so greatly. How, was it possible that now it was here? She had not said a word to Jacob or anyone about this gorgeous dress.

This dress was an all-new design. A three-piece outfit that had an under sleeve cut that was detachable. The skirt was 3 flounces over an under skirt of heavy gathers and trimmed in cotton to have the design stand out. However, the overlay material was like nothing she had ever seen. The silk had a sheen to it that was unsurpassed and the color was as white as a new born dove's feathers.

"Do you like it?" a voice from the dark corner questioned.

"Jacob, how did you know? I didn't tell anyone." Mary had temporarily forgotten about her present dilemma.

“I followed you into the shop one day,” Jacob said, “and watch from afar your reaction when the store keeper showed you the advertisement. I had smiled to myself in anticipation of this moment but somehow this is not how I had pictured it.”

Again she was shocked back into the reality of her circumstance.

“Oh Jacob, I am so sorry about all of this. You must know this is not how I would have had it either.”

“Did you come to dismiss me or did you come to gloat over my ignorant behavior. How foolish I must have appeared to you to assume that someone of my age could ever hope to make you happy.”

“Jacob, stop please. You are so wrong. I have come to accept your offer. This has all been an unfortunate misunderstanding. I would be honored to be your wife.”

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