A Novel

Nighthawkers

A n t h o n y T i a t o r i o

For my wife, Judy

It was very dark when Samuel led them along the path he knew that circled around the town, a little below the canal, and back down to the river. It went through the briary thickets and was mostly unused, except for the fruit pickers. The marsh was thick with raspberries that time of year and they were all around them, plump, ripe and ready to eat, but the light from the canal boat nighthawker he carried was keenly focused and cut too narrow a swath through the sooty shadows for them to be seen.

Chapter One

JOSIAH HAMRICK WAS CERTAIN that John Quincy Adams would handily win reelection to the presidency in 1828. This was how little he, and indeed most well-healed Bostonians, understood about the way America had changed in the barely fifty years since the Revolution, a revolution they had literally fashioned with their own fingers. For its first half-century the republic had been ruled by the educated few, the soft-handed children of refinement, the college educated heirs of tradition in public service. There was indeed a ruling class and it was widely assumed that, like any profession, ruling required breeding and experience; no one personified this idea more than John Quincy Adams, son of a former president and as close to a natural political aristocrat as any American could possibly come.

The nation's political elite were in every way gentlemen of wealth and social standing. But, power was about to be wrested away from these entitled few and, like any species threatened with extinction, they fought tenaciously for their survival. And, in this struggle they stopped at nothing to destroy the man they feared most, Andrew Jackson, the agent, as they saw it, of their political doom. Just as Adams represented the refined and reasoned aristocratic road, Jackson personified the path of the common people, an intuitive, raw, gut understanding of what was right and what was not.

The presidential campaign of 1828 was vicious and dirty. Jackson was charged with every conceivable crime, from treason to cold-blooded murder. Even the reputations of his wife and mother were mercilessly sullied in a futile effort to stem the rising political tide. The pot was boiling and this was not the time for timidity. It was Monday, May 26th; the Congress had just adjourned and its members were rushing home to join the fray.

Josiah Hamrick believed that the election would go whichever way the winds in New York blew it. He hoped the state would stay solidly for Adams, as it had four years earlier. But, in the spring of 1828, the venerable Dewitt Clinton, champion of the Erie Canal, and perhaps the most admired man in America, was dead. His lukewarm support for Jackson in '24 was cynically seen as a thinly veiled attempt to splinter the already almost hopelessly divided vote among the several candidates, so as to make himself the most viable alternative. It didn't happen.

Martin Van Buren and his so-called Albany regency were running the show now. Little Van, as he was sometimes called, for reasons of his own, wanted Jackson to be president, and he was in a position to help make it happen. New York was the pivot point for the nation, not only politically, but economically as well. The canal was bringing unheard of wealth to the state. In the western counties, population was doubling every two or three years and land prices had already quadrupled. New York City was clearly the country's leading port and Wall Street traders dominated the securities markets. Only breaking the stranglehold of Philadelphia and Nicholas Biddle's bank on the nation's purse strings remained to be done before New York truly became the Empire State.

Like many New Englanders, Josiah Hamrick's son, Thomas, saw nothing but a pot of gold in western New York and had been seriously advising his father to go after it. The times were not good for the firm of Hamrick and Son and hadn't been since the depression of the early '20's. The national need, in 1818, to retire the long term debt incurred by the Louisiana Purchase had forced the Bank of the United States to call in many loans, in order to gather the necessary cash. This, of course, shrunk the money supply, and that caused the Panic of 1819. With it

came a drastic drop in prices as the economy quickly deflated; many businesses were threatened. Hamrick and Son was among them.

The old New England economy was already in decline and had for years been rapidly hemorrhaging capital, which flowed freely from shipping into textiles and other manufactures. Josiah had flirted with the idea of selling his aging schooners and sloops and putting his profits into cotton mills. He had watched the water-powered plants spring up like summer weeds along the rivers of New England and sensed the birth of a new age, but he knew so little about manufacturing that he feared the risk.

Western New York, however, intrigued Josiah, since the new Erie and Chaplain Canals were causing an explosion in the economy there and he understood trade quite well. Thomas seemed so enthusiastic when he spoke of it and he very much wanted to be closer to his only son. He remembered how, as a young man, his own father had confided in him and relied on him and how needed and proud it made him feel. Josiah wanted very much to show confidence in his own boy and take his advice, but, somehow, something seemed wrong about it all and as much as he tried, he couldn't settle it in his mind.

Still, New Englanders were flooding into western New York; the population was burgeoning and the commerce on the Hudson was booming. Like his father and grandfather before him, Josiah Hamrick's vessels sailed in the coastal trade, as they had since well before the Revolution and, while he knew precious little about steamboats, shipping was shipping he told himself. He had discussed this with his own father, Jonathan, now eighty-one, the retired patriarch of the Hamrick family, and was encouraged. Even the old man could see that it was time to seek new directions, to make a new beginning, just as the nation itself was about to do. The west was blossoming before their eyes, as his son so often said, offering opportunity beyond their dreams. All of this urged him to go and see for himself.

Josiah had been away for nearly a month when the news arrived and Thomas knew instantly that his father would be gone forever. The envelope held the few things that had been recovered, his

small notebook and some other papers, a letter, and his pocket watch, smashed and stopped at 3:45. "My God, Tom, it can't be!" she responded half in shock at the news of her son's tragic death. "I don't believe it. How do we know it's true?"

Rachel Hamrick was almost eighty and had, since his mother's death, been incredibly close to her grandson. She loved him deeply, but showed him little of the indulgence usually lavished on grandchildren. His father provided plenty of that she realized, knowing that, devastated and damaged by the loss of his young wife, he had been utterly unable to cope with the responsibility of raising a child. Perhaps it had been a mistake for her to have assumed that role so aggressively. She thought of that often as she watched Thomas grow older and increasingly further from his own father. They hardly knew each other. There was nothing even approaching intimacy between them and she blamed herself for that as she searched her grandson's face, in this time of grief and sadness, hoping to see some signs of sorrow.

"It's true, Mimi. There's no doubt. They sent the death certificate and there's a letter from the sheriff of Albany County."

"He's dead? Josiah is dead?" she asked, shaking her head, somewhat dazed and still in disbelief. "What happened? How could this have happened?"

"An explosion they said, on the steamboat. Dozens were killed."

"And they're sure it was your father?"

"Yes," he answered and for the first time she sensed a small hint of sadness in his voice. "Oh, please, Tom, let's pray it's not true." But she knew.

Thomas put his arms around his grandmother and the two said nothing for what seemed like an eternity. Pressed against his chest she measured his breathing, hoping for any break in the rhythm that would tell her that he had loved his father, but she noticed nothing.

"Does your grandfather know?"

"Not yet. The envelope just arrived," he answered, laying the few sad items on the desk top. The broken timepiece caught her eye first and she began to cry. Struggling to get beyond her shattered emotions she said, "please, Tom, read me the letter, the one from the sheriff."

To the family of Josiah Hamrick of Boston Massachusetts:

It is my sad duty to inform you that Mr. Hamrick was killed on the morning of May 12, 1828, at approximately 3:45 PM, as the result of an accident aboard the steamboat Aurora. An unexplained explosion tore through the boiler, sending steam and scalding water, as well as wood and metal projectiles, in all directions. Twenty-seven passengers and two crew members were killed. Dozens more were hurt. Due to the extent of the massive injuries and mutilations sustained by Mr. Hamrick, and owing to the threat of disease, it was the decision of the coroner of Albany County, Tobias Ryckman, to order that Mr. Hamrick's remains be interred immediately. That was done here at the town burial yard in Albany on May 13th. Please know that I remain your dutiful servant,

Cornelius Pootman, Sheriff, Albany County, New York

"The whole continent is being opened by this great canal, Bumpa, and the opportunity for us, for anyone, is almost beyond belief," Thomas reacted more than a bit defensively, feeling in his heart that he was responsible for the death of his father and needing to justify his part in what had become a tragic nightmare. "I would never have recommended this had I not seen it for myself. This country is exploding, Bumpa."

"Yes, you've seen it yourself, Tom, I know," his grandfather responded, beginning to sense the depth of guilt that was plaguing the boy. "I know, and I have no doubt but that your plan was wise and well founded."

"I rode this canal myself, from Albany to Buffalo and back, Bumpa," Thomas went on, in an almost pleading tone. "Its locks and weigh stations are jammed with boats, groaning under tons of back country produce of every conceivable kind, apples, peaches, plums, fruits and grains of all sorts; villages and settlements literally spring up overnight."

Jonathan heard the excitement in his grandson's voice and sat quietly while he continued. "Docks, warehouses, cranes and weighing machines are all around you at the quays and port towns… and you should see the Albany terminus! The trade has grown so much due to the incredibly low carrying rates on the canal. You can now move four-hundred tons of lumber, for over twenty miles, for only fifty dollars. Can you believe that? It can't be done, over the road, for less than a thousand! Think of what that means, Bumpa! Before the canal, transporting one ton of goods from Buffalo to Albany cost at least one-hundred dollars. Today, it can be carried on the canal, and profitably, for twelve!"

"Yes, I know son. Your father was excited by it too and we all agreed to pursue the plan. It was not just you, Tom. We all had a hand in it. It's no one's fault."

Jonathan's attempt to quiet his grandson's growing sense of guilt went unnoticed and Thomas was driven to go on. "There are so many opportunities it literally boggles the mind. I looked carefully at salt for example. The reduction works at Salina produces over one-half a million bushels of salt per year. They boil out the solids, in huge cauldrons, from the water of natural salt springs. You should see it! Salt can be bought at Salina for eighteen cents a bushel; carrying it all the way to New York City only adds fourteen cents the bushel more. Imported salt, at New York City, presently costs over double that… and whisky …why good whiskey can be bought at Albany for twenty cents a gallon…"

Jonathan began to understand how talking about his part in the ill fated venture was soothing and so he nudged his grandson gently forward. "Tell me more about all of this, Tom. I want to know more."

"Well, you're aware of Clinton's Erie canal, surely. It connects the great inland seas with the Atlantic. But, the real key came when the court broke Fulton's monopoly on the Hudson River steamboats. New York State gave him the right to control everything, but old John Marshall put an end to that when he ruled that the monopoly was unconstitutional. Mark my words, Bumpa, Gibbons versus Ogden will be long remembered for the way it opened this country up."

"When was that?" Jonathan asked.

"1824."

"Only four years ago."

"And since then there's been a mad scramble to put steamboats on the Hudson and to corner various aspects of the new trade. We're not alone, believe me; it's a free-for-all."

"Had you and your father settled on any specific investment idea, Tom, or…"

"No, that's what he was doing when the accident happened. There were countless possibilities. Population is really rising out there. Rochester has already tripled in size and land prices anywhere near the canal are skyrocketing."

"So it wasn't the steamboats themselves that you were looking at?" Jonathan asked, somewhat puzzled.

"He didn't want to move too aggressively that way, since, from all we could learn, the steam engines were not all that well designed. With so much money to be made, things began moving so fast that he thought greed was outstripping common sense. The boiler explosion that killed him," he paused to control his voice, "was only one of several in the last few years. Ironic, isn't it?"

"What a shame," Jonathan said softly. "What a damn shame." The old man could feel the tears beginning again to glisten in his eyes and he cried silently, trying hard not to break down too much. "So the explosion was not unprecedented then?" he finally continued, partly to push the focus of fault away from his grandson, "just an accident, an unfortunate accident…"

"Negligence, more likely," Thomas responded, deliberately goading his sadness into anger. It was a defense mechanism that most men new well. "Everything has to be about speed for these people. The competition between the steamboat lines is keen and outrageous egos get stoked just like the engines. Racing and gambling are a way of life on the river. Captains routinely over-fire the boilers and keep water levels low. They even weigh down the safety valve to jack-up the pressure."

"So do you think that was it then?" Jonathan asked. "Negligence, I mean."

"Well… I did think so, until I saw this," Thomas answered. "It was hidden in the binding of his notebook." He unfolded a small piece of paper and read it to his grandfather.

> *They know! The problem has been discussed, and you are in great danger. They are masons, Mr. Hamrick, many are in high places and they are all sworn to their secret causes. Get out while you can. I dare not help you.*

"Why would he be mixed up with the masons? He wasn't a mason was he, Bumpa?"

"No, son, he wasn't. In fact he was very critical of the masons. He never tired of telling me that the masons were a threat to American democracy."

"I think a lot of people agree with that, Bumpa."

"Yes, I'm sure they do. Since that Morgan business, this crazy anti-masonry sentiment seems to be sweeping over the whole northeast. The masons are a secret society, it's true, and that always invites suspicion about conspiracies, but I have never known…"

"Are you a mason, Bumpa?" Thomas interrupted, already knowing the answer, but having never spoken about it before. To Thomas there had always seemed to be something mysterious and evil sounding about the masons and their rigid code of silence. There was little wonder why people mistrusted them and their motives. All of this had come to a head, only a year earlier, in western New York, with the disappearance, and presumed murder, of a man who had planned to publish a book revealing all of the Masonic rituals and secrets. His name was William Morgan and it was widely believed that, to prevent this, the masons had abducted and killed him. The cry of cover-up spread wildly when little or nothing was done to apprehend the killers and it was discovered that most of the local officials charged with the investigation were themselves also brother masons.

"I was, once, yes… years ago. I joined and became a master mason in the Roxbury lodge. But, I haven't been active for over twenty years… Like I said, Tom, I never knew anyone…"

"It only takes one bad apple, Bumpa," Thomas said shaking his head. "And why do you call them crazy? It seems to me that they are right in trying to expose secret cabals and elites."

Jonathan could hear his own son speaking through Thomas. How many times had he heard it? Perhaps more than anything it had caused him to leave the lodge, even though he had never accepted the allegations. "It's all politics, Tom. The politicians feed the frenzy to get votes. They're always on some kind of crusade. I don't know where this country is headed, especially in western New York. They're trying to play into these reform movements that the women are so fanatical about, temperance and abolitionism. They're nothing but religious holier-than-thous and they think they've found the devil hiding in the Masonic lodge."

Perhaps, in an odd way, Jonathan was right. The canal had quickly flooded western New York with cheap manufactured textiles and this freed rural women from the drudgery of the spinning wheel. Especially in the evening, they were now free to meet and talk with other women. Conversely, building and maintaining the canal had created lucrative second jobs for the men, who spent more and more nights away from home. The wives began to suspect that their husbands were drinking and carousing in the surrounding towns, driving up their anger and with it the righteous cry for moral reform, especially against drinking.

As the women became more assertive, the men increasingly found sanctuary in their fraternal lodges, which were insulated from feminine moral aggressiveness. But, the understandable explosion in popularity of these men's clubs hatched its own countervailing forces. Many ambitious and upwardly mobile rural men began to believe that the privileged few were co-opting free and fair opportunity through closed secret associations, like the masons, where inside deals were made in smoky rooms.

"This note bothers me," Thomas continued, completely buried in his own thoughts. "Who could have sent it? How can we ignore it?"

"What can we do about it, Tom? The note is not signed. We have no idea who wrote it or if it even has anything at all to do with Josiah's death."

"I'm going to Albany, Bumpa," Thomas suddenly asserted. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this and I'm going to bring my father home."

Chapter Two

THOMAS HELD HIS GRANDMOTHER'S HAND as they strolled slowly up Cornhill and past the customs house to Town Dock Square. A little further on was Wentworth's Wharf, where the aging Hamrick schooner, *Celia*, was loaded and ready to depart. Jonathan walked a few feet ahead and in his mind relived the events of his youth that had so strongly molded his life. Whatever happened to Beresford he wondered, as they passed the Ann Street Courthouse. And …the Tally-Ho Tavern was still there where it had always been, although Hester was long gone. Then his memory flashed back to the day that his own father had died in that same courthouse, almost fifty years earlier. It seemed like only yesterday. Some memories never fade… and never change. He thought about their quarrel and how much he needed to believe that his father had come there to say that he wasn't angry any longer and that everything was alright between them. He had brooded about this for a half-century and somehow it made him feel better to believe it. Now his own son was dead and buried far from home. Consumed by his own past, he heard nothing of the conversation behind him.

"Tell me about it, Mimi." The sudden loss of his father strangely compelled Thomas to think more and more about his mother, even though he was only a small child when she died and

couldn't remember a single feature of her face. "I don't know why, but I just need to know more about my mother's death."

Rachel dreaded this subject, which to Thomas had always seemed needlessly shrouded in secrecy. She knew now that her grandson needed more than the routine palliative she so often served up to shield him from the ugly truth; but, for some reason she started in the same sheltering way. "Your mother was a beautiful person, Tom; she loved you and your father very much. It was such a tragedy that God took her so young."

"I know, Mimi, but how did she die? What were her last days and hours like? Why couldn't you save her?"

"She was a victim of the pocks that swept over us during the war years. You know that, Tom. It was a horrible disease that crossed the whole continent and it struck down your dear mother. There's not much more to it then that."

"No, Mimi, there is more to it. I want to know it all. Tell me the truth. Please, Mimi."

Rachel finally relented and recounted, for her grandson, his mother's last days. The image of that horrible time was still vivid in her mind, as it was for everyone who had lived through it. "She hadn't been complaining of anything and then she suddenly became very ill. It was about mid-day and she was very listless and drowsy, so we ushered her off to bed. Then she took the fever and complained of such terrible thirst that we feared she would drown herself drinking water."

She paused briefly when her eye caught the flight of a seagull floating weightless on the warm offshore updraft. The bird was brilliant white and seemed ethereal and free, not of this world, like an angel, she thought. The image lingered in her mind as she continued. "She sweated profusely, but her hands were ice cold. We bundled her up and tried very hard to keep her warm and to stop her shivering. It is now accepted beyond question that a cold regimen is to be applied to combat the fever. This runs counter to what the doctor told us at the time of your mother's death." She said it so emotionlessly that it belied the anger, which had for so long seethed inside of her. Even after all of these years she still couldn't escape the feeling that somehow she had innocently

added to her daughter-in-law's agony through blind faith in a medical authority that knew precious little. "We only did what they told us to do, Tom. We didn't know any better." Thomas listened silently, ironically carrying within him the same kind of mindless feeling of guilt for something which was clearly beyond his control.

"On the third day, tiny red spots appeared on her face. We hoped against hope that it was only the measles. Then they began to spread all over her body. She was soon covered with pustules; so many that they ran into each other, turning her face a sickly grayish white. The confluence of the pustules, when they run together you know, indicates the most serious condition that almost always foretells death. We were very frightened."

"What did you do? Couldn't you help her?" he asked, sensing the hopelessness that they all must have felt, watching this young and vibrant woman wither and die before their eyes.

"There was nothing we could do, Tom, nothing but pray. In the next few days the pustules swelled and began to run with fetid pus, it just oozed out and hardened into a crusty brown scab and she continued to get more and more of them. They were insanely itchy and were so numerous that her whole face became hideously swollen and almost unrecognizable."

Thomas closed his eyes and quietly whispered, "I had no idea she suffered so much."

"It was horrible …horrible. You've never seen it, Tom. If you do, the image never leaves you, nor does the fear that it puts in your heart. You would do anything not to see it again."

"How long did it last, Mimi? Did she have to suffer long?"

"At this point, about the fifteenth day, she was delirious, as the fever never got worse and she lapsed into a coma and died, mercifully, in the night."

She didn't look for a reaction and for a time they walked silently, in their own worlds. He forced away the horror with thoughts of the present. In his mind, he scolded himself for not feeling bad enough about his father's death. He tried to make himself sad, but it didn't seem to matter at all to him, only the selfish thought that he had somehow

caused it, bothered him. He did cry the first night, and everyone saw him cry, but he knew that those tears had come to console his distraught grandmother, who had lost her only son and seemed almost inconsolable. He really cried for her. She was the person he loved, more than anyone, and he couldn't escape knowing that he would soon lose her too.

"Why didn't you stop him, Jonathan? You know how much he blames himself for his father's death. What's to be gained from his going there?"

Rachel knew nothing about the mysterious note and Jonathan couldn't keep it from her any longer. It was only a matter of timing. "How could I stop him, dear? He has to find out what really happened…"

"What do you mean, what really happened, Jonathan?"

"I think there may be more to it."

"What are you saying?" she reacted curtly, "more to what? There's more to Josiah's death?"

"Yes."

"Jonathan," she scolded in a way that he had come to know and with the look he usually loved so much to see.

"I'm sorry, Rachel. Tom didn't want to worry you and so I waited until now. There was an unsigned note concealed in Josiah's things. It was a warning to him not to continue with his plans. Apparently there were people who didn't want him there. Anyway, the note implied that the Freemasons were conspiring somehow to hurt Josiah."

"What! …Jon, do you think he was murdered?"

"I wouldn't go that far, Rachel, at least not yet. But, Tom is determined to find out."

"Do you have this note?"

"No, he took it with him. It may help him to find the sender."

"Oh, my God, Jonathan," she said, clearly perplexed and for a time gazed absently out into the harbor where the *Celia* had just passed Castle Island and was fast disappearing around Dorchester Neck. "Do you remember exactly what it said?"

"I told you, Rachel, it was very short and cryptic. Essentially it said get out while you still can."

"And it says that the masons were…"

"Yes, but you know how foolishly insane the antimasonry is getting up there. The masons are blamed for everything. There's even an anti-mason political party running candidates for Congress. I don't think there's anything to it, but he needs to do something; he's still stressed about sending his father off to his death so to speak."

"Honestly, Jon, you didn't tell him that did you?"

"Of course not, but that's what he thinks."

"But it's so absurd…"

"Of course it is, but, until he works it out for himself, it will always be there. Let him go and put it to rest."

"But where will he go? What will he do?"

"He's headed first to New York City. He'll meet our factoring agent there, Peter Winn, and then he'll travel up the Hudson to Albany, the same as his father did, track his steps so to speak and find out whatever he can."

"And what part are you playing in this?" she asked suspiciously.

"None," he responded, a bit too evasively, "what makes you think…"

"Jonathan…"

There was no use. "I'm going to find out what I can about the upstate New York masons through my lodge here in Roxbury, that's all," he answered, as matter-of-factly as he could, and tried to quickly change the subject. "Do you remember the day we first met?"

She smiled, looked at him knowingly and parried, "at the house you mean?"

"No, the very first time, you remember."

"At the cotillion?"

"No, Rachel," he said, "out there… in the harbor. You remember… the day…"

She wasn't fooled, or distracted for long. "Those damn masons! I could never understand why you ever got involved with them in the first place."

"You don't understand the true purpose of masonry, Rachel. It's an honorable thing."

"How could anyone understand it, Jon, when everything is kept so secret? For God's sake they even murdered that man who just wanted to tell about it."

"Now you know that there's no real proof of that…"

"Don't worry. People aren't stupid; they know what's going on." He thought it best not to respond and she added, "why in the world would you ever want to belong to a stonemason's guild anyway? You are definitely not a stonemason and have never had even the slightest inclination toward anything like that."

He hadn't ever spoken about the masons before, having given his word under oath. But now he thought he should. "Yes, that's true dear, you know that the Free and Accepted Masons are not actually stonemasons. We just follow their great fraternal tradition," he answered and sensing that her interest was sincere, as was her concern, he went on cautiously. "For example, the trowel is used by the stonemason to spread the cement that binds the separate stones of the structure creating a single, strong building. The trowel has become a key symbol of ours and for us it signifies the freemason's duty to spread the cohesive bond of brotherly love."

"So that's what you do… spread the bond of brotherly love," she teased, laughing in a way that brought some relief to her saddened heart. "And how, might I ask, do you do that?"

"Well, you work on yourself, Rachel. You try to improve your own character to become a better person. It's an educational process. As you go through the degrees, you learn more and more. Masonry is a series of stories, or allegories, through which great moral lessons are taught. The true freemason is a seeker of truth, with which he hopes to serve his fellow man."

"Now isn't that noble!" she chided. "So why then is it so secretive and spooky, Jon? Where does all that come from, and where do you suppose it's likely to lead?"

"Well, we were taught that masonry had its origin in Biblical times, during the building of Solomon's Temple. The instructions in our

sublime degree of master mason tell us that the first lodge was created under the direction of God, the great Architect of the Universe…"

"God, no less," she mocked gently and then apologized. "I'm sorry, Jon, but it's so damn pretentious."

"Do you want me to tell you more, or not?" he responded, but only slightly annoyed, having often endured her ridicule of freemasonry.

"Yes, Jon, go on. I'm sorry, but I just can't help myself."

"Alright then… Divine inspiration guided the building of Solomon's Temple and a man named Hiram Abiff, the widow's son, was the earthly architect of that great edifice. He was the first master mason; he was given the divine secrets by God."

She shook her head dismissively, thinking what puffed up foolishness it was, but, out of respect for her husband, resisted any response.

"Before the completion of the temple, Hiram Abiff was attacked by three evil men seeking the sacred knowledge. They were named Jubela, Jubelo and Jubelum. Hiram Abiff, the widow's son, who had sworn never to reveal the secrets, refused to talk and was brutally slain by them. Thus Hiram Abiff is held up as a great hero, the ultimate paragon of virtue, and an example for all freemasons, who are reminded by his martyrdom, to always do their duty and stand by their word and their obligations to their brothers, even unto death."

"So, it is all based on secrecy, right from the start! You know that it's the secrecy that spawns so much of the criticism of masonry that you see everywhere today. And what about the murder of that man, Morgan?" she asked again. "That's a perfect example of how this sort of thing can get out of hand."

"Even if it's true, Rachel, it doesn't represent real masonry."

"That still doesn't answer my question, Jon. Why do you have to have secrets? You're not protecting any divine knowledge; you're protecting each other's schemes and covering each other's crimes."

"Masons are expected to come to the aid of their brothers. The secrets of our brethren are just that, secrets. The entire edifice rests on this foundation. It is a nexus of trust, without which masonry would crumble. Loyalty is the highest virtue."

"It's a underground club, Jonathan, and nothing more, that promotes the interests of its members, most likely at the expense of everyone else. It is incredibly elitist and probably corrupt; I'm surprised that you can't see that loyalty has its limits. It can't just be blind loyalty."

"Don't be so harsh, Rachel; it's not masonry that is corrupt, although admittedly some masons may be. It has the potential for doing great good."

"And has a greater likelihood of doing harm it seems to me!"

"I suppose," he said with a sigh, once again ready to retreat, rather than face her feisty barrage of criticism, but she didn't let him.

"And just what do you do at these mysterious conclaves, if not conspire to bring about your own selfish schemes?"

"The friendships within the lodge are no different from what one would expect to find everywhere in society. We are taught to live by the virtues of Aristotle. The mason is faithful to his duties and loyal to his brothers. The ceremonies and teachings emphasize this. The freemason tries to spread this honorable way of life into the world."

"It seems to me that the mason is faithful to his friends, period."

"He shouldn't be, Rachel."

"But is?"

"Perhaps some are… in some lodges…"

"And these secrets you are pledged to keep," she interrupted, "do they include crimes as well?"

"We are not sworn to hide knowledge of murder or treason."

"So, are you saying that, you are sworn to hide all sorts of other dirty deeds? Tell me that's not what you are saying, Jon."

"The mason may not violate God's law. The laws of men are not always just," he responded evasively. "We try not to judge our brothers."

"So there it is then. It's a private men's club, where you go to get away from your wives. You go to drink and scheme behind the walls of your grandiose den, which you pompously decorate like a holy temple, and then you pledge never to tell about it."

"There is a social side to it, I'll admit, but not to the extent that you're suggesting, although the increase of late… in holier-than-thou

women… minding everyone else's business, has no doubt boosted the membership." He responded with a slightly subdued chuckle, knowing that she knew he was referring to her.

Rachel pushed her husband playfully with both hands breaking his balance. "Be thankful that there are women watchful enough to keep you're natural depravity in check."

They both laughed and Jonathan added, "it's no wonder then that the most vocal critics of masonry seem to flock together with the anti-everything crowd."

Rachel suddenly became deadly serious. She blamed herself for the distance that had grown between Tom and his now deceased father. He was still, she knew, in many ways, a little boy searching for his place. "You have to help him, Jon. I fear that he'll lose his way; he needs to find his identity. Josiah never helped him become a man. He needs you, Jon. Don't let him do this alone."

Chapter Three

FOR THE MOST PART THE ERIE CANAL was nothing more than a very long ditch, forty feet wide and four feet deep, stretching in a serpentine course from Buffalo on Lake Erie to Albany on the Hudson. When Karl Olmstead shoved his scow off from the Salina side-cut and began the "long level" east from Syracuse to Utica, he knew that for nearly seventy miles there were no locks and that progress would be steady. He carried any general cargo, or serendipitous freight, he could get and even an occasional passenger willing to go slow for a low fare. Mostly, however, he carried white pine boards, shingles and sundry lumber of all descriptions, to Albany, which was fast becoming a major commercial center. He bought salt, by the barrel, at Salina and his wife Harriet repackaged and sold it in the little villages and towns that were springing up everywhere in the canal corridor; and he also collected cord wood from the local farmers along the way, hauled it to the Hudson River canal basin and resold it to help feed the boiler fires of hundreds of hungry steamboats that visited that port every year. He only managed a modest income from all of this, but it was enough to support his family and provide him with an opportunity to pursue his real passion. Karl Olmstead, you see, was an evangelical preacher of some local repute and his small scow additionally served as a gospel boat; everywhere he stopped, if people came, he preached.

Karl's fourteen year-old son, Samuel, was his mule skinner and had walked the towpath from Syracuse to Albany for most of his young life.

Olmstead had, on occasion, tried to hire-on one of the many homeless vagrant boys who spilled out of the cities in the summer to find work on the canal as drivers and deck hands. Two boys, working the mules in shifts, would have allowed him to keep his boat moving around the clock. He knew that with only one Hoggie, as they were called, he would be forced to overnight at the various quays and way-stations along the route, but the aggravation these rowdy young hooligans brought with them soured the bargain and made him twice abandon the idea.

The canal's great promise to expand economic opportunity for everyone seemed, to many, to have degenerated into little more than the exploitation of a permanent underclass of uneducated and unskilled lowlifes, who then set the stage for more scoundrels, loafers and liars like themselves. And among them were thousands of children, both boys and girls, mistreated and abused by their unscrupulous employers. Through the heat of summer they did the dirty work, tended the mules and horses and scrubbed the decks, only to be fired, when the canal froze over, and left to fend for themselves through the winter, as best they could, in the streets of the fast growing towns and cities along the route.

Little wonder that these young strays rejected the middle class values trumpeted so loudly by the heralds of the time and seemed to revel in their reckless depravity. Crime and disease ran rampant among them and this only deepened the call for change that was then sweeping across western New York. Saving the souls of the seemingly countless innocent wayward waifs the age had spawned inspired the imagination of many; Reverend Olmstead was once among them, but his aggressive moralism had been repeatedly thrown back in his face and it made him harder and more cynical.

Olmstead had been lucky in another way though. His son Samuel was a natural with the animals and seemed content to be alone. What the boy thought about, or dreamed about, during those endless hours walking with the mules never entered his father's mind. He did, however, understand that his youngest son's days on the towpath were numbered. With his older brother suddenly and tragically gone, he would soon need Samuel with him at the helm. But, until then, his

daughter, Amanda, would serve well enough as bowman. She could snub a line like a man and handled the tiller expertly as well.

Amanda Olmstead was eighteen. Her father often remarked that she wasn't like other girls, referring to her penchant for books and her fierce resistance to the notion of domesticity. Amanda was as fiery and independent as she was beautiful and brilliant; she had the young farmer's sons lined up and waiting at every village dock and lock; her mother noticed this of course, even if she pretended not to. Amanda Olmstead was like a flickering fire, seductive and intriguing… from afar, but with an edge as sharp as a razor.

"If only she would like one of them," Harriet remarked as she came up from the kitchen onto the tiller deck, aft. It was early evening and the sun was setting. They had made seventeen miles since dawn and Olmstead was planning to settle in for the night, as he usually did, at halfway-basin. There would be several boats already there and he expected many of the locals to gather for his sermon.

"She's just too aggressive, Harriet," he answered. "Women should be modest. She acts too much the man."

"She'll never marry for I fear she will not submit to a husband," his wife commented, prodding him to talk about their daughter and her concerns. But, the Reverend Olmstead didn't understand Amanda, had no patience to try, and, as usual, preferred to fall back on authority.

"Talk to her, Harriet. Remind her of Ephesians: Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husband, as unto the Lord."

"I have, Karl and there's no use. She only argues. She loves to argue. It's you that should talk to her, Karl."

He pretended not to hear her and said in a rising tone rolling slowly into an old sermon half-remembered from somewhere, "religious piety and purity are the woman's strength. Women are not suited to the materialistic struggles of the world; they are by nature passive and submissive. Her role is to preserve her innocence and thereby employ her moral superiority to help men temper their promiscuous passions. Marriage is the proper mission for a woman, where she can be a helpmate for her husband and a mother to his children. I don't understand her at all, Harriet, what does she think life is all about?"

"She wants to go to school," his wife said meekly and without looking up. He said nothing and she let it rest for a few seconds before asking, "…did you hear me?"

"She wants to what?" Olmstead answered absently, already distracted by a glimpse of what looked to be an obstruction immediately around the bend ahead and, quickly tying off the tiller to the taffrail, he ran forward to where Samuel could hear him from the towpath. "What's wrong there, boy?" he yelled.

And his son responded, "looks like a jam."

"Get up there and see what it is."

Samuel immediately halted the mule team and ran to where two boats, heading in opposite directions, had become wedged together. This kind of thing didn't happen often, but, when it did, it could be difficult and dangerous to straighten out. "Ask your captain if he'll try to swell us out," a voice came from one of the boats.

These jams were almost always caused by low water, or sometimes canal grass, especially if the mucking crew hadn't done any dredging for a time. Karl had already reached the mule cabin when Samuel returned. He knew that any delay would quickly cause congestion, as more and more boats piled up behind it, and that it could take hours to smooth out. Right now, at least, there were no other boats in sight and he wanted to act quickly.

"They want us to swell 'em out," the boy yelled, but his father was ahead of him and already dropping the fallboard to off-load the second mule team onto the towpath. Olmstead carried four mules. While one pair towed, the other rested in the mule cabin, which was little more than a small stable in the bow of the boat. For this job they would need all four animals tied together in a tandem rig. The idea was to make as much speed as possible, while approaching the jam, to push the water in front of the bow into a slowly rolling wave, which would, if they were lucky, flood the stuck boats free of the muddy bottom. Then, a well-timed tug from their own teams could nudge them loose. They all hoped it would work, since if it didn't there was no alternative but to unload the cargo to lighten the jammed boats and no one wanted to do that.

"I'll snub her off on that tree," Olmstead yelled. "Judging from the rope burn, this has happened here before I think." The trick, of course, was to stop the fast approaching swell boat before it rammed the jam. The mules alone could not be expected to do this and in fact could be pulled into the canal, and even killed, by the momentum of the forty ton boat. The technique was to use a rope, looped around a stout tree trunk, to gradually slow the drifting boat to a stop.

"Get Amanda to take the tiller," Olmstead called to his wife, as he pulled the hawser out far enough to reach the tree. "It's gonna be close," he cautioned, and with a wave of his hand signaled Samuel to start the mules.

"Big Jack…Hee-ahh," the boy commanded, directly into the lead nigh-mule's ear, while cracking his whip over the off-mule's head. Mules are smart; they know their names and respond quickly. The lead mule leaned into the task and the others dutifully responded; the boat lurched forward. It's not important to know what Big Jack and the other animals thought of all this, it's only necessary to know that they did it. Considerable water quickly piled in front of the wide and almost vertical and flat bow of the canal boat, which, like a plow, pushed a rolling wave ahead of it down the canal.

"Whoa…" Samuel yelled, to bring the team to a stop as they bore quickly down on the jam. The tow rope fell slack on the path and the forward drifting boat began to overtake the team.

"Head way… Unhitch the mules," Olmstead yelled as he wrapped his rope around the snubbing tree. Amanda skillfully swung the bow out away from the bank, to keep the boat from being pulled in too precipitously as it slid slowly past Samuel and the mules.

The canal, may have been forty feet wide at the surface, but it was only twenty-eight feet wide at the floor and these flat bottomed boats were usually weighed down well beyond their intended capacity, leaving precious little clearance under the keel and Amanda could tell from the freeboard distance between the water's surface and the top of the bank that the water level was very low. She held tight to the tiller as she began to hear the screeching and searing sound of the snubbing rope sliding and squeezing into the tree. Olmstead gradually increased the

pressure trying to steadily slow the stubborn boat. "Get up here, Sam; I need you now," he yelled. "Get some weight against the stump; it's rooting up!"

The swell lifted the jam, just as they hoped it would, and in seconds the once captured boats were free. Karl Olmstead slumped down beside the snubbing tree and looked at his son. They were both drained, more from the emotional urgency of the moment than from real physical exertion. But the job was done and it had been done well. It was at these times, rare though they were, that the boy longed for his father's approval, and hoped, always beyond hope, for his praise, but for some reason Olmstead could never respond. He loved his son, but refused to show it.

"Go help those men, Samuel," he said sternly, standing to escape the moment and turning to see if the mules were quiet. "We're going to have to bank-haul that scow to get it past us." With Olmstead's boat lying still along the towpath, they would have to pull the oncoming craft around it by hand, since the towrope would have to be carefully carried over the top of Olmstead's boat. "Amanda, get down here and tend to the mules; Harriet, you guide the rope over." And so, with little more talk, everyone worked together to get back under way.

Amanda stayed on the towpath to help her brother load the spare team back into the boat. This task required two people since the ramp down into the mule house was so steep that someone had to hang on to the mule's tail and hold him back while he skidded in. For some reason, Amanda had always loved to do it.

"Do you want me to walk with you for a while?" she asked, as her brother finished re-hitching the team to the tow rope.

"Great, Mandy! You want some cherries? I've still got some."

"Where did you get those?"

"There was a tree, a ways back."

"You know you're not supposed to leave the team. Didn't he see you?"

"I waited until Ma was on the tiller. Big Jack leads 'em fine without me." And so the small talk continued for a mile or two until Amanda asked, "what are you going to do, Sammy, when you grow up I mean?"

