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1

BARET BUCKINGTON'S DILEMMA

Aboard the twenty-gun buccaneering vessel the *Regale*, its enigmatic captain, Baret Foxworth—in reality Viscount Baret Buckingham, grandson of Earl Nigel Buckingham II—opened his desk drawer and replaced his worn, leather-bound copy of John Calvin's Institutes beneath a sheaf of drawings. The copy of Calvin's theology along with a book of Puritan prayers were contradictory evidence revealing Baret's complexity.

Included in the papers he kept at hand were several pirated maps of the West Indies, which he had gratefully confiscated from a Spanish *capitán* before happily sinking the galleon to the bottom of the blue Caribbean. There were also several of Baret's better sketches that he'd done in pencil. One of them was of Emerald Harwick. The second was of the woman he had intended to marry—until she had betrayed him by marrying his cousin.

Flaxen-haired Lavender, a future duchess, was now Lady Grayford Thaxton. He knew he should get rid of the drawing, but his emotions had not yet been able to release her. He comforted his troubled conscience by telling himself that he kept the sketch only because it was well done.

The third drawing was of his staunch Puritan tutor from Cambridge, Sir Cecil Chaderton. His sharp, sanctified gaze pierced Baret's soul with scriptural conviction of the absolute holiness of the God he read about in Calvin's Institutes.

Gazing at Sir Cecil's hawklike countenance brought an unlikely half smile to Baret's face. When Cecil discovered that Uncle Felix Buckingham hoped to have Baret arrested for piracy and hanged, he would be quick to remind Captain Foxworth of his past warnings against the dubious career of buccaneering. Baret's mouth curved with bitter irony.

"Warm family affection runs as deep as the Caribbean currents," he murmured. "An uncle, in order to inherit the earldom

of my father, will justify his decision to hang a nephew who stands in his way.”

“*Har*, you was sayin’, your lordship—I means, Cap’n Foxworth?”

Baret glanced at his serving man, Hob, seeing a grin-creased leathery face beneath a floppy hat pulled low over shaggy white hair. His cool cotton drawers were cut off calf-length, and his sun-faded red shirt was too big on his stooped shoulders. The sleeves were rolled up haphazardly and tied into place below the elbows. He carried a gleaming coffee pot in one gnarled brown hand and a spotless captain’s mug of Peruvian silver in the other.

“More’s the pity I can’t hang Felix instead,” Baret said.

Hob scratched his chin and chuckled. “Always did think ye had a shark’s sense of good humor. Aye, ol’ Felix would make a pert sight, says I, but better think twice. Havin’ Jamie Boy danglin’ on the yardarm of the *Regale* be trouble enough for ye at port. If ye go to danglin’ Lord Felix too, I’ll be bringin’ your coffee to Gallows Point. Them rascally-mouthed judges in the Admiralty Court don’t have any humor.”

Hob set the coffee service on the desktop and left.

Baret snapped the heavy drawer closed and locked it, then turned to an ornate peg on the cabin wall behind the desk and removed his buccaneering regalia. He slipped the wide leather baldric, containing a pair of silver-butted French pistols, over his dark head. Unlike his Puritan beliefs and the short hairstyle generated by the Roundheads, his own hair bore quiet proof of his royal blood and was worn in the fashion of the Cavaliers of King Charles II.

Catching up his wide-brimmed black velvet hat with dashing pristine-white plume, he flicked away a speck of lint and settled it on his head with a tap. He wore a matching black velvet jacket with wide lapels and a white Holland linen buccaneer shirt with full sleeves. His appearance had earned him young feminine sighs, but the reaction to his goodly countenance brought Baret more cynical amusement than it cultivated conceit.

Sir Cecil had taken laborious pains to lecture him as a growing lad about the evils of undisciplined handsome flesh. “Good looks are the devil’s playground. So is idleness. It is now time for your lesson in Greek.”

Baret smiled at the memory of his days in France with the exiled King Charles. He took only a sip of the coffee, then turned to leave his immaculate cabin. As he did, an accidental glance at his darkly handsome reflection in the small looking glass brought a thoughtful pause, followed by a slight frown. The frown was not at the remembered words of his teacher but at what his reflection represented in the Caribbean.

His image belonged to a stranger, not the youth he remembered under the strict tutelage of Cecil. Baret hardly knew the man in the mirror. The ruthless challenge in his dark gaze might have belonged to the pirate Henry Morgan or to Pierre LaMonte. Nor did he even try to reconcile the difference between what he had been at Cambridge and what he was now.