"I don't know, get a job I reckon, maybe on one of them Hudson River steamboats. They're like greased lightnin', Mandy. I got an awful hankerin' to be captain of one of them steamboats."

"Do you think beating the hair on these mules is the proper training for that?"

"I reckon not, but I'll be on the tiller soon, he says so, as soon as you get hitched."

"Get what! What makes you think that?"

"You've got to sooner or later… sooner would sure suit me."

"You won't get anywhere without an education. You'll be slapping some mule's ass until you die," Amanda chided.

"I get learnin' enough right here," he reacted in a somewhat testy tone.

"You're beginning sound more and more everyday like these hooligans you hang around with, Sam. Don't you want to go to school? …I do."

"Mandy, you're crazy as a loon thinkin' about that."

"I'm going. You see if I don't."

Amanda Olmstead had a brilliant mind and was as well educated as anyone in her circumstance could expect to be. She had no formal schooling, but had been taught to read by her mother and she visited the library boat in the Albany basin as often as she could. She dreamed most of learning French and loved sciences too, especially chemistry and biology, although she knew quite well that these were not the proper subjects of traditional female education. Perhaps it was because of her eclectic home schooled experience that her mind remained so free to explore and she saw so few boundaries.

"You can't go to school Mandy; you're too old."

"I'm going to college."

"Girls don't go to college. He'll have a conniption fit. You know that."

"There's a college in Troy that's especially for women. That's where I'm going, to Mrs. Willard's Female Seminary in Troy."

Amanda was right. There was a college for women by that name in Troy, the first in America, although it was not called a college. But, the room and board alone would cost two-hundred dollars a year, a sum well beyond her means and she knew it. She had no money of her own and no real way to earn any. Women in America had no political, and little economic, existence independent of men. Even Emma Willard herself could not legally lease the building, which housed her school, without the consent of her husband.

It may have been a hopeless dream, but Amanda wouldn't let it die and fought back with audacious fury. "Perhaps someday I will be President of these United States."

"Man alive, Mandy, you sure are somethin'," he shook his head laughing. "Women can't even vote."

Logic and reasoning were commonly believed to be beyond the capacities of the female mind and nothing irritated Amanda more than being underestimated by men, even by her little brother and she struck back viciously. "Surely you have read the Declaration of Independence. Doesn't it say that the power of government derives from the consent of the governed? How then can laws that govern women be just when women have not consented?"

She waited a short time for him to respond and then, knowing he couldn't, added with a bit of impatient irritation, "can you think of even one reason why women are not permitted to participate in their own government?"

"Women don't belong in politics, Mandy. They'd just mess everything up," he responded dismissively.

"And why is that, because women are not smart enough?"

"I don't know, Mandy; they just don't belong in politics, that's all."

"I'll tell you why women have no say. It's because, by law, they cannot own property. Allow me to quote Mr. Blackstone for you: 'by marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law; that is, the very being and legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage.' This is the crux of it. Can you imagine it? And it is nothing more than

slavery." She paused to catch his eye and then taunted. "Do you even know who William Blackstone is? Have you ever read a book?"

"No …I don't know who in Sam Hill he is and I don't give a damn; and I don't need no high fallutin' school-marm for a sister neither," he sputtered, his feelings hurt and his ability to cope smothered by her unintended arrogance. Her anger exploded sometimes and he was the one target she could always hit.

"There's a mule-drink there. Do you think we should stop?" she asked, to change the subject and defuse the tension.

"Naw, we'll be at the basin in a few minutes. They'll get a proper rest then."

"I'm sorry, Sammy," she said sincerely. "I didn't mean to…"

"I can't read," he said abruptly with tears in his eyes.

"Yes you can. Of course you can."

"Shucks, Mandy, you're smart as a steel trap. But I ain't."

"No …don't say that, Sammy. You're smart …and you can so read."

"No I can't. I tried. God… I tried so hard. But, I just memorize things and pretend. And he knows. But he won't say it 'cause he's ashamed of me."

"He's not ashamed of you. He's proud of you. Why he's always bragging on you and how much he needs you, especially now that Caleb is gone."

Samuel was crying; she didn't look at him and pretended not to see it as they walked silently for a while. She thought about how young and insecure he was and how responsibilities would soon build on him now that he was suddenly the oldest boy and how unprepared he was for it. Her frame of reference broadened that afternoon on the towpath and for the first time she also saw herself caught and controlled by other people's expectations.

Chapter Four

PETER WINN WAS THE HAMRICK business agent in New York City. He was also a stockbroker and venture capitalist with wide ranging experience who had, in the past, arranged the financing for several successful Hamrick enterprises. Thomas knew that his father trusted Winn implicitly and had been relying on him for advice. After arriving in New York City, late on the Monday morning of June 9th, 1828, Thomas went directly to him. Winn was a permanent guest at the magnificent Holt's Hotel, reputed to be the largest and most beautiful in the entire nation. It was close to the Battery and the steamboat wharves and Thomas had no difficulty finding it. Its marble façade and six stories dominated the street.

"Mr. Winn, my name is…"

"Yes, Thomas Hamrick, of course, Josiah's boy. I remember you, of course." Winn flashed his disarming smile and offered his hand. "How is your grandfather? I haven't seen him in years."

"He's well, sir, thank you."

"You know I saw your dad only a few weeks ago and we…"

"My father is dead, Mr. Winn."

"What! …Oh my… What happened?"

"He was killed in a steamboat explosion on the river, somewhere near Albany."

"Oh… Thomas, …that's awful. It must have been the *Aurora*. Was it the *Aurora*? We got news of that, but no names of the…" There was really no, delicate, way to say it.

"Yes, I believe it was, although we don't know much more than that. That's why I'm here, Mr. Winn. I'm going to Albany to recover my father's body and to find out exactly what happened."

Winn nodded and, realizing that they were still standing awkwardly in the doorway, said, "Thomas, please come in. Let me get you a drink or something."

Hamrick set his suitcase down by the door and followed his host into the plush parlor. Holt's Hotel, like many in the city, catered first, and foremost, to regular guests who, especially considering the spike in real-estate prices in lower Manhattan preferred to lease suites and enjoy the service a first-class house provided. It put them permanently in the fast paced business district around Wall Street and also served as an office and ready retreat.

"Well how can I help you? I'll do whatever I can."

"Tell me all you know about what my father was planning and where he was going."

"As I said, he came here and we discussed investing in western New York and on the Hudson. I told him that real-estate speculation was running wild and that big money could be made just about anywhere out there. It really is the best bet, but, understandably, he seemed more interested in the carrying trade on the river. He asked me to cost out a plan to build steamboats and to see if I could get some backing, which I started to do, until I got a letter about two weeks after he left instructing me to begin to shop his durable assets around to determine how much he could raise quickly. It sounded like he was thinking of taking a big cash stake in something, but he didn't say in what."

"Have you any idea, maybe from your discussions, what sort of investment it might have been?"

"No. But it must have been highly speculative and requiring quick cash. Maybe he got a stock tip. The market is booming right now… That's about all I can think of. He was interested in the stock market and asked about different companies, but nothing unusual."

"You are a broker, are you not Mr. Winn?"

"Yes, I'm also a member of the board, although I'm not a regular trader, only for my own portfolio… and for special clients, like your dad."

"You say he was interested in the stock market?"

"Well, he did want to see the exchange and he asked some questions …but as I said, nothing concrete."

"Could you show me the way this business is transacted so I might get a better idea of what he might have been thinking?"

"Yes, of course. The market doesn't close until one. We still have time to go there now if you'd like?"

As the two men walked toward Trinity Church, towering above the head of Wall Street, its tall steeple seemed to consecrate this almost sacred way, where the bells tolled as much for Mammon as for God. It was odd, Thomas thought, that such an inauspicious street, running from Broadway down to the river, should symbolize so much, or that it was here at this spot, and along this narrow lane, that George Washington was inaugurated and the nation was born. But, it was indeed appropriate and spoke eloquently to the determining force of commerce on America's history and destiny.

The investment schemes themselves were, almost clandestinely, hatched along this street. Not at the exchange itself, but rather in a collection of rooms and attic offices, cellar chambers and dark dusty hallways, where brokers and speculators gathered to strike bargains and where fortunes were won and lost. The deals were officially done and sales actually made, however, at the Gold Room on the corner of Wall Street and Broad. There, deposited in a hundred safes, were the liquid assets of the nation's many millionaires.

When they arrived, the exchange had been open for over two hours and it was fast nearing the closing. The room was elegant and expensively appointed. Overstuffed chairs, appropriately done in gold and green, made a symbolic, if ostentatious, impression and the two men sat to watch and listen. The cock-pit was crowded with wild bidding.

"Erie Canal Enterprises, do I have any bids gentlemen?"

"A hundred at nine."

"A hundred at five-eighths."

"Two hundred at a half."

"Any part of five hundred at a quarter."

"I'll take a hundred at a quarter."

"Sold, Roberts, one hundred shares ECE at nine and a quarter."

And so the cock-pit boiled as the last of the regular stock list was presented. The gavel rapped with every sale and the blackboard grew longer as the secretaries recorded the constantly changing prices.

"You can see how bullish the market is on anything to do with the canal. It's been running up steadily since Vanderbilt broke Fulton and Livingston's hold on the river."

"But, I don't think it was the kind of thing my father was looking for," Thomas responded, himself however fascinated by the rush of emotion that flooded the floor when a hot stock was announced. Traders rushed to the pit and what seemed like pandemonium prevailed, which to the novice was electric, but almost unintelligible.

"What are your plans then, Thomas?" Winn asked, when at 1 P.M. the gavel rapped an end to the trading.

"I'm going to book passage on a steamboat for Albany as soon as I can. Do you have any suggestions?"

"There are at least seven or eight lines already competing on that route. The Night Line has a boat every day at 5 P.M., which goes straight through, only making one stop at Poughkeepsie. It arrives at Albany around noon tomorrow. But, I would recommend the Day Line, a corporation I might add in which I own significant stock," he added with a smile, "which is running a brand new, and faster, boat called the *Mary Malone.* She leaves from the Battery at 5 A.M. and reaches Albany at 11 P.M… the same day!"

Thomas was tired and agreed that the morning boat was a better choice. It would also offer him an opportunity to watch the operations of the crew and to question other passengers, since the manner and cause of the explosion were uppermost in his mind. "I can't believe how fast these boats are getting," he remarked.

"One of them recently made the run to Albany in fifteen hours. That's half of what it took Fulton only twenty years ago. Of course they run much higher pressures now."

"Alright then," Thomas said standing. "Perhaps I can get a room at your hotel, Mr. Winn."

"I wouldn't hear of it, Mr. Hamrick. You'll stay with me tonight."

THOMAS HAMRICK'S NOTEBOOK: THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1828.

I learned from the posters and placards that the Mary Malone is two-hundred and ten feet in over-all length and is twenty-eight feet in width, with its decks extending out over the hull for several feet on all sides. I would estimate the hull itself to be about one-hundred and ninety feet. I was told that the displacement was four-hundred tons.

This remarkable vessel is propelled by a pair of paddle wheels, one on each side, each over thirty feet in diameter. These wheels are connected by a shaft extending across the width of the boat. The shaft has two cranking jogs built into it and each is attached to a piston in a huge steam cylinder. The engine itself has two boilers, each driving one of the pistons, and the cranks are arranged to be opposite each other very much like the pedals of a bicycle, so that when one is resting and cannot produce any power, the other is driving the wheels around. Since the massive bulk of the boilers and their furnaces present an obstacle to a direct driving mechanism, each piston is connected by an iron rod to a large wooden beam, which goes up and down much like a see-saw, the opposite end of which is attached to the drive shaft. I am very curious to see this behemoth in motion as the technology is incredibly fascinating.

Two huge eighty-foot smokestacks reach skyward, belching billowing clouds of black smoke, soot and sparks as the stokers are furiously feeding the furnaces in preparation

for our departure; and as I can no longer hear any escaping steam I suspect that they've closed the safety valve and are building pressure. I was first told that the great height of the chimneys improves the draft and results in a hotter fire. Then I was told that some towns require the stacks to be higher than the buildings along the shore for the sake of fire safety. I'm not sure which is true, if either, but all of these steamboats carry very high, incongruous, smokestacks.

Much of the deck space is taken by the boilers and furnaces and various devices for propelling the monster, especially the heavy oak and iron frame which provides the fulcrum for the rocking beam. There must by thirty cords of wood neatly stacked on deck, as it takes fifteen or more to make the run to Albany. There are, however, two spacious open air areas. Both are roofed and appointed with comfortable chairs and benches. The forward deck can accommodate at least one-hundred people. The double deck aft is open on the upper level and enclosed on the main level, which is used for the dining room and lounge. Meals are served promptly at specified hours; I am looking forward to the captain's table to which, through Mr. Winn's kind offices, I have been invited.

Suddenly our boat burst from the dock with a rush and steamed aggressively into the East River. New boatyards, to meet the growing demand for new bottoms, are busy all along both the Manhattan and Brooklyn shores. This city roars with commerce and there will be no let up. Ships lying at anchor are everywhere around us.

As we steam south into the bay and I can't help contrasting the clusters of houses, churches and civic buildings in Manhattan with the neat little villages of white fenced houses nestled within the green hillsides of Staten Island. Behind us, Long Island forest fades away in the distance as we turn north into the broad Hudson. The cliffs at Weehawken suddenly come starkly into view. The cove below the town is

jammed with schooners and sloops of every variety. The river is teeming, almost alive, with trade.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention," the captain said, standing and addressing the passengers at breakfast. "We have a distinguished guest with us today. Let me introduce Mr. Jacob Goode. Mr. Goode is a scientist working on behalf of the Franklin Institute of Philadelphia and he is going to Albany to address the legislature there on aspects of steamboat safety. On behalf of the Day Line, welcome aboard, professor."

Goode, who was a naturally shy man nodded, but made no remarks, which suited the captain perfectly, since the fear of explosions was always in the back of every passenger's mind. So strong had it become, in fact, that some steamboat lines were beginning to tow what were called safety barges behind the main boat, for those too timid to chance the near proximity of the boilers. To Thomas Hamrick the breakfast could not end soon enough.

"Mr. Goode," he called hurrying to catch his quarry before anyone else could. "My name is Thomas Hamrick. May I have a word with you, sir?"

"Yes, of course. What can I do for you, Mr. Hamrick?"

Thomas explained the tragedy which had befallen his family and the purpose of his trip and then asked, "why do these boilers explode, Mr. Goode? Are these accidents or incompetence?"

"An excellent question, my boy," Goode responded, "and you failed to include criminal negligence, as this is also a strong possibility in some cases."

"What are some of the principle causes of the explosions?"

"Simply put, Mr. Hamrick, blow-outs occur when the steam pressure exceeds the capacity of the boiler to withstand it. There are several reasons why the pressure gets too high."

"But aren't there safety valves to regulate the pressure."

"Yes, there are, but there is no way to measure the deterioration of the boiler plate. So what was once a safe pressure can easily become unsafe. For example: sediment collects on the bottom of the boiler and

acts as an insulator, blocking the heat of the fire from reaching the water; this causes the plate to get red hot, weakening it and making it prone to failure."

"Can't this be prevented by flushing out the boilers regularly?"

"Yes, but this takes time and costs money. That is part of what I meant by criminal negligence. I am hoping to convince the legislature in Albany to enact strict regulations on these boats, which are now totally unregulated. There is also the matter of running with low water. This makes it cheaper to generate steam, but can be deadly. The feeding pumps must keep the water in the boiler at a level above the contact point of the flames. If it should fall below, the exposed plate would overheat, could become red hot and erupt."

"Is there no concern for safety among these people, Mr. Goode? Have no steps been taken?"

"The only improvement of consequence has been the recent substitution of wrought iron for cast iron in the boiler. During an explosion, cast iron fragments into thousands of projectiles, while wrought iron rips and tears rendering it less likely to kill and maim as many bystanders."

Hamrick sat shaking his head and the professor went on. "There are also now, generally, two safety valves. One controlled by the engineer and the other set by the company and covered by a locked box so as to be inaccessible to the engineer."

"And why is that, sir?"

"To make it such that he cannot override it. The safety valve is a kind of conical stopper with a metal rod upon which lead weights can be stacked. These determine the amount of pressure allowed to build in the boiler. This could be easily be tampered with by the engineer trying to make speed."

"What will you recommend, Mr. Goode?" Thomas asked.

"It's largely a matter of requiring mandatory maintenance of the engine and better training of the engineer, with licensing requirements and stiff penalties for noncompliance."

"Has there been any evidence that some of these blasts were the result of sabotage?"

Goode looked surprised. "Given the level of cutthroat competition between these boat lines I wouldn't discount it, Mr. Hamrick, but I have not seen any clear evidence of it." He waited for Thomas to respond and when he didn't, Goode changed the subject. "There is, however, another possibility, which I have been experimenting with. If enough static electricity, from the friction of the drive mechanisms, were to somehow flow into the boiler it would cause the creation, by electrolysis, of hydrogen gas. If enough of this gas were produced it could explode."

"Like a bomb," Thomas interjected.

"Yes, exactly, like a bomb."

"Could that happen, Mr. Goode?"

"Yes, I believe it could. Especially since sea water is commonly pumped into the boilers. The salt increases the conductivity of the water and renders it much more susceptible to electrolysis. I have proved as much in the laboratory. I am now hoping to conduct an experiment, while at Albany, on an actual steamboat engine."

THOMAS HAMRICK'S NOTEBOOK: THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1828.

As we begin to pass the Palisades to our west we reach Spuyten Duyvel Creek, which marks the northern boundary of Manhattan Island. The sheer cliffs along the New Jersey shore provide roofing slate and other stone for the endless building projects around us. Several busy quays can be seen where sloops, loading stone, line the river's edge and give testimony to the incredible pace of this ceaseless expansion.

The almost endless Palisades finally give way to sloping green hillsides and we find ourselves entering the broad Tappan-Zee where the river widens into an inland sea, or at least this seems to be the origin of its name. The village of Nyack nestles peacefully here, as do Yonkers and Tarrytown, surrounded by green grassy hillsides and peaceful glens. I can't help seeing in my own mind the vision of

America so strong in the dreams of our recently departed father, Thomas Jefferson.

The river noticeably narrows as we leave the Tappan-Zee and enter the highlands. Everywhere around us there are villages and towns separated by neatly cultivated fields and orchards. The river carries countless boats coasting here and there in the pursuit of trade and profits. Nowhere is this more evident than in the steady, almost endless, stream of canal boat tows, snaking their way slowly behind powerful steamboat tugs, bringing the vast inland produce of the west to the cities of the east.

Chapter Five

HIS EYES GLOWED IN THE LIGHT of the flicking lanterns that flanked the makeshift stage. The assembly was small, by the standards of the day, but seemed sincere and Olmstead knew how to dig his words down deeply into the core of the human innate urge for equality, knowing well that this was an entrenched, and highly emotional, economic and social issue, as much as it was a religious one.

"The Calvinists say that Christ died only for the souls of the elect…" he paused perfectly before adding pointedly, "the few… according to them… are already selected for salvation," and then, in a thunderous roar, bellowed, "while the double curse of predestination falls directly upon you, my friends, and condemns… you… to the fires of hell; for if some are predestined for salvation, others must be condemned to damnation!"

The calling power of his voice was stunning. "Christ died for all of us!"

"Yes, he did," came the first response.

Olmstead called again. "For all mankind he died, not just for the few, for the privileged, or for the special …but for you brother …and for you sister."

More voices added agreement. "Yes, that's right, he did. Yes he did…"

"Not for the powerful and the entitled elites alone… oh no…"

"No, no."

"It was for you… and for you," he called, turning this way and that, catching eyes and pointing with his finger, "for you, John and for you, Sarah."

"It was for us, for all of us…"

"But… that is how they would have it… oh yes, that is how they do have it, those who are favored, and those who think they are special."

"Yes …yes …that is what they say."

"They pervert the Holy Scripture with their lies!"

"They lie…"

"But they will not escape His wrath. Oh no. The Lord will have vengeance on the sinners. And why do they lie my friends?" he said, suddenly softening his voice, waiting briefly before he boomed again like the growl of thunder. "To protect their privilege… their boon, their birthright as they would have it." His words reverberated across the short space and through the crowd, frightening a few of the more timid. "Pay them no mind brothers and sisters, but listen well to Holy Scripture when Peter says that the Lord… does not wish for any to perish, but for all to come to repentance. You need only open your heart to Him… for we read in John that He has given the gift of faith to everyone. …Everyone!" he screamed. "John tells us this when he says of our Lord, He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

"He died for us. He died for all of us," the voices echoed from the darkness.

"And again in Timothy, and for this we labor and strive, that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe." Then pointing his finger at a man in the front row he almost conjured, "do you believe?"

"Yes."

"And you brother," he urged to another man behind the first, "…do you believe?"

"Yes, yes."

"And what of the children?" he asked softly, and with subtle emphasis. "The motherless waifs," he repeated to be sure the cue was

not missed, and then paused until the rhythmic chords from Samuel's concertina drifted over the murmuring congregation. "They are the lost souls that need Him most. Pray for the orphans… so they may find salvation in the Lord."

Hark, the herald angels sing, Glory to the new-born King….
Mild he lays his glory by, Born that man no more may die….

"Come Amanda," her mother nudged. "He doesn't need us and I'm tired."

"He's been this way for almost two years now, as though he were bewitched by that preacher in Utica. Sometimes I fear he is possessed."

"Now, Amanda, you know your father is very passionate and very devout. If this is to be his calling, we must support him."

"But he frightens me mother. I thought he was going to strike me the day he found me reading The Age of Reason. He screamed, ripped it from me, called it the atheist's bible, said that Thomas Paine was the anti-Christ and that I would burn in hell."

"You should think a bit more about your own salvation, Amanda."

"And he should worry more about his and less about everybody else's."

"Stop, Amanda… you're being impudent. It's not becoming."

"I want to live my life here and now, and I'm not going to do it his way or any other way but my own."

The two women walked back toward the boat without speaking. Halfway-basin was little more than a wide place in the canal at a point where a feeder channel brought water from a nearby stream. It was a popular rest spot for canalers and a gathering place for the locals who came there to access the outside world, to buy groceries and to gossip.

There were two other boats in the basin that night. One was a closed grain boat whose storage bins were covered with decking and upon which Olmstead stood to deliver his sermon. It placed him perfectly, a few feet above the small crowd that gathered on the berm along the canal bank opposite the towpath. The lanterns from his and the other boats created an eerie orange glow in the growing darkness that

gave an otherworldly aspect to his image, heightening the impact of his words on minds made more impressionable by the night.

There was also a hurry-up boat and its crew that had been dispatched to open the weir at halfway-basin and correct the low water problem that had been causing some havoc for several miles along the level. Canal operations required the vigilance and attention of thousands of workers. Eighty-three locks along its length had to be constantly manned and maintained. Way-stations and weighing machines had to be ready and functioning at every hour. Even the most earnest and well meaning efforts to suspend canal operations on the Sabbath were soundly rebuffed, being seen as counter productive, not only causing congestion on the water, but also in the barrooms and brothels that were springing up in every town. Even the most pious of religious critics saw nothing good coming from slowing the traffic down.

The house on the Olmstead boat was aft and consisted of a large space set on a platform built directly on the hull timbers, its roof rising about three feet above the deck, making it low enough for the helmsman to see over it from the small awning covered quarterdeck at the stern. Owing to the fact that the locks on the Erie Canal were all fifteen feet wide, the boats themselves were fourteen, leaving a usable interior space of about thirteen feet. The single room living area was twenty feet long, quite spacious actually. It included, at one end, a cast iron woodstove and a kitchen table and chairs. Over the stove, pots and pans hung from the rafters. There was a small piano along the wall, a couch and a rocking chair, holding Harriet's unfinished knitting, at the other. There was a vase of flowers on the table and window boxes where geraniums were beginning to bloom. Windows on both sides provided ample light and ventilation. It was remarkably bright and livable, attesting to Harriet Olmstead's homemaking skills.

This could not be said for the sleeping quarters, which were partitioned within the hold itself and completely below the main deck. Overhead hatches in the low ceilings let in air and some light. There were two separate spaces for sleeping. In the first, curtains that flanked a narrow passageway hid double bunks along each wall. Amanda occupied

one side and her brothers used the other, although in the summer Samuel usually slept on deck or in the mule house with his dog.

Amanda kept her things in a box, which she slid under the bottom bunk. The quarters were close, but she knew no other experience. Besides, she now had the whole upper bunk too, where Caleb's clothes were piled, although her mother hadn't yet found the will to take them away. Their parents had a proper bedroom. It was open and was comfortably furnished with a full-sized bed, an armoire and bureaus, no different from any ordinary land house.

"Would you like some tea, dear?" she asked hoping to restart the conversation on another, less intense, note. She loved tea and was very careful to keep her leaves in an airtight tin, knowing that the often dank and decayed smell of the canal could easily infuse into them, especially here along the level, where standing water could sometimes be seen stretching back for some distance. She slid the half-hot kettle to the center of the stove, positioning it directly over the still glowing coals, where it rolled quickly to a boil. "Light the lamp, Amanda. There's a nice breeze coming in."

Amanda slid a slender stick into the stove to catch a flame and began to light the wick on one of the Betty Lamps hanging over the table. For the most part they burned animal fat, which Harriet rendered herself. But in the winter this was too smoky, so once a year Karl traveled to Hudson to buy whale oil, even though a gallon was worth a week's pay. "No, Mandy, light the whale oil one; it's so much brighter and nicer."

This was all Harriet Olmstead seemed to need from life. She loved her kitchen and its cozy feel and with her family around her she was content. It was not enough for her restless daughter and her mother could see it in her face. "I don't understand you, Amanda. What do you want that you don't have, or can't have?" She paused out of frustration and then added, "…I do wish you had a sister."

"And why is that mother, so she could braid my hair and I could do her's and we could prattle on about how pretty we are and what this boy said and how tall he is and handsome and how cute his curls are and the way he walks?"

Mrs. Olmstead had heard this kind of tirade from Amanda before and had always attributed it to adolescent yearnings, but this time it seemed different, almost as though it were a prelude to something, something momentous. She worried that her daughter would leave home, alone and unmarried. That, she believed, would be a recipe for disaster. Finally she said, "we have our mission, we women, to serve God, and …"

Amanda interrupted in an irritated tone, "truly we work for the freedom of our Black brothers and sisters who suffer in slavery, yet in many ways we are no better off, mother. Don't be fooled by the fact that our slavery is soft and polite. I cannot continue to accept it mother. I will not be put on a pedestal and told to be quiet and look pretty."

"You need to marry, Amanda, and start a family of your own," Harriet responded with as much assertiveness as she could muster. "Then you will see your true calling."

But, her daughter wasn't listening and drove on, "and no where is this more evident than in marriage, where women are deprived of every vestige of equality. The law dissolves the woman's identity, her entire being, into that of her husband and she disappears as a free person."

"Indeed, Amanda, it is wonderful that you have a lofty view of life, and will not waste it on vanity and idle gossip as so many young girls do. But, in the end, where will it lead if you have no husband and family to fall back on?"

"You and father have worked side by side to make a life, build a business that has afforded us a home and some modest measure of property. If you should die, none of this would change for him. He would go on with no interruption. Yet, should he die, you will be given a small, and probably pitiable, settlement, while the boat and all of the property will go to Samuel. You can only hope that he will… keep you… as the saying goes…"

Harriet had no idea how to respond to her daughter's onslaught and retreated into a more familiar sphere. "Let me show you what I've been knitting," she said, reaching for the unfinished work on her rocker. "They're Marigolds, aren't they beautiful. I love knitted flowers. They're getting to be very popular you know. It takes eight petals to

make each flower, then they're edged with wire. Look at all the colored wools your father bought me; isn't this orange striking?"

"Mother," Amanda interrupted forcefully. "You know I want to go to school… in Troy. Did you speak to him?"

Mrs. Olmstead knew this moment would inevitably come and dreaded the crisis it could create. She slowly turned to face her daughter and said, "yes… and he's not pleased."

"But why, what possible objection could he have to a fine education for his only daughter?" She reacted instinctively sensing from the start that her dream had little chance of coming true.

"He says that an education should prepare you for the life you will… actually lead." Her mother waited to judge her daughter's reaction then added, "you know that you are likely to lead a humble life."

"As a milkmaid, maybe?"

"Amanda… please… your father loves you and only wants what's best. Think of the temptations and dangers of living alone away from home."

"He loves me like he loves his mules, like something he owns. I don't know what he wants from me mother… or even what you want from me."

"I want you to be happy dear, to make a good match… and be happy."

Amanda saw the hopelessness of her quest, but was not prepared to surrender, not yet. There was something in her spirit that would not be denied. "What else did he say?"

Her mother hesitated to fashion the right words. "You know how pious he is. He even scares me sometimes. He hollered at me when I told him. He said that these women, like that Willard woman, had to be evil, somehow trying to pervert God's plan. It would be an atheist education you would get there he said and he would not allow it. It would lead you to the everlasting fires of hell, he said."

"Why does he get this way? I don't understand him any…" Amanda responded with obvious frustration, but before she could finish her mother interrupted with a whisper.

"Shhh, he's back. He's on the quarterdeck with someone. Let's take our tea down below."

The two women quietly lifted the lamp from its hook and disappeared into the big bedroom, where they sat on the bed, sipped their tea, and listened to the words wafting in through the open hatch above.

"It's time to lay the Federalist aristocratic cabal to rest. End the corruption and patronage."

"I think that's Casper Conine," Harriet whispered. "He was at the sermon. I saw his boat there. He and your father are always arguing about politics."

"The corruption is right here in Albany where that infernal regency controls everything, the banks, the canal. Jackson is a snake in the grass. He's a mason just like the others, all those Bucktail bastards. They're all masons and they won't hornswoggle me."

"Damn it Karl, Jackson's a man of the people. You don't make any sense. Adams! …wake up …the man's a monarchist. His wife's English ain't she. He ain't even married to a proper American woman."

"The masons have been running things too long, that's all I can say. They're subverting this country and Jackson's right in with them. You watch which way Van Buren goes. You don't think he does anything by accident do you?"

"The *Albany Argus* is coming out for Jackson you know."

"Damn right they are. That's just what I said."

"It's the Federalists like Adams that have been at the public trough too long. He's rich and then defaults on his debts. Everybody knows how he wiggled out of paying his turnpike stock subscription when it began to look bad. He's no gentleman I'll tell you. He has no honor, not like Andy Jackson. Why if Old Hickory got a hold of that wimp he'd thrash his aristocratic ass."

"The freemasons are stealing this country right out from under you, Casper, and you can't see it. John Quincy Adams knows what the masons really are. I heard him speak on it. He'll put an end to their shecoonery."

"Well if its patronage and sweetheart deals you want to talk about, what about the corrupt bargain with Clay in '24? That was your man Adams wasn't it? And that was just the start of it. He's using his power and patronage right now to try to buy this election and that's subversive; I say treason even. The man ought to be hanged and Jackson is just the one to do it too." Olmstead didn't answer and after a short pause Casper Conine continued to offer his reasons. "You know how tight the credit is out here, Karl. It's that infernal bank and the big city boys. That's why I'm for Jackson. He's a man of the west. He understands us and our needs. He'll smash that bank and loosen the credit."

"And you'll get another bank just like it, only in Albany where the regency can suck in the profit. This isn't a democracy with equality for all. It's a plutocracy, where the rich rule and get everything and they do it through secret scheming in the Masonic lodge."

"Well, what about Clay?"

"He's no better. He's a mason too and what's worse he's a slave owner. They're all the same."

"I don't understand how you can not be for Jackson. I know you've got debt like we all do, and the debtor's prison hanging over you too. These son-of-a-bitch banks are squeezing people like you and me. I don't have to tell you that, Karl. Jackson will fix it and them with it."

"It's more than about money," Olmstead responded. "It's about what's right. It's about oppression and the poison of slavery and what it's doing to this country. It threatens our very salvation…"

And so it went until long after Harriet was asleep. Amanda, however, sat up and listened to it all.

Chapter Six

THOMAS HAMRICK'S NOTEBOOK: THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1828.

The site of the new state penal institution presently being built at Sing-sing is clearly visible above me. I am told it is to be a model prison, designed by a man named Lynds, in which a honeycomb of three by seven foot cells will be stacked into four tiers, with two-hundred cells in each, so as to accommodate eight-hundred prisoners. Everything is being done by convicts brought from the city prison or from Auburn. The objective is to prevent fraternization among the convicts who, in this place, will almost never be able to communicate with each other.

Today I learned from a former slaver holder, a man named Jan Vroman, that slavery was fully abolished in New York only last year. I am surprised by the strong proslavery sentiment I am encountering among the passengers. Interestingly, there are also several South Carolina planters on board, traveling with their families to Saratoga Springs for the summer and I have found the conversation very enlightening.

The ruins of old Fort Putnam, which is high above the valley and once commanded the Hudson, is now coming

into view. West Point forms a promontory below it, where the river curves west and where, since 1802, the nation's military academy has been located. The enrollment is limited to some two-hundred and fifty carefully chosen cadets and I am told that they give preference to the sons of officers who fought in the War for Independence and the sons of officers who died in the recent war with Britain, as seems fitting.

The crowded forward deck had thrust the passengers into such close proximity that spontaneous conversations were erupting everywhere. "I was not aware of that, Mr. Vroman," Thomas remarked. There was something about the man that Thomas liked. He wore leather knee breeches, which seemed a bit out of fashion for day wear, but his stand collar shirt and waistcoat were impeccably tailored and this made him seem the perfect image of a rural gentleman.

"New York was always the stronghold of slavery in the north, Mr. Hamrick. You know the state resisted longest the emancipation of its slaves."

"And now that they are free, Mr. Vroman, have you experienced any problems as a result?"

"Unfortunately… it's just invited more and more runaways from the south. This valley has always been their chief escape route. They collect in the city, which has a big free Black population, and then they sneak up the valley, from safe-house to safe-house, largely orchestrated by the Quakers I might add, who are very numerous in these parts, particularly in Poughkeepsie and Hudson. But, lately we have come to believe that they increasingly rely on the river to reach Albany and Troy. From there they scatter into Vermont and through to Canada or via the Erie Canal and Buffalo and to Canada that way."

Vroman's attitude was somewhat unexpected and Thomas remarked, "it sounds as though you are annoyed by the idea of runaway slaves passing through the state?"

"These fugitives are dangerous delinquents, they are criminals, Hamrick. We lost considerable property in the emancipation here in New York and most respectable people fully understand the problem

facing the slave owners in our southern states." Vroman was not angry, but unremitting in his gentle assault on his new acquaintance. "Come, Mr. Hamrick. Let me introduce you to some friends, perhaps it will broaden your perspective."

The two men walked a few steps to a table where some people were seated, sipping something from tall glasses and gazing in a half-stupor at the shore, sweeping past them. "Philip… Caroline, there's someone I'd like you to meet… This is Thomas Hamrick. He is from Boston. He is a Yankee who has no use for slavery." Vroman said it with a smile and Thomas took no offense.

"How do you do, Mr. Hamrick," the man responded standing and offering his hand. "My name is Philip Forest. This is my wife, Caroline. We are up from Charleston, with the children, for the summer, to Saratoga, taking the waters as they say. We try to come every year."

Thomas shook the man's hand firmly and bowed to the lady who nodded and smiled. "Can we offer you some refreshment, Mr. Hamrick?" the woman asked, but he politely declined.

"Do you enjoy your summers in New York?" Hamrick asked her, searching for a way to move forward and hopefully side-track Vroman's challenge.

"Indeed we do, Mr. Hamrick."

"And what is it, might I ask, that appeals to you most?"

"Why the medicinal waters of course and those of Saratoga are said to be unequalled anywhere in the world. Have you been there? …Oh, my…They constantly bubble with the escape of some sort of gas, carbonic acid I was once told, but that's all beyond me. I do know that it is a marvelous palliative for dyspepsia, perhaps because it carries carbonates of soda. And the cooling breezes along the shores of the lake make the summer wonderfully pleasant when it would be almost unbearable at home."

"And where will you stay?" he asked, finding himself inadvertently trapped in his own ruse by a woman craving contact beyond her small family circle.

"Gracious, Mr. Hamrick, the big houses, like the United States Hotel or the Congress Hall are most alive with balls and cotillions

nightly. But I prefer a bit of quiet and favor the Union Hall. It's smaller and more comfortable as well as being closer to the waters. It's right next to the springs you know…"

Hamrick smiled and nodded his attention with an occasional, "really" or "you don't say," but began listening more intently to the conversation behind him between Vroman and Philip Forest, his attention buffeting back and forth.

"We've studied this travel pattern, but haven't solved it entirely. We know they first collect in Philadelphia, with the help of the Quakers there, and are then passed along to New York City, where people hide them and pass them back to the Quakers for the trip up the valley."

"…I understand they recently bored a new one nearby, called Washington Spring. It's some two or so…"

"There are at this point more than a dozen regularly scheduled steamboats going from Manhattan to Albany, not to mention hundreds of barges and steam tows. A lot of free Blacks work in this trade and the difficulty of …"

"…hundred feet deep and was fitted with an iron pipe so as to concentrate the pressure…

"They travel pretty much in the open and mock us, I swear, particularly when the local authorities are less than helpful."

"…causing a jet spray of fifteen or twenty feet. This spring produces the finest chalybeate water anywhere…"

"They use the river because it's faster. I have no doubt that they will soon be using the railroads as well. But, it's not safer for them since we can travel on it too and they're trapped, so to speak, on the boats. We mean to get the ring leaders and the boatmen who assist them."

"Mr. Hamrick, I do believe I am boring you with my prattle," Mrs. Forest remarked noticing his inattention.

"No, not at all," he responded, quickly fashioning a relevant question to prove it. "May I ask what route you take to reach these marvelous waters, as your description has tempted me?"

"We will travel by regular coach from Troy north to the springs."

"And you prefer it to the coast, Newport or Cape Cod perhaps?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Hamrick, these people understand us better than most in the north," she answered, somewhat absently and, looking beyond him called, "oh, doctor. …Doctor Van Ness. Please join us."