"You make a realistic enough rogue to gather a crowd at your hanging." A crisp voice came from the cabin door.

Baret turned toward the familiar voice. Sir Cecil stood without, wearing his wry yet affectionate expression.

Surprised and genuinely pleased to see him, Baret smiled disarmingly. "Welcome home to the *Regale*, my dear Cecil. I'm soon ready to sail for an attack on Cartagena. Have a seat." He gestured to an unlikely furnishing to be found aboard a pirate ship, a luxurious velvet chair that Cecil had claimed for his own in the past.

Baret turned his head and called, "Hob! Quick! Tea for the Cambridge scholar! We have a royal guest today, the gentleman who taught me Greek and—" he doffed his hat and bowed to Sir Cecil—"Spanish. A debt I can never repay."

Sir Cecil's thin mouth went down at the corner. "My one mistake." He eased his lanky frame into the soft chair, looking about.

"Seems like old times," said Baret. "I've been wondering what to do with that odious chair."

"Old times and comfortable chairs are not as easily forgotten and packed away as books—and Bibles." He shot Baret a meaningful glance.

Baret slipped from the uneasy moment as smoothly as a live wet fish, and smiled. "I'm glad to see you've returned. Your presence graces my ship with an aura of respectability. His Majesty will find the report you will write about our venture on the Venezuelan coast of serious interest—and acceptance. In light of

the trouble I'm having with Governor Modyford, we'll need your endorsement."

"I dare say. There will be no more respectable reports to the king by this Cambridge divine until you quit the life of a buccaneer. The tropics are going to your head, and the gallows are waiting for your neck."

Baret folded his arms. "Now you're sounding uncomfortably much like Earl Nigel Buckingham. Did you come this dangerous distance to Tortuga to have me surrender to the High Admiralty Court—or to board a merchant ship for London like a whipped puppy?"

"Discipline your tongue, you impudent rogue. Neither the Admiralty nor Nigel knows I've risked a trip to the odious Tortuga to find you and bring you safely back to Foxemoore." He smoothed the starched white shirt at his throat. "I've come on my own—and because Jette is asking for you each night in his prayers."

Baret let out a breath, more troubled over his half brother than he could or would admit. "I can do nothing for the boy yet. I've written a letter. You can deliver it for me. Along with a wood turtle that Hob carved."

"He'll be up till midnight with delight. Look, Baret, come home! The boy needs you. Your father may be dead, and Jette is only eight. He looks on you as his father. Then there's the delightful young lady Emerald, just waiting to become Lady Buckingham. I would think you'd be beating your sails back to Port Royal with the first fair wind. She's as lovely as they come. Marriage will be good for you. Sell the *Regale* to one of your pirate friends, and let's return to Foxemoore."

Baret looked at him from beneath dark lashes, resisting the pull. He managed a laugh. "I always knew there was more humor in that mind of yours than pure Calvinism would allow. I confess I'd enjoy Jette immensely. And I've missed the schoolgirl treachery that Harwick's daughter so blatantly inflicts on me. She ought to be here now, rummaging my desk and gliding about in pirate's drawers. But—"

"Pirate's pantaloons! Is that how you envision her?"

Baret concealed a smile. It wasn't, but he wouldn't admit this to Cecil.

"She's emerging into a fair and noble young woman," said Cecil.

"I've no doubt." He tapped his chin thoughtfully, pretending consideration.

"Yet you persist in calling her 'Harwick's daughter.' Do you realize how often you say that? As though you wish her to remain impersonal. Her name is Emerald."

"I know her name."

"Then use it. You might as well call her 'Harwick's brat,' like the rest of the family."

"I've never called her that!"

"And now you're furious. Why? You care for her more than you admit, yet you are still thinking of Lavender."

"I never mentioned Lavender. As for Emerald, I know she's growing up. She's sixteen—"

"Seventeen now."

He knew quite well that she was seventeen. "And three years more is fine with me."

"I'm certain it is." Cecil gave a laugh. "You'd make it ten if you could get by with it."

"You don't know what you're talking about, Cecil. I intend to marry her. In fact, I admitted I wanted her, didn't I?"

"In a small way."

"Do you call twenty thousand pieces of eight *small*? I bought her." He smiled. "She's mine."

"Indeed?"

"And it's also been quiet and peaceful even on Tortuga now that she's safely on her way to England. That's just where I want her. Out of my life for three years. I need time to breathe. She can learn under the prim and sour instruction of a school-mistress, who will do her willful spirit wonders." He added with silky innocence, "And when I see her next, she will be donned in French gowns and wearing sugar curls. She'll be bowing and pleasing me, her dutiful master and upcoming husband!" His dark eyes danced. "'Yes, m'lord, no, m'lord. Why, anything you say, m'lord.'"

"*Hah*. You scoundrel." Cecil's eyes flared with malicious amusement. "Well, you may see your new darling much sooner than you expect, but without bowing and pleasing your conceited whims."

Baret scrutinized him with suspicion. *Much sooner than you expect.* Cecil had sounded too sure of matters. Baret glanced toward the door. "Don't tell me you've brought the little darling back to my ship? I fear I've run out of pieces of eight, and who can tell what knave will next wish to duel me for her?"

"No, no." He waved a hand airily. "I came alone. And if she heard you making light of your audacity in buying her with pirated pieces of eight, she'd relinquish your betrothal to the sharks swimming about and never shed a tear."

Baret leaned against his desk. "Your warm words cheer me. It's always cozy to have the girl you intend to marry so desperately attached."

"You could consider your own wealth of cozy warmth sadly lacking. From what I hear from Karlton, you sent Emerald away without so much as a ring of credential promising your intentions. Every girl wishes a ring to wave under the noses of jealous friends."

Baret glanced at the family ring on his hand, and his mouth curved. "And the Buckingham ring would do well enough, I suppose. It would make Lavender uncomfortable, wouldn't it? She always boasted it was worth the crown jewels," he said with a touch of sarcasm. "I should send the ring to Harwick's daughter at once. After all, it's only been worn by family earls and countesses for generations."

"And pirates."

Baret winced. "I guess I deserve that."

"You do indeed. If you're not serious about your claim to her, Baret, you best play the gallant scoundrel you are and do something about it as soon as possible. She's a fair child, and I won't have her hurt any more than she has been. With your growing reputation for piracy, and Emerald known to have voyaged with you, you'll ruin any further chances she has to marry a godly man."

Baret frowned, and his dark eyes narrowed. "She'll marry no one else unless I'm good and ready to give her up."

"Such conceit. You sound the viscount, to be sure."

"And I'm not ready," he stated flatly. "Of course, I'll make good. I told her that."

"Did you? Very businesslike, I suppose."

"Not exactly business." He felt unexpected irritation as

though trapped by the huntsman. "Did she send you here to hound me?"

"Good mercy, no! I've not seen her, but I have spoken to Karlton. So has Lady Sophie."

"Then that accounts for it. Sir Karlton would want me to send the ring with blaring trumpets."

"Do you think Emerald is the kind of young lady to chain you to her even if she is not wanted?"

"If it's a ring she demands, I'll send her one—one from Porto Bello. And a trunk of gowns. That should keep her busy for a while. She can tell Lavender I proposed to her on bended knee with thudding heart."

Sir Cecil stared at him, interlacing his long fingers and tapping them with tried patience. "You would do well to bend the knee to Emerald rather than Lavender. Need I remind you it was you who dueled that odious French pirate Levasseur to claim her?"

"I remember quite well."

"I didn't see her chasing after you, begging you to stay, as I've seen the others—including Lavender."

Baret flipped the pen on his desk. The thought brought further irritation. "Never mind. As for Lavender, why do you persist in bringing her up? She's married to Grayford."

Sir Cecil's fingers fell still.

A moment slipped by. Baret, aware of the strange silence, looked up from the pen, frowning, wondering why the man had ceased his badgering. "One would think I'm yet a lad in knee pants the way you lecture. This is like that cramped chamber above the narrow streets of Paris. The only thing missing is my glass of milk."

Cecil laughed. "Ah! Those were the days . . . but in truth, I didn't come about the raven-haired Emerald *or* Lavender. You won't be so pleased when you know why I'm here. I won't be sailing with you, Baret. I've just come to ask you to come home before I must come to the grief of my old age."

Baret laughed.

"The grief," said Cecil distinctly, "of seeing your death."

Baret cocked his dark head, scanning him. "So soon?" he mocked. Cecil's grim expression convinced him that he was not jesting.

Baret swept an arm about his cabin. "This, beloved scholar, is 'home.'" He looked up as Hob entered with the tea. "This is our new serving man," he said. "You've not met Hob yet. He sent the turtle the night we first arrived."