Thomas turned and smiled as the obligatory introductions and harmless hellos were made. Mrs. Forest then said, "I've been dying to ask you doctor: what has been the impact of these inoculations, which are becoming the rage in Europe? Are they effective, doctor?"

"It is difficult to attribute the decline in the disease to this practice since only a very small percentage of people get them. No, the scourge is on a natural decline. Smallpox is caused by the growth of tiny organisms in the blood. These organisms are very much like plants, which have good and bad fruiting years. In other words it can be expected that it will rise and fall naturally in its incidence and virulence. The best scientific opinion, madam, is that these cycles occur about every five years."

Caroline Forest turned to Thomas and said, "we are very concerned about the pock, Mr. Hamrick. It is the primary reason we come north in the pest season. Many diseases, especially the putrid fevers and dysentery, are the result of poverty and filth you know. And, it is seriously suspected that those hot and sweltering summers bring on the pest. …Isn't that right doctor?"

"Yes, while there is a contagion, there must also be present a certain condition of the air, an epidemic constitution of the atmosphere so to speak, for it to spread."

"It is also known to spread in more populous areas and hence urges one to avoid crowds, and especially of the… lower sorts. …Isn't that right doctor?"

"Yes, madam."

"Why one in six afflicted will die. This is a frightfully high number don't you agree?"

"The inoculation is said to have remarkable effects."

"Is it not possible to die from the injection?" Thomas asked.

"Indeed, yes, but the statistic is only one in six-hundred," the doctor responded with a smile.

"The further you get from large towns, the safer you will be from the putrid smallpox," Caroline Forest added and then asked, "has your family been touched by it, Mr. Hamrick?" She waited, but he didn't respond.

THOMAS HAMRICK'S NOTEBOOK: THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1828.

It is afternoon and we have docked at the steamboat landing in Poughkeepsie, the mid-point of our journey. There is very little of note here, as the town itself is some distance away. Some sloops are loading Barnegat lime, which is made here in great quantities I am informed.

A man came aboard today named Nicos Bleeker, a bounty hunter commissioned by southern planters to catch runaway slaves. Bleeker is a strange, mysterious man with an accent that oddly doesn't seem Dutch or German. He has terrible burn scars on his face, rumored to have been caused by an explosion, which apparently occurred in his youth. He carries a black bag, which, I am told, he never lets out of his sight.

He is holding four former slaves in shackles, a man and his wife and two babies, and is taking them to Albany to be certified as fugitives. He leaves his captives here and there in the local jails until he finishes his sweep up the Hudson. Later he will collect them all and return them, via ship, to Charleston where their owners will come to claim them.

Supper was served promptly at seven and, as promised, Thomas was invited to the captain's table. The steamboat lines competed furiously, not only in the speed of their vessels, but also in the comfort of their accommodations and the sumptuousness of their cuisine. The *Mary Malone* had only been in service for a few weeks and already her supper table had become the talk of the town. But, in this hotly contested election year of 1828, even the most delicious soups and

succulent roasts were no match for the clash of interests and opinions that was about to occur.

"Mr. Hamrick, sir, you are from Boston, are you not, sir?"

"Yes sir, I am."

"And I am told you are a merchant and a businessman?"

"That is correct, sir."

"Then I take it you support the protective tariff?"

"Yes sir, I do."

"I am a cotton planter, Mr. Hamrick and my plantation is becoming increasingly less profitable. I say that this is directly the result of the infernal tariff of which you are so fond, sir. The tonnage diminishes yearly at Charleston and while I have heard it said that this is only because more enterprising Yankee merchants, such as you, have lured it away, I don't believe it."

"Look then at the total of trade tonnage," Thomas responded, feeling comfortable in this debate of economic issues, "and you will see a steady increase. Charleston may be losing its duel with the north, but the total trade is up."

"This favoritism shown to manufacturing promotes a concentration of wealth and tends toward aristocracy, wouldn't you agree?" the man responded, turning for support to his friends who nodded and murmured assent.

A strange, and more strident, voice interrupted. "It seems odd to hear that charge from the defenders of slavery, where a scant few own it all and lord it over the rest."

Thomas quickly spoke again, trying to blunt the rising confrontation. "The manufacturing corporation is a joint stock venture with hundreds or even thousands of shareholders. Nothing could be more democratic," he offered.

The other man interrupted again, directing his remarks directly to the southern planter. "If you think manufacturing is so advantaged, why don't you do it as well? The south seems well suited to it with so much surplus slave labor."

"The gentleman assumes that slavery is cheap, when in fact it is not. If we were to embark on the manufacture of cotton fabrics, as you

suggest, and thrust ourselves into direct competition with the north, we would be at a distinct disadvantage, since it is cheap, female, labor that fuels the Yankee textile mills and that is your real critical advantage. Why you hear complaints of it even in England where men still spin and weave."

"Everything is stacked against us," another southern gentleman went on with a bit of evident anger. "The tariff raises the price of everything we buy while reducing the capacity of our foreign customers to buy our products in return, thereby driving us slowly to ruin."

Thomas responded. "It is true that the price of cotton has dropped in recent years, but that did not result from the tariff. It resulted from a vast increase in cotton production. And, I might add, that increase was caused by the growth of home demand, as our factories in the north expanded and multiplied under tariff protection." Then he dropped the bombshell. "Tariffs, in fact, generally lower prices."

"What! Are you trying to tell me that adding forty or fifty percent to the cost of something will lower its price? Be serious man; we're not fools here."

"Indeed, sir, I am serious and let me explain why. Protective tariffs stimulate home production, as was evident in the manufacture of textiles. This increased production increases supply in the home market and as supply goes up, prices go down. The more effective the tariff is, the more it will actually reduce prices."

"Well, if that don't beat the devil, do you hear this? He does take us for fools," the man reacted shaking his head, but, before he could continue Thomas went on.

"The effect on all agricultural products is very much the same. As the home market is stimulated so is the demand for food stuffs and all other produce of the land, which will automatically command higher prices. You can see it all around you in this very valley and along the canal corridor all the way to Canada. But you, sir, are interested only in cotton. Am I not correct?"

"And is that a crime, Mr. Hamrick? It is the backbone of the southern economy and it is on the verge of collapse as prices plummet?"

"Let's look then specifically at cotton."

"Yes, by all means, let's look at it. Cotton sold only a decade ago for twenty cents a pound and today it brings only ten. How do you explain that, my friend?"

This was Thomas Hamrick's domain and he knew it. "The first remarkable thing to note is how rapidly the production has increased since the start of the light tariff in 1816. The total cotton production of this country was eighty-one million pounds, and then in only ten years it increased to two-hundred sixteen million pounds. The drop in price was occasioned by too much cotton flooding the market, not by the tariff. In fact, the tariff boosted demand in those years and encouraged greater investment in textile production. You simply overproduced, that's all. The price of cotton is not determined by the American market alone, but by the world market. When the huge demand for cotton after the wars died down, production was too high to be sustained. That's all there was to it." The man was momentarily stymied and Thomas, who was beginning to command considerable attention from others around them added, "investment capital has continued to flow into cotton because it is still profitable. There is no better agricultural investment, even now, than cotton… unless it's sugar."

"Of course it's sugar," the man rejoined the fray, "as sugar is protected by the tariff and thereby competes unfairly with cotton for investment capital."

"And you would have us eliminate the tariff protection for sugar?"

"I am for free trade, sir and have no use for the abominable Yankee tariff in any shape or form."

"If the protection for sugar were eliminated, our Louisiana planters would not compete well against the West Indian plantations and would be forced out of business. They would then likely convert their land to cotton production and further stuff your already glutted market, thereby adding immeasurably to your perceived misery. All prices are determined by supply and demand. The demon north does nothing to increase cotton supply. You do that quite handily yourselves. We, in fact, buy your cotton, reduce the supply through our consumption and thereby act to raise your prices."

Several guests at the captain's table sprang into spontaneous applause and Hamrick made a gracious retreat. "Forgive me. I did not mean to be presumptuous. I fear we've been too serious for the supper table."

"No, not at all, Mr. Hamrick," a southern lady opposite responded. I find your perspective most intriguing. Perhaps you can enlighten us further."

Thomas was uncomfortable, but undaunted, and the woman continued. "The slave states comprise over half of the territory of this republic and have every manner of natural geographic advantage over the present free states. Why then, if it's not the tariff, should we be falling so rapidly behind in economic development and population growth?"

"The problem is slavery, madam, which degrades the value of free labor and discourages immigration, which is the engine of economic expansion."

"How can a system which need pay no wages to its workers be defeated by one that must?" the woman challenged.

"Any economist worth his salt will tell you that a slave economy is weighed down by excess capital investment, which, by the way, accounts for the fact that slave labor has never been successfully employed in any form of manufacture."

"Even in agriculture, here in New York, it steadily declined in profitability," Vroman added.

"Yes, of course it has and for the same reasons."

"Explain yourself, sir."

"Let's say a farmer who had enough land wants to plant an additional number of acres. If he employs free labor, he need only be prepared to pay a year's wages. But if he chose to use slave labor, he would need first to buy the slaves, which would require a capital outlay far beyond the cost of wages alone. Now add to this the cost of housing, clothing and feeding these slaves and you can easily see that the burden in capital investment discourages growth and makes slave labor uncompetitive with free labor."

"But the slave economy is expanding is it not, and rapidly, into the southwest, especially into Texas?" a man remarked and then asked, "how do you explain that?"

"It expands to absorb unproductive surplus slaves in the east and exploits fertile virgin land until that land is exhausted, flourishing for the time of easy picking and then falling inevitably into decline. Like a drunken man, slavery will continue to stagger westward until it reaches the great continental deserts, where it will finally fall down and die."

"You paint a bleak picture for the future of our way of life… our culture, sir."

"Yes, I suppose I do. Even with almost monopoly markets for its tobacco and cotton, the slave labor enterprises of this nation are most certainly doomed."

"Not without a fight, sir: I can assure you of that," Forest responded defiantly.

Chapter Seven

THOMAS HAMRICK'S NOTEBOOK: THURSDAY, JUNE 12, 1828.

It is nearly eleven on a clear moonlit night as we approach the steamboat landing at Albany. I can see the lights in the basin stretching out before me and what look to be hundreds of glowing canal boat headlamps, called nighthawkers, strung out in a line, three abreast. Lashed together into a kind of floating train, these boats will be towed in tandem, by steam tugs, down the river to New York. I am told that the work must go on ceaselessly night and day or the traffic would quickly back up on the canal and become unmanageable. The basin is very crowded and I can just make out another side-wheeler, steaming away from us and up the river toward Troy.

The slave hunter, Nicos Bleeker, is bringing his unfortunate captives ashore. The man is shackled and his wife is carrying a baby, not yet walking, while a toddler, a girl I think, is holding on to her apron and being pulled along as she tries to keep up. I was told that after the sale of their master's plantation, they feared being separated at the slave auction in Charleston and this caused them to make a

desperate run for freedom. These ill planned attempts often end quickly in capture. Barefooted and dressed in what are hardly more than tattered rags, they stand out sorely. There are many free Blacks living and working all along the escape routes and the most basic need for the fugitive is to find a way to blend in. It is my understanding that a growing network of abolitionist reformers routinely helps these runaways with adequate clothes and some money, while moving them from house to house. This poor family apparently had little help and was easy prey for the slave catcher.

I can't avoid the depressing thought that the races will never live together in peace and harmony. Slavery is wrong, without question, and must end in time. But, what happens then? Even in the north where the slaves have been liberated it was always seen as a constitutional question and never one of human dignity. There is no belief in racial equality and I swear it is worse in the so-called free-states; as soon as they are free, in every instance, a bevy of restrictions on that freedom has quickly followed. Free Blacks have no political rights, can't own guns or serve on juries. What a cruel irony it is that racial prejudice deepens with freedom. It's a fear I think, a fear of equality.

Bleeker swept the river once a week and landed at Albany, routinely, on Thursday nights. Cornelius Pootman was the sheriff of Albany County and it was his practice to meet Bleeker right at the dock and take custody of his prisoners, a service for which he expected a substantial remuneration.

"I see you've got four more, Nicos," Pootman said smiling.

Under New York law these detainees had to be brought immediately before a magistrate, to be certified as fugitives, before Bleeker could transport them out of the state. This credential was sometimes difficult to obtain, without clear proof of the alleged slave's identity. Often unsympathetic judges, particularly in the Quaker strongholds down river, would require the plantation owner himself to

appear and swear to the identity of his property. This was a most serious and costly detriment to the recovery of runaways and Bleeker often took the extra time to make the trip up to Albany, where he knew that he could count on Judge Peter Van Brughe to legalize his kidnappings.

"Any sign of trouble?" Bleeker grunted handing the leash to one of Pootman's deputies. "There's so damn many Blacks on this river now, and with them getting so uppity lately, I'm worried that sooner or later they're going to try to bust my prisoner's loose, and probably try to cut my throat to boot."

"Relax, it ain't happened yet, has it?"

"No, but it will. Just give it time, the way things are building in the city. They're talking more and more about their right to self defense; it could get out of hand. They're starting to sound like Patrick Henry, if you can believe that, making speeches about liberty or death."

"Good… dead is where they'll end up if they try any of that shit around here," the deputy interrupted, with a bit too much bravado, and then added a half-hearted banality. "They should send them all back where they came from."

"They ain't goin' back to Africa, if that's what you mean. No way. They won't go. They want freedom and equality right here. Now don't that beat all?" Bleeker responded.

"Now, you see, that's where they go wrong," Pootman said. "There is no way in hell they're going to get that. The White people here won't stand for it. That's why every yeoman farmer and working man in this state will vote for Andy Jackson. He knows how to keep the Africans in their place, and the Indians too for that matter. How in hell can any free man, who works for wages, compete with slavery? If it ever ends in the south, an honest man won't be able to earn a living wage. That's why I say vote Jackson!"

Thomas was surprised to hear Pootman's name and was eager to introduce himself to the sheriff. He waited quietly while the three men finished their business and then he stepped forward.

"Sheriff Pootman, may I have a word with you, sir?"

"How can I help you, mister…?"

"Hamrick, Thomas Hamrick. You wrote me in regard to my father's death in the recent explosion on the *Aurora*."

Pootman didn't answer and Thomas waited a few seconds before continuing. "I've come to bring my father's body home to Massachusetts."

"You can't exhume a body, Mr. Hamrick, without the permission of the Sanitation Committee."

"Where is my father's body?"

"I believe he is buried in the strangers section of the State Street Cemetery. But, as I said, you cannot disturb the grave. I'd suggest that you talk to the coroner. He can tell you much more than I can about that."

Again Pootman fell silent, deliberately showing a sense of impatience with Hamrick's inquiry, but Thomas was undaunted and persisted. "Sheriff Pootman, I would appreciate the answers to a few questions concerning the circumstances of my father's death."

"Again, Mr. Hamrick, coroner Ryckman is more qualified to help you than I. Now if you'll…"

Thomas pressed on firmly. "Sheriff… a few minutes of your time… please."

Pootman made no effort to conceal his annoyance and answered curtly, "very well."

"Did you investigate the scene of the accident?"

Once again Pootman shifted the responsibility to the coroner, Tobias Ryckman. "The coroner was in charge of the scene and he determined it to be an accident, so there was no criminal investigation."

"You sound as though you question that finding, sheriff. Do you believe it was an accident?"

"Of course! What else would it be?"

"Sabotage perhaps. The competition between these steamboat lines is fierce is it not?"

"What are you getting at, Mr. Hamrick?"

Thomas didn't really know, but there was still a lingering feeling that there was something to the cryptic note and the dark reference to

the masons. "Did you see my father's body? Was he examined to determine the cause of death?"

"Why don't you talk to the coroner, Mr. Hamrick?"

Thomas spent the night at the Eagle Tavern, about one-half mile from the steamboat landing and near to the Public Square and City Hall, where he expected to find the county coroner. Although Ryckman was a medical doctor, this was not necessary for a coroner, who was primarily an officer of the court, charged to determine if a death were the result of a crime. He had the power of subpoena and could hold an inquest, where witnesses could be compelled to testify under oath. Thomas knew that the law, at least in Massachusetts, required a coroner to keep detailed notes of his investigation and to make a sworn statement of his findings. His first stop was at the county records office to see this document for himself.

He read quickly through the coroner's reports for the current year, not only to find his father's, but also to get a gauge on the man who wrote them. They were surprisingly sketchy and contained nothing not also on the death certificate.

> *FLEMING, Margaret - Clothes catching on fire when she was putting coal in a stove, b. NYC age 10 yrs (1 May 1828).*
> *FOLEY, Dennis - congestion of lungs and brain from drinking too much cold water when he was carrying mortar to a roof, b. Ireland, age 36 (8 March 1828).*
> *GAHAGEN, Ann - suicide by arsenic, b. Ireland age 29 yrs. and 8 mos., (17 March 1828).*
> *GALLAGHER, Sarah J. - whooping cough, b. NYC age 1 yr. and 6 mos,. daughter of Patrick and Mary Gallagher (23 Jan 1828).*
> *GALLAGHER, William - struck in the leg by a piece of rock from a blast, b. Ireland, age 20, a laborer working on the Erie Canal (1 May 1828).*

GANNON, John - accidentally struck across chest by a plank, b. NYC, age 11 yrs and 6 mos., son of Thomas Gannon (26 April 1828).
HAMRICK, Josiah – in the explosion of the steamboat Aurora, b. Boston, age 58 (11 May 1828).

"Mr. Hamrick," the voice behind him broke his concentration and he turned to face a balding man, short and in his sixties. "I understand you wish to see me. My name is Tobias Ryckman. I am the coroner here in Albany County."

The two men shook hands and Ryckman ushered Thomas into his office, a small cluttered space, which somehow seemed to fit Hamrick's initial impression of the man. "Thank you, Doctor Ryckman. My father was killed last month in the explosion of the *Aurora*. I am most interested in getting more details about his death and in arranging to move his remains back home to Boston."

"Yes, I understand, Mr. Hamrick, and may I extend my personal condolences to you and the other members of Mr. Hamrick's family. It was a most tragic and untimely death." Thomas nodded to acknowledge his appreciation for the gesture, but before he could speak, Ryckman resumed. "However, I don't believe we can allow you to exhume the body, at least not right now."

Thomas was bothered by this, but decided not to press that issue immediately and changed tack. "Could you give me more details about his death, doctor? The report I read was rather brief." While Ryckman fumbled through his files, Thomas went on, "did you examine the body yourself?"

"Yes."

"Did you do a post-mortem or hold an inquest?"

"No, there was no need. I was satisfied of the cause of death from my observations at the scene."

"Was there a clerk present to record your findings?"

"Look, Mr. Hamrick. I understand your need to know more, but there was no need for me to go further. It was obvious that your father died from wounds inflicted by the explosion of the steam boiler."

"Are you certain that there was no foul play, doctor?"

"Are you suggesting that your father may have been murdered, Mr. Hamrick?"

"Yes, I suppose I am."

"Ordinarily, when there is a violent death, we endeavor to ascertain if there was in fact a murder by carefully examining the wounds. In this case it was not necessary… Ah, here it is… He had massive head trauma, including the rupture of major arteries. He was eviscerated abdominally and his small intestine was completely severed. Additionally, he suffered severe burns from scalding water and steam." Ryckman saw the pained look on Thomas's face as, emotionally, he felt the impact of the explosion that had killed and maimed his father and added tersely, "are you satisfied, sir?"

"Why can't I take my father home?"

"The bodies from that explosion were very badly mangled, including your father's. They were buried immediately because of putrefaction. Those graves cannot be opened for at least six months to allow for complete dissipation of the putrid gasses that emanate from decaying cadavers."

"Where is he buried?"

"He is at the cemetery on State Street, which is well over on the northwest side of the town so as to be away from the river and most of the houses. I suggest that you use caution Mr. Hamrick."

"And why is that, sir?"

"The fumes that rise from a graveyard on damp nights have been known to kill. This occurs because the water vapors in the air hold the putrid gasses in solution, then deposit them on solid surfaces, such as the roofs of houses. This cemetery is particularly damp and subject to occasional flooding. It is not a safe place, Mr. Hamrick."

"I am allowed to visit my father's grave?" Thomas asked in a rising, coldly sarcastic tone.

"Of course, Mr. Hamrick," Ryckman responded wryly, "but I wouldn't linger too long or breathe too deeply. There are many examples of gravediggers dropping dead from the effects of the miasma

escaping from fresh graves and penetrating directly into the body through the lungs."

The state street cemetery had been opened some years earlier to replace the many church and private burial grounds that were spread all over the city. There was a very real fear of the noxious effects of decaying dead bodies and it was thought wise to concentrate this threat in one outlying location. People believed that this contamination could easily pass through the soil and penetrate the walls of cellars in nearby houses causing severe illness and even death. It could also find its way into the water table and poison the wells.

The cemetery was divided into sections, set aside for the various religious denominations and there were also large reserved plots for the many prominent families of Albany. Thomas was looking for the area intended for "Negroes, indigents, strangers and unknowns." As he passed the gate he noticed a young woman kneeling at the site of a fresh grave and he approached to ask for some direction. In deference to her sorrow, he stood silently behind her for a few seconds. His eyes swept across the expansive graveyard and returned to rest on the newly set headstone before her. Over the leaves and blossoms of two freshly placed pots of geraniums, he read the inscription.

In Memory of Caleb,
Son of Karl and Harriet Olmstead
May 11, 1828
Aged 21 Years
Torn from us in the prime of his life
Now safe in the arms of Jesus

His consciousness was suddenly shattered when she removed her bonnet sending her long auburn-red hair cascading in undulating curves across her shoulders and back. What extraordinary hair, he thought. She stood slowly and so as not to frighten her he spoke softly before she saw him. "Miss, please excuse me, I don't mean to…"

She turned toward him, her face only inches away and her green eyes glistening through the tears. She was breathtakingly beautiful and for more than a few seconds he couldn't speak. "…please excuse me," he began again… and then again, "I'm sorry… perhaps… I should introduce myself. My name is Thomas Hamrick."

She smiled and shook his hand, sending a chill thorough his body that once again destroyed his concentration. "Please excuse me," he repeated, only now beginning to sense how silly he was beginning to appear. But, to her it was an entirely different impression. He was a handsome gentleman, polite and proper. "I'm looking for my father's grave and I'm afraid I've become a bit disoriented."

"Yes, it would appear so… Mr. Hamrick," she responded playfully and with a knowing smile. But, he didn't notice. "My name is Amanda Olmstead. How can I help you?"

"I couldn't help noticing the date on the grave you are visiting. It's the same day as the death of my father. He was killed in the steamboat explosion."

"Caleb was my brother, Mr. Hamrick. He died in that same explosion. What an awful coincidence."

Thrust together as they were by the terrible tragedy, they each felt a kind of kinship that allowed more than an ordinary intimacy to two otherwise strangers. "Please call me Thomas," he said. "How did it happen? Do you know any details, Miss…? May I call you Amanda?"

"Yes, of course, Thomas… Mandy, if you like."

"Well… then… it's Tom, then," he said with a broad smile and for a few seconds the sadness of the circumstance was completely forgotten and he was floating.

"Not really," she answered breaking his enchantment. "My father sold cordwood to the steamboat. Caleb unloaded it and stayed on board to hitch a ride to Troy when the boiler exploded, only a short way from the dock. He went to Troy whenever he could. His fiancé lived there."

"I'm so sorry, Mandy."

His reply was earnest and heartfelt and he seemed so forthright and genuine to her, so uncontrived and innocent, that she trusted him

immediately. This was not normal and it frightened her a little. "And your father, Tom, tell me about him."

"I have no idea why he was on the *Aurora*. He was here in Albany to research some investment opportunities. That's about all I know and I wouldn't be so concerned if I hadn't found a note among his things that seemed to suggest that there was foul play involved, that the boat may have been deliberately sabotaged and that he may have been murdered." As they walked through the cemetery to the site of Josiah Hamrick's resting place he showed her the note with its reference to the masons.

It was a simple grave, hardly more than a slight elevation of the earth beneath a small wooden cross with his father's name. "It seems so barren and sad here," she said, quietly folding and putting the small piece of paper back into his hand. While he kneeled and prayed, she ran back for one of the pots of flowers.

"Thank you," he said. "That was very kind." Then he asked, "do you have any idea what it might mean?"

"The masons here in Albany are dangerous men, Tom. It would be best if you didn't pursue this."

"Why? What do you mean, Mandy?"

"I really must return now, Tom. My father is waiting."

"Please, Mandy. What do you know about the masons?"

"Speak to the editor of the *Albany Chronicle*," she told him as she turned to go. "His name is Adrian Quacumbus. He will help you."

The mix of emotions was dizzying as he saw his time with her rapidly running out. He knew he couldn't let her go off and disappear into the unknown. "Where do you live, Mandy? How will I find you again?" he called after her, but she was gone.

Chapter Eight

THE MOST WORSHIPFUL MASTER, Enoch Barnum, began the meeting with the traditional invocation. "Gathered here once again, by the grace of the Supreme Architect of the Universe, let us in all humility ask for His blessing in the solemn tasks before us. As we renew our vows of fidelity and honor, let us acknowledge His mercies and be thankful for His divine wisdom, being ever aware of His hand as it guides us to the light and protects our ancient and honorable fraternal lodge of Freemasons."

Jonathan Hamrick hadn't been inside the Roxbury Masonic Lodge for over twenty years and as he looked around him there were very few familiar faces. His old friend Rufus Brooks was there and he recognized Thad Stowe, but that was about all.

"Brothers, we have with us tonight a distinguished fellow mason and a past master of this lodge, Jonathan Hamrick. He has come to us tonight to ask our help in a most distressing matter concerning the death of his only son. I move, therefore, that all other business be suspended so we might retire at once to reflectively consider his request."

The motion was quickly seconded, then passed unanimously and the members adjourned to the parlor, where no creature comfort seemed to have been forgotten. The posh furnishings, in the elegantly paneled mahogany room, reeked of wealth and leisure; couches and easy chairs were clustered on beautiful Persian carpets to form several informal gathering places. There were billiards and card tables at the far

end and an unfinished game of chess waited patiently on a low table between two leather recliners.

"Brandy, Mr. Hamrick? …or perhaps a glass of Sherry?"

"No… no thank you, nothing for me," Jonathan responded, seeing his old friend Rufus Brooks approaching. The two men shook hands warmly. "Rufie, it's been a long time… how are you, and how is Sarah?"

"We're well, Jon. I heard the news about Josiah… terrible… tragic. We were all deeply saddened." Before Hamrick could respond, Brooks went on. "Do you know Bill Kingsley? …and this is…" The introductions and obligatory idle chat lasted only a few minutes before Barnum said, "let's get down to business, boys and see how we can help Hamrick, shall we?"

"We must all remember at all times to adhere to the word of our worshipful master," someone said, in a gently sarcastic tone, generating polite laughter at the bar.

"Brother Hamrick, you know we are all sworn to protect and promote the welfare of our brethren. We will do all we can to help you. Masons are as a family, where all discord is anathema and is banished." Then he turned to face the group that had gathered and said, "whatever happens in this room is guarded and defended. Remember to always keep the secrets of masonry, never revealing what is given to you in trust by a brother, whose welfare is as your own." Turning back toward Jonathan he added, "I greet and meet you on the level brother Hamrick, as all masons meet. And when we part, let it be on the square."

The men sat loosely in a circle, some lit pipes and Hamrick began. He outlined the events, as he understood them, which had led to his son's death and explained his feeling that there was more to it than he had been told by the Albany sheriff. He was careful not to reveal his suspicion that the New York masons, themselves, were implicated. "My purpose in going is to satisfy myself as to the cause of Josiah's death and I hope I can count on our brothers in Albany to help me to do that."

"What exactly do you want us to do, Jon?" his friend Rufus Brooks asked.

"I'd like your wise advice and counsel concerning the Albany lodge and a letter of introduction attesting to my Masonic credentials."

"Why couldn't we send him as an official ambassador from our lodge here in Roxbury? That way he'll likely be accorded more respect," Barnum suggested, adding his stamp of approval to the idea, without saying as much.

"You know there are problems with the upstate New York masons?" someone remarked. "I'm not sure if it's been cleared up yet."

"Tell me what you know about them," Jonathan responded and the man continued.

"Well, after the war, as you know, all of the lodges disavowed their old charters from England and new grand lodges were set up here in America. The Hudson valley lodges, along with most of the others in western New York, refused to give up their ancient charters and they set up a renegade grand lodge in Albany. It's all pocketbooks and politics, the struggle between the east and the west; and it's really coming to a head now. They didn't want to be dominated by Gotham, so to speak."

"What's the story there now?"

"I think they've straightened it out, but, I'm really not sure."

"Does anyone know any Albany masons personally?"

There was no answer until Barnum spoke again. "There is a man named Frank Salisbury. He is a shadow working out of New York City. He was a mason, formally from Albany, and is a man that I believe can be trusted. Perhaps you should engage his services, Mr. Hamrick. I will be happy to give you my letter."

The idea of hiring a private detective had not occurred to Jonathan, but this Salisbury intrigued him. If he had inside knowledge about the Albany masons he could be very helpful. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Barnum. I shall certainly contact him."

There was one other rather delicate matter that needed to be dealt with. "I have one further request. I hope you will not think me too deceitful, but I believe that my chance to unmask any wrongdoing would be greatly handicapped if my true identity were known. Would it be too much to ask that no name be put on the letters of introduction?"

Brooks spoke immediately to support his old friend. "I personally would have no objection. The documents need only say that the bearer of the letter is attested to. You can then call yourself whatever you like."

Heads turned toward Barnum and his expression indicated assent, so the deal was done.

"Drop us off near town dock square," Brooks said to the coachman, as the carriage Hamrick had hired rolled along the common. "Why don't we stop over at the Tally-Ho? It'll bring back some memories."

Hamrick knew his wife would be waiting up for him and ordinarily he would have refused, but he knew that Brooks had family in western New York and hoped he might know more. "Alright, my friend," Hamrick said, "maybe just for a few minutes."

"Stay on Tremont," Brooks directed, "and then turn right."

The coach gradually rumbled to a stop near the head of Wing's Lane. It was a beautiful summer night and the two men walked as briskly as their age would allow. They cut through the narrow alley between Hanover Street and Town Dock Square and then turned onto Ann Street, where the Hamrick warehouse still stood. He hadn't been in the warehouse for many years and the thought of it saddened him for some reason.

"How's the business been, Jon?" Brooks asked. "Have you been keeping busy or are you finally out to pasture?"

"No… I don't do much any more. Josiah was doing it all. Now I guess Tom will have to…" He muffled the words trying not to show his emotion. His friend saw it and helped him through.

"Come on, Jon. Let's see if they can still make flip."

"I don't think anybody drinks that any more," Hamrick responded.

"So what?" Brooks replied. "We'll show them how it's done."

The Talley-Ho looked the same and they decided to forego the flip for a glass of Port. The corner table, that had seen so much turmoil in the old days, was empty and quiet now, but it still felt like home. "Tell me Rufus," Jonathan began, "you know a lot about New York. What's the story there? Josiah went to look for investment opportunities. Do you have any idea how he could have gotten into trouble?"

"You really think he was murdered, Jon?"

"I don't know, but I have this feeling. I can't explain it."

"The upstate is really in turmoil, and has been. Between the canal and the politics, I don't know where to start."

"Start with the politics."

"Well… the state was overwhelmingly Democratic, or at least the legislature was, until the last go 'round. That campaign split the party wide open. The legislature refused to allow direct selection of the presidential electors and this caused a big to-do, as did the attempt by the anti-Clinton crowd to oust him from the Canal Commission." Brooks paused briefly and shook his head. "Now, sakes alive, Clinton is almost deified for building that canal and they wanted to boot him off the Canal Commission! That gave the Clintonians an issue that could wake snakes and they easily got him elected to the governorship again in '24. So you had the legislature being run by Van Buren and his cronies and most of the administration was still old-line federalist big bugs. It's a real witch's brew, as you can imagine."

"So what's the political atmosphere like, right now, Rufie?"

"The strong showing of Jackson last time has induced Van Buren to come over to him. As a one-time Crawford man, this seemed a bit surprising, but it was politics plain and simple. Van Buren tried to get Clinton on board by promising that they wouldn't challenge him in the next gubernatorial race if he would support Jackson. Of course Van Buren couldn't really deliver his people, since most of them really hated Clinton, and the governor knew it, so no one had any idea what he would do or where it was all headed. Of course he's dead now, so it doesn't really matter."

"How do you think the election will go, then?"

"It would take Philadelphia lawyer to answer that one, Jon."

"What about the economic and financial scene, Rufus? Where might Josiah have been looking?"

"A couple of years ago Clinton proposed a highway across the state. This highway has not yet been built and offers a plausible opening for an investment scheme. You know how these things work. The road will push up land prices all along its route, so knowledge of exactly where it will go is worth a lot of money. He may have gotten mixed up in something that way, with land speculation I mean."

"Yes, possibly, but I don't think so. What about the canal?"

"They want to dig canals everywhere in the state. It seems like a strategy to build political support in the areas where the canals… might… be dug. The government, of course, has no money to carry out all of these grandiose schemes. It's all designed to win elections. They go into a rural area and promise to put a canal, or a road, through and people vote for them. For the most part it's all balderdash. And there are a lot of scams spun off of these promises and dreams. They get people to put up money to lobby the legislature or bribe the right people."

Hamrick listened intently, but could not envision his son pursuing anything outside of his competence and that meant shipping and trade. No, it must have, in some way, involved the river or the canal and his friend didn't know very much about that.

"There's always a flurry of applications for bank charters constantly before the legislature and personal interests and inside deals are usually mixed up in them," Brooks went on, trying to be helpful.

"But, getting a corporate charter is not so easy any more, not since the Dartmouth College decision. The legislature can't simply annul a charter any more," Jonathan interjected half-heartedly, having begun to lose interest.

"That's right. Today charters between the government and a private individual or group are full fledged contracts. They're being much more careful now, putting time limits on them and such. This is a real invitation to corruption, getting favorable corporate charters, especially bank charters, maybe that's what he was into."

"Thanks, Rufus. You've given me a lot to think about," Jonathan said already eager to move on.

"Are you hungry Jon?" Brooks asked as he took in the delicious smells wafting from the kitchen. "Do you remember that roasted rabbit with chestnut stuffing that Hester used to make? I wonder if they still make that."

"I really need to run along," Hamrick responded, but his friend was only half-listening.

"They used to get those fattened tame rabbits from Coon's farm. Do you remember, Jon?"

Hamrick remembered well the wonderful roasted rabbit at the Tally-Ho, but those days were gone, gone with his youth. There was little time left for reminiscing and, at the risk of seeming rude, he stood to go. "I really can't, Rufus, maybe some other time. Rachel will be waiting for me."

"Do you remember the roasted rabbit at the old Tally-Ho, Rachel?"

"Yes, of course I do, Jon," she answered suspiciously and before he responded added, "I hope you don't think I'm going to roast you a rabbit now?"

"No… of course not. It's only that I was there tonight and Rufus Brooks reminded me of it, that's all. The one with the chestnut stuffing was his favorite, but I liked the way she did it with the oysters. Do you remember?"

"With oysters?" she frowned.

"Stuffed with oysters… breading and spices. She made it with Madeira wine. Remember how crazy we were for Madeira wine?"

"You still are, Jon; and now I'm sure you're hungry," Rachel remarked. "I've still got some hot beef gravy soup on the stove. I could break up some Naples macaroni in it."

Jonathan smiled slyly and as she turned toward the kitchen, he disappeared into the cellar for a bottle of Madeira. His wife of nearly sixty years set a table for two and lit the candelabra and the sconces. It seemed like a night for it. They weren't as bright as the lanterns, but nicer. The teamwork was so time-honored and effortless that without another word they were soon sitting in the warm glow of the flickering candles. Jonathan poured her wine while Rachel grated some Parmesan cheese over his steaming soup and the old, loving couple began their midnight supper.

"To my wonderful wife," Jonathan offered, raising his glass to a toast. She smiled and the glasses touched, but before she could respond

he added, with some measure of doubt. "It has been a good life, hasn't it, Rachel?"

Sensing sadness in his voice she responded, reaching across the table to touch his hand, "of course it has, Jon. Why would you ever think otherwise?"

He kissed her fingertips and began to cry. "It's Josiah I guess. I can't get used to it."

She went to him and cradled his head in her arms. They stayed that way for a long time, each remembering a good son. It was Rachel who finally spoke first. "Come, Jon, eat your soup before it gets cold."

His voice was soft and shaken. "I don't know what I would do if I lost you, Rachel."

She lifted his face and kissed him gently. "Tell me what happened tonight."

The macaroni soup was simple, but delicious, perhaps more so that night as the loss of his boy moved him to realize how much he loved his wife. He couldn't stop looking up at her beautiful, care worn face, half-hidden in the shadows and thinking of how fleeting and ephemeral life was. Then, as they drank a second glass of Madeira, he recounted the details of his meeting at the Masonic lodge and showed her the endorsement letters they had given him.

"What in the world is this?" Rachel said, seeing the strange symbols beneath the signature.

"That's nothing… that's the secret Masonic cipher. It just says that the bearer of this letter is held in the highest regard and can be trusted."

"What is it, some sort of a secret code?" Rachel reacted incredulously.

"It's a cipher that allows you to code messages, yes."

"I'm not sure I like this, Jon. Are you sure you know what you are getting into?"

"It's all a part of the Masonic ritual and practice. There was really no need for it, but they wanted to add it. Believe me, it's nothing."

"For the life of me, Jon, I cannot understand how grown men can be so foolish."

Hamrick smiled and sipped his wine while his wife delivered her warning. "If it's only innocent camaraderie then why is it that so many countries in Europe have outlawed it? I understand that some have even made it a capital offense to be a mason."

"The Catholic Church fears free thinking. Look at the list, Rachel… Spain, Portugal, Rome… what do you expect?"

"There's a general consensus among most European governments that free masonry, because of its secret oaths, encourages conspiracies and is a threat. You can't deny that."