"Ah, yes . . ." Sir Cecil peered down his hawk nose at Hob, taking him in from head to toe. "So this is our turtle man."

Hob's shrewd eyes danced with good humor. "Aye, I be him, says I. An' beggin' your pardon, Lord Scholar, but do ye wish a dab of sweet cream in the mix?"

Cecil's brow lifted.

"Tea it is, ye can be sure of it. An' no swish of kill-devil rum neither. Straight black tea it is."

"Well, that is something to be grateful for on this day, Hob. Have you any cream?"

"Nary a drip, ye lordship, but I be knowing of an old cow the *boucaniers* took from hereabouts. She's aboard the *Black Dragon*. If'n ye have a hankering, an' if Captain Lex Thorpe's ship ain't sailed yet, an' if the cow be in a kindly mood to give a wee bit of milk, I'll get it for ye. She ain't always so obliging."

Baret laughed.

"Thank you, no," said Cecil with bored dignity. "Black tea will suffice, Hob."

A minute later as Cecil sipped the brew, Baret watched him, again growing uneasy. "You know me well enough, Cecil. You know I won't return to Foxmoore yet. So why did you come, really, if not because Emerald sent you?"

"I told you. To convince you to hang up that baldric once for all."

"A possibility for the future. But not yet. And leave my father in chains, tormented by Spanish whips? I see no cause to give up my role as buccaneer until my father's reputation is restored and we both have audience with His Majesty. After that? I'll decide if I like the sea well enough to remain a blackguard. After all," he said lightly, "it's the one career that permits me the liberty to attack Spain. Being a pirate brings me immense advantages."

"Yes, and doubtless you'll hang for your immense advantages," his dour tutor challenged. "And I'll be below the gallows reading from the Scriptures about the due results of your sins until you cease your kicking and the vultures come to feast upon you."

Baret winced. "You always were the grandfatherly sort, Cecil. You might instead read of His grace and mercy while I twist in the tropical breeze."

Cecil arched a dignified silver brow. "You are certain of His grace and mercy, are you?"

"As certain as a man can be."

"Need I remind you there is also the truth of evidence of one's having sipped pardon from His cup?"

"You may sip if you like," said Baret with a disarming smile. "I prefer to quench my thirst with a few satisfying gulps." Turning to the mirror to straighten his hat, he saw Cecil's smile. Regardless of his pretended hardness, Baret knew the old scholar took great pleasure in Baret's having learned the doctrine well.

Sir Cecil placed his thin hands on his lap and sighed as he pushed himself to his feet, housed in shiny black shoes. He threw back his thin shoulders beneath the dark frock coat and retrieved his scholar's hat from Hob, who stood gravely as Cecil peered at him with suspicion.

"Then you're determined to sail on this new venture?"

"The *San Pedro* holds an important Spanish don, one who will answer a few questions at my insistence. Yes, I intend to sail," said Baret easily, the strength of conviction showing in his handsome face.

"Take the *San Pedro* and you will have double piracy charges on your hands," Cecil warned.

When Baret regarded him evenly, his tutor sighed. "You're as stubborn as Royce was. Then I shall leave you to your vices, Baret, and you, Hob, to your turtles."

"Aye, me lordship, an' I'll be thinkin' of ye with kindness as I makes me turtle soup."

Cecil placed his hat snugly on his head, his jaw-length silver hair hanging straight and neat. "One thing about Foxemoore, Lady Sophie sets a delectable table. I have never seen so much food. You should repent and turn to raising sugar, if only for roast capon and guava jelly, Baret."

"I will ponder your advice." And Baret smiled, amused.

"I have better hope of getting my divinity student out of little Jette than you. Though I admit you studied much harder at Greek. Jette," said Cecil with emphasis, "prefers to sing."

Emerald and her interest in a singing school and slave

chants flashed before Baret's mind. "I'm disappointed you've given me up for dead," he said smoothly. He knew his tutor caught the underlying tone of his remark, for Cecil looked at him sharply.

"I, too, have better plans for Jette," he continued, turning grave at the mention of his half brother. "I don't fancy Felix as his stepfather. Nor do I trust Jette to be left to his explicit care. Remember, Jette is next in line to the inheritance after me."

"I'm well aware. So is Nigel," he said of Baret's grandfather, the earl of Buckingham. "Jette's in capable hands between us, and you mentioned you wanted the charming Emerald to become his governess. A wise decision."

"A governess is hardly the title for a young girl I am expected to marry in the future. But what is this you say? My grandfather is at Foxemoore indefinitely?"

Cecil cast him an impatient glance as though Baret had been dozing at his desk. "The war, my son Baret, the war with the Dutch! You are surely aware England is fighting Holland this very hour? The earl can hardly voyage safely across the Atlantic now, can he? The rest of us are rooted to Foxemoore as well. At least until the war ends. And that may take several years. Jette will need to have his schooling on the plantation. A wry set of circumstances, considering that the plans of so many have been turned inside out, including Emerald's schooling in London. By the by, where is she? She hasn't shown herself at Foxemoore, and I haven't seen Sir Karlton recently. If she's to help me with Jette, she ought to be brought with her trunk to the Great House."

Baret straightened from the desk where he'd been leaning. He'd been so preoccupied with his planned expedition that the possibility of a delay in Emerald's voyage to England hadn't occurred to him.

"They sailed for Barbados," he told Cecil. "By now she's on a ship for London."

The long-range effect of the war could be disastrous to his plans, thought Baret, considering what it might mean to have the earl in Jamaica while he attacked the Spanish Main with Henry Morgan.

"The war means a good deal of trouble all the way around," Baret told him with a frown, remembering he had promised his grandfather he'd fight for the king against Holland.

Sir Cecil appeared to follow his concerns. "So I thought myself. At least the three years or more in England for Emerald will settle the Jamaican dust as far as this marriage is concerned."

Baret scowled under his probing gaze. "Don't look at me like that. I intend to keep my word to Karlton, though he played the game cheaply."

"You did little better by her. Twenty thousand pieces of eight! Well, she won't need to move into the Great House for who knows how many years until this war is over and you redeem her honor. A fine mess of pottage that would be."

Baret's eyes narrowed, and he leaned back against the desk.

"Stubbornness is written in your countenance," said Cecil.

"I said I'd keep my promise."

"Saying so to the girl in that tone isn't likely to send her into titters over donning a wedding dress. You look as though a matchlock were barreled into your back."

"Never mind. I got us both into this, and I'll defend her before the hounds." In a gesture of frustration over more than Emerald, he doffed his hat and dropped it with boredom on his desk. He thought of Lavender.

"I suppose Grayford will now be called on to fight the Dutch here in the Indies," he said thoughtfully, looking over at Cecil curiously, for as yet his mentor hadn't mentioned Lavender and his cousin Grayford's unexpected marriage at Foxemoore.

"I suppose he will," was all he said.

"You don't sound enthusiastic," said Baret dryly. "What's the matter? Do you think he's not up to commanding the H.M.S. *Royale*?"

Sir Cecil brushed his sleeve, avoiding Baret's gaze. This wasn't like Cecil. What was he trying to hide?

"I'm not jealous of his commanding the king's ship, if that's what troubles you," said Baret flatly. He snatched up the silver Peruvian cup of fresh coffee that Hob swiftly poured him. "I wouldn't trade the *Regale* for two of the Royal Navy's ships!"

Cecil cast him a glance. "I must be going," he said. "The knave whose sloop brought me here will be wanting to set sail for Port Royal. In the meantime, if you won't redeem your reputation on the Caribbean to save your own neck, do think of the rest of us. You should, if you would listen to my advice, return to

Jamaica to make peace with Governor Modyford and your grandfather. Wed the girl and settle down to grow cane."

Baret's mouth turned into a bored half smile. "Thank you, no. Not while my father drags Spanish chains on his ankles at Porto Bello. Forget the Dutch and French! It's Spain that England needs to blast off the Caribbean map!"

"Temper, temper. Do you also wish to forget Emerald as well as the Dutch?"

Baret caught up his hat. "I've no time now to consider her or anyone else," he said easily.

"I suggest you have time and not the inclination. Forget Henry Morgan. You'd do better to write a letter of appeal to King Charles."

Baret ignored him. "Morgan's getting the expedition ready for Porto Bello, and the *Regale* is itching to unloose her cannon on any Spanish galleons who try to stop us."

"Attack the Main when England has signed a peace treaty with Madrid and you *will* hang," said Cecil gravely. "There is no question in my mind. It's the Dutch colonies that His Majesty has sent word to Modyford to attack."

"If His *Majesty* wishes me to attack fellow Protestant brothers in favor of the inquisitors who marched across Dutch soil, he may do better in appealing to his brothers in Madrid."

Sir Cecil winced. "Softly, lad—treason will be added to piracy."