"The masons are not trying to overthrow any governments, honestly Rachel," he responded shaking his head.

"What makes you so sure?"

He didn't speak for a few seconds and then said, "besides this isn't about politics."

"If you think the masons are so innocent, Jon, why are you planning to use an assumed name? You know damn well it's because you don't trust them."

"If there are masons involved in our son's death, it's not… because they are masons… but because they are corrupt and evil men."

"But don't you see that the whole structure of masonry makes it easier for men to become corrupt and evil? Masonry must be a magnet for corrupt and evil men."

"I hope you're wrong, Rachel… I really hope you're wrong."

Chapter Nine

WHEN THOMAS REACHED the newspaper office, he was astounded to find only a small storefront room, hidden away in an alley along the river. The door was locked, but he could clearly see movement behind the frosted glass and he knocked loudly. A tall man, with an ink-covered canvas apron, unlocked the door, but blocked his path.

"Are you Adrian Quacumbus?" Thomas began.

"If you've come here to try to frighten me or bully me, you'd best get out while you can," he reacted angrily, pulling the lever arm out of the press and brandishing it like a club.

Thomas was startled by the man's reaction and raised his hands defensively. "Calm down, Mr. Quacumbus; I mean you no harm or disrespect. Please let me begin again."

Thomas explained his intention and told Quacumbus that Amanda Olmstead had suggested the meeting. "I apologize, Mr. Hamrick. It's just that I'm at wit's end with threats and intimidations."

Adrian Quacumbus was the owner, editor and publisher of the *Albany Chronicle*. He also worked the traditional, wooden, floor-standing, hand letter-press and personally delivered the copies to his customers. It was a miniscule one-man enterprise, whose modesty belied its local political impact. Quacumbus was a gifted and passionate writer and was one of the most provocative and influential political voices in the valley.

The *Albany Chronicle*, with its incessant antimasonry diatribe, had irritated many influential people. The editor's life had been threatened and he was forced to sleep in his shop to guard it from vandals, especially on the night before the weekly paper came out.

Thomas noticed the smell of wet ink as he entered and was cautioned to avoid the already printed sheets drying over long wooden dowels, fashioned into a frame hanging from the ceiling. Quacumbus put down his composing stick, wiped his hands, as best he could with one of the big rags draped over his shoulder, and offered Hamrick a chair.

"What did you say your name was again?"

"Hamrick… Thomas Hamrick."

"And what can I do for you, Mr. Hamrick?"

"Mr. Quacumbus, did you know my father, Josiah Hamrick. He was killed in the boiler explosion on the *Aurora* last month?"

"No… I can't say that I do."

"I have reason to believe that he was involved with the masons here in Albany and that they may have had something to do with his death. Do you have any information that might help me?"

"What was he doing here?"

"Looking to invest money in something, but I'm really not sure what. I think it would have involved a risky cash outlay though, since he was trying to raise capital quickly."

"Sounds to me like he may have been sucked into some scam and it wouldn't surprise me if there were masons behind it… You said he died in the explosion on the *Aurora*?"

"Yes, I met a man named Goode…"

"Jacob Goode, yes… I know him. He wants the legislature to regulate the steamboats, another fart in a windstorm." Thomas's puzzled look drew Quacumbus on. "There's too much money to be made, too much corruption. The special interests will win out over the public good, as usual."

"What sort of scams did you mean, Mr. Quacumbus?" Thomas asked.

"Land speculation… along the roads and the canals… and now the railroad in starting up. Villages and settlements spring up wherever the

roads go, although most of the population seems to be concentrating along the canal. The west road from Albany is an improved road, which easily handles six-horse hitches and heavy wagons. But that land is long gone. You need to know where the road is going next… before… anyone else. That's how you buy up the land cheap."

"And that's where the bribes and payoffs come in," Thomas added.

"Exactly… inside information is how the masons operate. They're a network of busy little back scratchers."

"So it would be very possible that my father could have gotten involved with them," Thomas thought aloud, rhetorically. "What about shipping, Mr. Quacumbus? My father was a merchant and probably would favor that."

"Wheat!" was the one word reply. Thomas nodded questioningly and Quacumbus continued. "Perhaps the finest wheat in the world, the white bald wheat, is grown all over this area and has easy access to markets through the canal and the Hudson. The impact of the canal on the country's internal trade will be incalculable. New York will rapidly outstrip New Orleans as the nation's preeminent port. It's three weeks sail nearer to European markets. And the new proposed canal connecting Lake Erie to the Ohio River will drain the entire west right down the Hudson."

Thomas was grateful for the editor's help, but saw no solid clue to help him trace his father's footsteps, when he noticed the bold headline, BLOOD OATHS, across the top of the broadside still resting on the press bed and redirected, with a friendly question. "You seem to be preparing a powerful piece for tomorrow, Mr. Quacumbus."

"No more than is necessary in exposing these bastards," Quacumbus reacted angrily.

"And you really think the masons are dangerous?"

"Masonry is no more than an artful façade, falsely built upon the scriptures. But, in reality it's nothing but a sham. It tries to claim the glory achieved by others, but it is in fact nothing but a front for cowardly and unscrupulous men, who hide behind its grandiose cloak to do their dirty deeds."

"What about the local masons, Mr. Quacumbus? Are they corrupt as well?"

"It's clear to anyone who looks that they control two-thirds of the offices in this state and use those positions to promote their own greedy enterprises. The masons are the greatest danger yet faced by our American democracy. Masonry is aristocratic and in fact is a cancer growing within our borders."

Thomas could feel the venom almost oozing from the man's pores. "Why do you say it threatens the democracy?"

"Why the thing is the utter antithesis of democracy. It's a monolithic conspiracy to ignore the good of the majority on behalf of a gluttonous minority, trying to gobble up everything. Why… it reeks of aristocracy, the stench of which would call the fathers forth from their graves. Masonry is subversive and threatens the very fiber of our freedom. It needs to be stamped out."

"And here in Albany?" Thomas once again tried to narrow the focus. "What do you make of this lodge?"

"They're no different. The issue here is the same, inequality and everything that smells of it. They hold to these secret ceremonies and take their blood oaths even against the commands of church and state. They will protect a brother mason no matter what. They pledge to come to each other's aid in all circumstances and to hold their Masonic oath above all else. What other purpose could there be for all of that if not to cover their dirty deeds?"

"So if it is, as you say, that the masons are a clique bent on furthering their own personal interests at the expense of others, could you see them committing crimes… murder even?"

"Hamrick… Don't be a fool, wake up… they scoff at our laws and mock our justice."

"Are you saying that the law here is not to be trusted?"

"They're all in bed together, Hamrick. We've learned the hard way to keep masons off of juries in cases where any other masons are involved. Lawyers now peremptorily challenge any prospective jurors who are known masons, and try to disqualify any judges as well. The trouble is you don't always know who they are."

Thomas began to rethink his plan. If Quacumbus were right his appeals to the local officials would likely yield very little and this seemed consistent with his earlier experience. He did have two contacts he thought he could trust and asked, "do you know Amanda Olmstead?"

"Yes, indeed I do," Quacumbus answered smiling. "She's the daughter of an evangelical preacher, a man named Karl Olmstead. I've known them for years."

"How can I find them?"

"Olmstead owns a boat and goes up and down the ditch. They'll be heading back up; I saw his boat today. They're somewhere between here and Schenectady. They go back and forth… to Syracuse I think… about every two weeks or so."

"Where can I rent a horse?" he asked, knowing that two weeks would be too long to wait.

"I'd take the stage to Schenectady and wait. There are a lot of locks on the first stretch and that will slow them down. If you get the morning stage, I'm sure you'll beat them there."

"There's a regular run to Schenectady?"

"Yes sir and they've got the new overland coaches from Concord New Hampshire too. The ones where the body hangs on some long leather straps. They call them through-braces, or something, and they make the whole thing swing and sway instead of bouncing up and down. Believe me, it beats riding a horse. You can get the stage right over on the public square every morning at eight."

"You said her father was a preacher. Can you tell me any more about him?"

"There's been a massive surge in religious revivals in the past few years with so many itinerant preachers all over the place. They're all high on emotion and low on substance it seems to me, but it's catching on and taking a real bite out of the old-time churches… like the Presbyterian and the Congregational. Most of them call themselves Methodists or Baptists. I think their real appeal is freedom from the old religious bigwigs. Ordinary people here are very sensitive about perceived advantages given to elites and special interests. Olmstead is right in the middle of that."

"Is he a Methodist or a …?"

Quacumbus laughed and shook his head as he interrupted, "Olmstead doesn't believe in any denomination. He's a loner and very fanatical about slavery. He's combined his evangelical stump thumping with abolitionism. I heard tell that since his boy was killed he has really gone off the deep end."

It looked to be little more than a six by four foot box with padded and upholstered seats at each end and a plain wooden bench across the middle, so as to be able to accommodate nine in a squeeze, allowing that none were too big that is. The whole thing was painted in the most outrageous colors, with the underbody in yellow and the main chassis in red with yellow trim.

Four large open windows, rigged to be covered by heavy leather curtains that were thankfully rolled up, made the coach seem light and airy. A leather boot, in the back, held the luggage and the mail sack. There was a strongbox under the driver's seat and a railing around the roof, to provide more carrying capacity, or perhaps a perch for some thrill-seeking passengers. The whole magnificent contraption was pulled by a beautiful hitch of six matched horses and was driven by a man with a natural flare for the dramatic.

Thomas arrived late and there were no seats left, except the center bench, which seemed cramped and uncomfortable, so he climbed up to ride next to the driver. The way the "whip," as he was called, handled the six-horse hitch was a marvel to behold. Three sets of reins, each held in the spaces between his fingers, and filling both hands, had to be controlled separately and skillfully. In entering a turn, particularly at speed, the lead pair of horses had to be brought gently around first, with the swing horses in the middle and finally the wheel horses curved smoothly around after them. If all the horses tried to turn at once, they would create enough torque on the coach to flip it over.

Seeing Hamrick's interest the driver commented. "Each pair of horses weighs over a ton, with the biggest in the back. I never whip 'em and they rarely have to run, except that is when entering the station, when the boss likes me to bring 'em in at a gallop. I hear tell that they're

going to go whole hog and put a bugle-boy up here to scream out a fanfare when we roll in. It'll be good advertisin'… or so they tell me."

"I'm trying to catch a canal boat that left late yesterday afternoon," Hamrick remarked. "Where's the best place for me to wait?"

"The road don't run near the canal, mister. The canal shoots up north for quite a ways and then turns west; we go straight across. We won't hit the canal until we get to Rexford, almost to Schenectady. There's a big aqueduct bringing the canal back across the Mohawk. It's a bit out of our way, but that's where we tote the mail for the farms north of the river."

"How long will that take?"

"Ordinarily there's fifteen miles between stations, to get fresh horses and a short pause to refresh, as the ladies say. But, since it's only about thirteen miles to Schenectady…" and seeing Hamrick's concern he added, "you'll beat the boat by half a day at least, maybe more. They go way out of the way, back and forth over the Mohawk River, through all kinds of locks. There's more than a dozen at Cohoes Falls alone."

The coach rumbled along, rolling and swaying, for a few miles as Thomas pondered his plan… such as it was. He didn't trust Quacumbus, who was too caught up in his own struggles. Amanda Olmstead seemed to be his most promising contact. She too had reasons to suspect that the explosion on the *Aurora* was not an accident and he very much wanted to talk to her again about it. There were other reasons as well.

The driver was friendly and Hamrick took the opportunity to see if he knew anything useful. "I guess the stage line is doing a good business, brand new coach, latest design. If a man were looking to make an investment, would you say this might be it?"

The driver's response was quick and candid. "They're already laying track, the Mohawk and Hudson River Railroad Company. They have the right of way and it won't be long before the stage line will be history."

"Well then why are they investing in new coaches? Doesn't that seem dumb?"

"No. They'll just move along with the country, stay ahead of the tracks, that's all. People are moving west and they're going to ride these

Concord Coaches all the way to the Pacific… as long as we stay ahead of the railroad that is."

At Rexford, about a mile from Schenectady, the road ran for the first time along the canal and at a place called Schuyler's Farm, as serendipitous luck would have it, Thomas spotted the Olmstead scow resting in a side cut. "Stop," he said suddenly. "Stop the coach and let me off. That's the boat I'm looking for right there."

"What are you doing here, Tom?" Amanda asked with an unmistakable hint of happiness.

"I came to see you," he answered smiling broadly. "What are… you… doing here?"

"Loading split wood to take back to Albany. We had to leave it on the way in because we didn't have space."

"So… you're returning to Albany right away?"

"Late tonight. After my father's sermon."

Amanda and her mother were throwing the wood into the open hold of the scow after her father and brother had hauled it, with the mules and a small wagon they carried, from the several huge piles created by the constant land clearing on the local farms. This was a regular and reliable source of income for Olmstead. In Albany, firewood was always in demand and the steamboats paid as much as a dollar-ten a cord. It took hours of back breaking toil to haul and load fifteen cords of wood, but that meant seven dollars profit, a very good day's pay. Thomas worked beside the women and was tired and blistered by late afternoon. Olmstead saw him, but never stopped to ask who he was. In fact, it wasn't until they were all seated at the supper table that he spoke at all.

"Karl, this is Thomas Hamrick," his wife began. "He is a friend of Amanda's. I have invited him to supper and he's returning to Albany with us tonight."

Thomas stood and said, "how do you do, Mr. Olmstead? It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

Olmstead nodded and replied, "you don't look like a man who's used to hard labor. How is it that you have to work for your keep?"

"Thomas helped us out of kindness, father," Amanda interrupted. "He is our guest."

Olmstead ignored her remark and bowed his head to say grace. The supper was ham and eggs, regular fare on the boat, which carried at least two dozen live chickens and a store of smoked and salted meats. They drank a passable homemade hard cider and had cheese and preserved pears for desert. The coffee was remarkably good, owing to the proper roasting of the beans, for which Harriet was particularly proud.

"Mr. Hamrick is a merchant, Karl," Harriet said. "He's here from Boston seeking out investment opportunities."

"What's your politics, Mr. Hamrick," Olmstead responded abruptly. "Or are you just a Yankee peddler, afraid to have a mind of his own?"

"Please father, do you have to always look for an argument?" Amanda reacted, but Olmstead was undeterred.

"Well, the man's from Boston so I'll assume he's an Adam's man."

Thomas answered, although he had no deep convictions concerning the looming election many viewed so emotionally. "No… actually I had hoped that Henry Clay would run." He saw the little sign of pain on Amanda's face and felt sure that he had said the wrong thing.

Olmstead roared his disapproval. "Well if that don't cap the climax. The man's a slaveholder and a mason to boot; he's morally corrupt and beneath contempt." His remarks revealed how tightly his convictions were fixed and about how this overwhelming moral issue drove him, since Henry Clay's much ballyhooed American System called for vigorous internal improvements and a high tariff, both strongly favored by most men, like Olmstead, working the western canal.

Thomas glanced quickly at Amanda for some clue and thought he saw her lips say Adams, but he didn't believe it. "I have given some thought… to Jackson…"

Amanda cringed as her father once again interrupted, "that no-account disgusting scum is an… unapologetic… slaveholder and a murderer to boot. Not to mention that he's running with Calhoun, the slave master's pimp."

"I take it you are a… National-Republican?" Thomas hesitantly asked, a bit surprised.

"As long as they don't run Clay, the degenerate bastard. Adams is a man of principle. He'll be the beginning of the end for slavery and he'll stamp out the stinking masons as well."

Chapter Ten

THE ROAD TO NISKAYUNA connected the small farms and orchards nestled on the neatly cultivated hillsides of the Mohawk valley. The small village, just south of the river, had in recent years become a popular site for camp revival meetings. Karl Olmstead left his boat immediately after supper to join the half-dozen other itinerant evangelist preachers scheduled to speak in the big tent that night. Smaller tents, that served to shelter the many families who gathered there, clustered around it like children clinging to a mother's apron.

The sun had been long since set when Amanda and Thomas began the two mile trek from the turn-around at Rexford to the site of her father's sermon. "You said you wanted to hear him speak, Tom."

Hamrick was already falling in love with Amanda Olmstead and this sudden complication in his life was causing him some measure of confusion and consternation. She was so different from any other woman he had ever met. She was so feminine and beautiful and yet she could work like a man without whimper or complaint. Her hands seemed gentle and soft, yet they were strong. She was bold and confident beyond her years, while still impetuous and naïve. In many ways, she was the spirit of this new west, seductive and alluring, yet distant and dangerous. He was captivated by her charm and when she looked at him, looked into his eyes and smiled, he felt a wave of warmth rise through his temples and flush his face.

It was a magic night. "Come on, Tom, we'll be late," she urged, reaching back to take his hand. As the darkness settled over them, they could hear the eerie twilight serenade of the whippoorwill and the air was alive with fireflies. He wanted very much to stop her, pull her into his arms and kiss her, but he didn't know what to say and was unsure of how she would react.

Olmstead had nearly finished his sermon when Tom and Amanda reached the camp grounds and slipped into the back of the big tent. The canvas was folded back at both ends and a cooling breeze had carried away the sweltering heat of the summer day, but the torrid fervor of emotion still filled the air.

"Listen to me my brothers and sisters. Our Lord Jesus Christ commands you to find and admonish your brother when he has done wrong, for Matthew tells us …if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault… But will the sinner listen? Oh no, he is too proud to listen, he is too vain. He stiffens his neck and feels for his pocket book. And for such foolishness the Lord has promised merciless retribution, as he makes clear to us in Deuteronomy: For by my wrath a fire is enkindled that shall rage to the depths of the nether world, consuming the earth with its yield, and licking with flames the roots of the mountains. Fire and smoke will rain down on the sinners; there will be no escape; there will be no mercy."

His booming voice began building to a new crescendo. "Today we live in a new Sodom." He paused skillfully and waited for a response.

"Yes… we do," came a reply, amid assenting murmurs.

"Just as Lot warned of its destruction before a righteous and avenging Lord, we hear the same doomful warnings now. But do they listen?"

"No, no one listens… No… they won't listen…"

"Not for an instant do they heed the word." He then lifted a shining sword from its scabbard and held it high above the eyes of the increasingly enthralled crowd. "I am the Lord's avenger and I point my blade at the wicked sin of slavery and say, repent ye sinners, ye wicked merchants of human flesh…"

"Repent… repent we say… Sinners… wicked sinners…"

"Cast off the shackles that bind you as tightly as they do your helpless chattel." His eyes flashed and shimmered in the dim gleam of the lanterns as his voice tore through the tent. "Then the Lord rained down upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven."

The power of his voice came from conviction, a belief so deeply entrenched that it frightened everyone, even Amanda. She squeezed Hamrick's hand and whispered. "He scares me sometimes, Tom. He gets so fanatical." Hamrick said nothing, but could see how the crowd was caught by his almost hypnotic power.

His voice suddenly slowed and dropped in tone and timber. Looking down at the sword, now hanging loosely at his side, he resumed softly. "There can be no peace when righteous indignation calls our hand to vengeance. Men of money have tried… and will continue to try… to bridge the canyon that lies between us. To secure their petty contracts and protect their empire of human flesh they would have us find some compromise by which the slave power would go on forever. It is no longer merely a question of whether the slave empire of the South will survive…" And then with enormous energy he roared, "but whether we… my brothers and sisters of the north… whether we will also fall beneath its whip."

The sound of his exploding voice stunned the people and before they could fully recover he swung his sword over them again. "Who will come with me to cleanse the honor of our great nation by sweeping away the stain and stench of human bondage?"

This time there was no response as the stunned crowd, unsure of how to react, looked to each other for clues. So he called again. "Wherever a slaver can be found he should be slaughtered, slaughtered where he stands, and rightly so, as the Lord commands us to have no mercy on the wicked."

Again he was met with silence by the gaping crowd.

"Take vengeance on the sinners," he screamed with a crazed and terrifying look.

Amanda closed her eyes and hung her head as the next preacher hurriedly climbed to the stage, shook Olmstead's hand and ushered him to the side. His last words were muffled by the curtain.

"I'm so sorry Tom. He hasn't always been this way. It's just that he's been so despondent since Caleb's death and he…"

"You don't need to apologize, Mandy. Your father is very passionate about it, that's all," Hamrick said in a gently consoling tone and then slightly adjusted the subject. "Tell me about your brother."

Amanda quickly regained her composure. "He was twenty-one, just about to start his life. He had saved almost three-hundred dollars and was going to get married and go west, to Ohio."

"He must have worked hard to save that much," Hamrick continued, politely priming the conversation.

"There was always extra work while they built the canal. Caleb and my father went to the big dig near Lockport during the freeze-over months and worked on the excavating and blasting the hard rock for the locks there. Have you seen the cut they made between Lockport and Pendleton?" Hamrick shook his head and she added, "it's incredible, Tom. They learned a lot about black powder blasting and Caleb was sure he could get work while they cleared land and built their farm."

"He was about to be married, you said?"

"Yes, as soon as the season ended. He was afraid to tell my father, though. My mother knew. My father is a difficult man, Tom. He smothered Caleb with his expectations. It's funny because he just ignores my little brother, Sammy. I think Caleb just wanted to break away and be free of him."

"And what about you, Mandy? What do you want in life?"

"I guess I want to be free of him too. But of course my options are far fewer."

"Why so?" he prodded, trying to follow her lead without tripping over his tongue.

"Because… I am a woman, Mr. Hamrick." She answered abruptly and then with a warm smile and distinctly friendlier tone added, "what is

your opinion of women, Tom, that is of their proper place in our society?"

This question, coming as it did from its cunning hiding place and exploding like one of her father's black powder blasting sticks, promised a perplexing start to this new relationship. "Well… I'm not sure what you would have me say, Mandy. This is not the sort of conversation I'm accustomed to having with…

"Come on, Tom, you're not afraid are you?" She paused smiling to herself although not in a way which could be seen and after a few seconds said, "you do at least believe that men and women were created equal?"

"Yes, of course," he answered without elaboration, feeling his way forward very carefully.

"Why then do men so much want to control women… in the real world I mean?"

"While equal in the eyes of God, women and men have different natures and are best suited to serve different roles," he replied, in the most conventional manner.

"Should women seek to be reformers and fight against oppression, or would that smash the ideal image that you men seem to want so much to have of us?"

"I have no ready answer for you," he parried, wondering if she were somehow trying to bait him and trying desperately not to offend her.

"Perhaps you find it unbecoming for a woman to act too much like a man, as my father is so fond of saying. Is that it Tom?" She continued to prod. "What is then the true nature of a woman, to be a simple plaything, an adornment with no higher purpose but to stand about prettily?" Hamrick wanted very much to change the subject, but couldn't and silently endured her playful tirade. "Women are awakening, sir," she added with a stiff nod, "and we will not return to embroidery and lace. This world is no longer ruled by power alone. Reason and intellect are rising and will soon reign supreme."

"But what of marriage and children, are these not the most important duties of women… to be wives and mothers?" he responded.

"What, I ask, does motherhood have to do with it? Do you think a strong, useful woman is less feminine ?"

"You are not rejecting marriage then?" he asked, hardly concealing his growing infatuation and failing to notice the real intent of her challenge.

"When you say men and women have different natures you imply that they should function as a team and compensate for each other's weaknesses. This implies an inherent inequality, Tom, don't you see? The perfect marriage is the bonding of two similar and equal spirits." Just as her relaxing tone seemed to promise some respite she said, "I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Thomas Hamrick; I'll never promise obedience to any man!"

They left the side cut at dawn. Thomas was already awake when Samuel off-loaded and hitched the team and he watched from the mule-cabin roof, where he had slept, as the boat slid slowly northward across the long aqueduct over the Mohawk. He looked back and saw Amanda at the tiller and could still see some stars in the early morning sky. The mules walked with a kind of practiced rhythm, which gently nudged the fully loaded line boat along almost effortlessly. It was quiet and serene, only the croaking of an occasional bullfrog broke the silence. He gazed out to the horizon and could see the fog rising on the hillsides far away, as the morning sun warmed the earth and he thought how incredibly beautiful this land was. Suddenly everything seemed filled with promise.

With boats traveling in both directions using the same towpath it seemed to Thomas that the potential for snags and tangles was very great and he watched with keen interest as they came upon a packet boat moving briskly toward them. Packets were passenger boats usually pulled by teams of three horses. The packet companies kept hay barns along their route and the teams were changed at regular intervals. It was generally conceded that these queens of the canal would continue unimpeded when encountering a lowly line boat, especially a lumbering scow, stacked with cord wood and pulled by two scruffy mules.

Samuel skillfully slid his team to the outside of the tow path and stopped just as the packet horses reached them. His tow rope slackened quickly since the line boat continued to drift forward with its momentum and the packet horses, coming the other way, walked right over the fallen rope. Amanda simultaneously steered the boat to the outside of the on-coming packet and Samuel held his mules steady. As the Olmstead boat continued slowly forward, the tow rope sank quickly beneath the water, just as the packet reached it and the sunken rope slid silently under the packet's keel. Samuel hardly acknowledged the other Hoggie as the teams passed.

"What happens if you don't stop soon enough?" Thomas's asked loudly from his perch on the mule-cabin roof.

"We lose either the rope or the mules," Samuel responded and then elaborated. "Well, if the rope slides up and threatens to go over the deck of the other boat it will be cut by a safety knife bolted to their bow," and noticing Thomas's questioning expression added, "it sticks up above the prow and looks like a sickle pointing forward. It'll catch and cut the rope if it slides up. But if it hangs on the bow and jams somehow, it would pull our mules right into the water, kill 'em even. That's why we got this breakaway clasp here," he went on, pointing to the place where the harness could be quickly detached. "You can rate a Hoggie by how many splices there are in his tow rope. We've got a cutaway knife too."

Thomas looked down at the bow of the boat. "That looks like the sword your father had last night," Thomas remarked.

"It is. That's why it ain't curved like it's supposed to be. It don't matter though. It's tilted a bit forward and he keeps it sharp as a razor. It'll cut rope like a hot knife goes through butter. He built a jig to hold it. Take a gander at it; you can pull it right out."

As interesting as the cutaway knife may have seemed to Samuel, at that moment it could not command Thomas's attention, which was fully captured by the fascinating young woman at the tiller. He picked up his carpetbag, climbed down from the cabin roof and walked carefully aft along the gunnels, leaning in on the loosely stacked firewood piled in the hold, until he reached and passed along the gangway beside the house and onto the quarterdeck. "Permission to come aboard," he said smiling.

"Permission granted," she responded. "Good morning, Mr. Thomas Hamrick. I hope you slept well," she continued, amused by the thought of him curled up in the hay beside the mules. "You weren't kicked I hope… or worse even," she added laughing.

"No… actually I slept on the roof. Samuel gave me a bedroll. It wasn't bad."

"There's a freshwater barrel in the kitchen and a sink you can use if you've a mind," she said pointing him to the gangway down into the galley. "And there's some good hard pearl ash soap on the sink as well," she called after him.

Hamrick could hear Olmstead rumbling around in the sleeping area below and worked quickly, hoping to be gone before the man appeared. His efforts were in vain.

"There won't be any breakfast until we reach the falls, if that's what you're after," he said without looking up from the small bible he held between the thumb and first two fingers of his right hand. Before Hamrick could politely respond they were interrupted by the double blast of a boat horn above them.

"Make way, Mr. Hamrick, there's no time to dawdle. We'll be presently entering a lock." Olmstead stuffed the book into his pocket and pushed past Thomas to the stairs. As Hamrick followed him from the boathouse, a voice ahead could be clearly heard.

"Prepare to make the lock." And, as they entered the stone chamber Samuel unfastened the team and continued up and around the massive structure, while Amanda tied off the tiller and jumped from the boat to the stone retaining wall, which formed the towpath side of the lock. Every move was practiced and deftly done. She quickly wrapped a line around a heavy stone snubbing post and, just before the bow bumped the forward gate of the lock, brought the moving craft slowly to a stop; and almost as quickly and quietly, the lock keeper closed the gates behind them.

The two men stood on the quarterdeck and watched. As the boat slowly sank with the draining water, the heavy weight of the flood piled behind the back gate squirted a steady spray between the timbers and over the stern threatening to soak them through.

"Get under the awning, Mr. Hamrick," Olmstead mocked, shaking his head disdainfully.

The back gates groaned against the ominous wall of water building above them. Beneath them the water gurgled out, roiling around the hull, with the opening of the sluices of the front gate. The heavily loaded line boat shook and trembled as its level quickly dropped. The power of the ebbing flood jostled the boat mightily, but gradually everything reached equilibrium and quieted as the craft settled at the bottom of the lock. The big forward gates were slowly swung open and Samuel routinely reattached the mules in a ritual that would be repeated again and again as the canal mechanically adjusted its level to match the surrounding terrain.

"How many locks are there then?" Thomas asked.

"There are eighty-something, I think," Olmstead answered as he untied the tiller and prepared to steer the boat out of the lock, "if you go all the way to Buffalo that is… But, owing as we only go part way we only need to deal with some of them." Then, noticing Hamrick's attention was elsewhere, he quipped, "she'll jump back on as soon as we clear the gates."

Chapter Eleven

JONATHAN HAMRICK RODE the regular scheduled stage from Boston to Providence and then took a steamboat to New York City. He made the coastal passage in less than twenty hours. It was, indeed, a whole new world of wonder and technology.

The old man had not been in New York City for nearly forty years and was amazed at how busy it had become. From the Battery, where he disembarked, he could see, disappearing up the North and East Rivers, what seemed like an endless string of wharves stretching in both directions, crowded with sloops, schooners and ships of every description. He marveled at how quickly the steamboat tugs were able to maneuver so many sailing vessels through the crowded harbor and neatly tuck them away among the teeming piers and quays; he smiled as he remembered the days of the slow and arduous longboat tows.

As he walked briskly from the promenade on the Battery and into Castle Garden, the pace of construction in the recent decades made the city of over one-quarter of a million people almost unrecognizable to him. Broadway, fading to the north like an arrow, drew him into the burgeoning metropolis. As he passed Trinity Church, he barely glanced down a crowded Wall Street, with its myriad of banks and insurance companies, being intent upon finding accommodations and contacting the detective, Frank Salisbury.

The bustle of the street, with its pedestrian comings and goings and its omnibuses and hackney coaches, might have confused an old man

of eighty-one had he not fixed his mind on the Hotel Hollingsworth, a little further up Broadway, only a few hundred yards ahead. He hardly noticed the City Hall or the Park Theater or the museums and fancy retail stores, which were quickly making New York City the financial, cultural and social center of the nation.

He quietly signed his name to the register and turned the book back toward the clerk. "Room four twenty-four," the man said, writing the number beside the name and without looking up. Before Jonathan could ask, a lanky Black porter, with a big friendly smile, lifted his single small suitcase and took the key from the clerk.

"Right this way, sir…"

"Wait…" Jonathan protested mildly. "There is one more thing."

"Yes, sir?" the clerk responded, motioning with his head for the porter to deliver the traveling bag to the room. "How can I help you?"

"Would it be possible to have a currier deliver a message to an address near here?"

"Of course, sir," the clerk answered directing him to the stationary conveniently stacked on the counter.

Jonathan placed his personal card, with a handwritten note, into a hotel envelope and addressed it to the residence of Mr. Frank Salisbury.

Jonathan Hamrick Esq.
Boston, Massachusetts

Urgently in need of your services. I am at the Hollingsworth, Room 424.

When he reached his room, Jonathan found the door open and the porter waiting inside for his tip. "Is there anything else, sir?" he said, justifying his presence with a small polite nod.

"No…you've been very helpful. I would have had difficulty on the stairs I am sure," he responded, handing the man two half-dimes.

"Thank…you…sir," the porter replied. "If there's anything else you need, sir… anything at all… ask for Marcellus… that's me, sir."

Frank Salisbury was a private detective, or a "shadow" as they were called. He was routinely hired by the angry victims of

various crimes, swindles and scams, to track down the culprits and recover all, or at least some, of the lost money. He rarely resorted to prosecuting criminals in the courts, rather preferring to rely on other, more efficient, means to encourage restitution. He received Hamrick's message as he left his boarding house, on Pearl Street near the Battery, for the Bridewell and City Prison, an imposing stone building in the Park near Broadway and close to the Hotel Hollingsworth.

"You've got ten minutes," the guard grunted as he closed the heavy wooden door, leaving the young scamp in the shadow's clutches. Salisbury thought the boy, hardly more than thirteen, was the spotter, finding marks, for a panel-scam crew that had fleeced his client of nearly one-hundred dollars.

"Boy… you're going from here to the penitentiary, unless you come clean and tell me who they are."

"I don't know beans, mister," the boy protested, but Salisbury would have none of it and he wasted little more time. "Listen you little piece of shit," he growled, twisting the boy's nose between his thumb and the knuckle of his forefinger, pushing him backward against the wall. "Just give me his name…"

The boy shrieked in pain, "alright, alright…"

Salisbury made many commissions by tracking down panel thieves. The scam was so well known that he wondered how it could continue to succeed. But, with the never-ending arrival of first-time visitors to the city, it lived on and on, feeding on a never ending food supply of easy pickings.

It was always the same; he laughed thinking about it. A well dressed woman introduces herself to a gentleman, new to town, and tells him she is destitute and trying to get away from her abusive husband. She is not a prostitute, she says, but is willing to sleep with the gentleman if he would agree to give her three dollars. The unsuspecting chump goes with her to her room. The room is dark; there is only one chair and, naturally, he puts his pants on it. The chair sits against a false wall set up in the room by the grifters and behind which a man is hiding. Later, when the time is right, the accomplice reaches through a sliding panel and steals the man's money from his wallet. He then returns the

wallet to the pants. A loud knock is suddenly heard on the door, followed by angry threats. The woman cries out that it's her husband. The sap grabs his pants and runs out the back door, often not even knowing until much later that he had been robbed. The grifters quickly pack up their paraphernalia, fold up their false wall, and move to a new boarding house.

It was the boy's job to sit in the lobby of a fashionable hotel and watch for the arrival of any single gentlemen of means. The young scamps, lured in by the promise of a quarter or two, rarely knew the real names of their employers, but could give a good description and this was usually enough for Frank Salisbury, who smiled and handed the boy a dollar to compensate for his bloodied nose. "I'm going to let you go. But, when I catch those bastards I'm going to say you ratted them out, so you'd best go back home to wherever you're from."

Jonathan was surprised to see the detective so soon. "Mr. Hamrick… I presume."

"Yes, and you are Mr. Salisbury. How do you do?" Jonathan responded offering his hand. "Please allow me to…"

Hamrick showed Salisbury his letter of introduction from the Roxbury masons. The detective read the letter and said nothing while Jonathan explained, in detail, the purpose for his visit to New York. He told the detective that he had been highly recommended, having himself been a mason and being familiar with the Albany area as well.

"And what exactly would you have me do?" Salisbury asked.

"I'd like you to accompany me, for protection, and to help me to determine the true cause of my son's death." He didn't mention his grandson or that he suspected that the masons may have been involved. "For that I am prepared to pay your expenses and five dollars a day."

Five dollars a day was far more than Salisbury normally averaged in the city and the assignment might last for weeks. He readily agreed.

"I must finish a job here first," he responded, already having forgotten the panel thieves, who, he believed, were long gone, and focusing his attention on busting a gambling scam that promised him a

tidy commission. "If you would be willing to help me, Mr. Hamrick, I think I can wrap it up tonight."

The casino was very elegant and staffed by impeccably trained and attired attendants. It boasted of the finest rosewood furnishings, set on expensive imported carpets. A buffet table of the choicest foods was on display and available to all and no one was required to gamble.

The gaming room, with its roulette and faro tables, was alive with action. Salisbury had told Hamrick that this house was a "skinning den" where unsuspecting suckers would be swindled by a team of well-oiled grifters. Hamrick was to play the part of a naïve visitor, a pushover who would rope in the hustlers. His job was simply to identify the key grifter.

He entered alone, while Salisbury, whose face was well known to the local dodgers and double dealers, and two young toughs in his employ, waited outside. The old man, seemingly confused and a painfully obvious patsy, was immediately targeted as he entered the room.

Hamrick looked down at the green felt top of the faro table and the complete suit of spades, Ace to the King, glued to it. The punters were putting cash down on various cards.

"Place your bets gentleman," the dealer said putting his hand on the "shoe" or box that held the deck.

"Are you going to play mister?" some one near him asked, trying to crowd closer to the action.

"I'm not sure how it works," he answered, priming the interest of the hustlers around him.

Faro was a deceptively simple, and wildly popular, bank game in which the odds of winning were almost even between the punter and the house and it was thought to be almost impossible to cheat. In each round of the game, players bet on what they believed would be the denomination of the next turn of the deck by putting cash money on the table over the facsimile of the card on which they chose to bet.

"It's real simple mister. The dealer turns over two cards. You bet that the one you pick will be the… second… one he turns. If it is, you win. But if it's the… first one, you lose."

Jonathan watched as the dealer slid the first card from the box. "Queen," he said and swept away all the money on the table that was sitting on the Queen. Then the second, or the winner, was called. "Seven… wins," the dealer said.

"That's me!" a happy punter yelped, reaching for his payoff.

Once a bet was down it could not be resituated or removed from the table until that card was won or lost. Jonathan ventured a dollar on the Three. "What about the suit?" he asked and the man next to him answered that it played no role. Only the value of the card counted.

Six… six, split," the dealer announced as the same number came up twice consecutively, to groans around the table.

"That happens two or three times a game," the man said, reading Jonathan's expression. "The house takes half the money on that card."

"Gentlemen, place your bets please." The game was fast and relentless. Jonathan's dollar rode on the Three for two more rounds before he lost it.

Gradually, he became bolder and at one point had five dollars spread across the table. "Queen… winner," the dealer announced and Hamrick felt the rush of excitement as he collected his first reward. The others congratulated him, as there seemed to be a kind of camaraderie building among the punters who were all, like brothers, betting together against the house, and this psychology worked well for the grifters.