"I can only hang once. Hob! Here—fill it." And he held out his cup.

Minutes later, Baret led the way to the open cabin door, ducked his head, and stepped out.

The tropical sun was blazing. The water of Cayona Bay was a glassy green-blue. The warm breeze did little to cool him as he stood, hands on hips, looking across the cove to the other vessels at anchor, all belonging to the Brotherhood.

He took the quarterdeck steps up. What Cecil didn't know was that he wasn't going to sail with Morgan just now. He was sailing with Erik Farrow to attack the Main.

Sir Cecil stood looking up at him. "As I said, Baret, I leave you to your vices. My conscience will stubbornly retain you in daily intercession to our gracious Lord. In the meantime, if you need me I shall be found at Foxemoore."

Baret smiled down at him. In spite of the man's gruffness, he was deeply attached to his divinity master. "Take care, and speak also fair words on my behalf to my grandfather. With Felix at Foxemoore, I will need someone who can define to the earl the difference between a buccaneer and a pirate."

"I shall try. Nigel sees little difference, and I begin to think he is right."

Baret watched him depart the ship for the cockboat. Cecil's words continued to plow through his mind as the small craft was rowed toward a waiting sloop on its way to Jamaica. His warning of certain trouble was not lost on a rebellious spirit.

Baret knew his plight. He had taken his share of Spanish ships and had won more than his share of fencing duels. His sword was stained with Spanish blood; he insisted it had all been done in war and not for personal vengeance.

Cecil was wrong about one thing, though. Even without his warnings, Baret's conscience was alive and smarted with more pain than he would ever admit. Hatred for Madrid and anything Romish was the reason he had taken to privately studying Calvin's theology and the worn Geneva Bible. There were two natures within him that were at war with each other. Perhaps neither would emerge as total victor yet.

It was not a trivial matter to him to simply forgive and forget those responsible for the torturous death of his mother. They had buried her alive for refusing to recant her Reformational beliefs. Now his father, too, was a prisoner and suffering.

He watched Sir Cecil until the boat was but a dot. Cecil wanted the youth he remembered, but it was too late to return to his Cambridge innocence, Baret thought. The young viscount who had once been was forever gone, changed by the cruelty of the West Indies and life on Tortuga.

He wondered that he felt such little concern at the possibility of premature death. He had not meant it to be this way, but little by little the hardness had set in. It had been Lavender's gentleness that he depended on to restore tenderness to his heart. Then she had betrayed him. Now there was only Emerald. Could she ever take the place of the idealistic girl he had seen in Lavender and whom he had expected all these years to make his own?

Perhaps he would never return to England. Perhaps he

would remain in the West Indies. Perhaps he would one day settle down to build his own plantation, not in Jamaica, not even in Barbados, but in the Carolinas. It was a thought. Not more than that. He had thought of the Carolinas because of Emerald. She wouldn't need to be a countess there, enduring the gossip and cheap innuendoes that would surely plague her steps for the rest of her life. No matter that he married her. The tale of the infamous duel would endure a lifetime. No, it would last for generations if he married her.

If he married Emerald. It was curious, even to himself, that he could look back and wonder just why he had relented to Karlton.

Had he been dazed? Had it been anger at Lavender? He had felt reckless, ruthless, and, yes, even impulsive! A trait that was not like him at all. Why, then, had he agreed to the marriage? Was it possible he felt more strongly about Emerald than he understood? That made little sense, unless his mind could not relinquish the illusion of a young woman whom it had been easy to love from afar without truly testing his affection.

Marriage could not be entered into with frivolity. He knew that. And, yes, he still felt attached to Lavender, despite her marriage to his cousin. Emerald had entered his life suddenly; dramatically, and she had left her indelible imprint on his mind, but there had been no leisure to consider what it meant. Her appearance stirred his passions—she was alluring, willful, sometimes sweetly innocent—but did he know her well enough to love her, to pledge his undying devotion, his utter faithfulness before God in a marriage ceremony officiated by Sir Cecil?

He would not need to think about it now. The painful process of that emotional decision was years away. She was safely packed off to England, he told himself. His emotions, too, were securely locked away, where he intended to keep them for an indefinite period of time.

The Spanish Main waited. A dangerous path lay between him and any future in the king's court, and liberating his father would take all his energy and skills. Emerald was out of his life now. He was free to attack Cartagena, Coro, Cumaná, Margarita! And a certain Spanish galleon, the *San Pedro*, leaving Cartagena, awaited boarding by his buccaneers.

Baret was still musing over his contradictory thoughts as he

strolled the quarterdeck, feeling the warm wind tug at his hat. He noticed a small cockboat being rowed from the beach toward the *Regale*. Carib slaves dipped their oars while the one passenger picked up a telescope and fixed it upon Baret. After a moment, Baret lowered his own glass.

"If it be Cap'n Farrow," suggested Hob, coming up from behind, "a piece of eight says he comes 'bout Morgan."

Baret watched the cockboat come alongside. The slave knelt in the prow to grab the rope and steady the boat against the *Regale's* side. A moment later Captain Erik Farrow came nimbly up the awkward rope ladder.

Baret stood on the quarterdeck looking down at him.

Erik doffed his hat in response to Baret's similar buccaneer salutation. He climbed to meet him.

Erik Farrow, in keeping with his style, revealed little emotion. He joined Baret at the railing, the breeze tossing his golden hair. His lean, tanned face was elegantly chiseled of fine bone, both somber and arresting, sometimes reminding Baret of a Michelangelo statue of an archangel that he'd seen as a boy, although he would never say so to Erik.

He'd told Baret he was born on the island of St. Kitts. He'd never known who his parents were and grew up as a mistreated cabin boy aboard a slave ship, trading out of Africa into the Spanish Main. Slaving was a part of his early youth that he would not discuss with Baret, however, except to tell him how he had loathed his captain and eventually set out as a buccaneer on his own. Later he became a soldier in the first Dutch War. They met while Erik convalesced in London and Baret was a youth at Cambridge. A shared hatred for the religious politics of Madrid bound them together in silent agreement to sink any galleon they came upon.

Baret had soon discovered that title and social position meant much to Erik. There had been a time in the recent past when Erik had even seemed willing to betray him to Felix for a comfortable life of nobility in London—with Lavender. Felix had hired him to spy on Baret and in return for his services had knighted him. Since then, he'd broken pact with Felix and was now loosely aligned with Baret. For how long? With Erik he was never quite sure.

Erik removed his hat. "Did Sir Cecil come about Emerald?"

Baret turned his head and gave him a measuring glance. He called her by her first name, as though he had the right.

"Yes, why do you inquire?"

Erik shrugged. "Emerald is a noble woman at heart."

"You have deduced this, I suppose, from lengthy musing about the rarity of Harwick's daughter?"

"I try not to think."

He now had Baret's full attention. "You try."

"Yes."

Baret's gaze narrowed. "But you've noticed her."

Erik shrugged lazily. "I confess I haven't had much time. I was foolishly enamored with Lady Thaxton. Then there's that cousin of hers—Minette. A bold little wench, that one."

Baret's irritation prickled under the hot, tropical sun that was making his dark hair stick uncomfortably to the back of his neck. His eyes turned hard. "It seems, Sir Erik, that you are destined to unwisely allow yourself to become enamored with the same women as I. First Lavender," he said too calmly, "now, Harwick's daughter. I confess I'm beginning to find it irksome."

Erik lifted a fair brow. "So it seems, your lordship."

Baret's gaze narrowed. He waited in vain. "Is that all you have to say about it?"

Erik contemplated calmly. After a long moment he said, "Yes, your lordship."

"Call me by title one more time," gritted Baret, "and I vow I'll draw sword over it."

"As you wish, my captain." Erik's gray eyes sparkled like sun on the snow.

Baret pulled his hat an inch lower and leaned back against the rail, crossing his boots at his ankles.

"Tell me, Erik, for the question begins to plague me, how long before I knew did you vainly make plans to steal Lavender from me?"

Erik scowled. "You behave the typical offended viscount, impatient and irritated."

Baret laughed. "Never underestimate the tantrums of nobility. If we were in London I'd have you arrested and tossed in the Tower."

Erik's lips tightened into silence.

Baret's smile was dangerous. "I should, even at this late

date, turn you into gallows bait for having tried to take her. However, since our precious Lavender has already become Lady Grayford, it won't be necessary." He turned, as though now bored, picking up his telescope again and fixing it on a ship. "Stay far afield from Emerald. You may have her little French cousin. And now! Let us forget the fairer sex, who make men's lives miserable. Any word from Morgan?"

Erik cast his gaze skyward to watch a soaring gull. "We both waste time on memories." He held his hat under his arm and glanced toward a ship making for Tortuga's harbor. "No word. And we waste time waiting. We have two of the best ships on the Caribbean. We can make an expedition of our own."