Now, with an almost fifty-fifty chance of guessing right, it would seem that little money could be lost. But, in reality, considerable sums were lost, especially on the turn of the last three cards. In order to increase the wagering, a "look out" carefully counted the already played cards. In this way, the players knew which denominations remained in the diminishing deck and were thereby less likely to put dead money on the table. To prevent cheating, the deck was kept in a box, that allowed only the top card to be touched and this seemed foolproof. The problem was… that the deck was reshuffled between games and the dealer was the only person to ever hold the cards.

When only three cards remained in the deck, the dealer asked if anyone wanted to "call the turn." This meant to predict the denomination and the order of the three remaining cards. Allowing that the "look out" had counted correctly and everyone knew the denominations of the last three cards, the odds of correctly predicting the order were six to one and the house payoff was only four to one. This difference alone generated considerable profits for the casino. It was the most exciting point in the game and the engine of the scam. Side bets were common and encouraged.

The grifters crowded around Hamrick and the other marks at the table. One proclaimed, "Damn you, my system has never failed. I know I can call this turn. I'll bet the limit."

The maximum for any bet was set by the house at ten dollars and this meant that no more money could be added to the wager. But, side bets were private and unlimited.

"How sure are you… smart ass," someone challenged and several men laughed.

"I'll tell you how sure I am. I'll match any wager at even money that I will call this turn."

The group buzzed among themselves. "He's nuts…even money… the odds are six to one against him…

"I'll take that bet," a man yelled and laid twenty dollars on the table.

"Is that all you've got?" the better goaded and pulled a one-hundred dollar gold piece from his pocket. "Cover that, you cowards."

"I'll take twenty of that… I will too." Greed is a powerful motive. The punters rushed to put their money down, knowing that the odds were decidedly against the seeming fool.

"I'm getting in on this," the man next to Jonathan said excitedly. "Come on old man, this is damn near a sure thing."

What the pigeons didn't realize was that the dealer had stacked the deck during the shuffle and the grifter already knew what the turn would be.

"Deuce… Five… Jack," the hustler said.

Then the dealer slowly turned the cards. "Deuce… Five… Jack… wins!"

The deck was quickly reshuffled and set up for the next round. The sly grifters grumbled at the man's dumb luck and taunted him to try it again, which of course he did. Playing on the human urge to get even, this scam could easily take hundreds of dollars from unsuspecting victims in the course of an evening. But, Hamrick would not be one of them. His job was now to simply point the man out as he left the casino.

"Stop there… you," Salisbury commanded, pulling his pepperbox pistol from his coat.

"Who are you?" the man responded, clearly frightened as he tried to run back into the casino. His way, however, was blocked by the detective's goons, as was his escape into the street.

"Hand over the money you stole tonight and you won't get hurt."

"What money?" the man bluffed, but the shadow just laughed.

"You cheated my friends and I mean to get it all back," Salisbury barked and his two guerillas grabbed the man by the arms, while the detective found his wallet. "I'll only take the three-hundred you owe me," he said snickering. "Now go back in and tell the other jackasses that the scam didn't work this time. Maybe they'll believe you…"

Salisbury paid his men enough for a night in the tavern and escorted Jonathan back to his hotel.

"This is a rough town, Mr. Salisbury," Hamrick remarked trying to astutely avoid making judgments. He liked Salisbury's decisiveness, but wondered about his methods. "Why not take the thing to the law then?" he asked.

"You mean sue the bastards in court?" the detective responded laughing. "No… this is the only way that always works. There's no police here, no chance to nab them in the act. If you bring a court action they'll just skip town. This is how I earn my living, Hamrick. It's tit for tat, that's all."

"Who's that with the helmet then?" Hamrick asked pointing to a man coming toward them. "Isn't he a policeman?"

Salisbury laughed again. "No… he's a leatherhead… night watch… they walk around the lamp district after dark looking for fires and rousting drunks out of the hoity-toity zone. You're safe enough down here where the gas lights are. But don't ever go north of 14th Street at night."

"The steamboats for Albany depart from the Battery at the foot of Barclay Street," the clerk answered. "It's on the North River side and is the second street above St Paul's Church. It runs down from the park."

"Could you advise me as to the mailing of a letter to Boston?"

"The northern steamboat mail leaves daily. The post office is in the southeast wing of the Exchange Building on Garden Street. It also has an entrance on Wall Street and is directly on your way to the harbor, sir."

Jonathan spent a sleepless night. He had already revealed his true identity to the detective and was now forced to abandon that clandestine part of his plan. What might go wrong next? Was he just an old fool fumbling around in the dark like a blind man he wondered? He felt lost without his wife to confide in and tried to find her in his letter.

My Dearest Rachel,

I am in New York and I am safe. I have achieved my first objective in securing the services of the detective, Frank Salisbury. I don't know what to make of him, though. There is something foreboding and frightening about him, which I cannot fully fathom. He is a rough and ruthless man who takes the law into his own hands and justifies his brutal means by believing that his ends are good. He carries a pistol and I am sure he is not beyond using it. I don't trust him, but I have little choice as I am too old to do this alone.

We are leaving later today by steamboat for Albany and I am hopeful that I will quickly find Thomas.
I will write again if I can. Pray for me.

Your most adoring,
Jon

Chapter Twelve

AT THE EAGLE TAVERN in Albany, Thomas once again met with Jacob Goode. The professor was preparing to go before the New York State Legislature in the matter of steamboat boiler failures and was eager to practice his presentation, which increasingly pointed toward incompetent operators and dangerous practices. Thomas listened with diminishing interest as the thought of a Masonic conspiracy insinuated itself more and more into his mind.

"I've got some good news anyway," Goode said, half smiling. "They have agreed to let me conduct an electrolysis experiment… on an actual steamboat."

"Really… how will that work?" Thomas asked with somewhat renewed enthusiasm.

"I'm going to connect a Voltaic pile to a running steam engine." Goode paused, anticipating a reaction and when none came he continued. "If the electrical current creates enough hydrogen the boiler should burst," he clarified, after noticing Hamrick's puzzled look. "It was invented only a few years ago… by the Italian, Alessandro Volta. Do you know of it?"

Thomas shook his head and Goode explained. "It's a chemical process to produce electricity. By building a battery of these cells we can make a steady strong flow of current."

"Won't that be a bit dangerous?"

"I'll take precautions. It's the kind of experiment that can't be done in a laboratory and the chance to try it is what lured me here in the first place."

"I thought you wanted to get the government to pass some laws, set some standards and regulations?"

"I do… but I don't know how much hope there is in that." He paused and looked around suspiciously, then leaning forward said softly, "I'm going to urge them to petition Washington about it. Only the federal government can effectively regulate the steamboats. I didn't realize how much people here hate this idea of regulation." He spoke almost in a whisper, as the waitress retrieved the first pair of empty cider mugs. "Two more," he mumbled without looking up from his hands, guarding the leather portfolio that held his research and recommendations. "I don't dare let these out of my sight."

"Why… what do you mean?" Thomas asked.

Goode had begun to feel the resentment against him building once his purpose had become widely known. He was the personification of east coast interference in their local lives and, no matter how much they feared the dangers of steamboat travel, they didn't like him. "I'm frightened, Mr. Hamrick. In fact… you shouldn't even be seen with me. These people hate government interference and some of them are damn near fanatical about their freedom. I don't think I'm safe here."

"Do you think the federal government will get into this?" Thomas asked.

"It doesn't look that way, at least not until there's a public outcry and… who knows how much more maiming and death that will take."

"What are you going to tell them, then?"

"Well, there are some things they ought to do locally. First of all, whenever a steamboat is stopped, for any reasons, the engineer needs to open the safety valve… and leave it open… until departure. This business of boosting pressure at the dock in order to make a fast, dramatic getaway is, I'm sure, the biggest single, easily preventable, danger."

"Did you study the explosion of the *Aurora*?" Thomas asked, thinking this may very well have been the cause of his father's death, since the boiler blew up only a few hundred yards after departure.

"Yes… classic… classic case… and this could certainly have been the reason for it."

"I don't see why that kind of rule should be a big problem," Thomas added.

"No, you wouldn't… but believe me it will be; it's the principle of the thing as they say, even something as simple and sensible as this. But, the real outrage will arise when I urge the state legislature to petition Congress to require all steamboats to take out a new license… from the federal government… and meet strict inspection standards, with heavy fines for operating without it… and be required to be re-inspected every twelve months."

"What do you think the chances are that they will go along with it?"

"Zero!" Goode answered abruptly. "But, I'm going to say it anyway, because people need to hear it. We desperately need a discussion of the regulation of business practices in this country and the federal government is the only authority with the power to do it."

Thomas didn't respond and Goode went on with a hint of anger in his voice. "And there's more. Under my proposal, any injuries resulting from the bursting of a boiler, or the uncontrolled escape of steam, will be prima facie evidence of negligence and will require the steamboat operator to prove otherwise. And… any negligence that results in the death of any person will be considered manslaughter to be prosecuted in any applicable federal circuit court."

"You might want to talk to a newspaper editor I met here in Albany," Thomas remarked. "His name is Adrian Quacumbus. He may be able to give you some insights about the people you're dealing with. I'm going there later tonight, if you would care to join me."

"Yes… yes, I've met him." Goode was distracted. "Those three men standing near the bar," he said, furtively motioning with his eyes. "They've been watching me all night."

Thomas glanced over at the men, who were drinking and talking. They didn't look odd or out of place. He was beginning to believe that

Goode was a bit irrational, but thought it harmless to humor him. "They just look a little sloshed to me. Did they threaten you or anything?"

"No… not directly, only with stares, but they're trying to…"

"Do you think you need protection? You could tell the sheriff."

"I don't think the sheriff would be much help," he chuckled. "No… I'm not going anywhere tonight, Mr. Hamrick. I'm heading straight up to my room and I'm going to lock my door until morning."

With that, Goode stood, shook Hamrick's hand and turned to go. Thomas looked over toward the bar and tried to judge the reaction of the three boozed-up men, who watched the professor walk across the room and disappear up the main staircase.

Thomas finished his cider and, with his mind fixed on another meeting with Quacumbus, thought no more about it. He hypnotically paid his tab and left the tavern, never noticing that the three men were already gone. He hurried north along Eagle Street, across State Street to the Public Square. He turned right into a narrow no name lane leading to the river and didn't hear the lurching footsteps careening up behind him until it was too late. As he turned he felt the thud and sharp pain of something heavy and hard slamming into his shoulder; he staggered, but didn't fall.

"Knock da bashhhtard's ass off…" he heard the muddled drunken slur. "We're gonna' teeeach you… a little… lesson… think ya can just come in here…" But, before another blow landed, Thomas slipped away into the darkness of a little alley. He ran as fast as he could on the emotional rush of fear, faster than he had ever run before, and luckily put a few yards between himself and his intoxicated tormentors.

He felt dizzy and weak from the blow and finally fell face down against a wooden fence that blocked the end of the alley. The muggers were almost upon him when a door opened beside him and strong sure hands pulled him quietly in.

"Shhhh," he heard as he slid safely into the arms of his saviors.

They crouched in the darkness and could hear the men stumbling about just beyond the cloaking wall and a drunken voice call out over the fence, "you're dead meat. We'll be waitin' for ya and we'll find yaw ass."

They waited silently for a long time to be sure the goons were gone before the man dared turn up the flame on the small lantern. Thomas recognized him at once to be the runaway slave he had seen, in chains, leaving the steamboat. Huddled around him were his wife and two babies. He suddenly felt deeply indebted to this brave Black man who knew fear and oppression in a way that Hamrick could not even begin to understand. Perhaps it was what urged him, hidden and safe as he was, and against any shred of common sense, to risk everything to help another tortured soul.

Thomas ignored the nagging pain in his injured shoulder and strangely felt safe, hidden away as they were in the dark. "I don't know how to thank you for helping me," he said standing. "I think you saved my life." But the man stopped him.

"No… you wait… wait fo' de angel. She comin' to get us."

Thomas protested… but only mildly. He knew he had no place to go, but back through the streets and the thugs were probably waiting there for him. So he sat, surrounded by his small surrogate family. For a short time no one spoke and then Thomas asked, "who are you… how did you get here?"

"De Quakers brung us. Dey savin us. We's just waitin' on 'em now."

Quaker families, with their moral conviction, formed the highway to freedom for a countless number of runaway slaves, passing them along a network of safe-houses from Philadelphia to Vermont. The route ran right up the Hudson River valley and through the stronghold of pro-slavery sentiment in the north. It was very unusual for fugitive slaves to get this far without help. This little family group was caught, as most were who traveled alone. But fate smiled when Bleeker failed to appear at the appointed time for his hearing and the judge summarily dismissed the case. A sympathetic deputy brought them to the Quaker meeting house, where a hasty midnight gathering had been called to determine what was to be done.

While they waited, the man told Thomas their story. "We's from Virginny. De marsa he hab a big plantation. We hab to wuk hard but dey treat us purty good. Den one dey de marsa he get powerful mad and say

he gonna sell us down de river. But not de chillun. He say he raisin' 'em for de market and we gonna lose 'em. We sho' wants to get away pow'ful bad, mister. So we just runs an hides, an runs some mo' and when we gets here we feeling de misery comin' on us till dis angel come to us and say we gonna find … de promise land."

The door opened and a man plain dressed in Quaker gray appeared. He motioned for them to enter. Looking at Thomas he said, "Thou is not a Friend, but Thou is welcome to attend our meeting."

They entered the meeting room and joined the Friends who were seated in a circle. They sat quietly, men and women together, with their heads bowed and hands folded in their laps. Women in light gray unadorned, bib-front, long sleeve dresses, covered by shawls and aprons. Elegantly simple, pure white cotton caps covered by sheer muslin rested on each bowed head. The men wore modest dark gray over-shirt jackets and square-cut loose fitting shirts with gathered sleeves, stock collars and bows. They all wore breeches with a hook and eye vent at the knee and dark gray, rounded-crown hats with unbound six inch brims, squarely set.

These meetings rarely had agendas, no leaders, only equals, men and women together, who sat silently waiting for Christ to come to them. These were Quakers. They believed that God came to man in the form of an immediate revelation, "the universal and saving light of Christ" as Saint Paul said to the Corinthians: "For to one is given through the Spirit the word of wisdom…" They rejected the letter of Scripture as outward and superficial and embraced the inner sense. They all felt the duty to seek the truth through a personal communion with the Spirit and were obligated to speak, directly and humbly, when they felt moved. The words would face the scrutiny of other minds… and truth would emerge. Unanimity was not sought, nor was a vote ever taken. The weight of moral certitude was expected to prevail. Finally, a woman rose and addressed the strangers.

"Oh, my poor wretched friends, who have known no peace, trust in the Lord and his tender mercies. To him thee are of inestimable worth. Those who are trodden down before Him shall be raised up again in His glory. Ye who are humble, broken and contrite, ye who are the

afflicted ones, lift up thy hearts and put thy trust in Him who suffered for thee. Take heart in the thought that whatever be thy tribulations, how much thee may suffer, that the Lord Jesus Christ is thy Savior."

To these people, the truth was plain and simple and anyone could see it. It was clear from the silent assent that they would hide the helpless runaways who had strayed from their path and try to find a way to make good their escape.

Thomas quietly slipped back out the alley door without ever saying a word. He didn't dare return that night to the Eagle Tavern and Inn. The streets were deserted and he walked quickly along the river to the canal basin in search of Olmstead's boat. He found Amanda, as he hoped he would, sitting alone on the quarterdeck and climbed aboard.

"Are you surprised?" he began, not sure of how she would react to seeing him there so late.

"No," she responded coyly, pretending not to even look up. "I knew you would come. You just can't live without me." It was a playful remark, intended to be no more than light repartee, but he was standing so close to her and in the lantern light she could see some unexplained need reflecting from his eyes.

The emotional drain of the evening's earlier events made him more than ordinarily vulnerable. He was alone, far from home, and for the first time he felt unsure of himself. She was strong and confident, the most beautiful and alluring woman he had ever known; he was already hopelessly in love with her and it confused him.

He put his arms around her waist and gently pulled her up toward him until their lips were inches apart. She put her hands on his shoulders, trying not to say or signal anything, and as she did, her fingers found his torn shirt and she innocently pressed down on the open wound; she heard him faintly wince in pain.

"Tom!" she exclaimed. "What happened to you? You're hurt. Come over here and let me look at that."

"It's nothing. I'll be fine," he responded as she pushed him under the lantern hanging from the awning above them.

"It certainly is something," she replied firmly and ushered him down into the kitchen, where he sat silently while she cleaned and wrapped his wound. As she walked around him his cheek brushed against her dress and he looked up at her. She smiled and with two hands lifted his face until their lips met. It was only one kiss, one unforgettable, wonderful moment, and neither of them spoke of it after that, but they both knew.

"You'd best tell me what happened," she said.

"There are some Blacks, runaways, a man and woman and two babies, now hiding at the Quaker meeting house in town," he blurted out. "They're stranded and in real trouble. Do you know anyone who can help them?"

"At the Quaker meeting house… on Market Street?"

"I think so… near the river."

"The Quakers know how to handle these things," she answered.

"I don't think they do, Mandy. They don't seem to anyway."

"I'll go and see them," she answered, nodding. "My father will do it."

"Your father? What exactly will he do?"

"Sometimes we pick up fugitive slaves at Albany and carry them to Schenectady where another boat takes them through to Buffalo. But, it's getting dangerous. There is very strong resentment in the valley since emancipation."

"He's more than just a preacher then?"

"My father is very committed to the cause of abolitionism… as am I, Tom," she answered raising her eyebrows and making it clear that their relationship would not change anything.

Hamrick had already experienced the confrontational attitude that seemed to be everywhere around them and was now falling helplessly into the abyss of someone else's struggles. "Why do you say it's dangerous?" he questioned.

"Slavery was only abolished last year here in New York, Tom. There were once more slaves right in this state than there were in Georgia. The Hudson River valley is not a safe place for abolitionists,

which is why, once my father got the boat, he stayed mostly in the canal corridor."

The struggle over slavery was escalating dangerously all over the north as radical abolitionism became more and more of an open threat to the south. Amanda had tried to mitigate her father's fanaticism, reason with his moral absolutism, but in the end could not see, herself, any justification for gradualism. She worried that his extreme attitude, and increasingly radical tactics, would ultimately lead to disaster and feared that his ever-widening forays up the valley would ultimately result in tragedy.

"The pro-slavery backlash scares me, Tom. There's a man named Bleeker, a slave hunter, around here right now and he is a brutal and ruthless man. I think he may even be behind the steamboat explosions. Maybe he's trying to intimidate the boatmen who smuggle slaves out."

"It doesn't seem likely to me, Mandy. Those steamboats were carrying a lot of southern planters and their families north for the summer. Why would he want to kill them?"

"I don't know, Tom. He just scares me, that's all." Then she said, with a sense of real urgency. "I think we need to get those poor people out of Albany tonight."

Chapter Thirteen

JONATHAN HAMRICK GRASPED THE MAN'S HAND firmly and pressed his thumb between the joints of the second and third fingers. This was the secret handshake known to all master masons and the man returned the sign. Judge Peter Van Brughe was the most worshipful master of Albany's St. James Masonic Lodge and he looked intently into Hamrick's eyes, leaning forward for the stranger to utter the secret password. When their faces were barely an inch apart Hamrick whispered, "Tubal Cain."

For a few seconds Van Brughe remained silent, squinting with his eyes and looking directly at the old man for any sign of deceit. Jonathan was worried that he would not be believed, but then the lodge master finally nodded and smiled saying, "Jonathan Hamrick, you will now salute the senior and junior wardens, and convince them as well that you are truly one of us."

Jonathan performed the same ritual with the wardens and was then presented by Van Brughe with a white lamb's skin apron. "Before donning this ancient symbol of Masonic purity and being admitted to the inner sanctum of this ancient temple, we must be certain that you understand your obligation as a master mason. Tell us brother Hamrick, what is that obligation?"

Jonathan said the words that all master masons knew. "I promise and swear that a master mason's secrets, given to me in charge as such,

and I knowing them to be such, shall remain as secure and inviolable in my breast, as in his own."

"You are bound by these words, under no less of a penalty than to have your body severed in two and your bowels burnt to ashes and scattered before the four winds of heaven. And this we will do to you, should you ever violate any part of this sacred oath. Do you swear?"

"I do."

"Say: I do, so help me… God," Van Brughe growled in a sinister, almost angry, voice that told Jonathan that this was no idle threat.

"So help me, God," he quickly added.

The master, being satisfied that Hamrick was indeed a true brother, approached him and said, "under the due guard and sign of a fellow master mason I approach you from the east, the direction of light and wisdom."

Jonathan held his arms out, with his elbows bent to form a square, and then gave the solemn sign of distress… by suddenly dropping his hands to his side saying mournfully, "O Lord my God! Is there no help for a widow's son?"

"As a master mason you have promised, and sworn, not to ever give the grand hailing sign of distress, except for the most urgent of causes. Speak, brother Hamrick. What is your plight?"

The men retired to a private parlor where no luxury or comfort was spared. The Masonic lodge was a male bastion, classically designed and expensively furnished. There were several spaces flanking the main dining room on the second floor, a library, considered to be the best in Albany, and a lounge with smaller adjoining smoking, billiards and card rooms. On the third floor were several discreet bedroom suites for members.

The finest French cognac slid down the sides of the most exclusive Baccarat lead crystal snifters and, in honor of the newest rage, handmade imported Cuban cigars were passed around. "Do you smoke cigars, Mr. Hamrick? We have the best habanos… or a pipe perhaps… if you prefer," Van Brughe said ushering Jonathan into the richly appointed and furnished room. About a dozen men gathered around the dark cold marble fireplace and settled into the gleaming horse-hair upholstered

classical mahogany sofas and overstuffed wingback easy chairs. The atmosphere was comfortable and, most of all, private.

"Let me introduce our secretary, Evert Van Eps," Van Brughe began, "and our treasurer, Joseph Yates."

After reading Hamrick's letter from the Roxbury masons, Van Eps asked, "do you know Ebenezer Shrewsbury, by any chance, Mr. Hamrick?"

"No sir, I do not," Jonathan replied and Van Eps responded.

"I believe he is a brother mason in your lodge."

"That could very well be, sir; I'm afraid I have fallen out of touch with the others." Jonathan tried to gauge if the man were suspicious or merely reaching for common ground, but couldn't tell.

"Mr. Hamrick has asked for our help gentleman." Van Brughe got right to the point. "Tell us how we can be of service?"

Jonathan was probing, unsure of the involvement, if any, of these very men in Josiah's death. He was looking for any sign that might give him a clue. "I have come to recover the remains of my son. He was killed in the explosion on the steamboat, *Aurora*. His name was Josiah Hamrick and he was here seeking new investment opportunities. Did anyone meet him or know what exactly he was involved with?"

A low murmur spread across the room as heads shook negatively; for a few seconds, no one spoke. Then a voice responded. "I can speak of those events, Mr. Hamrick. My name is Cornelius Pootman. I am the sheriff of Albany County."

"As can I," came another response and coroner Ryckman introduced himself.

The two officials assured Jonathan that no foul play had befallen his son and Judge Van Brughe added, "if you have any evidence of anything, Mr. Hamrick, bring it forward and rest assured that I will investigate it vigorously."

"Thank you, gentlemen," Jonathan answered politely. "It is gratifying to know that one has friends to help and support him." But he wasn't convinced.

"That's what the masons are about, as you well know, brother," Ryckman responded.

"And we are in the best position to help you as well," Van Brughe added. "It's a shame that your boy didn't come to us with his plan, as, with our connections, we certainly could have guided him. There's no man of consequence in this county who is not himself a mason… or who is not under our influence." There was a sinister sense of entitlement in the man's tone.

The implication was obvious and the hint of corruption sent a slight shiver along Hamrick's spine as he remembered his wife's words. "It's a secret club… and nothing more…" Jonathan regained his composure and used the opening. "Are there good long term money-making chances here then?" he asked, sounding as naïve as possible and adjusting the focus of the meeting significantly.

"Indeed there are, sir," Van Brughe answered enthusiastically. "If one is prepared to take some risk, that is."

"I certainly understand risk, in the shipping business, judge, but…"

"But then, we know how to minimize risk," Van Brughe interrupted. "The big money is made in the back rooms, Mr. Hamrick, through public connections and private knowledge. This is our domain."

"I certainly am interested in getting your advice, judge," Hamrick contrived. But Van Brughe was moving more slowly and deliberately.

"As you are from Boston, Mr. Hamrick, I am sure you enjoy oysters."

"I do indeed, sir."

"We have a fabulous chef at the Excelsior Hotel who prepares things for us on these evenings. Tonight, in honor of our distinguished guest from Boston, I asked him to do oysters."

"Fresh oysters?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Hamrick. This is the age of steam! We have them here now and as fresh as you do on Cape Cod. Let's retire to the study where we can relax and perhaps talk some more about the many investment possibilities."

Several of the men, seeming to know not to interfere, adjourned to the card and billiards rooms. Van Brughe, with lodge secretary Van Eps and lodge treasurer Yates, ushered Hamrick to the private office in the

back. As they passed through the kitchen, Van Brughe paused. "Mr. Hamrick let me introduce you to our chef, Pierre."

The two men shook hands and Van Brughe added, "tell us what you have for tonight, Pierre."

"Oysters, monsieur, as you requested, steamed in white wine with a little nutmeg and pepper."

"Wonderful, Pierre, I can't wait."

The oysters were piled, in small bowls, over buttered toast, with the steaming broth poured over it all. It was a soggy, but satisfying and savory, midnight meal and was washed down with several glasses of the finest French white.

"What is this wine?" Jonathan asked.

"Pouilly…" Van Brughe responded with a hint of pride, "it's getting very popular in Paris and is increasingly harder and harder to get. But we have our ways."

"It's wonderful," Jonathan complimented.

"It's grown on the hillsides of the Loire Valley, a place called the Couteaux de Lossery," Yates joined in. "Even the Excelsior can't get it in quantity."

Sensing that the opening was quickly narrowing, Jonathan pressed. "I would appreciate your thoughts on how I might share, shall we say, in your booming economy."

Van Eps and Yates looked over at Van Brughe who quietly closed the door and began. "The amount of traffic on the Erie Canal is growing dramatically, Mr. Hamrick. Presently there is a small abutment on the river, upstream from the guard lock, which creates slack water for exiting canal boats, but the sheer number of vessels arriving daily is increasing so rapidly that this will not suffice for much longer."

He paused to pour another glass of wine and after Jonathan gestured his refusal, went on. "Certain interests… have applied for a charter from the state of New York, to create a corporation that will finance the construction of a breakwater in the Hudson River, parallel to the shore, to create a much bigger basin at the terminus of the canal, a harbor, in fact. This will all be done with natural fill and will result in an artificial island about a mile long and about one-hundred feet wide,

angling out from the shore above the lock. The basin will be about forty acres of slack water. The corporation… will then own this new land… which will be sold, or leased-out, to various commercial interests for warehouses, wharfs, and so forth. We are the corporation, Mr. Hamrick and there's millions to be made."

"Are you suggesting that I buy stock in this venture?" Jonathan asked.

The three men all laughed almost as one. "There will be the usual public sale of stock on the New York Stock Exchange," Van Brughe began again, nodding, "if the state legislature grants the charter… but… by then, this tip will be worthless. No… that's not it. There are problems that need to be addressed in order to get the charter in the first place. Several important people need to be encouraged?"

"What sort of people… local politicians?" Jonathan asked, as though wholly uninitiated in the niceties of insider deals.

"No… the pols stand to profit mightily and we have adequate connections here. The city of Albany gets the entire waterfront on the mainland side, while we get the island. The city pays nothing, but gets a tremendous spike in the value of otherwise useless land, made ripe for development. With their inside knowledge they will make a fortune, believe me."

"I'm not quite sure I follow you," Jonathan remarked, urging Van Brughe to cut to the chase.

"We need to bring new investors into the original partnership in order to raise enough capital to convince the key deal makers that we can succeed. The opportunity is there for you. The risk is small when you consider the potential reward."

"What exactly is the problem?" Hamrick asked.

"Certain people are worried about the impact of the Dartmouth College decision on the legislature's ability to repeal or revoke the charter if we have difficulty finishing the project, so they are insisting on a substantial up-front commitment from us. They want us to buy enough of their land to guarantee them a windfall, even if we fail to build the basin."

"So you are saying that you need investors to buy presently worthless land, owned by the right people, at high prices?"

"Exactly," Yates interjected. "But… when the basin is built this land will skyrocket in value!"

"Precisely! In the end everyone gets rich," Van Brughe assured.

"Isn't there a huge risk that if the state later repeals the charter, the corporation could lose everything?"

"We believe the Dartmouth decision will prevent that. Besides, any property acquired by the corporation, as a part of the charter, is private property and can't be forfeited to, or seized by, the state, except, of course, by power of eminent domain, which is highly unlikely. It will end up in trust for the shareholders of the corporation. We've thought it through, Mr. Hamrick, the plan is foolproof."

The darkness spilled silently over them. The western canal stretched away shrinking into the endless unknown and they stood at the start of all of its promise. As they walked along beside it neither spoke. First their fingers touched, then hands clasped. Their steps slowed to a kind of rhythm as though they were dancing and for a time they dreamed the dreams of the young.

"Look out there, Tom. It's an endless land we live in. What it must be like to leave everything behind and just go. I feel so driven to do that sometimes. I can't help thinking how brave they are and how frightened they must be, to strike out into the unknown like that."

"Somehow I can't picture you… as a pioneer," he joked gently.

She stopped him and said, "Tom… I'm serious… not so much about moving west… just getting away from here, being finally able to rule my own life, to make my own choices. Don't you feel that way too sometimes?"

"Yes… I guess I do…" But life isn't that simple, he thought to himself, especially now that his father was dead. There was the business to run and… his grandparents were in their eighties. What choices did he really have? The reality of it had only lately become a worry. He was only twenty-one and his future was already fixed for him. He had always known this would happen, but now he had to face it.

When he didn't speak, she began again. "Don't you want to do something important, to be useful and to know that your life has meaning?"

She seemed so sincere and idealistic to him, almost musical in the way she spoke and rhythmic in the way she moved. He was fully captivated by her, especially her confidence that she could control her own future and not be a pawn of circumstance, while he felt overwhelmed by the specter of an unknown future and the responsibilities that had suddenly begun to narrow his own options. "Don't you want to settle down? What greater meaning could there be for a life than to have children and raise a family?" he offered.

"I don't think we should have to make that kind of a choice. We can't ignore the world around us, Tom. There are so many injustices in it. I won't abide it, Tom. I can't sit by and do nothing. I guess it's my own sense of mortality. Maybe if I were a butterfly blithely flitting across some field with no awareness I wouldn't feel this need so strongly."

Her words called forth in him images of the poor slave family he had left behind and most of all he remembered their eyes… and the fear in the face of the father. He knew the feeling of obligation and accountability the man must have felt for the safety of his family, his babies, and how desperate and helpless he was at that moment, huddled and hiding in the dark.

"I want to do something about them," she continued. "Don't you see how everything is connected and how every injustice impacts us all?"

"Your father…" he began, but she interrupted tersely.

"My father?"

"He's an abolitionist, a preacher, surely…"

"My father is a fool, Tom. He's a fanatical fool who believes that evil can be beaten back by brute force. His world would be no better than the one he hates so much."

The sudden force of her emotional outburst took him by surprise and he had no ready response. "What do you mean, Mandy…? I thought…"

"He's a very angry man, Tom and it's his venomous sense of vengeance that really frightens me."

Hamrick remembered her father's words and his bizarre behavior at the revival meeting, but had since given it no thought. Now he began to fear that Amanda might be in some danger. "Is he mentally stable? Surely he's not a violent man?" he asked.

Amanda responded defensively, with a sense of vaguely understood guilt at having betrayed him with her words. "He hasn't always been this way. He was a wonderful father once; when I was a little girl I was always with him. I used to think he knew everything and he made the world seem so beautiful and exciting and I felt safe and happy." Then after a pause she added, "but as I grew older… somehow he changed… or… maybe I changed."

Hamrick felt nervous, trying not to let her confessions somehow shatter the idealized image he had of her. He searched for the right words, but before he found any she continued.

"He dwelled more and more on how much deceit and duplicity there was in the world and how much hypocrisy. He said I wasn't a child any longer and needed to understand that evil exists and must be stopped."

"But he's a good man, Mandy, deep down he wants what's right. You believe in the same things, I think… don't you?"

"It was natural for me to become part of his causes, especially helping runaway slaves, but he wasn't just motivated by Christian charity, believe me; it was almost like revenge for him, as though he needed to pay back the deceivers and the pretenders, that it was his purpose in life to expose their frauds. And lately, especially since Caleb was killed, he has become distant and as though possessed by demons. He's so closed-minded; he leaves no room for compromise anymore. It's as though he really doesn't want to solve the injustices he rails about, but only to punish people. He said there were things worth dying for… and things worth… killing for."

"How did he first become involved with all of this?" Hamrick asked hoping to reorient the conversation toward cold reason, but in her answer she remained emotional and intuitive.

"My grandfather Olmstead was a Presbyterian elder, he was a pastor, highly respected in the church, but he was very strict and rigid, almost unreasonable sometimes. I remember my father always addressed him with, yes sir or no sir… right up to his death."

"But he followed in his footsteps; that must mean something," Thomas commented.

"When my father began his evangelical ministry he refused to have anything to do with the Presbyterians. He said they were all hypocrites. I knew he was talking about my grandfather and that there was a lot more buried there that I never knew about."

He had no response and she added, "whatever it was, he can't get free of it… even now, and that's what scares me, Tom."

Chapter Fourteen

IT WAS DUSK AND A MURKY GLOOM was fast settling over the river. A light rain had been falling for hours when Thomas and Amanda, guiding the intrepid runaway slaves, left the Quaker meeting house. It was a sad, but noble, procession across Pearl and up Fox Street, skirting the Public Square and then, through the muddy fields, to the cemetery. The smoky shadows of twilight had already surrendered to the blackness of night before the little band reached the spot where they were to wait for Samuel to come and guide them through the woods to the canal turnaround basin, above the last lock.

A cold gust flurried over and around them. "It's starting to get bad, Tom. We've got to get these babies under cover," Amanda said just as the storm began to break and the sprinkle grew suddenly into a raging torrent. Sheets of wind driven rain, mixed with hail, came in waves and they were soon soaked through to the skin.

"The vault!" Thomas yelled to be heard above the din of pelting ice and water.

Much of the cemetery had foolishly been built on low and marshy land and the above ground vault, at the top of a small hill, was used to keep bodies sealed and safe before burial. It was a long low series of stone arches covered with earth and planted over with grass, having the look of a tunnel. "The door is open!"

"I hope he comes soon," Amanda said, helping the young mother unwrap her precious bundle, lovingly protected against her breast.

"What is her name?" Amanda asked.

"Danni-Mae," the woman answered proudly. The baby was sleeping and, miraculously, warm and dry.

"She's beautiful," Amanda said warmly and the woman smiled.

They sat, huddled together, and waited, while the deluge pounded down on their earthen roof and fell cascading, like a curtain, across the open doorway, where Tom stood to watch for Samuel.

"Thomas told me that you ran away from a plantation in Virginia," Amanda asked, curious to learn more about these tormented souls for whom she felt an almost unnatural obligation, almost as though she were personally responsible for slavery and all of its horrors.

The man answered, "yes'm, we belonged ta da marse John. He hab a big plantation."

"Your name is Luke, I was told."

"Yes'm… Luke."

"What made you run away, Luke? Wasn't your master a good man?"

"I usta think he was a good man, but I knows betta now. Da marse was a preacher, but he could get pow'ful ornery. He whupped us good sometime, when it suit 'em. He had big buck do the whuppin for 'em… He liketa tore a man open wid dat whip a his… But mostly dey treated us good, I guess."

"Dey was fixin' ta sell us, Missy," Lucy broke in.

Luke went on, "I nebber bin sold befo'. It ain't so bad dey sez. But dey fixin' ta sell us to da slave traders. Dey gonna take Lucy and me down south, but da marse, he gonna keep the chillun. Ain't no way we gonna bide by dat. Lucy say we gonna run wid da chillun. We gonna run ta da north… and dats just what we done."

"And no one helped you? That must have been very hard Luke."

"It weren't so bad, Missy. We had some cornbread and beans and we brung dat wid us. And one time I done broke inta a smokehouse and took a ham. Dat do us fo' a long time. Dat was wrong… but I reckon I had ta do it. I don't want nothin' nobody else got. I ain't got no money,

but I don't owe nobody nothin' neither… speppin you and deez here Quakers. Thank da Lord fo' dem Quakers."

"You're very brave Luke," she said and then, "and you are too Lucy, you're both much braver than I am."

"Twernt dat bad, Missy," Luke said self-consciously. "De wedder was mighty warm and we had no trouble… 'till we gets here dat is… I just wanna be free, Missy. I want my chillun to be free."

It was very dark when Samuel led them along the path he knew that circled around the town, a little below the canal, and back down to the river. It went through the briary thickets and was mostly unused, except for the fruit pickers. The marsh was thick with raspberries that time of year and they were all around them, plump, ripe and ready to eat, but the light from the canal boat nighthawker he carried was keenly focused and cut too narrow a swath through the sooty shadows for them to be seen.

"Your father has gone east to Poughkeepsie, Amanda. I don't think he's going to like this," Harriet Olmstead warned her daughter.

"We have to take them through to Utica, mother, you know that."

Amanda ushered the little family down into the sleeping quarters. "You'll sleep in here," she said pointing to the bunk beds in the first bedroom. "I'll sleep in with you, mother, and Sammy can stay in the mule house. We'll start at dawn."

"You must be very hungry," Harriet said. "I'm going to fix you something, but first let us pray for your deliverance." They closed into a tight circle and held each other's hands while Amanda recited a passage from the Bible.

"Let me read you something from your namesake, Luke," she began. "And he said to them: take nothing for your journey, neither staff, nor scrip, nor bread, nor money; neither have two coats. And whatsoever house you shall enter into, abide there and depart not from thence. And whosoever will not receive you, when ye go out of that city, shake off even the dust of your feet, for a testimony against them."