Baret tapped his chin. "You'd risk the Venezuelan Main alone?"

"Why not?"

"We'd need at least a ship or two more."

"Pierre LaMonte wishes to join us. He's steady and cool."

"We'll talk to him, but let's be discreet. Even here there are few I trust. The French buccaneers may have cheered my defeat of Levasseur in the duel; nevertheless, they are first loyal to their own blood. And with England now at war with Holland *and* France, they will be sure to side with them."

Erik went down the quarterdeck steps with him. "This venture of our own would get us both out of Tortuga for a seasonable time," he said. "Need I remind you there is the unresolved matter of the treasure of the *Prince Philip*?"

"You need not remind me. I remember well. So does Levasseur. He's been prowling about recently. Last night he met with Lex Thorpe of the *Black Dragon*."

Erik glanced at him, troubled. "You should have run Levasseur through when you had fair opportunity—or let me do it."

"There was no need. And I will take care of my own enemies. If I had killed him, Harwick's daughter would have mourned him."

Erik looked surprised. "She dislikes him!"

Baret's dark eyes flashed. "She only pretends to."

"There is something between them still, you think?"

Baret wasn't certain. There was much about Emerald he didn't know. "No matter, she'd have held his death to my account. I won't give her the opportunity. She's already offended

with me over the duel." He smiled. "It goads her that I bought her."

Erik's fair brow shot up. "A woman's pride is a curious thing, my lord viscount. One must rarely trifle with it."

Baret said thoughtfully, "I've a notion she's more fond of Rafael than she admits even to herself."

Erik shrugged. "She was willing to run away to Massachusetts with Maynerd's brother."

"Yes. So she was." Baret flicked a sand fly off his wrist. It was surprising how remembering added to his ill humor caused by the heat and the stinging insects. "Ah. Dear, sweet, and gentle Jamie Boy."

"Jamie was soft all right. But Levasseur is dangerous. You've not seen the last of him. He despises you even more because you spared his life."

Baret sighed. "The world is full of ingrates."

"And you injured his pride with the rapier when you defeated him before his crew."

"Yes, a palatable experience."

"Perhaps—to save yourself from further trouble—you should let it be known you are no longer interested in Emerald."

Baret paused on the steps and stroked his thin black mustache. "A possibility," he mused with mock seriousness, "but after I paid twenty thousand pieces of eight?"

Erik replaced his hat too carefully. "For some women a man would pay more than that."

Baret affected consideration. "Would they now, do you think? Maybe—fifty thousand?"

Erik gave a gesture with his hand. "I suppose all things are possible."

With a cool smile Baret suggested, "Next, even you will be wishing to duel me for her."

The breeze blew between them. Erik went on down the steps and waited for him at the ladder.

Baret watched him for a moment with a smirk. He thought back to the duel. His own words sounded in his memory: "I have every intention of making good. A bargain is a bargain," he had told her when she suggested he need not keep his vow of marriage, and that she understood it had been forced upon him by her conniving father.

He remembered her words exactly, for he had not expected them, and they had irritated him. Why they irritated him, he didn't exactly know, but they still did: *I would not marry a man because of a bargain.*

"You have very little to say about it," he had replied.

He might have behaved the rakish viscount, free to do with her as he wished. Still—even with his heart fuming over Lavender's betrayal—when he had held Emerald and kissed her goodbye, she had captured his entire vision of all that was noble and beautiful. His own reaction had surprised him, and still did. He frowned. *A mere lark*, he thought. She was still little more than a fledgling.

The vision of the woman who came to mind, however, was anything except a child emerging into womanhood. Stubbornly he shut her from his mind. No one, including Sir Cecil, would rush him into marriage. Emerald wasn't emotionally ready, and neither was he. Marriage would change his entire life! Instead of only himself to consider, he must make decisions that were best for her, for both of them, for if two became one flesh, so also did marriage ask that they think as one, sacrificially giving for the best of the other.

He frowned. Strangely, that seemed an easier task with Emerald than with Lavender. He wondered rather maliciously how Grayford was getting along with his delicate little rosebud. If he remembered right, the rosebud had a way of pricking sharply enough to bring blood.

He saw Erik watching him, waiting to row with him ashore. He continued on down the quarterdeck steps and swung his muscled frame over the ship's side. Then he went lithely down the ladder to the waiting longboat to parley with Pierre LaMonte, captain of the *Bonaventure*.