The man's response surprised them. "Dose sure is purty words, Missy. Dey don't allow us no religion. Don't gib us no book learnin'

neither. I wanna learn sumtin' Missy… but in all my deys I ain't never bin learnt nothin'. I bin a growd man and I cain't read no writin'… cain't print nothin' neither. Lord, I want to know how ta say writin'."

"Why do I have to sleep with the mules?" Samuel erupted in an angry tone. He had lately seemed irritable and overly petulant to his mother and she tried to tread lightly, knowing that he was taking the death of his only brother very hard.

"But you said you liked to sleep in the mule house."

"No… I didn't," he reacted instantly… "You're always telling me what to do… I don't give a shit about the gaw-damn mule house… I'm sick and tired a them stupid mules," and he stormed away, slamming the galley door behind him.

"Land sakes, he's growing like a weed. He's already out of his britches again," Harriet said, a bit apologetically, in the direction of Thomas and Amanda.

Amanda responded. "He so looked up to Caleb. You can see it in everything he does. He imitates his walk and his talk, even his way of sitting and eating."

Mrs. Olmstead went on, "now that his brother is gone I fear he will never find himself. I don't know him anymore; he's gotten so distant… and he gets so irritable."

"Maybe I can talk to him?" Hamrick offered in a rising tone, becoming himself uncomfortable with this new unasked-for family intimacy.

Amanda walked up to the quarterdeck with Thomas and added, "he doesn't get any guidance from my father, Tom. He thinks he's just bossed around and put down and it's not entirely untrue. I think he might like to talk to you…"

The rain had stopped and the night sky was breaking clear. The last of the storm clouds were thinning away to the east, promising a bright dawn for the new day. "Looks like it's going to be nice tomorrow," Thomas began carefully.

"Did they send you down to the mule house too?" Samuel answered, somewhat rudely.

"Yea…I reckon they did," Thomas said with a chuckle that began to disarm the boy. "Do you mind if I stay in here with you?"

Samuel didn't answer and Thomas continued. "Where do you sleep down here anyway?"

"It's best to stay up on the roof, if it ain't rainin'. It smells better, that's for sure."

"What do you do now?"

"Ain't nothin' to do, just wait 'till tomorrow."

"You must know a lot about mules?" Thomas tried again.

"Ain't nothing ta know. They's just dumb mules. They walk all day and that's what I do too, walk all day, skinnin' their sorry asses."

It took a while to break beyond the barrier the boy had erected and later, much later, the two were lying on their backs up on the mule house roof, looking at the stars, when Samuel asked, "you fancy my sister don't ya?"

Thomas's answer was honest and direct and it told Samuel that this man could be trusted. "Yes, Sam I sure do."

"Did ya tell her then?"

"Well, sort of… I think she knows."

"Gonna get married then?"

"I… I don't know… it's too early to say that… but…"

"Yea, you will. She can't stand it here any more than me?"

Thomas tried to avoid the shoals he saw ahead. "What about you Sam? Do you have a girl friend?"

"I can't get no girl friend. Look at the clothes I got and the job I got. I ain't nothin' but a monkey. Girls just laugh at me." Thomas searched for some adequate answer, but before he could speak Samuel went on. "Don't matter anyhow. I'm fixin' ta get outta here. I got a mind ta go west… goin' ta Ohio."

Thomas listened quietly as Samuel poured forth his fantasy and his plan. The Ohio Valley was the new west, the Promised Land and Thomas wondered how the boy knew so much about it. "There's a road now, they call the Cumberland Road…goes through ta Wheeling…

right on the river. And there's steamboats up there and I'm gonna get a job on one of 'em…" Then Thomas remembered that it had been Caleb's dream as well. How many nights had they relaxed here together, just the two of them, talking and looking at the stars, he wondered?

"Tom, come quick," Amanda whispered loudly, waking Hamrick with a sense of urgency that was hardly hidden by her obvious efforts to be discreet. "Something terrible has happened."

Hamrick, half-asleep, followed her along the gunnels to the family quarters. The sun was well above the horizon and Samuel was already hitching the mules. Amanda said nothing until they were in the kitchen and even then she looked here and there out the small porthole window, toward the canal bank, pressing her cheek against the frame to squeeze out every lateral inch of view.

"What's wrong, Mandy?" Thomas asked with a puzzled expression, never before having seen her so agitated.

"It's Bleeker," she said, her bulging eyes threatening to burst. "He's here and wants us to take him up the canal!"

"The slave hunter?" he reacted with a frown of disbelief.

"Maybe he followed us," she speculated, "last night, from the Quaker house."

"I don't think so, Mandy. If he saw us, why would he wait until now? Why wouldn't he just bring the sheriff?"

"Well, what else could he want?" she answered impatiently and obviously overwrought.

"Where is he now?" Thomas asked, trying to make sense of it in his mind.

"He's gone back to get his bag… and he said he'd board above the guard lock."

"Why are you taking him?" he questioned innocently and incurring her testy response.

"What else could I do? He saw the sign. We advertise for passengers. How could I say no? That would have made him more suspicious."

"Where will he ride?" Thomas probed, beginning to tread lightly and search for a way to move forward.

"We let the passengers ride on the quarterdeck, under the awning. That's right on top of us, Tom. What if the baby cries or…"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. He probably knows nothing. Keep the galley door locked and act normal."

"Will you come with us, Tom? I'd feel better, in case he…" Suddenly a vague anxiety overcame her. Why do I feel weak and afraid at this moment she wondered? Why am I asking him to protect me? It seems demeaning somehow; yet I can't help it.

"Yes, of course I will," he answered instinctively and then asked, "where is your father?"

"He's gone to Poughkeepsie," she answered and then went on in a rapid nervous staccato. "He'll be gone for a few days. I left word at the weigh lock. That's where he'll look for us. My mother is going to stay down below with the people. I'm so glad you're coming, Tom. There's a lot of locks between here and Schenectady and I'll have to jump on and off and I didn't dare leave him here alone." Amanda's voice and the feel of her outpouring betrayed a real fear of Bleeker. Thomas saw it and tried to help her control it.

"Everything will be alright, Mandy," he reassured her. "He won't find them."

"I'm scared, Tom. My father is very well known to these people and they're trying to get him; and he knows it and he's getting more and more fanatical. That meeting… in Poughkeepsie… it's with some Black abolitionists from the city. They're getting very aggressive now and they are starting vigilante groups to protect themselves and help the fugitives. It's going to get violent, Tom; I know it is. This is only the beginning. They want to come up the valley to confront the southern vacationers and my father has joined them. He took his sword with him."

Thomas had always equated abolitionism with gradual change brought about by moral persuasion. Relocation back to Africa was a popular notion and the fear of a widespread assault on private property seemed to prevent any rapid rush toward unqualified emancipation. But, as the free Black population in the north grew, so did their impatience.

There was also, for obvious reasons, little regard among them for the right of private property. What were now being heard were the impassioned calls for self-defense and the open threat of violence.

Bleeker boarded just above the guard lock as he said he would. He sat on the hatch cover right above the sleeping cabin and didn't come back to the quarterdeck as Amanda had expected. Only a few inches below him, and separated by the barest of wooden barriers, the babies slept in their mother's arms.

"Do something, Tom," she whispered. "They're right under him. What if he hears them?"

Hamrick, with as much calmness and composure as he could muster, slipped down along the side rail to the decking above the bedroom and climbed up to where Bleeker was sitting. Ordinarily, Olmstead carried only various lumber products that did not require protection from the rain, but his boat had been built with a sealed cargo hold for grain and flour, as well. It was in this protected place that he had built the family sleeping quarters.

"Good morning, sir," Thomas ventured, extending his hand toward the man, who looked up and nodded silently. For a few seconds the two paused, as though suspended in time, and Amanda held her breath, hoping that Bleeker suspected nothing.

"How do you do?" Bleeker responded blandly.

"The lady captain would like to invite you onto the quarterdeck," Hamrick said motioning with his head. "It's much more pleasant under the awning."

Bleeker looked back at Amanda and nodded. "I thank the lady, but I'm comfortable enough right here."

"My name is Thomas Hamrick," he began again, looking for a second chance to engage and distract the danger. "Where are you headed, if you don't mind my asking?"

Bleeker's answer was shockingly blunt. "I am a bounty hunter, Mr. Hamrick. I go wherever that takes me."

Hamrick felt his heart pound, but maintained his composure and replied, "do you think you will catch any slaves on this canal?" realizing too late that his tone of voice was revealing.

"They're all around us, perhaps on this boat even," Bleeker answered menacingly and then went on, "but, today I'm just a tourist, gawking at the canal, the aqueducts over the Mohawk and the falls at Cohoes. I've been to Albany a hundred times, and to Schenectady by stage and beyond, but I have never traveled this stretch of the ditch."

Thomas wanted to believe him. The first twenty miles of the canal were lock laden and slow, taking a roundabout course, to service the apple orchards north of the Mohawk River, before swinging south and west. Only travelers burdened with heavy baggage bothered to travel this section by boat.

"Yes," Thomas said, his eyes riveted on Bleeker's black bag. "I wondered why you didn't take the stage to Schenectady, since you're only carrying that one small suitcase."

But Bleeker didn't bite. "And you, Mr. Hamrick, you're a Yankee. I can tell. What are you doing here?"

"I too am a tourist… of sorts at least. I'm seeing the country in hopes of finding a good trade or a business to enter."

"Are you a Yankee aristocrat or a Yankee peddler?" Bleeker responded suddenly, startling Thomas, who could sense a hint of hostility in the man's voice and wasn't sure how to respond.

"I guess I'm the second one. I'm surely no aristocrat."

"You're no working man either," Bleeker said, looking Thomas up and down. "And I can tell you disapprove of me and what I do. Don't deny it, Hamrick. You Yankees are all alike."

"I mean you no disrespect, sir," Thomas answered defensively.

"Tell me then," the slave hunter challenged, "do you disapprove of me and what I do?"

"Yes, I suppose I do, sir. I am opposed to slavery and hope to one day to see it abolished."

"And do you believe in racial equality as well?"

Fearing that his unexpected confrontation with the man could escalate into disaster, Thomas retreated. "I do not wish to argue with you, sir. I was merely being courteous."

But, Bleeker wasn't done. "Without southern plantation slavery keeping the Blacks where they belong, free white labor would cease to exist in the rest of this country. It would be best not to disturb it, Hamrick, just leave slavery where it is."

"What makes you think that slavery will stay where it is?" Thomas replied.

Chapter Fifteen

BLEEKER SAT ON THE SLEEPING CABIN ROOF for the first few unencumbered miles northward toward Troy, along the west bank of the Hudson. At a point where a feeder from the great northern canal entered the Erie, a string of seventeen locks, needed to begin lifting the canal out of the Hudson valley, slowed their pace to an agonizing stop and go.

These locks rarely rested, day or night, with boats moving relentlessly in both directions. It would take hours to travel the barely five miles more to get around Cohoes Falls and a local service for trapped tourists and travelers had sprung up there. Carriages were available for hire and the weary packet boat passengers, going west, eagerly paid to avoid the agony of boredom. Bleeker was among them and Thomas joined him.

"Tell me, Hamrick," Bleeker began as the two men climbed into one of the six-passenger wagonettes that waited by the tow path. "Are you traveling on business or for pleasure?"

It was an efficient, if uncomfortable, two-horse hitch that would carry them over the bumpy and rutted road to Cohoes Falls. "Mostly business I guess," Hamrick mumbled absently, thinking to himself about how important slavery seemed to have become to him and how fascinated he was by Amanda Olmstead. She was so passionate and committed. How shallow and superficial he thought he must appear to her, searching for financial investments, devoting his life to making

money, while she saw so much more… "I am curious though, about you, Bleeker," he quickly reoriented himself and said, perhaps a bit too derisively, "do you get paid in commissions for each poor bastard you drag back into slavery?"

Bleeker glanced over at him with a dismissive smile and then deflected the comment, "I understand that there's a kitchen boat at the lower aqueduct just above the falls. I wonder if they have anything decent…"

"I don't mean to insult you, sir, but it does seem to be a rather nasty way to make a living."

"You are persistent, sir," Bleeker responded, seemingly amused. "Yes, it can be, especially as here in the north there are so many, such as yourself, who are opposed to slavery. But, we have our allies as well. I have a network of slave nabbers, all up and down the valley, local farmers who spot the runaways and hold them until I can get there. The poor fools never know who might be a nabber. Some of these chumps will just walk right into a quickly locked barn or shed."

Thomas reacted, "is that legal? I mean they don't have the authority to…" Bleeker laughed, causing Thomas to pause before continuing. "How do you even know you have the right person?"

"Look, Hamrick, right now I've got warrants from South Carolina for eight runaway Blacks. I've got names and descriptions. If I think it's him…it's him, that's all."

"But, what if you're wrong? What about the law?"

"The law!" Bleeker reacted mockingly. "It is the law!"

"Yes, it is; but that will change?"

"How can it change, Hamrick, without destroying civilization itself? It would be an intolerable affront to the property rights of too many people."

"So you see no solution, Bleeker? Is there any way to end slavery peacefully?"

"Not unless it is done voluntarily by the slaveholders themselves? This is the only way it could possibly happen. To try to impose emancipation on the South will lead immediately to bloodshed and war; I have no doubt."

Hamrick was unable to respond and thought to himself, we perhaps more than any other people, seem to have glorified violent resistance to anything perceived to be oppression. It will no doubt be our most telling heritage from a revolution that legitimized taking the law into one's own hands.

The cataract at Cohoes cascades down for sixty or more feet through a narrow, where the mighty Mohawk is forced between two sheer walls of rock. The roar could clearly be heard from some distance away, and even above the chatter of conversation in the coach. The river, over one-thousand feet wide, was swollen with its Spring flood and a wall of water washed in a solid mass over the precipice, crashing into a hundred separate streams, rushing headlong between the jagged outcroppings of shale. Hamrick watched it violently rolling into a roiling torrent below the fall and then bubbling up in a white foam that almost stopped and then slowly floated away down stream. He thought about Luke and Lucy and their babies hiding in the line boat and couldn't let it rest.

"What about the rights of the Africans? Aren't they people too?"

"The African is perfectly suited to slavery!"

"And how is that sir?"

"He, is first of all, cares little for personal liberty, this being clear from the widespread existence of slavery on the African continent."

"Why then do they run away?" Thomas challenged.

"He is a natural nomad, Hamrick," Bleeker responded disdainfully. "It is in his nature to evade responsibility. He has no strong domestic ties that bind civilized men, no strong kindred ties, little or no longing for lost family and absolutely no sense of homesickness or love of country."

Thomas thought again about Luke and Lucy. "But they do, Bleeker, you're wrong," Thomas blurted out, but Bleeker wasn't listening.

"Missionaries, who have visited these places in Africa, assert unequivocally that marriage means nothing to them. Love and affection shown to a wife is unheard of, while they bow-down to chiefs and priests and other symbols of authority. Perhaps that is why they respect their

parents and care little for their children. I ask you, sir, is this then not the material out of which slaves ought to be made?"

It was already early afternoon when the two men caught up with the Olmstead boat. "What does he want?" she almost pleaded. "Did you find out anything? I don't know how much more of this I can stand."

"He told me his job was done and that he would get off at Little Falls, or go back on the next packet boat we see," Thomas said climbing up to the quarterdeck and trying to calm her nerves.

"Was that all he said?" She reacted nervously. "What job? Why did he get back on? What job is he talking about?"

"Relax, Mandy. You're making more out of this than needs be." Thomas handed her a dollar coin and added, "he gave you this and asked me to tell you…"

"He's up to something, Tom, I know he is. He never lets go of that infernal black bag," she went on nervously. "We're going to push right on past Schenectady to the side cut at Little Falls before resting. We'll get rid of him tonight, one way or another."

Hamrick could feel the almost insurmountable chasm that had grown to separate the two sides of this increasingly explosive issue. There was little or no room left for conversation, much less compromise.

"Go back up there, Tom and don't take your eyes off of him."

THOMAS HAMRICK'S NOTEBOOK: FRIDAY, JUNE 27, 1828.

I must admit I have never before been so personally impacted by this business of emancipation. It now seems very real to me and no longer just a topic for polite debate. It is a subject that I would dearly prefer to avoid, but as it is so intimately a part of her life, I fear I will not be able to. She is so deeply driven by the need to help these people.

Her father is a wrongheaded fanatic for whom the end seems to justify the means. She fears him herself, perhaps as much as she fears the slave hunter, Bleeker. It's clear to me that the abolitionists are becoming more zealous and less tempered, more prone to exaggeration and the appeal to passion than to calm and careful progress toward a measured goal. Yet, what alternative is there when neither side will countenance any level of compromise?

I readily concede that I am not well acquainted with abolitionists, but if Olmstead is any fair measure, I can see that their intolerance and impatience will result in disaster. Their insistence upon immediate freedom is too emotional and potentially explosive for these times. Where will these former slaves go? How will they survive? How will they cope with the resentment and rancor that their freedom will generate? In their fervor, do they even think about these things?

Olmstead and Bleeker, the difference between them gets blurred in the fog of this mindless showdown. Neither exerts even the slightest effort to understand the other. And these poor Blacks, hiding now in the sleeping cabin below me, are not allowed by either of them to legitimately participate in their own struggle. The slave must not be encouraged to openly resist his condition, they say, as that would be too dangerous. And this, it seems to me, is what gives rise to the moral imperative. When they refuse to allow the slave to fight for his own freedom, don't they then obligate themselves to resist this evil on his behalf and isn't this how the radical abolitionists, like Olmstead, want it? Doesn't this fit neatly into their self-serving sense of duty?

Amanda judged all men by her father. He was strong and self-assured and as a child this had always made her feel safe and secure. But, there was a stubborn and unpredictable side to him that, as she grew older, increasingly concerned her; she now no longer wanted any part of it and began looking for signs of it in every man she met.

There were so few men who could satisfy her expectations and her standards and she began to fear that if she should find him he wouldn't notice her. Then suddenly, as if magically from nowhere, he appeared… and he did notice. She now felt her life moving inexorably toward a turning point.

Amanda stood at the tiller. She wondered what Hamrick and Bleeker were talking about and her thoughts wandered in and out of a half-hushed conversation with her mother. "Beware of men who chase money. They see everything in their path as a target for conquest and want to possess everything," Harriet warned, herself beginning to sense the reality of what may lie ahead. Her daughter had just turned eighteen, a psychologically devastating age for many young women, and she worried that Amanda would never marry. "Do you love him, Mandy?"

"I'm not sure I know what love is, mother. Is it something I choose, or does it choose me?" she responded, while in her mind she repeated the question differently: do I love him or is he only a way out? Why must I be forever dependent upon men?

"You were a very precocious child. You always needed reasons for everything," her mother went on. "You love with your heart, Amanda, not with your head."

"I don't know if I want to marry, mother. I want to work, to be useful, to create my own life."

"Amanda, that's nonsense, women cannot create their own lives. They create families to enhance and sustain the lives of their husbands."

"Is that what you do mother, just follow quietly behind him, even when you see what he is doing to us? He is leading us to destruction. Can't you see that?"

Harriet didn't answer and Amanda began to worry that their voices were slowly rising and were in danger of being overheard. "I have to get free of him," she said softly.

"But… won't your Mr. Hamrick give you all of that?" her mother whispered beginning to misread her daughter's motivation.

"Perhaps, but at what price?"

"Does it matter?"

Amanda didn't answer. How can I ever be free and equal, she thought to herself, when I am always assisted in everything I do? Wouldn't I be better off left alone to struggle, and possibly even fail, than to be ushered along to decorate someone else's picture of happiness?

THOMAS HAMRICK'S NOTEBOOK: FRIDAY, JUNE 27, 1828.

I asked Bleeker how slavery could be legitimate, when these people were seized against their will, kidnapped on the African shore and forced into bondage. Is that the justification, I asked him, that one can simply exert brute power over another? If that be so why not go on capturing people at will and forcing them all into slavery?

He answered that certainly no free man would ever allow such a state of affairs. What then would there be to prevent any man from being enslaved, I challenged and the absurdity of his answer shocked me. He told me that in civilized society, slavery was the norm, that slaves were property plain and simple. He recited me something from somewhere, saying pompously that a slave is in the power of the master to whom he belongs. The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, his labor; he can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything, but which must belong to his master.

I have learned that a slave is always defined this way, in economic terms, as someone's possession. But, in what way could it be just to treat a man as another man's property? No, I cannot believe that slavery is simply an impersonal issue of contract law. It cannot be that. It must be cultural and rooted in a belief in racial superiority and the will to dominance of one race over another, and this disturbs me greatly. I am determined to see for myself if this is so.

"Mr. Bleeker, may I disturb you yet again? I most appreciate your frankness and candor when it comes to the subject of the 'peculiar institution,' as your Mr. Calhoun has put it."

Bleeker smiled and answered. "It is indeed peculiar, Hamrick, and you are forgiven for your ignorance about the particulars of our way of life. You treat the word as an adjective signifying strange or odd. It is a common trait of you Yankees, who want to define us in your own way. But the term, peculiar institution, is in the usage intended by Mr. Calhoun, a noun meaning personal private property. We do not need Yankee adjectives to tell us who we are."

"I don't believe that's all there is to it, Mr. Bleeker. Are we not all Americans, born free and equal?"

He laughed. "Wishing will not make it so, Hamrick. No one is born free. Everyone is born into the most complete and utter dependency and no two people are ever, in any respect, equal. It is the natural and divine order of things that the superior being should dominate the inferior. Slavery is as much a part of the human condition as is the domestication of farm animals."

"You believe slavery to be part of God's plan?" Hamrick responded incredulously. "Are you not a Christian, sir? Slavery is surely unchristian."

"The great Apostle Peter himself tells the slaves to submit to their masters. In all ways, he says, not only to those who are good, but also to those who are wicked. Slavery is a part of the natural order of things, Hamrick and it is what it is."

"But it is uncivilized and barbaric."

"You're a fool, Hamrick. Without slavery there would be no civilization at all. Slavery relieves the gentleman of the degrading burdens of manual labor and frees him to pursue a higher calling. Throughout history, from ancient times, the highest civilized achievements have been the result of slave labor. Do you think the Greeks could have achieved their democracy or the Romans have conquered the world, without slaves?"

Somewhere between Schenectady and Little Falls, Hamrick saw a packet boat approaching and turned to tell Bleeker. "Mr. Blee…" he began with an airy sense of impending release, when the man's heavy breathing signaled that he was sleeping soundly. He looked down and in the moonlight could see the big black valise, slightly open, only inches from Bleeker's outstretched fingers, its secrets begging to be uncovered. The lure of opportunity was overpowering.

"Tom," he heard a voice from the stern, "there's a packet…"

"Shhh… Mandy," he whispered as loudly as he dared, waving his arms as he tiptoed quickly toward her. "Shhh… just let it go by. He's asleep and I want to get a look inside the bag."

The packet's nighthawker gradually grew larger, its lens throwing a warm orange hue on the water. The flickering beam of light cut a tunnel through the gloom, jittery moths fluttering in and out of its glow. As their bows crossed they could see that the curtains were drawn in the sleeping salon and the passengers already retired to their bunks. Mumbled and barely audible voices could be heard, as ever so painfully the boat slid past, casting a black silhouette against the bright moonlit sky.

As the packet slowly disappeared into the night behind them, Hamrick crawled on his hands and knees along the deck to where Bleeker was sleeping. It was too dark to see anything clearly and too dangerous to try to carry the bag into a better light. This would have to be done by touch. His fingertips quickly found some papers and a pistol wrapped in an oily cloth. He carefully pushed his hand down along the inside of the bag and beneath the cloth there was something big and cold. It was round. A glass jar, he thought, or at least something that felt like a big glass jar. His hand slipped silently over its smooth surface probing for clues. It had what felt like a wire attached to a heavy stopper at one end, but there was no way to tell what it was or what might have been in it.

Then suddenly Samuel's piercing voice from the towpath shattered the silence. "Little Falls… Mandy… We're almost to Little Falls." Hamrick stiffened and held his breath, his hand still at the bottom of Bleeker's bag.

Then it rang out again, louder, "Mandy…

Bleeker opened his eyes and Hamrick was sure he was caught. "Here are your things, sir," he said assertively, tossing the bag to Bleeker. "It's Little Falls. We're not stopping, but if you hurry you can hop off in time to catch a packet back." And so with a stroke of fast thinking luck, Luke, Lucy and the babies slipped through, literally right out from under the slave hunter's nose.

Chapter Sixteen

THE DRIVER THOUGHT IT ODD that anyone would hire him, so late at night, to find a room on the outskirts of town, but the detective had told Jonathan that Thompson's Inn would be an inconspicuous accommodation for him and a private place for them to meet. The old stately inn was the last stage coach stop on the New York to Albany road and had, since the steamboats began to pass it by, begun to fall on hard times. It was already in disrepair and the now rarely used stables at the back seemed like a graveyard for the idle hackney carriages patiently waiting there, a service that was once in great demand, to shuttle guests to and from the city center.

The metallic, piercing clang of the door bell that had so often alerted a scattered and busy crew of attendants to the arrival of another stage now sent its lonely echo ironically across the expansive, but empty foyer, moving only the single chambermaid, left alone on night duty.

"Yes, sir, come right in, sir."

The corridors were shadowy and serpentine, imparting an eerie foreboding to the place and Jonathan felt strangely uneasy. He asked about the attendance fees, if they were included in the price and what the charge would be for a hot tub, but hardly heard her response.

The room was dark and dominated by an ancient four-poster. He watched the woman walk around the big bed, mechanically open the curtains and raise the window sash, letting in a little of the damp late night air. She put her lamp down on the three corner washstand and, in

the dim light, Jonathan saw the small sad piece of dried soap next to the neatly folded towel.

"Would it be possible to buy a bar of brown Windsor?" he asked as she pulled back the curtains surrounding the bed.

"Oh… yes, sir. We have a whole case just recently arrived from Europe." It wasn't, strictly speaking, true, but she loved to say it as it reminded her of the old days when the lobby and dining room were brimming with gentlemen and the smell of spicy Windsor soap was everywhere. "Shall I draw your tub now, sir?"

"No," he answered absently. "I've changed my mind, thank you, but if you could bring the soap… and a second towel as well please."

"Would the gentleman like to light the candles?" she asked, as she was trained to do.

"I'll take two tapers, yes … if you have them."

"Yes, sir." She took two small wax candles from her apron pocket and put them in the candelabra on the small writing desk against the wall. Jonathan looked at the few pieces of hotel stationary scattered there and thought of Rachel.

The towels were course and the water cold. The slippery soap slithered from his tired grasp, crashing and sliding into a dark corner, where he left it. Exhausted and frustrated, he waited for Salisbury by the soft glow of his candles and wrote again to his beloved wife.

My Dearest Rachel,

I have reached Albany and am safe, though tuckered out, as you might imagine; although my fatigue is as much mental as physical. It is very late and I have finally taken a room on the edge of town. I have not yet located Tom. Upon my arrival this evening I went immediately to the Masonic lodge and was soundly lectured on the importance of loyalty. There is, as you have said, my dear, only a fine line between the highest moral virtue of duty and responsibility and the basest allegiance to

one's own self-interest. Do not all the great virtues spring from duty and responsibility? The man who is loyal to his country is held in the highest esteem and called a hero and patriot. And what of the great martyrs of the Church who were willing to die for their belief? Were they not thought to be the paragons of morality? Loyalty to others provides stability and meaning to one's life, as Cicero has written. This seems to be the reciprocal benefit for the responsible and true person. It gives one a purpose by which to define one's existence. But, surely this is not why these men are loyal. They pervert the true moral value of duty, and the true meaning of masonry, because for them it is, as you warned me, a self-serving mechanism to feather their own nests. It depresses me to know how misguided human nature can become…

Suddenly Hamrick was interrupted by footsteps slowly approaching down the long narrow hallway. He hurriedly tucked the half-finished letter into his suitcase and reached the door before the knock. He opened it quickly, expecting the detective Salisbury and was stunned momentarily to silence when he saw Masonic lodge secretary, Van Eps, standing before him.

"May I come in, Mr. Hamrick? It is urgent."

"Yes… of course," Jonathan reacted calmly, although somehow he knew, at that moment, that this was the man who had written the cryptic note to his son. His heartbeat quickened.

Van Eps was a short and slight man in his late fifties and he seemed very edgy. Swinging between eagerness and apprehension, as he entered the room he looked back into the corridor as though he were being followed.

"You're the one who warned my son about the masons, aren't you?" Jonathan began aggressively.

"I am, Mr. Hamrick, and I've come to do you the same service. The canal basin scheme that Van Brughe told you about is a scam designed to dupe naïve investors trying to make some quick cash."

Van Eps told Jonathan that Martin Van Buren was unalterably opposed to giving private corporate charters of this type and that the Albany regency would surely block it in the legislature, which was predominantly Democratic. "Oh, it started out as a legitimate venture when De Witt Clinton was governor, an inside deal like so many of them are. Clinton was a political enemy of Van Buren and a loyal fellow mason. He was expected to support the charter proposal and make it happen by doing a deal with Van Buren, promising that he would support Jackson in the coming presidential election, which Van Buren desperately wants. But, now Clinton is dead and the deal has no chance."

"Why are you telling me all this, Mr. Van Eps? Why are you betraying your friends and your trust?"

"It's just gone too far, that's all."

"But surely corruption in public office, bribery and such, are not that remarkable. Why not just walk away from it?"

"It's more than that, Mr. Hamrick… they will stop at nothing to achieve their ends."

"Murder? Would they stop at murder?"

"I've said enough, Mr. Hamrick…"

"Oh no you haven't, Mr. Van Eps. Tell me about my son. He was murdered, wasn't he?"

"I don't know, Hamrick. I do know that he threatened to expose the swindle just before the steamboat explosion. But that isn't proof of anything."

"Tell me more about this con game?"

"After the election, everyone on the inside knew the charter proposal would be killed. They were about to lose their shirts, so they hatched a scheme to entice new unsuspecting investors from outside the region, especially New Englanders. You Yankees are more than a little bit resented by the Patroons you know, and nobody around here cares if you get suckered. Your son was a perfect patsy. The early partners had already risked big money buying land options and bribing legislators to

get the votes and then Clinton dropped dead and suddenly it was all going down the drain. Van Brughe and a few others faced ruin. They needed new money and for that they needed new pigeons."

"You said my son was about to expose them?"

"Yes, he was going to give the details to an anti-masonry newspaper editor here in Albany named Adrian Quacumbus… naming names."

"And you were his source."

"Yes.

"And now you want me to do it?"

"Yes, Mr. Hamrick."

"I don't understand, sir. Why are you doing this? It doesn't seem necessary, just to expose a little fast shuffle."

"You're right, Hamrick. It's much more than that. I want to destroy masonry in this country once and for all. It's a cancer that breeds men like Van Brughe. Sure, I was in with them early and pocketed some money, but he's gone beyond that. He's two-timing us. He's got grandiose dreams about a Masonic empire in northern Mexico. I don't know the particulars, but he's scheming with masons in New Orleans and a mason named Austin to get himself set up as some kind of grand pooh bah in Texas."

Hamrick saw the flash of bitterness and contempt in his eyes and realized that this was something deeply personal driving Van Eps and he let the man continue.

"He's double crossing everyone. I'm not certain of all the details, but he's planning something."

"And how is this newspaper supposed to stop him?" Hamrick asked.

"Antimasonry has grown into a major political movement here in the last couple of years, in the western part of the state, especially in Genesee and Monroe Counties. Since this Morgan affair convinced so many people that the masons were setting themselves above the law, town meetings have begun to oust them from local governments. This general election could spell doom for them."

"Do you think you can vote masonry out of existence, Van Eps? Is that your plan?"

"Indeed, that's exactly what we intend to do. The key will be to get Adams elected. The anti-Jackson elements are trying to take advantage of the depth of feeling against the masons, but its not working in the eastern part of the state. Adams has no chance in the election if he can't rally the anti-masons to his side and they are very likely to vote in big numbers, particularly in Albany and in Dutchess Counties, if the details of this scandal come to light at the right moment. If Adams can take New York, Mr. Hamrick, he will be president and the masons will be history."

"Why don't you just expose them yourself, Van Eps?"

"I'm frightened, Hamrick. I'm not a brave man. Maybe that explains how I got mixed up in this mess in the first place. It seemed comforting to be part of something, to be attached to something and be protected by the allegiance of others. The bond of loyalty is personal and social you know, but it also robs you of individual responsibility. It takes away the need to be accountable for one's actions. I want to be free of the masons, but I can't just walk away. I know too much. They will kill me, Mr. Hamrick. Of that… I am sure."

"What happened to my son?" Jonathan asked again, assertively.

"I honestly don't know, Hamrick," Van Eps responded. "Will you do it?" he implored again.

"Will you help me to find out what happened to my son?" Jonathan bargained.

Van Eps nodded and then opened his brief case. "All the details are in these papers. Bring them to Quacumbus. Tell him you have a contact inside the lodge who will answer his questions, but only indirectly through you. If word gets out about… do you understand, Hamrick? Swear to God that you won't tell him who gave you this."

Van Eps was a bit unnerved when he passed Frank Salisbury in the hallway. The little man looked down, hiding under his hat, trying to avoid eye contact, and hoped he wasn't recognized. The detective looked right at him.

It was very late and Salisbury was more than a little surprised to see Jonathan awake and dressed. "I wasn't sure if I should disturb you at this hour, Mr. Hamrick. It's after three. Have you been up all night?"

"I only arrived about an hour ago, Frank. Please come in. Is there any news?"

The candles were long gone and the two men sat in the dim moonlight as the detective began. "You asked me to find out what I could about the masons, here in the up-state, Mr. Hamrick and I can tell you that there's big trouble between the lodges in Albany and Troy. Albany wants to make itself a grand lodge and get out from under New York City control, but Troy is standing in their way. Now, I don't know if it means anything, but one of the men killed, in the same explosion as your son, was a Masonic ambassador from New York City heading for a meeting with the masons in Troy."

"You don't think the Albany masons blew up the steamboat to kill that man do you?"

"I don't know, Mr. Hamrick, but a lot of people would like to believe it. It's the election. It's the most dangerous and dirtiest one yet. That steamboat explosion wasn't the first you know and it's got a lot of people on edge, thinking there might be a blood feud starting and someone is deliberately doing it."

Jonathan was dumbfounded by the intensity of suspicion he saw directed at the masons and, being a mason himself, responded with a natural defensiveness. "But masons are not political, Mr. Salisbury. You know that politics is explicitly forbidden inside the lodge."

"It isn't happening inside the lodge, Hamrick. The masons have been pulled into the middle of a nasty political mess and there's nothing that can be done about it."

"Is it possible that the masons are being framed or set up by the National-Republicans?" Jonathan asked, testing the Van Eps hypothesis. "Everyone knows Jackson is a mason, so if they can hang something really sensational on the masons it could put Adams over the top."

Salisbury paused, as though never having considered such a possibility, and then said, "judging from all the hickory poles I've been

seeing, the Adams side has to be worried. He was counting on Louisiana, but Jackson has been stumping down there of late and, from what I hear, he will easily take the state. The National-Republicans are desperate to win New York, so all bets are off. Anything could be true, I guess."

"But, it's hard to believe they would blow up innocent people to win an election."

"Well isn't that the whole point, Hamrick? Everybody rides these steamboats nowadays and they're terrified of the boiler explosions. If people believed the masons were behind it… it's hard to imagine what might happen."

Jonathan was only beginning to fathom the depth of anger felt in the region against the masons and responded again, "I can't believe anyone could believe that the masons, or anyone else for that matter, would do such a thing."

"Don't kid yourself, Hamrick. People already believe the masons are behind everything. If the Adams crowd could hang this on them… you're right, it would be a perfect scheme to steal the election."

"But slaughtering innocent people like that, Salisbury, whole families… children."

"When a man is committed to a cause, he gets irrational and will do just about anything. Even kill innocent children."

Hamrick was exhausted. He had been awake for nearly twenty-four hours and at eighty-one he had little energy left for this encounter. The intensity of the detective's visit had completely drained him. Unfortunately however, Salisbury wasn't through. "There is one more thing that might be significant."

"Yes," Jonathan answered struggling to stay alert while gradually succumbing to the dead weight of the hour.

"There's a man in the valley who calls himself Nicos Bleeker. He's a bounty hunter and a slave catcher openly working for a group of southern planters and he has close ties to some of the leading masons here in Albany. Bleeker suspected that the *Aurora* was carrying fugitives and he was seen several times on the wharf where the boat was tied. I did some digging and I discovered that this man is not what he seems to be."

"He's a slave catcher you say?"

"Yes, but he has a reputation for other things as well and could be…"

"I don't see the connection, Mr. Salisbury. Are you now saying that the masons…?"

"No… Hear me out, Mr. Hamrick," Salisbury said firmly and Jonathan gestured his apology. "At this time of the year there are many southerners coming north to take the waters at Saratoga and Ballston Springs. Normally they would ride the steamboat through to Troy and then take the stage. There were several Carolina families on that particular steamboat, and, for some reason, they all got off at Albany. That's very unusual, Hamrick and suspicious."

"But, why would this Bleeker want to sink a steamboat?" Jonathan protested, not yet comprehending what he thought Salisbury was trying to tell him.

"No, you're missing my point, Mr. Hamrick. Bleeker warned those people that the boat wasn't safe and got them off at Albany. He has since said to several people that he knows how the explosion happened and who was responsible and that it was only a matter of time before he would have the proof."

"So Bleeker thinks someone was trying to kill the southerners?"

"Exactly! I tried to find him to talk to him, but he seems to have disappeared."

"What do you know about this man?" Jonathan asked with considerably more interest.

"Evidently Bleeker is not his real name. He is actually an Italian named Nicola Blasetti. He came here almost thirty years ago from Italy, where he had apparently been a brilliant young assistant to some important professor of physics or something. A big scientific break through was about to be made there when some critical research went missing. He was accused of stealing it. Even though he vehemently maintained his innocence, he was convicted, and spent a year behind bars. After that he became a bitter man , left his home in Italy and said he would never return."

"How did you learn all of this, Frank?" Hamrick asked weakly, too tired to sense the significance of his innocent question.

"I have my sources. That's what you pay me for, isn't it?"

… and the more I learn of this the more depressed I become. When is violence justifiable in pursuing a cause? It certainly cannot be justified when peaceful means are available. Perhaps if the oppressors are beyond the reach of reasoned persuasion and there is no other way. But then wouldn't everyone be justified in resorting to such brutal tactics and wouldn't a vicious circle ensue?

Please forgive me Rachel as I must seem incoherent to you at this point. I am very tired and I am already almost asleep.

Remembering your wise words and longing for your touch,
I am your most adoring,

Jon

Chapter Seventeen

AS HE ENTERED THE DINING ROOM for breakfast that Sunday morning, Thomas was surprised to see Jacob Goode sitting alone at a corner table. The morning salon at the Eagle Tavern was pleasant and airy. Windows were opened wide and a fresh breeze swept briskly across the brightly covered tables, fluttering through the petals of freshly cut daisies. The hostess had been instructed, a hundred times, to be particularly cheery and pleasant at breakfast, as the guests were likely to be tired, disheveled and grumpy, after a less than refreshing encounter with a strange mattress.

Intent as he was to speak once again with the professor, Thomas hardly noticed the fruit plates waiting at each place, piled high with succulent June-bearing strawberries and early season blueberries. "And would you look at these red raspberries?" Goode marveled. "The back country is covered with them they tell me… and they're always ready by the fourth." He went on blithely, as he stood and reached out to shake Hamrick's hand. "Nice to see you again, Hamrick."

Thomas shook Goode's hand and said, "how are you, sir? Did your meetings go well?"

"About as I thought they would," the professor answered, handing Thomas a bottle of wine. "Here's a present for you, Hamrick. They're growing a grape up here they call a Muscadine, very hardy, makes a spicy wine."

Thomas suspected that Goode was discouraged by his encounter with the legislature and was trying to avoid the subject, but he pressed ahead anyway. "Tell me what happened."

"Well," he finally began reluctantly, "I recommended a licensing law… as I said I would… to be enforced by well paid state officials… to guard against bribes you know. The worst thing you can do is underpay people and then expect them to enforce these kinds of things… Anyway, as I told you before, the license would not issue unless certain safety precautions were in place."

"And there were objections to this?" Hamrick asked with a puzzled look.

"Well… no one is against safe steamboats obviously, especially not the politicians in these parts, but the consensus was to just let people sue in the common courts, to force the operators to be more mindful of the dangers."

"Isn't that what's supposed to happen now?"

"Of course, it's the same as doing nothing and it's clear to me that it simply won't work, when most people, around here at least, find it repulsive to initiate this kind of thing. Only a federal law can solve this problem and since there is no federal law you would reasonably expect each state legislature to act for the protection of its citizens."

"Did you tell them that, Goode?" Hamrick asked, smiling.

"Yes…" the professor answered absently, his mind already elsewhere. "I don't know why some people don't like sweets at breakfast, Hamrick," he said rolling a particularly succulent ripe strawberry between his thumb and fingers. "Catch that waitress, Hamrick and get the tea."

The girl smiled as she poured the boiling water into the teapot. "Would the gentlemen like porridge?"

"Oatmeal or cracked wheat?" Goode asked.

"We have both, sir."

"Wonderful, let's have one of each, what do you say, Hamrick?"

Thomas nodded mindlessly, somewhat baffled by Goode's demeanor and apparent cool indifference to his failure to make any headway in his quest to regulate the steamboats. He listened politely to

more details about the differences between oatmeal and cracked wheat until the waitress returned to clear the fruit plates and place the porridge bowls on the table. He then asked, "why won't they budge?"

"Why do you think, Hamrick? Sugar… cream?"

"Yes, please, but surely…

"The owners and operators of these floating bombs will never voluntarily comply with anything that costs money… and they have influence. Besides, the whole idea of government regulation is hated by everyone out here anyway."

"I don't understand how you can be so nonchalant about it, Mr. Goode. Don't you feel a sense of failure? I mean, wasn't this what you were trying to do?"

"I expected it, Hamrick. I did get the go-ahead to run my experiment and that was why I came… really. They gave me an old steam tug to try it on and I'm rigging it today. The rest isn't important right now. Come on, finish your oatmeal. They have a great solids plate here I want you to try, poached eggs, white perch and potatoes."

"Perch?"

"The lakes are overflowing with them. It's a nice sweet whitefish; you'll like it, very good with eggs and the Dutch sauce, the Hollandaise."

"I guess this would be the perfect place for the Dutch sauce."

"Indeed, Tom, Indeed."

It was a glorious summer morning and the river walk was teeming with Sunday afternoon strollers, gallivanting lazily on the promenade, out to see and to be seen. The mustachioed young dandies, with their thickly curled hair and sideburns, sported double breasted waistcoats in the most audacious colors, contrasting with their tight fitting pantaloons, strapped nattily through the arch of polished black boots. Style was everything in this new ephemeral age of youth and unlimited opportunity. Coat collars were rolled up in the most fashionable Parisian style, with the open cuffs of shirt sleeves falling carelessly down over the hands. The new generation tried to be noticed

and to challenge, as it always did, and probably always will, the standards of their elders.

And on their arms, beneath slowly spinning silk parasols were the elegant ladies, their tiny corseted waists contrasting almost absurdly with broad puffy skirts, ballooning out over starched petticoats. With revealing low necklines and bare shoulders, hardly hidden under lace shawls, they smiled flirtatiously from the shadows of broad brimmed hats piled high with mountains of bows and flowers. It was indeed a beautiful summer day and no one could have foreseen the horror that was about to happen.

The big *Sally-Ann* was preparing to make the run up to Troy with several vacationing families, heading for the lakes, and to pick up some last minute passengers and freight. It was part of the normal routine before she made the down stream dash back to the city. The short turnaround cruise was quickly becoming a popular little Sunday afternoon junket for the locals. It's impossible to tell how many picnickers and day-trippers swarmed onto the open decks of the *Sally-Ann* that day. She had only made a few previous trips up from the coast, but she was very fast and was already widely hailed as the new crack boat of the Hudson. Never before had so much power propelled so sleek a craft. Everyone came out that day to see and ride the big *Sally-Ann*.

The gawkers, gathered on the river bank, were anxiously anticipating an awesome display of mechanical muscle. The boat's owners, eager to attract attention, were ambitious and the young captain daring and not likely to disappoint them. Clouds of black smoke and sparks billowed from her stacks as the flues were laid wide open to force feed the already raging fires. A bystander commented that, by the strained sound of the steam squeezing through the dangerously weighed-down safety valve, he reckoned that a tremendous burden was building on her caste-iron boilers. Then, suddenly, the power of pent-up pressure hitting the standing pistons sent a shivering, ominous, vibration across the deck that momentarily hushed the throng. For a few seconds the crowded boat didn't move as her two broad paddle wheels churned mightily into the river, kicking water thirty feet into the air behind them. The people gasped and then cheered in welcome relief as the big

boat rose in the water, paused and then lunged forward, surging from the dock, and out into the river.

But then she rumbled and seemed to sigh in resignation… before both of her boilers burst and shattered in one tremendous eruption, sending thousands of ragged iron shards, scrapping a bloody swath across the forward deck, mercilessly blasting over one-hundred shredded bodies into the river. In the same deadly split second her wooden top works were blown to splinters and sent skyward, mixing with the mangled, twisted torsos of passengers and crew alike. Arms and legs came down crashing and bouncing hideously on the near shore and rained a repulsive gore into the river, which quickly ran red with blood and bits of human flesh.

The expanding steam almost instantly flooded through the open doors and windows of the main cabin, trapping and severely scalding everyone in its path. Gruesome screams and moans began to be heard as though they had been cued by the director of some macabre drama. Some jumped into the water in agony, trying to ease the scorching pain of their burns, while others, mostly on the still intact and spared aft deck, stood like statues or wandered, aimlessly in shock.

It wasn't loud, more like a low roar rolling up from the river, or a small earthquake barely rattling the teacups. Thomas saw his spoon bounce in the saucer and looked up with a searching expression. Goode knew immediately and ran to the windows. "A boiler blew," he said, straining to see. Then he turned to gather his things. "Let's go, Hamrick. There's no time to waste."

The two men ran toward the scene with countless other would-be rescuers and assorted thrill-seekers and serendipitous onlookers, but the breeze blew the hot acrid mix of smoke and steam across the river bank and into their faces, driving most of them back. Goode and Hamrick tried to press on, squinting into the smoke, trying to see and not to breathe.

Thomas's eyes hardly focused through the tears and he could feel the burning in his throat from the tiny specks of cinder and toxic dust that were sticking there. "Wait, Hamrick," Goode said, beginning to

cough uncontrollably and turning away from the smoke, his voice muffled by a mouth pressed tight inside the curve of his elbow. "I… I can't breathe. …got to stop… catch my breath."

Then miraculously the wind changed and the smoke cleared, like a curtain rising, to reveal the loathsome landscape of carnage. For a few moments they just stood there stunned, listening to the low groaning and moaning of the maimed and dying victims. Two men in a rowboat were poking, with an oar, at bodies floating in the river, apparently probing for any signs life. Others waded out as far out as they dared, trying to reach and pull to shore anyone who appeared to be alive. There were so many bodies.

The *Sally-Ann* was fully engulfed in flames and would quickly burn to the water line. A makeshift bucket brigade had already begun. Calls of "fire… fire," could be heard fading away into the town and the burly men of the volunteer fire brigade were already pulling the pumper on to the wharf.

"Get those hoses in the water," a gruff voice commanded. "Keep it from drifting back against that schooner. This thing could burn the town down." Some men threw a grappling hook trying to catch the hull of the steamboat, but it fell short, splashing helplessly into the water. Thomas ran past them toward the crowd on the beach below, but Goode went to the wharf.

"Aren't you going to try to put out the fire?" he asked.

"No point, mister, she's gone. We've got to think about the town now. If that wind shifts…"

"You've got to save the deck. Don't let the furnaces fall through the decks," he yelled, but they weren't listening.

Goode shook his head and watched the fire quickly consume the broken hulk and with it his chance to determine the precise point of the explosion and the key to how it happened. "How can I help you to get to the bottom of this if you don't think it's important to preserve the evidence?" he added angrily.

"Look mister, if you want to help, go down to the water and help someone down there. There's people dying here and you're worried about the damn deck."

It was a surreal scene of slow motion mayhem on the beach. Dazed and dumbstruck victims, glassy-eyed and confused were walking in disoriented, but oddly purposeful, circles, as though performing some sort of bizarre dance. "Have you seen my daughter?" a woman asked and Thomas noticed her distinctly southern drawl. "She's only four… her name is Alice. She has long blonde hair… her dress is yellow… did you see her?" Thomas looked into the woman's face as she pulled him toward her. "Please… you must have seen her. I was holding her hand…"

"No ma'am," Thomas responded. "I just got here. I'm sure she's alright. You say her name is …" Thomas stopped in mid sentence as the woman wandered away to make her piteous plea to another man.

"Hurry," Goode said, as he reached the beach, and Thomas turned to follow him, when he heard a man's voice say, "it's God's vengeance on those who would dare desecrate the Sabbath."

Hamrick turned around almost instantly, propelled by the familiar rasping tone and peered back through the haze and smoke. It was Karl Olmstead. "Go on," he said to Goode. "I'll catch up."

Olmstead seemed to be looking over everyone's head, stoically surveying the scene without even a hint of emotion. "Mr. Olmstead… it's Thomas Hamrick… Amanda's friend."

"Yes, I know who you are," Olmstead answered curtly.

"Did you see the explosion, sir?" Thomas asked, but Olmstead didn't answer and so he rephrased. "How did it happen? Do you know?"

"It was retribution, boy, on the sinners, on the slavers who think they can summer in luxury on the blood of human bondage and then think they're safe, relaxing in their hotels and spas. Now they know that they are not safe, that their sins will be avenged."

Thomas was staggered by the strange words and had no response. Then Olmstead, as though preaching from the pulpit, began his diatribe directly into the backdrop of destruction. "It is the evil slave society which is the oppressor and even the children reek of its stench. Let them die. Let their children die so they will feel the wrath of the Almighty. Let their rotting corpses lie on this beach for all to see what happens to sinners."

Thomas remembered Amanda's warning, which he had wanted desperately to discount, forget and avoid if possible. But, how could he ignore it now? Olmstead was a religious fanatic and seemed insane. He wanted to walk away, but couldn't. He couldn't help thinking that Amanda was in danger.

"The Lord will rain terror down upon those who oppress the weak and downtrodden. The slave society is evil and the Lord commands that it be mercilessly smashed."

"Come on, Hamrick," Goode said again, pulling his arm. "The man's a fool. Forget about him. There are people who need us."

As Goode pulled Hamrick away, they heard Olmsted quoting scripture, "… he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain, and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace."

Thomas tried not to look back as he followed the professor to the beach and into the water, where they hoped to help survivors reach the shore. But they were too late for that. There were no more survivors. Rowboats were weaving about everywhere in the river, picking up dead bodies and body parts. "Carry her up to the tent," a man yelled from one of the boats, while pushing a mangled woman's torso over the side and into the water in front of them. Bodies, and any identifiable body parts, were being laid out on the grassy hillside above the promenade, where a guard would be posted until morning, when the coroner was to begin his investigation.

Goode lifted her from the arm pits and Thomas reached instinctively into the water for her knees. He only found one. As they began to carry the woman to the makeshift morgue, he wrapped both arms around her remaining leg and she rolled onto her side.

"Hold on," the professor grunted. "I'm losing my grip."

They put the body down on the muddy beach. Her eyes were wide open and Hamrick looked at their glassy stare. The smoke had cleared and the bright noonday sun warmed and gave color to her face, washing away the cold gray tint of death. She was young and pretty once, only moments before, heading for the lakes, perhaps to Saratoga or Ballston for the summer. She was smiling then. Hamrick kneeled down beside

her and gently closed her eyes. He tried not to think about his own father's gruesome death, but it was no use. He tried to work fast and hard to cover his emotions, perhaps overwhelm them with activity. Something inside him wanted to scream. "Could that crazy bastard have done this, Goode? Could he have deliberately killed these innocent people to get at a few slaveholders?" he cried out, but his friend had gone back to the wharf, still hoping to learn something.

Thomas carried corpses for the rest of the day, foolishly hoping to conceal his own grief, and becoming increasingly obsessed with the understandable need to save everything that remained of the human slaughter, everything that could be found that is, as though a modern day Isis would appear and somehow magically reassemble the torn viscera and ruptured limbs.

The hillside was soon covered by cadavers, laid exposed on their backs and in rows spaced apart to help the searchers find their lost loved ones. Some surely would have called it cruel to force the grieving relatives and friends through such a heartless hell, but there was no other way. So many could only be identified by a birth mark, a wedding ring, a piece of special jewelry or some strange scrap of clothing known only to the closest others.

"Tom…" a half-whispered voice behind him beckoned. "Tom… it's me, it's Bumpa."

"Bumpa!" Thomas said excitedly, turning to embrace his grandfather, but the old man pulled him aside with an urgency in his expression that struck Thomas. "No, Tom… Listen! It's best if no one sees us together. I'm staying at the Thompson Inn, outside of town. This is a dangerous place, Tom. I've learned some things about your father's dealings here and I have some information about the cause of his death. Apparently there's a man named Nicos Bleeker who knows how it happened. We need to find this man. Come to my room tonight. I'll be waiting." And with that the old man turned and left, not giving Thomas a chance to respond.

Chapter Eighteen

"TELL ME AGAIN HOW THIS HUSTLE was supposed to happen," Adrian Quacumbus said, closing the blinds and ushering Jonathan Hamrick into his tiny office at the far end of the one-room print shop.

"The city of Albany gets the whole waterfront on the mainland, while the corporation keeps the island. The city pays nothing, but gets a lot of valuable land, ripe for development… at least that was the bait."

"Sounds pretty sweet!"

"Yes… too sweet, Mr. Quacumbus. It was a fraud that really had no chance of passing the legislature, especially with Van Buren against it. But, it was critical that it be made to look like it was a done deal so they could lure unsuspecting investors who wanted in on the seemingly sure thing. Then, once it looked like it was really rolling, they would sell stock on the New York City stock exchange to raise the really big bucks."

"And, of course, the corporate charter would protect them from liability," Quacumbus added, smiling and shaking his head.

"Exactly!"

"It's the same-old, same-old, Mr. Hamrick. What makes you think Van Buren was going to stop it this time?"

"I guess it was his track record as a real hard money man who apparently voted consistently to deny charters while he served in your state senate."

Quacumbus was a passionate man and he lapsed into a soliloquy that stopped Jonathan in mid-sentence. "That depends on whose charter it was going to be. Everyone around here knows damn well that that little bastard is looking out for himself. If ever there was a man of low character, and unbridled ambition I might add, it is surely Martin Van Buren. He's not called the little magician for nothing. He was hot for the Niagara Bank when it suited him. Corporations make the perfect cons, Hamrick… especially banks. They don't even have to steal the money, they can just print it! The stockholders are not liable for the debts of the corporation and they get their cronies in the state legislature to approve a charter that doesn't require them to redeem, in real hard cash money, the worthless paper notes they issue. That's just a license to steal. And they've been doing a good job of it for a long time, I'll tell you."

Jonathan waited for him to finish and after an apologetic nod went on. "Apparently there was a growing feud between the New York City masons and the local masons and it was reaching a boiling point. We think the big city boys were not happy about being cut out of so many lucrative deals being hatched here in western New York so they sent an envoy to meet with the big-bug masons in Troy to try to straighten it out and he may have been the target of the steamboat explosion that also killed my son."

"Do you have any proof of this?" the editor asked, leaning forward, his interest suddenly tweaked.

"I have my information from a high ranking official in the Albany lodge."

"And he told you that the masons deliberately blew up the steamboat, *Aurora*?" Quacumbus reacted incredulously.

"No… he didn't go that far… but, he didn't deny the possibility."

"What does he want me to do?"

"He wants you to expose all the corruption here. He wants to make it a campaign issue to help Adams get elected and he knows you are a strong voice of antimasonry. He has given me this detailed record of the entire undertaking, names, dates, amounts… it's all here. Will you print it, Mr. Quacumbus?"

Quacumbus read the first few pages and shook his head. "These are very prominent men, Mr. Hamrick. This will be a bombshell." Quacumbus shook his head again and added, "I need to talk to your source myself."

"I gave my word not to reveal his identity, Mr. Quacumbus."

The editor chuckled and said, "it's Van Eps isn't it?" and when Jonathan remained silent he added, "I'm sorry, Hamrick; I can't print this. Not unless he comes forward."

It was early afternoon. The sheriff's deputies were methodically dragging the river bottom when Thomas and Professor Goode returned to the crime scene. Several more bodies had been recovered during the night and more were expected to be found in the weeds and mud flats along the bank below the town. At least one-hundred dead had been positively identified and over one-hundred and forty more were still listed as missing.

Ordinarily, after a few minutes, a drowned human body will slowly sink and be carried along by the currents until, after several days, the gasses building in the internal cavities from gradual decay cause it to become buoyant and bob to the surface. Alerts were sent down stream to watch for, and recover, floating cadavers that were expected to begin to appear.

"That's the coroner over there," Thomas said, pointing to Tobias Ryckman, who seemed to be fully engaged, directing what looked like a team of young assistants. Bodies were being carried to two examination tables set in the bright sunlight in front of a large tent, pitched at the crest of the hill. Each station was also manned by a clerk, who recorded the findings. There were also several other men watching the proceedings, taking notes and conversing quietly. Sheriff's deputies were stationed at the perimeters, but as so many bodies had not yet been identified, it was possible to walk unchallenged among the corpses.

"Jacob… Jacob… look at this… over here," Thomas called excitedly. "It's Bleeker! Bleeker… the slave hunter. Oh, no; this is terrible. He knew something about my father's death and now he's dead." As the two men looked down at the body they were struck

simultaneously by the stark contrast his intact and neatly dressed image made among the mangled and maimed corpses all around him. His clothes were soaked through, but he showed no signs of injury. "Who found this man?" Thomas asked one of the deputies.

"They dragged him off the bottom about an hour ago, mister. Do you know who he is? He's got no papers on him."

"Yes, Yes I do."

"Would you be willing to sign a statement verifying the man's identity?"

"Well…" Thomas hesitated. "I know his name is Nicos Bleeker, that's about all… but, I guess I could vouch for that."

The deputy escorted Hamrick to the coroner's tent. "Mr. Hamrick," the coroner said, hardly looking up from the table where a young associate was beginning to examine a body. "We meet again."

"Yes, Dr. Ryckman. How are you?"

Ryckman nodded and gestured his impatience with small talk and for Hamrick to get to the point.

"A man over there that they just pulled from the water is Nicos Bleeker."

"Bleeker… you mean the bounty hunter?" Then before Hamrick could respond Ryckman turned to the attendant struggling with a badly mangled cadaver and said, "just answer the four questions and move ahead. And we don't need ambiguity. We need concise, definitive results. Is the body dead? Did the subject die from violence? What was the nature of the violence? Or did the subject drown? There's no time to do any kind anatomical examination. We're going to have a putrefaction problem if we don't hurry."

"I don't think there is sufficient wound damage to conclusively…"

"Look for sanguineous froth in the windpipe."

"Yes… yes I see it."

"Then list it as a drowning, and move to the next one. There may be upward of two-hundred cases and it's going to be very hot today."

Thomas heard Goode chuckle to himself and looked over quizzically. The professor leaned toward him and said softly, "it's extremely important to determine if the subject died from drowning or

was killed by the explosion. In other words, did the subject voluntarily jump into the river and later drown. This will become very relevant when people sue and that's why he's concentrating on it. Death from maiming and mutilation, when there was no intent to kill, are considered accidents and not criminal offenses, but the victims, should they survive, or their families, if they don't, are entitled to recover money damages for negligence in such cases. There will be a lot of lawsuits and he will be called to testify to the extent the victim brought on his or her own death."

"So, the more that are ruled drowning the better for the owners and the insurance companies." Hamrick concluded rhetorically. "It seems like an open invitation to bribery." Goode raised his eyebrows, but said nothing, and Thomas continued, "do you think he'll do any autopsies?"

"I doubt it. He's going to ram this right through. See those men there, watching everything? Who do you think they might be?" Goode smiled and said softly under his breath, "you can bet that most of these poor bastards will have officially drowned; it will greatly reduce the awards."

"But there may be more to it," Hamrick said in a clearly irritated tone as he walked briskly over to Ryckman. "I think there's one body that you need to examine, Doctor." Thomas interrupted an obviously annoyed coroner who glared over at him. "It's Bleeker. I don't think he was on that boat. He may have been in the river, but he wasn't killed in any explosion. Anyone can see that." Thomas waited for a response and when he got none challenged, "are you going to examine him or not?"

"Look… Hamrick, when we get to him we'll make a finding. That's it! This is an official coroner's investigation and you are beginning to get on my nerves. Now… kindly step into the tent and fill out the identification affidavit."

Before Thomas could say any more, Goode pulled him away saying, "thank you, doctor. He's a bit distraught. It's a terrible sight. We'll sign the papers and be on our way."

Inside the tent Goode told Thomas that there was little hope of getting any cooperation from Ryckman and that if he could get another,

closer, look at the body, he might be able to draw some conclusions himself about the cause of death. "If we're sure it's a murder then we can go to the sheriff and force him to take action." It was a faint hope, but it was all they had.

As they walked back down the hillside they made a point of engaging the young sentry they had met earlier. "It's going to be a hot one today," Goode began innocuously and the young deputy nodded.

"I guess you never get used to this, huh?" Thomas added.

"Not in a coon's age, mister. I can't even look at 'em any more."

"I know what you mean. But… that guy, the one you found today, he was our friend. Do you think we could pay him a few respects before we leave?"

"If you want to look at him some more, mister, be my guest."

As they made their way between the bodies, they both, almost simultaneously, glanced back up at the hilltop and happily saw Ryckman enter the tent with some other men. When they kneeled down beside the body, Thomas positioned himself between Bleeker and the sentry, while the professor went to work.

"I should examine the body from head to foot to uncover any wounds, but I don't see how we can do that," he began mumbling to himself. "There's no blood and no damage to his clothing. Wait, here it is!" Goode said suddenly. "He has a single puncture wound to the throat, right here… see it?"

"To the throat?" Thomas responded. "But why isn't there any blood?"

The professor carefully probed the wound with his finger to determine its extent, trying hard not to enlarge it and talking to himself in a low voice. "It's a very clean cut. There's no foreign body or debris in the wound. The jugular vein and carotid artery are intact. It's too low to have damaged the phrenic nerves. I'm not sure this wound killed him…" Then he exclaimed loudly, "wait… his esophagus is completely severed!"

"Would that be fatal?"

"Absolutely fatal!"

"What do you think killed him?" Thomas asked. "Do you think it was the explosion?"

"It could have been a piece of shrapnel from the explosion. But the wound is clean, there's no exit wound and the shrapnel didn't pull itself back out. This looks like murder to me!"

The judge studied his face. "You say your name is Hamrick?"

"Yes, Thomas Hamrick."

Van Brughe wondered, but didn't ask, about his relationship with the old man. He stood and walked slowly around the desk and closed the door to give himself time to think. "What can I do for you, Mr. Hamrick?" he asked concealing his suspicion.

"I'd like to report a crime," Thomas answered, in a matter-of-fact tone that caught the judge a bit by surprise.

"I think you want the sheriff, Mr. Hamrick."

"I saw the sheriff, this morning, Judge Van Brughe, and he wouldn't listen to me."

"What is this all about, Hamrick?"

"It's about the explosion on the *Sally Ann*. I was there at the scene and I saw the body of a man named Bleeker, who was among the victims of the accident, but he clearly was not killed by the explosion or by drowning. I think he was murdered."

"You do!" Then the judge scowled and asked, "where did you say you saw this body, Mr. Hamrick?"

"At the crime scene, I identified him for the coroner and I insisted that an autopsy be done, but Doctor Ryckman refused…"

Van Brughe reacted abruptly. "Ryckman allowed you to examine a body?"

"Not exactly. I looked at him… carefully… while I was identifying him and…"

"Who do you think you are, Hamrick?" Van Brughe interrupted angrily. "What do you want?"

"I want you to issue an injunction to preserve Bleeker's body and to order an autopsy. I believe he was murdered and that the explosion itself may not have been an accident and Ryckman won't…"

The judge broke in again. "You say you spoke to Ryckman and reported your suspicions?"

"Yes."

"Then he's apprised of your belief and will proceed according to his best professional judgment."

"But he's not even considering a criminal possibility. He's only concerned with the civil liability aspects of it all and I think he's being manipulated by agents of the insurance company who are watching and advising him."

"Now you are making unfounded and slanderous accusations against coroner Ryckman," Van Brughe reacted with rising anger in his voice. "I'd be careful if I were you, Hamrick."

"Don't you understand?" Thomas forced forward, "Ryckman is going to cremate the remains of all of the victims. If he does, he could destroy the evidence of a crime."

"That will be enough! The coroner is in charge of the investigation and he will determine if there was any crime. You have no business interfering with him."

"Look! I saw the body, it was…"

"Are you listening to me?" Van Brughe paused to be sure Hamrick read his expression. "You are not authorized to examine bodies at a crime scene. In fact, you are dangerously close to obstructing justice and if you go back and bother the coroner any further or make any more nonsense accusations to Sheriff Pootman, I will have you arrested." The silent look of exasperation on Thomas's face caused the judge to add, "am I clear, Mr. Hamrick?"

"You're a lawyer Bumpa. Isn't there something we can do?" Thomas appealed to his grandfather later that night at the Thompson's Inn.

"Maybe we could get it into the federal court," Jonathan answered, but without even a hint of enthusiasm. "We could appeal to the judge for the northern district of New York. He's right here in Albany. Maybe he would assume jurisdiction in this case."

"How do we do that?" Thomas asked, desperately grasping for straws.

"We need grounds to argue that there is federal jurisdiction."

"Let's think of something."

"Federal jurisdiction is very limited, Tom. It has to involve citizens of different states, or an alien suing a state, or…"

"Wait a minute, Bumpa. Bleeker was not an American citizen, he was from Italy."

"Well, in cases where an alien sues a state, jurisdiction goes to the federal courts."

"Bleeker is dead," Thomas responded with a clear tone of resignation, "and he's not about to sue anyone."

"Has he got any family?"

"I don't know; it's too late to look for them anyway."

"Besides, that rule applies to civil suits, Tom and this is a criminal case and clearly falls under state jurisdiction."

"No, it's not!" Thomas answered with renewed enthusiasm. "They're treating it as an accident and as a purely civil matter."

"Wait…a…minute," Jonathan said, half in thought. "There may be another angle. If this were defined as a maritime event… let me see," Jonathan went on, digging through his mind for a clear recollection of statutes and rules, long ago lost to his immediate memory. "The federal district courts have original and exclusive jurisdiction in all civil matters… made upon the high seas…" He paused for a long time and then suddenly his voice slowed and became very deliberate, "or on waters within their districts… navigable from the sea … Blazes… that might work."

"Do you think he'll buy it?"

"I don't know, but it's worth a try; what else do we have?"

Their excitement was quickly erased by the realization that it would all be in vain if the body were burned and Thomas said, "somehow, we've got to steal Bleeker's body and hide it until we can make our case to the federal judge."

"This is dangerous, Tom, and illegal. Are you sure…"

Thomas was now convinced more than ever that there was some connection between this explosion, the bounty hunter and his father's death. He wanted to solve the mystery and Bleeker was the key. It was easy for him to justify his actions as right and necessary in light of what he viewed to be a conspiracy of criminals using their public positions to cover up a crime. His grandfather, too, understood the unsavory side of these local officials and recognized that there was no other way to get to the truth.

"How in the world are we going to do that? We'll need help and we don't know anybody in these parts," Jonathan cautioned.

"Yes we do, Bumpa. I met a girl. Her family sails a boat on the ditch and she will help us if I ask her to; I'm sure of it."

"A girl you just met is going to help you steal a body?" Jonathan shook his head in disbelief. "I think you'd better tell me more about this girl, Tom."

"Her name is Amanda Olmstead. She's eighteen; her brother was killed in the same explosion with papa and she's suspicious about it too. She's very passionate about things and…"

"And she's pretty too, no doubt."

Thomas looked down and smiled self-consciously. "Yes, Bumpa, she's very pretty."

"Hmmm… I don't know, Tom?"

"Why do you say that, Bumpa?"

"Do you care about this girl, Tom?"

"Yes, I think I do, Bumpa, very much."

"Then are you sure you want to get her involved in this?"

"She's already involved, Bumpa."

"Tell me more about your… Amanda Olmstead, Tom."

"God, Bumpa, I don't know where to begin. She's incredible; she's smart and strong. She can skin a mule or throw a rope like a man and yet she's unbelievably soft and feminine… her hair is incredible… auburn, flowing… I can't describe it… it's so beautiful…"

"And you're in love with her, that's obvious… all the more reason to protect her from this, don't you think?"

"I can't protect her from… anything, Bumpa. I'd lose her if I tried. That much I know."

Even after only a few short days, Jonathan began to miss his wife very much and his grandson's words drove his memory back to the first time he saw her, to how stunning she was and to how helpless he felt not knowing anything about her. "Do you remember when you first saw her?" he asked absently, more immersed in his own half-dream than in Thomas's story, but his grandson didn't yet notice.

"Bumpa, I couldn't speak. She took my breath away. I couldn't get her out of my mind. I was obsessed. I had to find her and see her again…"

But the old man, engulfed by his own memories, didn't hear and said, "were you driven to find her and see her again, Tom, like you were obsessed?"

Thomas smiled and responded, "you're thinking about Mimi now aren't you Bumpa?"

Both men laughed and hugged, each harboring the same realization of how vulnerable they really were.

Chapter Nineteen

FOR THOMAS HAMRICK life had always been full of promise. He had never known failure; his future seemed secure and his happiness guaranteed. Then suddenly his world had been shaken by the unexpected tragedy of his father's death and he faced the first severe setback of his young life. It was understandable that he was consumed these last days with thoughts of death. That his body would one day rot in the earth was beyond question, but what of his soul? Would it rise into paradise, as he had been told it would? It wasn't that he didn't believe in God, only that he saw little sense in the rituals of organized churches. He believed in a supreme being, an architect of the universe as his grandfather said, a kind of a nature god, who set his creation into motion and then stepped away, letting it carry on according to natural law. But this, Hamrick deity, was also a moral God that rewarded the good with an afterlife of bliss, even while being disinterested in the ordinary, mundane, activities of mankind. His father's death made even this God seem cruel and capricious. If we transcend the material into the spiritual world, and the body is of no value, he reasoned, why then is the mere thought of death so terrifying? Why am I so saddened by my father's passing if, after all, life is only ephemeral and meaningless?

But now what had begun to look so dark and foreboding had suddenly become brighter and it was because of her. Amanda seemed so

focused in her view of life; she confidently defined herself by her deeds and believed that until she achieved some real purpose, her existence would have no meaning. Although she didn't realize it, Thomas was severely challenged by this to question his own assumptions and to rethink his beliefs to determine if they were truly meaningful. After all, his life had always been neatly defined as unavoidable duties and responsibilities thrust on him by others, who told him to prepare for a career, meet his family obligations and earn a comfortable living. But the reckoning had always seemed so far away; now, suddenly, his father was dead and it was right in front of him.

Again his uncontrollable emotions overwhelmed him. What if they are right, these Christians, in their Holy Scripture? Didn't God tell Adam …for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return? Doesn't that mean that sinners will rot in the ground and only the good will rise to heaven? And, if God rescues the good from their earthly pain, isn't this proof that mortal life is unworthy and that life in this world is some kind of perverse ordeal; and doesn't it say that his father's life was wasted and that he too is on the wrong path? Death is the punishment for sin; salvation is the reward for having lived a good life. But, what is a good life? What does God want?

Until this precise moment he had never thought it important to serve some cause simply to benefit others, especially strangers. She was changing that with her selfless commitment to the emancipation of slaves and it deeply impressed him. She wasn't like anyone he had ever met before. His mind swarmed, engulfing him, giving him no rest. Causes gave meaning to life for her, he thought. Just living comfortably was inadequate to satisfy her sense of fulfillment. For her father, this earthly existence was only a painful precursor to an eternity in paradise, but for her it was the suffering of real people, here and now, that mattered.

Remarkably, she didn't show even the slightest hint of surprise when the first thing he said after climbing aboard was, "Mandy, what is happiness? What makes you happy?"

She could tell by his plaintive expression that he was bothered by something and responded, "what's wrong, Tom?"

"I don't know what I'm about any more. I'm getting more and more confused and I don't know why. I want to understand what I'm doing and know where I'm going, but I'm just being swept along."

Amanda softened the tension by deliberately returning to his first question. "I'm happy when I feel good about myself and know that I have done a good thing."

"But… how do we know that what we do is good or right, truly moral I mean?"

"We have to make a judgment, Tom. It's the choices we make that define us. Meaning in life, for me, comes from service to others and that I believe is God's purpose for me. True Christianity is service to the poor, Tom and to the weak. Remember, Jesus said, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. We need this kind of selfless purpose or we just drift aimlessly through life."

"But why can't we just be happy? Why do we have to complicate life with duties and causes?"

"We can be happy, Tom. This is why we always live for the future, expecting better things, striving for greater joy, for what makes us happy in this world leads us to God." She slowly put her arms around his neck pulling herself up to him, "the greatest causes are the simple ones, Tom, as when two people fall in love…" she paused and looked into his eyes, "and devote themselves to each other, to their children and to a brighter future." Her expression softened as she felt his arms tighten around her waist.

"Mandy," he said almost in tears, "I hoped but…"

"Shhhh…" she whispered, smothering him with her warm soft lips.

Suddenly his grandfather's words came crashing back over him, if you love her you'll protect her from this, and he stiffened slightly. She sensed it immediately and pulled her head back.

"What's wrong, Tom? Didn't you want this to happen…?"

"Of course I did. I love you, Mandy; I love you so much."

"What's wrong then, Tom?" she asked again.

"I need your help and I don't know if I should ask it."

"Tell me what it is," she said assertively and then listened as he told her everything that had transpired, about Bleeker's body, and all of his suspicions and theories.

"And where will the body be?" she asked, already well beyond the question.

"I don't know. That's one problem…"

"They're bringing them up to the cemetery," a voice from the shadows said.

"Sammy… how long have you been listening?" Amanda responded quickly.

"I saw you, if that's what you mean," he retorted laughing.

"How do you know that, Sam?" Thomas refocused.

"I was down there today. They're all lined up on the field just inside the gate, where the cremation pits are being dug. There are two or three wagons moving them just as fast as they can put together the pine boxes."

"What were you doing down there, Sam?" Amanda asked in a way that was sure to spark an adolescent reaction.

"Things… Mandy, whadda you care anyway?"

"Did you go to the barn like you were supposed to?" she said, suddenly sounding very serious. Hamrick noticed the change in her tone and stayed silent.

"Yes, and everything is all set for tonight."

Amanda turned to Tom and explained. "There's a fugitive slave waiting to be picked up, Tom. We're going to get him to a safe hiding place for tonight." Then she turned back to her brother and asked, "what's he like?"

"Same as all the others I guess, Mandy, just another runaway."

"You came through the cemetery on your way, Sam?" Hamrick asked, eager to get more information if he could. "Is that how you saw the bodies?"

"I thought I might get a job digging or carrying wood or something. They're putting on extra hands on account of the rush. But I didn't have no tools with me so they wouldn't hire me on, but if I go back with a shovel they said they would."

"Did you see the cremation trenches, Sam? How long were they?"

"Ya, they're pretty big, but most of the bodies are being claimed. There's graves being dug all over the cemetery. They're paying two dollars for a day. I'm gonna go back."

"How are they deciding which one's to cremate? Do you have any idea Sam?" Hamrick continued.

"I heard they were going to burn all of the body parts they found, legs and feet and such, and any bodies that were mangled real bad. Maybe the one's that aren't claimed, too," he added as his mind switched focus. "Where's the spade Mandy? I can only find this damn square manure shovel and I sure as hell can't dig with that."

"I don't want you to go back there, Sam. You have an important job to do don't forget."

"Bullshit, Mandy, I can make two dollars by sundown. I'm going. I'm not picking him up until way after dark anyway and I'll already be halfway there. Besides, you can't tell me what to do."

Sensing that the two were plunging into a needless argument, Hamrick interrupted. "Wait, Mandy. I think it's a good idea. He could help us."

"It's dangerous, Tom. He's too young."

"Bullshit to you, Mandy," the boy reacted. "I'm fourteen."

Amanda smiled at so predictable a response and Hamrick carefully went over their plan to, shall we say, remove the body of Nicos Bleeker from the coroner's custody. "So if you could nose around there, Sam and find where he is and then meet us in the cemetery, about midnight, we could carry the body up to the vault and hide it."

Before Hamrick could leave the Olmstead boat, two men arrived and inquired about him.

"Are you Thomas Hamrick?" one of the men asked from the dock below.

"Yes, that's right. What can I do for you?" Thomas responded.

"You're under arrest, Mr. Hamrick," the first man announced, opening his coat to reveal a deputy sheriff's badge and the butt of a pistol

tucked into his belt. "Come along with me. Don't make trouble now and we won't have to tie your hands."

"What!" Thomas reacted, as though dumfounded.

"I have a warrant for your arrest, Mr. Hamrick," the deputy repeated assertively, pulling the paper out of his vest pocket.

"On what charge?"

"Obstruction of justice."

The arrest warrant was signed by Judge Van Brughe and Thomas immediately suspected that he was getting dangerously close to something sensitive. "This is ridiculous. Where are you taking me?"

"To the county jail in Albany. There have been complaints about you, Mr. Hamrick, but I'm sure it will all be straightened out soon."

"I want to see Judge Van Brughe."

"You will… in a few days," the man chuckled and Thomas began to better understand what was happening.

"Don't worry, Tom," Amanda said supportively, squeezing his hand. "We'll take care of everything. Won't we Sammy?"

As Hamrick turned to climb down onto the dock, he whispered, "my grandfather is staying just outside of town at the Thompson's Inn. Find him. He will help you."

"Now we all know that Jackson is dead set on destroying the Bank of the United States," Jonathan Hamrick remarked to Detective Salisbury as the two sat by the window in Hamrick's room at the Thompson Inn. "What I don't get is why Van Buren and his cronies support Jackson when they have always opposed loose money. Isn't that what Jackson wants, to free up the lending, get cheap cash for westward expansion and the like?"

"They don't actually oppose the bank, Hamrick. They just want to reincorporate it here in Albany as a state bank. That's why these regency pols back Jackson this time. They want to pull the fingers of Philadelphia off of this country's money bags, plain and simple." Jonathan shook his head at the audacity of what Salisbury was suggesting and his quizzical look encouraged the detective to go on. "That was tried once before, you know. Shortly after the first bank expired in 1811 there was a move

made here in Albany to charter the so-called Bank of America. This is nothing new. It's all politics. If Jackson kills Biddles' Bank, he'll have to put the treasury's money somewhere. Why not right here so little Van's boys can get rich?"

"Indeed, why not?" Jonathan quipped as though cynical politics and inside deals should be an accepted way of life. He remembered the idealism of his youth, the glory and promise of this new republic for which they had bled and died and wondered if greed and political corruption would take it all away. Then he asked, "can this country survive, Salisbury, with this kind of unabashed political corruption? What if the people lose faith in the democratic process and no longer trust their elected officials?" But before the detective could respond, there was a knock on the door.

"Mr. Hamrick, you have a caller," the girl announced with a polite curtsy, handing Jonathan the card.

Please meet me, something has happened. Tom sent me.
Amanda Olmstead

"She wishes you to come to the parlor at once, sir and she looks very worried," the girl added.

"Maybe I should run along, Jonathan, I'll meet you for supper," the detective interjected, but Hamrick thought otherwise.

"No, Frank, you come too. We may need you."

The two men hurried along the corridor to the back staircase that descended directly into the parlor and was the preferred gentleman's evening escape route. As they entered the room, Amanda stood to meet them. She recognized Jonathan immediately from the strong family resemblance and looked so hard at his face that she hardly noticed the detective beside him. She was very intent to find an ally in her time of need.

"Mr. Hamrick?" she began cautiously and as he nodded she said, "my name is Amanda Olmstead. I'm a friend of Tom's."

He could tell immediately, by her expression, that she was troubled. "How do you do, Miss Olmstead. Tom has told me all about you. And please… call me Jonathan," he responded routinely.

She smiled at the compliment, but had little patience for continuing with idle banter and simply blurted, "Tom has been arrested. He's been taken to the county jail."

Jonathan frowned and for a few seconds said nothing. He was not a man to rush blindly into anything and his reflective reaction was comforting to her. "Why don't we sit down?" he began, ushering them to a small table near the windows. "I'm sure we can get to the bottom of this." Before they sat he added, "allow me introduce you to Frank Salisbury. Mr. Salisbury is a private detective who is assisting me. Do you mind if he joins us?"

The two men listened intently while she recounted, step by step, everything which had transpired and every detail of their plan to abscond with Nicos Bleeker's body. Jonathan explained why to the detective.

"You told me that Bleeker knew who was behind the steamboat explosions, Frank and then when Tom saw his body and was convinced that Bleeker had been murdered, well, we just put two and two together that's all. It's important that his death be ruled a homicide and that a murder investigation be opened. If we find out who killed Bleeker we'll know who the saboteur is, and who killed my son."

"And you say the body is lying among the victims of the disaster that are intended for cremation?" Salisbury asked. "And you're going to move it into the vault with the bodies that are scheduled to be buried and then get a federal judge to take over the case?"

"I know it's a long shot…" Jonathan began, but Salisbury stopped him.

"It's more than that. It could land you in jail."

"I had hoped you would say it could land, us, in jail, Frank, because we are going to need your help. You have a pistol and in case they post a sentry you could keep him out of it."

Salisbury said nothing while he pondered his response. There was never any question that he would join in, but he had a sense of the dramatic and a flare for enhancing his own role. Then he laughed and

said smiling, "I doubt they'll post a sentry. Who in hell would want to steal a body?" The detective shook his head and then added, "still, you'll need protection in case you are on to something. One good thing though. We won't have to carry him too far. The cremation pits are up on the hill to keep the seepage from getting into the water table."

"Are we agreed then?" Hamrick asked and Salisbury nodded. "We'll meet tonight, about midnight at the cemetery gate."

They all stood as the detective departed. He bowed politely and said with a sly smile, "pleased to have made your acquaintance, Miss Olmstead."

She immediately saw the humor in his remark, considering the circumstances, and responded in a dropping tone, "likewise, Mr. Salisbury."

"Would you care for some refreshment, Miss Olmstead, tea perhaps?" Jonathan asked. "It's about that time."

"Please call me Amanda," she answered and then after a brief pause continued, "no thank you, I really must get back."

"Did you come alone?" he asked politely, although it was obvious that she was unescorted and he quickly asserted, "I will accompany you back to town. It isn't proper for a lady to travel unescorted."

"There's really no need," she began to protest, but he insisted.

Jonathan Hamrick was too old to waste time with needless words. "Tom would expect me to. He is very much in love with you, you know. And it's easy to see how much you care for him."

"Is it that obvious?" she responded, reaching for his hand. She looked at Tom's grandfather, saw what a wonderful old gentleman he was, smiled and said softly, "I love your grandson very much."

Chapter Twenty

IT WAS A DARK AND DOLEFUL NIGHT. Amanda waited at the cemetery gate while Samuel went on alone to get the runaway slave and guide him back. The small whale oil lamp she carried created a cocoon of dim orange warmth in the cold sea of blackness around her. She stood there for a few minutes, motionless and silent, as she watched the glare of her brother's nighthawker grow smaller and smaller, finally fading into the misty, moonless night. Instinctively her eyes searched the darkness around her for reassurance that she was safe. For a time she watched the gas lanterns of a steamboat flickering on the river, over a mile away, and the thought of it masked for a moment the apprehension that lurked just beneath the surface. She told herself, of course, that there was nothing to be afraid of, but it failed to fully calm her. Every perceptive human sense in her body was agile and alert, keen to the emptiness around her, testing the dark void to see if it were in fact truly empty.

She strained to see something beyond the gate, across the flat, and imagined the gentle hillside further on, where the cremation pits were, but it was no use. Then she closed her eyes, hoping to help them become more accustomed to the dark and better able to perceive something, anything in the deep black night. The frightening thought swept into her mind that there may be someone out there in the darkness, someone evil who could see her, could come quietly right up to her in the inky gloom. The glowing lantern, that had once been her

protector, was now poised to betray her. Her heart pounded and her breath quickened. She listened to the creaky symphony of the night, trying intently to interpret every sound, every chirp and snapping twig. Her hand shook as she rushed to hook the lantern on a low tree limb along the path toward town and then backed slowly away, disappearing into the darkness, feeling her way carefully back to the gate. She tried not to make any sound and waited, watching the moths that swarmed around, over and under her little beacon. The almost hypnotic clutter and confusion of the insects calmed her and she chided herself for being afraid.

There was a tinsmith in Albany who made whale oil bullseye hand lanterns for night watchmen. These had a lens to focus the light into a concentrated beam and Detective Salisbury had borrowed one from the stable at the Thompson Inn; with it he and Jonathan Hamrick came slowly, but deliberately, up the path toward Amanda's glowing guidepost. The old man worked diligently to keep up and to conceal his growing fatigue.

"Amanda, is that you… are you there?" Jonathan said softly as they reached the cemetery gate.

"I'm over here," she responded from across the path behind them, perhaps a little too loudly, relieved to recognize the voice. Her response, shattering the silence, startled even the intrepid detective.

"Shhhhh," Salisbury reacted, "sounds carry quickly… and far… in the damp of night. We're not sure we're alone."

"I don't think there's anyone up there," Amanda answered. "I've been here for a while and it's been very quiet."

"We can't be sure," Salisbury cautioned, in hushed tones, feeling for the Billy club he had tucked into his belt. "You two go ahead with the lanterns and I'll stay in the shadows a few feet behind. If you're challenged by a sentry, I'll be able to sneak around behind him."

They followed the beam of the bullseye lantern as it sliced through the pitch black night. A grimy scent, carried by the fog, rolled down the hillside, filling their nostrils with its sooty smell of death. The path led directly to the vault and just below it there were two long straight

cremation trenches, crisscrossed at intervals by several flue ditches, designed to bring oxygen to the fire. They were already filled with straw and wood for fuel. Everything was ready for the grisly event.

"Shhhh, I hear something," Amanda warned, her ears keen to the slightest sound.

They stood motionless and listened. Even the old man could hear it, a sloshing kind of raking sound a few feet in front of them. The beam of the bullseye lantern cut a swath across the canvas covered bodies lying on the open ground. Then suddenly the snarling teeth of a wild dog flashed in the light and then disappeared into the darkness.

"Scavengers," Salisbury said, "I hope there aren't too many of them. We'd better hurry."

Amanda was the only one of the three who could identify Bleeker and this meant that she would have to look carefully at every cadaver. They began systematically, pulling back the canvas covering of each in turn. The eerie greenish light from the bullseye lense turned the mutilated and bloodied faces a sickening yellow. It was a slow and methodical hunt, which finally yielded its quarry. "There he is! …that's him!"

Bleeker was a big man, awkward to carry. They had difficulty just dragging him out from under the stiff cover and the uphill climb to the vault was strenuous. Hamrick was too old to lift and went ahead to light the way with the lanterns while Amanda and the detective tried to hoist the body up enough to carry, but they managed only a few steps. "We'd better wait for my brother and the runaway to help us," Amanda said, losing her grip and letting the limp carcass slip from her grasp. "I think I see them now," she added excitedly as at that exact moment she spotted a beam of light on the path below. She lifted her hand lantern above her head and swung it back and forth to show him the way and they waited while the swaying light quickly approached.

"You're just in time," she said as the two figures paused a few feet away. "Help us carry him to the vault."

A strange voice came from behind the blinding beam. "I don't think he'll be visiting the vault tonight, Miss Olmstead… But you will."

"Who are you?" Salisbury responded, feeling his belt for the butt of his pepperbox pistol.

Jonathan instantly flashed the beam of the bullseye lantern across the faces of the two men. "It's Van Brughe and Sheriff Pootman," Hamrick said, "and I don't think this has anything to do with Bleeker."

"You're too smart for your own good, old man," Van Brughe growled. "Now let's get up to the vault. That… is where you were headed… isn't it?" the judge snickered.

"We'd better do what they say," Salisbury offered and began the trek up the hillside.

There were dozens of pine coffins stacked outside the vault and inside, in a single neat row, bodies were lying uncovered. "What's this all about…?" Hamrick began, but was suddenly shocked when his light swept across the dead bodies already in the vault and he saw another familiar face. "My God!" Jonathan exclaimed, "it's Van Eps!" Everything suddenly seemed to be coming clear for Hamrick. "You killed him because he was going to expose your dirty deals and Bleeker too because he figured out how you staged the steamboat explosions. Was it Quacumbus? Did he tip you off?"

Van Brughe laughed. "Shut up, you old fool. You know nothing, and what you think you know is all ass-backwards." Then he turned toward the sheriff who was visibly shaken by the sudden sight of his friend's body.

"You didn't tell me anything about this judge," Pootman said in a troubled tone. "I didn't expect anything like this!" He looked for some sign that it wasn't true, but could tell by Van Brughe's stoic expression that it was. "You killed him?" he screamed out, obviously very upset and still in disbelief.

"Van Eps was a traitor and a coward, Cornelius. He would have ruined it all. There was no other way."

"And now what?" the sheriff responded. "Are you planning to kill these people, too?"

"No, Cornelius, now relax," Van Brughe said smoothly, trying to tranquilize the troubled sheriff. "There's no need. We'll just hold them

for a couple of days, until the evidence is all burned to ashes. Now… keep them covered while I tie and gag them."

The sheriff was worried. "I don't want any part of any murders, Peter. I didn't know anything about this and I'm not getting…"

"You'll do exactly what I tell you to do," Van Brughe suddenly snapped violently. "You're nothing Pootman, without us, without the lodge, you're nothing, and remember… you'll go down too if we're exposed. You can be sure of that."

The concentrated beam from the big nighthawker was trained on the ceiling of the vault, creating a circle of visibility spreading out from the center of the space and fading into impenetrable shadows along the edges and in the corners. Van Brughe pushed Hamrick into the darkness knocking him to his knees. "Put your hands behind your back old man and keep your mouth shut."

Hamrick sensed that the sheriff was their best hope and ignored the warning. "Don't listen to him, Pootman. He's going to have us killed. There's nothing else he can do. Think about it, sheriff. Why would he bring us up here to the vault? He can't hide us up here. This place will be swarming with people in only a few hours."

Jonathan's desperate appeal to the sheriff rang true. "That's right, judge," Pootman reacted. "We can't hide them here."

"Stop whining, Pootman," Van Brughe barked. "I have some men coming in a few minutes to take them to a safe spot and hold them until it's all over." Then he added slyly as he tightened the rope around Jonathan's wrists. "If you cooperate you'll all be set free in due time."

"You lie!" Amanda shouted, struck by the transparency of the scheme. "Those men that are coming, they're not coming to take us anywhere are they? They're coming here to kill us!"

The sheriff reacted, "I don't like this, Peter. Who are these men? Why didn't you tell me about this?"

"Do what you're told, Pootman." Van Brughe commanded deliberately, but the worried sheriff became unstrung and snapped.

Turning his shaking pistol on the judge, he said in a cracking voice, "stop! I'm not going through with this. I'm not going to be a party to any of this any more."

"Don't be stupid, Pootman. What do you think you are going to do?" Van Brughe responded almost disdainfully as though he could just brush the man aside.

"I'm going to do my job… now untie them," the sheriff asserted with what seemed to be genuine courage that momentarily stunned the judge.

At that precise moment, Amanda saw the startled expression on Jonathan's face and turned quickly to determine what had caused it, just as Salisbury sprang out from the shadows, striking Pootman on the back of the head with his Billy club; the pistol flew from the sheriff's hand, sliding across the floor, stopping at Van Brughe's feet. He picked it up and said with a new measure of bravado, "I thought it might come to this, Cornelius. So I kept my… ace in the hole. Nice work, Frank! Like they say, it's hard to catch the fox asleep."

Salisbury stepped into the light, cocking the hammer on his pepperbox pistol. "What do we do now, brother?" he asked and then glanced at Jonathan Hamrick whose stare was knifing.

"You're going to watch them until the crew gets here. They'll take care of everything. Then meet me at the lodge; by then I'll have everything ready," Van Brughe ordered.

"What about my son… did you kill my son?" Jonathan shouted angrily from the shadows.

"Yes, Hamrick," Van Brughe answered cruelly. "You might as well know since you're all going to die anyway."

"You bastard, Van Brughe, what did he ever do to you?" Jonathan reacted, struggling so violently with his binds in a useless emotional effort to get at his target that blood began to stain the ropes.

Van Brughe bent over bringing his mouth within inches of Hamrick's face and taunted. "He was meddlesome like you, old man, and didn't know when to keep his nose out of other people's business."

"Leave him alone, judge," Salisbury interceded in an act of guilt driven kindness. "He's a harmless old man. Let's just get on with it."

"And you blew up the steamboat to create a way to cover your crime," Amanda yelled, trying to divert Van Brughe's attention away from Jonathan.

Then strangely Van Brughe stood, shook his head and said, "no! We had nothing to do with that; it was an accident, just an accident, that's all and a serendipitous opportunity for us."

"Well… what about Bleeker then… why did you kill him?" Amanda responded.

"Who the hell is this Bleeker?" Van Brughe reacted looking at Salisbury.

"He's the bounty hunter they fished out of the river," Salisbury answered. "He was telling people that the explosions were sabotage and that he knew who was behind it."

"Oh yes… I know who he is," Van Brughe went on almost reflectively, paused and then spewed impatiently, "I don't know anything about Bleeker. That's enough of this shit. Steamboats explode. When it happens in our jurisdiction we use the opportunity to solve problems, that's all. It was just a coincidence."

Then he walked over to where the sheriff's body was heaped unconscious against an empty coffin, kicked him and ranted, "problems like you, Pootman. I hope you can hear me you son of a bitch. You're a backsliding bastard and I want to tell you personally where you're going, where you're all going. When my crew gets here, your throats will be cut and your faces mutilated beyond recognition. Then, tomorrow, you'll burn in the pits with all the other chumps. Ponder that Pootman. That was the choice, you, made. You brought it on yourself."

Van Brughe left the detective to guard the prisoners and wait for the executioners. He told Salisbury that he would not have to take part in the murders and to just turn the prisoners over to the crew and then meet him back in Albany.

Hamrick could tell that the detective was worried. He wasted little time, after Van Brughe had gone, and began by trying the confidence game. "I should have smelled a rat, Frank. You set me up pretty good."

"It didn't start out that way, Hamrick. How was I to know where it would lead?"

"What did they promise you, Frank… money… power… what?"

"It's more than that," Salisbury responded. "It's about loyalty. It's about being part of something, something bigger and more important than you or me. You should understand that Hamrick, you're a mason."

Hamrick was shocked and saddened. "No mason I ever knew would countenance fraud and murder. You surprised me, Frank. I thought you were an honest man."

The detective was very nervous, pacing and glancing over and over again at the open vault door. "Get off your high horse, Hamrick. It's fools like you and Pootman that make it all possible."

"Sheriff Pootman saved his immortal soul tonight, Salisbury. You should think about your own salvation while you're spending the blood money he promised you." Then he tried to drive his wedge home, "if he keeps his word that is." When Salisbury didn't respond Hamrick went on. "What makes you think you can trust him? You know he's a cheat and a liar. He's a jackal who uses others to do his dirty work for him and then he double-crosses them. Look over there at Van Eps. How do you know he isn't telling his men right now to kill you too?"

The detective didn't answer and proceeded to gag Hamrick and Amanda. The sheriff was still unconscious, but Salisbury tied his hands and feet and gagged him too. He then backed into the darkness along the wall just inside the vault to wait for the killers. He was clearly spooked by Hamrick's words.

They didn't have to wait long before a lantern appeared in the doorway and two men cautiously entered. Salisbury stepped quickly out, behind them, saying, "they're all yours," and then ran into the night.

"Who was that?" Samuel reacted with a puzzled look. "What's going on?" he added as he began to untie his sister and the others.

"Oh Sammy, I prayed it would be you," she answered, throwing her arms around him and adding little at that moment to his understanding.

"Geez, Mandy, you know I don't relish that," he said pulling away from her embrace, "what the hell is going on?"

"We're in a tight scratch, son," Hamrick responded. We've got to get out of here quick and we need your help and your friend's there too."

Samuel and the slave carried the sheriff down the hillside to a spot off the path and near a stream at the marshy edge of the cemetery. They waited hidden in the darkness, under an overhang of bushes, for Pootman to recover his senses. Jonathan was content with the thought that, with the sheriff as a witness, justice would ultimately be done and he was ready to let it rest. But, Pootman was angry and, partly driven by revenge, was determined to go after Van Brughe and make him pay. "I'm going to get him… now. He'll find out tonight that his plan failed and make a run for it. There's no time to waste."

"How can we go after him tonight?" Hamrick objected. "We have no guns, no deputies; we don't know who we can trust even."

"What about them?" the sheriff said motioning toward Samuel and the runaway slave.

"No!" Amanda interrupted. "No, it's too dangerous," then, sensing her brother's likely reaction, artfully rephrased, "It's too dangerous for the runaway. Sam has to take him out of here. They'd hang him sure if they caught him helping us." Samuel was silent and Amanda finished assertively. "Take him to the barn Sam… now! You're the only one who can do it."

"I'll go alone if I have too," Pootman said standing to test his shaky legs.

"What about Thomas?" Amanda said excitedly. "He's sitting in your jail right now. Why can't you deputize him?"

"I sure as hell can," Pootman said smiling. "I'll call a Posse Comitatus and I'll swear in the devil himself if needs be."

Chapter Twenty-One

SALISBURY RAN AS FAST as he could, all the way to the town, and reached the Masonic lodge completely exhausted. His loud raps on the big ornate front door went unanswered for a minute or two, but he could see light on the second floor and soon heard footsteps approaching. The pause gave him a chance to regain his composure. A strangely calm Van Brughe silently let him in and the two men went directly to the lodge office.

"Did everything go alright?" the judge grunted, offering Salisbury a shot of whiskey. The detective downed the strong drink and nodded, but didn't elaborate, wishing to avoid revisiting his loss of nerve in the burial vault.

Van Brughe wasted no time pursuing his purpose. "Have you ever heard of Texas, Mr. Salisbury?"

The detective motioned for the judge to refill his shot glass and asked somewhat puzzled, "Texas… why?"

"Because that's where you're going to make more money than you ever dreamed possible," the judge answered with a confident swagger.

"And how am I going to do that?" Salisbury retorted in a low tone, letting his suspicion show.

"Because you're lucky, Frank. You're real lucky because I need you and I'm going to let you in on something very sweet. It's over for me here. The lodge is being ripped apart by these antimasonry fanatics. Besides… I have it all in place now… and with your help…"

"What exactly do you want?" the detective cut to the chase.

"There's big money involved, a lot of gold and it needs to be moved… quietly. I need a man who can get me and that cash safely to New Orleans."

"Where is this gold now?"

"It's right here in the safe," he said, gesturing with his head toward the big black iron box against the wall. "But there are two separate dead bolt locks and two keys. I hold one key and lodge treasurer Yates has the other. On my way here, I stopped at his house and rousted him out of bed; he should be on his way by now. I told him that I got a cash investment tonight, from the old man, and that I needed to deposit it right away."

"What's going to happen to Yates?" the detective asked already careful about Van Brughe's motives.

"Nothing!" the judge answered, shaking his head, sensing that Salisbury was not eager to be involved in anything too unsavory. "He knows nothing about any of this. We'll just send him on his way and in a few days you and I will just disappear. It'll be months before they figure it out."

"No more murders?"

"No," Van Brughe answered convincingly and Salisbury moved on.

"And what's in it for me?"

"Money and power, Salisbury, luxury beyond your wildest dreams."

The detective seemed more amused than convinced and Van Brughe thought it necessary to more fully persuade him. "You've probably never heard of Stephen Austin," he began. "He's a brother mason… like you and me, Salisbury. We met many years ago when we were both involved in a bank chartering scheme in Philadelphia. That little deal fell apart, but we stayed in touch. Well, Austin's a man of real genius, a man of great foresight. He's now got the grant to bring settlers into Texas. There are virtually no people in that part of Mexico and the Mexican government has given it over to Austin to populate it."

"Texas?" the detective seemed leery, signaling Van Brughe that more swaying was needed.

"Texas has long been a dream target for speculators, Frank. But most of them are just that, dreamers, romantic fools who don't understand how these things are done. We know that if you can't bribe the public officials into your pocket then the best bet is to become the government yourself. Austin was wise when he decided to get the proper land grants and commissions from the Mexicans and he is now poised to set up a huge colony in Texas. And the best part of it is that it's all legal and aboveboard. They're lining up to go, in droves, down in New Orleans. But… he needs money to back the scheme. He's agreed to pay Mexico a few cents an acre for the land and to assume all costs of surveying and procuring titles, as well as provisioning the new settlers. Each family that goes gets a *hacienda*, that's over four thousand acres of land… and the *empresario*… that could be you, Salisbury… gets a matching four thousand acres! There could be thousands of settlers. This will be a huge land holding of perhaps a million acres, a virtual country by itself. And do you know what's really funny?" Van Brughe snickered. "He wants… me… to oversee the establishment of a legal system for Texas, based on what we do here in New York." Even the detective saw the humor in that remark and it seemed to break the ice for him.

"Exactly how many thousands are we talking about?"

"We have almost two hundred pounds of pure gold in that safe, which is worth about sixty thousand dollars."

Van Brughe pressed his proposal home. "We can turn that into millions and live in luxury beyond the reach of United States law. Down there, we'll be the bigwigs."

The detective smiled almost imperceptivity but Van Brughe saw it and knew he had won. "Think of it Salisbury; there's no police down there, no courts, no enforcement. It's perfect for men like us. You and I Salisbury, we'll run everything!"

It was already after three in the morning and the waning crescent moon was finally rising when Jonathan and Amanda reached the jail with the sheriff. Pootman was determined to get after Van Brughe that night and to get men for a posse, he decided to ring the fire bell and call out the bucket brigades. In the ensuing commotion and excitement

he forgot about young Hamrick and Amanda reminded him. "Sheriff, you said you would release Thomas."

"I'll tend to him in the morning. Right now…"

"But, sheriff…"

"Look Miss there's no time now," he reacted taking a pistol from his desk drawer.

The two fire watchmen, who walked the streets at night and had seen no signs of a fire, were the first to appear. "What in hell's going on sheriff? Where's the fire?"

"There's no fire, Josh. I need a posse and you men are drafted. Go around to the stables and saddle the horses. Tell the men who show up that we're going after a murderer."

"You said you needed Thomas to help you," Amanda interrupted with a sense of urgency, but to no avail.

"He's no good to me, lady. I'll need twenty men I can trust to block the roads and pin that bastard in so we can hunt him down." He seemed obsessed, brushing past her, but Jonathan blocked his path.

"Where's the key to the cell, Pootman. I'm going to let my boy out."

The sheriff looked sympathetically at the old man and said, "it's right there on the desk. Just stay out of the way."

Amanda ran to unlock the cell. "What's happening, Mandy?" Thomas asked as she pulled open the heavy iron gate. Then seeing his grandfather behind her he repeated, "what's going on, Bumpa?"

"An incredible turn of events, Tom, almost unbelievable…" the old man began, quickly recounting for his grandson the near catastrophe in the cemetery. He went over every detail and once again seemed satisfied that a resolution would be reached without their further involvement. "…and so I guess that's it then. Van Brughe was behind it all and the explosions were accidents. Pootman will get him. It's over."

"I'm not so sure," Amanda interrupted. "What about Bleeker? Who killed Bleeker? There was no reason for Van Brughe to lie when he said he knew nothing about it."

"Just a coincidence most likely," Jonathan argued. "Men like that have enemies. There's probably no connection."

"No," Amanda reacted instantly. "No, someone was sabotaging the steamboats and Bleeker knew who it was. Bleeker was tracking the terrorist. That's why he came on our boat, Tom" she said suddenly spinning toward him. "He wasn't looking for slaves he was looking for my father!"

The fire bell had been tolling for several minutes when treasurer Joseph Yates arrived at the Masonic lodge. Van Brughe had been pacing nervously inside the main entrance and was now clearly worried.

"Is there a fire?" Van Brughe asked quickly scanning the horizon as he pulled the somewhat startled lodge treasurer into the vestibule.

"No, it's not a fire. It's something else. Sheriff Pootman is calling out a Posse Comitatus to chase down some murderer who's on the loose."

The remark cut through Van Brughe like a sharp blade. "What!" the judge reacted, "Pootman!" looking quickly at Salisbury whose blank expression left him clueless. "How can Pootman be…?" he started and then paused, turned toward Yates and finished. "What's the posse for? Who are they after?"

"I don't know. I didn't stop to get the details. It must be important though considering the criticism he's sure to get in the morning for scaring the shit out of everybody."

Seeing no point in continuing the charade, Van Brughe pulled his pistol from his coat, pointed it at Yates and said, "give me the key, Joe and be quick about it."

"What's this all about, Peter?" the man responded in disbelief.

"You'll find out soon enough, now just give it to me. Don't try to be a hero."

Salisbury frisked Yates, found the key and handed it to Van Brughe who then asked, "Joe… how did you come tonight. You didn't walk did you?"

"I came in my gig."

"It's better than nothing," he said to Salisbury. "Now tie him up and gag him, there's no time to waste."

"What is this all about, Peter? What's going on here?" Yates struggled to regain some control of his situation, but Van Brughe was already busy with the double locked safe and paid no attention.

"Sit in that chair," the detective ordered, poking Yates with the barrel of his pistol, "and put your hands behind your back."

"Damn it, Peter, what the hell are you doing," Yates yelled loudly.

"Gag him!" Van Brughe responded without looking up.

They managed to carry all of the gold, in one trip, to the ally where the small two-wheel, one-horse, hitch was waiting. Two big men and nearly two-hundred pounds in treasure were all the little buggy could handle, but it was down hill to the low-road along the river and they managed a smooth swift escape, only minutes before Pootman and the posse broke down the lodge door.

"What the hell happened, Salisbury?" Van Brughe finally exploded as he tried to urge the old mare into a trot.

"I don't know! I left them with the men you sent, like you said. They must have got away."

"That really screws us," the judge lamented. "We'll never make it in this gig. They'll run us down in no time."

"Maybe we can steal some horses. There's a farm…"

"Wait a minute…" Van Brughe interrupted with a flash of hope. "Thomson's Inn has a stable. It's right up ahead."

But the inn was on the high-road, well above the river, and they had already passed the cut off. They pulled the carriage into the bushes along the side and climbed down to lay out a plan of action. It was at that moment of quiet that they noticed a rumbling sound out on the river and saw a rowboat tied to a stump on the bank just below them. "That's a steam tug out there," Salisbury said straining to see in the faint light of the crescent moon, pointing to the shadowy silhouette anchored a few hundred feet off shore. "Her steam's up. What's she doing there?" he asked vaguely.

Van Brughe was excited by the scent of escape and all too quickly concluded. "She's a gypsy tug up from New York, looking for a tow," he said eagerly. "They're waiting for daylight to safely go into the harbor." The judge's mind was moving too rapidly and mixing reality with

wishful thinking. "The crew came ashore in the dinghy, probably to kill some time in the saloon at Thomson's Inn. There may not even be anyone on board. This is our chance, Salisbury. Get the gold into the rowboat. We'll hijack that tug and be gone, gone for good."

The two men moved quickly. They would have liked to have hidden the horse and hitch to buy time, but the posse was too close. Hoof beats, lanterns and voices were almost upon them as they slipped away silently into the mist.

"Here it is," someone said. "They must be up at the inn. The gold is gone too."

"No… wait look out there. They're heading out to that steam tug in the river there," one of the deputies remarked.

"That bastard," the sheriff growled, thinking his quarry had slipped from his grasp and then they heard a voice from above them, "stop… stop those men…" and, noticing a figure tumbling and sliding down the steep hillside toward them, Pootman warned, "you there… stand your ground or I'll shoot."

But, the man kept coming and the sheriff called out again, "Who are you, man? Stop I say…"

"My name is Goode," a voice shouted out, "Professor Goode… That steamer out there belongs to me…" Then he screamed, almost in a panic, out toward the fast disappearing rowboat, "come back… come back… Don't get on that boat!"

The crescent moon seemed to hang over Olmstead's scow like an oriental scimitar. Amanda ran wildly, almost as though pushed mindlessly on by some supernatural power, through the back streets and alleys to the canal basin, oblivious to the chaos and commotion around her, as more and more men rushed to answer the false alarm. Behind her, Thomas helped his aging grandfather, who limped along, determined to continue; but they couldn't keep up. Several times he called for her to wait, but she was driven by the fear that something terrible was about to happen to her mother and she wouldn't slow down.

"You go ahead, Tom. Catch her if you can. I'll be alright," the old man said. "She may need you."

"We'll make it together, Bumpa."

"Go, Tom, I'll be right along soon." he answered, barely able to catch his breath, but Thomas was afraid to leave his aging grandfather.

The Olmstead boat seemed strangely dark and sinister when Amanda climbed aboard and onto the quarterdeck. The little whale oil lamp was still burning in the kitchen below, but it hadn't been tended in some time and its little flame was flickering and dying. She stopped for a second to listen for voices and then stepped silently down the galley steps. Harriet Olmstead was sitting motionless in the rocking chair along the wall. "Mother," she called quietly from the threshold hoping not to frighten her. "Is everything alright?" There was no response and for some reason Amanda was struck with fear that her mother was dead. "Mama!" she almost screamed, startling the half-sleeping woman.

"Mandy, is that you? What's wrong?"

"Where's father?" Amanda began, still seized by suspicion and unable to see the dazed and almost comatose expression on her mother's face.

"He's here. He's up in the mule shed."

"With Sammy?"

"No… Samuel is gone," Harriet answered in a monotonous drone that caught Amanda's attention.

"What do you mean gone? Where has he gone?"

"He's gone where he'll be safe, Amanda and you had better go too," came the cryptic response and Amanda pulled her mother's chair around to confront her.

"It was he wasn't it? He was behind it all wasn't he?"

"Your father is a very sick man, Amanda. He wants to do right, but he's a sick man. You can't stay here; I don't know what he will do. He killed that man Bleeker with his sword, Amanda. It's too dangerous. Go… go tonight. Go with your young man. Get away from here."

"He blew up those steamboats too didn't he? He did it to get the slave holders coming up from the south. And you knew about it."

"I didn't know… Amanda, I swear I didn't know, not until after, after Caleb was killed."

"He wasn't…" Amanda continued in disbelief, but her mother interrupted

"No… Caleb knew nothing about it. The steamboat was carrying many southerners and he knew that after the stopover at Albany they would be the only one's to continue on to Troy. He and Caleb delivered some last minute split wood that day, like they always did, while she was docked at Albany, but this time your father planted a piece that he had hollowed out and filled with black powder. He deliberately put it at the top of the pile so that it would be thrown into the furnace as soon as the boat left the dock."

"Oh, my God! He killed Caleb. He killed his own son!"

"It's so sad, Amanda. Caleb knew nothing about the bomb. After his father left, he sneaked back aboard the boat to hitch a ride to see his girlfriend in Troy. He was afraid to tell his father about her and that he was planning to marry her. It's so tragic, Amanda, a boy and his father, so far apart."

"I'm going up there," Amanda said strongly.

"I'm going with you," Harriet responded and the two women walked the length of the scow to the mule shed where they found Karl Olmstead standing in the bow, his sword glinting faintly in the dim moonlight.

"Come down, Karl," Harriet called out. "You have to come down. Things will work out, you'll see."

For a few seconds the women felt relieved as he turned away from them and pushed the sword's handle back down into its holder in the boat's bow, locking the hilt in place. He tested the blade's stability with both hands and seemed satisfied saying, "there… it's alright now."

There was a crazed look in Karl Olmstead's eyes, but the women couldn't see it. He was mumbling incoherently, looked up toward the sky, paused for a moment and then threw himself forward with great force over the bow. The protruding blade, poised once again to save them all from impending disaster, punched straight through his heart, impaling his body. His arms and his head dangled limp and dead; blood

dripped into the water. He made no sound. Harriet struggled to go to him, but her daughter prevented it. She held her mother tightly so she couldn't see the gruesome silhouette profiled against the flash of a fiery explosion that suddenly erupted somewhere on the river behind it, lighting the sky with a smoky glare.

At that very moment, and in time to see it all, Thomas and his grandfather rushed aboard the boat. "There's nothing we can do mother," Amanda said as clearly as she could through the surge of emotion that was welling up inside of her. "Go back to the house and wait for Sammy. We can't let him see this."

"Stay with her, Bumpa, don't leave her alone," Thomas whispered without taking his eyes off of Amanda who turned her back to him and began to cry. "He killed your father, you must hate me, Tom. You must hate all of us."

"Stop it Mandy," he said firmly, turning her toward him and pulling her into his arms, smothering her tears against his chest. "How can you think that? I love you, Mandy. Nothing can ever change that."

"Oh… God… I feel so awful," she blurted, looking up at him, "and Caleb… my brother Caleb… and all of those innocent people… I should have known. I should have seen it coming. I didn't do anything to stop him, Tom."

"No, Mandy… that's crazy. It's not your fault… none of it is your fault," he said in a strong, confident tone that almost instantly calmed her. "We'll get through this, you'll see. We'll get through it together." She reached up and gently brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. Behind him she saw the warm glow of the morning sun glimmering on the horizon.